



The Sinful Duke's Bride (The Duchess Dilemma #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: "You are mine, no matter what you say. That is my mark, to remind you."

Lady Cecilia's heart once beat for her brother's dashing friend. But when he's accused of her brother's death, her love turns to loathing. Forced to live a lonely existence, her life is a shadow of its former self—until a scandal binds her to the very man she blames for her suffering.

Duke Lionel, shunned by society and left broken by his best friend's death and fiancée's betrayal, has spent five years in isolation. When he finally steps back into high society, he finds himself locked in a searing, forbidden kiss with Cecilia, his late friend's alluring sister.

Forced into a marriage with her sworn enemy, Cecilia must navigate a life she never wanted nor imagined. But resisting the man she once desired becomes more complicated than expected, now that they are forced to share the same roof...

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CHAPTER 1

THORNHILL CASTLE

“Now you can open your eyes.”

Upon opening her eyes, Cecilia felt as though she had stepped back through time.

The hall through which she walked, arm in arm with Arthur, was of brooding dark stone. A vaulted ceiling was supported by massive timbers. Windows set to either side of the hall were tall and arched—they looked as though they belonged in a cathedral! The floor was of naked stone, though highly polished, and despite the finish, it bore the scars and scratches of its centuries of use.

“This is... remarkable. I cannot imagine living in such a place...” Cecilia gasped.

Her long auburn hair cascaded down her shoulders in bouncing curls. She shared the same brown eyes and small, straight nose as her brother, and both possessed dimples in their cheeks when smiling—so deep, it wasn’t difficult to tell they were siblings.

Arthur nodded. “Neither can I. In all the times I have visited Lionel here, I cannot picture Thornhill Castle as anything other than cold, brooding, and possibly haunted.”

He grinned and Cecilia returned the smile. “How exciting. I would love to share a house with a phantom.”

“But not the bloodless seventh Duke who walks the passageways of the east wing,”

Arthur noted, grimacing in the manner of a gargoyle. “They say his throat was cut and when he was found, he was as white as snow. Now, he remains there, prepared to push unwary visitors down the tower stairs.”

Cecilia shuddered, though she knew her brother was exaggerating.

“I don’t see how an insubstantial wraith could push anyone down anything,” she said.

“By the force of sheer fright,” Arthur pointed out.

Cecilia playfully slapped his shoulder.

“Stop trying to frighten me, Artie. I am sure that this house is not nearly as frightening as its age makes it appear. It is... atmospheric, however.”

“Very,” Arthur agreed.

The babble of voices reached them from the far end of the hallway. A carved wooden screen divided the room at that point. It was painted to depict a grandiose scene from Teutonic mythology. A door was set into the screen, and as it opened, the sound of the other gathered guests grew in volume. A man stepped through the door and Cecilia immediately felt her heartbeat hasten.

“Ah, there you are, Penrose! Come and join us. Have you shown your sister around this moldering pile of stone I call home?” he uttered.

He was tall and broad-shouldered with short-cropped black hair. The darkness of his hair made his skin seem pale and emphasized his emerald, green eyes. His handsome features were completed by a Roman nose and full lips above a strong jaw. The man exuded strength and power. When those green eyes met her own, Cecilia found her breath quickening. She did not want to look away and found herself reminded of dark

fairytale concerning seductive vampires. There was a physicality to him that made her acutely aware of her own body. By comparison to the muscle that seemed to make his clothing tight, her own curving hips and bosom felt soft. Under those broad hands, she would be helpless, to be manipulated as he saw fit. She wetted her lips and forced a breathless smile as he approached them.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of being introduced. I am the Duke of Thornhill, Lionel Grisham.”

He did not smile. Nothing disturbed the marble stillness of his pale face. It was the visage from the mind of a Renaissance master artisan. There was the capacity for cruelty there and the potential for an implacable enemy. But, she fancied, there was also a vulnerability in the softness of his full lips.

“Thornhill,” Arthur suddenly hastened to say, “may I introduce my younger sister, Cecilia.”

Cecilia remembered to curtsy and put out her gloved hand. She felt Lionel’s lips brush her fingertips and experienced a moment of wild fantasy in which she imagined that kiss without the material of the gloves in between,

“My pleasure, Cecilia. Please call me Lionel, as your brother is wont to do,” Lionel added, releasing her hand.

She regretted the end of that touch but at the same time was glad. She knew that Lionel was engaged to be married, and would have been disappointed had he shown any sign of being one of those men who did not respect the sanctity of marriage. Or respect the woman to whom they were betrothed. She considered her parents to have been the perfect examples of marriage, devoted to each other and their children. Her father’s brother, Rupert, was the opposite. A rogue who chose his wife for her money and his mistresses for their youth and beauty. Cecilia had little experience with men,

having only just reached her debut this year. No suitors had yet come forward. Or at least none that had passed Arthur's ferocious protectiveness. He took seriously his responsibilities for his younger sister in the absence of their father and mother.

"That is most gracious of you, Lionel . I should be glad to," Cecilia replied with a happy smile.

Arthur grinned but Lionel remained stony-faced.

"He never cracks a smile if he can help it," Arthur stage-whispered to Cecilia.

Lionel's eyebrows raised a fraction and he inclined his head.

"You only think so, Penrose, because you've never said anything humorous in my hearing."

"Touche," Arthur replied.

"I was just saying to Arthur how remarkable this house is, Lionel," Cecilia said, her voice soft and inviting, "would it be imposing to ask for a tour and perhaps something of its history?"

Arthur rolled his eyes. "My sister has an inordinate interest in such dreary subjects as history and literature, I'm afraid. Give me sport and a mug of ale over a book any day.

Lionel's mouth twitched at the corner and his eyes narrowed. "I remember from our days at Westlands. Your love of sport saw you whipped far more often than I."

"Worth every stroke," Arthur grinned, "books are for librarians."

Cecilia giggled softly. “I have never heard those stories! I suppose that is why you insisted I learn fencing, brother. To be entirely truthful, Lionel, my brother’s insistence on these lessons meant I had heard quite a bit about you even before our acquaintance.”

Lionel’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, a spark of intrigue lighting in his eyes. “You? Fencing?”

“Oh, indeed,” Cecilia replied, her gaze holding his a moment longer than necessary. “Arthur mentioned more than once that his skills were sharpened under your tutelage, if I’m correct?”

Lionel chuckled, stepping slightly closer to her, the space between them becoming tantalizingly small. “I had no idea. Perhaps one day we might spar together. I would love to see if your brother’s teachings did my lessons justice.”

Arthur groaned good-naturedly, breaking the moment. “Enough of that. When are we to start the hunt, Lionel? My patience wanes.”

“Soon enough, old boy. We await one more guest, a friend of Arabella’s. And as for the tour, Miss Sinclair, I will ask my man, Blackwood, to show you around the castle and give you an account of its history. He has served my family since birth and knows more about Thornhill than any man living.”

Cecilia found herself smiling brightly, touched at the consideration Lionel was taking. She knew that while the men who had been invited to Thornhill were hunting, the women would be gathered in a drawing room and would talk over tea. She had little aptitude for the kind of gossip that was the primary discourse in those gatherings, remembering hours of tedium as a young girl, sitting beside her mother and listening to the conversations going back and forth. Afterward, her mother would translate the seemingly innocuous comments, stripping away the surface meaning to

expose petty squabbles and sniping. The prospect of exploring such a dramatic residence as Thornhill Castle was much more appealing to her.

“I should be delighted, Lionel. Thank you very much.”

Lionel actually smiled, and it transformed his face. The austere expression was gone and a joyous life seemed to appear like a blossoming sunrise. His green eyes, previously the hardest emerald, became the light shade of grass, soft and comfortable. Cecilia, always quick to smile by nature, found herself mirroring his expression while lost in the verdant depths of his eyes. A moment stretched into eternity and then Arthur cleared his throat. Cecilia jumped and Lionel blinked, turning away hurriedly.

“Yes, well, I shall lay that on for you. Come through and meet the company, both of you. No one you haven’t met before, Penrose. Several people for your brother to introduce you to, Cecilia... I mean, Miss Sinclair. Yes, come through, come through.”

He was talking in a breathless rush and hurrying away. Cecilia found herself blushing with such fury, she could feel the heat of her cheeks. Arthur looked from one to the other with a raised eyebrow and a quizzical expression. He offered his arm to Cecilia, who gave him a wide-eyed stare above lips compressed to a white line. It told him she would tolerate no teasing. Duke Lionel Grisham of Thornhill was a man engaged to be married. There would be no flirtation and the moment that had just passed between them was a mere trifle. Hardly worth commenting on. So she wouldn’t. And neither would her maddeningly mischievous brother. Or there would be consequences.

“Shall I give you a moment to dispel those scarlet cheeks, dear sister?” he smirked.

“You will not,” Cecilia said with as much dignity as she could muster.

Lionel was a man happily promised to another. Doubtless Arabella Wycliff was a famed beauty and a woman of accomplishment and rank. Cecilia Sinclair, orphan and ward of her brother, the Earl of Penrose, would be no competition. Even that thought increased the heat in her cheeks. The very thought that there could be any question of competition with herself as the victor in particular. Nonsense. But she could not forget the frisson she had felt when looking into Lionel's eyes. The quake that had begun somewhere deep within her at the proximity of such masculinity. His height and the breadth of both chest and shoulders made her breathless to think of.

She smoothed the cream skirt of her new dress, bought for her by Arthur from London for her birthday the month before. Its bodice was a pale green that complimented her brown eyes and bronze hair. Wearing it made Cecilia feel beautiful. It was the finest gown she had ever worn and it gave her a thrill to know that Lionel had seen her in it, that he had seen her at her best. Once again, Cecilia berated herself for a foolish fantasy that could never come to be. Best to forget Arthur's handsome and enigmatic friend.

Lionel stood at the door in the screen that led to the part of the Great Hall in which his other guests were mingling and talking. As Cecilia and Arthur reached him, there came a raised voice from the far end of the hall. Cecilia happened to be looking at Lionel as the voice rang out and saw his expression change. Green eyes narrowed and his chin lifted. There was tension in the muscles of his neck and jaw and a hand at his side clenched into a fist. Arthur turned and Cecilia saw the tightness in his features. Arthur was a happy, smiling man but now there was almost an expression of open hostility on his face. She looked for the cause of this sudden tension.

Approaching across the hall was a man with black hair, curling close to his scalp and short. His skin was pale and his body slender. As he approached, she saw that he had pale blue eyes and something of a resemblance to Lionel. But while the Duke was powerful and strong, this man was lean and whip-like. On his arm was a beautiful woman. She had golden hair and was tall, moving with grace and deliberation. Her

lips possessed a pout that made them seem full and luscious but her blue eyes were cold. Cecilia was left with the impression that her beauty was the product of a great deal of work rather than something bestowed by nature.

“Your Grace!” the slender man said, looking at Lionel, “I do so apologize for my tardiness. But look who I bumped into as I arrived!”

“Lord Thorpe. Welcome,” Lionel replied stiffly.

The blonde woman left Thorpe’s side and crossed to Lionel, kissing his cheek and taking his arm.

“Cecilia, may I introduce my fiancée, Arabella Wycliff. Arabella, this is Cecilia Sinclair, sister to Lord Penrose, whom you already know.”

Icy blue eyes swept over Cecilia and rosebud lips smiled. Cecilia was left feeling that she had been weighed and measured by those eyes.

“Miss Sinclair. How nice to meet you,” she spoke.

“My Lady,” Cecilia replied politely.

“And may I introduce Lord Gordon Locke, Viscount of Thorpe,” Lionel continued.

The dark-haired man took Cecilia’s hand without invitation and pressed his lips to it. His blue eyes met hers and he smiled. She returned the smile politely, not liking the presumption he had shown.

“I had not expected to meet such a beautiful stranger. I thought I knew all of His Grace’s society,” Thorpe grinned, “where have you been hiding yourself?”

Arthur cleared his throat and removed Cecilia's hand from Thorpe's grip, placing it upon his arm.

"Shall we go through, Sister?"

Cecilia caught the brief flash of a mocking smile on the face of Lord Thorpe at Arthur's intervention. Then those blue eyes were on hers again. His stare was direct but did not have the effect upon her that Lionel's had. Cheeks cold and not remotely blushing, Cecilia smiled politely, looking from Lord Thorpe to Arabella.

"It was a pleasure to meet you both."

As Arthur led her away, Lord Thorpe called out, "I am so looking forward to this hunt, Penrose. Perhaps I will show His Grace and yourself the marksmanship I learned in service of King and country."

Cecilia looked questioningly at Arthur as they stepped through the screen. Lionel closed the door behind them and she heard him speak to Lord Thorpe, though she could not hear what was said. The room beyond was softened by the addition of plush furniture, rugs, and wall hangings to disguise the bare stone of the hall. A fire roared in an impressive stone fireplace and men and women stood about or sat, talking, eating, and drinking.

"What was that all about?" Cecilia asked in a quiet voice.

"Thorpe is a scoundrel with a terrible reputation when it comes to women. It is rumored that he came by his wealth through looting the bodies of the dead in Spain. And a viscountcy followed soon after. A reprehensible man. I had hoped he would not be in attendance and do not like the fact that Arabella arrived in company with him."

“Whyever not?” Cecilia asked.

Arthur glanced at her and he tapped the side of his nose.

“Best not speak of it. Let us enjoy ourselves and hope that the blackguard does not cause trouble.”

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CHAPTER 2

5 YEARS LATER

Lionel entered the mist-shrouded woods. His footsteps were slow and careful, making no noise among the moist undergrowth, rich with decaying leaves. Mist rendered the trees to dark silhouettes, skeletal figures in the gloom. The sun was not yet to its noon peak and was not yet strong enough to dispel the covering of fog that clung to the shadows of the woods. To his right, Arthur stalked, rifle held ready, eyes keen. To the left, invisible among the shadows were the others of the hunting party. The white stag that had been seen on the Thornhill estate these last few weeks and whose presence had precipitated the calling of the hunt, was somewhere ahead. The ground fell away beneath his feet, a slope that would carry him into an ever-deepening dell. Lionel raised a hand, a signal to Arthur to halt. Closing his eyes, he tried to pinpoint the minute sound that had caught his attention. It came again, the soft sound of movement from ahead and below. Opening his eyes, he looked to Arthur who was watching him. Lionel pointed and Arthur nodded, he had heard it too.

They descended a slope made slippery by soil churned to mud. Tree roots made a precarious staircase for the two hunters. Above them and to the left, a human shape moved among the mist, another hunter but one who had not heard the sound that Lionel and Arthur pursued. He ignored them, if they were not as skilled as he, then their hunt would be in vain. These hunts were as much a competition against his guests as they were against nature. Lionel liked to win at the hunts he organized. He would not begrudge his guests if one of them emerged the victor but would not give up victory out of deference. The only one present whom he would defer to was

Arthur, his old comrade from the battlefields of school. A shape appeared from the mist ahead, large, and dark. Too tall to be man or beast. It was a standing stone, and soon, others appeared. They were arranged in a circle at the foot of the dell, moss-covered and dark with damp. A brooding relic of a bygone age. Something moved quickly between the stones. Something taller than a man but moving on four legs. It dashed from left to right and both hunters brought their rifles to their shoulders. But the stag was gone before they could fix it in their sights, hidden by the all-consuming mist.

Nature was contriving to frustrate the human hunters today, conjuring an unseasonable mist to hide their quarry. Lionel relished the challenge. He glanced at Arthur and, from the gleam in his old friend's eyes, he saw that his own feelings were mirrored. Then Arthur's eyes widened as they became fixed on something beyond Lionel, over his left shoulder. Thinking that the deer had circled around them, Lionel swung around, raising his rifle to his shoulder. But it was no deer. A man had stepped from behind a standing stone, already with rifle raised. Lionel was close enough to see the face of Lord Thorpe, see the victorious smile as his finger tightened on the trigger. Arthur roared as he shoved Lionel from the back, knocking him to the side. Lionel hit the ground as the rifle held by Thorpe fired. The sound was an explosion in his ears, accompanied by a flash of light and the acrid stench of gunpowder. There was a gurgling groan from behind him and the sound of a body hitting the ground. Looking back, he saw Arthur on his back, unmoving. Lionel screamed, reaching for the rifle he had dropped when Arthur had pushed him aside, saving his life and becoming the victim of the shot that would have killed Lionel—that had been intended for Lionel.

Thorpe had stepped clear of the stone and was drawing a pistol from his belt. Lionel's hand closed around the rifle, fingers finding the trigger as he jerked it to point towards his attacker. The rifle discharged at the same instant as the pistol Thorpe held. He jerked at the last moment and the shot intended to kill seared along Lionel's back. Pain enveloped him, followed by the deepest, icy cold blackness.

Lionel lashed out against the foe of his dream but found only empty air. He jerked upright in his bed, panting as though he had run a mile. With one hand, he reached to the scar that ran for three inches to the base of his spine. For a moment he felt the fire of the lead shot that had made the scar. Fired by a man who had killed Lionel's best friend that night.

A man who was still free.

His left leg ached. The pain was a dull throb that never completely faded and which, from time to time, had to be dulled by poppy juice supplied by an apothecary in London. Still, the pain was better than the terrifying numbness that had engulfed both legs years ago when he had awoken in the dell, at the foot of the standing stones. A white stag had been chewing the bark of an elm when Lionel had jerked into wakefulness. It had looked at him once and then leaped away into the woods. And Lionel had been unable to walk, or even stand. Now, he silently thanked God that he had been spared the life of a cripple, reliant on others for his most basic needs.

False dawn was lighting the windows of his bedchamber and, despite the early hour, Lionel knew that sleep was done for him. The dream did not come every night but when it did, there was no rest for him. He swung his legs out of bed and reached for the complicated structure of flexible willow and leather that stood beside his bed. With practiced ease, he strapped it to his left leg. It attached to his thigh and shin, reaching as far as his ankle. Under his breeches and boots, it was invisible but provided support to that leg that had never fully recovered its strength or full mobility. Lionel's dancing days were done. He had not attempted to dance since his recovery and would not risk the humiliation of falling. His hair fell about his face, long and wild and he rubbed at the beard that now covered his jaw. Beyond the window, he could see the shadow-shrouded countryside around Thornhill castle. The dark woods which concealed the dell of the standing stones. The dell in which Thorpe had laid his trap, attempting to kill Lionel for reasons he had never admitted.

But, justice had not been served. Arthur was dead, unable to bear witness to events. And Thorpe's presence at the far end of the hunting line, some five hundred yards from Lionel's position, had been attested to by the Sir Reginald Cox, Baronet of Laleham. Lionel found himself grinding his teeth, jaw clenched in anger at the injustice that had been done against him. They had escaped justice thus far but he would find a way to take revenge. Except, that had been five years ago and he was no closer to that end. A tap came at the door of his bedchamber and Lionel smiled to himself grimly. Blackwood was almost psychically attuned to his master's needs.

"Come in, Blackwood," Lionel said.

The door opened and the butler came in. He was as broad as his master, though shorter. He walked with bowed legs and the slight, listing stride of a man more accustomed to the rolling deck of a ship. The only hair on his head was two thick, black eyebrows above a broken nose and a permanently squinting expression. Immaculately clad in Thornhill livery, he nevertheless resembled a highway brigand.

"Does Your Grace require assistance in dressing this morning?" he asked in a thick west country accent.

"No, Blackwood. I will accomplish that task myself."

"As I thought, Your Grace. I have therefore brought implements for the shaving of beards and cutting of hair," he noted.

Lionel rubbed at the beard, several weeks' worth of growth. "I have not requested grooming."

"As tonight is the night of the ball, the first Your Grace has hosted in a long time, I decided it was needed," Blackwood added, putting a basin and towels down on Lionel's bedside table.

Lionel chuckled, knowing that only a direct order would deter the man from what he saw as his duty. Five years of helping Lionel learn to walk again had reduced the social gulf between them. Lionel stood stiffly and limped to a chair before the window.

“If it must be done, then do it here. I would have a view while you work.”

Blackwood muttered to himself under his breath as he moved his gear to rest on the windowsill. Lionel suppressed a mischievous smile, knowing the move would provoke his manservant, who was by nature morose and fond of complaining.

“Whom have we had responses from to our invitations?” he asked.

Blackwood began reciting a list from memory of those who had accepted the invitations as he began to apply lathered soap to Lionel’s beard. One name, in particular, made Lionel put a hand to his arm to stop him.

“Did you say Sinclair? Cecilia Sinclair?”

“I did at that, Your Grace,” Blackwood replied, removing his arm from Lionel’s grip and recommencing the job of lathering.

“Whom is she to be accompanied by? A husband?”

“No, Your Grace. An uncle and an aunt. The Earl of Hamilton and his wife,” Blackwood corrected, unfolding a straight razor and tilting Lionel’s face to better catch the light.

“I have not seen her for... well, not since that day,” Lionel muttered.

He did not need to say which day he referred to. All who worked at Thornhill knew

that references to that day meant only one thing. The last time any kind of social occasion had been hosted at Thornhill Castle. Until now.

“She is presumably betrothed by now if she is not married.”

“Living with her aunt and uncle says to me it is neither,” Blackwood commented, “unless she married a pauper, that is to say.”

“Well reasoned. It is of no matter regardless. A woman like that could not have remained available for long. God, but she was beautiful. My eyes were full of Arabella at the time but she still struck me.”

Blackwood’s only comment on Lionel’s former betrothed was a snort that almost became a spit until he remembered himself. Instead, Blackwood muttered imprecations about Arabella Wycliff that Lionel was glad he only half heard. Another betrayal. Another injustice unpunished. Lionel put Arabella from his mind. Instead, he thought back to the first time he had met Cecilia Sinclair. He gazed out of the window, no longer aware of Blackwood or the room about him. Even the pain in his leg was lost in the backwoods of his consciousness. He remembered Cecilia’s cascading bronze hair. Her pale, delicate skin and the shimmering dress that seemed to have been made to accentuate her coloring perfectly. That first meeting had momentarily put Arabella from his mind. It had made him extremely uncomfortable when he realized.

The racing heart. The dry mouth and shivering stomach. Those were what the poets said a man and a woman experienced when they felt the kiss of true love. But he had never felt that for the beautiful, perfect Arabella. She had been like a work of art, appreciated but with detachment. Cecilia had been different and Lionel had been wracked with guilt when he understood the nature of his reaction. Those brown eyes. Had they been hazel? With lighter flecks that were almost gold? Was that his imagination, conjuring perfection that no woman could ever live up to?

“A handsome woman, I thought,” Blackwood added, turning Lionel’s head to shave the other side.

Lionel felt his heart thump in his chest. It was ludicrous to experience such excitement for a woman he had met only once, and that, several years ago. But it was true. Cecilia had been beautiful in a way that struck at his core. He remembered well her slender but curving figure. The very epitome of femininity. While he had known that Arthur’s aunt and uncle, the Sinclairs of Hamilton Hall, were invited to the ball, it had simply not occurred to him that they would bring their niece. Or that following the death of her brother, Cecilia would not be resident at Penrose any longer. Suddenly, he found himself looking forward to the event.

CHAPTER 3

THORNHILL

Cecilia watched the approach of Thornhill castle with trepidation. She sat in the carriage belonging to her uncle, the Earl of Hamilton, opposite him and next to her aunt Margaret. She wore diamonds in her mousy brown hair and pearls about her thin, over-long neck. Her dress matched the color of the pearls and the glinting diamonds. Uncle Rupert was resplendent in a waistcoat of red and an overcoat of purple with a ruby in the pin of his scarlet cravat. The carriage was new and from a coachbuilder with royal patronage. By contrast, Cecilia wore no jewels openly. A simple chain around her neck held a heavy signet ring intended for a man. It had belonged to her father and then to her brother. Her aunt and uncle did not know that Arthur's solicitor had quietly passed it to her when the Penrose estate had passed in its entirety to the Sinclairs of Hamilton. As well as Cecilia. She wore the same dress that had been new the last time she had attended a social event at Thornhill.

Now, however, its luster had faded as a result of repeated laundering. Repairs had been made, not visible but of which Cecilia was very conscious. By contrast with her aunt and uncle, she felt as though she were clothed in rags. The walls approached, ancient and stained by the years. The gates in those walls were of massive, fissured wood bound in black iron. Beyond was an open courtyard and two huge, oaken doors leading to the great hall that she remembered so well. She remembered the last time she had watched the castle approach. Arthur had been her companion then, seeming to enjoy her marveling at the grandeur of his friend's home. Cecilia felt her dear brother's loss as a physical wrench. It was as fresh now as it had been when his body had been brought back into the castle, along with the paralyzed form of Lionel

Grisham.

“Whatever is the matter, girl!” Margaret snapped, “You are being treated to a ball held at the home of a Duke. You could at least look as if you are grateful.”

“She is not, Margaret. My brother’s family never were,” Rupert muttered lazily, sounding bored, “they were not like us.”

Cecilia felt a flash of anger at the thinly veiled insult to her mother and father. But she knew well enough to keep her lips tightly sealed. Instead of replying to her uncle as she ought, she smiled tightly.

“I was thinking of Arthur,” she finally said.

“Yes. Irresponsible of him to go and get himself killed like that, leaving a burden for us to carry,” Margaret sighed.

“Well, it would seem odd if you were not here given the friendship between your brother and the Duke,” Rupert added, “just you remember your place. Speak when you are spoken to and do not make any social gaffes that might embarrass us.”

“I won’t, uncle,” Cecilia reassured, putting on a show of timidity that didn’t pass her aunt’s cynical eye.

Rupert, though, had already turned away, looking with interest at a couple alighting from a carriage ahead of them.

“I do believe that is the Chertsey Littletons. Do you see what she is wearing, Margaret? And he?” Rupert scoffed, looking the couple up and down.

Margaret smirked, nodding her agreement. Cecilia resolved not to look, not wanting

to join in with her aunt and uncle's shallow sniping. Dwelling on Arthur inevitably made her think of the man whose house this was. The Duke. Lionel Grisham. She wondered what her aunt and uncle would say if they knew he had once given her leave to use his first name. She licked her lips and smoothed her skirts. The man had been a revelation. She had not known that such giants existed. And with such handsome features. He was not a brute, but rather, a god. That idea brought on a blush and Aunt Margaret raised an eyebrow when she saw.

"Do you judge us, child?" she whispered, dangerously.

"Merely stuffy," Cecilia said quietly, fanning herself with her hand.

"Well, this place will air you out. Never have I set foot in such a drafty pile. Ridiculous that a man should wish to live in such a place. It might have been well for the Middle Ages but we are considerably more civilized now. Quite why the Duke would not adapt the place to the style of the Renaissance, I cannot think."

"It shows a deplorable lack of taste," Margaret nodded.

The carriage was coming to a halt and Rupert rapped on the roof with his cane.

"Further forward man!" he roared, "I will not alight behind the Littletons. Take us to the door!"

"We must get rid of the foolish man," Margaret tutted, "he has no concept of etiquette."

"He is extremely knowledgeable about horses and an expert driver of a number of conveyances. You could not ask for a finer coachman," Cecilia put in, unable to hold her tongue.

George, the driver, had a family of four to support and a sweet and gentle nature. Cecilia felt lucky to consider the man and his wife as friends and had spent many happy hours with his family in their little cottage on the Hamilton estate. But the look that her aunt directed at her would have frozen water to ice.

“And what, precisely, would you know about it?” she asked lowly.

Cecilia swallowed her first response and tried to look meek. She lived on the charity of her aunt and uncle, trying to avoid their ire because she depended on them. She had been left with nothing in Arthur’s will, a fact that had shocked her at the time. If Rupert and Margaret decided so, she would be without a home.

“Nothing, Aunt Margaret,” she said, folding her hands in her lap.

“Exactly. We shall fire the man after all and you will know that you are the reason. Dwell on that, young lady.”

Rupert harrumphed his approval as the carriage moved to a position opposite the entrance to the castle. A footman opened the door and Margaret alighted, followed by Rupert. Cecilia followed, smiling her thanks at the young servant. She looked up at George Preston, the driver, who winked at her when her aunt and uncle weren’t looking. He didn’t know that his livelihood was about to be snatched away. Cecilia resolved to help him, somehow. She followed her aunt and uncle through the grand entrance of the castle and into the daunting hall. It was as majestic and awe-inspiring as she remembered. This time the guests were not confined to the partitioned section beyond the painted screen. There looked to be far too many of them. They milled about the hall and a wave of noise flowed from them. Cecilia felt even more under-dressed as she looked around. Rupert and Margaret were greeting another couple, equally as resplendent as themselves. Cecilia quietly moved away, knowing that they would not wish to introduce her or even be associated with her. She allowed the crowd to hide her from them.

That brought a measure of relief but she still felt self-conscious about her dress. There was no one here that she knew. Indeed, most of her friends were not the kind of people who would be invited to soirees such as this. At Hamilton Hall, she lived among the servants and counted them among her most trusted friends. The tenants of the Hamilton estate were also good friends to her and most of them were either farmers or weavers. She tried to avoid attention but felt that eyes were upon her unceasingly.

Finally, she reached the edge of the milling throng of guests. A cool, shadowed alcove appeared and she stepped back into it. It was then that she saw him.

Lionel Grisham...

He was moving through the crowd which parted before him like the waves of the Red Sea. Head and shoulders above most other men at the gathering, he had the same coal-black hair that she remembered. It wasn't as short as it had been but flowed back to the nape of his neck. It gave him an exotic look, like an Eastern prince or an Indian rajah.

Emerald green eyes stabbed into the throng around him as he greeted his guests. He did not look like a host who was enjoying his ball, but rather that he would prefer to be anywhere else but here. She felt a pang of empathy at that moment. She too would rather be almost anywhere else. Unable to look away from him, she watched him move through the crowd, bending his head to speak to people, greeting them. She became hypnotized by him. His movements were careful and controlled with an underlying sense of power but with grace. As though he had learned through painful practice an awareness of his body that went beyond most people. It was as though he had total control over his musculature. It increased the sense of physical power that had been so attractive to her on their first meeting. As she watched, a man approached him from behind, greeting him and forcing him to turn suddenly.

Cecilia saw a sudden stiffness in the movement and a quickly controlled flinch of pain on his carefully controlled features. Then he was smiling politely, greeting the man, and inclining his head towards him in courteous acknowledgment. Cecilia wondered if she were the only one to have seen the pain that had clearly gripped Lionel at that moment. She wondered at its source. Was he ailing? Or suffering the ill effects of an injury? Did it have something to do with that fateful afternoon when the spring mist had brought about such a terrible accident? Brought about the death of her brother at the hands of the man she now watched. For the longest time, she had tried to forget it, to tell herself that a hunt was a dangerous place and accidents of this sort did happen. It was in God's hands. But she could not rid herself of the belief that her brother had been killed and this man walked free. Accident or not, if there had been no hunt, then Arthur would still be alive and she would not have spent the last five years living as a servant in the house of her aunt and uncle.

She wanted to be angry with him. Wanted to hate him. But something about him drew her. He was magnetic in his charisma. Looking at him made her heart quicken and her breath release in short gasps. She knew that she was blushing and willed herself to stop. But the sight of him brought only illicit thoughts of what he must look like beneath his clothes. It was a scandalous thought, but it would not be dislodged. His body would be ridged and hard as steel. Muscles like smooth-sided boulders bulging beneath skin, itself covered in a fine layer of dark hair. The body of a barbarian prince, a descendant of the warrior nomads who had terrorized the Romans and scourged the continent of Europe.

Savage and prideful. Fierce and passionate.

Cecilia almost gasped aloud when Lionel's head turned and their eyes met. For a moment, there was no one else in the room. The echoing babble of conversation faded to silence. The crowd melted into the stone, leaving only Cecilia and Lionel. The space between them became charged. Cecilia felt she could reach out and touch the air, that it must be tangible with the energy that thrummed between them.

Her blush deepened and her eyes widened as he took a step towards her. But another guest stepped in front of him, escorting a matronly lady with silver hair piled atop her head. The contact was broken as Lionel directed his attention to them and began again the charade of greeting and mingling. Cecilia was left with a hot but empty sensation in her stomach. A feeling of loss and of need. She wanted those eyes on her again. Wanted his hands on her. His lips.

“My dear lady, are you quite well?” inquired a voice.

Cecilia looked to see a young man with brown hair combed forward in the popular Roman style. He held a wine glass and a smile of concern and... something else. His gray eyes were direct, never leaving her face.

“I am... feeling somewhat... hot... I mean, it is crowded in here. I feel the need for a breath of fresh air,” Cecilia stammered her reply.

“Then allow me to escort you to a quieter room. There must be a veritable maze of them in this place,” the man replied.

“I am sure I can find my way. I thank you for your concern,” Cecilia replied hurriedly, not wanting to be escorted, simply wanting to be alone.

“Very well. I am Sir Gerald Knightley, by the way, of Brockwill. And you are?”

“Cecilia Sinclair of Penrose,” Cecilia replied, giving the name of her parent’s seat rather than the place where she lived with her aunt and uncle. Hamilton Hall had never truly felt like home.

“ Penrose ? Indeed. A tragic tale. We really must talk during the course of the evening, about Penrose.”

Cecilia frowned, wondering what this could mean. But the need to escape that room had become overwhelming. She wanted a cooling drink and a breath of fresh air. She wanted to escape the magnetism of Lionel Grisham, to escape the confusion he wrought upon her. The man she reviled for the killing of her brother. The man who made her heart hammer in her chest and her body tingle. She stammered what she hoped was an acceptable goodbye and walked rapidly away, looking for a door that would take her from the great hall and the Duke of Thornhill.

CHAPTER 4

Lionel hoped that his astonishment had not been obvious to those who crowded around him. When his eyes had met those of the woman with the rich, bronze hair and fathomless brown eyes, he had recognized her instantly. That was Cecilia Sinclair. When he had first seen her on the arm of her brother, she had been a girl scarcely into womanhood. Yet she had possessed the charisma of a goddess, had drawn him like a moth to a flame. That girl had eclipsed even Arabella, whom he had believed to be the paragon of womanhood at that time. In five years, the girl had stepped through the doorway of womanhood and now commanded the room beyond. She had matured, her body acquiring the curves so enticing to a male. Her face had grown into its beauty, wearing it like a fine ballgown with confidence and assurance. She had stood out amid the crowd like a beacon fire, drawing him to her.

The constant interruptions of his guests had been an annoyance, like the tiny insects that emerged from the mere in summer to bite and swarm. Like those insects, Lionel had wanted to swat the impudent intruders aside, clear his path to reach Cecilia. Whether that was to look into her eyes, talk to her, or simply offer her his heartfelt condolences for the loss of her brother, he could not say.

In the wake of the murder, he had wandered a fever dream for weeks, straying in and out of consciousness. Blackwood had been his constant companion and nurse, but as time passed, so had the opportunity to reach out to Cecilia and share the grief they both wrestled with. Lionel felt guilty over that oversight. An eventual letter to her had received no reply. Lionel had then become obsessed with his quest for revenge and the demanding, draining task of teaching his body to walk again. Only occasionally had thoughts of Cecilia returned to him. Even less occasionally came thoughts of

love, which had once been uppermost on his mind.

But those had been the times before Arabella had crushed his heart and tossed it to the side of the road. Before her betrayal, following hard on the heels of Lord Thorpe. Seeing Cecilia across the room had been the first he had truly thought on her for years.

As a man whose name he did not know and had not remembered from being given it, pestered him with demands for small talk, he looked back to the alcove where Cecilia had been standing. She was no longer there. Her absence struck him as an almost physical blow. A sense of loss yawned within him that he had not expected and he told himself it was pure foolishness. A young man with fashionable hair and dress was standing in her place, looking towards a door that led out to the west wing of the castle. Presently, he glanced around and then quickly walked towards it. Lionel frowned. The young man was a callow youth, shallow and privileged in a way that Lionel disapproved of. His invitation had been necessary as his family was prominent in the county set. But it did not sit well with Lionel that such a man was his guest.

The man slipped through the door and Lionel wondered if that was where Cecilia had vanished off to. He pursed his lips, answering absently to the small talk being directed at him. Not the nameless man now but another, made anonymous by his similarity to his predecessor. He forced a bright smile and put energy into his voice, looking at the man directly.

“Would you excuse me for a moment, good sir? A matter requires my attention but I look forward to hearing about your...” he racked his memory to recall what the man had been talking about just moments before, “...park in due course. Come and find me in a short while, if you will.”

It was enough to allow Lionel to disengage and he strode briskly towards the west wing door. The guests had not yet all arrived so his absence for a short while would

not be noticed. There would be an hour or so of mingling and chaos as the guests mixed and flowed together, renewing acquaintanceships, and forging new ones. Before the dancing began, they would expect a word from their host. He had perhaps an hour.

Face set and stride purposeful, none sought to interrupt him or divert him, for which he was grateful. The stop-start cadence of moving among the throng made his leg ache abominably. It took a huge amount of willpower not to limp or show the pain each step gave him. He was overdue a dose of the poppy juice and his body was crying out for its soothing milk.

His father had taught him from a very young age that he was not born into a life that permitted the display of weaknesses so freely. It was a lesson he strictly adhered to throughout his lifetime. The one time he set this rule aside, his betrothed had abandoned him. Ever since, he had sworn never to let anyone close to him again.

He put the thoughts of it to the back of his mind for now. It was not difficult for Cecilia was still lodged at the front of it, unable to be moved. He hoped that meeting her once again, speaking to her, would exorcize the feelings which the sight of her had engendered in him. No woman could possibly live up to the vision that she represented. He would speak to her and find her to be shallow, vapid, unintelligent, or simply dull. Then he would not think of her again.

Cecilia walked a maze of stone hallways. She fought to recall the tour she had been given by Lionel's curious manservant, Blackwood. He had been eloquent and knowledgeable and yet spoke in the vernacular of the roughest sailor. Looked forbidding and angry but treated her as though she were made of fine porcelain. But, the horror of events that had unfolded that day had driven her recollection of the tour from her mind. Five years had erased any memory she had and she had become thoroughly lost. Realizing that simply wandering randomly was doing her no good at all, she stopped and sat in a window seat that overlooked a small square of paving at

the center of which was a circular pool. Shrubs were planted around the pool and four paths wove towards it from the four sides of the square. Each seemed to be carpeted in thick, lush moss. The sight of the greenery and the rippling water stirred by a breeze was peaceful.

“If only you were here to share it with me, Arthur,” she murmured, feeling unutterable sadness welling within her at the thought of him.

“Do I find you talking to yourself? Or a suitor hidden in a cupboard?” came a voice.

Cecilia stood as Sir Gerald Knightley stepped into view. He held two glasses of wine. The smile on his face had become smug. It was the look of a boy unused to being denied, always expecting to be given everything he wanted. He sipped from one of the glasses and offered the other to Cecilia.

“I spoke to myself and I rarely take wine, good sir. Thank you for the offer.”

“Oh, but you cannot come to such an event and not imbibe. It is practically the law,” Sir Gerald continued, moving closer.

“I will not, thank you,” Cecilia replied, stepping back but prevented from moving further by the window seat.

Sir Gerald moved smoothly into a position to block her escape, moving closer, his smile deepening. Cecilia began to feel extremely uncomfortable, moving along the window seat until she was backed into a corner formed by the window and the wall.

“I think that you wanted me to follow you. You advertised your desire for solitude plainly enough. Well, here we are. Two young people. All alone. None to judge us.”

“Only ourselves,” Cecilia muttered. “I must return to my aunt and uncle.”

“Oh, but we have not discussed Penrose yet,” Sir Gerald added.

“There is nothing to discuss. It is my uncle’s property now. You must direct your interest to him.”

“Your uncle?” Sir Gerald seemed surprised, pausing in his advance for a moment.

“Yes, the estate passed to my uncle following the death of my brother, the Earl of Penrose.”

Sir Gerald’s smile deepened and Cecilia had the distinct impression that he was silently laughing at her. She could not think what it was he found so amusing.

“Allow me to suggest that if you and I were to become better acquainted, that situation might change,” he muttered cryptically.

Cecilia was momentarily intrigued, until he stepped closer, wine glass held out before him. She moved sharply to try and escape him and bumped the hand holding the glass.

She could not say if what happened next was the result of that accidental contact or had been deliberate, but the glass was suddenly emptied over the bodice of her dress. Sir Gerald stepped back, his wrist twisting as though he had deliberately upended the glass over her. But his mouth was open in shock and he hurriedly put the glass down and took out a handkerchief.

“Miss Sinclair, I do apologize. How clumsy of me. Here, allow me to help.”

Cecilia squealed as he clumsily dabbed with his handkerchief at the wet patch on her bosom. Squealed because he pressed firmly and it was clear that the act was merely a cover for placing his hand upon her breast. His lips came next, his face looming as he

leaned in to kiss her. When she turned her head away, she felt them fasten upon her throat and reacted in a way that she had learned from the farm girls on the Hamilton estate. They had told her how to treat a bullish young man who would not take no for an answer. Seizing Sir Gerald by the front of his coat, she sharply lifted her knee into his groin. Breath rushed from the young man and his eyes bulged. When she released him, he staggered back and then fell, hands clutching his bruised manhood. The sound of dashing footsteps reached Cecilia as she picked up her skirts to run herself. But Sir Gerald reached out and seized her ankle, gripping with ferocious tenacity. Cecilia looked down to see his face contorted into a rictus of fury. He was staggering to his feet.

“What goes on here?” a voice suddenly demanded, sounding from down the hallway.

“This cow assaulted me, Your Grace!” Sir Gerald wheezed, getting to his feet and releasing Cecilia, “Expel her from the house immediately, she’s nothing but a common whore!”

Lionel moved with the swiftness of rolling thunder. One moment he stood in the hallway and the next he had lifted Sir Gerald from his feet by his shirt front. Sir Gerald was swung through the air to slam into a wall, his feet six inches above the ground.

“Apologize or I will call you out,” Lionel hissed between bared teeth.

“I... I apologize!” Sir Gerald stammered, eyes wide with fright.

Such was the grip that Lionel had on him, that his face was darkening from red to maroon, the blood prevented from reaching his face by the terrible choke in which he was held. The Duke released him, and as he stepped back, Cecilia saw his right leg buckle. For a moment he staggered, hand behind him seeking the support of the window seat. Cecilia moved instinctively, coming forward to support him with a hand

to his back and another to his elbow. Sir Gerald looked at them with wide eyes for a moment and then ran back the way he had come, towards the hall. Lionel's breath hissed between his teeth, sharp and pained. Cecilia felt the strength of him where her hand rested against his back. The arm which she supported bulged with muscle. Standing this close to him, she was overpowered by his physicality.

This was a bull of a man. The thought made her giddy. By comparison, Sir Gerald was a lowing calf, a boy who could be snapped in two by Lionel without effort. She helped him to sit, taking a seat next to him, still with one hand on his back and the other on his arm.

"Are you quite well, Your Grace?" she asked.

"I am, Miss Sinclair. I recall once giving you leave to use my given name. I should like it very much if you did," he said, voice tight with pain.

He clutched at his right thigh, fingers kneading the muscle.

"You remember me?" Cecilia asked, surprised.

"Of course I do," Lionel added, looking at her for the first time. "The sister of my oldest and dearest friend. How could I forget?"

That reminded Cecilia of Arthur and how this man had not even acknowledged the loss he had caused by his incompetence. It sparked anger within her. Even now, he did not take the opportunity to tell her how sorry he was. She stood, suddenly acutely aware of their proximity and the fact that her hands were upon his person. She knew that she should rejoin the gathered guests but her dress was stained in the most obvious way, a splash of dark red wine across her front.

"Thank you, Lionel. For your gallantry. I should return to..."

“Like that? Surely not,” Lionel replied, unsmiling.

She remembered that about him. Remembered how Arthur had joked about his serious friend.

“I... I cannot stay here. With you, I mean. It would not be...”

“I find myself suffering an acute attack of my old injury, Miss Sinclair. And you find yourself in acute need of a change of clothes. There is female attire in the castle, the Sunday best of one of the maids, she is about your size. If you would help me to the servant’s wing?”

Cecilia was torn. Part of her wanted nothing more than to remain in this man’s company. To be close to him again. The kind of closeness that would come inevitably from helping him to walk. Part of her wanted to be away from him. Wanted to be left alone to hate him for what he had done. That hate was hard to keep sharp in his company. His handsome face and titanesque presence dulled it. Her attraction to it eroded it like storm-tossed waves battering cliffs. She straightened her shoulders, his eyes still fixed on her. It felt like a physical touch and made her realize how much she yearned for that touch.

“Very well,” she found herself saying, at once thrilled and appalled.

CHAPTER 5

Lionel cursed his injury as he limped along the hallways of Thornhill, supported by Cecilia. The wooden support that he secretly wore was the only thing keeping him from falling to the floor but it could do nothing for the pain. He cursed the cruelty of the lordling who had sought to force himself on Cecilia, provoking an anger in Lionel that he had barely managed to contain. The young man would be bruised, but had Lionel allowed his rage to escape, it would have resulted in murder.

The scent of Cecilia's perfume made a muddle of his head, it was floral and citrus at the same time. Intoxicating and unbearably feminine. Stubbornly, he tried to shut it out of his perception. He also tried to ignore the feel of her soft body in such close proximity to his own. She supported him with a slender arm about his waist and he could feel her hip pressing into his. At once intimate and maddeningly remote. He wanted more of that touch and wanted to be far away from her at the same time.

"I am sorry to be such a burden to one of my guests," he grunted as they climbed a set of stone steps just wide enough for the two of them.

"It is no trouble. I would not see you left stricken."

"It flares up without warning. I can be perfectly fine, and then..."

"I noticed the way you were walking in the Great Hall and wondered," Cecilia murmured.

Lionel looked at her. She was looking down, concentrating on the steps ahead. Her

profile was lovely, an exercise in perfection. Tight with concentration as her features were, she looked both intelligent and intent. Her skin bore the olive shade of the Mediterranean. Arthur had jokingly claimed that the Sinclairs boasted a bloodline that stretched back to the Romano-British. In his sister, the sun-kissed skin tone was more pronounced than it had been in Arthur, leading Lionel to wonder if the jest did not have a basis in fact.

“You were watching me?” he said, directly.

“I saw you,” Cecilia corrected.

They reached the top of the steps and Lionel directed her to the left. A broad hallway led directly to the servant’s wing, concealed from the rest of the castle by tall, double doors. Servants were entering and leaving through those doors, laden with platters and trays of glasses, keeping his guests watered and fed.

“We should not get in their way. They have enough to do already,” Lionel grunted.

He pointed to a door halfway along the corridor and Cecilia helped him to the chamber beyond. It was tiled with a flagstone floor and small windows. Shelves covered two walls flanking the window, filled with sealed bottles and jugs of cider and beer. Crates sat beneath the window and Lionel gratefully sat on one. He thought about her words. She had seen him but had not been watching him. Seen him closely enough to note his gait and deduce that he still bore an injury. Did it remind her of Arthur? Did she blame him? It mattered not. Should not matter, because he should not care if she blamed him or not. But he found that he did care. He did not want to be badly thought of by this woman. It mattered to him how she saw him. It was utter foolishness but he could not shake the feeling.

“I... I was not responsible for your brother’s death,” he murmured finally.

Cecilia stepped back, hands clutching each other at her waist.

“I did not say that you were,” she said coldly.

It told Lionel all that he needed to know. The frost in her voice stabbed at him but he told himself that he should expect nothing less. Until Thorpe’s guilt was proven and the world knew what had really occurred that fateful day, Lionel had to carry the burden alone. Without proof, it would simply look as though he were squirming away from accountability.

“Forgive me, I thought that you must. That was the judgment of the coroner’s court, after all.”

“My brother was the victim of a terrible accident. That is what they said,” Cecilia replied tightly, “your gun killed him. It was not your fault but at the same time...”

“It was not,” Lionel blurted and immediately wanted the words back.

“It was not?” Cecilia asked, raising her eyebrow, “then whose?”

Lionel grimaced against a bayonet of pain in his leg, clutching at it.

“I cannot say. Better to leave things as they were. I am to blame. Forget that I spoke,” he muttered between gritted teeth.

Cecilia chewed her bottom lip, looking towards the door as though giving thought to leaving. Lionel suddenly wished that she would. The pain had weakened him, eroding his resolve. It was a most effective sapper, burrowing beneath his defenses to render them useless.

“I will not, Lionel. Because what you have said is so... odd. I did blame you. It was

your hunt and, I thought, your gun. If it was not, then please tell me the truth of it. I deserve that much.”

“I have,” Lionel finished brusquely.

He levered himself to his feet, locking his right knee against a sudden weakness that threatened to put him on the floor.

“I must get back to my guests. I will send for the maid who is your size and she will take care of you. If you wish a carriage to take you back to Hamilton Hall, I will provide it. Simply, ask Blackwood.”

He bowed his head to her, more to hide the pain on his face than from courtesy, and tried to move past her to the door. But she stepped in front of him. Lionel looked up into a face wracked with uncertainty, but eyes that were firm.

“I am sorry, Lionel, but I must insist,” she continued with only the tiniest waver in her voice.

“Insist?” Lionel asked quietly.

He could not recall the last time anyone had stood up to him in this way, let alone use a word like insist . The Dukedom of Thornhill was ancient and close to two royal dynasties. Even the likes of York and Wales looked upon his house as something close to equals. For this young woman from a middling family in both wealth and rank to insist ...

“Yes,” Cecilia maintained, her resolve only spoiled slightly by the sudden licking of dry lips.

“I will not be insisted upon by anyone. Not by the King or the Regent. Or by the Lord

God himself, Miss Sinclair,” Lionel growled in a voice hardened from steel to stone by a combination of anger and pain.

He moved again but so did she. There was determination on her face and fear also.

“Who do you think you are?” Lionel demanded, livid now.

“I am the sister of the man you killed. Except you suggest that you did not, which begs the question, who did? I have a right to know!”

“I misspoke!” Lionel raged, moving to the side only to be blocked for a third time.

He seized Cecilia by her upper arms, trying to move her aside, gently but firmly. His right leg chose that moment to buckle once more. Lionel cried out and Cecilia seized him instead. Lionel fell, dragging Cecilia with him. At the last moment, he managed to get a hand to the floor which slapped into his palm. His weight was carried on that arm instead of falling fully onto Cecilia.

He found his face mere inches from hers, brown eyes staring into his. Her scent filled his head, making him feel reckless. Lionel did not know who initiated the kiss.

As he lowered his head to press his lips to hers, he found her head lifting to meet him. The touch was soft at first, her lips pliant and warm. Then it firmed as passion grew within both of them. Lionel pressed down and Cecilia whimpered beneath him. He felt her arms go about his body, tentative at first, as though she did not know how to touch a man. But then she gained confidence, as though the more she touched him, the more she learned. Her hand roamed down his back, fingers pressing, exploring his body. It responded, muscles flexing and firming against her soft, delicate curves.

That brought gasps from Cecilia and renewed ferocity in her kisses. Lionel found himself kissing her cheek, then her ear, biting at the lobe and making her squeak. He

impatiently tugged at the neck of her dress to expose her throat. It was white, blemish-free, perfect .

The softness of her skin made him want to moan aloud, such was the thrill of pleasure that ran through his body. The taste, the texture, her scent, all inflamed his senses. With his free hand, he caressed her neck, then her breasts which were trapped against his chest. Cecilia was whispering, barely audible, a single word over and over. An affirmation, a consent to be touched. His hand followed the line of her ribs to her waist and then down to her thigh. She pressed herself up against him and Lionel could feel his body responding fiercely. Cecilia gasped and moaned, writhing beneath him. Lionel wanted to tear the dress from her body to explore her nakedness with his hands, his lips, his tongue. Nothing was more important in that moment than seeing and hearing her pleasure.

From outside came Blackwood's voice raised in command.

"Fetch a fresh bottle from those brought up from the cellar, if you please. They need more wine aloft."

Lionel's head lifted from where he had bent it to mouth at Cecilia's breast through her dress. The room Blackwood had ordered a servant to was the one in which he and Cecilia lay. He pushed himself up, Cecilia's head lifting with him to continue the kissing. Lionel smiled until the pain in his leg hit him.

"They are coming in here," he whispered urgently.

Cecilia's eyes opened wide and she hastily scrambled to her feet. Lionel was slower but he was looking around the room as the sound of hurried footsteps grew louder, coming towards the door. He grabbed Cecilia by the hand and pulled her towards a corner of the room where two shelves met at a right angle. They could just squeeze between and be concealed by the shelves and the shadows they cast. He knew that

someone with sharp eyes would see through the hiding place in a moment but hoped that a harassed servant would not look too closely.

The door opened and Lionel noticed Cecilia take a deep breath and put her hand over her mouth, holding it. Johnstone, one of the footmen, came in, looked around for a moment, and then went to the shelves directly in front of where the two of them hid. He found himself holding his breath too as the man drew nearer and reached for a wine bottle at the level of Lionel's face which, once removed, would reveal him. But as the man reached for the bottle, Blackwood barked from the doorway.

"Not that one, man! Hell's teeth but His Grace will have the cat o'nine tails out if you serve that vinegar to his guests. Get the burgundy from the crate. Quick now!"

The man began gathering bottles from a crate on the other side of the room and hurried out. Lionel breathed again. He quickly became angry at himself for the awful risk he had taken. And for what? For a kiss and a fumble with a beautiful woman. An extraordinarily beautiful woman. But that did not matter. He could not risk a scandal and did not desire a wife. The kind of trust required to bring a woman into his heart was more than he could give. He extricated himself from the hiding place, followed shortly by Cecilia.

"Come, I will take you to where you may change your clothes," he said brusquely, heading for the door.

"Are you angry with me?" Cecilia asked in a small voice.

"I am angry with myself. I apologize. I do not know what came over me," he muttered.

"Nor I! A moment of madness for both of us," Cecilia replied quickly.

“Indeed. Let us see that it is not repeated. I am not seeking a wife.”

He opened the door a crack after listening for a moment. When he was sure it was safe to emerge, he opened the door and beckoned Cecilia to follow him. He limped still but would not ask for help this time. He wanted to maintain a distance from Cecilia lest her beauty overcome his defenses again.

A moment of searching brought him to Blackwood, marshaling his army of servants from the kitchen. Lionel explained Cecilia’s predicament and asked for a change of clothes. Blackwood showed no surprise but immediately set to the task he had been ordered to. In the bustle of the kitchen, Cecilia looked back at Lionel as Blackwood led her from the room. Their eyes met and he saw the same regret on her face that he felt.

He turned away, shutting the door on that emotion, telling himself that it was over and he was better off for it. His life was not made for romance or love.

His sole purpose, ever since the night five years ago, was vengeance.

CHAPTER 6

Cecilia changed out of her spoiled clothes and into the dress of a maid called Peggy. It fitted her well, a plain dress of wool and cotton that would not be suitable for mingling in a ballroom.

Her ballgown was taken away by Peggy to be laundered for her and she had asked Blackwood about the possibility of a carriage to take her back to Hamilton Hall. She didn't know what her aunt and uncle would make of it. They would not miss her but would not take kindly to anything remotely smelling of scandal. Their niece needing to leave before the ball had truly gotten underway and not in her own clothes would be scandal enough. No proof of any wrongdoing existed but the circumstances were unusual enough that the gossipmongers of the ton would certainly invent their own. Blackwood had instructed her to remain in Peggy's room until he was ready to take her to the stable yard and the carriage. Cecilia sat on a wooden chair beside the bed, hands folded in her lap, and waited.

The room was simple, larger than the accommodation given to servants at Hamilton Hall. There was a bed, a wardrobe, and a dressing table and chair. A small window looked out over a garden. Her own quarters at Hamilton Hall comprised what had once been a storeroom. Furniture had been put into the room for her but no other accommodation had been made. It was cold and drafty, never meant for human comfort.

Cecilia's thoughts went to the master of this house. She wondered at the sheer insanity that had gripped them both. Or was it merely an attraction so strong that it battered down the defenses of modesty and propriety? They had behaved abominably

but she could not bring herself to regret it. Except, Lionel Grisham was the man who had killed her brother. How could she consider making love with him? She was not an animal, able to indulge in such an act without thought or emotion. But, then again, that was precisely how she had behaved. Hadn't she?

The feel of his body against her body, his lips against her own, filled her memory. It was still vivid. She could even recall the scent of him, the musky cologne that screamed masculinity. The woody aroma that came from his leather boots and his hair, speaking of time spent out of doors. The hardness of his physique, and in particular... Cecilia found herself blushing furiously. That had been a surprise. She was educated enough to know how sexual reproduction worked, the mechanics of it. But, it had never occurred to her exactly how it would feel. That pressure against her had been monumental, even a little frightening. A tingle swept through her that made her clench her legs together and curl up her toes. It was a wonderful feeling and brought on by the memory of Lionel's powerful form. She had been helpless before him. Had he so desired, he could have ravaged the clothes from her body. Rendered her naked and then there would have been no barrier between his hungry, insatiable yearning and her maidenhead.

She fanned her face with one hand, trying to think of anything else, not wanting to be blushing when Blackwood returned for her. The handle of the door turned and she spun to the window to hide her face.

"Miss Sinclair! What on earth!" exclaimed Sir Gerald Knightley.

Cecilia whirled at the voice.

"Cecilia! Explain yourself this instant!" her uncle snapped.

He stood behind Sir Gerald in the doorway. And behind him was her aunt, face crimson, and mouth open and aghast. Cecilia stood, frozen to the spot as Sir Gerald

sauntered into the room. His feigned shock was replaced with a smug grin that she had come to recognize as his customary expression. He kept his back to her uncle so that he could not see it.

“I... I... wine was spilled on my dress. Lionel... I mean His Grace kindly offered to let me change my clothes,” she stammered.

“Lionel is it!” Uncle Rupert exclaimed, “well, I see all too well what has been going on here. You were presumably going to rejoin the guests dressed like a servant. Did you think it would be a good joke to play on us?”

“The very notion! Oh, I have never been so mortified!” Aunt Margaret gasped, crowding closer, eyes going wider as her mouth became more pursed.

She and Rupert pushed their way into the room alongside Sir Gerald, closing the door behind them.

“I was not planning on going back to the ball dressed like this,” Cecilia replied with indignation, “in fact, His Grace has arranged for a carriage to take me back to Hamilton Hall, as well as for my dress to be laundered.”

“Oh, we know all about the dress, young lady,” Aunt Margaret snapped, “that is what led us to you. It is fortunate that Sir Gerald caught a servant with your dress after becoming lost in this maze of a house. And recognized it too. He alerted us that something untoward was going on.”

Cecilia glared at Sir Gerald who had put on a look of concern now that the other two could see his face. He frowned and nodded as Aunt Margaret spoke.

“The dress was torn, I observed,” he noted somberly. “Naturally, I feared the worst.”

“It was not torn!” Cecilia retorted.

Then she recalled the fall and subsequent tryst between herself and Lionel. In that confusion, could her dress have been ripped? How would it seem to an outsider that a young woman disappears with a Duke into a backroom of his home and emerges with a torn dress?

“Do not lie! Tell us what you have been up to!” Aunt Margaret chided.

“Tell us what that blackguard Thornhill made you do...” Uncle Rupert added gravely.

“You are among friends and safe now,” Sir Gerald chimed in without a hint of the lie he was telling.

“That sinful man!” Aunt Margaret gasped theatrically.

There came a rap at the door which Uncle Rupert whirled to and snatched open. Blackwood was on the other side, looking surprised for a moment.

“Miss Sinclair, your carriage is prepared, as is your return journey,” he declared with marvelous equanimity, choosing to completely ignore the situation.

“Pah! I do not think so. Send for your master at once!” Uncle Rupert spat. “She shall be returning home, but not in any conveyance of Thornhill’s, I can assure you.”

“And we will not see him in this... this dingy little room. Quite why he chose to hide away my niece in such a place is beyond me. What he intended here is all too obvious. We will receive him in his private study, away from the other guests. Convey us there, then run to your master,” Aunt Margaret added haughtily.

If Blackwood was offended by the insinuations or surprised, he didn't show it. He merely bowed and withdrew from the room without uttering a sound. Moments later, a groom appeared to escort Cecilia and the others. Uncle Rupert and Aunt Margaret flanked Cecilia as though she were a prisoner, marching her through the labyrinthine stone hallways of Thornhill Castle with Sir Gerald following behind.

They were taken up several flights of stairs and shown into a stone-walled chamber with a high beamed ceiling. A large wooden desk stood in front of a fireplace the height of two tall men standing one atop the other. The room gleamed in the light cast by the fire, the deepest ruby. Bookcases coated the walls with reading tables and chairs scattered about. A rifle hung in a space between those bookcases. Cecilia looked at it as she was shown to a seat, practically pushed into it by Aunt Margaret.

"You are most fortunate to have a benefactor like Sir Gerald take an interest in you," she hissed lowly, "noticing how you were seduced into leaving the great hall by that nefarious man. Had he not, I shudder to think what might have happened!"

"Now, now, my lady, I merely acted in what I saw as the best interests of a vulnerable young woman. The Duke is an odd man—who knows what such a man might be capable of," Sir Gerald shrugged smoothly.

That was the final blow.

Cecilia could not put up with this boyish act of his any longer. "Or rather, such a man as you! It was you after all that caused my dress to be ruined," she finally snapped, anger shaping her tone.

The slap from Aunt Margaret snapped her head to the side and left her cheek stinging. Cecilia gaped at her aunt in shock. Margaret was white, lips pressed together and eyes blazing.

“Don’t you dare cast aspersions on an honorable young man when you are the one who was caught red-handed, about to enter into very dishonorable behavior indeed!”

“I was not!” Cecilia protested.

“And still you remain so impertinent!” Rupert roared. “You have disgraced yourself and us. I will not hear another word from your mouth. Not one! I will cast you out and leave you to the poor house otherwise. Ungrateful child!”

Cecilia suppressed her anger at the injustice of the situation. Tears welled in her eyes and she blinked them away furiously, biting her lip. They were not tears of fear or distress. Those tears were hot with rage. She had been assaulted and the man responsible was covering his crime by attaching it to another, casting Cecilia’s character into question at the same time.

Rupert was more than capable, she believed, of making good on his threat. She knew that her aunt and uncle resented her presence in their home—her dependence on them. Often, she had wondered why they continued to let her live with them at Hamilton Hall at all. They could very easily have moved her into a cottage on the estate, there were many such places which had once belonged to weavers until the mills had begun to erode that trade. She had listened to her uncle bemoaning the loss of income many times, yet had never acted on it.

What she truly wanted now was to get up and walk out of the room, never to see either of them again. Alas, she could not. There was nowhere for her to go. Her brother’s estates were in the hands of her uncle. The home she had shared with Arthur was let out by Rupert, to recoup the cost of keeping Cecilia, according to him. And if she were without a home or means to support herself, she would be vulnerable to a man like Sir Gerald. So, she bit her tongue, clasped her hands in her lap, and endured.

Suddenly, the doors to the study flung open and Lionel stormed into the chamber.

“I am informed you have invited yourselves into my private study. I would like to know why,” he grated as he took a seat behind the enormous desk, hands planted on its polished surface.

“I am the one to demand, Your Grace,” Uncle Rupert shot back. “I found my niece in your servant’s quarters, dressed like a peasant because her own clothes were torn. From what activity, I know not, but you were seen with her last, alone. What is your explanation!”

Lionel glared at him. Rupert had risen, clutching his lapels as though making a speech. The glare dropped him to his seat as effectively as a blow to the chin. Lionel’s eyes narrowed and he looked from Rupert to Cecilia. She felt a chill run through her body to be so regarded and hoped desperately that he did not think her in league with her aunt and uncle.

“Who told you her dress was ripped?” he asked quietly.

“I stopped a maid who was carrying it. I recognized the garment, having spoken to Miss Sinclair a few moments earlier,” Sir Gerald began.

“And why were you in the servant’s wing?” Lionel asked.

“I was lost,” he replied with a smile. “This is doubtless such a big house. Such a maze.”

Lionel’s eyes went back to Cecilia and she felt herself weighed and measured. She reminded herself that she should despise this man. He had killed Arthur! His cryptic statement to the contrary was meaningless unless he could offer proof. She had to keep that image of him in mind, because otherwise... otherwise, his magnetism would draw her like a siren song. His beauty, his physical perfection, the way he made her knees turn to jelly and her heart fly, she would be lost to him forever.

“I see. You believe that Miss Sinclair is compromised,” Lionel muttered.

“Of course she is!” Margaret almost shrieked, “And we demand satisfaction!”

Lionel smiled but without joy or mirth. “You wish to challenge me to a duel, madam? Or your husband? Or this tomfool?”

Margaret shifted in her seat and Rupert remained silent when she glanced at him. Sir Gerald cleared his throat.

“I would defend Miss Sinclair’s honor with my body. With my life even. Such is the duty of a gentleman. But I would always strive to resolve differences peaceably. It appears it is in your nature to resort to other measures.”

Lionel’s face grew dark. “Speak plainly, sir. You accuse me of being a violent man?”

“You are a man... of violence . I can personally attest to that. As can the late nephew of my good friends, the Sinclairs,” Sir Gerald replied matter-of-factly.

Lionel rose, hands still planted on the desk. He loomed above Sir Gerald and his face was one ready for murder. It seemed though, that his grip on the desk was anchoring him, keeping him from the other man’s throat.

“Enough of this posturing. You have been caught, Your Grace, in a compromising position with my niece. My husband and I, as her guardians, demand satisfaction, or...”

“Or what ?” Lionel remarked, head whipping in her direction.

“Or we will ruin you,” Rupert stated calmly, and with a subtle smile exchanged with Sir Gerald.

CHAPTER 7

Lionel paced the dark, chilly hallways of Thornhill Castle. He seethed inside, seeing the trap that had been set for him. A trap he had blundered into. He did not understand the connection between Sir Gerald and the Sinclairs. They were very clearly allies. Had Sir Gerald simply seized the moment after being caught in the act of assaulting Cecilia, turning the tables on Lionel? Or was there a prior connection between the lot of them?

Cecilia must be part of it, he reasoned. She had been sent to entrap him. And for a very obvious purpose. That purpose had been spoken, coldly and clearly by Lady Margaret. Marry Cecilia or the scandal will become public. Lionel could not afford the distraction of a scandal, it would interfere with his plans. Nor did he want to drag his family name through the mud a second time. After the tragic death of Arthur, there had been much speculation about what really happened. The fact that Lionel's truth was not believed was infuriating. The fact that the lie that everyone accepted as reality cast Lionel as the villain, shooting Arthur either by accident or design, was utterly maddening. The Sinful Duke, he had been labeled.

When the ultimatum had been given, Cecilia had uttered a sob and risen from her seat to run from the room. Her aunt and uncle had demanded that she return and Sir Gerald had risen to pursue her. Lionel had come around the desk and casually shoved the young man back into his seat, stating that he would summon servants to find the young lady. He then left the room intent on nothing less than finding her himself. He would get to the bottom of this plot, if a plot it was.

Instinct told him that she would make for the quieter, more secluded parts of the

castle, avoiding the bustle of the gathering guests. She did not know the castle except for the one guided tour she had been given five years ago. But, to head in the opposite direction to the clamor of the visitors was a simple enough strategy.

Lionel did the same, seeking the quietest staircases, passageways, and rooms until he had left the sounds of merriment far behind. Windows to his right looked out over a jumble of roofs. Beyond was the dark mass of the Thorn Wood, which covered the grounds to the east, swallowing the old ornamental gardens that had once lain there.

He paused to ease the pressure on his aching leg, watching a thrush skip among the rooftops and briefly alight on the stone windowsill. It picked up a snail which it found there and tapped its shell a few times against the sill before taking flight once more. The passageway was utterly silent and dark beyond the oasis of pale daylight that spilled through the window. The east wing was to have been refurbished for his marriage to Arabella, to create guest wings for her family and friends. She had taken delight in the design of it, picking out wallpaper, paint, and fabrics. In the wake of her abandonment, that work had also been abandoned, as had the east wing. Rooms were left to dust, fireplaces cold and unlit.

A sound reached him, breaking the stone silence. The soft sound of a woman's footsteps. Lionel's head turned towards them just as Cecilia emerged from a spiral staircase at the end of the hallway. Her face had a smattering of dust, as did her hands, from her journey through the neglected wing of Thornhill. Her eyes were red-rimmed and tears glistened on her cheeks. The sight of her so obvious distress struck a chord within Lionel. His first instinct was to go to her, to comfort her. Even beneath the tears and the dirt, her beauty shone through, brighter than the sunbeams that fought through the grimy glass of the window. Lionel lurched to his feet but Cecilia was as flighty as a deer. She spun and dashed back the way she had come.

"Miss Sinclair, come back!" Lionel called out, stumbling after her.

His leg betrayed him, refusing to let him move at a speed that would enable him to catch up with Cecilia. But he fought against the pain, hauling himself up the stairs with gritted teeth. He knew every inch of his home, had been a recluse within it for most of the last five years. Reaching the top of the staircase, he turned in the opposite direction to that which he could hear Cecilia's fleeing footsteps emanating from. Slowing his pace, he walked with occasional support from the wall along a corridor that turned abruptly more than once, until he stood before an ancient door. It was banded with rusted black metal and stood ajar, one of its hinges since lost to the crumbling red-orange of decay.

He waited, and a moment later, heard Cecilia's footsteps. The door creaked as she pushed at it. Lionel stepped forward, seizing the metal ring on his side of the door, and pulling on it. The door scraped along the floor and Cecilia screamed at the sight of him. He did not expect what happened next. Cecilia did not turn and run, nor did she shy away from him. Instead, she launched herself at him and slapped him across the face.

He staggered, taken completely unawares. As she tried to slip past him though, he managed to get a hand to her elbow, holding fast.

"Let me go!" Cecilia demanded.

"Not until you talk to me," Lionel insisted.

"I have nothing to say to you. What they accuse you of is true. You are a seducer. You took advantage of me at the first opportunity. You are also a murderer!"

The words cut deeply, and Lionel released her. His anger at her evaporated.

While he told himself that he did not care what her opinion of him was, the truth was, her words had hurt him. The why was unfathomable to him, except that perhaps he

was the kind of man whose head could be turned by a beautiful face. Which he knew he was not.

He slumped back against the wall, running a hand through his hair and sighing. Cecilia took a couple of steps away from him and then stopped, confusion on her face.

“If you have convinced yourself of those things, then return to your aunt and uncle. You do not have to speak to me, nor see me. We will live completely separate lives within this castle.”

“I will not marry you,” Cecilia retorted, “no matter what threats my family make.”

“We have no choice, you and I. I must protect my family name from disgrace. As I placed it in jeopardy, I must remedy the situation. You have even more to lose. If a scandal such as this touches you, it will destroy you. Women always come out of these situations worse than men. That is the world we live in.”

Cecilia shook her head but she did not run. “This is a nightmare. I will awake in my room at any moment. This cannot be.”

“It is,” Lionel exhaled, feeling sympathy for her plight, even while he was not entirely convinced she was not involved in the ruse, a willing participant. “I have been snared in a trap, and your family’s goal is clear—my wealth and title.”

“But it is not my goal. And I am not like them!” Cecilia cried out.

“How am I to know that? I did not look for this. I helped you and now I am enmeshed in a scandal. What else am I to think but that you were complicit.”

“Because I am not like my Uncle Rupert or Aunt Margaret! I am like my brother,

remember him? A man of honor and chivalry. A man who raised his young sister after the death of our parents. I am that manner of Sinclair ! Perhaps you have forgotten what a good man Arthur was. Perhaps you have made yourself forget in order to assuage your guilt!”

Tears flowed freely and the words caught in her throat. Lionel felt stinging at his own eyes at her pain and the memory of his friend, his brother in all but name.

“I feel no guilt except for the guilt that I could not bring his killer to justice,” Lionel responded blankly.

“You are his killer!” Cecilia accused, stepping closer to him in her anger.

“No. It was another,” Lionel blurted.

He immediately wanted the words back. He did not know if he could trust Cecilia—if she was friend or foe. That information needed to be kept close. He ground his teeth, closing his eyes as he tried to marshal his thoughts and calm himself. He was giving too much away, had been manipulated enough. No more could be allowed.

“Who? Why?”

Lionel growled in his throat and pushed himself away from the wall, favoring his strong leg. “Let us return to your aunt and uncle and discuss my surrender. You have won, be content and let my secrets remain so,” he muttered harshly.

Cecilia reached out, putting her fingers to his chest. He stopped, held in place by her delicate, gentle touch.

“I swear to you on my brother’s memory that I am not in league with my aunt and uncle, nor with that despicable cretin, Sir Gerald. I give you my word that the only

thing holding me to Hamilton Hall is the fear of the poor house. That is where my uncle would have me sent immediately after cutting me off with nothing.”

There was something in her words that quelled Lionel’s irritation. He looked into her eyes, wanting to believe her. It was offensive that such beauty could be dishonest and deceitful, but then Arabella had also been a beauty. And she had abandoned him in moments when learning she might be marrying a cripple.

“I wish I could believe you,” he whispered, lost in those hazel-flecked eyes, “but I have learned through bitter experience that trust is a weapon to be used against one. The only defense is not to give it in the first place.”

“Then I shall prove it to you,” she said resolutely.

Cecilia still held him by the touch of her fingertips against his chest. He could feel that touch as though she pressed her entire hand against his bare skin. The point of contact was the focus of his every sense. He felt his breathing coming fast and hard, knew that she too could feel it, could see it. Their eyes were locked together. He did not want to look away, not ever. She appeared to possess the same reluctance, the same desire to remain lost in the gaze of the other.

Lionel wanted to kiss her. It was an overwhelming desire, dwarfing the craving he felt for poppy juice when the pain in his leg became too great. He wavered, leaning forward imperceptibly, his chest pressing against her touch, deepening it. Cecilia gasped as the distance between them narrowed.

He was conflicted. He did not want to trust, could not trust, yet he wanted the intimacy with Cecilia that only trust could bring. Could he trust her after all? She had sworn on Arthur’s memory. To a decent person, that kind of oath should not be taken lightly. Yet there were many indecent people. People capable of committing murder and hiding it beneath sheathes of lies.

“And how could you prove it to me?” Lionel whispered, “I can see no way.”

“I will consent to marry you. To spare your name and escape the scandal. And as your wife, I will prove myself worthy of your trust. I will show you that I am worthy to bear my brother’s name,” Cecilia said in a breathless rush. “...And in return, I wish to know the truth of that night.”

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes seemed to glow with life. Her lips were rosy, half tilted into a smile. It was the nervous smile of one who knew they had committed a reckless act, a frightening gamble. Someone who rolls the dice and feels the exhilaration of it.

Lionel felt the path of his life mapped out for him then. He would marry her. It was the only way to kill the scandal.

CHAPTER 8

The ceremony was not how Cecilia had envisioned such an event, even in these strange circumstances. She had returned with her aunt and uncle to Hamilton Hall, to remain under virtual house arrest for one month. During that time, she was informed, her uncle had corresponded with Lionel about the particulars of their marriage. Meanwhile, the rumor mill of the ton had been hard at work. Aunt Margaret had informed her with gleeful venom of the rumors linking the Duke of Thornhill to a young woman who had been a guest at his ball. From her account, she and Rupert had spent an inordinate amount of time battling those rumors, quelling the gossip to protect their good name. The date was duly set and a ceremony was to take place at the small chapel adjoining Thornhill Castle. The Sinclairs were to be in attendance and Sir Gerald Knightley was to be witness to the union. The entire event was explained to Cecilia as though it were a transaction of business rather than a ceremony avowing love. She did not hear from Lionel but could not forget the intense chemistry between them. It reminded her of lessons from her governess on the subject of the sciences, particularly those concerning the attraction of bodies together and the interaction of elements. Such interactions could produce explosive results and Cecilia felt that she and Lionel were two such elements.

But he had pulled away from the brink of that explosiveness and maintained a distance between them. At first, she had told herself that this was for the best, that she did not want to come to like this man. But, when she thought of a lifetime spent in Thornhill without ever feeling his touch, his kiss, his body, it brought a deep sense of loneliness. She had spent many hours in her room, listening to the bustle of the servants, smiling when those of them who were counted as friends used their spare time to visit her. Then had come the day when she had been taken by carriage to

Thornhill. Aunt Margaret and Uncle Rupert were finely dressed but not as finely as they had been dressed on the day of the Thornhill ball. This event was not as important as that had been. Socially, anyway. Cecilia had watched the dark, forbidding sight of Thornhill castle looming up from the horizon and felt a chill run through her. She could not tell if it was excitement or trepidation. Perhaps an element of both.

The chapel was an old building of moss and stone with windows of plain glass and a dark, cool interior. Ancient pews filled the space which was dominated by the altar. The air was hushed and dry, rendered even more terrifyingly silent by the lack of a congregation. As Rupert had led Cecilia into the chapel, she saw Lionel standing at the altar and her trepidation vanished. He was as handsome as ever, his long hair tied at the nape of his neck, enhancing the vision of him as an eastern prince. His pale skin was slightly flushed and his eyes were bright and intent upon her. The lines of his face were tight, as were his lips. But as she neared him, she caught the merest hint of an upward tug at the corner. A smile, half-formed and crushed before it could reveal itself. Even the merest hint of a smile sent a thrill through Cecilia, gave her a sliver of hope. The priest raced through the ceremony, appearing uncomfortable to be in the old church. Or perhaps it was the presence of the glowering Duke. Cecilia kept glancing at him and saw him doing the same.

The final declaration that they were now man and wife was greeted with silence, broken only by a harrumph from Uncle Rupert. Lionel made a sharp gesture to the priest who hastily departed. He offered Cecilia his arm and escorted her from the church, ignoring her family who followed in their wake.

“Would it upset you greatly if I asked your aunt and uncle to leave immediately?” he whispered to her as they neared the entrance to the church.

Beyond that was a sunny day, in contrast to the somber atmosphere in the place of worship. A grass sward separated the church from the castle, which loomed blackly

beyond. A gravel path wove between mossy, lop-sided gravestones, and gnarled trees with reaching branches and fissured bark.

“It would not,” Cecilia murmured. “I should not be sad if I never saw them again.”

Lionel looked at her for a long moment. She returned his look levelly and he patted her hand where it rested on his arm.

“I suspected as much. I do not blame you. They are the worst kind of grasping mercenaries.”

He gestured to someone lazing in the shade of one of the antique trees standing in the churchyard. A moment later, Cecilia watched Blackwood come forward. He bowed to her courteously.

“Your Grace, welcome to Thornhill. About time there was a woman’s touch about the place.”

Cecilia smiled and Lionel grunted. “The Sinclairs are leaving. Inform them—and make it clear, I shall be corresponding with them in due course.”

Blackwood bowed to his master and moved towards the Sinclairs who were stepping out of the church, into the sun. Lionel glanced back over his shoulder to Sir Gerald.

“You!” he pointed. “Get off my land. You are not welcome and have no further business here.”

Sir Gerald smiled and bowed, showing no sign of chagrin. He whispered something for the Sinclairs, then put on his hat and strode away.

“I do not know what that man wants, but I suspect it is more than simply sparking ire

in me,” Lionel muttered, watching him go.

“He... said something about Penrose . I cannot decipher what precisely it was,” Cecilia replied in thought.

Lionel looked down at her and patted her hand once more. He led her out of the churchyard to the sound of protest from the Sinclairs, clearly not pleased to be turfed out of Thornhill.

They were a few dozen yards down the path before he spoke again. “I would like to establish some ground rules. I am not a cruel man, and would prefer that you are comfortable during your stay here,” he began. “Frankly, I want to accept that you are not part of this plot to marry into my family, simply a pawn. But trust is difficult for me, as I have repeated many times.”

Cecilia listened, appreciating the kindness that was evidently his motive. They had passed through a lynch gate and were following a path that wound its way towards the castle through a grove of willow and birch. Hawthorn grew in between, still with masses of white blossom on its boughs. A squirrel scurried into the path and paused as they walked slowly along, regarding them before continuing its journey. The castle was frightening but the grounds were green and sunlit, the air warm and the walk pleasant. Lionel could be frightening, but he was also exciting and enticing. Her attraction to him seemed to be intensified since his revelation that he was not to blame for Arthur’s death. It was as though the last barrier to allowing herself to be drawn to him was being eroded. And it was just like when she had set her sights on him the first time they met, all those years ago.

Except now, they shared a similar ambition, and Cecilia was determined that he would tell her exactly who had been responsible.

“I accept that,” she sighed, “and I’m determined to win that trust. As your wife, I

should be your closest confidante.”

“You are my wife in name only,” Lionel shot back harshly.

He didn’t look at her as he spoke, staring directly ahead.

“For now,” Cecilia whispered.

This time, he glanced at her and she smiled with wide, innocent eyes. Lionel’s face was unreadable—until a twitch of his lips, a smile escaping from his iron self-control. It was all that Cecilia needed to fuel her hope for the future.

“You will have rooms in the south wing. My own quarters are in the north. The great hall lies between us—north and south wings are the most distant parts of the castle from each other. I will not trouble you with my company nor require yours. You may come and go as you wish, both within and out of the castle. In due course, when the risk of scandal has passed by and the rumors concerning us become stale, the marriage shall be quietly annulled.”

“I do not wish the marriage to be annulled,” Cecilia hastily put in, “I wish to make it work.”

Lionel eyed her peculiarly. “It cannot,” he continued, “I do not desire a wife.”

“But you desire me.”

She knew that now was the time for brave action. Her future would not be one of frigid loneliness. Not a future of frustration, with the man that she desired living apart from her and counting the days until he could be free. She would not be a shackle on Lionel.

“Do you think so?” Lionel uttered with ice in his voice.

Cecilia knew his objective. To keep her at a distance, to push her away. Shove her into a remote wing of the castle, forget her until the day that he felt safe to divest himself of her entirely. But she had felt the passionate ferocity of his kisses, of his touch. She knew that his coldness was a lie, a defense against being hurt. She wondered why those defenses were necessary. Were those high walls behind which Lionel hid, built in response to an event in his past? Had there been a woman who had broken his trust? She remembered a woman on the day that Arthur had died. Arriving on the arm of Lionel’s acquaintance. Lord Thorpe? Was that his name? What had her name been?

Just then, it came to her— Arabella Wycliff . What had become of her? Aunt Margaret gloried in gossip but Cecilia had always found it to be distasteful. Now she cursed herself for not taking a closer interest in her aunt’s salacious pastime. Had she listened more, she might know what the story of Arabella and Lionel was.

“I know so. I have been in your arms. Have felt your desire for me,” she simpered, stepping closer to him and putting a hand to his chest.

“Perhaps it was the hunger of a starving man. Nothing to do with you at all. Perhaps any woman would have sufficed in those circumstances.”

The words stung, but Cecilia refused to let that show.

He had not backed away from her and she stepped closer again, keeping her hand against his chest. The feel of his steely pectorals was intoxicating. They were slabs of powerful muscle, utterly unyielding and promising fierce, terrifying power. She pressed her fingertips against the material of his shirt, wanting to feel the skin beneath. Her breathing quickened and she felt the flush spreading across her cheeks.

The elaborate and luxurious wedding gown she wore had been provided by Lionel. She still did not know why he had gone to such effort if the ceremony was so meaningless to him—as he so often claimed. The dress covered her from neck to toe and from shoulder to hand. But it also clung to her in a way that only silk could. Her bosoms and hips were accentuated, their shape outlined indecently. It made her feel naked.

“Why did you have this dress made for me?” she asked, “if I mean nothing to you.”

“You deserve beauty in your life,” Lionel replied matter-of-factly, though his voice was laced with a touch of husk.

Cecilia smiled and raised herself onto her tiptoes to brush her lips against his cheek. Lionel did not move at first, neither to lean into the kiss, nor to withdraw from it. But she felt his hands about her waist. His fingers touched her, then his hands pressed into her hips, owning them, and drawing her closer. She kissed him again, this time on his lips. It had not been her intention, she wanted to tease him, to draw his desire out of him a little at a time. But, she could not hold back. The idea that she might be enticing him in order to discover his secrets drove her desire to a peak. The thought of being a courtesan to Lionel was maddening, making her want to press her body against his, to tear the clinging gown from her frame and feel the warm air against her skin. The warm air and Lionel’s hot mouth.

Suddenly, Lionel’s arm went about her waist, picking her up and spinning her around. She cried out as she was carried from the path and into the trees. When they were obscured from the view of the castle, he released her. Cecilia found herself standing with her back to a silver birch, Lionel before her, his body more unyielding than the tree.

His embrace tightened around her like iron bands. She gasped into his open mouth, feeling his tongue exploring hers and reciprocating. His hands gripped her buttocks,

making her squeak. Then he was caressing her breasts, stroking, and exploring before gripping and squeezing. Cecilia could not catch her breath. She gasped and squealed, moaned, and whispered his name, her hands ravaging through his tresses, pulling them back so that she could kiss his throat. She bit until he gasped in pain, leaving a livid bruise behind. It pleased her to see it. The mark was a brand of ownership. He could deny that he wanted to be married to her but he could not deny that, for the moment, he belonged to her.

“That will be embarrassing when the servants see it,” Lionel growled.

Cecilia bit her lip, chest heaving, waiting for his next action.

“You are mine, no matter what you say. That is my mark, to remind you,” she smiled sheepishly.

Lionel’s answering smile belonged on the face of a ravening wolf. Cecilia wore a lacy veil that covered her head and shoulders like the wimple of a nun. He pushed it aside and seized her dress by the neck. With one powerful move, he tore it, ripping the bodice from her throat to her chest, heaving the ruined material aside until her breasts were exposed. Cecilia put her head back and closed her eyes as Lionel’s hungry mouth closed upon her vulnerable naked breasts. At first, she gloried in the erotic sensation of his soft lips and tongue against her skin. Then she cried out, tightening her fingers in his long hair, unraveling the cord that held it tied back, as he bit down at her nipples. Colors swirled against the eyelids of her closed eyes as she squeezed them tightly shut. When she opened them, Lionel was panting, looking at her with a flush in his pale cheeks, eyes bright. Glancing down, she saw his brand upon her left breast. She grinned, touching the spot which was mildly sore and still wet. She licked her fingers, looking into his eyes as she did.

“You are a witch. You have me under your spell, damn you,” Lionel whispered.

CHAPTER 9

Lionel tossed aside the bedclothes and strode to the window. The room felt unbearably hot, the air clinging to his body, stifling him. He flung the windows wide and leaned, hands on the windowsill, breathing deeply.

His thoughts were all on Cecilia. The windows of his bedchamber looked northward, out over the Thorn Wood and the dark humped shape of the hills beyond. But his bedchamber occupied the top floor of a square Norman-built tower that protruded beyond the reach of the highest of the castle's roofs. As such, there were windows facing both north and south. He looked back over his shoulder. The south windows were curtained but he knew the view those thick folds of fabric hid. They hid the south wing, which rose beyond the bulk of the Great Hall. And he knew which of the many windows of the south wing looked into Cecilia's bedchamber. She had broken down his defenses earlier. Those walls that he had considered unbreachable had crumbled at the sight of her in the silk wedding gown he'd commissioned for her.

Why had he done that? What was his goal in supplying her with a dress which so enhanced her beauty? Better by far to insist she attended the ceremony in the dress she had borrowed from his maid. Or to attend in rags. Her callous relatives would probably have approved of the humiliation too.

Yet, Lionel had ordered a dressmaker to go to Hamilton Hall and had told the man to create something the like of which had never been seen before. The dressmaker had been a master and had excelled himself in his craft. Lionel cursed himself now. When he was away from Cecilia, he fancied he could forget her. But it never lasted long. There was much work to be done, a revenge against the Count of Thorpe to be

planned. He had no room in his mind for Cecilia and yet she had taken up residence there, commandeering his heart. The encounter between them among the trees was indelibly seared into his memory. The sight of his mark upon her perfect breast and the pride in her face at being so marked. He had wanted to take her there and then, make her his in truth.

But, he had held back, recognizing the danger he was in. He had stepped away from her, stiffly insisting they go inside and then handing her to a lady's maid with orders that she be escorted to her rooms, while Cecilia had covered her torn dress with her veil rather astutely.

Sleep had been looked for but not found. His mind raced through all the encounters he'd had with his new bride. He remembered the feel of her skin and the taste of her mouth. The sight of her naked breasts and the wanton way that she had licked her fingers after touching breasts still wet from his tongue. She was veritably a temptress and his body ached for her.

But no, revenge was more important. Arthur was owed that revenge. Thorpe could not be allowed to remain free from justice. It was Lionel's duty and it came before everything. There could be no happiness or contentment for him until it was finished.

Just then, he realized that he had thought of Cecilia in terms of happiness and contentment.

With an audible groan, he whirled from the north window and strode across the room towards the south. Such was his passion that he momentarily forgot the pain in his stiffness that plagued his legs, singly or both at the same time. He tore aside the curtains and stared at the south wing.

It was dark except for a single, flickering, glowing light. That light emanated from Cecilia's bedchamber. So, she too found sleep elusive. He pulled the curtains back,

hiding the view, and turned his back on the window. But he could not unsee that flickering light, that sign that she was there and was awake. He wondered if she had tried to sleep but, like him, had been plagued by thoughts of lust and desire. By memories of those occasions when they had both given in to the irresistible attraction that drew them together.

Finally, he could bear it no longer. Snatching a dressing gown from a wardrobe, he left the room to walk barefoot through the icy hallways of the castle. The pain in his legs, unsupported by the structure he wore during the day, was pushed aside and Lionel moved like an arrow towards the south wing.

As he neared the rooms he had provided for Cecilia, he became aware of another sound in the silent hallways. Pausing, he listened and made out the distinctive sound of bare feet padding against stone. Cecilia was also abroad. He turned corners, passed through darkened rooms, and traversed staircases, following that sound. Eventually, he came to a small courtyard of untended grass and wildflowers. By daylight, it was an oasis of color amid the drab stone of the castle. An oak tree rose from the middle of the courtyard, its branches thick, its bole wide and ancient. A breeze sighed through the branches and stirred the long grass, carrying the scent of the wildflowers with it. Lionel paused in the shadow of a colonnade which overlooked the courtyard from the north side. A figure in white flitted through the grass ahead of him. For a moment it was as though he watched a ghost—Thornhill was rumored to contain many restless spirits, including that of a young nun who had resided at the convent that had stood there before the castle had been built.

That convent had been razed by the Danes, in the days of King Alfred. Now Lionel watched the ethereal figure before him and felt like one of those marauding reavers. She wore a sheet wrapped around her, leaving only her shoulders bare. From time to time she reached out to cup a flower, bending to savor its bouquet. Then she moved on, letting the long blades of grass tickle her fingers. Lionel wanted to bear her to the ground and tear the sheet and nightdress from her body. Wanted her to tear his own

nightshirt to shreds and fasten her nails upon his flesh. He thought of the mark she bore and wondered if she felt the same giddy thrill at its presence as he did. Thrilled at both marking her and being marked himself.

“Cecilia,” he spoke into the still night air.

She glanced back over her shoulder and the sheet slipped. In the moonlight, her skin was alabaster, pure and unsullied. Her hair appeared dark, robbed of the bronze sheen that it possessed in daylight. She looked like a phantom, a succubus intent on seduction, dangerous in the desire she invoked.

Cecilia bit her lower lip as she beheld him, then let the sheet fall further. It whispered to the ground, held up only on one side of her body now. Her arm was bare and he could see the suggestion of her *derrière* through the sheer fabric of the nightdress. Lionel drifted forward and she turned to face him, discarding the sheet entirely, standing with her arms by her sides and her chin lifted. When he reached her, he put his hands to her shoulders, pulling aside the straps that held her nightgown up. Gently, he glided them down her arms. The material fell from her chest, revealing her perfectly round breasts. It gathered about her hips, and she made to push it further, her breathing growing frantic and heavy.

Lionel stilled her hands, holding them out from her sides, then pushing the nightgown down her hips himself. It fell to the ground and she kicked it aside. He gazed into her eyes, rendered almost black by the darkness. He teetered on the edge of a precipice, standing on the brink of a void as black as her eyes looked. Within was the unknown. It was not a future he had planned for himself. He could turn around and walk away, return to the path he had chosen. Or he could step off the edge and into the darkness. She was there, within that void, and together, he felt, they would fill it, make a life together. Would there be room in that life for revenge? Would a woman be capable of maintaining the thirst for vengeance that he had nurtured for several years? Or would she steer him to forgiveness, love, and family? All thoughts fled as Cecilia took his

hand and pressed it to her breast, the one bearing his mark. She smiled timidly and reached for the laces of his nightshirt, leaving his hand to caress her breast, drawing soft moans from her.

Soon, his own shirt was being hauled up over his head and tossed aside. He drew closer, kissing her ferociously and lifting her with arms locked about her waist. Her breasts pressed against his chest, her nipples hard, announcing her arousal. He hungrily consumed her body with his touch, hands exploring her soft curves and perfect skin. Their lips met and then parted before meeting again, always with increasing hunger. Cecilia's toes left the ground as Lionel lifted her. Then the long grass embraced them both. Lionel felt it tickling at his sides but the sensation was as nothing compared to Cecilia's touch. He lay atop her, holding himself on powerful forearms planted in the earth to either side of her face. Lionel looked down at her, taking in the desperate longing in her eyes. His body pressed against hers and cried out for union.

She was his wife.

But in name only.

If they did this, it would be as lovers. Perhaps not in the eyes of the law but certainly in the eyes of God. Neither had meant their vows. He hadn't. Had he?

Cecilia reached up to cup his face in her hands, lifting her head to kiss him. As she did, some instinct in her virginal body told her to lift her feet from where they had been pressed against the damp earth. Lionel felt his own body joining with hers as she did so, almost without conscious intent by him. The feeling was glorious. Cecilia's eyes went wide and she cried out in pain and wonder, equally. She clutched at him, arms going beneath his shoulders and fingers digging into his flesh. She lifted her legs further as Lionel's hips thrust forward, deepening the union between them. That brought another cry from Cecilia but her embrace was so fierce that he could not

withdraw, even if he wanted to. Had she meant her own vows? Was this an elaborate plot to entrap him? A beautiful young woman to ensnare his heart, derail his plans, carve up his estates? He whispered her name and heard his own return. She smiled, and then her lips pulled back from bared teeth. The grimace of both pleasure and pain. The smile returned as she gazed up at the sky, open, joyous wonder alive on her face.

The castle spun away from Lionel.

He had no more awareness of where he was than the few yards of earth on which they lay. The grass rose above them and enclosed them. The tree watched over them, boughs softly moving in unfelt breezes. Lionel felt heat between them where their skin joined and their bodies merged. Sweat slicked his chest and glistened between Cecilia's breasts. The air against his back was cool except where her nails raked it, drawing grunting groans from him and a tight smile of satisfied desire from her. She turned her head from side to side, biting his fingers and thumb, sucking, and watching the reaction on his face. Lionel was lost in a world of sensuous delight, unending pleasure.

Her fulfillment came suddenly, an increase in the tempo of her movements, her cries becoming more frantic, eyes widening until her legs clamped around his hips, squeezing tight. He felt a shuddering in her thighs and she threw back her head, clawing at the ground and mewling before finally crying out in a voice that echoed and rebounded from the stern walls of the castle that surrounded the courtyard. His own climax came soon after, and then they were limp, laying together, arms and legs draped over and under each other.

CHAPTER 10

Cecilia woke languidly, stretching and savoring the newly awakened awareness of her body. The bedclothes felt luxuriantly decadent against her naked skin, and there was a pleasant ache in the muscles of her legs, arms, and loins, a remnant of the passion from the night before. Sunlight gently seeped under closed eyelids until she opened her eyes. She looked at the window first, unshuttered and with curtains open. There was a blue sky visible beyond, decorated with tufts of clouds. It was a welcoming day and she felt ready to embrace it.

Then she turned her head and frowned. The bedside was empty. There was no indication that Lionel had shared it with her. For that matter, she now realized that she was in her own room in the south wing. Surely, Lionel would have carried her to his own chambers now that they were truly man and wife? Yet that side of the bed was cold, the sheets undisturbed by anybody but her own. A cold feeling coalesced in her stomach, reaching out to close itself about her heart, rising into her throat with steely fingers. Perhaps last night had not been the glorious culmination of their marriage. Perhaps Lionel's reservations had not been swept away on a tide of passion, as she had thought.

Suddenly, Cecilia felt foolish. Lionel was a man after all. A man who had been offered what all men want. She had stood before him, practically naked and inviting. He had taken what she had offered but that did not necessarily mean that he intended their marriage should become real. It did not mean that he had feelings for her.

Tears pricked her eyes and she angrily blinked them back, running a hand through hair tangled by Lionel's rough hands. She could still feel those hands on her body. On

her breasts and her hips. She could feel the grip of his fingers against her rear and his skillful touch in other places, a touch that had sent Cecilia into delirium. Such sensations she had not dreamed to be possible. Such pleasure she had not previously imagined one person could give to another. It seemed that she was deceived. Hard on the heels of grief came anger. She could not very well accuse her husband of taking advantage of her.

But that did not change the conviction she now felt that he had done that very thing.

Reaching out, she gave a sharp tug on the bellpull, the silk rope that hung beside her bed. She drew up her knees, wrapping her arms about them, chin resting on them. Lionel could not expect to at one and the same time experience all the pleasure that came with being a married man and keeping his wife at arm's length. She would be a wife to him in the fullest sense of the word or she would be nothing. If he could not be persuaded of her good intentions, that she was not part of a plot to entrap him, then he must release her from the marriage.

And if, as she wished, he intended to try and make their marriage work, however unsatisfactory its beginning had been, then he must embrace it. There could be no halfway. Her heart would not stand it.

Even thinking that sent a chill of fear through her. What if he were to reject her? In a few weeks' time, she might be returning to her aunt and uncle, returning to their resentment. Part of her did indeed want to give Lionel what he desired, in order to experience more nights like the one she had woken from. Even if those nights were followed by days or even weeks of loneliness...

She shook her head. It would not be. Better a lifetime of loneliness than a moment of pretense.

Presently, there came a knock at the outer door of her rooms. She called out

permission to enter and Peggy came into the room. She was a young girl, not yet eighteen, and pretty with a fresh, innocent look. Her face was round and her cheeks red with a smattering of freckles across her nose. Dark hair was tied neatly away. Her mother was Mrs. Hardcastle, the housekeeper of Thornhill, her father the groundskeeper, and she had grown up at the castle and in service to the Grisham family.

“You rang, Your Grace?” she began politely.

“Peggy. I wish to wash and dress, but...”

Cecilia suddenly realized that she was unused to being a lady who was waited on by servants. At Hamilton, she had taken care of her own needs and had dined with the servants.

“I confess that I am ill-prepared for the rank of Duchess. I grew up in a house very different to this one. Where I lived with my brother Arthur... well, it was a rather informal household. I usually dressed myself. But here, I don’t know where to find anything and am not even sure that I should be dressing myself, doing my own hair. I do not want the Duke to be disappointed or feel that I am not representing my new rank appropriately,” Cecilia said.

She felt embarrassed now that her maid was here, feeling as though she should be giving commands and knowing precisely what she was about. She felt sure that showing such indecision in front of a servant would be taken badly—would affect how the staff saw her and ultimately how Lionel saw her. But Peggy smiled kindly.

“Your Grace, I had this very conversation with my mother just this morning while I waited for you to awaken. She told me that you are new to the title and to the household and I must take great care of that. To ensure that you are happy and content with your new position and that the world sees you as Duchess of Thornhill.

May I speak frankly, Your Grace?"

"Of course! And while we are in private, I should very much like you to call me Cecilia. I had a very close relationship with the servants at my aunt and uncle's house and at Penrose. I do not think I could simply go back to being referred to by an honorific all the time."

Peggy beamed, her face glowing. "Oh my, Your... I mean Cecilia . That is an honor. Thank you. I think Mother would be very unhappy if she caught me, but I shall call you by your name when it is just the two of us, if that makes you feel more comfortable."

"It does, Peggy. Very much so." Cecilia returned the smile.

It did give her some ease, she realized. The burden of constantly being the Duchess before the staff was inescapable. That is what she now was and she must step fully into that role. But, knowing that she could be a simple person in front of her maid, when it was just the two of them—that made her breathe easier. Peggy would be a confidant, one that she so desperately needed.

"Well, you have a dressing room where all of your wardrobes are. I will show you and help you dress for the day. But first, I have water heating downstairs for your bath, for which you have a room dedicated to nothing else!" Peggy enthused.

She seemed very excited by the novel notion of a room just for bathing. Cecilia found the notion somewhat decadent but it reminded her of the sheer scale of her new chambers. Thornhill was huge and sprawling. There were rooms aplenty, so why not have one to be used for nothing but bathing?

"My, I feel like royalty. What a change compared to my previous circumstances," Cecilia murmured.

Peggy was well-trained enough not to pry, but Cecilia glanced a quick, questioning look. She smiled.

“I do not mind telling you, Peggy. I think we are going to be friends. My aunt and uncle quartered me in the servant’s wing of Hamilton Hall, their home. Or at least in a room adjoining it. I think it used to be a storeroom actually, until I came to live with them.”

Peggy looked positively aghast, halting in the act of opening a door in a corner of the bedchamber, opposite the one she had entered through.

“It is not as bad as I make it sound! My friends were those same staff, good people and kind. I don’t think I would exchange my circumstances even if I could go back in time. Not for that reason, anyway.”

“But you would for another reason?” Peggy asked.

“I live with my aunt and uncle because my brother was killed. Here in fact. In a hunt. I would change that if I could and still be living at Penrose with him,” Cecilia murmured somberly.

Peggy flushed. “I’m sorry, Your... Cecilia. I was prying.”

“Not a bit of it, Peggy. I was being open and honest with you. You will find that is my preferred way to deal with people. If I don’t wish to talk about something, I will say so.” Pulling the bedsheets up to her chin, she added, “Now, do I have a dressing robe, I seem to have misplaced my night clothes.”

Peggy giggled and Cecilia wondered if she took the jest at face value, a silly joke about her mistress somehow losing her clothes during the night, or if she understood the subtext. Namely, that Cecilia had been stripped of her nightclothes which had

been abandoned somewhere, likely in the throes of passion. The question was soon answered.

Peggy hurried across the room and lowered her voice. "It is my habit to take tea in the Fairy Garden, and I found your nightclothes there this morning. I have put them to be laundered."

Cecilia blushed and impulsively reached up to catch Peggy in a hug. "I did not know it was called the Fairy Garden," she whispered.

"That's my name for it, since I was a child. It is a magical place when the flowers are blooming. The fragrance of them is almost as beautiful as the colors. His Grace used to carve little figures of fairies for me and leave them in the Fairy Garden for me to find. I still have them all in my room."

Cecilia felt a pang in her heart, a sensation of wonder. The towering, brooding man that she knew. The man whom her brother had joked rarely cracked a smile. That man entering a child's world of magic and wonder, just to please her. Such a man was truly a husband to be proud of. She became determined to see more of that side of him, to get past the walls he cast up between them and get to know the man that Peggy and her family had the privilege of knowing for so long.

"I shall fetch you a robe and then bring up your bathing water," Peggy added, blushing furiously from the hug but smiling happily.

She went through the door she had opened and returned with a long, silk gown. Then, her nakedness covered, Cecilia was given a tour of her rooms. There was a dressing room with three full-length mirrors and an enormous dressing table. Three large wardrobes stood against one wall into which her old clothes were placed as well as many more new garments. The bathing room was tiled on floor and walls, and dominated by a large bathtub on clawed brass feet. It looked large enough to

accommodate at least two people. That led Cecilia to think of sharing it with Lionel, which made her blush. There was a study attached to a library and a sitting room that looked out over part of the castle grounds.

As Peggy left to bring hot water for the bath, Cecilia stood at the windows of her sitting room, looking out over the vast gardens. Many were still in shade, the sun not yet reaching over the castle's bulk to caress them with its rays. Her eyes followed winding paths between rose beds and towering rhododendrons. There was a fountain, tinkling merrily amid a large pond on which lily pads floated. The path disappeared into a grove of trees at the garden's furthest point. As she watched, she saw Lionel walking along the path towards the trees.

He limped, favoring his right leg, and walked with head bowed as though lost in thought. Before he reached the trees, he stopped and turned. She could not tell where he looked because of the distance between them, but it felt as though he looked at her.

For a long moment, she looked back, wondering if he could see her. If he was thinking about her.

Then he turned away and was swallowed up by the trees.

CHAPTER 11

As Lionel was clearly not at home to join her for breakfast, choosing instead to stroll through the woodlands, Cecilia had Peggy bring it to the sitting room which formed part of her suite. She asked Peggy to join her and they talked as they shared tea, toast, and jam.

“So, tell me, Peggy. The Duke. What are your thoughts on him? Is he a good master? A kind man or a cruel one?” Cecilia asked, chin propped up on her hand as she leaned forward. “He certainly seems very... serious at times.”

Peggy hastily shook her head. “A very good employer. Generous and kind I would say. He expanded the servant’s wing after recovering from his illness and our rooms are very spacious now. Not that they were cramped before. But we have a sitting room of our own and I have a bedroom that could accommodate two very easily, yet I have it all to myself! And he is a man who is very inclined to laugh. He often makes jokes in my hearing. And he is very fond of the funny stories Mr. Blackwood tells of his days at sea.”

Cecilia frowned. “I have not seen that side of him. He struck me as a very dark man, prone to glowering.”

“Begging your pardon, my lady, but, I think that is the face he presents. I know what you mean and have seen it. He can be very frightening when he scowls. But that is the face he shows only to the outside world. Never in Thornhill.”

Cecilia felt a touch morose upon hearing this. He was treating her as though she were

an intruder from the outside world rather than his wife in name and deed. It made her feel doubly used and even more determined to win him over.

“I hope that I can be included in the number of people privileged to see him smile soon,” she murmured, “this house will be a cold and lonely place otherwise.”

“Oh, I am sure you will, Cecilia,” Peggy smiled softly, offering the teapot to refill her cup.

Cecilia accepted and sipped at her tea. She did not share Peggy’s optimism and found that she was somewhat envious of the side of her new husband that Peggy and the other servants saw.

“Oh, another thing. I seemed to catch the Duke walking into the woods beyond the gardens this morning,” she began. “Where could he be going, do you think?”

Peggy looked up to the ceiling, her pretty face creasing momentarily into a look of concentration. “I do not know that he would be going anywhere in particular. Those woods extend for some distance I think. I remember playing there when I was a child. The old mill is there, and beyond that, the farm belonging to John Fletcher and his family. But that is some miles distant and over difficult countryside. I never went that far, though my father took me in the trap a few times. Perhaps he goes to visit them?”

Cecilia smiled brightly, not wanting to make a mystery of it where there might not be one. She supposed he might have some business with his tenants. If Lionel was not at home, then she would have to make use of her time somehow. Her preference would have been to seek him out, to spend time in his company, and to try to show him that she was genuine. For now, she would simply have to make do with using this as an opportunity to explore the castle by daylight.

After breakfast, Peggy left her in order to complete her duties and Cecilia was alone.

The castle felt cavernous and lonely. Its stone hallways and empty rooms were oppressive in their loneliness. She wandered for a while, not knowing where she was going or with any direction in mind. She saw many rooms, sitting rooms and drawing rooms, games rooms and libraries, studies, and bedrooms. It seemed there was a room for every pastime imaginable. Many were shrouded in dust sheets, clearly disused. Others were simply empty and with the air of rooms kept clean but rarely utilized.

After climbing a stone, spiral staircase, she found herself in a corridor carpeted in thick, dark blue. Paintings hung on the walls depicting animals and landscapes. Tall windows gave a view of a jumble of rooftops with the Great Hall rising above all like a mountain. She also saw the tower in which her rooms were located and realized that she must now be in a part of the castle close to the Duke's chambers. For a moment she stopped, wondering if they were above or below her. Or perhaps simply further along this corridor.

Her mouth grew dry and her heart skipped a beat at the idea of walking into Lionel's bedchamber. The thought of doing so while he was absent, was somehow more erotic than if he had been there. It would be an intimacy, unguarded and unlooked for. Perhaps, in his rooms, she would find some insight into his nature. A glimpse behind the wall he maintained against her.

She began along the corridor, studying the paintings with curiosity as she went. They had the look of antiquity and each bore a layer of dust. Servants clearly did not come into this passage very often. She wondered why. The paintings were beautiful and would be an adornment to any wall.

She paused to wipe the dust from a rather majestic picture of a sweeping landscape. With slight surprise, she realized it depicted Thornhill, though at some much earlier point in its history. The castle rose above the surrounding forest in stony majesty, smaller and starker. In that painting, it was a fortress rather than a house, clearly still serving the purpose for which it had been built.

As she was about to walk on, something caught her eye. In the bottom right-hand corner of the painting was a signature, scrawled in black paint. Pale daylight behind her provided good illumination and she could read the name... Lionel . She gaped for a moment before then reexamining other paintings. She saw the signature on a landscape depicting St Paul's cathedral. Then again on a picture of a horse and rider. It was the third such painting that made Cecilia stop dead. It hung higher up and so hadn't drawn her eyes immediately. Now that she had seen it though, her gaze was drawn to it as though by a magnet.

It was a picture of Penrose. The house was just as she remembered it. Five stories and robustly square, made of brick with a central tower rising above its chimneys and rooftops. How many times had she climbed the rickety wooden steps of that tower to gaze out over the park and surrounding countryside?

So, Lionel was or had been something of an artist. None of the paintings gave much indication as to their age. The dust that each bore could have accumulated in a matter of months. But the depiction of Penrose was, she thought, how the house had looked in her childhood. There had been some alterations made by Arthur, she remembered, that altered the basic shape of the house. But then the painting of Thornhill as a medieval castle was clearly painted from the imagination, so why not Penrose? Something told her that art was a hobby that Lionel had put aside long ago. It just did not fit with anything that she knew of him.

An abrupt sound disturbed her thoughts. It seemed to come from the far end of the hallway, as though a floorboard creaking from the step of a person.

Yet no one appeared.

The hallway turned at the end through ninety degrees and the noise seemed to reach her from around the corner. She walked along, not hearing the sound again, until she heard a click, as of a door being softly closed. Rounding the corner, again, she saw no

one.

“Hello?” she called out.

There was no reply. That sent a chill through her. A servant would respond. Someone who did not wish to be seen would not. And who would be sneaking around the castle, seeking to be unobserved? There was only one door in this section of the hallway, at the far end. Shaking her head at her own timidity, she strode towards it.

Despite her determination, she felt her heart hammering in her chest as she approached the door. Reaching for the handle, she paused, listening for any sound beyond. Then, steeling herself, she turned the handle and flung the door wide.

For a moment, she expected to see some shadowy figure standing on the other side. A specter of the castle’s haunted past, or a stranger with nefarious designs. Perhaps Lionel himself. But there was no sign of anyone in the room beyond. It was brightly lit through windows on the far side of the room. The daylight reflected from carpets of a soft, golden hue, illuminating a warm glow along the walls and revealing it in all its glory. Curious.

It was a music room. There was a pianoforte standing before the window and a shrouded shape that looked like a harp. A violin case sat on the shelf of a bookcase which otherwise seemed to be home to sheet music. Cecilia had been taught the pianoforte by a governess but had lacked the patience for the practice necessary to become proficient. The temptation to run wild in the woods and fields with her brother was too great. But her mother had been a master.

Cecilia smiled sadly as she glided her fingers over the music contained on the bookshelf, studying the titles of each. There were works from all the great composers from all across Europe. She paused when she came across one sheaf of paper in particular. It bore no composer name and she did not know the name of the song

printed neatly at the top, but the arrangement of notes looked familiar. She tried to recall the melody that such an arrangement would produce.

After a few halting attempts, it came to her. At first, her voice was barely louder than a whisper. Then, feeling foolish at her reticence to sing aloud in an empty room, she began again louder. For a few minutes, she sang, looking away from the music as the memory of the tune returned to her. She lifted her chin and sang to the room, closing her eyes. Memories returned of singing alongside her mother at the pianoforte. Taking childish delight in the music her mother so skillfully brought forth. Though untutored, her voice had a sweet tone, she was told.

The music ended abruptly at the sound of the door. She opened her eyes and saw Lionel stepping out from behind the harp, a door shutting behind him. For a moment, they stood, looking at each other.

“...You have a fine voice,” he said, at last.

Cecilia found herself flushing at the compliment. “Thank you. I used to sing this song with my mother. She accompanied me on the pianoforte.”

Lionel spread his hands towards the instrument. “Feel free. You may try any instrument you see.”

“I have no real skill with instruments,” Cecilia told him, replacing the music sheet. “I enjoyed singing along to my mother’s playing, that is all. I think you are the first to hear me since she passed.”

“Ah,” Lionel said, running his hand on the pianoforte and grimacing at the dust, “I think this room has been undisturbed since the passing of my own mother. She and my father died within a few months of each other. She first, of a fever.”

Cecilia felt a pang of sympathy at such close bereavements. “My own parents were returning from a grand tour when their ship foundered while crossing the Channel. It was lost with all hands.”

“Ah, yes, I had heard of it from Arthur. It must have been devastating,” Lionel murmured, somewhat awkwardly.

They were standing apart on opposite sides of the room. And he seemed reluctant to cross the space and be nearer to her.

“It was a long time ago. Time heals all wounds, do they not say?”

“I am not so sure I believe it,” he muttered.

“Nor I,” she replied.

His eyes rose from where he had been looking down at the pianoforte and met hers. The gaze was bright and she felt that there was something of recognition in it, a shared experience.

“Well, I will not intrude on your memories. Feel free to use this room to sing whenever you wish.”

“Singing to an empty room has little satisfaction,” Cecilia put in hurriedly, “and I would rather talk with you.”

Lionel’s face hardened and he gave his waistcoat a sharp tug, making it seem like a suit of armor. “I am rather busy, I’m afraid. I have much to attend to.”

“Just not me,” Cecilia mumbled beneath her breath, a note of accusation in her voice. She looked up to regard him again. “Except when the need arises. Do you think I

should accept being used for your pleasure when it suits and then cast aside? Am I to be a plaything?"

"No!" Lionel snapped immediately. "Never. I would not... Not with Arthur's younger sister..." He trailed off, running a hand through his hair.

"Stop that! I am more than that! Why won't you see me as an equal?"

Lionel exhaled with apparent frustration. "In a few months or so, the scandal will be yesterday's news and we can go our separate ways quietly. There will be no stain on your name or mine. That is the best outcome. I am sorry that... I am sorry for my weakness last night. I should not have given you false hope in such a way. Nor should I have insisted on the rights of a husband if I was not prepared to be a husband in truth. I can assure you it will not happen again."

CHAPTER 12

Lionel stared at the letter in his hands and saw nothing of it. He sat at his desk in the study adjoining his suite of rooms. A fire was burning low behind him, untended, the fresh logs left by Blackwood beside it forgotten. He had decided to fill his mind with correspondence that had been neglected due to the need to prepare for the wedding and the day itself. Now he tried to read, tried to deal with the normal business of his estates, but his mind was elsewhere.

With an exasperated sigh, he flung the paper down, staring across the room. The head of a stag, a twelve-pointer, hung on the wall opposite. He and Arthur had stalked it. Both had taken their shot and neither could be sure which had felled the magnificent brute. Arthur had insisted it was Lionel, and Lionel that it was Arthur. In the end, the toss of a coin had decided where the trophy would hang, Penrose or Thornhill. Lionel stood, walking towards the trophy, remembering the day.

“What would you advise me now, old friend?” he whispered to the ghost of Arthur.

The eyes of the stag gleamed in the light cast by the guttering fire. Gleamed brightly for a moment before returning to the dullness of death. Arthur was not here. He was long gone, snatched away by the malice of a man whose enmity Lionel did not understand. There had been no further attempts on his life, even when he was vulnerable and effectively paralyzed. Attempts after his recovery to speak to Lord Thorpe had been met by a brick wall of silence.

Lionel gritted his teeth. If Arthur could hear him and was seeing him, he would slap his face for the way Lionel had treated Cecilia.

“I am sorry for my weakness. I intended this to be a bloodless, passionless marriage. A matter of weeks to allow the scandal to die. I do not know how to trust!”

“You bloody fool,” Arthur’s laughing voice was in his head but could have been in the room with him, “she adores you and has done since you first met. If your eyes hadn’t been blinded by that trollop Arabella Wycliff, you would have seen it. Stop being a jackass and go and talk to her.”

Lionel turned away from the now accusing stare of the stag. He strode angrily across the room to a decanter on a table. Pouring himself an unhealthy measure of Scotch, he tried to put Cecilia from his mind. It was easier said than done.

Three nights ago, she had called to him with a siren song. Bewitched him. His will had broken and he had been unable to resist but equally unable to leave himself vulnerable and open to her. Sister of his best friend or not, she had been years in the company of the Hamilton Hall Sinclairs. He certainly did not trust that branch of the Sinclair family. The circumstances of the scandal that had ensnared him were just so convenient. Too convenient.

His mind was a muddle and he could hear Arthur’s incredulous, mocking laughter at his foolishness. Cecilia was by far the most beautiful, intelligent, and fascinating woman he had ever met. She had drawn his eyes on that fateful day, five years ago and had not let go. But, Lionel had long ago decided there was only room for one passion in his life. One goal. Revenge for the murder of his friend and the failed attempt to take his life.

For three days and nights, he had managed to avoid her, dining alone and occupying himself either with the business of the Dukedom or his own, more private business. Now it was telling on him. He knew she was there, within reach. Knew that he had only to visit her chambers and she would welcome him, as she had done that night. The knowledge that such pleasure, such happiness was within such simple reach was

maddening. Because he could not trust that it was not a trap. Because he had made a promise over the body of Arthur Sinclair. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with that. He simply needed to remain strong, to keep Cecilia at arm's length. To forget that sweet, angelic voice.

The melody haunted the air around him and he tossed back the Scotch in an attempt to drown it out. The burning liquid scalded his throat and began to heat his stomach. But it did nothing to distract him.

With the voice came a body. A body he had touched and tasted. A body he had used and allowed himself to be used by. Pale in the darkness of night. Moaning and whispering his name. Writhing and clawing at him, leaving scratches that burned his back and shoulders. He poured another drink and it swiftly followed the first.

A knock came at the door and for one wild moment, he believed it to be Cecilia, pursuing him after their meeting earlier in the music room. He felt too weak to face her and resist, the thought skeins of wool in the paws of a cat. Then reason asserted itself. The knock had been a heavy rap, announcing Blackwood. Carrying his glass, Lionel went back to the desk, throwing himself down into the chair and taking a swallow of the amber liquid.

"Come in!" he bellowed.

"I shall, without the need for shouting," Blackwood grumbled as he entered the room.

"I am rather busy, Blackwood," Lionel muttered, spreading his hand over the letters on the desk.

"Aye, I can see with what," Blackwood replied, looking from the decanter to the half-empty glass in Lionel's hand.

“What is it?” Lionel asked.

“I thought you should know, Your Grace, that your wife is moving the paintings from outside the music room.”

Lionel sat up straight, thudding the glass down on the table. The contents spilled across his hand. The music room and its surroundings had been left alone since his father’s death. He had rarely visited it. Today he had gone there on a whim, driven by an instinct he did not quite understand. And had found Cecilia there. His conversation with her, more brusque than he had intended, had driven from his mind the need to tell her.

“She does not know about the prohibition. But your staff should,” he snarled.

“She is moving them herself with Peggy’s help. I cannot say if Peggy is aware of your feelings about the music room,” Blackwood continued.

Lionel stood abruptly. “I will not attach blame to a young girl who knows no better. But you will ensure she knows in the future. Where are the paintings being moved to?”

“Her Grace’s quarters, Your Grace,” Blackwood replied.

Lionel drained the last of his Scotch and strode from the room. He had not asked which paintings she was moving but an instinct told him which it would be. When he reached the hallway leading to her rooms, he found Cecilia and Peggy struggling to lift one of the landscapes that he had painted. It was sizable and, with its gilt frame, heavy.

As he approached, Peggy looked around and the movement was enough to disrupt her grip. A corner of the frame slipped from her hand. Lionel caught it before it could hit

the floor. Peggy stepped away as he took the full weight, muscles bursting out in his neck from the strain. From around the frame, his eyes met Cecilia's. She still held her share of the weight and her fingers slipped down the frame to his own.

"You should not have tried to lift something so heavy without aid," Lionel grated.

"We managed it this far. But the effort was tiring," Cecilia began.

With a grunt and a sharp pulse in his weak leg, he pulled it from her and laid it to rest against a wall.

"Peggy, the music room and its hallway are out of bounds. Blackwood will tell you as much," Lionel said, "go along now, about your duties."

Peggy looked alarmed, face flushed. She dropped into a curtsy and scurried away.

"She should not get into any trouble over this. She was obeying my orders," Cecilia defended.

"I understand, and she will not. I would not punish someone when they did not know they did wrong."

"And why is it wrong? These paintings are very fine indeed. Works of great skill."

"Amateur daubing," Lionel said dismissively.

He looked at the pictures she had already hung. There had been half a dozen in the music room hallway and the same again in the music room itself. Cecilia seemed to have found almost all of them.

"Hardly. I am no expert but I love all of them. Especially the picture of Penrose,"

Cecilia murmured as she turned her gaze to the painting too.

Lionel's eyes scanned the walls for the painting in question but he could not see it.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"I have hung it inside. I'll show you."

She opened a door and disappeared inside. Lionel followed her to her bedchamber, seeing the picture hung opposite the bed, where Cecilia might look at it as she lay, awaiting sleep.

"When did you paint it?" she asked. "I do not recognize it as belonging to Arthur's time as lord."

"It was as a present to him on his inheritance. I found some engravings of the house from the time your family acquired it, during the reign of William and Mary."

"And from that, you created this?" Cecilia cooed in awe, drifting a hand across the surface. "It is remarkable."

"As I said, I am no painter."

Cecilia rounded on him. "Your modesty is ill-placed given the evidence I can see with my own eyes."

"Nevertheless. I did not tell you but I do not care to see these pictures. That is why they have been left in the music room. That area of the castle is out of bounds," Lionel replied.

"Why?" Cecilia asked.

“Because those are my orders!” Lionel snapped.

He saw the fire flaring in Cecilia’s eyes then. She stepped towards him, chin raised. He did not like to be defied, it was not a state of affairs that he was accustomed to. But he could not deny that she was magnificent when roused. Cecilia stood facing him with defiance in her expression.

“Well, that is not good enough. I am not your servant. I am your wife. You may think that makes me your property and the conventions of our society may agree with you. But I am not. The women of my family are equal to the men. That is how it is and how it should be. If you would care to tell me why I am prohibited from going to the music room, after you gave me leave to use it three days ago, then perhaps I shall consider it.”

“Three days ago...” Lionel began.

But he could not finish. He was being irrational and he knew it. When he had heard Cecilia singing, he had been entranced. When he recognized that fact, he had wanted nothing more than to be away from her lest the spell take firmer hold. At the moment in which he stood there listening to her sweet voice, he would have given her anything. To hear her sing for just a few moments more he would have paid a king’s ransom.

Now he ran a hand through his hair, turning away. Or trying to. Cecilia put herself in front of him as he did, one hand resting on his chest. The physical contact seemed to anchor him. She barely touched him but might as well have thrown him into chains. His eyes met hers and he did not want to look away. He became lost in them, so wide and bright. So deep and gentle while at the same time blazing with the force of her will.

“I was not myself in that moment,” he whispered.

“Are you yourself now?” Cecilia replied.

Her voice carried as much barely controlled emotion as Lionel himself felt. She was mere inches from him, though she had not taken a step. It was a shock to realize that it was he who had moved, drawn to her. A flush rose in her pale cheeks, evidence of the same excitement he could see in her eyes. Her lips parted and her breath came in quick gasps. Lionel felt his own heart racing, hands twitching from the desire to hold her. He wavered on the brink of self-control, feeling as though he held on by his fingernails only.

Then the control was gone. His hands went about her waist and his lips found hers. For a glorious moment, reason fled along with time. There was only the feeling of her warm lips against his, of her soft, curving body in his hands. Then he was pushing against his chest roughly. He stepped back. Cecilia danced away from him, a hand to her lips.

“No. Not again,” she started, “I will not be used. I will either be your wife or not. There is no halfway.”

Lionel felt a tearing wrench within him. Denying the passion that had risen within him was nearly impossible. It raged through his veins, demanding satisfaction. Shutting off that desire was like trying to dam a river in full flood.

But Cecilia was right. He could not use her like this. Nor allow himself to be used. They could not be what she wanted. What they both wanted. Never. There was no room in his life for it.

“You’re right. No halfway,” he murmured. “Keep the paintings here if you wish, and feel free to use the music room. In a few months, this will all be over.” With that, he spun and left the room without awaiting her response.

CHAPTER 13

ONE WEEK LATER

Lionel felt eyes on his back and turned. A beech spread its boughs over his head, casting a deep shade across him. The castle was silhouetted against the bright morning sky behind it, the sun not yet visible. He knew that he was looking towards the distant south tower. Was she at the window watching him? The distance was too great for him to see but an instinct told him that she was. He had caught her once before doing just that.

For a long moment, he gazed at the dark tower, imagining the beautiful face at the window. Such beauty as he had never beheld. It had seemed fortuitous when she had appeared at the ball after so many years. An opportunity presented by fate for him to set the record straight, to tell her the truth about her brother. And perhaps to court her. The last time they had met, he had been enamored of Arabella Wycliff, foolishly so he now saw.

Now he was free.

Except that he wasn't.

Free of romantic entanglement—but not free to pursue his heart.

Fate had brought Cecilia back into his life to taunt him, to show him what he might possess if he gave up his quest for revenge. For Lionel was convinced that the two desires could not co-exist. He could either have Cecilia or take his revenge on

Thorpe. An innocent lady was not something that should ever be compromised by the depravities of vengeance. That was the decision he had made a week before after his confrontation with Cecilia and the kiss they had shared. So far, he had managed to maintain his resolve.

He turned away, letting the deeper shadows of the grove swallow him. After just a few yards, the earth path that had led him into the woods had vanished. Long grass brushed his boots with dew. Saplings grew amongst each other in a tangle of young, pliable branches. Older trees towered overhead filtering the daylight through broad, green leaves. He followed an unerring path through the thick undergrowth, stepping carefully around rocks and roots, gritting his teeth against stabs of pain from his leg under its brace. At the corpse of a lightning-blasted willow, he turned, crossing a clearing of bramble and grass, and then following the course of a small stream. Where the banks of the stream became low and the stream bed choked with pebbles, he crossed, the water barely deep enough to reach his ankle. On the far side was a line of ash trees, planted in a double row. In between was an ancient trackway, old before even the convent that predated the castle was built. Lionel followed it, noting the occasional stones that were the only remains of the antique road. It curved along the outer edge of the wood, marking the far northern boundary of his estate, before descending into a narrow valley.

Lionel limped down a stair made of protruding tree roots and old stones until he reached the floor of the valley, which spilled away to the north, curving out of sight. Before him was a shape swathed in ivy and brambles. Trees poked their heads through a broken roof and blackberries bloomed in jagged branches thrust through windows. A wooden door hung on a solitary, rusted hinge.

As he approached, he saw the corroded long still waterwheel. The mill was not as old as the track that led to it but rather had been placed there to take advantage of the busy stream that began back in the wood. Here, it tumbled over rocks into the valley and its merry tinkle would once have been a ferocious roar. Except it had long since

silted up and become a still, green-tinged mere next to the long idle wheel of the mill. A secret place, long forgotten by the servants of Thornhill and the people of the village alike. Tucked away in a fold of the land, quiet and secluded.

He pushed past the door and into a room that belied the overgrown exterior. Inside, the vegetation had been cleared. Furniture had been moved from the dustiest cellars and attics of Thornhill to provide some comfort. An old, leather armchair whose upholstery was cracked and missing in several places. A bureau propped at one corner by bricks. In another corner was a wrought iron safe, secured by a combination lock and a chain thick enough to anchor a ship.

Lionel fished for the chain he had placed around his neck. On the chain was a long, bronze key. He undid the padlock and then swiftly turned the combination dial to open the safe. Within were an assortment of papers and a writing box. He took all out and sat before the bureau, brushing from its surface stray leaves. He spread the papers before him and tried to focus on their contents. But his mind was not on his work this morning.

A head of fiery red hair, brown—almost hazel eyes, and luxuriant, olive-shaded skin kept intruding into his mind's eye. He ran a hand through his hair, then pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes tightly. Almost a fortnight past, he had given in to his desire and made love to Cecilia. It should not have been a subject of consternation. She was his wife. Legally and in the eyes of God. They were married and nothing was more natural. But it was a source of consternation for Lionel. He did not wish to use Cecilia like that. It bothered him that she might think he was using her. Trying to have his cake and eat it too. He had married her as she had become embroiled in scandal because of him. A trap set by Sir Gerald Knightley and Sir Rupert Sinclair, for reasons best known to themselves. He had stepped innocently into it and marriage seemed the only honorable way to remedy the situation.

Had Cecilia behaved as though she were part of the scheme, he could cheerfully have

ignored her and nullified the wedding when the social furor had died away. But she behaved as though she were entirely innocent. Worse, she believed that he had killed her brother. That was not true but he couldn't tell her the truth without proof. And not without potentially revealing his hand to the man he intended to destroy. If one word reached Thorpe that Lionel had revealed the truth of what happened that night, he would know that he was not safe. He would look hard at every decision he took. It was his reckless nature that Lionel had come to rely on to destroy him. That and the fact that in his arrogance, he had come to believe that he had been able to commit murder and get away with it. All of Lionel's plans depended on secrecy. It was so ingrained in him that he could not bring himself to change the habit.

Lionel's fists closed tightly, only to spring open when he realized that he still held the precious papers. These were the instruments of his revenge. The information that would allow him to utterly destroy the Viscount of Thorpe.

"Do I intrude, Your Grace? I did knock," came a voice in a lilting Scottish accent.

Lionel jumped to his feet, whirling, and causing himself a stab of pain in his left leg. A man stood just inside the ruined doorway, his approach rendered silent by Lionel's deep introspection.

"Not at all, Lennox. I was expecting you," Lionel started, forcing a smile and offering his hand.

Lennox was gray-haired and pencil-thin with a beak of a nose and powerful eyebrows. He took the hand offered and shook it before holding up a leather satchel.

"I have the information you requested, Your Grace. And interesting reading it makes. I believe we have reached a turning point in your plans with this. May I?"

Lionel stepped back and allowed Menzies Lennox, formerly Master of Police for the

city of Glasgow, to take a sheaf of papers from the bag. He spread them on the bureau and stepped back, hands clasped behind his back. Lionel placed a hand on the table and leaned in to peruse the documents.

“What we have here, by means which it would not be wise to scrutinize too closely, is a record of trade for a particular shipping company which carries goods in and out of the river Clyde. This includes imports from as far away as the United States and India. This is a company registration for three vessels with Lloyds of London,” he pointed to one paper, “and this is a charter for said corporation. There are three names on that charter. Sir Reginald Cox MP, Sir Gerald Knightley, and Mrs. Nancy James.”

Lionel frowned. “I recognize the first two names and am not surprised to see them. Sir Reginald testified to the innocence of Thorpe at the time of his attempt on my life. Knightley is a young villain recently come into my life, though I see now he has been an enemy for longer than I have known. But who is this woman?”

“A question that vexed me for quite some time. It took me from the Merchant City in Glasgow to Bristol, Chester, and finally, to Cornwall. There I discovered an inn owned by a former merchant seaman named Nathaniel James. The son of an American who remained loyal to the British during their War of Independence and found himself unwelcome in Boston subsequently. He settled in Bristol and met a woman who had been given a tidy sum by an English aristocrat to buy her silence. Together, they purchased a lovely seaside inn just outside Penzance. Can you guess who the generous aristocrat was, Your Grace?”

Lennox loved nothing more than spinning his investigations into a yarn, a pastime only surpassed for enjoyment by the slow reveal of exactly how clever he had been. Lionel had no doubt the man had made an excellent Master of Police in Glasgow’s nascent police force but had little patience this morning.

“Out with it, man. Tell me!” he snapped.

Lennox sighed and muttered something in Scots dialect too alien for Lionel to follow.

“The gentleman was Charles Grisham, then Duke of Thornhill. Later to be father to you, Your Grace,” Lennox added patiently.

“Mrs. Nancy James was paid off by my father?” Lionel said, the truth dawning on him.

“She was, Your Grace.”

“I can only think of one reason why a man like my father would do such a thing...”

“If she were carrying his child?” Lennox suggested gently.

“My god,” Lionel inhaled, “my father had a...a...”

“A bastard, yes, Your Grace. You know, of course, who that bastard must be?”

“Thorpe... It all makes sense now. You are sure that he was born before I? That he is the elder?”

“By a matter of months,” Lennox finished, producing another paper. “Here is a copy of his birth certificate. He was born in Glasgow where Nancy James was sent to have her child in the house of her mother, a housekeeper for a cotton merchant in the city. She moved with the child to Bristol with the money paid to her by your father, and there met the man she would marry. They’re still at the inn, the Sea Sprite Inn. And it’s a very homely place too.”

“My father... he—he never told me I had a brother...” He was suddenly sitting but had no memory of doing so. Lennox bowed his head, nodding gravely. “He wants the Dukedom. That is why he attempted to take my life five years ago,” he breathed.

“This... this is bigger than I thought. Could I retaliate against my own blood?”

CHAPTER 14

Cecilia strode across the gardens towards the looming grove of trees. She had chosen one of the new dresses, provided for her by her husband. It was dark green with bronze highlights that she felt complimented her hair. It was a fine dress and, she flattered herself to think, one that suited her very well. She realized that she had no clue what Lionel's favorite color might be but would discover it, if only by trying on each hue of the wardrobe she had been provided with until she found it.

A week had passed since her last contact with Lionel. He had assiduously avoided her for that time, dining alone each day. But Cecilia had observed him entering the grove once more. And on that occasion, she had seen a stranger in the castle, taking tea in a sitting room. He had introduced himself as Mr. Menzies Lennox and claimed to be of service to the Duke but unable to elaborate for reasons of confidentiality. Scottish, polite but unbending in his refusal to speak more or on any subject other than polite conversation.

On the eighth day, after bathing and dressing there had been no sign of Lionel at breakfast once more. She had been informed by Blackwood that His Grace was occupied on business matters. The butler had refused to state precisely where Lionel was, which had precipitated Cecilia to begin an exploration of the grove.

The grass was still moist with dew which wetted the bottom of her skirt as she crossed the garden. For the walk, she had chosen a sensible pair of shoes to replace the soft slippers she wore within the house. Birds were chirping noisily in the trees and the air was filled with the pleasant aroma of damp grass and mossy bark.

For a moment she stood, looking at the trees for any sign of where Lionel might have gone. She could not be sure of the point at which he had entered the grove. There was no path to follow and the vantage point of the window had provided a very different view to that which she now saw. Then she noticed the branch of a sapling, bent where it had been brushed aside and subsequently become caught behind another. Her eyes went from that sign down to the long grass and she saw where broken stems had been crushed under a heavy boot. The grass around it had sprung back up but not entirely. Cecilia had learned much of hunting and tracking from her brother, though her preference was to stalk in order to watch animals rather than shoot them.

She stepped forward, moving carefully through the undergrowth, looking for more signs. Once her eye was in, they were not hard to find. Lionel was a large man and though he was probably as skilled a hunter as Arthur had been, it would still be difficult for a man of such bulk to move through a crowded woodland like this without leaving some signs of passage. She noticed moss scraped from a stone by a heel, a soft patch of earth bearing half a boot print, a broken branch, and a snatch of cotton on the arm of a bramble. All pointed her in the right direction, she hoped. It could be that she was following the trail of Mr. Hardcastle, the groundskeeper, but she had no other clue as to where she might find Lionel, so she pursued it nonetheless.

The trail took her through a clearing created where a tree had been struck by lightning, then along the course of a merry stream. Where the stream descended steeply into an ax-cleaved valley, she began to doubt her own eyes. Surely Lionel would not have wandered so far? But she continued, slipping and sliding, skirts brushing through leaf mold, mud, and moss. Finally, she stood beside what was now a wider and deeper stream, staring at a dilapidated old mill.

Two clear sets of footprints led along the soft earth of a path, right up to the door of the mill. Cecilia cleared her throat as she approached.

“Hello? Lionel? I hope I am not disturbing?”

As she reached the door, it was opened from within. Lionel stood in the doorway. Cecilia was stopped short by the expression on his face. It was as though he had been disturbed from a deep slumber, or else caught daydreaming. He blinked, rubbing his eyes.

“You seem surprised to see me,” Cecilia said brightly.

“I am. How did you find this place?” Lionel asked.

“I tracked you. Arthur taught me much about woodcraft. He was very skilled.”

Lionel looked down for a moment, when he looked back his gaze was sharper. The surprise of seeing her seemed to have been sloughed away like a discarded overcoat. Cecilia felt a drop of water on her forehead and squinted at the thick foliage above.

“Was that a drop of rain? I did not see a cloud in the sky when I left the castle.”

“What are you doing here, Cecilia?” Lionel said coldly.

The ice in his tone stung her but Cecilia firmed her jaw and returned his gaze steadily. Another, larger drop of rain struck the top of her head but she ignored it.

“I wanted to speak to my husband. I wanted my husband’s company after eight agonizing days spent in loneliness. I am sorry but no matter how many times you say it, I cannot reconcile myself to being less than your wife.”

“Did my absence not tell you something about my desire for company?”

“It did, but I wished to know precisely where I stand. And for you to know the same,”

Cecilia replied.

The drops were coming thicker and faster now, filtering through the woodland canopy. Lionel glanced upward in irritation, then at her dress which was becoming darker in spots where the rain was striking it.

“For goodness sake, come inside. There is some shelter in here,” he finally said, stepping aside from the doorway.

But Cecilia did not move. She felt the uncomfortable wet, coldness of the rain and knew that it would soon completely ruin her dress. However, she was determined. If Lionel did not care for her then it would not matter if she got wet or even ended up in bed with a fever. It would solve his problem in fact—make the task of avoiding her far more simple.

Cecilia stood her ground, watching him. Her heart pounded as he studied her through narrowed eyes. This could be the moment that her happiness hung upon. He might shrug and tell her that not only did he wish to avoid scandal but had no further desire to touch her again. He might walk away and leave her cold, shivering, and alone. Or...

“Get inside woman. I did not have that dress made for you so it could be drenched in the rain. We can discuss it in the dry, can we not?” Lionel snapped.

He sounded exasperated, and actually stepped out through the door and extended a hand to her. He was only yards away but Cecilia hesitated, examining his face. Finally, she took his hand and allowed him to draw her into its interior.

Well, it could hardly be called an interior. Part of the ceiling survived to provide a sheltered corner in which there were two chairs and a bureau as well as a formidable-looking iron safe. Lionel ushered her beneath the dubious shelter of the ceiling, which

tilted towards one corner and was producing a steady drip of rain from that edge. Cecilia shook her long, auburn hair, running fingers through it to stroke out the excess water that had begun to darken and dampen it. The restricted shelter meant that she now stood close to Lionel. He looked down at her silently and she was, once more, acutely aware of his powerful masculinity. It was as intoxicating as a potent wine, making her heart skip and her breathing come fast and hard.

“This is an odd place for a study, is it not?” Cecilia chimed.

She could see the shutters slamming shut behind his eyes at the question and cursed herself for it. It would just make it seem to him as though she was prying.

“I do not wish to know your secrets if you do not wish to share them. I was simply making an observation,” she added hurriedly.

“I apologize for how our last conversation ended rather... abruptly. I lost control of myself again,” Lionel muttered, as though he had not heard, “I gave in to a primitive drive that had nothing to do with reason or civilized behavior. And I have avoided you, in earnest, to prevent it from happening again.”

Cecilia could not help but laugh. It was sudden and involuntary, partially sparked by the look of utter seriousness on Lionel’s face. That face darkened at the laughter.

“Have I said something amusing?” he asked, quietly.

“I am sorry,” Cecilia smiled, quelling the laughter, “but surely civilization as we know it would not exist without that drive which you seek to demean by calling it... what? Animal? Primitive? You are more intelligent than that, Lionel.”

Her words clearly stung him. He moved away, face pinched and Cecilia regretted her levity. He was a proud man it seemed and did not like the idea of being made sport

of.

“I do not say that to poke fun. I simply do not see what we have done as any kind of primitive urge. Merely a natural one. I apologize for laughing,” Cecilia continued.

Lionel turned back to her. “You realize how your words might make you seem in the eyes of some? A gentlewoman of England calling the things we have done as anything but animal lust? Surely, that is not the behavior of a gentleman?”

“Do you believe that?” Cecilia asked, astonished. “You took my maidenhead. As you would expect. I have never more than kissed a man before and even that was the innocence of girlhood. You may have lain with many women for all I am aware.”

“Not many, but some,” Lionel murmured.

“As I would expect. As I believe it normal for a young man of your age. I do not judge. How can you judge me for enjoying my husband’s body and the way he uses mine?”

There was a touch of anger in her now. Anger and frustration at having to justify what should have been beautiful and natural. Perhaps not every Duke and Duchess made love in the open air though. Perhaps not every Duke and Duchess reveled in their nakedness and the sheer sensuality of their conjoined bodies as they had done. Cecilia was prepared to accept that but not to be judged by a man who had been equal partner and participant.

“I do not judge you,” Lionel sighed, “never that. And I agree, there is no shame in what we did. It was primitive and animalistic but I would be a hypocrite if I said it was wrong.”

“Strip away the trappings of civilization and we are revealed as sophisticated animals.

But as the Lord made us.”

“Well argued. You are a philosopher?” Lionel added, with a hint of a smile.

“Arthur kept a large and wide-ranging library at Penrose.”

Lionel barked a sudden laugh, throwing back his head. Now it was her turn to be offended. She folded her arms beneath her breasts, mouth set in a firm line.

“Have I said something funny now?” she asked.

“I was at school with Arthur. I doubt he could find the library at Westlands without a map. The librarian certainly would not have recognized him. He spent his time playing cricket or football. Or pugilism and wrestling. Any sport. Arthur was a master but he had to be whipped to open a book.”

Cecilia wanted to be offended at the suggestion that Arthur had been some kind of muscle-brained oaf but the description was too close to the man she had known and loved.

“Arthur was never happier than when he was out of doors. He could not sit still,” she confessed.

Lionel chuckled but seemed to sober quickly. “I do miss him very much.”

“As do I,” Cecilia whispered.

She looked up at Lionel and was shocked to see the glint of wetness in his eyes. He turned away when he saw her watching him but she was unwilling to let this glimpse of the man behind the armor go. She put a hand to his shoulder, moving around so that she faced him. Lionel looked up with eyes bright with pain, face taut with

suffering.

“We both still grieve,” she sighed, tears of sympathy staining her own eyes.

He shook his head sharply. “I do but that is not... I do not shed tears for loss. It is the injustice. And the guilt.”

“Guilt?” She released him at once. “You told me that it was not you that shot Arthur as the coroner decided.”

“And I spoke the truth,” Lionel responded with heat.

Such was the conviction in his voice that Cecilia nodded and put her hand to his shoulder again. “Lionel. Look at me. I believe you. But why will you not tell me what truly happened? Even if you cannot prove it. I am your wife and I want to be your most trusted confidante and advisor. You should be able to trust me with your life.”

“I feel guilt for Arthur’s death... he died because of me. I did not pull the trigger but it was my family that brought about his death,” Lionel muttered.

“How?” Cecilia said, breathlessly.

“The man who killed Arthur was aiming for me. Arthur saved my life. Had he not acted with such courage, I would be dead and another man would be Duke.”

Cecilia had both hands on his shoulders now, though she did not remember putting up a second hand. Lionel did not pull away and she could not bring herself to lose the physical closeness she had now realized. Thoughts whirled through her mind as she tried to adjust her worldview to this new information. He spoke with such pained sincerity that she did not doubt him. When he could not offer her any other explanation, it was hard for her to take him at his word. But now...

“Who?” she pleaded.

“A man I knew, but did not know at all, it seems. A man I have since discovered bears my father’s blood in his veins, though I am reluctant to admit him to be a Grisham. No Grisham would behave as he has done. You recall the Viscount of Thorpe?”

Cecilia’s heart pounded violently in her chest, her breath catching as her eyes widened in disbelief. “The Viscount of Thorpe? He is your...?”

“Half-brother,” Lionel finished.

“Half-brother?!” she blurted without regard. “It was your half-brother that took away my Anthony?!” Cecilia was shocked—no, horrified. She did remember the confident young man who had escorted Lionel’s then-fiancée to the hunt that fateful day. He had seemed confident to the point of arrogant and it was clear that Arthur and Lionel both disliked him, though it was unclear why. There had been no opportunity to ask Arthur about the feud—if that is what it was. She looked into Lionel’s face, still handsome despite the anguish that painted it at her accusatory glare.

“Lionel,” she whispered, her voice quivering yet resolute, “I shouldn’t have... I’m sorry, I believe you. I will stand by you.”

CHAPTER 15

Lionel felt as though a weight had been lifted from his back. After the revelations of Menzies Lennox, Lionel had sent the man away to find himself breakfast at the castle. The papers he had brought which showed Thorpe's business interests, carefully concealed, had been locked away for safekeeping. The safe was too heavy to be lifted easily and would be impossible to open without key and combination. Assuming one was able to find it in the long-abandoned mill, to begin with.

For the entire night, Lionel had remained in his sylvan hiding place, rocking back and forth, brooding on this new information and the light it shed on Thorpe's motivations—or rather, his own entire life. On his father's legacy, on his view of the Dukedom. On the reality of what he was now toiling towards—the utter destruction of his only kin. That truth had been a millstone, like the one that lay forgotten in a corner of the room, buried beneath soil, leaves, and brambles. It had taken an age for him to eventually submit to the song of slumber and he was soon dragged right out of it by a lonely voice outside.

Now, he gazed into Cecilia's soft brown eyes and felt unburdened. Could he truly trust her? If she was in league with his enemies, then what he had told her would only serve to tell Thorpe... his half-brother, that Lionel was on his trail. He found himself reaching up to stroke her cheek, savoring the feel of her soft, perfect skin.

"I have learned to keep my circle of trust close and select. I think the staff of my household are the only ones in which that trust is currently bestowed upon, and even then, only two men have my complete confidence, and only one knows what I just told you."

“I know it is no use to simply ask that I be added to that trust circle,” Cecilia murmured. “But I hope my actions will show you.”

She reached up to take his hand, straightening his fingers so that his palm lay across her cheek. She closed her eyes and Lionel felt a shiver run through him at the look of sheer delight on her face. Such delight from a simple touch to the cheek. And yet it was the same thrill that he felt, touching that cheek. She opened her eyes and he saw the shining desire there. Saw his own passion reflected. There was a flush now to her cheeks, spreading to her neck as her breathing came faster.

“You now have information that only one other has, besides myself. With it, you could give advantage to my enemies by telling them what I know. Or by leading them to this place where I plot my revenge.”

Cecilia’s lips parted, her face moving closer to his. His hand went from her cheek to her lovely throat. His fingers closed partially around it, savoring the feeling of power it gave him. She looked up at him, biting her lip and letting her hands fall. She was helpless before him, utterly in his power, and if he was any judge, utterly entranced at the prospect.

“Then secure your secret and keep me here, a prisoner,” she whispered huskily.

The flush deepened as she spoke, as though she had shocked herself at her brazenness. Lionel’s lips twitched into a smile and he saw a tentative reflection from Cecilia.

“A prisoner?” Lionel asked. “Would you be tied to the wall in here? At my mercy?”

Cecilia let out an involuntary gasp, a whimpered squeak from the depths of her throat. Lionel intended to let his hand fall, but instead, it came to rest upon one of her breasts. He pressed through the dress, recalling how those breasts had felt. He felt a

sudden, urgent need to see them, unclothed by darkness as they had been before.

“Yes. If that is what you wish. Keep me prisoner and... and use me as you desire.”

Lionel could feel his body responding to her wanton words. He had never heard a woman speak like this. From her shining red face, Cecilia was also new to it. But, novice or not, it was as though she were reaching into his mind and plucking images from his deepest fantasies. Cecilia was now pressed against him and his hands were gliding down her back before finding the gentle swell of her hips and derrière. The image of her olive-colored skin under the revealing glare of daylight came to him as he explored. Her buttocks were round but with the tightness of a woman well exercised. Pressed against his own he felt the strong thighs of a rider, thighs that had clamped around his waist weeks before, shaking with the agony of her ecstasy. Her pert breasts were hard against him, nipples evident even through the fabric of her dress. Lionel knew that his own arousal would be evident to her. As his body responded with increasing intensity, he felt her breath catch in her throat. Then her hips pressed against his own even harder than before.

“Am I being seduced by a spy for my enemies?” he whispered.

“Perhaps the spy has been bewitched by your body and your masculinity,” Cecilia replied, playfully.

Unable to resist any longer, Lionel bent his head to kiss her. But Cecilia leaned back, placing a finger on his lips. He took the finger between his teeth, tasting her skin and biting gently. She gave a squeal, pulling it back and Lionel darted in, mouth fastening on her throat, kissing and licking. She moaned softly, arms wrapping around him and holding him tight.

“Then you have become my plaything, utterly under my power, your own will subsumed. I can command you to do anything...” Lionel whispered.

“Anything!” Cecilia gasped as he bit her throat.

“Undress,” Lionel commanded.

As the week before, his passion and desire for her overrode his paranoia. The burden was too much. The burden of keeping secrets and keeping her at arm’s length. The freedom of being able to speak freely was as intoxicating to him as the lust he felt for her.

Cecilia stepped back, watching him from beneath heavy lashes as she reached to the back of her neck to begin undoing the buttons of her dress. Lionel said nothing as she managed to undo it and push it down to her waist, then beyond that to fall to the floor. No sooner had it left her that she bent to pick up the hem of her petticoat, lifting it and revealing the white stockings, concealing her legs to the thigh. The garment was tossed aside to reveal bare breasts and womanhood. But she did not stop. She slowly rolled down each stocking before flicking it aside with her toes. All the while a smile played across her face, part seductress, part innocent. Her cheeks were flushed, even as her eyes sparkled with delight.

“I told myself I would not give myself to you again until I had your word that we would be man and wife proper,” Cecilia whispered.

“I have taken that choice away.”

He moved around her, examining her naked loveliness from all angles. Stepping close enough that she would be able to feel his warm breath on her skin, he nevertheless refused to touch her. Instead, he watched her twitch and jump as she anticipated the first touch. Anticipated and was denied.

Lionel stooped to lift one of her stockings and, as he passed behind her, he suddenly looped it around and over her eyes. She raised her hands towards the makeshift

blindfold.

“Hands down,” Lionel snapped, “by your sides.”

She obeyed instantly and that submissiveness made Lionel’s arousal almost painful. He was driving himself to distraction with his prolonging of their coming together. After doubling the stocking over her eyes to make the material opaque, Lionel stepped back.

He quietly moved around, watching her breasts heaving with excitement. Without warning, he leaned in to enclose one of her nipples within his mouth, sucking on it and caressing it with his tongue. Cecilia squeaked again and then moaned aloud. She began to raise her hands to touch him, but he thrust them down and then pinned them behind her with one strong hand. Picking up the second stocking, he swiftly bound her hands together behind her. She whimpered and he kissed her, darting in to steal and then darting away, leaving her licking her lips for the taste of his own.

Lionel began to undress, saying nothing until he stood before her naked. Then he moved close, letting her feel his nakedness with her own. His loins melded with hers and she moaned aloud before gasping his name. He gripped her derrière, his manhood pressed between them, announcing itself to her with its hardness. She moved her hips obediently against his, in the motion of love-making. With each thrust, the movement became desperate and more pronounced, the gasping moans rising from her more urgent.

Again, Lionel sought to prolong the pleasure. He stepped back again, walking behind her. Cecilia’s head turned this way and that, searching for him. Lionel let her feel his touch when he reached down, fingers slipping beneath her thighs to find her womanhood.

“Bend,” he commanded.

Cecilia obeyed and he watched her bound hands clench and unclench as he caressed and delved. With his other hand, he reached around to cup her perfect breasts, tweaking her hard nipples. She was gasping in short, frantic bursts in between whispering his name.

Without warning, he seized her about the waist and lifted her, bearing her to the desk where he laid her on her back. With insistent hands, he parted her legs and his lips replaced his fingers in giving pleasure to her. Cecilia was bucking and writhing on the table now.

There came a tearing sound, and suddenly, her hands were free. She ripped the blindfold away and lifted her head. Lionel looked up at her without ceasing his lapping. She clamped both hands on his head, burying her fingers in his hair. His tongue moved with deliberate strokes, each one drawing a gasp from her lips. He felt her body quiver beneath him, every tremor urging him on. His hands roamed over her, grasping the curves of her body.

Finally, when they could take it no more, he moved up, positioning himself between her thighs. She arched towards him, desperate for the connection. He entered her in one swift motion, a gasp escaping both their lips at the sensation. He began to move, slow at first, each thrust deliberate and deep. Her legs wrapped around him, urging him on. He picked up the pace, the sound of their bodies colliding filling the space around them. Each thrust was met with a cry from her, her nails digging into his shoulders, pulling him closer, deeper.

Lionel shifted, moving both her legs to the side, changing their angle. “Beg for it,” he growled, his voice thick with desire.

She whimpered, her breath catching. “Please, Lionel... I need you—” she gasped.

He didn’t need to hear anymore. With that, he thrust into her with a new intensity.

Her body arched to meet him, her moans louder, more desperate. He grabbed her hips, pulling her against him with every thrust. The sensation was overwhelming. Her fingers clawed at his chest. Their movements were frantic, primal.

He pulled out suddenly, flipping her onto her stomach. "Hands behind your back," he commanded. She obeyed, her body trembling. He entered her again, this time from behind, as he kept her wrists fixed in place with one hand. His thrusts were relentless, each one harder than the last. His other hand went around her throat as he leaned over to snarl wolfishly into her ear. "You like that, don't you?"

"Yes, oh God, yes," she cried out, her voice breaking. He reached around, his hand finding the sensitive spot between her legs, rubbing in time with his thrusts. Her screams of pleasure filled the room, raw and unrestrained.

Lionel felt her tighten around him, her cries reaching a fevered pitch. He drove into her, his movements rough and commanding. "You're mine," he growled. "Say it."

"I'm yours," she panted. "Only yours."

He thrust harder, his control slipping. Cecilia cried out, again and again, body convulsing and shaking. He gave one final, powerful thrust, and they both shattered, their bodies collapsing together in a heap of exhausted satisfaction. Then, Lionel lifted his head from her and laid his body against hers. The joining of their two naked forms was as glorious as it had been the first time. The world shattered. Time and space ended, and the totality of their existence was their entwined bodies.

When it was over, Lionel lay with his head pillowed upon Cecilia's breasts. She had her arms about him, stroking his hair. He did not want to move, the softness of her body more than compensating for the hardness of the table on which they lay.

His body felt liquid, his desire sated. He felt utterly vulnerable, exposed but uncaring.

If Cecilia was a spy, then she was committed to her cause, willing to give the entirety of her being to it.

He could not imagine any woman giving so much unless driven by true desire.

Trust was difficult for him. An unfamiliar concept. But, something was changing. Perhaps he was bewitched. If so, he welcomed it.

A fork in the road stood before him. To lie in Cecilia's arms and accept her as his wife. Or to reject her once and for all. Reject her and continue his quest for vengeance alone. Something told him that such a lonely, personal quest would destroy him. It would take something of his humanity away, never to return. And would leave him unfulfilled once achieved. But in the same vein, having her join his quest for vengeance against his own blood might put her in harm's way. Might even destroy whatever they dared to build. The foundations of a marriage birthed on duplicity and fueled by betrayal could never survive. And that was a gross sin he could never forgive himself for.

He was conflicted. For, no matter how he framed this dilemma, greed was the prevalent emotion. He couldn't allow Thorpe to walk free. He couldn't allow anyone else to have Cecilia. Not now, not ever. A gnawing feeling clawed at his stomach—a feeling that he might regret the dark path he was treading down. His heart pounded against his ribcage and he swore she could feel it.

"Lionel," Cecilia whispered after an age of laying in his arms, "I don't know what the future holds, nor can I convince you that a marriage can be anything but a burden, but if it is to be the case that we must separate some day, then can I make a request? That this dream only end when the scandal is forgotten? And not a moment sooner."

He raised his head to face her. Seconds later, he crushed his lips against hers fiercely. "So, what would you like to do first?"

“So soon?”

“Of course,” he chuckled, pinching her cheeks at her astonishment. “We hardly have forever. I shall make your time at Thornhill immemorable.”

A flicker of anxiety passed through her at his words, the implication of their fleeting time together sinking in. But she left it there for now, at the back of her thoughts. “Hmm. A tour of Thornwood, perhaps? I have only ever seen the view from my bedchamber window and it looks a magical place.”

He kissed her again. “Your wish is my command.”

CHAPTER 16

Cecilia whooped as her white mare, Summer, leaped the low hedge and stretched its neck to race across the field beyond. Lionel was ahead, as he had been for the entire ride. His gray stallion, Thor, was larger than her mount and as heavily muscled as its rider. He looked back at her, grinning at the sight. Her eyes were streaming from the gale of their passage, and her bonnet, secured around her neck by a ribbon, was bouncing in the wind. Long, curling locks of red hair flew like a banner. Lionel's own dark hair streamed like the mane of his horse. He looked like no English gentleman that Cecilia had ever come across. On horseback, the pain in his legs did not encumber him. He appeared like a Tartar prince, galloping across the Russian steppes intent on pillage and plunder.

Cecilia grinned in return as Summer began to gain on Thor. She may be of slighter build but that meant she was lighter and bearing a lighter rider too. Her stamina was beginning to tell on the big gray. Summer's nose was drawing level with Thor's tail as they followed the line of a tall hedge that bordered the far side of the field. Lionel pointed ahead and to the right.

Cecilia looked and saw a hill with a cluster of trees on its summit. Lionel steered his horse in that direction and she followed. There were sheep up there but they scattered in fluffy alarm at the thunderous approach of the riders. She felt a pang of remorse over frightening the poor creatures but supposed that simply walking over to them would probably have elicited the same response.

Finally, Lionel drew his rein at the top of the hill and Cecilia reached him moments later. She wore skirts that she had cut and sewed especially to allow her to ride astride

the horse. A pair of pantaloons or breeches like Lionel would wear would have been ideal but she daredn't go that far from convention yet. Instead, the skirt of her dress, pale gray today with a bodice of yellow, sat on either side of the saddle, as did her modified petticoats. Beneath those, she wore a laundered pair of Lionel's undergarments. That was a secret known only to him and her. They were large on her and felt very odd as a garment, but they served to protect her modesty while mounting or dismounting.

She drew Summer alongside Thor and the two stablemates nuzzled each other affectionately. Lionel leaned from the saddle to steal a long kiss from her too.

"Magnificent," he breathed. "I have never seen a finer rider. Is that Arthur's influence again?"

"No, actually. Our father taught us both to ride as children but I got as much practice as I could when I had to go and live in Hamilton Hall."

Lionel dismounted with grace and no little elan. He reached up to Cecilia and she took his hands and allowed him to pull her from the saddle. She dissolved into giggles as, after sliding from the saddle, she found herself swept into his arms and carried across the hilltop.

"Oh, what is it about Hamilton that encouraged you to ride? Are your aunt and uncle keen riders?" Lionel inquired.

"No, it gave me an opportunity to get away from them. I took every opportunity to get out of the house. When I could steal a horse, I would ride to Upton or Langley Marsh. Even as far as Windsor. But Uncle Rupert saw me ride out one day and forbade me access to the stables. Any of the staff who turned a blind eye faced the sack. I could not have that on my conscience so I took to walking everywhere. But by that time I'd had many hours of practice on horseback. I devised the system of cutting

and sewing my skirts with the help of a seamstress I met in Colnbrook. Agatha, her name was,” Cecilia explained, smiling as she regarded him from against his steely chest.

Lionel placed her on her feet under the boughs of an oak that presided over the rest of the crops, which mostly consisted of hawthorn and hazel. He was frowning.

“You do not speak much of your time in Hamilton. I did not realize your family was so cruel.”

“I do not even think of them as family any longer,” Cecilia confessed. “Rupert was my father’s brother but Margaret is no blood kin of mine. And I cannot even blame her for the way Rupert is. I always remember him as a cold fish. Obsessed with his wallet.”

“He charged a pretty penny in dowry for you, so he is obviously a fair judge of value,” Lionel said, unsmiling.

Cecilia looked at him, momentarily outraged until she saw the smile break across his face. She slapped his chest with a gloved hand and his grin broadened. When he smiled from genuine happiness, it lit up his face, illuminating his eyes and giving him an energy that was infectious. She found that she could not help but mirror that smile when she saw it.

“So, where is it you have brought me?” she asked, looking around for the first time.

The slope they had climbed was long and gentle but the view from the oak was much steeper. Far below she could see the glittering band of a river, presumably the Thames. The landscape was a patchwork of greens, dotted with woods here and there. She could see villages and towns laid out like miniature models of real places. Lionel pointed to the right.

“Over there is Chertsey, and across that loop of the Thames from it is Shepperton, with Halliford beyond that. Nice little places all within the Thornhill lands. At least the ancient lands. There is nothing owed to the Grisham’s from those lands any longer but there are ancestors of mine in the parish churches of each of those places as well as houses bearing the Grisham crest. My mother had long ago wanted my marriage ceremony to take place there. Arabella was against the idea.

He spoke with pride in the history of his family and its connection to the land. It was a contrast for Cecilia, so used to her aunt and uncle’s grasping materialism. They were not interested in history except where it could bring them coin. Nor did they care for any place which they did not own or could not buy.

“Lionel,” Cecilia began tentatively, “why do you never talk about Arabella?”

Lionel paused, a shadow of something flitting across his face before he shrugged lightly. “What is there to say? She belongs to the past.”

“But she was important to you once,” Cecilia pressed gently, her eyes searching his.

“Was being the operative word,” Lionel replied, leaning back against an oak tree. “I suppose it’s not much of a story. She did not wish to be tied to a man who had become... let’s say, less than what he once was.”

Cecilia’s brow furrowed. “You mean because of the scandal surrounding Arthur’s death?”

Lionel nodded slowly, his gaze fixed on a distant point. “Among other things.”

“I see.” Cecilia looked down, her fingers absently picking at the hem of her dress. “It is just... I can’t help but wonder what she was like. Do you ever think about what could have been?”

Lionel glanced at her now, a playful glint in his eye. “Why, Cecilia, are you jealous?”

Her head snapped up. “Of course not! I was merely curious.”

“Curious, you say?” Lionel’s smirk widened. “I must confess, the thought of you being jealous is rather flattering.”

Cecilia huffed, crossing her arms. “You are insufferable.”

“And you are delightfully transparent,” Lionel laughed.

Cecilia hesitated, then pressed on. “Was it difficult, when she left?”

“Difficult? Yes, but not for the reasons you might think. It was more about what she left behind rather than her departure itself.”

“What did she leave behind?”

“The east wing,” Lionel said, almost casually. “It was meant for her. After she left, it has remained abandoned.”

Cecilia’s eyes widened. “The east wing? It was for her?”

“Indeed,” Lionel muttered. “It never quite felt right to occupy it after she left. Perhaps it was a foolish sentiment.”

Cecilia’s heart softened at his words, though she kept her expression neutral. “Not foolish. Just... human.”

Lionel raised an eyebrow. “Human, you say? Well, now that you know about the east wing’s sad history, perhaps you can put it to better use. Take up residence in there,

perhaps?”

“Heavens no!” she exclaimed. “Arthur once told me the ghost of a bloodless Duke haunts that wing.”

Lionel laughed again. There was a moment of silence before he leaned closer once more. “So, you were jealous, after all.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smile. “Fine, I admit. The first time we met, five years ago at your ball... I may have been a little envious.”

“A little?” Lionel grinned. “I seem to recall you glaring daggers at Arabella when she first arrived on the arm of Thorpe.”

“I did not!” Cecilia protested, laughing despite herself. “I was merely... observing.”

“Observing, indeed,” Lionel continued, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “And what, pray tell, did you observe?”

Cecilia crossed her arms, fixing him with a pointed look. “I observed that you have a talent for infuriating people.”

She smoothed out her skirts and took a seat directly on the grass beneath the oak. Lionel chuckled before taking off his coat and putting it on the ground to sit on.

“You are a wild daughter of nature at heart,” Lionel laughed.

Cecilia nodded stubbornly. The view from the hill was pretty and it was countryside that felt familiar to her. Somewhere out of sight, to the north by three miles or more, was the town of Colnbrook, and not far from that was Penrose. She thought she could almost make out Colnbrook as a dark blur on the horizon.

“Are you looking for Penrose?” Lionel asked gently.

“I am, but it is not a tall building. There is no way I would see it from this distance. But I think it would be about... there,” she pointed at a spot on the northern horizon.

Lionel got up and walked to Thor, rummaging in his saddlebag and producing a looking glass. It was made of tough leather, bound in brass with a leather cup over the lens. He knelt and put it to his eye for a moment. Then he placed it on his right shoulder.

“Look through it now,” he said.

Cecilia obeyed and the distant landscape leaped closer.

“Do you see the square church tower to the right of Colnbrook?” Lionel guided, “Colnbrook is the town you should be able to just make out on the horizon.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Move the looking glass down an inch or so towards us and you will see a grove of trees,” he continued, “with a loop of river around them.”

“Yes, I see the trees.”

“That is Penrose.”

Cecilia looked at the cluster of trees but could see no sign of the house she remembered. It had consisted of three floors in a square shape with a central tower rising from the center. There was no sign of it.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I am. I have ridden out that way on a number of occasions since... that day. To pay my respects and to...” Lionel trailed off.

“Is it overgrown?” Cecilia asked.

“I am afraid so,” Lionel sighed grimly. “It was a fine house with a noble aspect. To allow it to deteriorate is a criminal act.”

Cecilia felt a wrench within her. The estate had passed to Uncle Rupert since Arthur’s death. She had assumed that he would be responsible for taking care of the place, paying the staff there, and ensuring the building did not fall into ruin. He clearly had not been doing that.

“What did he think he was doing?” she whispered in outrage, putting down the spyglass.

“Who?” Lionel asked, looking back over his shoulder at her.

“My uncle. He is the owner of Penrose,” Cecilia frowned.

“He is? Not you?” Lionel frowned too. “Well, that explains why you didn’t know of its condition. I had assumed that you lacked the means to care for it, once death duties had been paid. Arthur was never the best with money.”

“I was not his heir,” Cecilia sighed, gazing out in the direction of Penrose, now rendered invisible by distance again.

Lionel shifted his seat to sit next to her and she put her hands through his arm, resting her head on his shoulder. Being close to him comforted her, made her feel safe. A month had passed since their wedding, three weeks since she had finally begun to win Lionel’s trust. Now, they shared a bed every night and spent much of their time

together during the day. Cecilia knew it would not always be so. Lionel had business interests in London to take care of, disliking entrusting too much to any one agent or solicitor. And then there was the matter of his revenge. She knew little of it or the documents he kept in the safe at the derelict mill. Respecting his privacy, she had not pried. Lionel would confide his secrets to her when he was ready. Now, she felt sadness at the thought of her childhood home being so neglected.

“How is it that you were not?” Lionel asked, sounding surprised.

Cecilia lifted her head and he looked down at her.

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked, “I am not because... I am not. He did not name me as heir. Perhaps he thought a man should be lord of Penrose.”

“No, I mean that I bore witness to his will. He gave everything to you,” Lionel added.

Cecilia looked at him dumbly, unable to take in what he was saying.

“You are mistaken,” she said slowly.

“I am not,” Lionel replied, resolutely, “my signature is on Arthur’s will. I was named executor but I waived that position in favor of Arthur’s solicitor in light of what happened, of what people believed happened. I did not gain anything from his will but it was felt that it was not entirely appropriate. I can assure you, Arthur left house and lands to you.”

Cecilia looked out over the countryside, hazy with sunshine. Penrose was out there, crumbling and being subsumed by exuberant nature. It was hers. Had always been hers. All the time that she had endured living in an old storeroom at Hamilton Hall, she could have been at Penrose. All the time enduring her uncle’s frequent malice and her aunt’s casual cruelty, she could have been among halls that were alive with happy

memories of childhood. Of her parents and of Arthur. She felt cheated.

“My uncle once told me that I was left nothing. He claimed it as evidence of the fecklessness of my brother, that he had made no provision for me. Claimed that my father was equally worthless. They did not get on as brothers, Rupert and my father. There was bad blood between them.”

“He lied,” Lionel declared with implacable coldness.

It was the voice of justice, cold and hard, casting judgment over Rupert Sinclair and promising revenge. Cecilia felt an echoing feeling deep within her. It came with the need to make her aunt and uncle suffer, to take from them all that they had, to watch them cry and beg. For too long had she been taken advantage of by them... Then she shook herself.

“No,” she said with vigor, “I will not.”

She made to stand, rubbing hands up and down her arms as though chilly. Or perhaps cleansing herself of something. Lionel stood also, watching her with concern.

“Cecilia? What is the matter? To whom are you talking?”

She whirled. “To myself. I’m sorry, I suppose I’m not making much sense. I found myself thinking how lovely it would be to get revenge on the Sinclairs of Hamilton. To make them pay...”

“As was I. And we will. Now we both have a cause of revenge to pursue,” Lionel stated, face dark.

“No! I won’t do it,” Cecilia replied, moving to him and catching him by the arm. “Don’t you see? It will consume us. I do not take pleasure in the misery of others.

Not even the Sinclairs. Penrose was stolen from me and I will get it back. And that will be enough. I don't need revenge."

"But they deserve to pay for what they've done to you," Lionel insisted, brows furrowing as if it was the most unusual thing he'd ever heard.

"No. I want my home restored to me and I want nothing more to do with them. They can continue their lives, and I, mine. Will you help me?"

Lionel looked at her with utter confusion. Cecilia thought she knew what was at the heart of that. He had been obsessed with the idea of revenge for so long that it was inconceivable to him that she would not want the same for the hurt done to her.

"Of course, I will help. We will go and see your aunt and uncle as soon as we may. Give them the chance to put this right. If they do not, we will see my solicitor in London. We will get your home back."

CHAPTER 17

Lionel could not help but laugh at his first sight of Hamilton Hall. He and Cecilia rode in Lionel's town coach, painted in the green and silver livery of Thornhill. The family crest was adorned on the doors of each side of the vehicle, a green hill surmounted by a spreading tree and encircled with a ring of silver thorns.

"It is childish, I know," Lionel had said to Cecilia as he ordered the huge coach brought out of the stables, "to wish to bludgeon Rupert Sinclair with evidence of my wealth. But, I feel that the bounder deserves it."

Cecilia had giggled in response, looking up at the coach which had to be pulled by no less than six horses.

"Uncle Rupert and Aunt Margaret place great store by wealth and material goods. This will ruin Rupert's day, he is inordinately proud of the coach he commissioned from a coachbuilder in London with royal patronage. Except, it is still half the size of this one."

Lionel had chuckled. "There is something disturbing about a man who feels he must prove his worth by the scale of his possessions."

"I would say that yours are in perfect proportion," Cecilia put in with a mischievous smile, looking up at the towering coach.

Lionel had spluttered, flushing crimson which had made Cecilia laugh gaily. He'd soon joined in.

Now they had come within sight of Hamilton Hall. Windsor lay to the south and it was as though the Sinclairs were conscious of the royal presence on their doorstep and were attempting to outdo the King himself. Hamilton must once have been a modest but dignified abode, Lionel thought. A simple structure of four stories in red brick with neat, white surrounds to its windows and elegant string courses in between. To that had been added renaissance-style wings of gleaming white stucco with stone garnishes in the shape of clusters of fruit or prancing animals. A classical frontage had been applied, presumably attempting to emulate the Parthenon but resulting in nothing more than an ugly hybridization of styles. It was ridiculously grandiose and clumsy. The park through which the carriage drove was an overblown attempt at Versailles. Fountains sparkled in the sun amid manicured lawns and hedges. The ground staff must have been kept working day and night to keep nature so twisted out of its natural state, Lionel thought.

“Good god in heaven,” he breathed, taking it all in.

He looked at Cecilia who was also gazing out of the window.

“Thankfully I was rarely afforded the opportunity to walk in the park or in the gardens at the rear of the house,” Cecilia began, “Aunt Margaret was fond of entertaining outdoors in the summer. She liked to think that her summer garden parties were the talk of the county. I was most definitely not welcome.”

Lionel took her hand in both of his, squeezing gently and feeling the pain of such cruelty. It made him all the more resolved to help Cecilia regain her rightful inheritance and punish the venal and grasping Sinclairs. But she had made him promise not to set out on a quest for revenge. She could not dissuade him from his own but she had refused to allow him to take on the burden of hers.

“They sound odious,” he muttered.

Cecilia shrugged. "I suppose they are the product of our modern society. So much emphasis is placed on status and rank. If you live by that creed, you will inevitably become someone who is obsessed with wealth and material possessions. The trappings of wealth. I don't blame them for their flaws. They are as our society has made them."

"Not all of us are like that though. There is a choice," Lionel said harshly, "I choose not to be like that. As do you. As did Arthur."

Cecilia leaned across to kiss him on the cheek. She allowed her lips to linger and he closed his eyes, savoring the touch. Her perfume was a subtle blend of summer flowers and fresh linen. It was clean and feminine. He reached up to stroke his fingers down her cheek. Her lips broke the contact and she turned her head so that her smooth cheek rested against Lionel's. He could have stayed in that position with her for an eternity. All too soon though, the speed of the coach was slowing and the driver calling out.

"Hamilton Hall, Your Grace!"

Cecilia gave a little regretful sigh and exchanged a rueful smile with Lionel.

"Was I a complete fool, all these weeks and months?" he asked.

"No more than most men," Cecilia replied playfully.

"I am sorry for any hurt that I caused when I tried to keep you at arm's length," he continued.

"You have said that before and it was not necessary then. I understand completely and do not blame you. I simply wish for us to now take this rocky start to our marriage and make something great and beautiful out of it. Something memorable

and unforgettable,” she replied. “...Even if it may not be built to last.”

Lionel nodded gravely. “But before I can do that, I suppose I must dispense with the ugly business of justice.”

They’d had long conversations on the subject of the mission that had occupied Lionel for the last five years. He could not call out Thorpe, challenge him to a duel without cause. That would simply make Lionel a murderer or else a dead man. Thorpe was a soldier, skilled with a blade but a crack shot with a firearm. Lionel had not served in the military and could not due to the injury that had disabled him. Even recovered as he was, the muscles of his legs were prone to weakness and pain. Lionel had not yet shared with Cecilia the brace that he wore to strengthen his legs. She had remarked on the marks it left behind but he had always brushed them aside as welts or bruises left behind from riding or some other activity. There was something of a stigma in Lionel’s mind over the need for the brace. It made him feel less of a man that he needed it at all. He did not wish for Cecilia to think anything less of him.

“And justice must be served?” Cecilia asked tentatively. “Even if no proof can be found after all these years? Would it not be justice to live our lives in happiness, showing our enemies that they have failed to destroy us?”

Lionel shook his head fiercely. “I could not bring myself to give up. To know that he continues to live his life with no consequences for his actions. I will have vengeance. I am sorry, Cecilia, this is the one matter you will not sway me on.”

If he could not kill Thorpe and could not prove his guilt, the only avenue left was to ruin him. After years of patient work to recover his strength and the use of his legs, he had devoted himself to finding out where Thorpe made his money and how. Knowing his business affairs better than he knew them himself would help Lionel plan a scheme to bankrupt him. To see him thrown into debtors jail would be just the beginning though. Thorpe had taken a life, and Lionel wished for one in return.

Cecilia looked upset at this and he turned away, not liking the idea of causing her such pain. The coach had come to a halt and a footman was opening the door and unfolding the steps that would allow for the passenger's egress.

Lionel went first, then turned back to offer his hand to Cecilia. She placed a wide-brimmed hat upon her hair, which was tied up in fiery coils. With her hair up, he could admire the porcelain skin of her swan-like neck. She saw his eyes linger and smiled, putting her hand through the crook of his elbow.

They proceeded along a gravel drive to a set of marble steps flanked by towering columns. Lionel wore a top hat and carried a silver-headed cane which clacked against the stone with each step. He walked with head high and the dignity and pride of his rank. If the Sinclairs put great stock in such things, then let them see him every inch the Duke. At the door, he wrapped the head of his cane sharply. A servant opened it and Lionel offered a card to the man without a word. After a glance, the servant's eyes widened and he stepped aside, holding the door open and bowing as Lionel and Cecilia entered.

"Announce us, if you please, Christopher," Cecilia said kindly.

Christopher bowed again and left at a brisk walk. The entrance hall was floored in black and white marble with columns that marched the length of the room. The servant's footsteps echoed loudly as he went. Lionel looked around with distaste, liking Rupert and Margaret Sinclair less and less.

They did not have to wait long before they were being escorted to a drawing room overlooking the columns at the front of the house. The view that would originally have been provided by the drawing room's windows was now curtailed by the pillars to either side, providing a view of mildewed stone instead of the park.

Rupert and Margaret Sinclair were standing as the pair entered.

“Your Grace. It is an honor!” Rupert declared emphatically. “I had hoped that we would be graced with your society at some point. We were rather unceremoniously asked to leave your house after the wedding ceremony.”

“Most unusual,” Margaret chimed in primly.

“It was a most unusual ceremony. And one into which I had been forced. I was not in the mood to entertain those who had done the forcing,” Lionel remarked, tempering his words with a polite smile.

Nevertheless, Rupert swallowed and Margaret’s fixed smile slipped for a moment. Cecilia hung on to Lionel’s arm looking from aunt to uncle for all the world as though this were a pleasant family visit by a devoted niece.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of your company today, Your Grace?” Rupert finally said. “Please sit and tell us.”

He belatedly offered the use of a chaise longue which Lionel and Cecilia graciously took.

“Tea has been sent for,” Margaret put in, resuming her own seat. “We would have been prepared had we known to expect you. You did not send us a card in advance, Your Grace.”

There was a note of reproach in her voice that made Lionel’s blood boil. These two had no right to be reproachful of him or of Cecilia. Not even to pretend at it. He knew little of them socially. They had been present on invitations to balls he had hosted at Thornhill but he had never conversed with them beyond a few perfunctory greetings.

“We did not as our visit was somewhat spontaneous,” Lionel replied cryptically, “precipitated by a conversation between myself and my wife on the subject of

Penrose.”

The name fell into the room like a lead weight. It was greeted by silence and stillness from the Sinclairs. Finally, Margaret’s eyes darted to her husband and his to hers before ingratiating smiles enveloped them both.

“Penrose?” Rupert inquired.

“Cecilia was rather under the impression that she had been left nothing by Arthur in his will. Nothing of his fortune or estates. And not Penrose,” Lionel stated matter-of-factly.

“That is so,” Rupert replied, “it was left to me as his father’s brother—”

“Except that it was not,” Lionel interjected smoothly, “I bore witness to Arthur’s will and know for a fact that the house was left to Cecilia.”

Another lead weight dropped with a thud into the room.

“You must be mistaken, Your Grace,” Margaret laughed awkwardly.

“Indeed. The will was very clear,” Rupert insisted.

“Nevertheless, it is not the will that I witnessed. At least it could not be if Cecilia was not the sole beneficiary,” Lionel continued.

The companionable smile that he had been holding onto was slipping, revealing a steely gaze beneath.

“I can only speak to the contents of the will that we saw...” Rupert trailed off.

“May I see it?” Cecilia chimed in.

There was a pause.

“Alas, my child. The will is no longer in existence. There was a fire, you see, not long after your brother’s tragic death. It was at Penrose, and the will along with all of his correspondence was consumed,” Margaret said.

Cecilia’s eyes flashed horror in that moment.

CHAPTER 18

Cecilia looked at the charred remains of Penrose in dismay. She now understood why there had been no trace of the house visible through the looking glass. Fire had torn through the place, gutting it, and the vegetation had returned to the fire-scoured soil with a vengeance. They'd had to fight their way through tight secondary growth, a dense thicket that had sprung up around the ruin.

Now she and Lionel stood before it.

A wall faced them with empty eye-sockets of windows. The entrance was outlined by its stone lintel but the doors were long gone. Through the empty windows, Cecilia could see the blackened beams of the roof and the skeleton of charred floorboards. They jutted in odd directions, like the bones of some long-dead leviathan. She picked her way carefully through nettle and bramble to reach closer to the door.

"Careful!" Lionel cautioned. "The structure may be unstable."

He made to follow her but his foot snagged in something and he stumbled. Cecilia turned as he put out a hand to stop himself from falling. He cried out at the pain in his leg and then the sudden stinging as his hand plunged into a patch of nettles. The fight through the dense thicket to reach the house had taken its toll on his leg which now ached abominably. His knee felt like water and his thigh trembled with the effort of holding him up. Cecilia came to him, leaping over the tallest brambles, kicking aside nettles. Lionel made to pick himself up but his leg would not allow it.

"What is it?" Cecilia said with concern.

Lionel grimaced. "It is nothing. The wound I suffered the day your brother was killed. It leaves me weak sometimes and in pain. But I can manage."

Cecilia seized his arm, leaning back to help him to his feet. She could see that he was attempting to put on a brave face, covering up his weakness. It was silly to her. She did not think any less of him suffering an injury. She noticed a thick stem of brambles clinging tenaciously to his breeches and made to brush them away lest they tear the fabric or cut into the leg.

Under her hand, she felt something that was not flesh. Lionel immediately withdrew, stepping away from her touch. But he could not stand without support and his leg gave way beneath him. He fell, thumping down hard on the ground. Cecilia knelt beside him, skirts thick enough that she could ignore the nettles she knelt on. She put her hands gently to his left leg and felt it again. Lionel tried to stop her but then growled in frustration and let his hands drop.

"What is this?" Cecilia asked.

He looked at her for a moment, then he sighed. "Something I did not want you to see," he finally conceded. "After my recovery, I still had a weakness in my left leg that hampered my ability to walk significantly. It was... it was the other part of the reason Arabella put an end to the betrothal. Ever since, I have had to make some concessions in my life so as to not become a cripple. There is a frame made of leather and wood which is flexible but strong. It replaced the strength I had lost in my left leg."

"Arabella had ended the betrothal over such a thing as that?" Cecilia gasped, bewildered. "What in heavens..."

Lionel simply shrugged. "I would be dishonest if I said it affected me much. It was the early days of the accident. I was too entwined with my recovery and thoughts of

revenge against Thorpe that losing someone dear to me—though it did leave a sharp sting of betrayal—eventually felt like a burden I was freed from. I preferred to remain alone, honestly, and it is how I stayed. Only Blackwood by my side.”

Cecilia felt a tincture of uneasiness with his simple response. Perhaps he intended to disarm her, not fuel any lingering insecurities she might have once harbored when comparing herself to his ex-fiancée. But all she wanted to do now was ask if it might become the case with her also—simply being a stepping stone in his greater story dedicated to something that wasn’t her. She decided against it.

“So... those marks that I noticed earlier, they were left by this device?” Cecilia asked instead, rolling up his breeches to examine his leg further.

“They were. It is not uncomfortable. Not really. But it does leave some bruises.”

“They at least must be painful. What can I do to help?”

Lionel looked at her. Cecilia gazed back openly, waiting to know how she could ease his burden. There was no question in her mind that she could and would help him, however he needed it. She could not think how for the moment but the idea occurred to her that Thornhill’s library was extensive. Would there be medical books there that might give her the answer?

“I honestly do not know,” Lionel sighed. “I take the juice of the poppy for the pain when it becomes unbearable. When it is simply uncomfortable, I endure it.”

“Something to soothe the muscles then, perhaps?” Cecilia thought aloud. “The application of heat is often used in horses when they are lame. So perhaps a hot bath? There must be something.”

Lionel laughed. “Cecilia, if this is an invitation to share a bath, I shall more than

gladly accept. But I have lived with this for some time. I do not think you can ease this pain so simply, but I appreciate you giving it much thought.”

At that point, he winced, lifting his hand where welts left by the stinging nettles were raising bumps along the inside of his wrist.

“Well, that at least I can cure,” Cecilia began, “where there are nettles there are always...” She cast about until she saw a clump of dock leaves, “Ah ha!”

She got up and gathered a handful, then sat back down beside Lionel and began to rub vigorously. His skin became green under the effect of the dock leaves but the swelling subsided. Lionel raised an eyebrow.

“I did not know there was a cure for stinging nettles. That did not feature in my education at Westlands. How did you know?”

“Because some of my closest friends are farmers,” Cecilia chimed brightly. “I learned a lot of woodcraft from them. All that Arthur did not teach me.”

“You are remarkable,” Lionel gushed.

Cecilia looked up into soft eyes. She flushed, seeing the adoration in them. It felt like a reflection of the emotion she felt towards him. She felt validated. After enduring loneliness for weeks at Thornhill, being embraced and then rejected all over again, she felt that she had earned the emotion shining in his eyes now. It was her reward. She smiled and kissed him softly. Intended only as a peck on the lips, it became something deeper as she cupped his face in her hands. His arms went about her, gathering her body in and depositing her on his lap. Then he put his hand to the ground and yelped in pain as he found a clump of nettles again. Cecilia laughed as he sucked in a breath through gritted teeth.

“Let us extricate ourselves from this prickly mire,” Cecilia grinned.

“Do you not want to look at Penrose?” Lionel asked.

She looked up at the blackened edifice and shook her head. “This is not Penrose. That was a house of joy and laughter, even after mother and father passed. This is a husk.”

Lionel looked over the walls and glaring windows, frowning. “We will rebuild it. It is yours by right. It cannot remain in the hands of the Sinclairs.”

“Do you think the fire was accidental?” Cecilia wondered aloud.

“Not if it erased all evidence of Arthur’s wishes regarding his legacy. What I don’t understand is how such a covetous couple would be willing to squander such a valuable piece of property. It may not have the grandiosity of Hamilton, but it was a fine house and worth a tidy sum. Why not sell it if they did not want to live in it? Or better yet, rent it out and accrue a steady income from it? It seems out of character...”

Cecilia stood and reached down to help Lionel to his feet. He rose stiffly and with a groan of pain, brushing at his clothes.

“I cannot fathom. Perhaps the fire got out of control? Set to destroy the study or library, wherever the documents were kept.”

Lionel rubbed his chin, frowning intently. “I cannot believe that the Sinclairs would do anything without a motive that might profit them. How does allowing this house to be destroyed profit them? It will take some thinking.”

“Can we get away from here?” Cecilia muttered plaintively. “It is like seeing the body of a relative you last saw hale and hearty.”

Lionel nodded, turning away from the ruin of Penrose. Cecilia felt the urge to look back but resisted it. She concentrated on helping Lionel through the voracious and tangled undergrowth without falling on her face. Without a free hand to lift her skirts, they caught on every bramble and thorn. Soon they were both stumbling and tripping, falling over their own feet and each other's. Were it not for the somber nature of the occasion, Cecilia would have laughed. Finally, sweating, pricked, and disheveled, they emerged from the thicket to where the coach waited on the road.

"I will not get much sleep tonight," Lionel groaned as the driver, having leaped from his seat at the first sight of his stricken master, helped him into the coach. Cecilia alighted beside him and gave instructions to return to Thornhill.

Lionel looked pale, his face tight. When she touched his hand, she thought she felt a slight tremor.

"How long since you last took poppy juice?" she asked.

"I have not always needed it. But probably three days," Lionel gritted.

"Perhaps a dose when we return to the castle will help," Cecilia said, innocently.

In truth, she knew more about medicine for cows, sheep, or horses than she did for humans. It seemed logical that a medicine whose purpose was to relieve pain must be a boon, but equally, she wondered how else the pain might be alleviated. Once Lionel was resting, she resolved to dive into Thornhill's library and discover all she could. She took his hand tightly in her own and rested her head on his shoulders.

"I will be fine," he tried to reassure her, only to suppress a groan as the coach rode a bump, "I just require a tincture of poppy juice and some rest."

Cecilia sat on the side of the bed, listening to the deep, tranquil breaths of Lionel's

sleep. His bedchamber was larger than hers and now accommodated her three wardrobes as well as his own. He had no suite, only a large bedroom, bathing chamber, and study. Cecilia had not been back to the rooms that had been assigned to her for some time. After all, his bed was now her bed.

Outside, a full moon cast pale light over the rooftops. A flickering light was cast by the fire inside as well as a comforting warmth. Lionel had been stubborn about accepting the medicine until he had completed the tasks he deemed necessary. Cecilia had wanted him into bed as soon as they returned to Thornhill by late afternoon, but Lionel had other ideas. He summoned Blackwood and began issuing instructions. Those had included sending for Sir Menzies Lennox, whom he introduced to Cecilia as a brilliant detective and long-term conspirator. He also penned notes to his solicitors in London. As he did this, Cecilia, throwing up her hands in frustration, retired to the library and began to read.

Peggy found her some hours later with the message that the Duke was retiring to his chambers after taking his medicine. She had found a single book that made an interesting suggestion for an alternative. She made her way to the bedchambers she shared with Lionel but first made a detour to the kitchens and requested a number of items from a bewildered Mrs. Hardcastle. Now, she sat and watched her husband sleeping peacefully. He had undressed, preferring to sleep naked. The bed sheets reached to just beyond his navel, giving an uninterrupted view of his muscular torso.

Cecilia ran gentle fingers over sculpted pectorals and a flat, hard stomach. She had never met anyone so unashamedly masculine. Never known how inanimate muscle and bone could give an aura of god-like power and strength. She moved her touch to his arms which lay atop the sheets. A vein ran down the middle of each bicep which bulged even in the relaxation of sleep. Lionel's head turned on the pillow, and suddenly his eyes were open and looking at her.

"I did not mean to wake you," Cecilia whispered.

“I don’t think I could sleep with the scent of you in my head,” Lionel murmured in turn.

He sat up, the sheet falling lower, revealing more of his body, and making Cecilia’s pulse race. She too had taken to sleeping naked since sharing a bed with Lionel and now she wanted to be in that state very badly. But she had a greater purpose than love-making. Beside her was clean linen, warmed in the kitchens. A bowl of hot water sat next to the linen, laced with mint and a handful of other herbs which produced a soothing scent.

“I found an old book in the library, translated from an earlier tome found on the sub-continent,” Cecilia began, “it explained the benefits of massage. A technique used by Indian healers for centuries.”

Lionel looked skeptical. Cecilia threw back the bed sheets to reveal his left leg. She ignored the fact that she had also exposed his manhood, which was responding to that exposure. She smiled slightly as Lionel lay back, his eyes hot upon her. She picked up the small dish of butter that had lain beneath the linen and began to rub some between her fingers. Then she began to rub at the muscle of Lionel’s thigh. As she worked, the expression of expectant desire on his face began to change. An expression more akin to relief and surprised pleasure began to dawn.

Cecilia probed the rock-hard muscle. At first, it was like kneading stone. Then she began to feel knots long tied into that muscle beginning to loosen. As it did, Lionel’s expression of bliss deepened. He gasped as she pushed deeper with thumbs and stiff fingers, finding new pockets of tension. Initially, the gasp was pained and he began to sit up. Then it became a sigh and he relaxed once more. Dipping the linen into the hot water, she wrung the excess water from the fabric and then wrapped it tight around Lionel’s thigh before continuing her manual work.

“The pain... it’s receding,” Lionel breathed, “even with the poppy juice there has

always been underlying pain. Even the stiffness is going. I have not felt like this since before that day.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at Cecilia. She was smiling proudly, seeing the effect of her newly learned knowledge.

“Does it work on other parts of the body?” Lionel smirked wolfishly.

He sat up, kissing Cecilia and then reaching for the buttons at her back that fastened her dress.

CHAPTER 19

Lionel was amazed at the newfound skill that Cecilia had displayed. The butter she used to moisten his skin was warm, allowing her fingers to slide over the muscle of his thigh smoothly. She kept working her fingers against his leg as he reached behind to begin unfastening the buttons of her dress.

As he did, she gazed into his eyes, kissing his lips softly and frequently. Each touch was a tantalizing butterfly, bringing a burst of pleasure and leaving him wanting more.

Craving more.

The dress loosened under his insistent fingers, slipping away from Cecilia's shoulders. Beneath it was another layer of fabric, another barrier to the alabaster smoothness of her skin. He ran one hand down her spine, fingers tracing a teasing path. With the other, he tugged the stiff material of the fabric down from one shoulder.

Suddenly, Cecilia pushed his chest, forcing him back into the plump pillows of the bed. He allowed himself to fall back and remained there as Cecilia mounted him, drawing up her skirts to allow her to straddle his legs, pinning them beneath her. She applied more butter to her fingers and began working one hand on each thigh. Fingertips, soft but surprisingly strong, kneaded the flesh, pressing hard. Pain that was almost indistinguishable from pleasure sparked in each thigh, but especially the left. Lionel let out a groan, reaching for her face. She batted away his hands, pushing and kneading his thighs, hands working up and then down.

She impatiently rolled her dress down to her hips, freeing her arms from it and then hauling her undergarments up from the waist. The tight waistband of the dress hampered her efforts momentarily but then gave up. The linen undergarments came off and went over Cecilia's head. She tossed them aside, shaking her head to allow her mane of fiery hair to cascade freely. It contrasted with her pale skin and the pink of her nipples in the middle of pert and proud breasts.

For a moment, she looked down on him, half naked and unashamedly so. There was a look of wanton lust in her eyes that drove Lionel's own passionate desire to a frenzy. He felt himself harden, pressing against Cecilia as she moved herself forward. Her loins lay atop his own, and when Lionel pushed his hips, he saw her eyes widen.

He reached for her, hands cupping her breasts, savoring the feel of smooth skin and perfect, curving flesh. Between his deft fingers, her nipples became erect, pushing out between the grip that was making Cecilia gasp. She squirmed atop him, making Lionel moan in turn.

Cecilia grinned, shaking her magnificent red hair so that it fell across her face. Lionel found himself moving in concert with her. Their bodies were not yet joined but in delicious contact. He found himself yearning for that contact that would join them together but at the same time wanting to delay that moment, stretching out the anticipation as long as they both could endure it.

With one hand, he reached blindly for the tray of butter, scooping a handful, and then slathering it across Cecilia's breasts. She squealed and Lionel sat up, effortlessly resisting her attempts to push him back.

He had allowed her to hold him down before but now demonstrated how powerless she was compared to his strength. Bending his head to her bosom, he began to lap up the warm, liquid butter that was trickling between and around her breasts. Cecilia put her head back and closed her eyes, moaning and wrapping her arms about her

husband's head.

He brought one of her breasts to his mouth, sucking it clean. Then, seizing her about the waist, he flipped her to the bed, rolling atop her with only the smallest twinge of pain from his leg. A trickle of golden, melted butter had worked its way to her navel and now Lionel intercepted it, running his tongue up her stomach to the hollow between her breasts. She ran her hands from her beautiful swan-like neck, down and over her nipples to her stomach. As she did she smeared the melted butter over her skin, giving it a sheen in the light from the fire.

Lionel kissed her lips with fevered passion, tasting the saltiness of butter there, feeling it greasing their skin as their bodies came together. Cecilia lifted her legs as Lionel's body moved up and slipped in. The moment had been prolonged and now neither could delay it further.

Cecilia gasped, crying out as they came together. At first, it was slow and controlled, each thrust of Lionel's hips joining their bodies deeper. Then passion overcame them both. Cecilia writhed and clawed at Lionel's body, demanding more and craving release at the same time. Whenever Lionel looked down at the pale, shining skin of his wife, at the sight of her writhing pleasure, he could barely restrain himself. He craved her like a man dying of thirst craved a drop of water. His body demanded hers, sought her touch, her taste. The sight of her ecstasy was the single most perfect vision he had ever seen. No master artist could compose such an image to better communicate their fiery desire.

Finally came the moment of release, when neither could hold back any longer. It was shattering and glorious, leaving Lionel gasping and speechless as he lay atop Cecilia. She was unmoving, head buried in his shoulder, arms and legs wrapped tightly about him. They unwound themselves slowly, muscles becoming liquid. Lionel looked into Cecilia's eyes, beginning to move to the side. But she held on tighter, reaching to press her hands to his firm buttocks.

“Not yet,” she whispered, “I want to feel you a little longer.”

Her face was flushed and her eyes, bright. Lionel brushed sweat-darkened hair from her forehead and remained where he was, savoring the feel of her body around his.

“I think you have given me a child,” she whispered.

Lionel’s eyes widened at that. “You can tell?”

“Not according to medicine,” Cecilia giggled, “but I feel it. It is different this time. There is a...” she seemed to flounder, searching for the words, “...a sanctity. A feeling that there is more than just the fulfillment of carnal pleasure at work. As though we have just done something far greater. I am probably being silly.”

Lionel considered his feelings for a moment. Had she said this after their first time making love, he would have believed it a clumsy attempt to trap him. Now, things were different. He was slowly beginning to accept his feelings for Cecilia, his desire for her, and his desire to be with her. It was more than just lust. He wanted to be her friend as well as her lover. Wanted her to be his confidante and he, hers. The idea of her becoming the mother of his child was beyond even his wildest imaginings. The revenge against Thorpe left little room in his heart. What room there was had been commandeered by Cecilia. Except he found there was yet more room than he had thought.

“Is it... is it wrong that I sincerely hope that you are right,” he breathed.

“You do?” Cecilia whispered in confusion, running gentle fingers down his face.

“You have never mentioned it to me.”

“I have never mentioned it to myself.”

“But... but what about the separation?” she asked, brows furrowing.

“I am no longer certain. I never considered an heir. My mind was too full of other things,” Lionel admitted, “but presently, in this moment, I feel that I desire you to be the mother of my children more than life itself.”

“Children?” Cecilia laughed, “I spoke of a child.”

“And I would have you be the mother to many. This house needs the sound of laughter and joy.”

“I think we have taken our first steps in that direction. My body tingles with the magic within me,” Cecilia smiled.

In that moment, with a sheen of sweat and glowing skin, eyes alight with feminine mystery, Cecilia looked like a pagan goddess. A sorceress of ancient times, attuned to nature. Fey and powerful. Lionel was in awe of her beauty, of the aura in which she clothed herself. In awe and in love. The feeling had stolen over him without his being consciously aware. Acceptance of her as his wife had been the product of his rational mind. The love that he was now aware of was from somewhere deeper. More primal. He knew in that moment that he would kill or die for her. That if she wished it he would renounce his title and his lands, forsake his name and his legacy.

“I... I think I...” he whispered, but trailed off, a pit growing in his chest at the dangerous realization. Dangerous, for he was stepping into the very same trap he had sworn to never let ensnare his heart again. But the words came out of their own volition. “I think I am falling in love with you, Cecilia Grisham.”

Tears filled her eyes and she stroked his face, reaching up to kiss his lips tenderly. In those proceedings seconds, all his fears were vanquished like the final echoes of a fading storm.

“And I love you, my heart. I think I always have. From the first moment I saw you in the Great Hall.”

“I was blind that day. A foolish man,” Lionel muttered.

He made to move to the side once more but she held on fiercely.

“I like feeling you there,” she whispered with passion, “inside me. I would lay like this all night if I could.”

To Lionel’s amazement, his body was responding, though he had doubted it would for hours. Not until sleep had restored strength to him. But the proximity of her alluring body and her demanding eyes, her touch and the feel of her moist smoothness holding his manhood was stoking a fire deep within him. She felt it and smiled in such a devilish way that Lionel’s ardor roared to the forth. His body tightened and stiffened and her smile became a gasp just as her eyes closed, only the whites showing, as though she had been driven into a trance.

Their lovemaking was drawn out and languid this time. The towering strength of their earlier passion had been replaced by an intense heat that smoldered rather than burned. Lionel withdrew from Cecilia, her whimpering moan echoing through the room at the emptiness, before pressing himself back against her slick, heated core. His hands gripped her hips firmly, guiding her movements as she rocked against him, their bodies moving in perfect harmony. The friction between them built slowly, each stroke desperate and deliberate.

They came together and then drew apart, taking the time now to explore each other’s bodies. Lionel’s deep moans caught in his throat as his callused hands roved Cecilia’s delicate frame, tracing the soft curves of her waist and the swell of her hips. Her skin was warm and inviting beneath his fingertips. He leaned down to kiss her neck, his lips trailing down to her breasts, taking one taut nipple into his mouth and sucking

until a gasp escaped her lips. The fire burned low in the grate as their passion once more built to a fever pitch.

Cecilia's soft moans filled the room as Lionel's hands traveled up her legs, gripping her hips more firmly. "Please, I need you inside me," she whimpered, desperation lacing her voice. "Fill me completely."

He guided himself back inside her, her lungs escaping for air as he filled her. Her thighs pressed against his sides with each thrust. "You are a deity," he groaned with pleasure.

"Deeper," she demanded, her voice trembling with need. "I want all of you."

Lionel began to thrust, steadily at first, then faster, harder, driven by the intense depravity of her words. His hand moved between their bodies, fingers finding her sensitive pearl, rubbing her womanhood in rhythm with his thrusts. She arched her back, her breasts brushing against his chest, her nipples hard against his skin. Her hips buckled at the pleasure, her cries of ecstasy growing louder. His mouth found hers, their tongues tangling together in a heated kiss.

"Yes, right there," she panted against his lips. "Don't stop."

They gasped for air as he thrust up into her, matching her rhythm, each movement sending waves of pleasure through their bodies. "I... I need to feel your release," he growled, his voice thick with desire. In one smooth motion, he wrapped a strong arm around her and rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him.

She straddled him this time, her hips working back and forth in a steady, insistent rhythm. She pressed down on his muscular torso, lifting herself only to push back down onto his length. "You're so deep," she cried out, her fingers digging into his shoulders. He drove deep into her, each thrust more urgent than the last, their bodies

slapping together. His fingers returned to her womanhood, rubbing her as he thrust, eliciting louder cries from her.

“Please. Make me yours... Only yours,” she pleaded, her eyes locking with his, a mix of passion and need urging him on. The room seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them entwined in their shared desire.

Their bodies moved together in a desperate rhythm, sweat glistening on their skin. Lionel's grip on her hips tightened, his thrusts becoming more frantic. Her head fell back as she rode him harder, faster. The pressure built between them, a tight coil ready to snap. She felt the heat rising, her body trembling on the edge. “I... I feel something,” she gasped, her nails dragging down his chest.

“With me,” he urged, his voice a low growl.

With a final, deep thrust, Lionel pushed her over the brink. Cecilia cried out, her body convulsing around him as waves of pleasure crashed over her. He followed moments later, his own release shuddering through him, filling her with his warmth.

After their explosive climax, Cecilia collapsed atop him, their bodies still connected. Lionel's arms encircled her, holding her close as they both caught their breath. Before he had gently rolled her to her side and pulled the bedclothes about her, she was asleep. He pressed a delicate kiss to her forehead before placing his body beside her, one arm about her, his body molded to the lines of hers. Then oblivion swept over him.

Lionel awoke to the scent of coffee and toast. His eyes flickered open. Cecilia sat in a window seat across the room. She was utterly, gloriously naked with both legs drawn up and arms wrapped about her knees. Sunlight streamed around her, giving her an aura that made her seem every inch the goddess. A tray sat on the bedside table bearing a pot of coffee and a plate of toast.

“You didn’t allow the servants to bring this in, did you?” Lionel suddenly asked, aghast at the thought of any of the staff seeing the two of them naked beneath the bedclothes.

“I had Peggy fetch it to the outer room and brought it in myself,” Cecilia smiled, “I was famished.”

Lionel’s stomach growled in agreement and he sat up, taking a piece of toast and pouring himself a cup of black, steaming coffee. The aroma filled the room, earthy with a hint of bitterness.

“An excellent notion,” he chuckled.

“I do not think that any of the servants would be scandalized though,” Cecilia shrugged, “we are married, after all.”

“Yes, we are,” Lionel agreed, “I do not know why I was momentarily so horrified. Perhaps I simply cannot fathom the thought of sharing the deity I get to wake up to each day.”

Cecilia grinned adorably. “Do you think they are aware of how we came to be married?”

“Blackwood certainly is. The others will probably have worked out there was something amiss. It is not in my character to submit to a whirlwind romance. I am sure they have talked among themselves about what made me make the decision.”

“Well, I will be happy to set them straight. I will make sure that Peggy knows that you have my heart in your keeping.”

“And you have mine,” Lionel replied, getting out of bed, and walking across the

room to Cecilia.

The window was high enough amid the forest of rooftops that none from outside would be able to see the nudity of the Duke and Duchess, but it still felt reckless to be naked in full view of the morning sky. He bent to kiss Cecilia, plucking a piece of toast from her mouth to do it, then popping it back between her teeth when he was done. She giggled, munching on the bread. He lifted her feet and sat in the window seat, laying them back down across his thighs, running his hand up her legs and over her knees.

“The thought occurs though that there will be others in our society that are entertaining similar thoughts,” Lionel murmured. “It does not sit well with me.”

“I do not care what they think,” Cecilia replied.

“I do. I will not have you thought ill of.”

“But how can you stop gossip and rumor?” she asked.

“By showing off our relationship. By showing ourselves off. Let them see how happy we are together,” he continued, “what do you imagine the Sinclairs are saying at their luncheons and dinners when asked about their niece the Duchess? I will not have them write the history of our marriage. It is time we took our rightful place in society with our heads held high. Side by side.”

Cecilia sat up suddenly.

“What is it?” he asked.

Falling lightly to her toes, she made for the sheets of paper Lionel had stowed away at his bedside table and a couple of pens. All the while, his bewildered gaze followed

her about the room in confusion. Finally, she returned to the window seat and took her place once more, before replying, “Then we ought to make a schedule!”

CHAPTER 20

Lionel had risen before Cecilia, attending to the work that seemed to consume every moment that he wasn't with her.

Today was supposed to be different, a break from the castle's confines as they had planned a promenade through Kensington Park in an effort to fend off the relentless gossip that swirled around them. Cecilia had looked forward to the fresh air, the chance to walk side by side with Lionel in public for the first time, appearing as the united front they so desperately needed to be. She had spent much of the previous evening into the night planning their activities for the week ahead, eager to make the most of their time together. They had talked late into the night, her excitement about attending balls and soirées palpable, and he had fallen asleep with her voice in his ears.

But the bad weather had put a stop to their plans, and instead, Lionel had gone missing, vanishing without a word since the morning. Cecilia felt a pang of disappointment mixed with a growing sense of unease. She had enjoyed their newfound closeness and now, with him nowhere to be found, a small voice in her head wondered if he had grown tired of her already.

The rain drummed incessantly on the rooftops and windows, confining her to the castle's gloomy halls. She checked his study, expecting to find him buried in work, but it was empty. Her confusion deepened as she continued her search, her steps quickening with trepidation.

Drawn by the loud, echoing sound of falling water, she ventured down a hallway she

had not explored before. Recognizing it for its neglected state, she assumed it to be the east wing that Lionel had spoken of. The castle, with its endless corridors and hidden nooks, seemed more like a labyrinth than ever. Turning a corner, she found herself walking along a colonnade overlooking a quadrangle at the heart of the castle. Tall walls and gabled rooftops loomed above, creating a sense of enclosure. The quadrangle was tiled, with a circular pond at its center. The surface of the pond was alive with crashing rainwater, dancing with each minute blow, though its surroundings were unnaturally sparse.

At the end of the colonnade, still beneath the shelter, was a rack of blades of various lengths and thicknesses. Intrigued, she approached them. According to her limited knowledge, they were well made.

Taking up one, she tried the weight, found it too heavy for her, and put it back, selecting another. This one suited her better, and she tried a few tentative thrusts.

“Toledo steel. The very finest in Europe,” Lionel’s voice came from behind, startling her.

Cecilia whirled with a gasp, her heart leaping. “Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you all afternoon!”

Lionel stood there, his head and shoulders wet; he had evidently crossed the quadrangle through the rain. He pointed to a window on the opposite side of the square, one floor up. “That is one of the castle libraries. I saw you through the window and wondered what you were about. I have not ventured to the east wing’s fencing square since... well, Arthur was the one I was fencing with at the time.”

Cecilia felt a rush of relief but couldn’t help the slight tremor in her voice. “I thought perhaps you’d tired of my company after last night... after we were together... after I talked your ear off about balls and soirées.”

Lionel chuckled as his eyes gleamed mischievously. “Tired of you? Never. But after last night, I did think a little escape was in order. You know, a man needs some time to recover his strength after such... vigorous activities.”

She blushed deeply, feeling both embarrassed and indignant. “You’re awful,” she murmured, lightly slapping his chest. “You know I worry.”

“Only a little,” he admitted, his grin widening.

Cecilia looked around, seeing the area with new eyes. “So... Fencing square ? Is that what this is?”

Lionel followed her gaze with a partial shrug. “Whatever it was intended to be when it was built, Arthur and I put it to that use when I became Duke. Arthur seemed to think it was tailor-made. Quiet, spacey, good surface underfoot. I have not practiced in here since Arthur was taken from us. I did not have the heart.” His eyes finally rested on the saber in her hand. “You hold that like you know the use of it.”

Cecilia smiled, making to replace the blade. “You don’t recall when we first met and I told you how Arthur had forced me to practice sport with him? It wasn’t a jest. He taught me the rudiments. I am not exactly a swordmaster.”

“Ah. I do. And you had promised me a sparring match too, if I recall correctly,” Lionel put in. “So, would you care to show me your skills, madam?” he added with a graceful sweep of his hand and a distinctly roguish grin.

Cecilia eyed him, smiling. “It is not really ladylike as a hobby.”

“No, but it is intensely attractive, I must say,” Lionel finished, boldly.

Cecilia laughed, keeping hold of the rapier and looking up and down its length. Then,

without warning, she lunged, intending to touch the point to Lionel's chest. He did not move his feet but somehow pivoted and tilted his body so that the blade sang harmlessly past. Then he placed two fingers on Cecilia's wrist and pressed gently. Cecilia found herself unable to hang onto the blade as her fingers opened involuntarily.

With a grin, Lionel snatched it out of the air and threw it up to catch it by the hilt. "Tremendous form, I must admit. Quite like Arthur."

Cecilia rubbed at her wrist, which was not sore but felt as though it should be.

"How on earth did you do that?" she gasped.

"Your brother never taught you that?" Lionel tutted, reversing the blade and offering it to her, hilt first, "try again."

Cecilia did. The rain slowed as she demonstrated the skills that Arthur had taught her. Skills that Lionel was certainly impressed by. Sweat darkened her hair as he watched and gave her tips, taking up a blade himself and sparring with her, though slowly to accommodate his easily fatigued leg. Cecilia found the exercise exciting in its novelty. But there was also something intensely erotic about engaging in mock-combat with a man who was her lover.

When their sparring drifted from the sheltered colonnade to the open square, the ground became treacherous. Lionel slipped and Cecilia could not help but laugh at the expression of comical surprise on his face as his balance wavered. He recovered and pulled a face at her barely concealed laughter. Then he came at her with renewed vigor, making her back up towards the pond. He gave a wicked grin as she realized how close she was to the water, deftly stepping aside.

At that moment, a wave of dizziness swept through her. A riposte went awry as a

result and she stumbled into Lionel. He dropped his blade as he caught her faltering body.

“Are you well?” he asked, suddenly concerned, “perhaps this was not such a good idea after all.”

“I am, I think,” Cecilia breathed slowly.

The dizzy spell had passed as quickly as it had appeared, leaving her slightly queasy. Paradoxically, she also felt suddenly ravenous for strawberries, an image of the fruit popping into her mind without warning. She frowned. To feel queasy in your stomach and hungry at the same time was a peculiar combination. She looked into Lionel’s eyes and was lost, as she always was when he held her in his arms.

“It is nothing,” she repeated, softly, “and no exertion is too much if this is how it ends.”

Lionel smiled. The embrace which had been purely to hold her onto her feet became something more. His arms were strong about her, his hands caressing and stroking her back. His lips found hers and the heat of them ignited a fire within Cecilia. She allowed her body to go limp in his arms, something she liked to do simply to experience his strength, to let those steely muscles carry her.

But this time, the embrace came after their fencing exertions. Cecilia felt the tremble in Lionel’s right leg where it was pressed against her. She opened her eyes just as his leg gave way. Lionel tried to arrest their fall but the rain-slick floor was too treacherous. He slipped and twisted and both of them went into the pond.

The warmth of the fire was heavenly against Cecilia’s goose-pimpled skin. She lay on a luxuriously soft, deep rug before the hearth in the library. The curtains were drawn and the fire provided the room’s only light. She lay face down, completely bare, still

glistening damply from the escapade in the pond. At a sound, she looked over her shoulder as Lionel entered the room in only his breeches, carrying a tray with two, steaming goblets and a small, ceramic pot.

“Two hot possets to warm us after our drenching,” he began, putting the tray on a table beside the rug, “with extra honey if you would care for it.”

Cecilia reached up for a goblet, tasted it, then picked up the honey. As she did, she exposed her breasts and bare stomach to Lionel. He watched her unashamed, his own Herculean physique on display. She dipped her finger in the honey and tasted it, instantly closing her eyes in sheer delight.

“This is heavenly. I will be happy with this alone,” she sighed happily.

Lionel got down on the floor beside her with difficulty, stretching out his legs as he lay on his back.

“You should rest. Do not exert yourself any further,” Cecilia told him.

“Faith, am I to be chided for this again,” he chuckled lightly, referring to Cecilia’s earlier hammering at him for pushing himself too far during their fencing session, when he ought to have been resting.

Noting the guilt in his voice, she scuttled over to him. “You know I am only looking out for your health,” she pouted, before crossing her arms. “Besides, I cannot be giving you massages if you will squander all of my good work in an hour of hopelessly entertaining me. You ought to rest for your muscles to settle so they can work properly.”

“Is that my treat then? Free massages?” Lionel laughed.

Cecilia nodded vigorously. “Yes. And perhaps more...”

Lionel raised his head to face her. “There is more?”

Teasingly, she dipped a finger into the honey, then put a hand on his chest, leaving a trace of honey there. Seeing the glistening drop, she then lowered her head and licked it away. Dipping her finger once more, she laid a trail of honey down between his pectoral muscles and up and down his ribs. She followed the trail with her hungry tongue while Lionel softly moaned her name, running his hands through her long, slick hair.

When she reached his navel, she looked up at him, an idea entering her mind that was so wanton and wicked that it shocked her even while it excited her. Lionel looked up, meeting her eyes as she lowered his breeches and upended the pot over his waiting manhood. He sat bolt upright as the golden honey oozed into the air and then touched his skin, flowing slowly but inexorably down. Cecilia put a hand to his chest, pushing him down and then straddling him. Her loins met his and the honey poured over him began to coat her. She kissed him, long, hungry kisses that made his body respond with quivering urgency.

Then her lips once more began to move down. Lionel cried out in agonized joy as her questing mouth found the core of his manhood, engulfed it. She began to pleasure him in every way she could think of using lips, hands, and tongue. He writhed and jerked, whispering her name and crying it out until he could contain himself no longer. She finally sat back, panting and satisfied with her efforts, even while her body craved a different kind of satisfaction.

After a moment in which Lionel’s chest heaved and his breathing was as hoarse as an animal, he sat up, looking at her. Without a word, he seized her about the waist and lifted her as he fell back into his previous, prone position. At first, Cecilia could not fathom what he was about. Then, with a gasp of shock and a furious blush, she knew.

She felt him, beneath her, beginning to lick at the honey that had been smeared over the heart of her womanhood. She felt his tongue, thrusting and dancing, making her squirm and writhe. She closed her eyes to the ecstasy building within her, becoming a being of pure, sensuous, sinful pleasure. Caring not for anything beyond the four walls that surrounded them. She reveled in that pleasure.

CHAPTER 21

2 WEEKS LATER

The world seemed, to Cecilia, to be mirroring her emotions. She walked a quiet country lane beneath a blue sky, beneath the watchful yellow eye of the sun. Shade came from time to time from white clouds that seemed too high and light to threaten rain. Swifts darted from the hedgerows to dance and skip through the breeze. A trill filled the air from a high tree top, a robin she thought. All in all, everything was perfect—all that was missing was her husband being by her side, as he had promised.

Instead, Peggy walked alongside her mistress, her arm threaded through the handle of a wicker basket. Cecilia also carried one, spreading the weight of their picnic evenly between the two of them. Peggy knew the roads and paths around Thornhill, to the village which bore the same name and as far as the town of Chertsey, on the Thames. So, she led their peregrination.

“Such a glorious day. Nature demands us to be out of doors on a day like this,” Cecilia began, raising her face to the sunshine and squinting. The last time she’d had a tour about these lands, it had been with Lionel, on horseback. She felt a pinch in her stomach, but snuffed out the thoughts of her husband for now.

Peggy copied her mistress’ gesture, reveling in the warmth too. “My mother says it is the Lord calling us to breathe in his good, fresh air on such summer days,” she noted. “I rarely seemed to get the chance with my duties. Even working for as lenient a master as His Grace, the Duke.”

“Fear not, Peggy. You will have plenty of such opportunities with me as your mistress. I intend to enjoy the country and the weather while it lasts. Winter will come soon enough. Every day is precious.”

“That is what my mother says too,” Peggy beamed.

“Mrs. Hardcastle is indeed a wise woman. This looks like a likely spot coming up ahead.”

A bend in the road revealed a hollow in the land. The road curved down a gentle slope. In the distance, she could see a village with a greater town visible on the horizon as a large, dark smudge, interspersed with spires of chimney smoke. A thick wood covered the slope to their right. To the left was a meadow in which a herd of sheep contentedly munched at their pasture. At the lowest point of the hollow was a silver ribbon of water, crossed by a thin, wooden bridge over which the road ran.

“That would be the Chert Brook,” Peggy pointed, “it runs through Chertsey and joins the Thames there. This is the old northern border of the Thornhill lands. Do you see the marker?”

Cecilia shaded her eyes against the sun and looked where Peggy was pointing. In a loop of the brook, there was a monument of some kind, standing proud of the landscape. It was dark with distance, too far to make out the details.

“That is a standing stone known as the Tall Knight. My grandfather told me stories of how a brave knight of Arthur’s court accepted the duty to watch over the land.”

“How romantic!” Cecilia clapped with a wide smile. “That is the perfect spot then. Can’t be more than a fifteen-minute walk from here. What lies beyond it? I can see a hill and... I think there is a building upon it.” She used a hand to shade away the sun.

Peggy frowned and suddenly looked uncomfortable. “Perhaps we should turn back and find somewhere else,” she mumbled abruptly.

Cecilia frowned too, wondering at the sudden apprehension in Peggy’s voice.

“Whatever for?” she asked.

“I had lost track of where precisely we were,” Peggy confessed. “That house you see atop the hill is Thorpe Manor. Home to Lord Thorpe.”

Now, Cecilia understood. Thorpe was the man who had killed her brother. He was, himself, half-brother to Lionel, though she would not say as much in front of Peggy. Her first instinct was to turn and walk quickly away, out of sight of the distant house. Then she stopped herself. These lands all came under the Dukedom of Thornhill. Perhaps no longer directly owned by Lionel but historically under the protection of the Thornhill Dukes.

“I am Duchess of Thornhill. I will not run from the mere sight of Lord Thorpe’s house,” she said with determination.

“But he is the Duke’s arch-enemy!” Peggy remarked with alarm. “He has not set foot in Thornhill since that day when your brother was killed.” She lowered her voice and leaned in closer. “There is even a rumor going about in the village that it was Lord Thorpe who pulled the trigger.”

“He did,” Cecilia declared with conviction, “though Lionel could never prove it before a magistrate, and so, Lord Thorpe walks free. Be that as it may, I will not turn tail and run. We have every right to be here. More than some, for these lands are part of the Thornhill legacy. We will take our picnic and eat in the shade of the Tall Knight. Thorpe Manor is a long way off, besides.”

With that, she began to stride resolutely down the road towards the standing stone in the loop of the brook. After a moment, she heard Peggy hurrying to catch up. Keeping her chin high and her stride deliberate, Cecilia fought down the apprehension she truly felt.

Thorpe was a villain. Arthur had disliked him, as had Lionel, even before the crime he had committed. At that moment, she wanted Lionel by her side. But, he was occupied yet again with papers and the discoveries of Menzies Lennox—with his revenge.

It was no matter though. Cecilia had her own planning to complete, a series of luncheons that Lionel had urged her to set up, inviting various gentlemen and gentlewomen of the county set. She herself cared little for social standing but knew that as Duchess, she bore a responsibility for something greater than herself. An obligation to a name, a tradition. The name of Thornhill had existed long before she was born and would go on through her children.

That thought sent a thrill of delight through her. The very idea that she would bear Lionel's children. Not just child, but children . Quite apart from the wonderful activity that would precede each conception, the idea of carrying his children made her weak at the knees. Those children would bear the name and the legacy. It fell to her as their mother to ensure there was a name to inherit. And so, she had thrown herself with gusto into the activity of writing to those she wished to invite, from a list of prominent local personages provided by the ever-resourceful Blackwood.

But on this wonderful day, she simply couldn't bear to be confined in the house any longer.

“Enough time has been spent at bureaus, writing letters and invitations. I will enjoy our outdoor luncheon,” she said, voicing her thoughts.

“If you say so, Your Grace,” Peggy replied, forgetting her promise of using Cecilia’s name when they were alone.

That told Cecilia how uncertain Peggy was, her worry forcing her to revert to the training that had been drummed into her since she was a little girl. They reached the Tall Knight, the distant shape of Thorpe Manor now clearer where it sat atop its hill. Still a two-hour walk away, Cecilia told herself. And an hour even by horse. Far enough away to be safe.

They opened their baskets and took out the woolen blankets that had been folded on top. Spreading these at the foot of the Tall Knight, they began to lay out parcels of food, string-tied in packets of oiled paper. Cheese, ham, and chicken were unwrapped along with a fresh loaf still warm inside. A ceramic jug contained the juice pressed from apples. Another bore milk. Lastly came plates, cutlery, and cups.

Cecilia distracted Peggy with observations of the birdlife they could see darting among the reeds that grew on the banks of the brook. When she saw a kingfisher, resplendent in its blue and orange, Cecilia pointed excitedly. Peggy watched it with delight, hardly daring to move lest she disturb the fantastic creature.

After that, neither woman raised her eyes to look on the dark shape of Thorpe Manor, nor did it enter their conversation. After a comfortable repast, Cecilia found herself drowsy. She leaned back against the stone, which was warm from the sun and soft from the moss that grew upon it. Her seat was thick, long grass, and perfectly comfortable. Peggy was dangling her feet in the brook and lying back amongst the grass too, eyes closed.

The invitations were all written and handed to Blackwood to arrange for posting. By now, Cecilia supposed they would be on their way to the post office in Thornhill village. In a few days, the replies would come in and then she would be hostess, standing proudly alongside her husband as she welcomed guests to Thornhill.

“When was the last time the Duke hosted guests at the castle? Before the ball, I mean,” she asked.

“Not since the day of the hunt,” Peggy replied sleepily.

“Five years? Really? I knew he had become a recluse since Arthur’s passing but I assumed there would have been someone visiting, even if only close friends,” Cecilia continued.

“No. Not a single person. For the first years, the Duke was recovering from his injury. He couldn’t walk at all at first. Then, he just seemed to... withdraw. Mr. Blackwood and my mother were most concerned for him. It was just so unlike him to be asocial.”

Cecilia thought about what she knew of her husband’s past. Severely wounded by the gunshot that was intended to take his life. Left heart-broken by the betrayal of his fiancée. She supposed that would make a man angry at the world, unwilling to open himself to his peers or neighbors. He had not said as much, merely hinted. It said a lot for how much he loved her that he was now prepared to welcome people into his home, to expose himself once again. And all for her. So that the world would know that their marriage was true. At least that was what she firmly believed, despite him never voicing it.

After a few moments of silence, Cecilia became aware of the sounds of deep, steady breathing from Peggy which eventually became soft snores. She chuckled to herself, standing, and walking over to her, removing her own coat, and spreading it over her friend as a blanket. Then she returned to her own seat and closed her eyes. Just for a moment, she told herself. Sleep soon swept over her.

“My, my, what do we have here? Two sleeping beauties!”

The voice startled Cecilia from her doze. The sun was shaded beneath a bank of clouds and there was a chill in the air. The Tall Knight remained warm and strong at her back though. A man sat on horseback on the other side of the brook. He had brown hair, combed forward in the Roman style that was currently in fashion. His clothes were of a fine cut and his steed was a fiery-eyed stallion that tossed its head as though impatient at being stationary. She recognized him at once.

“Sir Gerald,” she started, getting to her feet.

Peggy slept soundly and she walked to her maid’s side, bending to shake her gently by the shoulder.

“Do not wake your friend on my account, Cecilia,” Sir Gerald began, smiling, “she looks very peaceful. And most beautiful in her repose. Who is she?”

“I am Duchess of Thornhill, as you have clearly forgotten,” Cecilia intoned with frost in her voice. “The correct term of address is Your Grace .”

Sir Gerald laughed. “How comical. You are no more a Duchess than I. Remember, I know the circumstances in which you wed your... Duke.”

He suddenly swung his horse to face the stream and dug his heels into its ribs. It lashed the earth with its hooves, leaping into a gallop and then over the brook in a powerful bound. Peggy came awake with a small cry, looking around wildly as the horseman circled them, still laughing. Cecilia realized that she was crouching beside Peggy, head whipping around to keep Sir Gerald in sight, almost cowering before him. She straightened, lifting her chin, and watching Sir Gerald. He slowed his horse and his laughter died. Eventually, he stood before the two women, still looking down on them from the height of his mount. Cecilia stepped forward, looking up but holding Sir Gerald’s gaze in what she hoped was an expression of fearless pride.

“That is an insult to me and to my husband, Sir Gerald. I am Duchess in the eyes of god and man. My marriage is as real as the stone behind us. I do not care how it began, only for what it is now.”

Sir Gerald glared at her, mouth tightening in anger. Cecilia did not know if it was her words that provoked his anger or just the way she spoke. He clearly took pleasure in intimidation and causing fear in those he judged to be weaker than himself.

“Is that so?” he muttered, mouth twisting now into scorn. “If I recall correctly, there was another lady before you who had tried to tame that Duke’s obsessions. And as I seem to recall, that did not end well for her either.”

Cecilia’s thoughts shifted to his words. Was he speaking of Arabella? Lionel had told her the reason they had ended their betrothal was the scandal that ignited upon her brother’s death, and the loss of his ability to walk properly. Was there something he had kept hidden from her? That it was his obsession with his revenge that cut them apart? Or perhaps he simply was so sheltered from reality at the time, he couldn’t see the truth.

Cecilia chose to ignore Sir Gerald’s words, deciding he was likely lying to incite a rift between her and her husband. “Come along, Peggy. Let us pack up the picnic and return to the castle,” Cecilia said, turning her back on Sir Gerald.

Peggy’s scream was the only warning Cecilia had. She whirled around to see that Sir Gerald had spurred his horse until it was almost on top of her. Resisting an almost overwhelming urge to back away, Cecilia stood her ground. She locked trembling knees and clenched her hands into fists at her sides. The horse halted so close that she could feel its hot breath against her face. Sir Gerald was an expert horseman, able to halt his charge instantly. If he expected to see fear in Cecilia’s face, she did not give it.

“I understand that you paid a visit to your aunt and uncle with your... husband,” he began.

“We did,” Cecilia replied, working hard to keep the quiver from her voice.

“Then you will know that Penrose is lost to you. I did say that you should speak to me on that subject.”

“A brag surely,” Cecilia remarked with as much disdain as she could muster, “what could Penrose be to you, after all?”

Sir Gerald smirked. “Not what it could be. It is mine. My property.”

CHAPTER 22

Cecilia could only gape at this revelation. She remembered her first conversation with Sir Gerald, at Thornhill. When he had realized who she was, he had made a rather cryptic remark about Penrose. About how they must talk of it. At the time, events had transpired to wipe the remark from her mind. It had been the least of her concerns in the darkness that had followed. Now he had been explicit. He had wanted to discuss Penrose with her because either he was in the process of acquiring it or had already done so.

“What do you mean it is your property?” Cecilia demanded.

Sir Gerald turned his horse and trotted away a few steps.

“What do you mean?” Cecilia called after him in a louder, more strident voice.

Sir Gerald stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

“Precisely what I said, Your Grace ,” he put scorn into the title that left Cecilia in no doubt about his opinion of her rank. “If you would like to discuss it in private, then you can find me at Thorpe Manor where I am a guest of my good friend, Gordon Locke, or Lord Thorpe as he is to you.”

With that, he spurred his horse away, only to swing around and gallop towards them once more. Cecilia was forced to leap from his path, pushing Peggy ahead of her. She heard Sir Gerald laughing as his horse thundered past to leap the brook once more.

“He is mad! A gentleman shouldn’t behave so!” Peggy spluttered as she and Cecilia picked themselves up.

“He is a wicked man,” Cecilia agreed. “He is responsible for my marriage to Lionel.”

Peggy frowned in confusion and Cecilia wished she had not spoken.

“Did you and the other staff not think it odd that the marriage took place so quickly, with no courtship? Or that it was such a small, private affair?”

“It is His Grace’s business. I thought that he had decided to marry, and once decided on a course of action, he has always been one to brook no delay,” Peggy said, “though I did wonder at him isolating himself from you once married. We all did.”

Cecilia sighed. “Because a scandal was engineered by Sir Gerald. Or possibly Lord Thorpe. Or both. Marrying me was the only way out of it.”

“Good grief,” Peggy exclaimed, “I had no idea. So, the two of you do not wish to be married at all?”

“At first... it was not our choice,” Cecilia admitted, “but that did not last. When we came together, we fit like pieces of a puzzle. It was all meant to be.”

She watched Sir Gerald ride until he was hidden by the trees. Then she looked up towards Thorpe Manor. It now seemed to loom over them like a storm cloud on the horizon.

Penrose , the house, was no more, gutted by fire. But the property, the land around the house, why would the grasping mercenary Sinclairs sell it? Was the fire set deliberately? If so, why?

“He talked about your home, didn’t he?” Peggy asked. “Penrose?”

“Yes, where I grew up and where I lived with my brother Arthur after our parents were lost at sea.”

“But how could it be his? Why is it not yours?” Peggy asked innocently.

“Unfortunately, I do not have the answer to those questions, Peggy,” Cecilia sighed. “Something is afoot. And, it seems, Sir Gerald has answers. But to obtain them, I must go to Thorpe Manor.”

“You mustn’t!” Peggy cried. “His Grace would not hear of it. He would be angry!”

Cecilia could not deny it. Nor could she convince herself that Lionel would agree to go with her. Even hearing what Sir Gerald had said, he would assume it a lie, part of some grand scheme of manipulation.

“Come along, Peggy. It is high time we were returning to Thornhill,” Cecilia ushered.

She and Peggy began to gather up the picnic things, only then discovering that a number of plates had been shattered by the hooves of Sir Gerald’s horse.

“My mother will be the one angry now,” Peggy murmured, “she hates to lose good crockery.”

“I don’t suppose she would fail to notice if we simply discard these pieces into the brook?” Cecilia said hopefully.

“She will notice from the difference in weight of the baskets, I swear it. She knows the contents of her kitchen to the teaspoon.”

“Then I will take the blame. Say that the basket slipped from my hand and I dropped it,” Cecilia reassured. “I would rather that Blackwood did not get wind of our encounter. It would certainly be reported back to the Duke. And I do not want that.”

“You would keep secrets from him?” Peggy asked, voice piquing.

From the tone of her voice, it was something she did not understand and, possibly, did not approve of. Cecilia did not like it herself but could see nothing good coming from relaying their meeting with Sir Gerald. At worst, it might incense Lionel enough for him to challenge Sir Gerald to a duel. After her sparring session with Lionel, she had no doubt who would come out the victor of that duel, but still, she would not risk harm coming to her husband, nor risk dragging the Grisham name through more scandal than she already had done. Not for someone as petty as a bully like that odious man.

As they finished their packing, with the broken crockery wrapped safely in one of the blankets, she thought about her next steps. The sensible thing to do would be to ignore Sir Gerald, dismiss it as taunting. After all, Penrose was no more, a shell of a house. She was now Duchess and mistress of Thornhill. Penrose was a chapter of her life now closed. What did it matter who owned what was left of it?

On the walk back to Thornhill, she managed to convince herself of this. She would ignore the Sinclairs and Sir Gerald Knightley. Her future was with Lionel, her past was precisely that, passed.

As she entered her quarters, she saw the painting that had previously hung on the dusty, forgotten corridor wall outside the Music Room. The painting of Penrose that Lionel had concocted from his imagination as a gift for Arthur. She had hung it at first in her own bedchamber, until Lionel had moved her into his own suite. Now it hung beside the window on the side of the bed that she favored. Every morning she woke, facing the dawn through the window and with the warmth of Lionel’s body at

her back, arm draped over her. In that moment she always felt safe and protected. Looking upon Penrose in its heyday brought back the same feelings that she'd experienced as a child.

"Penrose is my castle. My sanctuary. Where I was safe," she whispered to herself, lost in the picture. "Everything was taken from me, I mustn't allow that to be taken from me too."

"What's that?" Lionel said as he strode into the room, rolling up his shirt sleeves.

So lost in her reverie had Cecilia been that she had not heard Lionel entering the suite from a room that adjoined the bedroom. She started, jumping up from where she had been sitting on the edge of the bed. Lionel stopped in mid-stride, looking quizzical at her reaction. Then his eyes traveled down her dress.

Cecilia followed his gaze and saw the marks of her mad leap from the path of Sir Gerald's horse. Grass and moss had left stains on the front of the dress and her skirts. A cake had been pressed into the skirts as she landed atop it, leaving a greasy stain. A leaf fluttered to the floor from where it had been lodged in her hair. Neither Cecilia nor Peggy had noticed it, and it had been there for the entire walk home. Now it chose to flutter gently down to the carpet. Cecilia blushed.

"You look like you've been rolling about on the ground," Lionel commented, brows furrowing, "did something happen?"

"Peggy and I sat for a while at the feet of the Tall Knight," Cecilia explained, "we both fell asleep. It was such a wonderfully warm day. I suppose I should have taken more care of my dress."

Lionel stooped to pick up the leaf and grinned as he placed it back in her hair, as though it were a decoration.

“No, if you were comfortable and content, it should not matter. It quite took me by surprise, that is all. I was afraid you’d had a fall.”

Cecilia laughed and felt a bitterness inside at lying to him. But telling Lionel the truth would serve no purpose.

He took her in his arms and she rested her head against his chest, letting his strong embrace surround her. She closed her eyes, embracing him in return and breathing deeply of his scent. For a moment, she allowed herself to forget Penrose and Sir Gerald Knightley. She lost herself in the simple pleasure of being held close by her husband.

That pleasure lasted for scant moments before reality intruded. Her thoughts returned to Penrose and to the offer made by Sir Gerald. She tried to put it from her mind, pushing it aside and putting Lionel and Thornhill uppermost in her thoughts. Always though, her mind returned to her childhood home. The home that had been built by her ancestors. That had belonged to the Sinclairs since the seventeenth century. That was the shelter to her last happy memories. And that had become another thing snatched from her by those who had pushed her around for the last several years of her life.

“I can feel the tension in you. It waxes and wanes. What troubles you?” Lionel asked, tilting his head to face her.

Despite herself, Cecilia stiffened, feeling as though her flesh were transparent as glass, allowing her deepest thoughts to be read. She looked up into a face creased by concern but impossibly handsome, nevertheless. She opened her mouth, intending to tell all, but Lionel’s face darkened suddenly and he spoke again.

“I almost forgot. You have received your first reply. From Sir David Greenaugh of Whitesheaf, a neighbor from Byfleet way. I had their invitations delivered by hand as

the Greenaugh family have long been allies and friends to the Grishams. Look at what that young pup had the temerity to reply.”

Lionel left Cecilia’s arms and crossed the room swiftly, going out into the study beyond and returning with a folded piece of paper. He handed it to Cecilia and she unfolded it and read aloud.

“Your Grace, my uttermost thanks for your invitation and I hope to become acquainted with your new wife in the future. However, the date offered is not suitable for me as I have committed to dining with Sir Gerald Knightley and my good friend Gordon Locke on that day. I should be happy to combine our respective luncheons, however, and invite my guests to join you at Thornhill. Please let me know and I will make the necessary arrangements, Greenaugh.”

She looked up at Lionel who was glowering out of the window, jaw set.

“Do you see what the rascal is saying?” he demanded. “That he will decline our invitation unless Knightley and Thorpe are included. They have gotten to him.”

“He may simply be already committed as he says,” Cecilia offered, “and quite innocent in his recommendation of... of those two men.”

“Nonsense!” Lionel barked. “He knows that I once accused Thorpe of murder. It may not have been public knowledge, but it was knowledge in our circle.”

The mention of Arthur’s death seemed to mollify him. He seemed to swallow the anger that had blown up in him so suddenly. A smile replaced it and he came back to her, hands running down her upper arms, fingers touching with the delicacy and precision of a master pianist. She shivered pleasurably beneath that touch and moved closer, laying her hands upon his chest, and letting her fingertips feel the rigid muscle barely contained by his clothing. His was the kind of body that demanded the open

air, that called out to be touched without the hindrance of clothing. She found herself envious of that long-ago time before mankind had discovered shame, when Adam and Eve had lived naked and free in the garden of Eden. The idea made her flush.

“Then forget Greenaugh,” she said, “there are plenty of other gentlemen and women whose company we can enjoy.”

“I am sorry for being cross. Mention of those two jackanapes makes me seethe. For the injuries they have done to us both and gotten away scot-free. It is unjust.”

“The world is unjust,” Cecilia told him, feeling his heartbeat thump beneath her hand, “what we cannot change, we must accept, or hatred will consume us. I will not spend my life in anger.”

Lionel lowered his head until his forehead touched hers. “You are wise for one so young. Where does this wisdom come from?”

Cecilia laughed. “Common sense, mostly.”

Lionel smiled. “Accept what we must. Avenge what we can,” he said, quietly.

Cecilia thanked heaven that Lionel had interrupted her earlier. She knew now that she could not tell him of her encounter. His anger made him unpredictable. The thought of Lionel being shot down in a pointless duel or incarcerated for murder was unendurable.

“I’m sorry. I know you do not like to talk of revenge.”

“I do not like to think of anything that might put you in harm’s way,” Cecilia corrected. “Revenge can be double-edged, can it not? Able to cut the wielder of its blade as well as its target.”

“Not if properly wielded. Have no more thoughts of it. I will ensure that I am not cut,” he murmured with dark conviction, before patting her on her shoulder twice and making to stand, presumably to meet with Mr. Lennox once more.

Cecilia's heart ached with a longing she could not voice. For she felt she had no right to control her husband's life—the guilt of possibly ruining his name and trapping him in a marriage to begin with still lingered, despite everything.

“I think I will get some rest,” she sighed, before making for the bed.

“Grand idea. I shall find you in a few hours.”

CHAPTER 23

“Menzies is waiting for me in the breakfast room,” Lionel said.

Cecilia blinked blearily at the bright sunlight flooding the room the following morning. Lionel was dressing, covering his wonderful body with those dratted clothes that society demanded they cover themselves in. Cecilia stretched languidly beneath the bedclothes, tensing her arms and legs from fingertips to toes. There was a delicious feeling of soreness to her body, the kind that only comes from strenuous activity.

She took pride in the scratches on Lionel’s back that were soon hidden by the shirt he pulled on over his head. They were the symbols of her ownership of him. But they were also the marks made in their nocturnal battles of passion, marks of her struggle for dominance and eventual submission to his strength. A glorious submission, but one that she made him earn.

He had sought her out the previous day, but not in a few hours like he’d promised. Rather, it was late into the night when he had returned to their bedchamber and stirred her from her slumber. She was very ready to be angry with him for making her wait so long, but those feelings were very quickly assuaged when she found he had prepared her a small midnight feast as an apology—an apology that had led to something so much more.

Cecilia propped herself on her elbow as Lionel turned. The bedclothes fell away from her breasts and she did not attempt to replace them. His eyes went from hers to her breasts, lingering there. His hands slowed in the act of tying the string of his shirt.

Cecilia languidly pushed the bedclothes lower, to the swell of her hip. One arm lay over her leg which she pushed forward to shadow the naked heart of her womanhood.

She smiled at his distraction.

“Are you sure that he cannot wait just a little while longer?” she asked, innocently.

Lionel’s hands fell to his sides and he walked to the bed, leaning over it. Cecilia lay back, letting her arms fall back to the pillow, helpless and submissive. He kissed her, long and deep. She writhed at the pleasure of his touch. Then he was standing again.

“Menzie is an old and loyal friend, and I would not be so rude to him,” Lionel said, stepping away from the bed.

“Tease!” Cecilia cried, playfully.

She grabbed for a pillow and hurled it at him. Lionel laughed as he danced aside and the pillow plopped to the floor.

“I will meet you for luncheon and you can brief me on the plans for our social calendar over the next few weeks.”

He skipped away from the room before she could reach for another pillow. Cecilia found herself smiling at the exchange. Partly. It was mostly at the memory of the night before. One of wanton, carnal play that had taken pleasure to new heights. But it was only partly, for she felt a deep loneliness settling in over these past few days. Lionel breaking a promise on a previously agreed engagement with her was not a mere oversight at this point—it had almost become a rule over the past weeks.

Though he did seem to put in an effort to make it up to her at times, she could not escape the feeling that he was slowly drifting away out of reach.

And there was little she could do.

Plates of soup grew cold before Cecilia. A platter of delicately made sandwiches completed a simple but well-made luncheon. A plate of soup had been put before her and another put out for Lionel. But Lionel was now fifteen minutes late. Finally, Cecilia folded her napkin and rose from her place. She decided to remind her husband of the time and the need to eat. Picking up two plates of soup and two soup spoons, she marched out of the dining room.

Nearing the study she could not hear voices but instead the quiet sounds of earnest study. The pages of a book or ledger being turned and the regular scratchings of a pen nib. The door was closed but she managed to open it by nudging the handle with her elbow and then kicking the door with her heel. Inside, Lionel looked up from a spread of papers on the floor. He himself was sitting, half reclining before the fire, poring over the papers.

“Cecilia! Whatever are you doing carrying plates about? Oh, is it...Damnation!”

Lionel’s eyes had gone from Cecilia to the clock on the mantle and he realized exactly what time it was. He rose, knocking over a jar of ink and cursing. He began attempting to blot the ink with handfuls of nearby paper. Cecilia looked around, found an empty space on a side table and put down her burden. Then she took up the folded napkins which she had clamped under her arms. She joined Lionel on hands and knees on the floor, replacing the sodden paper with the thick linen, drawing up the viscous black liquid.

“I assume those papers are important. Whatever was on them is lost to the ages now,” she said.

“No, I had already checked them. They were ledgers belonging to my father. Nothing enlightening,” Lionel said.

“Did you forget our luncheon appointment?” Cecilia asked, trying to keep her voice sweet.

The last thing she wanted was to be shrill or berating though she was mildly annoyed that he had forgotten his promise. And in favor of what? Paperwork? Business? She supposed that the running of his estates accrued a fair amount of administration. Unless this was all about something more than the management of Thornhill.

“I lost track of time utterly,” Lionel said, “Menzies revealed a rather promising lead in his investigation which requires me to go through my father’s papers with a fine tooth-comb. That is what I have been doing but it was not my intention to miss our luncheon date,”

“So this relates to your revenge,” Cecilia said,

She felt a tinge of despair at the knowledge. A touch of sadness. Would she always be secondary to Lionel’s revenge? Would any future child be secondary to it? Would Lionel’s own health become secondary to his thirst for vengeance?

“Of course, that is the sole reason for employing Menzies,” Lionel said, “he told me that...”

Cecilia held up a hand which had smears of warm soup on it.

“Please, Lionel, I would rather not know of the details,”

It hurt to say it, feeling as though she were erecting a barrier between them which was the opposite of her most heart-felt desires. But at the same time instinct told her that for her own self preservation, she must maintain a distance from it.

“You are not interested in the motivations of the man who murdered your brother?”

Lionel asked, tinged of irritation in his voice.

“Of course I am but I have accepted over the years that Arthur died as a result of a terrible accident. I have come to terms with that as much as I am able to. Now, you tell me that he was murdered and if you tell me much more of the circumstances I will not be able to rest. Not ever. Not until his killer is swinging from a rope before me. And even then, I doubt I will feel any satisfaction. Do you not see that revenge is a hunger that can never, ever be sated? I am trying to preserve my own sanity,”

Lionel nodded somberly. A sudden warmth filled the room, as if the fire had flared up unexpectedly. “You are right. I have been neglecting you for all this nonsense.” With a scrunched-up fist, he bunched up the papers on the floor next to him and tossed them into the hearth, clearing the ground. Then, quite unexpectedly, he took her hand in his and licked the smear of soup. “Yum, quite delicious. I must commend the cook for her efforts,” he added, deadpan.

Cecilia burst into laughter at the absurdity of the situation and Lionel grinned boyishly back. Was it that easy all along?

She saw a spatter of ink caught in a lock of his hair and carefully wiped it clean with a napkin. Unfortunately, she had not realized quite how wet the napkin already was. A blue-black streak was left behind that had the lock dangling heavily in front of Lionel’s face. He raised an eyebrow, eyes crossing as he tried to focus on it.

“I see...” he muttered in challenge, pursing his lips.

He dipped a finger into the one remaining pool of ink on the floor. Cecilia laughed, struggling to her feet. Everything felt so easy, so light all of a sudden, as if the weight of her troubles had evaporated into thin air.

“Do not dare!” she warned as he advanced with his inky finger.

Lionel chased her across the room as Cecilia laughed and giggled. They dodged around furniture until she collapsed into a chair. Lionel dotted her on the nose with his finger, leaving an inky black mark on its tip.

“Revenge,” he said, firmly.

Cecilia responded by grabbing for the front of his shirt, hauling him down to her, and kissing him thoroughly. After a moment, she carefully rubbed her nose along his, up and down, painting his patrician, Roman nose with the ink he had left.

“Revenge,” she murmured, just as firmly.

“I choose you over everything,” he whispered, his voice unusually tender, resonating deeply within her. His words seemed to reverberate in her chest, a promise that felt as eternal as the dream-like glow surrounding them. “From now on, it’s just you and me.”

As he took her in his arms, the room around them seemed to fade into a hazy golden mist.

A feeling surged in Cecilia just then. That perhaps, everything would be alright after all.

Cecilia woke to a sound in the still, blackness of the bedchamber she shared with Lionel. A full moon cast a silvery glow through the window. For a moment she blinked at it, trying to remember the dream that she had been having. Then Lionel appeared, stripped to his undergarment, running a weary hand through his hair. His body and his movements shouted of utter exhaustion.

“I’m sorry I missed dinner,” he whispered, pulling back the bedclothes and lowering himself to the bed with a groan.

“Is it done?” she whispered back sleepily.

“Not yet. But we are getting close,” came the reply.

As he lowered the bedclothes around himself, Cecilia put her arm across him, letting her body mold itself to his.

Within minutes, his breathing had deepened into the regular, steady rhythm of sleep. Cecilia lay for a while, thinking of the lonely day that she had spent. Another day in which her husband had promised his time, only to forget as his quest for revenge consumed him. She closed her eyes against the silent flow of tears that spilled down her cheeks.

She prayed that this would be the last day. That this was the worst of it.

CHAPTER 24

“Lord Thorpe’s investments are heavily weighted towards slaves in Jamaica,” Menzies Lennox pointed to a ledger containing a dense column of figures.

“Immoral but not illegal . He is not alone in owning slaves in the colonies,” Lionel noted.

He sat at the desk in his study, Lennox standing at his shoulder, drawing Lionel’s attention to the relevant sections of the ledger with a bony finger.

“Quite so. And that is where his shipping concerns come into the fold,” Lennox added, drawing out his yarn once more. “It has been extremely difficult to uncover. Lord Thorpe and his partners cover their tracks extremely well. Fortunately, there is a weak link in their chain. Namely—the wealthy but somewhat feckless Sir Gerald Knightley. Fond of gambling and wenching in the rookeries of London, and therefore vulnerable if one has loyal sources in such places. As I do.”

Lionel suppressed a sigh of impatience. “And what does this weak link tell us, Lennox?” he asked, playing along.

“That ships belonging to Lord Thorpe and his partners are collecting slaves from the African continent and shipping them to Jamaica from British ports. Quite contrary to law. Sir Gerald has bragged in the wrong ear about the wealth he is accruing by not using a middleman, as he puts it. They are effectively running their own illicit slave market out of British ports, namely Bristol.”

Lionel thumped the table, feeling the sweet thrill of victory. Or at least the taste of it. Here was the evidence that Thorpe was making his money by immoral means. Lionel could use that to tarnish his name, begin to erode his position in society. With Lennox's expertise, the evidence of criminal wrongdoing would follow and that would be the completion of his revenge. He frowned, mind racing ahead to possibilities and plans. The session with Lennox had been long, involving multiple complex books of accounts and ledgers. Lionel had insisted on seeing every step of his detective's work, not wanting to overlook anything, no matter how apparently small the detail. Their meeting had begun after Lionel and Cecilia had concluded their breakfast. Lennox had been waiting impatiently in Lionel's study, eager to impart his latest discoveries.

Glancing out of the window, Lionel could see that the sun was well beyond its noon height. While he felt alert with the urgency of potential action to be taken, his eyes felt gritty. An empty brandy decanter stood on the desk next to a candle that had burned down to a melted wax mess. A plate had been cleared from the desk that morning by one of the servants, food brought to Lionel in his office the night before. Lennox had not been present, but there was plenty of work from previous visits.

"May I say, Your Grace, that with this turning point reached, I would suggest some time spent away from this mission," Lennox said, suddenly diffident.

He walked around the desk to resume his seat, picking up a tumbler of scotch that had been poured for him. Lennox was a man for whom there was no hour too early for a wee dram.

"What? Not on your soul, not when we are this close," Lionel muttered, "I must speak to some of my contacts in the Lords, begin to lay the seeds about what Thorpe might be up to or involved in."

"I would recommend circumspection, Your Grace," Lennox reiterated, putting the

glass down and steepling his fingers in front of his face. “I have reason to believe that in the five years since the attempt on your life—five years of yourself remaining withdrawn from high society—Lord Thorpe has been busy building a network of allies in town. There is rumor that he has the ear of the Regent. Because of the military connection, you understand.”

“Military?” Lionel asked.

“Lord Thorpe had a commission in the Middlesex Rifles, the Prince of Wales Own Middlesex Rifles. That regiment wears the feathers of Wales and he is inordinately proud of any regiment which he sees as belonging to him. If he has the Regent’s ear, there will be others.”

Lionel reached for his own glass, though he had no taste for it. Fatigue was a heavyweight behind his eyes. As was the guilt for the conspiracy against him he had thrust Cecilia into. Last night had not been the first time he had heard the clocks chime two or three in the morning. Cecilia had been fast asleep when he went to bed. How many nights had that been? Part of him reasoned that it could not have been many, while at the same time, a more honest voice said that it was, in fact, too many.

He had promised her he would not allow his thirst for vengeance to consume his time. When was the first of the luncheons Cecilia had arranged to take place? Lionel shook his head, dislodging the stray thought, recognizing the sudden divergence from the matters at hand as the signs of tiredness.

“There will also be those at court envious of his growing influence and ready to tear him down. I will write to those I believe I can trust and find out who is who,” Lionel reaffirmed, more to himself. “If he truly is my half-brother, of which there is no doubt in my mind now, then this cat-and-mouse chase has become far more personal.”

The pieces were coming together like a jigsaw, each one sending through him a

frisson of pleasure—an anticipation of unraveling a riddle within his grasp. A sensation all too familiar, but peculiar nonetheless. Vengeance had gripped him so over the last half-decade—at times, it felt he had little room in his heart for all else.

“I completely understand, Your Grace. But why not let me sniff those people out? A few days in London and I am sure I can deliver a list of names to you of those ready to help drag Thorpe down,” Lennox stated reasonably. “If I may speak as plainly as is the habit of my country, you look tired. Take care that this project of yours does not consume you.”

“ Why ?” Lionel narrowed his eyes, feeling the sting of anger at Lennox’s presumption. Yet, deep down, he understood Lennox was being truthful, both about the plain-speaking manner of the Scots and the fatigue that gnawed at Lionel, feeling as though it were soaked into his very bones.

“If I may be so bold. When I met you, there was nothing in your life except your pursuit of revenge. You were an arrow with one purpose. I could appreciate that very much, I have been that arrow myself. But then you married and a married man can never be single-minded again. As I also discovered late in my life. Marie was taken away from me and I subsequently returned to my old ways. But for ten years, I gave up the pursuit of lawbreakers and became a husband.”

Lionel sat back in his chair, stroking his chin. “Ah. You are saying that I am losing my focus?”

“No, no, no, Your Grace. I would not presume so far. But that is precisely what I mean. Not everything in life must concern your revenge. You too have the opportunity to be... a complete man. Not just an instrument of vengeance. You have a duty as a husband, do you not?”

“A duty that is uppermost in my mind,” Lionel snarled, straightening.

He drew breath to deliver a stinging rebuke to the Scotsman, harsh words to put the man in his place. Then he stopped himself.

Was his duty as a husband truly uppermost?

As Lennox had revealed newer and newer information to him, the obsession had begun growing once more. Once, it had been the entirety of his world. Then it had been pushed back as Cecilia filled his life. To be a husband and potentially a father had begun to fill the space once occupied by his need for revenge. Fresh evidence had stoked that need once more, rekindling smoldering embers into a quick flame. And even his own health had been secondary to the need to know more about Thorpe's life and businesses. With the need to find the chink in his adversary's armor, sleep had been sacrificed, and even when he sought his bed, it had been long in coming, held back by thoughts of revenge and how it might be enacted.

"Perhaps you are right," Lionel muttered. "Quite right. And I thank you for your candor, Lennox. It is timely and necessary. That will be all for today. Please be my guest for as long as you would like."

"Alas, Your Grace. The call to action is too strong for me without my Marie by my side. I will go to London and begin the task of discovering Thorpe's allies and enemies. I shall have a dossier for you to examine within a fortnight."

Lennox stood and bowed, taking his leave. After he had left, Lionel hobbled to his feet too. It had been a while since Cecilia had massaged his leg last and the pain was gradually returning—though it was no fault of hers for he had scarcely made time for such activities as of late.

Favoring his stronger leg, he gathered up the ledgers and accounts, carrying them in a heavy pile toward the stone fireplace that stood behind his chair. To one side was a false wall panel, revealing an ancient priest hole. Within the space, walled in stone

and fronted with its secret door, Lionel had placed the safe, which previously had been resident at the old mill, his secret study. The need for secrecy had been borne of his initial distrust of Cecilia, but that bridge was well and truly crossed. He had no qualms about Cecilia knowing his work and had, with the help of a servant, moved the safe back to the house. Now he locked the work away and went in search of his wife.

It took Lionel an hour to find Cecilia, eventually seeing her sitting beneath the tree in the Fairy Garden. As he approached her, a chill ran through him. She sat on the ground with her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. He could see from the redness of her eyes that she had been crying. That fact alone was enough to sharpen his attention and spark fear within him. The idea of Cecilia suffering was utterly anathema to him.

“Cecilia? Darling, whatever is the matter? I have been looking for you,” he said, falling to his knees beside her.

He made to embrace her but she shrank away from him, leaving him with empty arms and outstretched hands. Slowly, they fell to his side.

“You have not been looking for me much in the last weeks,” she said, scrubbing at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

Lionel frowned. It could not have been as much as a week. He tried to think back to the last time they had dined together in the evening. Not the previous evening. It must have been the night before though... No, not then either.

“I’m sorry, Cece. I have lost track of time. It has slipped through my fingers...”

“So obsessed have you been with one man that you neglect your wife,” Cecilia muttered accusingly.

Lionel felt stung by that. It did not strike him as entirely fair. His mission to bring down Thorpe was important. For both of them.

“Thorpe must face justice for what he has done,” he frowned, brows furrowing.

“Must he? And what justice is there if it comes at the cost of your life?”

“I’ve already told you I will not do anything as foolish as challenge him to a duel. I will not risk my life for his. I cannot speak for him. He has already challenged my life once—”

“I don’t mean that!” Cecilia interrupted, looking at him with tear-filled eyes, “I mean our life together. I once made it my mission to convince you that I was here out of love for you, out of a desire to be your wife in truth as well as name. Now I feel like we are going backward. As if you are letting this obsession push aside all else in your life.”

“I am sorry. I do not want to let anything become more important to me than you. But, this is as much for Arthur, and therefore, you, as it is me. Do you not think that Thorpe has to pay for what he’s done?”

Lionel could not understand how there could be any part of Cecilia that could not see the truth of the matter. She looked away and Lionel took her by the chin and gently turned her head to face him.

“He cannot be allowed to get away with it, right?”

“And what will be the final cost of your revenge? What good is Thorpe ending up in disgrace or even prison if it has cost you your marriage? Our marriage!” Cecilia cried, seizing his hands in hers, looking into his eyes earnestly.

“Do you remember what today is?” she asked.

Lionel frowned. “No, today was of no particular significance, I don’t think. Ah, although, Thorpe did intend to host a—”

“Today was the first of the luncheons I had arranged. Today we were to host Lord and Lady Westchurch, the Dowager Countess Purfleet, and Lord and Lady Aldermarsh.”

Lionel’s stomach dropped at the laxity of his memory. He had known it deep down but it had been lost in a fog of numbers, information, and dreams of revenge. He hung his head, feeling shame as a physical pain with him.

“You had forgotten, hadn’t you!”

“Forgive me, Cece. You’re right, I have been remiss. I have allowed myself to become obsessed once more, as I was before we met. Come, we must get ready. When are they invited for?”

Cecilia laughed bitterly and picked up a handful of crumpled papers that had been lying on the ground beside her.

“They will not be. These are their refusals. Those who actually did me the courtesy of replying. Lord and Lady Aldermarsh did not. Neither to accept or decline. But the Dowager Countess mentioned them in her reply. Telling me that she could not bring herself to associate with two people making a mockery of the sacred institution of marriage. That she knew of my scandalous behavior from my aunt and uncle and could not endorse it. And her good friends the Aldermarshs were in agreement. I have been snubbed!”

Lionel’s eyes widened in fury. Without thinking, he took the papers from her hand

and ripped them across, then again. He tossed the pieces into the air. “To hell with those blackguards! I do not care what those people think of us or our marriage. If they will not accept our hospitality, then I care not. All I care about—”

“Is your revenge,” Cecilia interjected bitterly. “This is not about a desire to be part of the county set for its own sake. But I will not be the reason the Grisham name falls into disgrace. As Duchess, I must protect the Thornhill legacy. For the sake of our children and theirs. They do not deserve the pain of living as social pariahs because of our choices.”

“Nor will they...” Lionel coaxed.

“But how are we to prevent it?” Cecilia demanded. “The only way is to convince the ton that we are a respectable married couple, that there is nothing of scandal about us. But they will not let us get close enough to do that! Nor will you! We have not attended a single social since being married!”

Lionel sighed as the truth of her words dawned on him. He was so content with being isolated at Thornhill—so far from civilization, he had never even considered the world beyond for his wife. “You are... you are right. Then we will bypass the county gentry and go straight to the summit of Mount Olympus,” he decided. “To court. I will have you introduced to the Regent as my wife. Our first outing into high society together. And with the Regent on our side, everyone else will fall into step. I will have Blackwood schedule us a carriage to London in a week from now so our arrival is prepared for in advance.”

As he spoke, Lionel's gaze fell upon the scattered letters, his fingers brushing one that stood out for its plainness amidst the fancy scripts and wax seals. He picked it up and turned it over. “What is this?”

Cecilia peeked up at the letter. “Oh, that’s from a Mr. Hatch, one of our tenants. He

invited us to a small celebration they're hosting. I thought it would be a pleasant diversion, but I assumed you wouldn't have the time."

Lionel smiled softly, memories of his boyhood flooding back. "Mr. Hatch has sent these invitations every year since my father's time. I haven't attended since... well, since the..." He trailed off, a wistful look in his eyes. "He was a good friend of my father." He looked at Cecilia, resolve hardening his features. "In the meantime, I suppose we can begin to set things right with this."

"You mean, we're going?" Cecilia glanced up at him with hope glimmering in her tear-filled eyes.

Lionel nodded. "Yes. Reacquainting with the tenants will help build our reputation in Thornhill. It's a start, and perhaps, a way to show them that the Duke and Duchess of Thornhill are not so distant after all."

CHAPTER 25

Dappled sunlight pattered through the gaps in the leafy canopy above. Summer and Thor followed a wide path through the woods that lay to the south of Thornhill Castle. The path was an ancient trackway, lined by hawthorn and hazel with stone mile markers peeking from among the long grass and ferns. Those markers were mottled by moss and lichen, their inscriptions barely legible after years of weathering, a testament to the time that had elapsed since they had been placed. Lionel and Cecilia rode side by side through the deep wood. Cecilia was beginning to feel the constricting pressure of worry easing as they rode. Whether it was the freedom of riding, the peacefulness of the country, or Lionel's newly rediscovered attentiveness, she did not know. He glanced at her and she smiled. He smiled in return.

"I miss it when it is not there," he suddenly said.

"Miss what?" Cecilia asked.

"Your smile. You have smiled since the first day I met you, drawing me to you each time. Only when that smile seemed to have departed for good did I truly appreciate it."

"Fortunately, you give me plenty of reasons to smile," Cecilia chimed.

"But do I? It seems to me that I give opportunities for tears. With my obsession."

"I do not begrudge your quest," Cecilia replied, "but I can see the damage it is doing. I will not sit idly by and watch you eaten alive by it."

Lionel reached across the divide between them to take her hand. He squeezed it and Cecilia was comforted by the strength of his grip and the gentleness.

“Being in your company is enough to soothe my heart,” she murmured, “you make me feel safe.”

“You are safe,” Lionel told her, kindly.

Cecilia thought about the offer from Sir Gerald Knightley. How safe would she be if she took up that invitation? Surely, he and Thorpe were not so degraded in their characters that they would assault her? Or try and hold her against her will? She had considered taking Peggy along as a witness but could not bring herself to put her dear friend at even the slightest risk. No, if it must be done, it must be done alone. If it must be done at all that was.

For now, though, Cecilia did not want to think about it. She wanted to enjoy this time alone with her husband. Lionel had been beside himself at the thought that he had been neglecting her, even if it was inadvertent. The idea that his obsession could so dominate his mind that he would not even know how much time had passed since he had been in his wife’s company, had disturbed him profoundly.

With the afternoon one of pleasant warmth, they had decided to make a tour of the Thornhill tenant farms. It would be an opportunity to introduce all of Lionel’s tenants to their new Duchess, to let the ordinary people come to know her, even if the gentry did not wish to, before they set off for London. Cecilia breathed in deeply the scent of bark, grass and the sap rising in the trees. It was a deliciously outdoor smell, finer than the most expensive French perfumes. Their ride had taken them in the opposite direction to the Tall Knight, with Thorpe Manor beyond. Cecilia wondered if it were the case that there were no farms to the north, owned by Thornhill. Or was it that Lionel did not want to see the manor in the distance? Even if it was the far distance.

The trees began to peter out as they approached the first farm. Cecilia could see now that the woodland marked a boundary between Thornhill and the surrounding countryside. There were no walls, fences, or hedges to delineate Lionel's estate, merely the woods, beyond which was open farmland.

"Do the local people have free access to these woods?" she asked.

"Of course. If they did not, my gamekeeper would soon be overrun. The villagers hunt deer in these woods as well as grouse and pheasant. They help keep the numbers under control and do not take more than they need for their own table. It is an arrangement that works for all. The woods are extensive, surrounding the castle to the east, west, and south. Plenty of game for all."

He drew Thor to a halt as the road fell away before them, looping down the side of a hill. Trees lined its route and meadows now replaced the woodland to either side. In the distance, nestled in a dell formed by the coming together of three hills, was a cluster of white buildings. A lazy spire of chimney smoke rose from one of those buildings and Cecilia could see people and livestock.

"Hatch Farm," Lionel announced. "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hatch's family, the tenants. Good people and good tenants. I fear I have neglected them somewhat."

"Then let us get reacquainted forthwith," Cecilia said, spurring Summer past him.

Lionel laughed. "You are not in any way shy, are you?"

"Not with the ordinary salt of the earth," Cecilia replied, "I have spent my life among such people. I would rather dance to a farmer's fiddle, drinking from a jug of cider than waltz in a ballroom and sip champagne from a crystal flute."

"Then you are in for a treat. As I recall, the Hatch's take their hospitality as a

religion. They will insist we eat with them, no matter how much work is still to be done.”

Cecilia shot him a grin as she spurred Summer to a trot. “Then perhaps we should earn our keep and help them.”

It took mere moments for the two riders to come within earshot of Hatch farm. By that time, they’d been seen. A gaggle of children gathered in the main yard as Cecilia drew rein at the gate. Then a skinny man of middle years with a careworn face stepped out of a barn, pitchfork over his shoulder.

“Billy, Henry!” the man called to two of the older children, “you take Their Grace’s reins now and see their horses stabled and curried. Hop to it, lads!”

Two boys in their teens but with the shoulders and arms of men trotted forward, caps removed from their heads. Cecilia smiled encouragingly as she slipped from the saddle and handed her reins to the nearest. Lionel followed suit.

“Your Graces, welcome!” the skinny man chimed, propping the fork against a wall. “It’s been long enough since we had the gentry here. I hope it’s not with bad news you come today.”

“Not a bit of it, Tom,” Lionel beamed. “In fact, it was in regard to the invitation you sent.”

The man appeared bewildered for a moment. Then, realization dawned on his expression. “Ah! Margaret must have forgotten to strike your name from the list. After last year’s invite, we figured you’d lost interest and we were just bothering you.”

Lionel shook his head vigorously. “Of course you weren’t! I was rather busy, but I

appreciated the gesture every year nonetheless. Besides, this year, I wanted the new Duchess to meet all my tenants. She is keen to get to know all of you, the better to help provide whatever might be needed.”

Tom Hatch looked to Cecilia and gave her an appraising look before giving a perfunctory tug of the brim of his cap.

“That’s good of you, Your Grace. Taking an interest in the ordinary folks.”

“I grew up around just such folks. At Hamilton Hall,” Cecilia smiled.

“Aye, I’ve heard. Lot of talk in the village about the new Duchess. Some folks were saying as how you don’t know needlepoint or pianoforte but you’re a handy pair of hands when it comes to calving.”

Lionel laughed, looking at Cecilia with a raised eyebrow. She also laughed.

“I may have helped in more calvings and lambings than I can count. I am good friends with Master Brook at Old Slade farm. Do you happen to know him?”

“I’ve seen him at the market in Colnbrook before now, aye,” Tom replied. “He thinks highly of you, Your Grace. I’m right glad that you’re here.”

Cecilia beamed, pleased at the ready acceptance she had found here. Hopefully, all of Lionel’s tenants would be as accepting.

“Would you step indoors for a bite to eat and a cuppa?” Tom offered.

“We don’t want to keep you from your work,” Lionel demurred.

“Nonsense. Wife wouldn’t hear of it for you to come out all this way and not have

anything,” Tom said, already turning back towards the house.

“Perhaps after we’ve earned it by pitching in and helping out. That way I won’t feel guilty for lengthening your day, Master Hatch,” Cecilia called after him.

The farmer looked shocked by the offer but Lionel was already removing his coat and rolling up his shirtsleeves.

“My wife means what she says and will be even less likely to bend than your own good wife,” he shrugged, “so, an hour’s work to earn luncheon and tea, eh?”

Tom Hatch burst out laughing as Cecilia removed her own coat and proceeded to tie up her skirts, revealing sturdy boots beneath.

“Well, I never. Far be it from me to stop a toff getting his hands dirty. Come on then!”

Cecilia followed, exchanging a delighted grin with Lionel. Tom would doubtless give them the lightest chores to do but it would be good to help out, get to know the children and the laborers as well as the Hatch’s themselves. The sun was nearing its own width above the horizon when Tom declared their vittles to be well and truly earned. Cecilia had been forking hay down from the stable loft for Lionel to line the stalls with. She felt a sheen of sweat on her forehead while Lionel had strands of straw sticking out of his hair. They walked to the farmhouse arm-in-arm. Her limbs felt tired but lit by a warm glow, as if the tiredness of hard work bestowed its own particular life force.

Inside, the farmhouse was a large kitchen dominated by a table around which all of the Hatch children were seated. Tom sat at the head, with the older children ranging from his end of the table down to the youngest who sat at Mrs. Doris Hatch’s end. Two seats in the middle were reserved for Cecilia and Lionel. Doris and two of her

daughters were laying the table. Tom gestured to them both to sit.

The meal was hearty and plentiful. After they had finished with roasted chicken, potatoes, vegetables, gravy, and chunks of warm, freshly baked bread, there were flagons of ale or cider to wash it down.

She and Lionel had not intended to stay for the small party the Hatches intended to throw, rather planning on reacquainting with the other tenants first. As it was, however, the sun had dipped below the horizon and candles were being lit in the windows—and the pair silently agreed they'd stay for a little longer.

Tom Hatch took out a battered old fiddle while his two burley, eldest boys shifted the table to the far side of the room. A few guests arrived, from neighboring farms. Doris took the hands of one of the younger children and they began to dance. Cecilia approached Lionel who stood awkwardly against the wall.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance?” Cecilia asked, feigning shyness.

“I’m afraid I do not dance,” Lionel replied, formally.

“I’m afraid that I must insist,” Cecilia countered, taking his hand, “your body wishes to dance even if your mind wills against it.”

Lionel had been tapping his foot in time to the music, something he stopped as soon as he realized.

“My leg will not stand it,” he whispered.

“Your leg will not stand a waltz, but this is something very different. Let me show you.”

Cecilia drew Lionel after her into the middle of the room where the other children and some of the farmhands were taking a turn over the flagstone floor. Those not dancing were stamping their feet or clapping their hands in time with the music that Tom Hatch was playing with skill and gusto. Cecilia took both of Lionel's hands in her own and began to dance, turning a circle around him.

At first, Lionel seemed apprehensive, but that expression soon changed to one of wonder. Cecilia laughed, a feeling of joy bursting from her. In the society of Earls and Dukes, such dancing would be regarded as childish and primitive. In the company of ordinary people though, and with music provided by a simple farmer, probably self-taught, such thoughts did not matter. All that mattered was an expression of enjoyment in the music. An expression of joy, of life.

Lionel raised his hands above Cecilia's head, twisting them so that she spun into a tight embrace. Then he spun her out again after stealing a kiss on her cheek. That made the youngest of the Hatch children laugh aloud when she sat on the lap of one of the older children. Lionel took a step, clearly not wanting to put undue pressure on his leg but taken with the music enough to make the attempt. The tune changed, then changed again.

Finally, Cecilia was breathless and red-faced. She and Lionel drew aside, stepping out into the cobbled yard with two mugs of ale. In the Hatch kitchen, one of the farmhands was playing a tin flute while another beat a rhythm on a tea chest. Tom Hatch was enjoying a dance of his own and Doris and her daughters were preparing sandwiches for the gathered throng.

"Magical," Lionel breathed.

Cecilia nodded, taking gulps of foaming ale. Looking at her, Lionel wiped the residue from her upper lip where it had formed a thick mustache.

“I’m sorry I got so upset over the snub from the county set,” Cecilia mumbled. “I should have remembered that some things in life are more important. Like this.”

She looked towards the candlelit kitchen and the dance which was still in full flow. Outside, night had replaced day.

“You deserve to be recognized by your peers,” Lionel insisted with a wave of his hand, his smile fading. “I am glad you had the idea to bring us here and I agree that this part of life is more reviving to the soul than any number of balls or dinners. But, I will not have my Duchess snubbed. I will not have anyone looking down on you.”

Cecilia tossed back her hair, taking another swallow of ale and this time kissing Lionel to transfer her foam mustache to him. They both giggled like schoolchildren.

“It does not bother me in the least, provided you are by my side,” she smiled.

“Which I will always be,” Lionel replied, fervently.

Cecilia’s heart beat with a flurry. “Always?”

“ Always .”

He drew her out of the pool of light cast from the kitchen door. The deeper shadows of a barn enveloped them.

Cecilia felt Lionel’s arms going about her waist and sank into his embrace as his kiss deepened upon her lips.

CHAPTER 26

Cecilia lost herself to the sensation that swept through her body. It started at several points, all of them where Lionel's body made contact with her own. Her lips, her hips, her bosom. Lionel's hands slipped from the curve of her waist to her back, pressing her against the warm stone of the barn wall. Only the sensation of that stone reminded Cecilia of where they stood. The drape of shadows was scant cover from the eyes of those who danced mere yards away. She pushed Lionel to arm's length, feeling that his body was drawn to hers as though by magnetism. Then she took his hand and began feeling her way along the wall of the barn, leading Lionel by the hand. Presently, they came to the door and slipped inside.

The darkness within was warm and thick with the smell of horses and hay. Thor put his head over the top of his stall and Summer did likewise. Cecilia led Lionel deeper into the gloom of the stables, until they reached an empty stall. It was newly clean and covered with a thick layer of fresh straw, courtesy of the Duke and Duchess earlier in the day. Lionel fumbled with the latch of the stall door in the darkness, chuckling at his ineptitude and their daring. Cecilia felt like an adolescent girl, surreptitiously stealing moments of innocent romance. The stall door eventually opened with an alarming creak. Lionel put a hand to her lips and they both froze where they stood.

Overhead came a whispered voice.

"Did you hear that?" a girl said.

"No, Mary. Not a thing," came the voice of a young man.

“I thought I heard someone below.”

“Just me, my love.”

A husky chuckle came from the girl.

“You’re sure no one came in... and don’t give me any of your filthy jokes either, Henry Hatch.”

“Everyone’s in the house dancing with the Duke and Duchess. Pa will be playing until the early hours. He never needed much of an excuse for ale and song. Trust me.”

Cecilia had estimated Henry Hatch to be in his late teenage years. Perhaps eighteen or nineteen. It seemed he was old enough to be courting. If that was what it could be called. Lionel’s hands went about her waist and soon dropped to her *derrière*. They moved together, by silent consent, into the stall where the darkness was thickest. Hungry lips found hers once more, kissing with demanding passion. Then they moved to her neck and she wrapped her arms about Lionel, holding him close and savoring the painful pleasure of his biting mouth. Above came sighs of female pleasure followed by barely suppressed moans. The sounds were intensely arousing and Cecilia pressed her body tightly against Lionel’s. Their loins were hard against each other and each movement sent a shudder of pleasure through Cecilia.

Lionel’s hands crushed her rear, driving her sex towards his. The sensation of his hardness pressing into the soft core of her womanhood made Cecilia delirious. Combined with the smell of straw, horses, and hay; the sound of the stabled beasts shuffling and snorting and the soft noises of passion coming from above, all made Cecilia’s head spin. It was intoxicating, dissolving reason behind a driving rain of desire. It washed through her, inundating every part of her being, leaving her nerves fresh and alive. Her hands were driven by that passion, to clutch at and consume Lionel’s body. His incredibly masculine, bull-like body. She wanted that body.

Wanted him on her and in her. Wanted to join her soft, delicate body to his thrusting physicality.

Lionel urgently tugged at her skirts, lifting them high and gathering her petticoats in the same brutal motion. Cecilia cried out in surprise and found a hand clamped across her mouth. She bit the hand and Lionel hissed between his teeth but endured. Their eyes met, she tightened the grip of her teeth and he kissed the back of his hand, eyes wide open. Those eyes filled her vision, excluding all else. The world faded from her consciousness. There was only the hypnotic attraction of his eyes and the animalistic desire of his body, manifesting in a frightening size and hardness. Frightening always, but fear just a drop of darkness in a lake of light, the naked purity of her sheer desire for him.

Lionel slowly removed his hand and replaced it with his lips. As she returned his kiss, Cecilia found her lower lip seized between his. There was a brief bite, a taste of his hard teeth. Then he sucked and Cecilia felt her head spin. Her knees trembled and she might have swooned had it not been for the chains of his powerful arms.

Above them, the two young people were reaching the crescendo of their own passion. The sounds drove Cecilia into a frenzy, matched by Lionel. Maddeningly, they had to contain their passion, lest they be heard by the two illicit love-makers above. Lest any of those in the farmhouse hear and scandal spring full-formed from the discovery, like weeds in black, fertile soil. Cecilia found herself fumbling at the buttons that secured Lionel's breeches. They had never before made love in any state other than complete nakedness. Cecilia felt the cool night air against her bare derrière, wanted the same sensation on her breasts.

But Lionel was now free of the encumbrance of his breeches and underwear. Cecilia had the brief sensation of the night's caress against her womanhood and then the glorious, insistent pressure of Lionel's body joining with hers. He held her by her rump and she lifted her legs, entirely supported by him. She wrapped them around

him tightly and buried her face in his neck, clutching alternately at his back, his hair, his buttocks. Fingers clawed and grasped, nails raked. The wall of the stable creaked in time with their passion and it would have been obvious to those in the loft that there was someone below had they been able to hear. As it was, a female voice cried out and a male answered in desperate grunting passion. It pushed Cecilia from a precipice that she had been walking, a fine line between culmination and continuation. Lionel's shuddering climax followed a heartbeat later.

For a long time, after she had lowered her feet to the ground, Cecilia stood in Lionel's arms, panting. Her breath was muffled by his shirt, his by her cascading hair. Above them came the sounds of movement. Two people gathering together scattered clothing and dressing. Then the furtive movement of tip-toes across the boards of the loft, to the ladder at the far end of the stable. As the two young lovers paused for a final kiss before going outside, Cecilia had a fit of the giggles. She clung to Lionel, biting his shirt, and desperately trying to contain the explosion of snorting laughter that was making her shoulders shake. Lionel, famous among his peers for his reluctance to smile or laugh, began to shudder in a similar way.

The stable door closed and both managed to hold their merriment for a few seconds before exploding into helpless laughter.

"We are just the worst," Cecilia said in between catching her breath, "terrible people. Imagine the insult to Master Hatch by fornicating in his stable."

"And beneath his eldest son while he engages in the same activity. Did you see who it was that he was with?" Lionel replied.

Cecilia gave him a level look, raising her eyebrow. "The same young lady he has been making calf eyes at all night. The same young lady he has danced with and is clearly besotted with him in return. That one, do you think?"

“Oh, I had not even noticed,” Lionel sounded genuinely surprised.

Cecilia laughed. “I think we should ensure that we are presentable. No straw in the hair. And then rejoin the company. Master Hatch will be wondering where we have gotten to.”

“Quite right,” Lionel replied.

They bid goodbye to their horses and stepped outside. Light from the farmhouse windows was reflected in the water of a stone horse trough. Cecilia inspected herself in the dark mirror, plucking away a piece of straw and smoothing out a wrinkle in her dress. Fortunately, the dancing had been so frenetic that any disarrangement of clothing or sweat-darkened hair would be put down to the exertions of the dance. They went to the door of the farmhouse, re-entering to a warm furor of music and laughter. Later, when the fiddle and flute were put away and a late supper had been served by Doris Hatch, Cecilia and Lionel made preparations to leave.

“Nonsense, Your Grace! You can’t be riding about the district in the middle of the night. Your horse will break a leg. You can stay the night and leave in the morning.”

“Unless, of course, you’ve a mind to give a bit more help about the place. It was surely much appreciated,” Tom Hatch put in.

“Now, Tom. Don’t be greedy. You got some free labor out of the Duke and Duchess yesterday and I shall never live down the shame of it. Fancy letting a gentleman muck out the stables. My old mother would be turning in her grave!”

“I enjoy the chance to do something practical with my hands,” Lionel smiled disarmingly. “So much of my business is paper and ink. And long dry meetings with equally dry men. It was a pleasure, really.”

“But we could not possibly take up room at your house,” Cecilia protested.

“Nonsense!” Doris insisted. “You’ll take our room. We’ll take Henry and Billy’s room. They’ll sleep in the stable.”

There were groans of protest from the two eldest Hatch boys which Doris silenced with a look.

“I won’t hear a word said about it,” Doris insisted, turning away to see to the washing up.

Lionel exchanged looks with Cecilia and shrugged.

“Then we accept your kind hospitality. And will find a way to make it up to Henry and Billy come morning,” Lionel said, regarding the two boys.

“Letting them have a ride of those fine horses tomorrow is all they really want,” Tom Hatch remarked, “mad about horses they are.”

“Done,” Lionel exclaimed with a grin. “Take them out as early as you like, boys, and give them a good run.”

A full moon shone pale through the small window of Tom and Doris Hatch’s bedroom. The room was modest, set under the eaves of the house so that Lionel had to stoop to move about. The bed was wide and with a carved frame. An ancient chest sat at the end of the bed and an equally antique wardrobe stood where the ceiling was at its highest point. A small fireplace provided warmth from smoldering peat, if the earthy smell was anything to judge by. It created a feeling in the room of a warm embrace. As though the house were enfolding them into itself. Lionel slept in his shirt and underwear, Cecilia in her undergarments. She lay in his arms, content and filled with an overwhelming feeling of being protected and safe.

“One tenant met. Several more to go,” Cecilia whispered.

“I am not so sure all the others have barns,” Lionel replied with fake seriousness, which was met with a playful slap against his chest by Cecilia.

“You know what I mean,” she chided lightly.

“Yes, yes,” he chuckled. “And a good impression created. As good as we could have hoped for at least. The Hatch’s will be singing the praises of the new Duchess at market and in the village to any who will listen tomorrow. It should combat the gossip from the likes of the Dowager Countess... uhh, which Dowager Countess was she again?”

“Purfleet,” Cecilia whispered.

“They all blend together. Powdery, brittle, sharp women with pinched faces and turned-up noses,” Lionel muttered disparagingly.

“But reaching the ears of more influential people than the Hatch’s, unfortunately,” Cecilia added.

“No matter. The Regent trumps all,” Lionel replied with finality. “The arrangements have been made, we shall make for London tomorrow.”

Cecilia only hoped it would be that simple. What would happen if the Regent had already been turned against Lionel and his new wife? Then they would be pariahs. Not welcome by the ton or the county set. Not welcome, except by the simple folk like Tom and Doris Hatch.

Truthfully, that was enough for Cecilia and, she suspected, possibly for Lionel too. But what about their children? It was not fair that their prospects would be curtailed,

their lives less than full because of their parents. And maybe Lionel was not going to be as blase about it as she hoped. Maybe he would grow tired of being an outcast and she would be to blame.

CHAPTER 27

Lionel picked up the letter from Menzies Lennox, reading its meager lines once more. Lennox might have a tendency to draw out a story when talking in person, but on paper, he wasted no ink. The words were to the point and so economical that Lionel had already memorized each one of them. He didn't need to look at the paper again. Didn't need to read it a second time or a third time. Or a tenth time for that matter. That was not why he had picked up the letter again from the burnished mahogany surface of his desk. No.

What troubled him was what Lennox wanted him to do. What he himself wanted to do. And how Cecilia might react to that.

He stood, limping to the brandy decanter that rested on a sideboard on the other side of the room. He plucked out the crystal stopper, but then a moment later, roughly shoved it back, turning away from the drink with a silent curse.

Cecilia did not like his quest for revenge. Feared for him, in fact. He knew that it had consumed him, been his obsession for far too long. Until he had met Cecilia, there had been five years of isolation, ended by a supreme effort of will.

As the day had approached for the ball at which he had met Cecilia for the second time, he had wanted nothing more than to cancel it. To close the doors of Thornhill and allow no one admittance. To become a hermit and damn what anyone thought of that. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself in plans to ruin Lord Thorpe, the architect of his woes. But, he had recognized the need to return to society, to take his place among his peers. Not for his sake but for the name and the title.

He stopped before the fireplace, staring up at the Grisham coat of arms worked into the stone above the mantle. That sigil was why he had decided to introduce himself back into the ton. It was greater than he, greater than any single Grisham who had gone before or would come after. Duty went with it. Obligation .

“To hell with it, old man!” Arthur’s voice boomed in his head. “Go to London like the Scotsman wants and see this evidence he’s uncovered for yourself. Crush Thorpe. Destroy him.”

Lionel smiled grimly, staring into the flames now, imagining that the blackened logs burning in the grate were the remains of Gordon Locke, Lord Thorpe. The man he now knew shared his father. A half-brother. It changed nothing.

“I can’t let down Cece. We are going to London to introduce her to court,” Lionel whispered.

“Do both,” Arthur whispered back. “Introduce her to the Regent and meet with Lennox.”

He could do both, Lionel realized. He could tell Cecilia that he had business to take care of and slip away for a few hours. How many gentlemen did the same when in town? A visit to his club, where he had not been since he had inherited the Dukedom and who prohibited women within their august halls. A visit to Westminster where the Dukedom entitled him to a seat in the Lords. Women were not prohibited in Parliament, simply discouraged. But all would involve lying to Cecilia. Some men would think nothing of lying to their wives or even respect them so little that they did not bother lying, simply didn’t tell them what they were about.

He could do neither.

“I will not lie to her,” Lionel muttered with determination.

He glared at the innocuous paper lying on his desk. That missive was the cause of his perturbation. He wished that Lennox was less efficient, less effective an investigator. Another few months in which Cecilia could cement her position within the ton was all he needed. He turned away, striding across the room and heaving open the study door.

He resolved to ignore the letter. Cecilia was his priority. Protecting her and making her happy. It was important to her that they be accepted by society as Duke and Duchess, and so it became his mission too. But the knowledge that there was something urgent requiring his attention in London would not go away. It pricked and gnawed at him. Lennox would not urge haste unless he thought it necessary. This might be something that would not be there by the time Lionel and Cecilia reached London in a week's time. The evidence gone, the opportunity missed. Thorpe safe.

Lionel stopped in mid-stride, slapping a hand against the stone sill of a window in angry frustration. Through the window, he could see an aspect of the south gardens. Cecilia was kneeling beside a flower bed, working the soil with a small trowel. A collection of plants was gathered in a basket by her side. He found himself smiling. What Duchess would deign to kneel in dirt and plant flowers rather than directing their gardener to do it? The man Lionel employed for that job was walking across the lawn to Cecilia, holding a plant with bare, soily roots in both hands. Cecilia stood and the two of them talked, Cecilia pointing to a spot in the flower bed and the gardener nodding.

Lionel shook his head. She was a remarkable woman. An extraordinary woman. He felt that he had been waiting for her for his entire life. Before Arthur's murder there had been other women, Arabella Wycliff chief amongst them.

But with all of those women, Lionel had felt more that he was supposed to be in love, rather than actually being in love. It was as though he were play-acting, going through the motions of courting because that was expected of him.

With Cecilia it was different.

He leaned on the windowsill and watched as she continued to work. With her, there was no play-acting. No pretense. She had captivated him from the first moment they had met. And the second had seemed like divine intervention. It had been a second chance. Such a shame that their love had started as a face-saving exercise to avoid scandal. Such a shame that he had been so foolish as to try and pretend he did not love her, did not want her, and could easily live without her. Utter foolishness.

Watching his wife, Lionel knew that he could not lie to her. Would not try and keep anything from her. He would ignore the letter and let the revenge plan go. At least for now. The idea of giving up entirely made his stomach clench. The idea of Arthur never receiving justice was unconscionable and he couldn't understand why Cecilia was not as consumed by it as he was.

"For now," he whispered, "for the moment she will be my priority. Not Thorpe."

Cecilia suddenly straightened from her work and looked over her shoulder. She looked directly at the window at which he stood and beamed. Lionel smiled in return. She waved, removing the wide-brimmed sun hat she wore and shaking her magnificent red hair loose. She beckoned to him and Lionel nodded. It took him a moment to find the door that led out to the balcony overlooking the garden. Then he trotted down the worn, ancient steps and across the neat lawn. Cecilia wore yellow today. She was a bright sun amid the lush greenery of the lawn and the bright primary colors of the flowers. Her smile was the most radiant thing about her, dimming even the sun. He embraced her and kissed her thoroughly.

"What did I do to deserve that?" Cecilia said, breathlessly, "tell me so that I may do it again."

"Just being my wife," Lionel murmured, "I am eternally grateful for it."

“I’m glad,” Cecilia giggled, “you are done with your correspondence for the day?”

“Yes, just a letter from...” Lionel began.

He was about to tell her that it was from Lennox and explain its contents. He would also tell her that he had decided to ignore the letter. That their preparations for Court were his priority. But something inside stopped him. He looked at her beautiful face, her innocent smile, and her shining eyes. She was perfect, and in that moment, radiantly happy. He did not want to darken that smile, to see it slip and see worry take its place, marring her beauty.

“One of my business agents about the price of cotton. A good time to sell if I have a mind to,” he said.

Cecilia shrugged happily. “Not an area I have a great deal of knowledge in, I’m afraid. I’ve heard you talk about buying this and selling that but I don’t see mountains of cotton in the barn, or copper for that matter. So, I can’t conceive what it’s all about.”

“A man’s world. Don’t concern yourself,” Lionel replied with a wry smile, “concentrate on the flowers.”

Bad leg or no, he was prepared for the playful slap she directed at his shoulder and skipped clear, laughing.

“You have become intolerable with complacency. You would not have spoken to me so a few weeks ago. Do not think that you need to stop trying just because I am wholly smitten with you,” Cecilia chided lightly, pursuing him.

She caught him, putting her arms about his waist and settling into his embrace. He smiled down at her.

“I will never stop trying,” Lionel whispered, “and you can never be smitten enough for me. Or I for you.”

He kissed her again, ignoring the presence of the gardener not far away or any servant who might be looking out of a window at that moment. The kiss was warmer than the summer sun that stroked them with its light. Hotter than fire and deeper than the oceans themselves.

“When do we leave again?” Cecilia said after a long, silent moment.

“Eight days’ time. And our appointment at Court is set for eleven days’ time. We arrive on the 14th and will be received by the Regent on the 17th.”

“I have been reading up on etiquette,” Cecilia noted, “it is a veritable quagmire. So many ways to make a mistake. It is quite daunting, you know? But I suppose you are more informed on it than I, being a Duke.”

He shook his head disarmingly. “From what I remember of the Regent, he is capable of wit and charm and he comes from rather earthy German stock. His father was fond of farming.”

Cecilia nodded, frowning, and looking nervous. “I just hope that he does not take against me. I have been reading of his appalling behavior towards his wife, attempting to get her divorced. It seems that if he takes against you, that is it.”

Lionel stroked her back, hoping to reassure her. “He is, I believe, extravagant and somewhat feckless. He delights in displays of wealth and surrounding himself with beauty. We shall present ourselves as representatives of one of the oldest Dukedoms in England. Our wealth will be ostentatiously displayed, much as it is against my nature to do so. And your beauty will be a shining star that the Regent will immediately want placed in his firmament.”

“And with the Regent’s acceptance, we will be accepted by the ton and our children’s legacy will be secured,” Cecilia added, smiling bravely. “I am quite literally shaking at the thought and it is still over a week away. I have nothing in my life to prepare me for meeting royalty. I spent most of my time among the servants when I was living with my aunt and uncle.”

“Royals are just people, after all. Eccentric. Odd, even, but just people,” Lionel shrugged. “Despite being a Duke, I do not have much experience at Court myself, though I was introduced to the old King by my father. A very peculiar man.”

“As long as you are there with me, I think I can face anything,” Cecilia smiled giddily.

“Of course. I will not leave your side. I swear it.”

CHAPTER 28

4 Bruton Street was a tall townhouse fronted with black, wrought iron railings. Its facade was of the white plaster common in London and it had a brick arch at one end leading to stables. It looked out over Berkeley Square, a green oasis in the middle of London. Cecilia looked from the house to the park with wonder. The park was full of London gentry. Men with top hats and canes, women with parasols and beautiful dresses. She felt quite drab by comparison. London was a towering place that Cecilia found thoroughly intimidating.

“I did not expect it to be so big!” she exclaimed.

“It is that,” Lionel agreed, leaning out of the carriage window and taking it all in with her, “but just a place, for all its size. Only different to Thornhill in scope. Don’t worry, the first time I came to London, I felt much the same. You will soon get used to it.”

He squeezed her hand reassuringly, smiling. Cecilia forced a smile in return. She hoped that she looked reassured. Over the last week, Lionel had been... different. As though he were preoccupied. Not all the time but as though it was something he had to make an effort to hide. It seemed to creep up on him at times, until he remembered to cover it with a smile.

Cecilia was already nervous about coming to London and being presented at Court. Now she worried that all this effort was wearing on Lionel, that he might be growing tired of all the things he had to do for her. It would be understandable, she reasoned. Not many men had to go to such lengths for their wives to be accepted by their peers.

On the carriage ride into London that morning, Lionel had fallen into a silence, staring out of the window, and leaving Cecilia to draw her own conclusions. Now she was afraid to voice her fears lest it prompt him to agree with the worst of them.

Lionel opened the carriage door and prepared to disembark. He paused for a moment, frowning as he looked at her.

“Is something wrong, my love?” he asked, closing the door again, ignoring the footman that stood outside ready to aid disembarkation.

Cecilia felt a chill of fear go through her. Lionel looked genuinely concerned but a sudden terror gripped her, of seeing that concern melt away. It would be replaced by coldness, by the frosty glance that Lionel gave to those he shared no intimacy with and never would. She forced a smile and nodded.

“It is all a little overwhelming...” she began, “...but exciting. Thrilling in fact!” she continued, keen to show how happy she was, “I’m so very lucky that I have a husband willing to go to such lengths for me. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to obtain permission to present me from the Regent’s representatives.”

Lionel took her hand and kissed it tenderly. His eyes met hers and for a moment she was genuinely reassured. There was that warmth in him that spoke directly to her heart, a connection that could not be faked. Her smile became less forced and she wanted to melt into him as he kissed her lips.

“It was and is nothing. For you, there is no such thing as too much. If I had to present you to the emperor of China, I would hold it as a trivial matter.”

Cecilia laughed. “Such hyperbole. How is any woman supposed to live up to such expectations! I suppose that is the artist in you.”

Lionel grimaced. “Not such an artist as you will see. Once we have toured the galleries of London, you will see what true artistic talent is.”

“I have seen all the paintings I need to in order to judge that,” Cecilia reassured him, kissing him again. “Perhaps I might speak to some of the custodians of those galleries about your work?”

Lionel barked a laugh and flung the carriage door open. “Do it and I will put you across my knee,” he whispered.

The words brought an image to Cecilia’s mind that made her go weak at the knees. She fanned a suddenly flushed face furiously with one hand. Lionel’s grin was suddenly wicked. He stepped down from the carriage and offered his hand to her. Cecilia stepped down too, immediately conscious of the buildings towering around her like mountains. It was like standing at the bottom of a gorge.

With one arm, Lionel smoothly guided her toward a house. The black-painted front door had a brightly polished door knocker but the door was opened by Blackwood as the pair of them walked up the stone steps in front of the door.

“Welcome to Bruton Street, Your Grace.” Blackwood gave a perfunctory bow. “The air is unpleasant and the noise is something to behold, but you wanted to come to London so here we all are.”

His face was sour and he twitched as a carriage went rattling by.

“No worse than a French cannonade from twenty yards away, eh, Blackwood?” Lionel laughed jovially.

“I had my ears blocked with wax for that. And it was more like thirty,” Blackwood replied back morosely.

He stepped aside and they entered. The entrance hall was long and thin with a tall ceiling from which hung a glittering crystal chandelier. Sunlight from a window above the door spilled onto the chandelier and reflected in coruscating daggers. The floor was of light gray marble while the walls were paneled in dark wood. A staircase, plush with maroon carpet, rose at the end of the hall and split into two. Cecilia's footsteps echoed loudly, making her feel that she had stepped into a cathedral.

"My, this is impressive," she gasped.

"I have not used the family's London residence for quite some time. I must remember to commend the staff. They have kept it in fine condition in my absence," Lionel remarked.

"Should have been rented out to earn its keep," Blackwood put in. "The rental market is very lucrative I hear."

Cecilia nodded. "Very sound, Blackwood."

That got her a sharp nod, the equivalent of a smile from the gloomy butler. Blackwood respected nothing more than a person he judged to be competent and with common sense. He did not always see such qualities in his master.

"I just have an aversion to the idea of a complete stranger sporting about my house," Lionel grouched as he trailed a hand along one of the squeaky clean corridor walls.

"Then you vet the tenants. Or allow me to do it!" Cecilia chimed excitedly.

He shrugged. "I shall leave that to the two of you. Come, let me show you around the place, if I can remember myself."

Lionel took Cecilia's hand and led her towards the staircase. As they passed doors to either side, he pointed out a ballroom, study, library, and drawing room. Remembering the frontage of the house, Cecilia could not quite believe it all fitted in.

By the time they ascended to the second floor, which Lionel told her was the guest floor, Cecilia suddenly felt rooted to her spot. Her mouth was watering furiously and her stomach felt like it was turning somersaults inside her. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead.

"Oh my. I really do not feel well at all," she breathed, pressing her hand against Lionel's bicep for support.

He frowned. "Are you ill? Shall I send for a physician?"

"I am certainly..." she trailed off.

At that point, she realized that more words would be impossible. She clamped her mouth shut and put her hand over it. Lionel stared at her for a moment, then realization dawned. He flung open the nearest door and swept Cecilia from her feet, carrying her at a limping dash through the door and into a bedroom. Depositing her on the bed, he dropped to his knees with a groan of pain and rummaged beneath the bed before he came up with a chamber pot. Cecilia was violently sick into it.

Fortunately, she had not eaten much before their journey had begun that morning. She coughed and spluttered, head hanging from the edge of the bed while Lionel held back her hair and rubbed a hand on her back. Finally, she pushed the chamber pot away and fell back onto the bed, clenching a fist around her stomach. Lionel looked stricken and Cecilia had a sudden thought that she would rather he was worried for her health than growing tired of her.

"Christ. You are as white as a sheet, Cece," he began, eyes wide in unease, "is it

something you ate? It can't be, we were served the same at breakfast."

Cecilia knew what it was. It was not the first morning that she had been stricken with nausea, though it had occurred out of Lionel's sight thus far. She had developed a horror of such a thing happening in front of him. It was driven by his moments of distance from her. Surely, her beauty could not withstand the sight of her doubled over and emptying her stomach. Lionel tugged furiously on the nearby bellpull and then arranged pillows behind Cecilia's head.

"It is nothing like that," Cecilia whispered, weakly.

The room felt like it was spinning around her and she had to close her eyes and clutch the bedclothes to make the sensation stop. She heard a door open and Lionel bark out an order for brandy for the Duchess. The very idea made her stomach lurch and she opened her eyes.

"Perhaps tea, peppermint if the kitchen has it," Cecilia suggested, "lots of honey if not."

She put her head back. Lionel lay next to her, cradling her in his arms and stroking her hair from her face.

"You seem to know what this might be. Will you tell me?" he asked.

"It will occur every morning for a while and it began about a week ago. It will be followed by cravings for unusual foods and weight gain," Cecilia told him, "but will last less than a year."

She looked at him directly. He returned her look blankly.

"Did your tutors explain to you about the birds and the bees?" Cecilia asked. "Clearly

they did not think to explain the female experience in that process.”

Realization dawned on Lionel’s face. It washed over him, a series of distinct emotions. Shock. Surprise. Joy. Cecilia realized that she had been tensing, waiting for anger to rear its head. How long had it been since Lionel had been convinced that she was trying to trap him? But it never came. Lionel sprang from the bed and turned a circle in the middle of the room, hands running through his hair. His mouth hung open and his eyes were wide.

“You are...we are...you will be...I will be...great heavens! Good Lord!”

He returned to the bed with a thump, kneeling beside her and hesitantly reaching for her hand. He raised it reverently to his lips. Cecilia felt a blessed relief flood her, a feeling of utter joy. Muscles that she had not realized were taut, became relaxed. She took his hand, smoothed it out, and pressed it against her stomach.

“Could it be a son?” Lionel suddenly asked.

“I do not know, but if there is anything I can do to make it so, I will do it,” Cecilia whispered.

“No. Do nothing. I do not care. A daughter may inherit my estate as easily as a son. I will see to it. I just want a healthy child. And mother.”

“I hope that I am, though I may not seem it for a while,” Cecilia murmured.

Suddenly, London didn’t seem such an alien, frightening place. She felt confident that she could rise to its challenges. Even to the challenge of meeting the Regent, the sovereign of Great Britain. As long as Lionel was beside her, she could face anything. Lionel and their child. Their family.

Lionel was teeming with questions, she could read it in his face.

“Go on, what is it?” she finally prodded.

“How long does the sickness usually last?” he spluttered.

“It varies, but I would hope to be free of it after a few weeks,” Cecilia told him.

“That... we can work with that. I will write to the Palace at once and postpone your audience,” he immediately answered.

“No! On no account. It does not last a full day. Just an hour or two first thing in the morning. I will be fine to meet the Regent,” Cecilia assured him.

Lionel seemed uncertain, but eventually nodded.

“As you say. The appointment is in the afternoon. I will be guided by you. But do not hesitate to speak up if anything feels... wrong. I care not a fig for the Regent next to you and my child,” Lionel added nervously.

“I will speak so that the whole of Berkeley Square hears me,” Cecilia giggled softly.

Lionel smiled too and put his head to the pillow beside her. She turned onto her side, stroking a finger down his handsome jaw, marveling at the strength and majesty she saw there. He was god-like in his perfection and beauty. How had she been so lucky that this man had fallen in love with her?

A few minutes later, there came a tap at the door.

“Bring it in!” Lionel barked, rising from the bed.

But it was not just the servant with the tea. Blackwood followed the maid into the room.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace. The Scotsman is downstairs requesting an urgent audience.”

CHAPTER 29

Lionel pushed himself to his feet but Cecilia's hand caught him, holding onto his. His head swung from Blackwood to his stricken wife. She looked wan and weak, her grip was like the roots of a plant clinging to inches of soil on a cliff face. One good tug would pull it free. But that weak grip anchored him in place like a double-strand chain.

"I must see him. He has been sending me urgent messages since before we left Thornhill."

"The gentleman is most agitating, fair wearing a groove in the marble of the hall with his pacing," Blackwood commented.

"Tell him I will be with him momentarily," Lionel commanded without looking away from his wife.

He saw the wound that those words caused and it cut deep. He knelt on the bed and tried to lift her hand to his lips but she pulled it away, face firming.

"I must hear what he has to say," he reiterated. "He has been working hard on my behalf."

"You said you would remain by my side," she murmured back.

"You would not hold me to that when we are safe within our own walls."

“Yes, I would,” she responded, languidly pushing herself to her elbows.

“Why?” he frowned, brows furrowing.

He could not understand her resistance. The argument that revenge would consume him was one he understood of course. He was not so lacking in empathy or emotional intelligence that he did not see the monomania that he had developed over the years. And how that monomania must have worried anyone who cared for him. Not that there were many of those beyond Thornhill. But, in those days, he’d had nothing else in his life.

No passion. No great love and no pastimes.

Only the grief of losing a brother, for Arthur had been more of a brother than a friend. The grief of losing a woman he had convinced himself he loved, being betrayed in his time of need. And the anger at an inexplicable act of callous hatred by a despicable individual who he now knew to be his half-brother.

His life was very different now. The grief and anger which had been raw, bleeding wounds, were now healthy. The scar tissue was thin, prone to breaking open—but healed. And he had the greatest of passions in his life. The purest and most powerful form of love... for that’s what it was.

Cecilia was a light that shrank the appeal of revenge, making it appear small and petty by contrast. Lionel did not think there was any danger of his becoming obsessed as he had once been. Of his being consumed, driven to madness or death by the need for vengeance. Cecilia prevented that.

“I merely wish to speak to him. To find out what he has discovered in my service. I owe the man that much, he has given over his entire life to my service these last five years,” Lionel said earnestly.

“So, you will listen to what he has to say and then terminate his employment?” Cecilia asked.

Lionel hesitated. “I cannot think of anything he might say that would prompt me to send him out to probe further. Short of a signed confession.”

“Then I will come with you to this meeting,” Cecilia decided, swinging her legs from the bed.

But she could not stand. As soon as she tried to push herself into a standing position, she fell back, clutching her head and retching loudly. Lionel hurried for the chamber pot but was not much faster than Blackwood.

“That is my job, Your Grace,” he said gruffly. “Your job is to speak to the gentleman downstairs. Over here, girl!”

This last part was directed to the maid who had brought in the tea. Blackwood instructed her to secure her mistress' hair while he held the chamber pot and draped linen over his arm for Cecilia to wipe her mouth on.

Cecilia tried to protest. Tried to stand or speak. But the sickness had her firmly in its grasp. She could not straighten long enough to form words before her body was convulsing once more. Lionel resolved to leave her to the tender ministrations of the servants. He told himself he would be back to tend to her himself in mere moments. Whatever Lennox had to tell him would not be so urgent as her sickness. Even if the sickness was a good thing, a symptom of a wonderful condition.

He strode from the room and made his way downstairs, to find Lennox pacing as Blackwood had told him.

The Scotsman held his bowler hat in his gloved hands, turning it by the brim, round

and round. He wore his overcoat, a thick, dark hide that was his garment in spring, summer, and winter. Dark eyes turned to Lionel as he approached, darkened by bunched, stormy eyebrows.

“At last! And where have you been hiding, Your Grace?” Lennox blurted.

“I will allow that from you and similar from Blackwood but have a care, Lennox,” Lionel grumbled, irritated, “my indulgence will only go so far.”

“Forgive me, Your Grace. But when I wrote my first message to you, I had presumed you would come running. As it is, we might already be too late! Come, we must head for the Blackwall Reach without delay.”

Lionel held up a hand. “Wait, wait. Slow down. The Blackwall Reach? That is a stretch of the river is it not?”

“Aye, it is. In the east by Poplar and the East India Company docks. Your Grace, you employed me to find out about Lord Thorpe and then find the weakness in his business affairs. A weakness that could be exploited for an arrow in a chink of his armor. Well, I have it, but it will not be there for long!”

Lionel had never seen Lennox so animated. He thought of the conversation with the man about his Marie, whom he had lost. And how his life had orbited back to his former profession with that loss. Lionel could understand the emptiness such a loss might leave behind. He looked into Lennox’s face, thin and drawn. The old man looked tired, as though his very essence had been drawn out of him in the quest that Lionel had set him on. Every drop of his very life’s blood going to its culmination. In that moment, he felt a wave of compassion and sickened horror. He saw himself, old, gray, and obsessed. Lonely and animated only by his quest. A quest that would possibly never be fulfilled and which he would end up too weak to pursue.

“There is a ship at dock at the mouth of the Lea, just beyond the East India docks,” Lennox explained, “I have traced its passage from Western Africa to Bristol and Liverpool. To the West Indies and the Americas. To Glasgow. But always on paper. It always sailed on paper. But now, I finally have it. And I have Sir Gerald Knightley!”

“A ship?” Lionel asked, despite himself.

His mind had been going back to his wife, suffering and with child. Of how to placate Lennox so that he could be free to be by her side. But the mention of a ship caught his attention.

“A ship supposedly bearing ivory but, in actuality, carrying slaves meant for the West Indies. And Sir Gerald is there to inspect the ship. We can catch him red-handed, Your Grace. Then let the magistrates of Bow Street sweat him for information on his compatriots. This is the closest we have ever come to evidence of criminality linked to Lord Thorpe. We must act now!”

Lionel felt a rush of excitement. It swept away thoughts of Cecilia like a flooding river washing away its banks.

“How do you know what the ship carries?” he asked urgently.

“They are moored in the Lea. Not in the East or West India docks and not further upriver. They hide this ship from prying eyes amid the marshes. I found out the ship was due into London and have kept watch for it. I saw with my own eyes the slaves being brought up from the hold and inspected by Sir Gerald Knightley. Other ships arrived and then departed. I believe these villains are conducting their own slave market here in England for distribution to the southern states of America, to Jamaica. Everywhere. Since the slave trade was banned and the Royal Navy set to police the ban, what better way to hide than under the banner of a respectable gentleman? I’ll

wager no Navy frigate would think to board a ship bearing the Union Jack and coming from England.”

“No,” Lionel added thoughtfully, “they will not expect slave ships to come from English ports. They will be patrolling the mid-Atlantic between western Africa and the Caribbean. Those villains!”

“Exactly. And we have them! You are a justice of the peace, you can raise a militia to take the ship,” Lennox chimed, eyes shining.

Lionel waved a hand. “I am a JP of Surrey, of the county. I doubt my writ holds in London.”

“But your name does. Bow Street will listen to you as will His Majesty’s Custom and Excise men,” Lennox insisted.

Lionel’s heart was racing. Could it be that here was the opportunity, at least, to destroy his enemy? To undermine his business and expose him publicly as a villain. As a slave trader, one who was regarded with contempt and disgust by high and low in England. The common people and the gentry were united in their opposition thanks to the efforts of brave Parliamentarians and others in stamping out the vile business.

“You’re right. I will pen a note to Bow Street and another to the Excise Office in Broad Street. Two of my most reliable men will carry them. In the meantime, we will go and see this ship. Wait here.”

Lionel strode away towards the study, calling out for servants as he went. His mind was filled with the prospect of victory. After long years of waiting, after the painful years of learning to use his legs, feeling weak and vulnerable before a dangerous adversary, revenge was finally within his grasp. As he penned the notes to the respective authorities, his thoughts danced to his wife. He had promised to be by her

side but surely she would understand. His promise had been made when revenge was no closer to being realized than it had been five years ago. This was different. Evidence had fallen into his lap, proof was waiting to be discovered. She would surely not begrudge him taking the opportunity that fate had presented him. She would wholeheartedly give her consent for him to leave her side. Even if he went into danger.

Which he would not. Lionel would not be storming the decks of a ship. He would be watching from the marshes while Excise men did the storming and took the risk. In fact, he could probably take the opportunity, while waiting for responses to his notes, to go up and tell Cecilia everything.

Something stopped him.

He froze in the act of sealing the notes using the signet ring he wore on his right hand, bearing the Grisham seal. A candle burned in a sconce before him, waiting to drip its wax onto the folded paper. If he was so confident that his wife would support him, then there was no reason not to tell her. Was there? And yet he hesitated. Lionel shook his head angrily, astonished at his own temerity. This was the breakthrough he had been waiting for. All promises were void next to that.

“I will have victory!” he whispered fiercely as he pressed his ring into the wax and sealed the letter.

“But my sister does not understand men’s need to fight and win. She will think only of a promise broken,” Arthur’s voice whispered in his head.

Lionel shook his head, blowing on the newly imprinted wax seal to dry it. Arrant nonsense. Cecilia would understand but she was in no condition to do so now. Not when she was so struggling with the sickness of pregnancy. Best she be allowed to rest and sleep. He would be back before she was even aware that he had gone and

would congratulate him on his victory.

All would be well.

And he would be the victor.

CHAPTER 30

Lionel observed the Lark as it rested at anchor. His vantage was an earth dike built to keep back the waters of the Thames and the smaller Lea from flooding into the flat ground to the east of the Lea and north of the Thames. A sour smell of mud and stagnant water rose from the marshes around him, regularly flooding at high tide despite the precautions. In the distance, golden light glittered in the windows of the West Ham Abbey. That golden light was reflected in the rigging of the Lark, a brig with two masts, square sails furled. The holds of that ship would be substantial and, according to Lennox, were full of men and women, enslaved in Africa and only halfway in their journey into servitude. He knew that England was far from being in the majority among the nations of the world in her abhorrence of slavery but, it seemed to him, they were in the vanguard. The very idea was repugnant and it fuelled his hatred of Thorpe and Knightley.

The latter was a man who tried to force himself onto women. The former, someone who thought to kill and steal. Men walked the decks of the Lark. Through the looking glass, Lionel could see that they carried muskets, pistols, and cutlasses. Beside him was Menzies Lennox, while on the other side was Lieutenant Algernon Marshall of His Majesty's Custom and Excise. Lionel had a rifle strapped across his back, a Baker manufactured not far away in Enfield. He had little experience of the kind of hand-to-hand combat the excisemen were used to and carried no blade. Fencing had never been a sport he excelled at either. But he was an excellent shot with the rifle. The weapon across his back had been a gift from Arthur and was kept in meticulous working order for just this day.

“A small rowing boat approaching the vessel, sir,” said one of the excisemen,

crouching beside his Captain on the sodden ground.

Lionel tracked his looking glass to the left as he caught the bobbing light in his peripheral vision. Captain Marshall did likewise. Lionel frowned, trying to get a good look at the two men sitting in the boat. But the lamp which was hooked to a mast in the middle of the boat did not give enough light. They wore hats and overcoats. However, their approach produced something of a commotion on the deck of the Lark. Lionel saw a man emerge from below decks and immediately recognized Sir Gerald Knightley. There was another man beside him and the two spoke with their heads together for a few moments. The other man stood just outside the pool of light which conveniently illuminated Sir Gerald, and Lionel could not discern much about him other than the fact the two men were of the same height.

“That man in the light is Sir Gerald Knightley,” Lionel whispered to Marshall.

“Indeed. The name is known to me,” Marshall whispered back.

He was a hard-faced, serious man with a scar beside his right eye which he’d received courtesy of a smuggler. He took his work as an excise officer seriously.

“Known how?” Lionel asked.

“Suspected would be a better word. We have suspected him of financing a number of ships smuggling across the channel for a while. We have never had the proof to prosecute before.”

The man to whom Sir Gerald had been talking had walked away. Lionel could discern the shape of him on the other side of the ship, leaning against the rail.

“When will you make your advance?” Lionel said quietly.

“When those two men in the boat are aboard. If this is what I suspect, then I want to catch them red-handed.”

Lionel nodded grimly. He unlimbered the rifle, checking its breach which was wrapped with string and oiled cloth to protect it against the damp.

“You won’t need that, Your Grace. I won’t allow civilians on a raid,” Marshall began.

Lionel snorted. “And I will not miss this opportunity. I’ve been waiting a long time.”

Marshall looked at him, then nodded. “As you wish, Your Grace,” he muttered.

Lionel did not care in that moment if he would be in the way of Lieutenant Marshall and his excisemen. He cared deeply that he be on the deck of that ship when Sir Gerald Knightley was taken. Knightley was a man who had only recently entered into Lionel’s sphere of awareness as an associate of Lord Thorpe. But now that he was there, Lionel was determined that he would not escape. If Knightley was to be the weak link, then Lionel would be the one to smash that link and break the chain. Through the looking glass, he saw the rowboat draw alongside the Lark, and a stair of rope and wood was lowered to meet it.

“I do not recognize the passengers,” Lionel murmured as the two men stepped into the light.

One was rotund with gray hair. The other was tall and spare with dark hair. Both wore dark clothes, knowing that they were about a clandestine business.

“The large fellow looks like Sir Brendan Cawley, MP. The other I do not know,” Lieutenant Marshall whispered.

A chill wind was blowing across the marshes, bringing the stench of rotting vegetation and the bitter tang of thick mud. Lionel's position was kneeling in sodden grass before a rotten fence post. His looking glass was balanced across the single remaining horizontal bar of that post. He did not move or acknowledge discomfort, though he had been in that position for the better part of an hour. It did not matter. Physical discomfort was superfluous to him. Cold, hunger, thirst. None of these sensations registered for Lionel any longer. He was dimly aware of Lieutenant Marshall taking a canteen from the ground and uncorking it, taking a draught. It was held out to Lionel who ignored it. Cecilia came into his mind but only fleetingly. Lionel had convinced himself that she would approve of his actions, that it would be done before she noticed he was gone.

Activity was taking place on the deck of the ship. Sir Gerald was talking and gesturing expansively. One of the deckhands opened a hatch, and then a procession of naked men and women were led out in chains. All were dark-skinned, with heads and shoulders bowed. They walked with the painful motions of those who had been confined for a long period of time.

Bile rose in Lionel's throat at the sight, even as triumph roared in his mind. Lieutenant Marshall was snapping his own spyglass closed and getting to his feet. In the gloom, he would be invisible to those on the ship, especially as they had the bright light of lanterns all around them. Still, speed was of the essence. The ship could go nowhere, even with the entire crew aboard. The tide on the Thames was against her and there wasn't sufficient wind to carry her downriver against it. But that would not prevent many of the men from dispersing and getting away if confronted.

Lionel rose as Marshall picked up a shuttered lantern. He held it high and began opening and closing the shutter. It was answered by corresponding flashes elsewhere in the marsh and on the river, as excisemen acknowledged their officer's silent orders.

Lionel was already running along the top of the dyke heading for a large boat moored

at a flimsy jetty. He unslung the rifle and cocked it as he reached the boat, taking a place in the gunwales at the stern. Excisemen filled the rest of the spaces including Marshall. They pushed off from the jetty and two men rowed with long, smooth strokes that cut into the water with barely a splash. He had to wipe his hands on his coat more than once as sweat made them slick. His eyes remained fixed on the Lark and the grotesque activity that was taking place on her decks. A sale of human beings.

They were halfway to the Lark when the alarm was raised. Shouts rang out from the ship and men rushed to the rails. Marshall stood up in the boat and raised a metal cone to his lips, magnifying his voice.

“Excisemen! Prepare to be boarded and do not resist!”

Lionel distinctly heard the voice of Sir Gerald Knightley, before some of the men at the deck rail raised muskets. Marshall’s men were quicker and rifle shots sang out in swift, sharp cracks. Each was followed by a man falling back. Some fell to the deck, others toppled to the water. Then his boat was nudging against the other boat which had been tied to the stair, lowered for the earlier visitors. Lionel sprang into action, leaping to the other boat whose rowers lifted their hands above their heads. With his rifle in one hand, Lionel tore up the swaying rope and plank staircase. As a face appeared at the top, he swung the rifle to aim at it and it vanished with a flash of wide eyes. He ducked low as he reached the top and a shot sounded. He felt the wind of a shot sailing over his head.

Sir Gerald Knightley stood in the middle of the deck, holding a smoking pistol. Lionel ran for the cover of a large wooden box marked ‘sails’ in black, painted letters. Excisemen in their navy blue and white uniforms and tricorne hats were pouring after Lionel. Grappling hooks appeared on the ship’s rails on the far side of the deck, hurled up by the men who had rowed from the other side of the river. Lionel peered around a corner of the sail box and saw Sir Gerald hurriedly reloading. Putting

rifle to his shoulder, he slowly made to stand.

“Put the pistol down, Knightley. Or I will put you down,” he said, grimly.

Sir Gerald’s eyes were wide. The half-loaded pistol fell from nerveless fingers and he slowly raised his hands above his head. A movement behind him caught Lionel’s eye.

“Down!” he shouted, as he ducked and ran at Knightley.

The shot sounded as Lionel’s shoulder took Knightley in the stomach. Both men went to the deck and the shot that had been intended for one of them missed by mere inches. Lionel looked up, his rifle pinned to the deck by Sir Gerald who lay atop him. A stranger in a dark, oiled coat and top hat pulled low was calmly reloading a rifle. Lionel kicked at Sir Gerald, pushing him aside and trying to bring his own loaded rifle to bear.

At that action, the stranger had looked up and a flicker of lamplight had caught the grin on his face. Lord Thorpe . Lionel knew that he could not get free in time. As Sir Gerald scrambled to his feet, Lionel’s rifle was kicked away. Lionel was on his back, fingertips three feet away from the rifle’s stock. It might as well have been a mile. His eyes went to Thorpe’s.

Once again, he was in the mist-shrouded dell, watching Thorpe step out from behind a standing stone.

“Brother,” Lionel said huskily.

There was a flicker in Thorpe’s face, he hesitated in the smooth, expert actions of reloading the weapon.

“Yes, I—I know who you are and why you want me dead,” he added.

Around them, the crew of the ship were surrendering. A few fought hand-to-hand but were being overwhelmed. Some ran for the sides and splashed into the river below. The slaves cowered or lay prostrate, hands over their heads, not knowing if these new white men were saviors or some new form of devilry to be endured.

“I was born first. Why should you have it all!” Thorpe grated as he finished loading the rifle and raised it to his shoulder.

A volley of musket fire exploded from across the deck and several chunks of wood flew from the rail around Thorpe. The devil’s own luck protected him. Not one shot from the volley found its mark, though Thorpe did recoil in pain from a splinter of flying wood, clutching at his face. Lionel looked around to see a ragged line of four excisemen reloading while Marshall tracked the now-running Thorpe with a pistol. He fired but the range was too great. Thorpe leaped over the side. Lionel waited for the splash and didn’t hear it. He scrambled to his feet.

“Secure Sir Gerald!” he barked, pointing at where Knightley cowered.

With that, he ran to the spot where Thorpe had leaped from the ship. Beneath was a rope, thick knots tied along its length providing handholds. A small two-man rowing boat was secured beneath and Thorpe was in it. He must have been waiting for pursuit, knowing that Lionel would be that pursuit. He had seated himself in the middle of the boat with feet braced against the sides. His rifle was tight into his shoulder and aimed at the gap in the ship’s rail above where the rope was secured.

Lionel had the barest heartbeat to see this as he looked over the edge.

Then Thorpe disappeared behind a cloud of gun smoke, from the middle of which roared a spear of fire.

Immediately, Lionel threw himself back, but not before a searing line of fire scored a

burning streak from his temple across the side of his face.

Pain exploded inside his head, followed by the feeling of airlessness and quick merciful darkness.

CHAPTER 31

Cecilia woke abruptly, eyes immediately wide. She stared at the ceiling of her bedroom, wondering why she was lying in bed, in her nightclothes. It had been morning. She felt a dislocation, that she had fallen asleep without intending to. It was an almost guilty feeling. She sat up and saw Peggy sitting beside the bed and drowsing over her knitting.

“Peggy. Why am I in bed? Is it evening?”

The curtains were drawn and she could see no daylight leaking from between them. The sensation of having misplaced a day was alarming. She tried to remember what she had been doing prior to falling asleep. Memories of that terrible sickness came back to her. Of her stomach heaving and her limbs like water.

“It is evening, Cecilia. You’ve been asleep for most of the day. I think this morning’s sickness was a particularly bad bout. I have beef broth and bread keeping warm on the hearth. My mother says you are to eat all of it now that the sickness has passed. She was very insistent.”

Cecilia pushed herself up in the bed and Peggy busied herself rearranging the pillows.

“She needn’t worry. I am famished,” Cecilia admitted.

The aroma of the broth wafted to her. The bread smelled freshly baked. She supposed that Mrs. Hardcastle would have made fresh broth and bread to ensure that Cecilia got food in her. She was grateful for that care, her stomach protesting at a day without

sustenance. Peggy brought a tray over to the bread and Cecilia barely waited to spread the napkin before tucking into the delicious broth.

“Where is Lionel?” she asked as she tore off a chunk of bread and dipped it into the broth.

“I do not know,” Peggy replied, somewhat stiffly.

“Well, it would be nice to see him. I did not expect him to wait by my side for the entire time that I was asleep but... could you let him know that I am awake now?”

Peggy looked uncomfortable, staring down at her feet, fingers entwined around each other. Cecilia stopped eating.

“Peggy? Look at me, please. What aren’t you telling me?”

There was a growing feeling of coldness spreading through Cecilia. It was a thick, viscous dread. Peggy’s cheeks were scarlet and she was chewing her lip. Finally, she looked up, eyes bright and even a little defiant.

“Forgive me, Cecilia. But I was sworn to secrecy by my mother and by Mr. Blackwood. I was told how much trouble I’d be in with the Duke if I spoke out of turn. They said he would be back long before you woke up. But he is not. And now Mr. Blackwood has gone out in the middle of the night to look for him.”

“Where has Lionel gone?” Cecilia asked, quietly.

“I was not told. I would not lie to you, Your Grace. Just that he was leaving the house and would be back and not to tell you.”

Cecilia nodded to herself. “And Mr. Blackwood is also absent?”

“Yes, this past hour,” Peggy admitted.

“And he gave you no indication as to where he was going?” she asked.

“None.”

“Did he leave on foot?”

“No, he summoned a cab.”

“He would not follow Lionel unless he was concerned for his safety,” Cecilia murmured, “so Lionel was heading out to put himself into danger and now Mr. Blackwood has followed. And he promised me to remain by my side...”

“I have spoken out of turn...” Peggy began.

“No, Peggy, you have not,” she assured, “I thank you for your loyalty. I need someone in this house who is on my side. You know, for some wives, finding their husbands vanished while they were incapacitated would, I’m sure, have only one answer. But for Lionel, I am not worried about that. I am far more concerned that he has put himself at great risk for the sake of his obsession with revenge. And he promised me!”

There were tears pricking at her eyes and choking her words. She blinked them away. Anger was pushing them out but also worry. She had visions of Lionel lying dead in some rookery, Lord Thorpe standing over him. And she had no way of knowing where she would need to begin looking.

“Please take this away, Peggy. I do not have the stomach for food,” she muttered.

Peggy removed the tray with some hesitation and Cecilia threw aside the bedclothes.

She swung her feet to the floor and tentatively pushed herself upright. There was a tremor in her legs but nothing worse than the general feeling of unsteadiness after more than a day without food. Nodding to herself, she strode across the room to the door that led to what was now her dressing room. There were her wardrobes containing the clothes she had brought with her from Hamilton Hall, but also the much more numerous garments that Lionel had ordered to be made for her upon their marriage. She selected a dress of dark blue, something well-made and dignified without being ostentatious, and allowed Peggy to help her dress.

“I am not sure you should be out of bed, Cecilia,” she protested.

“Nonsense. Morning sickness is not an illness. It is part of carrying a child and it comes and goes. I will not lie idle in bed while Lionel is gallivanting on his damnable mission of revenge. Who knows what trouble he might have gotten himself into.”

Worry was warring with anger within her, fighting for supremacy. She was furious at Lionel for making a promise to her and then promptly breaking his word. How could she trust her husband if he lacked the strength to remain true to his word? She was also angry at him for putting himself in jeopardy. If he expected to be home before she awoke, then something had happened to prevent it. She could not think of many things that could do that other than injury or... death.

That thought was one she refused to dwell on, instead stoking her anger to keep it at bay. If Lionel was going to put his quest for revenge above her, then she owed him no loyalty when it came to her own quest.

Penrose was very much on her mind.

Before leaving Thornhill, she had availed herself of the library and, with the help of a copy of Debrett's and William Darton's map of the city of London, Westminster, and Southwark, she had located the London residence of Gordon Locke, Count of Thorpe.

Sir Gerald Knightley had been lodging with Lord Thorpe at his country residence. If Thorpe was now in London, and Cecilia had to assume he was or else why had Lionel gone off without a word, then there was a chance that Sir Gerald was in tow. If not, then Thorpe might have some light to shed on Penrose.

Cecilia looked at herself in the mirror, seeing a woman who was calm and dignified. The suitable appearance for a Duchess? It was hard to tell. She hoped so—the success she hoped for all depended on Sir Gerald taking her seriously. And she was sick and tired of nobody taking her seriously.

First, it had been her aunt and uncle. A sheltered existence that inevitably led to her learning that they had likely conjured a plot to have her brother's true will burned and her inheritance denied. Then, it had been Sir Gerald Knightley, the man who stole and promptly burned down her family home. Now, it had been her husband, who was so focused on his revenge that he'd broken his promise and risked their future together.

So be it. She would go through with this, for herself.

"Peggy, I will need a carriage. One of ours, not a cab," she said.

"Yes, Your Grace. Might I ask where to?" Peggy asked nervously.

"An address in Regent's Circus," Cecilia told her, suppressing the note of uncertainty in her voice.

"And to whom might I say you have gone to visit? If His Grace returns before yourself," Peggy quickly added.

"A man who may have information concerning my former home, Penrose," Cecilia replied.

Peggy frowned at the vague response and Cecilia forced a smile. “You know as much as is safe for you to know. I would not have you lie to Lionel or withhold anything from him if he returns and asks. I will bear the brunt of his anger if there is any. If he or Mr. Blackwood returns, you may tell them what I have told you.”

Cecilia watched the tall buildings flow past, the streets now largely empty. The absence of people simply served to emphasize the scale of the buildings which flanked the streets. Made them even more like deep chasms framed by steep, unclimbable cliffs. She found herself shrinking back into the plush upholstery of the seats and, when she realized that she was cowering before this monumental place, forced herself to sit upright. She folded her hands in her lap and looked out of the window with chin raised and face set. She would not go before Thorpe as a meek and frightened rabbit. She was a Duchess, and by the rules of their society, she was deserving of deference and respect. She had no idea if Lord Thorpe was the kind of man to honor such conventions and, based on his previous behavior, had every reason to think that he was not. But she would at least play the part that she was entitled to, that was hers by right of her marriage.

Regent’s Circus was a huge circle of houses, centered on an ornamental park. At the northern end was the new Regent’s Park. The address she sought was halfway around the eastern curve of houses. It was of red brick and white plaster with five stories and a veritable forest of chimneys above. A uniformed doorman stood in the portico that shaded the building’s entrance.

When Cecilia alighted, her driver, a man named Flock, stepped down with her. As a precaution, she had asked him to accompany her inside. Flock was a man in his forties with a square face and few words. He was also, she gathered, very loyal to his employer and rather too fond, in his younger days, of brawling in taverns. Mrs. Hardcastle had insisted that Flock be the one to drive Cecilia and had given him orders not to let her out of his sight.

“Once inside, you will wait in the main hall for my return. I see no danger. This is the home of a gentleman after all and there will be many servants,” Cecilia told him as they ascended the steps.

“Right you are, Your Grace,” Flock said in a strong, rural Surrey accent.

At the door, a card was requested, which Cecilia duly produced. It bore Lionel’s name as well as her own. The doorman went inside and returned after a minute or so. He opened the double doors wide and ushered Cecilia into the house. Flock followed, shouldering a door aside with a grunt when the doorman tried to close it on him. He took up a position just inside the door, hands folded in front of him, feet planted shoulder width apart, and looking for all the world as if he would be there forever.

A footman led Cecilia into the house. It was not as grand as Bruton Street. The floor was of wood and dark. Similarly, dark paneling covered the walls. The ceiling was high but there was no chandelier. There were no pictures on the walls though several squares and rectangles in a different shade to the rest of the walls gave evidence that there had been artwork at some prior time, and for a long time too.

The footman led her to the end of the hall and to the right, opening a set of double doors that led into what seemed to be a library. Within were a number of bookshelves, none of them more than half full. Several wooden crates stood about the room, packed with volumes and sawdust. Still more crates stood, nailed shut, beside the door. Cecilia wondered if Lord Thorpe was in the process of moving in or out. Debrett’s had indicated that this residence had been the official residence of the Viscount Thorpe for three years. Before that, it had belonged to the Duke of Salisbury, its first owner since the Circus and Park had been built on the Regent’s orders a handful of years before.

Thorpe had added some bulk to his frame since Cecilia had seen him on the day of the fateful hunt. He was tall and straight-backed but with a sense of power to his

shoulders and chest that Cecilia did not remember. The man she had met previously had been a rapier. His blue eyes and rosebud lips were the same though. To her shock, he was wiping what seemed to be mud from his face with a piece of linen. There was a basin of water on a table next to his chair. The bowl and linen were black. His boots were crusted with mud and there were spatters of it up his light-colored breeches and onto his vest. He rose as she entered.

“Your Grace, the Duchess of Thornhill. What an unexpected but welcome surprise,” he said, smiling.

CHAPTER 32

“ M y lord. It has been a long time since our first meeting. I trust this time is convenient?” Cecilia said, looking Thorpe up and down.

He looked down at himself, spreading his arms, then grinned wider.

“Quite convenient, I assure you. I have been on somewhat of an adventure tonight. Most exhilarating. I had considered myself defeated, but now, I am not so sure. Please, take a seat.”

He indicated a chair opposite his own but Cecilia shook her head, standing her ground.

“I will not, if that is all the same to you. I do not intend to stay long. I don’t suppose that Sir Gerald Knightley is still lodging with you?”

Thorpe’s face fell for a moment, from smiling politely to blank and dangerous for all his lack of expression. He dropped the linen into the dirty water of the bowl and walked slowly to a sideboard heavy with assorted decanters and bottles. He was silent as he poured himself a large measure of a liquid of deep, golden brown color.

“He was, until this evening,” he said, finally. “Can I offer you something to drink?”

“Thank you, but no,” Cecilia replied. “Is he no longer a guest then?”

Thorpe took a long swallow and began to walk towards Cecilia. She noticed a slight

limp, as though his left leg pained him. As he approached, she also noticed a bruise rising on the left side of his face. She stood her ground as he approached, feeling somewhat more confident now that it seemed he was in some way incapacitated. He stopped a few yards away, watching her with slightly narrowed eyes.

“He is no longer a guest... not of mine anyway. Why the interest in Sir Gerald? I understood that you and he were not on the best of terms.”

“He is a bully who believes he can take what he wants from women,” Cecilia retorted, “but he intimated that he was the owner of the Penrose estate...”

Thorpe threw back his head and laughed, cutting her off. “Penrose? That is why you are here? The bloody fool. I knew he would not be able to resist taunting you. It was an extravagant waste of money. But the Sinclairs were desperate for money and Gerald was desperate for something to hold over you.”

“I did not know that my aunt and uncle were short of funds. That explains why they kept Penrose from me,” Cecilia murmured, more to herself.

Thorpe took another generous swallow from his drink. His eyes roved across Cecilia’s body but she hid the discomfort such a look engendered in her. She was looking at him directly when his eyes returned to her face.

“They pursued appearances they could not afford. When your brother died...”

“Was murdered . By you,” Cecilia corrected, rather matter-of-factly.

Inwardly, she wondered if she should not be smiling and trying to affront this man. After all, Sir Gerald was his associate, if not his friend even, and she wanted to find out all she could about Sir Gerald’s plans for Penrose. Challenging Thorpe directly might not be the best of ideas, but the words left her before she could bring them

back. Thorpe's face did not change. He maintained his polite, even courteous smile and turned away, returning to his chair.

"Are you sure you would not like to make yourself comfortable, Your Grace?" he said, putting mockery onto the title.

Cecilia was beginning to feel foolish in her refusal to sit and nodded curtly, going to the chair opposite Thorpe's own and sitting.

"I did not intend to harm Arthur. Which I suppose you know given your willingness to face me despite the fact. Though the man did not like me and did not care to hide it. That was rude of him I always thought. But then he was taking his lead from my younger brother, was he not?"

"I'm sure they had their reasons. Arthur did not take against anyone for no reason. Nor have I observed Lionel doing the same," Cecilia replied.

Thorpe's eyebrows rose. "So, you know that your husband and I are brothers? Which means he knows it too. So that is why he came for me tonight."

Cecilia could not react quickly enough to hide her surprise and sudden interest.

"Came for you?" she queried.

Thorpe smiled, an expression that held a lot of wolf. "Did he not tell you his business tonight?" he asked softly.

Cecilia did not reply and Thorpe laughed again.

"So, he does not trust you with all his secrets, it seems."

“I did not come here to discuss my husband,” Cecilia said firmly.

“Well, this is my house and I wish to discuss him,” Thorpe replied, smile slipping.

It was like seeing a wolf wearing a mask and dropping that mask to reveal the slaving predator beneath. Blue eyes were suddenly cold and hard, mouth pulled tight with the suggestion of teeth beneath. He leaned forward, eyes wide and intent.

“I had assumed you were merely the tenant,” Cecilia began carefully, probing for a weakness in Thorpe’s armor, seeking to draw the blood of anger.

Thorpe sat back, looking around, eyes narrowing. “Of course, I am the master here. I do not rent other men’s houses any more than I share their wives.”

“It is just that this house has the look of a place newly occupied. So many empty spaces on the walls. And on your bookshelves. I had assumed you were yet to fully unpack your possessions. My mistake, my lord,” Cecilia said, looking around innocently.

Thorpe growled in his throat, suddenly hurling the glass aside where it shattered against a bookcase.

“Do not think that you can insult me without consequence,” he growled.

“Do I insult, Lord Thorpe? By admitting to being in error? I do apologize if that is how you took my words. I was merely observing the unfinished state of your house. Our servants had Bruton Street fully prepared for our arrival.”

“This shambolic pile of brick is my property, purchased with my money. But the house you brag of in Bruton Street should have been mine too. It is mine by right of being the eldest son of Charles Grisham!” Thorpe roared. “I am forced to live in this

modern rubbish while my younger brother claims my birthright.”

There was madness in his eyes and spittle flew from his mouth. Cecilia felt the first twinges of fear. She had believed herself safe enough from a rational, if objectionable man, in the middle of London and a house full of servants. But, if Thorpe was not rational? She instinctively understood that showing any sign of weakness at this moment would be her undoing. So she returned his stare stolidly, unmoving in her chair.

“I came here to discuss my own home with Sir Gerald Knightley. You suggested that you disagreed with his purchasing of the property?” she remarked, as though they were discussing the weather.

Thorpe stared at her for a long moment, then visibly restrained himself, swallowing his anger and steeping his fingers before his face.

“I did. The man has always been impulsive. I believe he wished to use the property as a means to persuade you to sell yourself to him.”

Cecilia couldn’t speak for a moment. Both at the notion and the matter-of-fact way in which Thorpe stated it. As though his only objection to the plan was that it was a waste of money. It said something about his character. But then he was prepared to kill a man he knew to be his brother so that he could steal his title and lands. That alone told her all she needed to know.

An inkling of doubt was beginning to grow in her mind, a wondering if she had gone too far. Her hasty journey here had been driven by her anger at Lionel for breaking his promise. Now, she felt that she had put herself into greater danger than she had at first realized.

“That is an unpleasant notion,” Cecilia replied, keeping her worries locked away

beneath the trap door of her calm outward appearance.

“It has a certain dark attraction,” Thorpe added with a leering grin.

“Is Sir Gerald in residence this evening?” Cecilia asked.

“He is not. Sir Gerald is at this moment in the hands of His Majesty’s Custom and Excise. Led by your gallant husband,” Thorpe muttered.

“Oh...” Cecilia said, not quite knowing how to reply.

“They raided a ship belonging to me which had moored to the east of the city, quite against my wishes. Again, my headstrong and impulsive partner seeking to make a quick profit,” Thorpe continued conversationally. “And as a result of his greed, ship, cargo, and enterprise are all lost. I believed that I was lost too. Utterly... well, except for one rather pyrrhic victory.”

He had been looking away from Cecilia as he spoke. Now, his eyes returned to hers. They were hooded and glittered where they caught the firelight. His smile was utterly predatory. The kind of smile that is the last sight a creature of prey sees before its untimely end. Cecilia stood.

“Then I see that my journey here has been for nothing. And it is hardly the best time to be visiting anyway. I thank you for...” she trailed off.

Thorpe came out of his seat with the smooth grace of a viper. He moved to stand between Cecilia and the door.

“I do not think your journey has been wasted. On the contrary. Do you not wish to know why my victory tonight was... pyrrhic?”

“I do not care about your victories or defeats...” Cecilia began.

“Oh, I think you will want to know about this one. In other circumstances, I would claim it the greatest victory of my life. The culmination of my lifelong quest.” With hands tucked behind his back, he raised his head to the ceiling, breathing in rather dramatically. “Alas, it is tainted with the loss of my wealth and the possible need to leave these shores. We shall see exactly how much Knightley is persuaded to tell the excisemen, I suppose. But, I am consoled that I have, at least, had the last laugh over my privileged brother.” He turned his gaze to her. “You see, I shot him dead.”

Cecilia did not know what happened next with any certainty. The words hit her like a physical blow. Perhaps that is what spurred her immediate reaction. She slapped Thorpe across the face with enough force to make his head whip to his shoulder. He actually staggered backward a step.

“You did not kill my husband!” Cecilia lashed out.

She was amazed at her own courage, but a feral fury was burning within her. Paradoxically, she was also deathly afraid. She prayed that this was an idle boast, a brag to break her spirit and gain a measure of revenge for his own defeat at Lionel’s hands. Within that yawning terror was an abyss, a void that would swallow her soul if Lionel was dead. She herself would join him, in spirit if not in body. Thorpe snarled as he raised his hand to deliver a backhand blow.

“My manservant is outside, and if I scream, he will come running. He is loyal to his master and mistress. Would you have him witness you beating me?” Cecilia uttered, unable to stop herself from stepping back despite her bravado.

Thorpe glanced towards the doors and Cecilia seized the opportunity to dash to the fireplace which stood to her left. Above it was a family crest over two crossed swords. Her hand closed around the basket-shaped hand protector of one of the

swords. A French blade, she thought, as she pulled it from the wall, adjusting her grip for its weight. Arthur had taught her much of sport, had been a practitioner of just about every one conceived. Fencing was among that number.

In a twist of bitter irony, it was one of the few sports taught to him by Lionel, and the first mention her brother had ever made of her soon-to-be husband. In some ways, she supposed, she had learned it directly from him.

Thorpe had taken a few steps after her but now stopped short. He grinned as Cecilia struggled to lift the tip of the blade from the ground. Or let him believe as much. He slowly advanced on her.

“Excisemen came out of the night and stormed my ship. I was on deck with Sir Gerald, about to oversee the ridiculous sale he had arranged. I saw Lionel in the van, leading the charge. I jumped from the ship to a waiting boat and when I looked back, I saw him. I took my chance and fired. He fell back. I saw him no more and he did not pursue me. I labored through miles of stinking marsh to escape.”

He was slowly edging forward, inexorably closing the gap between them. Cecilia licked her lips, backing away but conscious that the fire was behind her, cutting off any retreat. From the corner of her eye, she saw a tall pedestal bearing a silver goblet.

“You did not see him die though,” she put in breathlessly.

“I did not, but I saw him fall after I fired my shot. He was hit.”

“At night. And through a cloud of gun smoke? You used a Baker?” Cecilia asked.

Another sport that Arthur had educated her on. She had learned a lot about rifles and marksmanship even if she had no interest in learning how to actually shoot.

“I did.”

“Then you could not have seen your target once the trigger was pulled. The smoke will have blinded you. You saw him there. Fired and when the smoke cleared, he was not there. Hardly proof.”

Again, Thorpe seemed to hesitate, a flicker of doubt crossing his face. Then he grinned wolfishly.

“Why do we dance around the issue at stake here? With a few choice words, I will soon be heir to the Thornhill estate. I have the power to give you the most comfortable life. As my wife.”

He put out his hand as though offering it to her.

Slowly, she took it, before flicking the blade upwards with ease and slashing its tip across the back of Thorpe’s hand. He recoiled with a scream, clutching at his wounded appendage. Cecilia darted the blade to the side, knocking the silver goblet from its perch so that it clattered loudly to the ground.

When Thorpe looked at her next, his face was a mask of fury. He cursed, face reddening. Again, his eyes were those of a rabid animal, the thin veneer of civilization discarded like a ragged cloak. He lunged for her and she side-stepped, whipping the blade out and scoring a line under one of his arms, across his ribs. He grabbed for the other blade, slipping on droplets of blood that had flicked to the ground from the tip of Cecilia’s sword. She stepped back, knees beginning to tremble. She’d eaten only a bowl of broth and some bread after purging everything she’d eaten the night before. The sword was well-balanced but still a heavy piece of metal.

She was also fighting the mental shock that Lionel might be wounded. Or dead.

The library door banged open then and Flock burst in. He was holding a cane presumably plucked from the stand beside the front door. At the sight of his mistress holding a bloody blade and a man confronting her with a sword of his own, Flock lunged forward, swinging the cane. Thorpe lashed out with the sword and Cecilia screamed her concern, but the rapier blade smashed into the cane and was snapped in two. Flock discarded the weapon and seized Thorpe by the lapels of his coat, dragging him towards the fire with teeth bared in savage, outraged anger.

“Stop, Flock!” Cecilia cried out.

Flock froze. Thorpe’s feet had gone from beneath him and he hung, suspended, above the flames. Only Flock’s white-knuckled fists held him out of the hungry fire.

“We are leaving,” she commanded, “this man is beneath us.”

She snapped her own blade across the wall and discarded the pieces. Her heart was racing and she took deep breaths, remembering the child that grew within her. Was that to be a fatherless child? Just as she and Arthur had been? The very thought burned a pit in her stomach.

Flock tossed Thorpe aside so that he rolled and only stopped when he thudded into a bookcase. He hit it hard enough that it creaked and swayed, several volumes slipping from the shelves to cascade around him.

“I will destroy you just like I destroyed your husband!” Thorpe spat.

That brought Flock around, and he took a step towards the stricken Viscount, who whimpered involuntarily, raising his hands.

“Flock!” Cecilia repeated, “Ignore him. They are just words. Take me home, please.”

She prayed with all her soul that they were just words.

CHAPTER 33

“Y ou think you can come into my home and assault me!” Thorpe shrieked as Cecilia swept from the room with all the dignity her terror would allow.

Flock followed, she knew from the sound of his heavy footfalls—but she also heard those footfalls hesitate. Without looking back, Cecilia knew that he had stopped to glance back over his shoulder at Thorpe. She also didn’t need to hear the catch in Thorpe’s voice to know the fear that Flock’s hard-eyed stare had engendered in the Viscount. She did not reply as she walked through the almost bare hall to the doors.

“I have the ear of the Regent! I know what the two of you have been planning! I know your husband had sought an audience! It will be useless, you hear me?! I will see to it!” Thorpe screamed.

But Cecilia’s mind was full of one thought only. Lionel .

Was he wounded? Was he dead? Her sickening fear was laced with anger. She had told him why his obsession with vengeance terrified her! She had told him that she did not want to lose him to injury or death because of his obsession. He had promised to remain by her side, and now that she was carrying his child, he ran off like an errant youth seeking his pointless vengeance. For what good could it do him? If Thorpe was ruined or even killed, what would be the ultimate satisfaction? It would not bring back Arthur! At best, it would be a fleeting feeling of victory. Fleeting, but hollow, as the grief and loss would soon rush in to smother it. If she could endure the loss of her brother, endure, and then move on with her life, then Lionel should be able to too!

She waited for Flock to open the carriage door and unhitch the steps, then ascended, before sitting back, staring straight ahead.

Blankly.

Tears brimmed in her eyes but she refused to let them drop.

The carriage rocked as Flock took his seat and then began to move. Cecilia glanced out of the window at Thorpe's barren house and saw him at a window, watching her.

So, the Viscount Thorpe was short of funds too, just like his friend Sir Gerald. It changed nothing. She did not want to take revenge on Thorpe, only to live her new life with Lionel and raise a family. Thorpe could be rich or poor or the King of England for all she cared. She wondered if Lionel knew.

That brought her mind back to her husband and she was crippled by the fear that while she had slept, her husband had been taken from her.

The short drive back to Bruton Street seemed to take an eternity.

Finally, the carriage was rolling along the cobbles of the lane that led to the house's stable yard. She jumped down before Flock had a chance to unhitch the steps, and picked up her skirts to run for the kitchen door.

Inside were the startled faces of servants as she burst in. For a moment they froze where they stood and Cecilia realized that they were not engaged in the activity of preparing an evening meal. One maid had an armful of linen, while another, a large basin of steaming water. A footman bore a great bottle of rubbing alcohol, another a brandy bottle and glass. Then she saw Blackwood emerge into the kitchen, his hair awry and his face slack.

“Come along now! Come along! The master needs bandages and... Your Grace!”

His eyes alighted on Cecilia who glared at him. He had conspired to conceal Lionel’s plans from her. He knew his master’s insane plans and had helped him. She stalked towards him.

“How badly is he hurt?” she breathed, for that was all her voice could choke out.

For the wrong answer, Cecilia would have balled her hand into a fist and punched Blackwood on the nose. If he had told her that Lionel was grievously wounded, she would have been lost to rage and he would have been its object.

“A scalp wound. A rifle round grazed his skull. He is well and truly mazed and bleeding like a stuck pig, but he’ll live.”

The relief made Cecilia’s knees slump. She grabbed for the doorframe for support, and when Blackwood grasped her arm, she shook him off fiercely.

“Take me to him. Now!” she commanded.

Blackwood didn’t argue or hesitate, nor did he waste time with words. He simply turned on his heel and hurried away, Cecilia following close behind. A sudden mad thought came to Cecilia just then, that a head wound might have a perverse effect on Lionel, that he would forget her and their marriage. She almost laughed hysterically, having to clamp a hand over her mouth to stop it from bursting out. That would be cruel. Enough to make her damn the world and withdraw to a convent under a vow of silence. It would not be, of course. She remembered a book she had read by a Frenchman.

“All will be well in the best of all possible worlds,” she whispered.

Blackwood glanced over his shoulder once but one look into his mistress' eyes slammed his head forward once more. He led her to the master bedroom. Cecilia shoved past him at the sight of Lionel lying on the bed. He was clad in his breeches and shirt. A maid was gathering a pile of bloodied linen from the floor and depositing it into a basket.

“Get that stained linen boiled at once,” Blackwood ordered, “and give Her Grace some room there.”

Cecilia ran to the bed. Lionel's face was gray. A bandage was wound around the top of his head, one half of it stained deep red. For a moment, she feared that his very lifeblood was leaving him, soaking into the linen, leaving him a gutted wraith. Then she remembered Blackwood's words. She knew something of field medicine herself, having helped on the farm when injuries had occurred. She remembered a farm hand being kicked by a recalcitrant cow and battering his head off the stone wall of the barn. The wound had bled profusely but the boy had never been in any danger.

She took Lionel's hand and felt for a pulse. It was regular and strong. She lifted the hand to her lips and kissed it. Lionel lay with eyes closed, breathing deeply. At the touch of her lips, his eyes opened.

“Cece?” he croaked.

“ Cece ?!” she was about to snap back, but her words caught in her throat at the weakness in his voice and the paleness of his hollow gaze.

Immediately, he tried to sit up. She pushed him back to the bed, not roughly, but not as gently as she might have done. She ran a hand down the side of his face, avoiding the side that was bleeding. But her mouth was pressed tight, jaw clenched. She was relieved and happy, but at the same time angry. Furious .

“You promised...” she muttered between clenched teeth, hoping to conceal her breaking voice.

Lionel frowned in confusion.

“Do not tell me that you don’t remember. I will not let you off the hook so easily!” she punched lightly at his chest, eyes reddening now.

“I... I remember. I promised to remain by your side when we came to London. Have I not?”

Cecilia’s anger and grief slipped, doused by the look of genuine confusion on Lionel’s face. He lifted a hand to his head and winced as he touched the bandage.

“What has happened to me? The last thing I remember is...is...” Lionel’s face creased in concentration. Then his eyes widened in alarm, “You were unwell? Have you recovered? Is it serious?”

He tried to rise again but his eyes closed against a bright stab of pain. Cecilia kept her hand to his chest and was surprised and disturbed at how easy it was to keep his substantial frame pinned down.

“It is nothing, and I am recovered. I am with child,” she whispered, gently.

Lionel’s brows drew down and then he smiled. It was the dawning of bright sunshine through a raft of clouds. His face lit up from within, unable to hide the joy radiating from him.

“Yes, I remember that now. I remember you being ill and telling me.”

“But nothing subsequently?” Cecilia asked.

Lionel shook his head. “What happened? I woke up here but my head is in agony. Something has happened but...” He closed his eyes and then thumped the bed in frustration.

“I do not know. I was not there. But, I have been told that you... you received a scalp wound from a rifle shot.”

Lionel gaped at her in disbelief. “How could I forget such a thing? It is as though it did not happen. As far as my mind is concerned anyway. I am looking into a void of memory, except I am not, because it feels as though you telling me that you are with child was just a moment ago.”

“It was this morning. It is now nighttime,” Cecilia mumbled.

Lionel began to shake his head but stopped himself. He reached for a small brown glass bottle on the bedside table. Then he let his hand fall to the bedclothes.

“No, I will not take it. It will dull the pain but it will dull my senses more. I cannot afford that.”

“And why is that?” Cecilia asked. “Is there something requiring your attention?”

Lionel looked at her as though she was mad. “Your presentation at court. It is in three days’ time, unless I have lost more time than I knew. I must be able to navigate the currents of court and avoid any missteps. Who shot me?”

Cecilia was taken aback by the sudden change of subject. She wondered what to say. She knew it was Lord Thorpe but only because he himself had bragged of it. There was no other way for her to know it.

“I do not know,” she said, half-truthfully.

“You were accompanying a patrol of excisemen to view a ship,” Blackwood said from a position he had taken up on the other side of the room, far enough away to give privacy but not so far that he would not hear himself summoned.

“Excisemen?” Lionel repeated wonderingly. “This must have something to do with what Lennox wanted to see me about. A ship, you say?”

“Yes, Your Grace. You had been taken to the excise headquarters at Broad Street. That is where I found you and brought you here. Mr. Lennox was also present.”

“This had something to do with Thorpe, didn’t it?” Lionel added grimly.

“I do not know, Your Grace. I was not brought into your confidence.”

“Where is Lennox, anyway?” Lionel asked.

“Not here, Your Grace,” Blackwood stated. “He did not inform me where he was lodging in town. You may have been waylaid by highwaymen on your way to this ship. By all accounts, it was moored downriver in not the most respectable of areas.”

Lionel looked at Cecilia and managed to look guilty. He took her hand, squeezing it.

“No matter,” he shook his head before wincing at the pain. “I do not need to know what went on. I clearly had a narrow escape and that has taught me a lesson. I will not come so close to losing you again.”

Cecilia smiled behind a sudden veil of tears. “I am relieved to hear that,” she whispered, “I would not lose you either.”

“It will not be easy. Thorpe is bound to be at court if he has heard that you are to be presented to the Regent. And he cannot help but hear of it if he is an advisor to the

Prince. But, I will put it aside. You are my priority. We will begin now to create a legacy for our child to carry on. Will you forgive me for leaving you alone?"

"I have already forgiven it," Cecilia broke down silently, pressing his fingers to her lips.

Lionel smiled, closing his eyes.

"Good. I don't want to think of that blackguard anymore. I just want to sleep."

"Then rest and sleep, my love. All is well and all will be well."

"In the best of all possible worlds," Lionel murmured sleepily, unknowingly echoing Cecilia's earlier quotation.

"I love you."

"I love you more."

She smiled through thick tears, smoothing his hair back from his temple. Soon, his breathing deepened and she quietly got up, gesturing to Blackwood.

Cecilia left the room and Blackwood followed. She led him along the corridor for a few yards before turning.

"How much do you actually know, Blackwood?" she asked, rounding on the man.

"Of your evening jaunt or the master's?" Blackwood replied.

"My evening jaunt?"

“Flock told me that he took you to Regent’s Circle and there confronted the Count of Thorpe. Gave him a few stripes to remember you by. I don’t disapprove.”

Cecilia sighed in relief. “And the Duke?”

“Master Lennox told me that the raid was of a ship belonging to Lord Thorpe and his associates. That there were slaves aboard.”

“Why didn’t you tell Lionel?”

Blackwood looked uncomfortable, looking away from Cecilia towards the door of his master’s bedchamber.

“He is injured and it will do him no good to go chasing after Lord Thorpe. Which is what he would do if he knew what had happened. You saw Lord Thorpe before or after the raid?”

“After. He is a desperate man. Lacking funds and intensely covetous of what Lionel has. A very dangerous man...” Cecilia trailed off before sighing. “Thank you for not telling Lionel what you know. You are right about his reaction. And in his current state, I think Thorpe would kill him if he could.”

“Over my dead body,” Blackwood muttered. “This revenge nonsense was useful when it came to learning to walk again. But it’s gone too far. I will keep it from him as long as I may.”

“And if he ever discovers the truth, I will claim that I ordered you to withhold it,” Cecilia assured.

“I don’t need a shield from His Grace’s anger. I’ve been the brunt of it plenty of times. He knows how much he needs me. Water off a duck’s back, isn’t it?”

Cecilia felt a touch of confidence now. Lionel's mind was blank of his escapades. He had no idea that Thorpe was on the brink of ruin or that he had taken another opportunity to try and murder Lionel. She was not so naive that she thought the secret could be kept for long. Lennox knew the truth and so, of course, did Thorpe. But she would keep it as long as she could.

Lionel opened his eyes at the sound of the door shutting, the dim light of the moon filtering through the heavy curtains of his bedroom blinding him for the briefest moment.

Fragments of the past hours flitted through his mind like specters, leaving him disoriented and uneasy. He could scarcely recall the events—a flash of rage, a beat of chaos, and a fleeting glimpse of victory that felt disturbingly... disturbingly hollow. The pounding in his head served as a painful reminder of how perilously close he had come to losing everything.

Cecilia and their unborn child... his heart clenched at the mere thought.

The terror of losing them gripped him more fiercely than any desire for revenge ever could. He had masked his emotions well when he'd been confronted by her and Blackwood, but it was a façade. A deep façade, for it didn't reveal even a dash of the true horror he felt coursing through him. And now, in the solitude of his room, it threatened to engulf him. He made a decision then.

He struggled to sit up, his body protesting every movement. With a deep breath, he reached over for the paper and pen on his bedside table.

He now understood what Lennox had tried to convey weeks ago—how the loss of his Marie had driven him to bury himself in his work, never allowing himself to grieve. Lionel had dismissed it as a weakness, a failing he would never succumb to. Yet here he was, staring into the same abyss.

The memory of Lennox's hollow eyes haunted him. For he had seen that same emptiness reflected back at him in the reflection of the river, where he had wound up face down after falling from the ship. By the narrowest of luck, he had survived the fall over the ship's railing and been rescued by Marshall soon after.

Revenge had utterly consumed him, but in the end, it had brought no satisfaction.

His hands trembled as he lifted pen to paper.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, his resolve hardening. Cecilia deserved better . Arthur deserved better . And Lennox deserved better . They all did. Lionel decided then and there to write to the man, to tell him that his task was complete, that it was time to let go and grieve his wife as he should have done a decade ago.

For, now, he finally understood... that cherishing what he had was more important than burying the memories of those he loved beneath years of bitterness.

EPILOGUE

Cecilia felt as though she were walking through a giant glittering bauble. Nothing as pure as an uncut diamond or other precious stone. This was a bauble made of gold, silver, ivory, and amber. Precious gems shone in tasteless abundance. Gold and silver were inlaid into richly shining wood, and the carpets were either purple or red. She looked around in wonder, trying not to appear so in awe. She knew that Lionel had not visited this particular palace before. He had been presented to the King, the old king, as a boy at Hampton Court. This was the newly refurbished Buckingham Palace in the heart of London. And she was here, on Lionel's arm, to be presented to the old king's son, George, the Prince Regent.

"Everything I have read about him is true," she whispered.

Lionel grunted, also looking around. "Hampton Court was very different. His father had taste and distinction. When I met him, he talked to me of his pigs for five whole minutes. I counted. But this..." He shook his head mutely.

The bandage was gone but a scar remained, scything through his dark hair, marring the pale skin of his forehead. To Cecilia, he was still inordinately beautiful. Still a god among men. The scar would serve to remind them both of the fragility of life. How it needed to be nurtured and protected.

"While there are beggars outside, just a few hundred yards away. And men, women, and children, going hungry all over this country. How can one man live in such over-indulgent luxury?" Cecilia murmured.

They were walking through room after room, following one of the Regent's equerries. They were young men resplendent in red and white military-style uniforms who served the royals. The young man escorting them had brown curly hair and bright, blue eyes. He had been polite and professional but cold and distant. To him, they were a commodity to be delivered from the man who greeted visitors at the door, into the court of the Prince. Turning a corner, they reached a set of double doors, beyond which came the sounds of merriment. The equerry turned to face them and delivered a series of instructions on how to behave in front of the Regent, how to address him and when, how to enter the room, and how to leave it. It was delivered with a solemn expression and a tone of contemptuous boredom. This was not the first time he had delivered such a speech and it would not be the last.

Then the doors were opened and they were finally announced. Cecilia and Lionel stepped into the room, arm in arm. The floor was carpeted in what seemed to be an antique Persian design. The walls were decorated with objects of gold and silver, all with a distinctly Oriental design concept. The men and women of the court were dressed as finely as the palace in which they sported. The light reflected from mirrors and gold sconces, bounced from tiaras and necklaces, rings and bracelets. Women wore their necklines low and the men all seemed to be wearing the very latest fashions. It was not a subject on which Lionel or Cecilia were well versed but a Savile Row tailor had educated them as he measured Lionel for his attire. Cecilia had a new wardrobe too, shunning the ostentatious display of wealth that she was told was the fashion, in favor of something fine but modest.

The jewel in the crown of the Regent's court was, of course, the Regent himself. Prince George sat on a high-backed wooden chair inlaid with gold and amber, elaborately carved. A purple, gold tasseled cushion softened it and it had been positioned atop a dais at the far end of the room.

A throne in all but name.

He was leaning from it, a jewel-encrusted goblet that would have impressed the Khan with its lavishness in one beringed hand. Cecilia was proud that she did not miss a step as she saw who the Regent was talking to.

Lord Thorpe had one arm in a sling of red silk. He wore a full dress uniform including a sheathed rapier on his hip. He pointed to the two newcomers as they stopped to be announced. The Regent's eyes slid to them and narrowed. He quaffed from his goblet and stood. The room was silenced instantly. All eyes swiveled to the Duke and Duchess of Thornhill, waiting expectantly. The Regent wore the red and white of an infantry officer, with a golden sash going from shoulder to waist where it joined with a gold waistband. In that, he wore a sword, though it was heavily decorated with precious stones about its hilt and pommel.

“Do you dare to show yourselves at my court after your infamy?” he called out in a querulous voice. “Yes, I speak to you, Thornhill , and your... wife, I suppose we must call her, though I do not see her as any more valid than my own.”

“Your Royal Highness, what infamy do you speak of?” Lionel muttered between gritted teeth.

“What do I speak of? What do I speak of ? You dare to ask as though you do not know? Do you take us for fools?”

Cecilia nudged Lionel lightly out of his inexorable anger at the Regent for his subtle slight against her. “Forgive us, Your Royal Highness, we do not and would never take a man of your eminence for a fool but we are, ourselves, somewhat ignorant in this. Perhaps some gossip has overtaken us?” she said calmly.

The Regent's eyes darted to her. “Madam, it is not you that is to blame. I understand your predicament very well. I have been appraised of it by my trusted advisor, the Viscount of Thorpe. A man of the army, as I am. A man who has known the horrors

of war, faced the dastardly French and won through,” he glared at Lionel, advancing across the floor towards him.

The gathered courtiers parted before their liege like the Red Sea. Thorpe followed the Regent, keeping a step behind and to one side. His eyes darted from Cecilia to Lionel and back as though he feared an attack from either of them.

“What did you do to protect your country against the French?” the Regent demanded.

“Nothing, Your Royal Highness. I was crippled by a gunshot wound to my spine. It took me five years to learn how to walk again,” Lionel replied smoothly. “I was no use as a soldier without that basic ability.”

Cecilia’s hand tightened on his arm. It felt like cords of steel, tense and unyielding. She could hear the control in his voice, keeping the anger in check.

“And how did you come to be so wounded? An accident at a hunt, was it not, Thorpe?” the Regent said, looking over his shoulder.

“I believe so, Your Royal Highness.”

“That is precisely what happened,” Lionel replied with a smile.

Cecilia felt a flash of pride at the self-control Lionel was demonstrating. Her heart thudded in her chest and with every venomous snipe from the Regent, she wanted to slap the rotund man’s face. Wanted to tell the room the truth about Thorpe. But it would do no good. This was his territory. He had the ear and confidence of the Regent. It was up to Lionel and herself to try and at least dispel the negative views that Thorpe had put into the Regent’s head concerning them. And maybe from there, seek justice in a more orthodox manner.

“Your Royal Highness, you say that I am not to blame. That you understand my predicament. I am happily married and quite content with my lot. To what do you allude?” Cecilia began.

“Madam, I allude to the fact that this rogue forced you into a false marriage to avoid scandal. I suspect he was trying to get his hands on your family’s estates. The greed of the current Duke of Thornhill has been made known to me,” the Regent intoned.

“Your Royal Highness...” Lionel began but was silenced when the Regent raised his hand and turned on his heel.

“I do not wish to hear anything from you. What is it with the Dukes throwing a ruckus at my court? First, that Valebridge Duke and his complicated family, now this. Pah ! I wanted you to come here so that I might look into your eyes, as I once looked into the eyes of the French. Of those blackguards Soult and Nee.” At this, Cecilia noticed more than one of the courtiers hiding smiles behind their hands.

He spoke as if he had been present on the battlefield. As far as Cecilia had learned, he had never left England during the war with France. But this man seemed far from stable.

“Look into your eyes and tell you to your face that you are not welcome at this court. You are banished to your estates. Forthwith!”

At that, Thorpe moved closer to the Regent and whispered in his ear. The Regent looked to Cecilia and then nodded.

“But... not your wife. She shall remain and Lord Thorpe has most generously agreed to act as her guardian. Do not worry, my dear. We shall help you extricate yourself from this ruffian.”

“You bloody great oaf!”

Lionel gaped. He had been in the act of drawing breath, face reddening with anger when Cecilia had stepped forward and snapped the insult. The Regent’s mouth fell open. Thorpe stared, thunderstruck. Silence ruled the room.

“You think that Lord Thorpe has my best interests at heart? He murdered my brother, and two nights ago, tried to kill my husband!” Cecilia accused, pointing at Thorpe.

She knew nothing of the kind for certain, but rationally, that is what must have happened. Lionel stared at her in disbelief. Thorpe was recovering his wits now and the beginnings of a smile was appearing on his face. He glanced at the Regent, then back to Cecilia with the eyes of a wolf.

“I cannot believe what I am hearing!” the Regent exclaimed, “Lord Thorpe is...”

“A liar and a coward,” Cecilia finished.

“Have a care, madam,” Thorpe echoed. “I would call out a man who spoke thusly.”

“Then call me out if you dare. I call you a liar and coward. I name you murderer,” Cecilia spat, “and I stand ready to back my claim with blood.”

“Are you mad, woman?” Thorpe demanded. “Sir, control your wife,” he said to Lionel.

Lionel shrugged indifferently.

“No one controls me. Are you afraid, Lord Thorpe? Afraid of a woman?” Cecilia demanded.

“Madam, it is simply not done,” the Regent said with a cavalier wave, “women do not fight duels with men.”

Lionel stepped up beside his wife, his brows furrowed as he regarded her. She returned the look and he must have sensed her resolve and determination. This was her moment. After years of being ignored, neglected, and wronged, this was her chance at justice. She could never bring back her deceased brother, reclaim her stolen inheritance, or restore Penrose—her family's burned-down lands. But this... this was something she could seize. Civic justice. Against all those who wronged her. And it all culminated with this despicable man.

The ghost of a smile appeared on his lips.

“Your Royal Highness, I was grievously wounded two nights ago accompanying a group of excisemen aboard a ship smuggling slaves through British waters. I would challenge this man myself but my injury prevents it.” He put a hand to the scar on his temple and winced theatrically.

“But I learned swordplay from two of the very best,” Cecilia said with confidence, “draw blood from me and I will accept all allegations as true and place myself as ward to Lord Thorpe. My husband will immediately return to Thornhill in disgrace.”

Thorpe scoffed. “Your Royal Highness, this is an insult to yourself and the court...”

But a speculative look had come across the face of the Regent. He stroked his chin with a secretive smile.

“Well, well, well, there shall be no drawing blood, but this is quite the turn-up. A challenge from a woman to a man. What can you possibly be afraid of, Thorpe? A man who distinguished himself at Salamanca and Badajoz against a mere woman? This is fine sport! I was growing quite bored. Very well!”

He clapped his hands together and then began making shooing motions at the surrounding courtiers.

“Back, get back! Make room there I say!” he shouted. “ Ha! Another glorious addition to my legacy, we shall make history this very evening! Thorpe, you are already armed. And my own sword shall be used by the Duchess. Madam, this sword killed many a Frenchie in Spain. It will do you honor.” He drew the slender rapier and presented it to Cecilia, hilt first. “It is equipped with a foil tip, I won’t have my exquisite carpets stained with blood.”

“This is ludicrous!” Thorpe blurted. “If I will fight anyone, it should be the Duke. He is the one who has offered me insult!”

“No, he has not,” the Regent shook his head, “he has said very little, in fact. His wife has called you coward and liar.”

“At his urging no doubt. Because he knows I would not accept the challenge of a woman,” Thorpe accused.

“Your Royal Highness. In the sight of my sovereign and my heavenly Lord, I swear that my husband has not commanded me to insult or challenge Lord Thorpe. The ghost of my brother Arthur drives me to seek this revenge.”

“Stop fussing, Thorpe,” the Regent bellowed. “It is hardly a life-threatening duel. Now, arm yourself, man!”

Cecilia felt light-headed. This was indeed reckless madness. But she knew that she could beat Thorpe. Had done so already. She was the reason his arm rested in a sling. She was conscious of the vulnerability at her stomach, though little damage could be done by a stray blade with a blunt tip. But, she was gambling that the novelty of this situation would appeal to the vain, feckless Regent. And if she beat Thorpe, she stood

a chance of convincing the Regent that he was lying. That her victory was divine judgment. She had prayed that Lionel would not overrule her, would not step in himself. His head injury had left him prone to dizzy spells and even blackouts over the last few days, most recently an hour ago. Attending the court today was the result of a supreme effort of self-control.

Reaching down, she gathered her skirts, thankfully not as full or extravagant as the other ladies of the court. She noted the golden sash which the Regent wore across his chest and around his waist.

“Your Royal Highness, may I?” she asked.

The Regent’s eyes bulged, then he laughed like a child at this latest novelty. He stripped off the sash and handed it to Cecilia who used it to tie up her skirts around the knee, leaving her feet free to move. Shocked whispers echoed around the court and Lionel glared at the men who were staring at his wife’s legs. Cecilia ignored them, swinging the blade to gain the measure of its flexibility and balance. Despite the useless ornamentation, it felt a good weapon, supple and light. Thorpe was shaking his head, folding his arms.

“I will not. It is unseemly. Ungodly. Un-English!”

“You will meet the challenge or admit the right of it,” the Regent said sternly.

“Come on, Thorpe! What are you afraid of?” said a slightly drunken voice from somewhere in the crowd. A woman shushed the voice.

Cecilia took a few dancing steps forward, lashed out with the tip of her blade, and drew a neat line across the sleeve of Thorpe’s uniform. The Regent clapped and laughed in delight. Thorpe looked at the mocking crowds, face darkening.

“Very well. Let us end this farce!” he snarled, drawing his foil-tipped blade.

He did not assume a guard position but stood, sword by his side. He was complacent and arrogant, Cecilia could see that, not thinking he needed to raise his guard despite his previous experience of her swordsmanship. The Regent raised a silk handkerchief high and then let it fall. Thorpe strode forward, sword flicking up only to be deflected by a flick of Cecilia’s wrist. He tried again and again. Each probe was met and riposted by Cecilia. Thorpe’s look became more intent, he began to settle into a fencing stance, recognizing the skill of his adversary. Perhaps he had thought his earlier humiliation had been beginner’s luck?

Cecilia fell back, defending with ease but never trying to counterattack. She saw the moment that Thorpe became complacent once more. Saw the shadow of a smile at the corner of his mouth. Then she attacked. His blade whipped out and severed the epaulet on his right shoulder. Deflected even as she advanced. Block, parry, counter. She removed a button from his tunic. Naked alarm was on Thorpe’s face now as he frantically tried to block lightning-fast strokes from Cecilia.

Finally, with a double feint and a block that became an attack, she tangled her blade with his and flung her arm wide, removing the sword from his grasp and sending it rattling to the floor. Then she lunged, attacking with the blunt point. Point beats the edge, Arthur had told her as he taught her fencing.

Point always beats the edge.

In a practiced maneuver, she flicked off the loose foil tip, before her sword nipped between the buttons on Thorpe’s tunic and sank an inch into his chest. Not deep enough to cause anything but a minor flesh wound. But deep enough that none could be in any doubt that blood had been drawn. Red seeped onto the pristine white of Thorpe’s shirt.

As the pain and shock hit him, he staggered and Cecilia delivered the coup de grace, placing the point of her sword beneath his chin. A movement from her, a breath of pressure, and the sword would prick his artery. Thorpe became suddenly still, eyes wide and staring.

“Do you yield?” Cecilia asked.

Thorpe swallowed, the movement enough to scrape the needle-sharp point against his skin and draw a trickle of blood.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Not good enough. Do you admit to lying to your sovereign about my brother and my husband?” Cecilia challenged.

“Yes!” Thorpe cried as another swallow brought the blade a fraction of an inch further into his neck.

“Do you admit to...” Cecilia began.

The doors to the court opened once more and a voice rang out.

“Colonel Winston Winters of His Majesty’s Customs and Excise!” bellowed the footman responsible for announcing newcomers.

All eyes swiveled to a tall man with graying hair and a saturnine countenance. Dark brows gathered over darker eyes like thunderclouds. His jaw was set and fleshy lips parted into a sneer as he laid eyes on Thorpe. At his back were three excisemen bearing muskets with fixed bayonets.

“What is the meaning of this outrage!” the Regent bellowed, starting forward.

At the same time, Thorpe dodged to the side and aimed a blow at Cecilia's wrist. She barely had time to react before her hand moved of its own accord, parrying Thorpe's sword. Surprised, she glanced at Lionel, realizing he had taken her wrist and guided the movement. Thorpe staggered back, unbalanced by the unexpected defense. As Cecilia regained her composure, Lionel thrust her to the side, placing himself between her and Thorpe. He stood unarmed as Thorpe assumed a defensive stance, blade pointed unwaveringly at him.

Leaning closer, Lionel whispered, "My dearest, what did I say about never lowering your guard?"

She smiled sheepishly for a moment. Then yelled, "Don't just stand there! Protect the Regent. Protect him with your bodies!"

Two sounds dominated the room. The sound of men scrambling to make a wall of their bodies between the Regent and Thorpe, and the sound of three muskets being cocked, followed by the lesser sound of their officer's pistol. Thorpe looked around the room.

"Your Majesty, you are deceived! I am not a threat to you..."

"Your Majesty. I have a warrant for this man's arrest on charges of slave trading and treason!" Colonel Winters said in a sonorous voice.

"Treason?!" the Regent bellowed from the safety of his human shields.

Cecilia thought that it spoke volumes of the man's character that it was the treason charge that most caught his attention.

"Treason!" Thorpe echoed. "I have never..."

“A ship owned by yourself was found at anchor in the estuary of the river Lea at Wanstead. Slaves taken in Africa were found aboard, as was a representative of the government of the Republic of Haiti. He was hiding amongst the slaves and has admitted to being aboard in order to ferment insurrection among slaves held in His Majesty's dominions and colonies. Sir Gerald Knightley has admitted knowledge of the man and has implicated you, Lord Thorpe, as his accomplice.”

Thorpe's face was ashen. He looked at Winters in astonishment. “I did not know a revolutionary was hiding among those men. They were supposed to be bloody plantation workers for the Americans!”

The sword clattered to the floor as Thorpe realized what he had just confessed. The excisemen moved in, shouldering their muskets and seizing Thorpe's arms. Cecilia turned as the Regent bravely pushed through the wall of courtiers, now that the danger had passed.

“Lord Thorpe. I hereby strip you of all titles and lands. You are a traitor to the Crown and I will see you hung!”

“Your Majesty,” Lionel spoke up, “I find that I must speak in defense of a man who shared my blood.”

Cecilia's head whipped around to Lionel. A gasp went around the room. The Regent looked from one to the other.

“You cannot seek to defend a traitor and a slaver!” he said, incredulously.

“I ask, as a Duke of England, of a long-standing and respected family, that you show clemency,” Lionel continued.

“Lionel...” Cecilia began.

Lionel held up a hand and stepped closer to Thorpe, looking into his eyes.

“He is my brother. We have the same father, Charles Grisham ,” Lionel stated. “I fear the only distance between us was built of circumstance, not malice.”

What he said next was audible to Cecilia and the Regent, but most of the court would not have been able to hear.

“I will vouch for you. See that your life is spared. You can go to America, take your wealth, and leave these shores. Begin anew. Just admit that which lies between us,” Lionel whispered.

Thorpe glared at him. Then he looked to the Regent whose face was almost purple with anger. He glanced back at Lionel.

“I admit that I tried to kill you to take your Dukedom. It should have been mine. I served my country. Fought for my King. I deserved it!” he hissed.

Lionel nodded sadly and took a deep breath. “In another life, we could have been more, brother .” Then he turned away, took Cecilia’s hands, and kissed them softly.

“Then it is finally over,” he muttered. “Your Majesty, allow this man to be deported, never to return to British shores. I ask it as a boon for my half-brother.”

“As do I,” Cecilia supported.

She knew something that Lionel didn’t. Thorpe was not a wealthy man. He was selling his possessions to pay off his debts. When he was exiled, it would not be to a life of privilege and power in America or anywhere else. He would find himself beginning anew and with nothing. But he would at least keep that life.

“I grant mercy in honor of the two people who protected my person against a traitor and would-be assassin,” the Regent said, already fantasizing the situation into something it had not been. “You are banished from Great Britain and all her dominions. You will be held under house arrest until you can liquidate your assets, and then you will be put on a ship to... America. Yes, let the Americans have you. Shame on you!”

His diatribe went on but Cecilia did not hear it. The trial was over. The adventure was done. Lionel was looking at her as though she was a goddess. There was naked worship in his eyes. She looked back at the man for whom she had fought, figuratively and physically. Once she had lived as a servant in the home of her aunt and uncle. Then forced into marriage with the man she believed had killed her brother. Now, that mystery was solved and the guilty punished.

And she was finally free to be Duchess of Thornhill.

The End?

CHAPTER 1

OUTSKIRTS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

How a simple thing like a piece of paper, a letter, could bring such happiness.

Rain lashed the small window of Hester Haddington's room. Outside, the sky was leaden with the promise of unending downpours. But as she read on, the sun shone in her heart.

She sat in the window seat, its upholstery faded and split. The window did not fit its casement properly and admitted a chill breeze. But Hester liked to sit there, regardless of the draught. She liked to look out at the world beyond Goddington Hall. The distant woods beyond the park and the town of Buckingham visible on the horizon, its peaceful spires of chimney smoke mimicking the slender grace of the church steeple at the heart of the town.

That world was largely unknown to her.

Since the death of her parents ten years before, she had seen little of it. Goddington, the home of her aunt and uncle, had become her home and her prison.

She flicked her long, golden hair back and absently rubbed at the small white scar that marred the porcelain skin of her right shoulder. Sometimes she fancied she could still feel the stab of pain made by the willow switch that had caused it, wielded by Aunt Phoebe. She began to re-read the letter that had been smuggled to her by Cousin Selina, her only ally at Goddington. The words set a warm glow within her.

My dearest Hester, I hope this letter finds you well. Words on paper are such a poor substitute for the sight of you, for holding your hand in mine, for holding your body close to me. I still think of that night at your debut when we danced. Then when we walked the halls of Goddington together and I had my first taste of what it must be like for you to be mine, to be shared with no-one else. The letters we have exchanged since that night have sustained me for a time, have made me feel close to you. But they are a poor substitute. Under normal circumstances, I should call on you at Goddington, we would take walks in the park, perhaps chaperoned by your cousin. I yearn for it but know that it is impossible. I should like to call out your uncle for holding you a prisoner, making you into a slave. I want to take you away from them. I cannot marry you without the permission of your uncle, as your legal guardian, as you are not yet one and twenty years old. But, we can run away together. I know that what I am suggesting is scandalous but it will enable us to be together and married in Gretna. I hope that I have not misjudged your heart. Based on your letters to me, I do not believe so.

If you are agreeable, then meet me at noon five days from the date of this letter. I shall meet you with my carriage. The location shall be the crossroads to the west of the Tingewick Woods outside the village of Barton Hartshorn. It is but six miles from Goddington. I trust this will not be too far for you to walk. I would suggest a closer location but fear that you may be seen by your uncle or one of his men. If another location is preferable, then write to me at once. If I do not hear from you, then I will be waiting at the crossroads at noon.

Your ever loving

Arthur

There was a gentle tap at her door. Hester knew that she didn't need to conceal the letter because only Selina would knock so diffidently.

“Come in, Selina!” she called.

The door opened and a slender girl of sixteen entered the room. Her hair was fiery red, the color of which she inherited from her father. She smiled hesitantly, then broader when she saw Hester’s face. Hurriedly, she closed the door and ran to her cousin. Hester hugged her and made room for her on the window seat.

“I trust your lover has good things to say?” Selina whispered excitedly.

“He does. As always. In fact...”

Hester hesitated, unsure if she should disclose all to Selina. It was not that she did not trust the girl, but that it might put her into a difficult position when Selina’s father, Baron Goddington, eventually found out.

“In fact?” Selina coaxed, seizing Hester’s hand.

Her blue eyes were bright with excitement and Hester knew that she could not keep this a secret.

She did not want to.

Speaking the words aloud would make them somehow more real than being written on a page.

“He wishes to marry me!” Hester exclaimed.

Suddenly, tears filled her eyes. They were tears of happiness. Selina hugged her again, her own eyes wet.

“Oh, cousin! That is so wonderful. I am so happy for you! Will Papa give his

blessing, do you think? Do you wish me to speak to him?"

Hester shook her head hastily. "He would not. I am sure of it."

That darkened Selina's expression. She knew the cruelty that her father and mother were capable of, though it was rarely directed at her. But she didn't like to be reminded of it, or how helpless she was to prevent it.

"Then how will you marry him? Unless..."

Hester was mildly shocked that her innocent cousin had realized what Arthur and Hester were planning. If permission to marry was withheld, then there was only one option remaining.

"We will elope," Hester whispered.

A thrill ran through her at the very idea. Selina's eyes went almost comically wide, as did her mouth. Hester laughed.

"It is the only way I fear. We will be married over the blacksmith's anvil at Gretna Green and once that is done, Uncle Timothy will be able to do nothing about it. Other than accept me as Mrs. Arthur Binkley."

"Oh my, Hester! What a scandal you will cause!" Selina exclaimed.

But there was a smile on her face as she did so. The idea of a scandal to her was one of excitement and drama. It was something that did not often reach into the parochial Buckinghamshire world of Goddington. She associated scandal with cities such as London, where all manner of sin was perpetrated.

"How may I help? We could pretend to Papa to be taking the trap into town and

instead meet your beau! Where are you to meet him?"

Hester shook her head emphatically. "We shall do nothing of the sort. That would implicate you and I will not have that."

Selina opened her mouth to protest but Hester put a hand to her cousin's lips. "No, Selina. Absolutely not. Remember what I said to you all those years ago when first I arrived here? I was ten years of age and you were but seven?"

"You said that we must keep our friendship a secret. That Mama and Papa dislike you and would take pains to keep us apart if they suspected that I did not share their opinion," Selina said sullenly, "it is simply so unjust! I must smuggle your letters in and out of this house because of my beastly mother and father. I wish to tell them to their faces that treating their niece like a servant is wrong!"

"But your father is master of this house and neither of us has the power to challenge him. But, when I am wife to Sir Arthur Binkley of Marsh Gibbon, there will be no more mistreatment. Then we can be friends openly. I merely need you to be patient for just a few days longer. Maintain the facade that we are enemies since childhood."

Selina put her head on her older cousin's shoulder and Hester put her arms around her.

"It is so beastly," Selina complained.

"But almost over," Hester soothed.

So many times, growing up at Goddington Hall, Hester had soothed the younger girl after suffering the cruelty of Timothy and his wife Phoebe. She didn't understand its source. She had not asked to be their ward. That had been forced on them after the death of her parents from influenza. Timothy and Phoebe Haskett had resented her

from the start, placing her in the smallest room of their Buckinghamshire home and making her carry out chores in place of a servant. The only concession she had been given was a debut at the age of eighteen. But that was for appearance's sake only. They had no intention of letting her take her place in county society or the London ton, both of which they were active members of. It did not help that her father had been practically bankrupt when he died. What little inheritance was left had to be given over in death duties, leaving Hester beholden to her wealthy aunt and uncle.

Until now.

“All will be well,” she murmured, “the sun is breaking through the clouds at last, and life will be warm and sunny from today forth. You’ll see.”

Hester huddled within the shelter of a beech tree, an outlier of Tingewick Wood. It stood near the crossroads which signposted Preston Bassett to the south-east, Barton Hartshorn to the south-west, Tingewick to the north-east and Fimmere to the north-west. It was the furthest she had ever been from Goddington Hall. It had been a wet and blustery walk which had taken her the better part of three hours. Fortunately, Goddington Hall was situated on hills above the village of Barton-Hartshorn, so it had been a downhill walk all the way, following the Padbury stream as it meandered along the valley. The Buckingham road was relatively straight and well maintained or her journey might have taken all day, had she been forced to fight through mud and waterlogged lanes. As it was, her dress was spattered and her cloak sodden. Her face was wet and cold, and she suspected bearing one or two drops of mud from the road also.

But none of it mattered. Arthur was on his way and soon she would be safe and warm in his arms. The branches above her swayed, the leaves making a hushed roar in the wind. She moved closer to the fissured trunk as rain was gusted under the protective canopy in a frigid spray. It must be nearly noon, she had timed her walk most carefully. The sun was obscured by a blanket of clouds but she could not be too far

from the allotted time.

She waited.

And waited.

The rain ceased and the wind began to tear the cloud cover to tatters. It was with a small shock that she noted how far the sun had fallen from its noon zenith.

It must be between two and three o'clock by now! Where could Arthur be? Has he had an accident?

At that moment, as worry was knotting her insides, she saw a carriage pulled by a team of four horses, making its way out of the Tingewick Woods. Hope flared within her and she stepped away from the tree to the roadside. It was a fine coach, colored black and silver and driven by a man in the uniform of a footman. He slowed his team and brought the coach to a halt beside her. Hester looked up at the driver hopefully.

“Would you be driving Sir Arthur Binkley by any chance?” she asked.

The driver touched the brim of his hat to her. “I’m afraid not, Miss Haddington. His Grace, the Duke of Middleton, is within, and requests your audience.”

CHAPTER 2

Hester drew back a step as the driver leaned down from his seat to open the door. Within the coach, she saw an elderly man lean forward and recognized him immediately.

Percival Fairchild, Duke of Middleton was a distinctive figure.

In his late middle years, his long face was that of a kindly grandfather. His smile caused wrinkles to appear around his eyes and seemed kind. She remembered being introduced to him at her debut ball.

Reassured that it was, in fact, him, she stepped forward and accepted the hand of the driver to ascend to the interior of the coach. She saw that his left leg rested on the seat opposite him and was swathed in bandages. He saw the direction of her gaze and smiled sadly.

“Alas, a touch of gout. The bane of my family. My doctor says I must forgo port, rich sauce, and cigars. I say that life without such things is scarcely worth living,” then he fixed her with a direct stare, “and what brings you to this desolate spot, my dear?”

At first, Hester was unsure how much she should reveal. Would the Duke feel inclined to report back to her uncle if he heard something he did not like? Yet, at the same time, he may be able to help her find Arthur, and that was a risk she needed to take. Waiting any longer would undoubtedly alert her relatives of her absence. “I... I had arranged to meet a gentleman here,” Hester replied with a waver.

“Yes, I know. Sir Arthur Binkley of Marsh Gibbon, was it not?” Middleton replied gently.

“Why, yes! But how could you know that?” Hester asked, narrowing her gaze.

“Because I am acquainted with Sir Arthur. I consider myself fortunate to count him as a friend. Now, my dear, this is not going to be easy for you to hear but hear it you must.”

Hester swallowed, suddenly feeling as though the rug were being pulled from beneath her feet and she was falling. Despite that, she lifted her chin and firmed her mouth, resolved to face whatever fate was about to deal for her.

“Sir Arthur came to me about four days ago in a terrible state of remorse. He told me that he had indulged his emotions for a young lady of great beauty, intelligence, and sophistication, and entered into correspondence with her after a meeting at Goddington. That young lady was, of course, yourself.”

Hester found herself smiling at the description. Middleton raised a finger as though to forestall her initial feelings.

“But, he is already engaged to be married.”

The words fell from his lips like lead weights to thud against the floor. Hester felt her heart join those heavy words. She clutched her hands to her stomach. When she realized that she was sitting with her mouth open, she closed it hurriedly. She would not appear in such distress in front of a man who was almost a perfect stranger.

“Arthur is already engaged to be married,” she repeated.

“An arranged marriage and not one of the heart, I must add,” Middleton continued

agonizingly slowly, “but an engagement that he cannot break. Because he does not wish to marry the lady he is engaged to, he committed the sin of indulging his daydreams with you. Of allowing himself to believe that he could have true love and a happy ever after. But, alas, when the time came, he knew that he could not do it. And he asked me how he should proceed, not wishing to hurt you further and not able to renege on the commitment he has already entered into, personally.”

Hester blinked away the first treacherous tears, turning her head so that Middleton would not see. But, it seems, he missed nothing.

“Now, now. Here, take my handkerchief,” he offered her a square of white linen embroidered with his coat of arms in the corners, “all is not lost. The reason I am here to deliver this upsetting news is that I have a proposition for you. It is highly unusual but one which would mean that you do not have to suffer the indignity of returning to the home of your aunt and uncle. A home in which I believe you are not at all happy.”

Hester looked back at him. “How, pray tell, do you know of my life at Goddington?”

“From Sir Arthur,” Middleton said kindly, “he was most insistent that I help you if I can. And, I believe that I can.”

“How?” Hester’s voice almost broke.

“Before I begin, please may I ask that you hear my entire story to the end. Listen to my proposal and give it serious thought. You will wish to dismiss it out of hand but I ask that you promise to listen first, then decide.”

This was most perplexing.

Hester frowned, wiped her eyes and nodded, seeing no harm in listening to the mysterious proposal.

“I have a son. My only son, Dorian. He is Marquis of Langley which lies to the west of here near Cottingham in Oxfordshire. He was married to a beautiful young woman named Sophia Bennett. The Kent Bennetts, are you familiar with the family?”

Hester shook her head.

“Well, my dear. You bear a striking resemblance to Sophia, who, sadly, is no longer with us. She passed away from the influenza after being married for less than a year. I understand that your parents were taken by the same illness?”

Hester nodded. It made her feel an affinity for Middleton and her son, knowing that they had lost a loved one in the same way that she had lost her parents.

“Dorian suffered greatly from her loss. It led him to purchase a commission in the Buckinghamshire Rifle Regiment and go to war in Spain, fighting the French. There, he suffered a terrible injury, and he spent many months recuperating at a monastery near Ciudad Rodrigo, in the west of Spain. I believed, as did the army, that he had been killed in battle. For a year, I believed that I had lost my only son.”

At this, the kindly old man seemed to struggle with his own equilibrium. He put the knuckles of one hand to his mouth and turned to look out of the coach’s window for a long moment.

Presently, he spoke again.

“Oh dear, where was I? Ah, yes, I remember. Dorian was found by a British Catholic priest visiting the monastery and the church arranged for his return to me. We are and always have been one of England’s most prominent Catholic families and, I am proud to say, openly Catholic. However, I digress. I thanked God for Dorian’s return, but he... came back to me a very changed man. He had lost his memory of everything that had happened from the point of Sophia’s death. He did not remember joining the

army or fighting. Crucially, he did not remember losing Sophia. I have for many months now pondered how to break the news to him. You see, he believes her to be still alive. I fear that his fragile mind will be utterly destroyed if he ever learns of the truth. Do you perhaps begin to see why I am so keen to meet you?"

Hester remembered his comment about her resemblance to Sophia and had jumped to a conclusion, but it seemed too ridiculous, too far-fetched to be real.

"You are surely not saying..." she began.

"That I wish you to impersonate Sophia. Yes, that is precisely what I ask of you," Middleton intoned solemnly.

"But, Your Grace, that is... why it's..."

"Ridiculous? Farcical? Mad? I agree. It is all of those things, but a father once bereaved will resort to the ridiculous, farcical, and mad, to save the life of his child once again."

"I cannot spend the rest of my life pretending to be Sophia Bennett!" Hester exclaimed, "Not least because the Bennett family themselves would surely get wind of it. They too have lost a child. It would seem a ghastly, macabre joke to them that the Fairchilds are pretending that she is still alive. I am sorry, Your Grace, to be so blunt, but I cannot see how it could work."

"Do not mistake me, Miss Haddington. I do not propose this as a long-term role. Merely until his mind has healed enough that his true memories return. His doctor says that this will happen over time but only if he is given a peaceful, calm, and safe place in which to recover. I can think of no place more peaceful and safe than his home with his wife. Now, as the healing takes place, you and I will need to be in close contact to discuss how we gradually remove you from your role, how we re-

introduce Dorian to the truth. But, that is a conversation for a few weeks' time. In the immediate, my concern is for my son's recovery. I cannot break his heart by telling him the truth. I beg you, Miss Haddington. Do this for me. For us."

He squeezed her hand and water was eked out of the fabric to drip onto her skirts. Hester didn't notice. She looked into his imploring eyes, seeing all the pain of a desperate father. But one who has had his prayers answered once, had his son delivered to him from the dead.

"In return, I am prepared to offer you a new life."

"That is very generous, Your Grace. But my life is dependent on my aunt and uncle. There was nothing left of my father's estates and when I am once more Hester Haddington instead of Sophia Bennett, I will have nothing to my name once more. Except, I will have earned the eternal enmity of the Hasketts for running away. I will have nothing."

"Why, you will have your father's fortune, of course, Miss Haddington. I do not know why you believe there was nothing left. I must assume this is yet another aspect of the Haskett's villainy. The fortune of the Earl of Audley was renowned and cannot have been consumed by death duties. Nor can such a fortune have been consumed by the avarice of your father's sister and her husband. It surely exists, and I will use my considerable influence, wealth, and standing in court to ensure that you receive it. Then you will be free."

Hester found herself gaping once again, but this time could not stop herself. Her world had shifted, turned on its head. First, Arthur, and now her entire concept of her circumstances. Her aunt and uncle had lied to her for all these years. Keeping her inheritance from her while they enjoyed the fruits of it. Astonishment turned to anger and resolve.

“Very well, Your Grace. I accept.”

“Thank you, my dear. But remember, you must never tell him the truth. Many a physician have strictly forbade me from it. For if he learns of it before his mind is ready to accept it, it may make him lose whatever remaining sanity he had left after the war.”

CHAPTER 3

OXFORDSHIRE

The countryside of Oxfordshire was much like that of Buckinghamshire. Hester knew it must be so, but as she had never, in her memory, been much beyond Goddington or her family home at Audley, she could not be certain.

The coach rode smoothly along a road that wound between fields and meadows with the rising sun behind them. Villages appeared and disappeared, the road they followed running by them but not through them. Off to the left, she could see a large line of hills, dark against the pale morning sky.

“Langley Grange is there, right at the foot of Langley Peak, that’s the hill you can see,” Middleton pointed out.

He was sitting next to her and they had spent the journey thus far with one last rehearsal of Hester’s story. It was the story that Dorian had been told and that she would reinforce. Her grandmother, Lady Cynthia Purcell from York, had fallen ill and Hester, or rather Sophia, had been obliged to take care of her. The old lady had sadly passed away. This would explain any odd behavior from Hester, the vagaries of grief. Hester had spent the last three days learning about Sophia Bennett and her marriage to Dorian Fairchild. Her interests and passions, her accomplishments, and foibles. She could recount the occasion of Sophia’s first meeting with Dorian and the key moments of their story, at least those that Middleton was aware of.

Presently, Hester was a tumult of emotions.

Excitement was chief among them at the moment, but trepidation was not far behind. Anger ran through it all like the streaks of color in marble. Anger at the Haskett's who had treated her like a servant and lied to her. Anger towards Arthur, but only to a degree. He had allowed himself to speak of love and elopement while knowing that he could not carry through his promises. She could not paint him a liar though, merely a man whose head and heart were at war. It did cut her deeply that his feelings for her had not been strong enough to win through against what his head told him to do. She thought herself a fool for believing him and a fool for agreeing to this escapade. It was so patently ludicrous that it could not possibly work. Nor could she promise herself that she would be able to continue with it. The idea of deliberately lying to an innocent person, and such a monstrous lie at that, for weeks on end was unthinkable to her.

“Remember, this is all for Dorian's own good. And, selfishly, for me. So that I do not risk losing my only son a second time,” Middleton had told her on more than one occasion.

Hester clung to that and told herself that the only alternative was to return to Goddington and face punishment. In all likelihood, a lifetime of punishment. There was no alternative.

A dark speck against the looming Langley Peak began to grow larger. They had turned from the west and were heading more towards the south, but angling towards the great peak. Hester could see that it rose from a chain of hills that ran more or less north to south. Another series of rolling downs reached towards that line of high ground from the east, meeting it at right angles. In the gap between these ranges was the dark speck that soon became a mass and then a crenelated shape of stone and mortar.

Langley Grange.

The house was of dark stone, giving the appearance of an antique structure and

bearing none of the hallmarks of modern, fashionable design. It was square and rose to three stories in height. Its front door was housed in a huge, stone arch, appearing distinctly medieval. A forest of chimneys rose from a multitude of rooftops that rose at all angles from the simple structure.

The road passed between an ornamental gate, entwined with ivy, and standing open with the air of not having been closed for years. Gateposts were almost swamped by ivy too. Aspen and alder stood dotted around the long grass of the park, pioneers of the woodland that loomed behind the house and reached out as though to embrace it.

“It has been somewhat neglected of late,” Middleton observed with a distinctive blush, “there has been a high turnover of staff due to my son’s condition. Initially, it made him somewhat unpredictable. But, that has improved greatly, have no fear.”

His words degenerated into a cough, then a series of coughs until he sat back in his seat, gasping.

“Your Grace, are you quite well? You are very pale,” Hester exclaimed, her hands hovering in the air just before the elderly Duke.

Middleton nodded and forced a smile. “Age, my dear. Just age. And this damnably inclement weather. Damp air plays merry hell with the lungs. If you’ll pardon my French. At least the gout has subsided for the time being.”

The coach came to a halt before the imposing, medieval doorway. It opened, and a man strode out.

Hester found herself staring. He wore black, but so elegantly that it did not seem plain at all. A silk brocade waistcoat was accentuated by a silver watch chain, while silver thread had been worked into the collar of his coat and its sleeves. A cravat of dark purple was held in place by an onyx-headed pin. His hair was long and dark, hanging from his temples to his shoulders. An aquiline nose and a sharp jawline gave

him an angular and exotic face. Like that of an Italian prince. His shoulders were broad and he was tall, surpassing the height of his father. There was an air of strength about him that Hester had not encountered before, from any man. Her heart beat faster as his dark eyes fell on her. His brows were drawn down, intensifying his stare.

Time slowed as Hester's blue eyes met his impenetrably dark stare. She felt stripped by that stare, as though he saw through her clothes to her naked skin. As though he stripped away her pretenses to see the real her beneath. The feeling was intensely exciting. She had thought, while kissing Arthur, that she knew of the excitement that a man could cause in a woman. That she had experience of it from Arthur's embraces. But they were cold compared to the heat that she felt rise within her at her first sight of her 'husband.' For that is what she would now be pretending that he was to her. This enigmatic, darkly handsome giant was to be her husband. In name, if not face. But what if he wanted to make her his wife? What if he wanted to take her? The idea had her gasping, clamping a hand over her mouth.

"Are you alright, my dear?" Middleton inquired anxiously.

"Quite well," Hester replied in a whisper.

Dorian had reached the coach and pulled open the door. With one booted foot, he released the catch that unlocked the steps. They folded to the ground and he held out a hand for Hester. She wore no gloves and felt a thrill as her skin touched his. His hands were smooth, though she could feel the lines of scars upon them. His grip was firm, making her feel that if she swooned without warning, she need not fear. He would catch her and his strength would support her without effort.

With her feet on the ground, Hester looked up at Dorian. It was as though their eyes had held each other since the first moment, without a break. This close, she could see that his eyes were the color of chocolate with hints of hazel. For a moment, he stared at her with blank incomprehension on his face.

“Dorian. I have missed you,” Hester choked out.

Hardly believing her own daring, she stood on tiptoes and pressed her lips to his cheek. Her head spun. He wore cologne that was spicy and musky at the same time. Its sheer maleness was overwhelming, making her think of his body, his muscle. He was an immensely physical man. She could well imagine him on the battlefield, atop a charger, holding a sword and leading men into battle.

Dorian suddenly smiled and it was like sunshine breaking through clouds. His brooding demeanor vanished as though it had not existed. The smile lit up his face. It was boyish and roguish by equal measures. Both exciting and endearing. She could not help but return it.

“My dearest wife. My Sophia! How I have missed you so!” Dorian exclaimed.

Without warning, he wrapped his arms about her waist and lifted her into the air to spin her around. Hester screamed in delight, smiling, and laughing, clutching at the bonnet she wore. It was pale blue to match her dress. She had not tied it and Dorian seized it, pulling it from her head and tossing it aside.

“My golden-haired princess!” he declared.

Putting her back on her feet, he ran the fingers of both hands through her hair, making her skin tingle in delight. Then, he kissed her on the lips. Compared to Arthur’s, Dorian’s kisses were suns compared to a candle. Hester rose on her tiptoes to press her lips tighter against his. His hands were strong, holding her against him, slipping from her hair to hold her body in a tight embrace. All the while, his lips set her entire body afire.

“Now, now, children. Remember, your old father is waiting to get indoors in front of a fire, and with a warm drop of brandy. Save such behavior for when you have retired to your bedchambers,” Middleton exclaimed.

The kiss ended, though Hester remained poised on tiptoes, eyes closed. Finally, she opened them and found herself staring into Dorian's eyes.

"Welcome home," he whispered. Then he raised his eyes to the carriage where the footman was helping Middleton down, "Thank you for bringing her back to me, Father. And it is good to see you back on your feet."

"Just in time to partake of your excellent wine cellar," Middleton chortled.

"Now, now, Your Grace," Hester spoke, adopting his own colloquialism and tone, but remembering that she had been told that Sophia was also most solicitous of Middleton's health, "that is what brought on the attack of gout in the first place. Dorian, you must make sure that your father is moderate in his habits while he is here."

Dorian grinned. "You know him as well as I. Could anyone ever make him do something he did not wish to?"

"You will, I command it."

It was another aspect of Sophia's playful and confident nature. But it was also not far from her own. She had grown fond of Middleton in the last few days and the concern she expressed for his health was genuine.

Dorian nodded gravely. "Your wish, as ever, is my command," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.