



The Villain's Vixen (Wanton Wastrels)

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Category: Historical

Description: Dominic Eastland, the Duke of Cuthbert, is a known wastrel in polite society, but he harbors an even greater secret. In London's seedy underworld he's known as "Avalon," the leader of a cutthroat gang. However, he's recently decided it's time for someone else to rule in his stead. He owes respectability to his line and his brother who died young and never had the chance to inherit the title, so it's time to put his past transgressions aside and attempt to become an honorable man by doing his duty and taking a wife.

But then he sees her and suddenly he doesn't want to be that good anymore.

Miss Alexandra Givenwald has lived a life of simplicity under her father's roof where she was generally ignored. When she gets the chance to go to London under the pretense of finding a husband, she has other ideas in mind. Her aunt would be thrilled if she married well, and has picked a suitable gentleman, but Lexie cares not for the strictures of a union. She wants to experience passion and explore what freedoms life has to offer.

From the moment she sees him, she knows he can fulfill her deepest desires.

The attraction between Dominic and Lexie is instant, and although she is continuously warned away from him by the man himself, she is drawn toward him that much deeper. As true villains are revealed, they must embark on a perilous journey that will risk more than just the danger posed to their hearts.

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CHAPTER 1

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London, England

“Keep your distance from that one.”

Lady Alexandra Givenwald turned to see her aunt nodding toward a new arrival who had just entered the ballroom. As she glanced in the direction her companion had indicated, her focus instantly fixated on the tall dark-haired gentleman in question as she murmured, “Whyever not?”

Her aunt huffed. “Because he is the worst bounder in London! A true scoundrel if there ever was one. He’s a consummate rake who has no conscious thought of others. He’s ruined more than one lady’s reputation, but it doesn’t even seem to faze him. I speculate he has no number of morals left to speak of to have such a crass demeanor. I cannot believe that Lady Westcott would dare to invite him to her autumn ball, except that he is a duke and cousin to King George IV, which, I suppose, gives him a proper entrée in that regard.”

Lexie couldn’t help rolling her eyes. She loved her Aunt Bonnie dearly, but sometimes, she could be rather dramatic and particularly severe against those regarding whom she contrived a strong opinion. “Are you sure your sources aren’t based on ton gossip? You know as well as I do that London likes to stir the pot for their own amusements.”

Her aunt glared at her, the blue eyes so similar to Lexie's widening with rebuke. "Don't be vulgar! And no, I am not exaggerating. Trust me when I warn you to give that man a wide berth. And if he approaches you, no one would think ill of you should you give him the cut direct." With that, she patted her gray hair and found her attention caught by something beyond Lexie's shoulder. "Ah. Margaret is here. Find something to amuse you while I take a moment to converse with my dear friend."

Lexie wanted to snort as her aunt moved away. Converse might as well be code for gossip, because Lady Margaret Limewood was one of the worst in London. Lexie firmly believed that is where her aunt regained most of her "valid" information, which was likely fabricated highly, of course.

Since Lexie had been in London, she had to admit some of her anticipation for the little season this autumn was starting to wane. She had expected dashing gentlemen and women who were of a similar bent. Instead, she had discovered vapid debutantes with little to recommend them in the way of conversation and titled men who were not the handsome rogues she had anticipated.

All but one.

Her gaze was drawn once more through the crowd to where the mysterious, dreadful duke was conversing with another gentleman. She did not readily recall his name, but she remembered upon introduction that he was married. If the duke was such a rake as her aunt claimed, then why should he waste his time speaking to someone who could no longer openly carouse?

The duke was also the only choice, thus far, who intrigued her. She would be lying if his reputation didn't strike some interest as well, but for someone who had lived her entire life in the sheltered countryside, she was eager to engage in some flirtation and a bit of revelry. Her aunt would be shocked to learn her heart was so wild, but Lexie had always been a free spirit. She had not come to London with the sole purpose of

securing a husband, no matter if that was what she had claimed. She wanted to experience life.

Her eyes remained focused on the duke, and she realized that this was the man who could teach her everything she wanted to know. Unfortunately, the one spark of entertainment had been forbidden, so she was forced to search for other means of distraction.

And yet...

A quadrille was currently taking place, and since she had been left to her own devices, her aunt couldn't stop her from finding a way to gain an introduction to the duke. However, she had to be a bit covert about how she might gain his attention. It had to seem an accident so that she couldn't be held directly responsible should her aunt witness them conversing.

She pondered her options for a moment and decided that the best thing was to offer the pretense of moving toward the refreshment table, which just happened to be right beyond where the duke was standing. If she casually meandered about the edge of the room, she could easily become "jarred" by someone and fall right into his arms.

Her lips twitched on a smile. It was a perfect plan.

Seeing success in her vision, Lexie headed forward. She kept her attention on the duke, but a bit more covertly. She didn't want to be obvious in her attentions because if word returned to the duke, any chance she might have to gain his notice would be spoiled. She had grown up trying to gain her father's regard for years and only when she despaired of ever doing so had he finally started to engage in conversation a bit more. So while her experience with men was limited to the Marquess of Singleton and the handful of male servants he had employed, she decided it was enough for a "chance" encounter.

She smoothed her skirts, grateful that she'd chosen a mint ensemble this evening. While she despised pastels, at least she felt that green complimented her light hair. And the emeralds brought out the sparkle in her blue eyes, perhaps slightly disguising their true color by their reflection.

Moving easily through the throng of guests, she was grateful that she wasn't so petite in stature that she couldn't keep an eye on her quarry in his black and white formal attire. She was finding it increasingly difficult to turn her gaze away as she drew nearer to him because it was obvious he was quite tall, and those broad shoulders had no need of padding. Her heart thrilled at the prospect of securing such a handsome man, regardless if Bonnie thought he was a poor choice. He was infinitely preferable to the rest of the men present, and for the first time since her arrival in London a week ago, her spirits had finally lifted. But it wasn't hope that was rushing through her veins. It was excitement, the idea that she might actually trap the prowling panther before he had a chance to realize he was being targeted.

Her lips curved upward in another smile as she drew closer. She would have to quickly avert her eyes should he spy her approach, but thus far, he seemed to be engaged in a highly in-depth conversation. She would certainly have to ensure she bumped him lightly if he didn't sense that someone was watching him. But surely, he wouldn't be so oblivious? She should hate to act like a fumbling ninny when she had always been confident of herself. Thankfully, she had outgrown the insecurities that had plagued her as a child. She did not want to feel that way ever again, as if she was not merely ignored, but seen and quickly passed over.

Each step had her breath becoming shallower. She was nearly abreast of her target now. She could hardly wait for the moment he turned his dark head and set his eyes upon her. Would they flash with approval? She would certainly be devastated if it were the opposite. But she supposed if this man roamed London there could be more with whom she hadn't yet gained an introduction.

The music was starting to draw to a close and she knew she had to hurry if she didn't want to be inundated with people returning to the sidelines to find their next partner. She couldn't let this paragon of sin and vice slip through her fingers, not until she had made herself known to him. She wanted him to remember her name and her face and dream about her every night until he whisked her away on his noble steed.

Very well, that was probably doing it a bit brown. She had never been that sort of extreme romantic. But it would be nice should he sweep her into a dark corner and kiss her senseless.

She bit her lip, fantasizing about that very moment when the music stopped and the conversation began to buzz around her once again.

She lifted her skirts and closed the remaining distance between her and the duke, but when she heard her name called, she had no choice but to mumble a curse beneath her breath and turn to glance at the speaker. "Yes?"

It was a middle-aged earl something-or-other and he smiled broadly at her, as if she was already the prize he'd managed to win. Lexie understood that sometimes convenient matches were made as opposed to love matches, but she had to draw the line when it came to someone old enough to be her father. She had just turned twenty, and while some would say she was in danger of being on the shelf if she didn't wed soon, she was perfectly content to keep her options open.

And they didn't include the earl.

However, if she didn't play by the rules of society and conduct herself with decorum, she would soon be ostracized, which meant shipped back to her father's estate in shame. Since she didn't want to waste the opportunity she'd been given, she forced a smile to her face as she allowed the earl to take her hand and bestow a kiss upon her glove.

“I believe our dance is next.”

Lexie wanted to inspect the card dangling innocently from her wrist, but she had to concede that the earl was probably right. “Of course. But if you don’t mind, I was just heading for some punch?—”

“Allow me,” he said pleasantly and offered his arm to her.

She reluctantly threaded her arm through his.

As they turned back to her original destination, she felt her heart sink.

The villainous duke was no longer there.

Drat.

She wanted to stamp her foot in frustration.

A quick scan of the area proved that he wasn’t close by, so any hope that she could “bump” into him was lost as well.

As the earl gathered her punch, she took a few sips out of politeness alone and allowed him to escort her to the floor where, thankfully, another country dance was starting to play.

Although Lexie didn’t care for her partner, he didn’t make any suggestive comments or lewd remarks while they danced, for which she was grateful. She wasn’t sure she could accept defeat and unwanted advances.

As she waited for part of the line to move, Lexie happened to glance toward the terrace doors leading to the gardens. Her pulse fluttered when she spied a dark

shadow slipping out into the night air. She snapped to attention in enough time to resume her steps so she didn't make a fool of herself, but her mind was whirling with the prospect of cornering the elusive duke once again. It would certainly be easy enough to slip outside for a breath of air. No one would consider that odd in the least.

Satisfied that she had put a second plan into place, she quite enjoyed the rest of the dance.

Dominic Eastland, the Duke of Cuthbert, watched the intriguing woman from the shadows of the terrace doors. He had felt her stare on him from the moment he had appeared at the ball and while most of the ton whispered about him and his misdeeds, this was the first time he had been able to feel his skin crawl. But no, he supposed that wasn't the proper term, because he hadn't felt disgusted by her regard in the least. In truth, it was the first time in a long time the stirrings of lust had traveled through his body.

Unfortunately, it was too risky to form any sort of attachment to the lady because not only was his society reputation quite lurid, but the life he kept carefully guarded was one shrouded in danger. He was known in those circles as Avalon, the leader of the Blue Boys gang in the East End. They were some of the worst cutthroats, feared by the most hardened criminals. Even the Bow Street Runners gave them a wide berth. Because of this, Avalon was afforded many freedoms, but he was finding that trying to lead two separate lives was starting to take its toll. He'd found it amusing two years ago when he'd taken up the reins and held private meetings at his office at the Crown and Sceptre pub in Whitechapel. He had always fought against the strictures that his title had placed upon him.

On a lark, some years ago, he'd dressed up as a commoner and headed to the streets to experience a different side of London. He'd nearly paid the cost with his life. For some reason that he had never been able to fathom, he was spared and instead, offered a position within the coveted gang. It had been the outlet he'd been searching

for, and although it was believed that they actually committed all the misdeeds that had been rumored, most of it was highly fabricated. But the gossip helped to secure his standing within the ranks and the ability to move about the East End and take care of the true mischief makers .

The same sort of luck had been extended to his position in the dukedom. Most gave him a wide berth because they thought him a true ne'er-do-well. While they might not have been far off the mark in that regard, Dominic was grateful for the opportunity to slip away from society at a moment's notice and no one batted an eyelash at his disappearance. Most likely breathed a sigh of relief that his presence wouldn't have to be tolerated.

Together, his two personas had found a way to be compatible. Since he could move freely about in both sides of society, he'd been able to gain a lot of knowledge. Most of it was written in a journal that he kept in a secret location, known only to him. Should he ever find himself on the opposite side of the law or the king's favor, he would have a winning hand to play to secure his freedom.

However, as the pressure to find a wife and do his duty by his line was starting to increase, Dominic had decided that it was time to choose a successor for the Blue Boys. After the betrayal of his former right hand, he'd appointed Amos the honor of becoming his second. He had come to know the man quite well after a recent altercation with him and the infamous Mr. Drake Porter. Their interaction had ended quite amicably, more so than he might have anticipated. Drake was known to be just as ruthless as Dominic in his dealings, but it was his new bride that had managed to rein in the scoundrel.

Dominic had been envious of Drake's attachment to Miss Fleur Davies, but when it became evident the lady was steadfast in her devotion to Porter, he had ceased his pursuit and stepped back. But it hadn't ceased Dominic's wondering if he might ever be so fortunate to discover the same sort of all-consuming love. He had enjoyed lust,

certainly, but always when the fire died down, he was searching for his next conquest.

He searched out the woman once more and narrowed his eyes. He didn't recall seeing her before and that was the first warning he ought to have heeded. A new debutante in London would only cause trouble. She was likely an innocent, searching for a wealthy husband and eager to settle down and start a family. While he had plenty in his coffers, he wasn't quite ready to become a father just yet. Just the prospect terrified him. Thinking back to when he was ten years old and he'd watched them lower his father's coffin into the family plot with a sense of relief had never made him eager to repeat the devastation of his childhood. It was likely the only reason that his mother had borne Dominic and his brother, Edmund. While Dominic had always been the heir and Edmund the spare, Edmund was the one who had succumbed to illness when he was just fourteen. That was a death that was a bit more difficult for Dominic to witness. He had always been close to his younger brother even if Edmund had dealt with ill health most of his life.

These days, his mother was all that was left, and she never came to London for any reason. She remained at the estate and spent her days in seclusion reading or doing needlepoint. Dominic had never pried about why she had closed herself off from the rest of the world. He doubted that it was her husband's death that had caused her melancholy. It might not have even been Edmund's. The truth could be that she was just grateful to have a rest and let the rest of the world fade into oblivion.

It could have been a challenging time for Dominic, watching her withdrawal, but being sent to school was his saving grace. He was spared the horrors of home.

He knew that was where some of his worst rebellion had come into play. However, there was nothing he could do for his actions now but try to make a fresh start. He told himself he wanted to change, to become an honorable man like Porter had managed to accomplish. He'd set all his misdeeds aside and, the last Dominic knew,

he was living a fairytale life with his new wife, Fleur.

Dominic moved away from the ballroom and walked to the stone balustrade that surrounded the terrace. He set his hands on top of the cool stone and exhaled slowly. If there was one thing he knew, it was that he was far from being the prince from a children's story. He would surely be cast as the villain, but he intended to change all of that very soon. He intended to hand the responsibility of the Blue Boys to Amos or his son, Devon. He had come to trust both men quite highly and he knew that they would carry the gang in the right direction without letting them fall prey to the worst of temptations that lay in the East End.

Looking out over the darkened gardens beyond, Dominic was starting to ponder the next move his life might take, when the voice of an angel spoke up behind him.

“Lovely night, is it not?”

CHAPTER 2

L exie's heart was pounding so fiercely, she was tempted to put a hand over it to ensure it stayed within her chest.

But now that she was standing there, in front of the society devil, she could certainly imagine why many might think he was such a ruthless villain. With his towering height, slightly tousled dark hair, and those equally dark eyes that seemed to bore right into her very soul, he was intimidating. But he was also— dare she even think it—tempting?

Duke or no, she found him fascinating, and she hadn't been able to resist slipping out onto the terrace to follow him as soon as her dance had ended. With hastened steps, she had been praying he was still there, and when she'd walked through the open doors and spied him standing there, it had almost unnerved her. She had almost convinced herself that the space would be empty. When it was not, she blurted the first thing that came to mind. Of course, it was about the weather. Such inane chatter likely made her sound like a ninnyhammer, not any better than the empty-headed debutantes that she had befriended inside the ballroom. Thankfully, she was quite intelligent. Her father had made sure all his children were properly educated.

She just had to prove to the duke that she was different and worthy of being singled out by his attention. Whether or not her aunt approved, he was still a high-ranking peer. Surely, Aunt Bonnie could overlook the few faults he might possess.

He turned to her and crossed his arms, looking even more imposing. "Yes. I suppose it is. For October."

“I am not a fan of the rain,” she admitted, and then wanted to shake herself for such a boring comment. While it was true, she was prattling on about the weather again, for goodness’ sake. “I find it entirely too... wet.”

Heavens. Perhaps I’m a goose after all.

She could have imagined the slight upturn of his lips right then, but when he spoke, it was apparent that his deep voice held a hint of amusement. “Is it such a terrible thing to be... wet? This is England, after all.”

The fine hairs on the back of Lexie’s neck stood on end. Not because she was fearful of this man, but because of the electricity that seemed to pass between them in that moment. Something told her he wasn’t speaking of the sky opening up when he mentioned being... wet .

She clenched her thighs together at a decided dampness. “Naturally. England is notorious for... rain.”

Good lord. Could she not contrive any other topic than this ?

It was the duke who took the initiative. He pushed away from the railing and came toward her. Immediately, her throat clenched and she couldn’t speak even should she have wanted to do so. It was as if he’d put some sort of spell upon her. The way his eyes glimmered in the moonlight; she could almost imagine it were so. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

Lexie told herself not to respond, to tell the truth, to act the elusive and mysterious vixen, but instead, she abruptly found her voice and said, “The Duke of Cuthbert. ”

He lifted a brow. Either impressed by her honesty or amused by her naivety. She couldn’t discern which. “That seems to leave me at a disadvantage. You are?”

At the prompt, she told herself this was her chance to offer a seductive rejoinder. Perhaps Your Grace will simply have to find out. That would have been the perfect choice.

Instead, the absence was interrupted by the firm tone of her aunt's voice. "Alexandra! I have been looking for you." Her eyes widened as she took note of Lexie's companion. Immediately, Lexie's heart fell. She wasn't ready to end her time with the duke, but she had squandered her one opportunity to make a good first impression on this man with her empty conversation. Where was the charming wit she had always prided herself on?

"Come inside at once. There is an urgent matter that requires your attendance." The older woman didn't give Lexie a chance to speak as she grasped her arm and nearly dragged her toward the doors to the ballroom. With a helpless roll of her eyes, she hoped that was enough to offer her apologies to the duke.

Touching a hand to his forehead in a silent salute, that was the last she saw of him before her aunt pulled her into the nearest alcove. "What did I tell you about engaging with that man?" Aunt Bonnie hissed. "He is nothing but a bounder. Your father assured me that you were a sensible girl but your actions would prove otherwise."

Lexie did her best to appear repentant. If she did not, then her aunt might very well decide to wash her hands of her and send her back to the country. Before she'd met the duke she might have decided to do so, but London had gotten much more interesting. She wasn't ready to leave now. "I am sorry, Aunt. I merely stepped onto the terrace for some air. I didn't know the duke would be there."

Her aunt narrowed her eyes and gave a huff of disapproval. "I suppose such encounters cannot be helped. Just see that it doesn't happen again, and if you find yourself in the same company, quickly turn and walk the other way." She lifted her chin and said, "We shall take our leave. I daresay I did not prepare myself for such

excitement this evening.”

Lexie wanted to groan, but she knew she had no other choice. Nevertheless, she attempted one more ploy. “Must we?” She lifted her arm where her dance card was dangling innocently. “There are more dances that haven’t yet been claimed.”

“The gentlemen will have to find other ladies to stand up with.”

The finality of her aunt’s words pressed into Lexie’s heart.

As they started to walk up the stairs to exit the ballroom, she turned her head one last time to search the crowd for the duke, but he never reappeared in her line of vision.

The next morning, Lexie was having breakfast in the morning room with her aunt when Aunt Bonnie abruptly let out a horrified gasp. Lexie nearly dropped her toast thinking something terrible had happened. “What is it?”

“That... that... man ! The utter cheek...!”

Lexie had never heard Aunt Bonnie at a loss for words before, but this morning they seemed to have deserted her. “Er, could you be more specific?—?”

“The Duke of Cuthbert. That’s who!” Her aunt tossed aside the newsprint with a moue of disgust. Lexie, however, was suddenly eager to know what had put her aunt in such a tizzy.

Clearing her throat lightly, she attempted to adopt a neutral tone even if her pulse was suddenly starting to hum with anticipation. “I can’t imagine anything that might give you cause for such a nervous disposition?—”

“Can’t you?” her aunt snapped in a huff. She instantly retrieved the paper and opened

it back to the offending piece. “Listen to this. It has been rumored that the irreputable Duke of C—has finally decided to honor his family name by announcing to all and sundry that he is searching for a wife. However, there are certain qualifications that must be met before a possible duchess will be considered.” Again, the paper was thrust aside. “The audacity of the scoundrel to suggest that he find a paragon when his reputation is nearly besmirched beyond repair is quite a tall step in arrogance.”

Lexie shrugged her shoulders as she daintily bit a piece of her toast. “He is an aristocrat, Aunt Bonnie. You warned me that many men would be of a similar bent?—”

The older woman waved away her explanation. “Yes, yes. I know what I said, but when it comes to men like the duke, who has scraped by the edge of respectability behind such a revered title, it makes one doubt if his claims to find a wife are even genuine or another lark meant to amuse society.”

“I suppose we shall find out if he actually proposes,” Lexie noted dryly. Feeling that her aunt was going to leave her out to dry wondering about the duke’s qualifications for a bride, she held out a hand. “Might I see what he is daring to require regarding a future duchess?”

Her aunt tossed the print at her with a snort. Rising from the table, she smoothed her dress, as if the duke’s ridiculous suggestions had actually rumpled her clothes. “I will be out most of the morning. I have some calls to make.”

Lexie lifted a brow, knowing that meant her aunt was likely rushing over to see her friend Margaret, where they would slay the duke in the convenience of the lady’s drawing room over tea and cucumber sandwiches.

“I’m afraid you will have to amuse yourself while I’m away.”

“I shall manage,” Lexie noted. “I had a mind to wander over to the British Museum.” Knowing that her aunt despised history, believing that the present day was where people should keep themselves occupied, Lexie held her breath awaiting a reaction .

Her aunt gave a mock shudder. “Enjoy yourself, my dear. I will see you later this afternoon for the Sorrington musicale.”

As Aunt Bonnie breezed from the room, Lexie gave up all pretense of eating, her eagerness to read what had been printed overriding all else.

Scanning the black and white print until she found what she was looking for, she read the rest of the article aloud in an intriguing murmur. “ The duke has requested his future bride be kind of character, possessing of a devoted spirit, and forgiving nature. Every other attribute might be overlooked if one is capable of these three qualities. ” Lexie kept reading but it moved on to another article. “That’s it?”

Sitting back in her chair, she stared curiously at the paper, wondering what her aunt might have been so upset about. It seemed a sensible enough list to her. But then, perhaps forgiveness was a bit too much to ask if his past was littered with as many misdeeds as her aunt claimed. It would take a devoted spirit and kind nature in order to overlook the fact they were marrying a villain.

However, Lexie found the duke was even more mysterious after reading this. Not only was she surprised that he seemed willing to put aside his wayward ways to settle down, but the fact he was asking so little—no wealth, beauty, or any of the other qualifications that most men of society put upon women to be considered “accomplished.” He wasn’t asking for material interests, qualities that would impress upon society that he had gained a diamond, a paragon among women. No, instead he was just asking for someone who could look beyond the black image he’d painted of himself and discover the true man beyond all the rumor.

Rather than being critical, Lexie discovered that she was quite fascinated by his choices. Not only that, but should she find herself in the market for a husband, she would like to be considered as a candidate for the position of his duchess. She believed that she held those three demands with ease. The only issue is that she was a bit disappointed. She admired the duke for asking for so little, but she thought she'd caught a glimpse of the rogue beneath that smooth veneer the night before on the terrace. She wanted to find a man who would sweep her into his arms and kiss her utterly senseless. Until she had spied the towering, impressive figure of the Duke of Cuthbert, she couldn't imagine anyone of her acquaintance capable of any sort of passion other than for their cigars and brandy after dinner. How terribly boring!

Lexie had lived all of her life in the country near a small hamlet. She wanted to experience so much more than the same. She didn't want to continue rustication for fear her spirit would start to break and fall apart. She wanted to live . When the opportunity to come to London had presented itself, she had been pleased beyond measure. Unfortunately, it had yet to prove any different than the life she'd left behind.

Shaking her head, Lexie gathered her bonnet, gloves, and pelisse, and with her maid at her side, headed out for the day. It was a crisp, autumn day, but the sun was shining and she lifted her face to the warm rays beaming down upon her. If her aunt were there, she would surely scold her for daring to impugn her complexion with even one freckle, but Lexie had never overly cared for outward appearances. She knew beauty was something that must be retained in youth, but several women in the village back home had married without the benefit of aided cosmetics or maids eager to wind their hair into an elegant chignon. She had learned that simplicity was sometimes the best choice.

As the carriage deposited her in front of the museum, Lexie decided to put all thoughts of the duke aside as she headed up the front steps. She had long wanted to see the infamous and somewhat controversial Elgin marbles that the earl had pilfered

from the Greeks. He had claimed they would have been destroyed had he not intervened to save them and bring them to England, but there had been some speculation about that theory.

By whatever means they had found their way there, Lexie was grateful for the chance to behold such a sight. They were as remarkable as she had hoped they would be. All of the tomes she had read had not prepared her for the magnificence of the sculptor and his detail to preserving such heritage for all time.

Walking among the scenes of battle, her footsteps echoing on the cold marble floor surrounded by heavy scenes depicted in the same stone, Lexie could not ignore the irony that one of the most powerful nations on the entire earth had found a way to showcase such a legacy, as well as lay claim to the find.

Moving about the rest of the museum, her meandering finally brought her abreast of the Rosetta stone. It had been discovered during the Napoleonic wars and was named after the city in which it was found. The face boasted three different languages, including that of ancient hieroglyphics during the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty which ended with the most famous ruler of all Egypt, Cleopatra VII.

She had long wondered about the “Queen of the Nile,” which Cleopatra had been dubbed, and her affairs with two of the most powerful men of her time—Julius Caesar and his general, Marc Antony. Lexie had fantasized what it might be like to be so consumed with passion as to earn the affection for not just one, but two lovers. She had yet to turn the head of one gentleman, but she had always been consumed with the prospect of such a turbulent love.

“Have you studied ancient hieroglyphs?”

A deep voice rumbled in Lexie’s ear and she gasped as she spun toward the speaker. As if her imaginings had brought him forth, she looked up into the inquiring gaze of

the Duke of Cuthbert. She was so stunned to see him that she blurted the first thing that came to mind, “What are you doing here? ”

His lips quirked upward and, she found she liked the gesture. “Admiring the beauty of the museum,” he noted softly, his gaze traveling up and down her length. “The same as you are.”

“Indeed,” she breathed, and then blinked to gain some focus. She turned her attention back to the stone which was starting to draw more of a crowd. She stepped aside to allow others to appreciate the view. The duke joined her, and it took her a moment to remember what he had initially asked her. They started walking, and she added, “I studied it for a time. My father was not against me broadening my mind when it came to history as he championed most any cause as well.”

He smiled gently. “It seems that you have a good rapport.”

She laughed. “Not particularly. At least not when I was a child. He was scarcely present, but as he has gotten on in years, he has seemed to become more engaging. When it involves a subject that interests him, he can be quite conversational.”

“So you’ve learned to inquire about certain things,” the duke guessed. Quite accurately. She was impressed by his astute nature.

“You could say that. Although I would not speak of subjects that didn’t intrigue me as well.”

“Naturally,” he noted. “What else interests you at the museum, Miss Givenwald?”

She glanced at him curiously. “Ah. I see you have discovered my identity. Who solved the mystery for you?”

His dark eyes glimmered. “It was not so difficult as you might imagine. My hostess the previous evening was forthcoming with the information after a bit of persuasion on my part.”

“Ah. It seems your villainous ways precede you, Your Grace. My aunt has warned me quite clearly to steer clear of you.”

“Has she?” he noted softly. “I can’t say I’m surprised. The ton loves to gossip.”

Her lips twitched. “I have discovered that readily enough. It is a shame they have decided to target you. I have found that most of the time rumors are unfounded. It is speculation mixed with entertainment that causes such an uproar.”

He paused and looked at her directly. “Would that were true in my case, Miss Givenwald. But when it comes to my reputation, I have earned every black mark that has been thrust upon me.”

CHAPTER 3

Dominic didn't know why he'd spoken so boldly. He hadn't meant to frighten Miss Givenwald away by his easy acceptance of his dark character.

And yet...

As much as he feared he'd overstepped his bounds by revealing the truth, he hadn't been prepared for the spark of interest that lit up her blue eyes when he admitted his transgressions. He thought she might have quickly made her excuses to get away from him. The fact that she didn't was somewhat... curious. However, his alternate persona, Avalon, leader of the East End underworld, immediately found her absolutely intriguing. His cock stirred with interest, and he had to fight the urge to drag her to a shadowed alcove where he might test the limits of her acceptance.

As he studied her, he saw that her cheeks had turned slightly pink, her lips parting as her breathing deepened. If he had to hazard a guess, she was also wet between her thighs, the thought of his villainy somehow exciting her.

In the Times article he'd thought the qualifications he'd listed had been perfectly apt for a duke looking to turn his circumstances around. He figured it was what the matchmaking mothers of society would want to hear. The idea that any rake could be reformed was a temptation not many could resist and with words like kind, devoted, and forgiving, he would no doubt uncover a lady who would run a smooth household and do her duty without complaint.

Of course, he would quickly find such a mundane life boring in the extreme, but it

wasn't as though outward liaisons weren't commonplace. He wouldn't set out to take a mistress, hoping that the wife he selected would have more than enough characteristics to keep him entertained outside of the bedroom, but with the lot he'd encountered this early in the little season, he had little hope of that.

Until he'd spied a blond angel among the crowd.

But then, it could be she wasn't an angel at all, but a vixen sent to scramble his senses and appeal to his baser urges. Avalon was certainly impressed.

"Have I shocked you into silence?" he murmured, hoping to learn more about this paragon of society who appeared as though she wanted to run toward the danger, rather than away from it.

"Not at all." She shook her head, and as she tilted her head, he could see the pulse beat at the base of her creamy, slender neck and he had to clench his fists to keep from placing his lips there and sucking until she bore his mark for all to see.

"Then you would be the first," he added smoothly.

She shrugged a delicate shoulder, and then she reached into her reticule and withdrew a fan and began to wave it lightly in front of her face. His nostrils flared with the scent of prey. There was no doubt in his mind that should he decide to seduce this woman she would not deny him, nor would she make for poor bed sport. He could easily imagine her shapely body spread out on his coverlet, and sliding his length, inch by glorious inch, into her warmth as she pulled him deep inside her body.

"What was that, Your Grace? "

Faced with those sparkling blue eyes, he nearly spoke the truth, that he'd uttered a curse because his trousers had grown rather snug. He was grateful for the cool

autumn air and the greatcoat he wore that concealed his hardened manhood. “I was merely remarking on the time,” he said swiftly. “I have an appointment that I cannot miss.”

She looked disappointed, but it did not last long. She returned with a bright smile that did nothing to ease his discomfort, “Then I shall bid you good day, Your Grace. I’m sure we shall see each other again with what few amusements there are to be had in the city at the moment.”

He inclined his head to her. “Undoubtedly so, Miss Givenwald.”

As he left her side, he was grateful for the cool air that struck him the moment he exited the museum. He drew a restoring breath and exhaled heavily. It had been a long time since any woman had left him feeling so out of sorts. Even then, those sensations had been mild compared to the fire that lit his blood around Miss Alexandra Givenwald.

Lexie. He had heard that was how she preferred to be addressed and it suited her. It was a sultry name for an equally appealing woman.

Like his dealings with the Blue Boys in Whitechapel, there was not much in London that escaped Dominic’s attention. Although the duke and Avalon were two very different men on the outside, they were all part of the same personality. Dominic had always had the same stirring nature that Miss Givenwald seemed to have. Perhaps that was why he seemed so drawn to her.

He had never felt like a duke, although he’d been properly schooled in how to run an estate and dress and act appropriately. On the inside he’d always had a wild and rebellious nature and creating Avalon had been the outlet to allow his deepest desires to escape. It was what had driven him to begin a different life that did not resemble the one he’d been born into at all.

But if he hoped to take up the reins of his birthright and honor his brother's memory in a title that should have been his, Dominic knew it was imperative that he cease all ties with the East End before his enemies discovered his true identity. He had the threat of the journal in his possession, but he knew there could come a time when it was no longer a deterrent.

Thankfully, Amos was turning out to be a worthy ally and he had no qualms in turning the order of the Blue Boys over to him or his son, Devon. Either would make a leader he would be proud to acknowledge, because while they fit the devious characteristics needed to keep the gang in line, Dominic knew they were also bound by honor and justice. They would not act rashly or without due cause. It was the same principles that Avalon had set into place, and he was grateful they would be adhered to when he was gone.

Unfortunately, his work wasn't over yet. He still had a few things that required his personal attention and until they were settled, he had to ensure that his interest in Miss Givenwald wasn't overly noted.

Pity, because he was quite eager to deepen their acquaintance at the earliest opportunity.

He was nearly at his carriage when a young lad rushed up to him. "I 'ave a message for ye, guvn'r."

Dominic quickly surveyed the area around him, but when he didn't feel any strange prickling of warning rise on the back of his neck, he accepted the missive and handed the boy a shilling. The lad happily took it and scampered away as Dominic opened the note. He recognized Amos' handwriting instantly.

Trouble is brewing. You are needed.

Crushing the missive in his grasp, Dominic got into his carriage and ordered his coachman. "Return home posthaste."

He pinched the bridge of his nose as the coach set out. This was a complication he hadn't wanted but he knew was likely unavoidable. Transition of power was never an easy task.

The moment he arrived back at his townhouse, he changed out of his fashionable clothes into something more appropriate for a leader of London's underworld. Heading out the back staircase, he was grateful he had loyal servants, but then, he paid them well for their discretion.

He strode out into the mews and quickly flagged down a hackney. In short order, he was deposited near the Thames near Whitechapel. From there, he set out on foot to the Crown & Sceptre. He had long employed the usefulness of public transport in his guise as Avalon and never did he allow the drivers to take him directly to the front door of the pub. The reason he'd found a way to survive this long was because he'd taken several precautions to keep his two identities separate.

When he walked into the establishment and headed for his office, he saw the door was standing wide open. This immediately caused a scowl to deepen his brow because he was never so careless as to allow anyone access to his personal domain.

However, when he turned the corner and saw Amos sitting there with his head leaned back against the chair, some of his frustration eased. He was the only man with whom Avalon had entrusted enough of his secrets where a message could be sent in the event of an emergency. He closed the door and addressed his successor with a firm tone, "What's happened?"

The dark-skinned man narrowed the single blue eye that was revealed, the other covered by a patch that Dominic had never questioned. He'd learned enough to know

that his life had not always been easy or without the need to fight. Rather than reply directly, he tossed a packet on the desk in front of him. “This.”

Dominic picked it up and emptied the contents onto the desk. At first, he couldn’t believe what he was seeing and then he grabbed the leather-bound journal with a white-knuckled grip. It was the one thing he’d had at his disposal to use as leverage in case things got too heated in his dual roles. But as he flipped through the pages, he found that they had all been smoothly cut out and what remained was filled with notations of his life as the Duke of Cuthbert. “Bloody hell.”

“Aye,” Amos agreed with a heavy exhale. “It appears you no longer have the upper hand.”

Dominic snapped the journal shut and tossed it back down on the desk with a thud. He inspected the packet, but other than the receiving address, there was nothing to indicate from where it might have originated. “I had this secured where no one could find it. There must be more than one adversary that wishes to bring me down to involve my servants. My assumption is that it’s someone in the upper echelon.”

“So, it’s true,” Amos murmured. “You’re a duke.”

He didn’t seem impressed. In truth, Dominic thought he sounded more disappointed than anything. “Yes. But I have always felt more at home in the guise of Avalon. An identity that someone would like to destroy, as well as myself and everyone else that was written in this book.”

Amos tilted his head, his gaze shrewd. “Then it appears it shall be up to us to stop them before the damage is done. As my first order of business as the new leader of the Blue Boys, I feel it is my responsibility to release you from your previous obligations.”

Dominic stilled. He had been attempting to convince Amos to succeed him, but until this moment, he hadn't been sure if the man was intending to take up the reins. "You are sure you are willing to do this?"

Amos nodded. "It will give me something to do while Devon is welcoming his first child."

Dominic blinked and then gave a hearty laugh. "Offer my felicitations," he noted, and then sobered once more. Leaning forward on the desk, he said, "It appears all we have left to do is find out who is so eager to sabotage my future and then find some way to dispose of Avalon in a way that doesn't cause a riot. "

Amos got to his feet. "It sounds like we have some work to do. Let's get started."

Lexie had taken special consideration with her appearance later that afternoon at the musicale, but she left feeling despondent since the duke had failed to make an appearance. She wished she'd told him at the museum that she would be attending, but she had imagined he would be there.

Her aunt had noticed her reticence on the way back to their townhouse in Mayfair and remarked upon it, having no idea that her true disappointment was in the one man she had been warned against. "Don't fret, my dear. I know the ladies this evening had more gentlemen hanging on their every word, but we shall endeavor to set them all on their ear when the season begins in earnest next spring. Once your talents are showcased the fight will be on, and you will have no end of suitors clamoring for your hand, mark my word. I promised your father that I would see you happily married in one season, and I intend to keep it."

She had offered a weak smile to her aunt, but inside her heart was withering. She wasn't sure how long it took men of society to propose but surely it wouldn't take as long as the spring for her to see the duke on one knee?

Perhaps she had to adjust her strategy. It wasn't as though she was schooled in the art of flirtation, but she had thought she and the duke had shared a moment earlier in the day. When he'd claimed the rumors about him had been true, she couldn't stop her stomach from doing a little flip, nor the way her heart had abruptly run away with her. She had panicked at first, thinking that he had been able to see her delight at the revelation when she should have backed away in horror. Any sensible lady would have done so, but Lexie had been hoping to uncover just this thing. She wanted adventure and excitement, and with the slight flicker in the duke's brown eyes, she knew he could show her that—and more.

It was the prospect of more that had caused her breathing to become slightly erratic.

It was all she could do not to clap her hands together in glee as she'd practically skipped down the museum steps on the way home. Her maid had looked at her curiously but wisely said nothing as they had returned. Once secluded in her room, Lexie had spun in a circle of elation in the middle of her bedchamber before collapsing on the bed. She had closed her eyes and hugged herself, imagining the duke was there with her. He would take her in his arms and kiss her until her toes curled and she could finally experience something of note in her staid existence. She was tired of being so proper and perfect.

She wanted the chance to be naughty, so very naughty. Whether or not she found herself going home in disgrace or ruined, she wasn't certain that she cared. She had no other siblings to concern herself with and her mother was long gone, so there would be no disapproving stares to greet her other than that of her father and he was known to offer them more than a warm smile at any given time. She would regret injuring her Aunt Bonnie who had taken it upon herself to act as her chaperone, but Lexie had no doubt she would easily wash her hands of any scandal and rush to Margaret and explain how she had been taken advantage of by her nasty relation.

Lexie giggled at the image of her aunt fanning herself and trying not to faint. The

theatrics would almost be too entertaining not to witness.

She surely sounded like a horrible person for daring to envision such a scenario, but it wasn't that she was ungrateful for the opportunity she'd been given. She just looked at her journey to London as a different sort of opportunity than the one she was expected to have. Why was it that men got to have all the fun and women had to comport themselves with the utmost decorum so as not to garner a whiff of scandal? Men could have their liaisons and gamble and race their carriages, and no one thought anything of it. It was all part of the process of settling down, as her aunt had put it. Lexie decided women should have the same freedoms and she intended to do her best to fulfill those dreams.

Unfortunately, the next time she encountered the duke was more than two weeks later on Guy Fawkes night at Vauxhall amidst fireworks, large bonfires, and even a costume party. Lexie had been surprised when her aunt had suggested they attend, believing that it might be considered too pagan or Gaelic for them to participate, but she had merely lifted her chin and said she never missed any important society event. And since it was rumored that the king might make an appearance, she wasn't about to bow out.

All this time, Lexie thought of the subject of her fascination and how disappointed she'd been that he'd failed to appear at any of the ton events she had attended. For someone who had wanted to find a bride, she thought the man had done a superb job of making himself scarce. And of all the times he chose to resurface, it was rather ironic that he should come dressed as Hades when he was wanting to prove his new respectability in taking a suitable wife. She had spied his towering figure immediately. If it hadn't been for the air of dominance that he presented to the rest of the world, she would have known him by his tousled dark hair and the smirk upon his face as he conversed with a group of fellow Roman gods.

Lexie had chosen to play the part of Aphrodite, her Roman Palla robe decorated with

embroidered swans and seashells, while a faux crown of rose blooms sewn together sat atop her upswept curls. She had chosen the goddess of love in the off chance that he might attend, but now she rather wished she'd opted for Persephone.

Nevertheless, she was merely glad that he had returned. She was almost starting to fear that he'd left for his country estate. What a devastating thing that would have been to have her possible entertainment ripped away so quickly!

With her aunt nearby, she would have to ensure that she was covert about finding a way to gain the duke's attention, but as she turned her head and sought him out from the privacy of the supper box her aunt had secured for them, she realized she had no need to seek him out because he had already spied her. From a distance, the crowd buzzing between them, Lexie could still feel the heat of his gaze and it thrilled her to no end to be the recipient of it.

Suddenly restless, Lexie turned to her chaperone and kept her voice low. "Aunt, I need to use the necessary."

"Naturally, dear." The gray head bobbed in turn. As Lexie stood, her aunt's next words caused her to groan inwardly. "Make sure your maid goes with you. Vauxhall has not always been known to be respectful of single ladies out wandering on their own."

"Of course." Lexie signaled her maid, and the servant followed her obediently. However, as soon as they were out of earshot of her aunt, she turned to the girl. "Jane, I was wondering if you might grant me a favor? But you must do so with the utmost discretion."

The girl nodded. "Yes, miss."

"Good." She smiled broadly. "Then wait here a moment. I need to speak to a

particular gentleman, and I should like a moment of privacy to converse.”

The maid’s brow furrowed slightly. “But miss...”

“Please.” Lexie grasped her hand. “I will be indebted to you. Just a few minutes is all I ask. I can’t get into that much trouble in such a short time.” Her mind scrambled for something else to say to convince her maid that all would be well. “I promise I won’t stray to the Dark Walks. I will remain in full view for the entirety. ”

It took a moment for the maid to waver, but she finally sighed heavily. “Very well. It is a nice night for romance.”

Lexie wanted to shout her elation, but she kept her face a careful mask of composure as she headed toward her quarry, hoping no outward sign of her excitement was showing through. It wouldn’t be good to appear too eager to “accidentally” run into the duke again.

However, as she came abreast of the covey of gentlemen dressed as Roman gods, she found that Hades had fled from the rest of the flock. She muttered a curse as she surveyed the surrounding area, but there was nothing to indicate to where he might have disappeared.

Annoyed at the loss of her one opportunity to impress the duke in a casual flirtation, Lexie turned back to rejoin her maid. That was when she happened to glance across the lawn—and found the cretin in conversation with her aunt! She clenched her fists. The very idea that he should dare to approach her when she’d had the same thought in mind was frustrating, to say the least.

But then she wondered...

Hastening her steps, she started to head toward the supper box, her stunned maid

struggling to catch up as Lexie nearly sprinted across the expanse.

By the time they arrived, Aunt Bonnie was sitting alone. It was all Lexie could do not to huff in exasperation.

“Ah, Alexandra, there you are.” No matter how much Lexie had asked her aunt to call her by her preferred nickname, she refused, stating her given name was much more refined. But that wasn’t what bothered her now. It was the pinched expression to the older woman’s face. “I was afraid you might have been waylaid by that... man.”

Lexie sank into her seat and reached for the tea, wishing it was something stronger. She could certainly use a splash of brandy about now. Taking a dainty sip, she asked innocently, “Whomever do you mean?”

“The Duke of Cuthbert, that’s who,” Aunt Bonnie snapped irritably. “He dared to walk up to me as though we had something in common.” She shook her head. “In my day, gentlemen weren’t nearly so bold.”

“Perhaps he wanted to gain your favor?” Lexie murmured, hoping that her aunt took the hint.

She sniffed. “I can’t see why. I have nothing to offer His Grace. The doors to society will remain open to him because of his position. He doesn’t need my approval.”

Unless he wishes to court me...

Lexie yearned to blurt out the words, but she was wise enough to stay silent on the subject. It was not one that would endear her to her aunt, nor was it the appropriate time to discuss the duke and end up in a potentially heated argument that would strip the enjoyment of the festivities to come.

Regretting that she hadn't spoken to the duke, Lexie enjoyed supper and the soft glow of the bonfires set around. There was a mock play about the failed plot to blow up Parliament and the assassination of King James I. As the night wore on, Lexie could almost forget that she was supposed to be mourning the duke's absence, and instead, began to have fun in earnest. In the countryside there was some celebration around the holiday, but nothing that could possibly compare to what Vauxhall delivered.

Just before the fireworks burst into the air, Lady Margaret rushed over to their box. "He's here !" she hissed animatedly.

Immediately, Aunt Bonnie sat up straighter and patted her hair, as if the king was walking over to her in that moment. Of course, he wasn't, but that didn't stop her from rising to her feet and peering out into the crowd. "Oh, I must greet His Majesty properly!"

She turned to Lexie, but she waved a hand. "I will happily await your return right here. "

"Very well." Bonnie gathered her handkerchief and fluttered it about in a dismissive gesture. "I will return as soon as I am able."

Together, the two of them rushed off as if they had been given a personal invitation to the palace. Lexie rolled her eyes. She could care less for the royalty. There was only one person in London that turned her head.

"Miss Givenwald. We meet again."

CHAPTER 4

All night long, Dominic had been waiting for his chance to catch Miss Givenwald alone, but that crone she called a relation seldom left her side. She was taking her chaperone duties entirely too seriously, in his opinion. Of course, when word of the king's arrival had begun to spread, most of the assemblage quickly went to catch a glimpse of the monarch.

That was when he'd found his chance to move up behind his Aphrodite.

His . She was nothing of the sort, but that didn't mean he hadn't dreamed about making that a reality.

The entire time he'd been in the East End attempting to find the scoundrel who had ripped the pages from his journal with the intent to use his own information against him, he'd been wondering about the lady and if she had yet to have any suitors. It wasn't a pleasant thought to be sure and one that had his brow darkening more than once, until the point Amos had glared at him and told him to bed the wench that had caused so much distraction so that he might be able to converse on a normal level again.

The idea of bedding Miss Givenwald certainly had merit, but considering she was here to ensnare a husband, he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of her innocence for his own amusement without the promise of something more. Until he could be assured the threat to Avalon had been neutralized, he had to keep his distance from not just Miss Givenwald, but from any lady he set out to seduce or court.

Thus far, he'd been unsuccessful in gaining any potential brides, but then, he hadn't put a lot of effort into his charm. He realized it would take more than usual to get past the dragon matrons who eyed him with distrust, Miss Givenwald's chaperone included. She was barely civil to him as he had attempted to converse with politeness. But then, she was as convinced of his foul deeds as the rest of society, so until he could prove he was willing to put all his rowdy days to the wayside, he might have a bit of trouble convincing anyone to trust in him.

Except for one.

He still couldn't shake the feeling that Miss Givenwald preferred the prospect of his wicked ways and would be bored with someone who was straitlaced and staid.

With her light hair pulled back away from her neck, he was excited to see the pulse beating at the base flutter madly, giving further proof that she wasn't as proper as she would like for society to believe either.

"Your Grace." He loved the way her mouth moved, and he imagined it wrapped around his cock. "You have been absent from the city for some time. I wondered if you had retired to the country for the rest of the year."

His gaze traveled down to the shadowed valley between her breasts. "I would not dare deprive myself of the pleasures to be found in London. I have found them to be quite numerous of late."

"Have you?" The breathless quality of her voice made him envision her saying his name in the heat of passion in the same manner. He nearly groaned, his cock throbbing with the urge to sink himself into her wet heat.

"Indeed, I have." He bent down and spoke next to her ear, his lips inches from that tantalizing, perfumed skin. "I find you rather pleasing, Miss Givenwald."

“Oh?”

“I suppose that was too bold of me to say...” he murmured huskily.

“Not... at all.” She swallowed, and he could tell she was not unaffected by his presence, nor his words. This was a very promising start, indeed.

“What would you say if I suggested a walk about the grounds?”

She turned to him, and her blue eyes had darkened to the color of a turbulent sea. “I should like that very much.”

He straightened and held out his hand to her. Her bare palm slid into his and they both seemed affected by the intimate touch.

As Dominic led her away from the fireworks that had started to brighten the night sky, he told himself that he wasn't going to do anything but continue engaging in this heated flirtation, that he wouldn't take it further than that, even a kiss.

But the moment he spied a tree that carefully hid them from view, he pulled her against his chest. She gasped, and he reveled in the sound. Raising his hand, he lightly caressed her cheek. “What do you want, Lexie?”

“Out of life?”

Her lips were parted and he was having a difficult time not claiming her mouth with his. “From me.”

She inhaled sharply. “What makes you think I want anything?”

He moved his hips slightly but enough where she could feel his engorged manhood

pressing against her center. “Because I know what I want from you.”

Her breathing instantly turned shallower, and the color ran higher on her cheeks. He loved it. “I?— ”

“Have I shocked you now, my sweet? Perhaps I was mistaken when I thought our paths were aligned...” He started to pull back from her, but she reached out and grasped his robe. Dragging him back to her, she said nothing, but pressed her lips against his.

Dominic could feel a predatory growl rising within the center of his chest.

Mine .

He no longer cared if he was playing a dangerous game. This woman set him on fire like no one else had before and he couldn't seem to stop the inferno that threatened to consume them both. But then, he wasn't sure he wanted to be rescued.

He thought she would be untried, but it was obvious that someone had taught her how to kiss, because she moved against his lips with a precision that would not have been present in a true innocent. His hands tightened around her waist as he thought of some other man touching her, kissing her, but he told himself that they were no longer of any consequence because she was there with him and not his predecessor.

With a hungry desperation borne of desire, they finally broke apart. Her breathing was labored, and with her eyes heavy-lidded, she looked so lovely that he wanted to pin her against the tree and continue this little tryst. Unfortunately, he knew their time was limited and he wasn't a complete cad when it came to ruining a woman in such a crowded atmosphere.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked, the haze starting to leave her face. “I

thought I had learned?—”

“You were quite adept.” He lowered his voice. “But I’m not sure I want to know who taught you to kiss like that.”

He didn’t think she was the sort to get embarrassed so easily, but he took note of the blush that abruptly stained her cheeks as she said, “Believe me, it wasn’t one of the local village boys who tried to teach me.” She bit her lip in a manner that was both adoring and that almost brought him to his knees with want. “I studied others and did some... reading. ”

He lifted a brow. “I should like to know who allowed you to explore your education so thoroughly and thank them personally on my behalf.” He slowly stepped away from her. Glancing beyond the tree to the assemblage, he noted that the supper box they had vacated was still empty. Her aunt had yet to return, for which he was relieved. “You should get back.”

She halted his movements when he would have pulled her along behind him. “When will I see you again?”

“I’ll be around.” He winked. “On that, you may be assured.”

The entire way home from Vauxhall, Lexie lightly touched her lips. She couldn’t seem to stop dreaming of that moment when the duke had taken her in his arms and kissed her senseless, just as she’d always yearned for. It was even more than she’d hoped. It wasn’t just magical, but it was dark and seductive and full of carnal promises that he seemed more than willing to fulfill.

Lexie knew she should be trying to keep the duke at a distance, to keep his interest piqued without giving too much. But she wasn’t trying to become a duchess. She just wanted to know more about the hard length she’d felt pressed against her skirts. Her

core had immediately turned to liquid fire, pulsing with eager anticipation. When he'd pulled away from her, she had nearly begged him to return to her. It was bad enough that she'd gone so far as to ask to see him again. She didn't want to push him too far. That could be as detrimental as suddenly becoming bored.

The next morning, she dressed in a peach-colored riding habit, intending to take her mare out for a ride in Hyde Park. She had no idea if the duke rose this early, or if he cared to ride, but it would be the perfect opportunity for another chance encounter. Not only that, but she was also feeling rather restless after passing a sleepless night, so she was eager to burn off some energy that was pent up inside.

As she arrived in the breakfast room, Lexie was pulling on her riding gloves.

Her aunt glanced at her curiously. "You should wait until this afternoon when the rest of the ton is out and about on Rotten Row. You would have more hope of success of gaining an earl's eye." She smiled smugly. "Or better yet, that of the king."

Lexie wanted to sigh, because it was no less than ten times that she'd heard about the king and his acknowledgement of her aunt at Vauxhall. She had wanted to counter with her passionate tete-a-tete with the duke, but she knew that would be the wrong choice. It was a happy way to keep her aunt distracted if Lexie seemed to have her head in the clouds.

She walked over and gave her aunt a light kiss on the forehead. "I will return shortly."

"You won't break your fast?" the lady scolded lightly. "It's not good for the constitution to skip meals."

"I will be fine. I wasn't accustomed to eating much prior to ten o'clock before I came to London. I shall survive until teatime."

Thankfully, the lady didn't argue and Lexie was able to make her escape.

Accompanied by her maid, Lexie set out the short distance to the large park in the heart of London. Enjoying a taste of the country surrounded by the congestion of the city was something she had readily enjoyed as soon as she'd arrived in town. Although the small village she'd grown up in had bored her to tears, she had appreciated the beauty of nature, and with the colorful leaves of the trees at their peak, and the swans yet to move on from the Serpentine, it had become one of her personal havens.

It was also a way to breathe in solitude away from her hovering aunt. If she wasn't attempting to shove her in the direction of one gentleman or another, the woman was challenging her to be a more proper lady, telling her to sit up straight or smile a bit brighter. Lexie had nearly reached her limit of patience with Aunt Bonnie more than once, but she knew she had to hold her tongue because if she showed too much rebelliousness, she would be sent back to her father's house and that would be it. The punishment was certainly not worth the crime.

As she entered through the main gates of the park and her mare's hooves resounded on the pebbles of the path before her, Lexie glanced about the expanse, hoping to spy the impressive figure of the duke. However, other than a low bank of fog drifting near the lake, there was no sign of anyone that could possibly resemble the object of her fantasies.

She sighed; her dreams consumed with the passionate kiss they had shared. It was like nothing she could have ever imagined, and she was eager for a repeat performance, preferably in a place where they wouldn't have to worry about being disturbed.

Her aunt would be aghast if she knew Lexie's innermost thoughts, but how could she ignore the simmering fire that burned just beneath the surface of her skin? She

wanted to be consumed by it, to feel the ecstasy bursting through her body...

Her mare pranced in agitation beneath her, and she realized she had been pulling back on the reins a bit too tightly. She gently patted the horse's neck. "I do apologize, Molly. I fear my daydreams are threatening to overtake me."

Leading her horse to the stone bridge that overlooked the Serpentine, she made her way to a large stone and dismounted easily. A girl raised in the country, she had always been an apt rider. "Stay here with Molly. I wish to take a short walk alone."

"Yes, miss." The maid bobbed her head obediently as Lexie set out on her own.

Breathing deeply of the fresh morning air that had not yet been disturbed with the heavy chimney smoke of the day, Lexie leaned her arms on the bridge and looked out over the gray waters before her. She would catch glimpses of people milling around the edge and now and then she spied a boy eager to try out his boat, or a little girl hoping to find a moment that her governess wasn't watching to dip her toe into the forbidden lake.

Lexie recalled several occasions when she'd been young and romping about the countryside with some of the local village children when her governess had believed her to be sleeping. Those had been some of the most coveted moments of her life because although there were many times her hem would be filthy from mud, and her dress sopping wet from the adventures in the stream, the reprimand she had received hadn't fazed her in the least because she had been able to simply be a child, and not a gentleman's daughter who must comport herself in a certain manner.

She smiled, because apparently things had not changed so very much. She was still that same girl, eager to find a bit of mischief.

A movement out of the corner of her eye had her narrowing her eyes. She might have

thought nothing of the gentleman standing by a tree except for the fact he seemed out of place among the majority of London. At least, anyone from the West End, with his simple clothing and hardened jaw.

A shiver of apprehension crawled up her spine.

This man was trouble.

Suddenly eager to turn and retrace her steps before he glanced up and noticed her, Lexie stepped into the riding path of the bridge just as a horse and rider found their way there. With a muffled curse from the rider, combined with Lexie's sharp gasp of surprise, the encounter could have gone very differently. Instead, the man atop the steed was able to gain control over the animal quickly enough. Dismounting, he walked over to Lexie, who was trying to recover from the near mishap.

"My lady, are you injured?"

She glanced up into the face of a gentleman in a bottle green jacket, taking particular note of his clothing, simply because the shade of his eyes perfectly matched his attire. "I..." Words had suddenly escaped her.

He reached out and grasped her shoulders. "Can you tell me your name?"

She blinked, her tongue abruptly coming free from the roof of her mouth. "Alexandra Givenwald."

He smiled slowly, and she was taken aback by the sly yet charming nature of it. As more of his features came into focus, his light windblown hair and slightly darker, neatly trimmed beard, she would have to be blind not to notice that he was rather appealing to the eye. However, as lovely as his mannerisms and his outward appearance, she knew she would not be dreaming of him this night.

He exhaled in apparent relief and let his hands slide away from her. "I'm glad there was no harm done."

Recalling that she had practically jumped into the middle of the lane, she allowed some of her chagrin to come forth. "I do apologize for that, sir. I was woolgathering and should have been paying better attention."

He lifted a brow, as if surprised to hear her admit her guilt. "Yes, well, at least there was no harm done." He executed a slight bow. "I gather we will be crossing paths again, Miss Givenwald, so allow me to introduce myself so we can dispense with the formalities the next time. I am Francis Marcomb, the Earl of Lindley."

"My lord," she murmured with a small curtsy. With a twist of her lips, she added, "I will try not to embarrass myself at our next interlude."

He leaned forward slightly and murmured, "Should that not prove true, your beauty would still outshine any offense."

She wrinkled her nose. "Is that so?" She leaned toward him. "Then you should know I'm not easily swayed by flattery, my lord. "

Lexie moved past him, and although she heard the sound of laughter following in her wake, she did not turn around. Instead, she rejoined her maid and made her way out of the park. She was disappointed that she had not seen the duke, but it was always pleasant to engage in some harmless flirtation.

Unfortunately, she made the mistake of relaying her encounter with the earl when she returned to the house after her aunt asked her if she'd had a pleasant ride. "It was very nice. And I met someone new by way of a chance encounter. He introduced himself as the Earl of Lindley."

The older woman's blue eyes instantly lit up. "How intriguing! I was under the impression that he was on the continent and would not be returning until the season began in earnest next year. How fortuitous that he should arrive earlier than planned! This might be your chance to gain his notice, although it seems you already have."

Lexie wanted to roll her eyes, but she refrained. "He seemed pleasant enough, I would agree, but I'm not sure we would suit in that way."

Her aunt waved a hand. "You are entirely too fickle when it comes to choosing a husband. The process is simple enough. You choose a man who can keep you comfortable and in turn, you provide him with the requisite heirs to carry on the line."

Lexie snorted. "Of course. There is nothing to it at all, except for the misery a wrong match would surely bring."

"Tell me you still aren't hoping for a love match?" The lady sighed heavily. "Such fanciful dreams aren't commonplace in society. I have tried to instruct you in these matters most thoroughly. You should have known your parents married for convenience and they lived in harmonious contentment until your mother's death."

"Is that all I shall be granted?" Lexie asked curiously. "Mere contentment? Is love truly that unattainable?"

"In most cases, yes. But security and a good name are worth much more in the ton, I can assure you." Although her tone had been firm, her aunt softened her voice when she added, "I was hesitant about marrying my Alfred at first too, so I understand any reservations you might have, but once we wed, we were able to combine our interests to make a harmonious home. Although we were not blessed with any children from our union, we made the best of our misfortunes and found happiness together. The same can be true for you and the man you wed, if you marry the right one."

Her brow furrowing in thought, Lexie carried her aunt's words with her for the rest of the morning. She wanted to trust in her advice. Because she was an older woman, Lexie should believe that she knew what she was speaking of regarding relationships.

However, when Lexie was in her room and looking at her reflection in the dressing table mirror, all she could think of was the Duke of Cuthbert and how she should turn her attention to the earl who her aunt thought was obviously more suitable. But it wasn't the earl's face she saw when her cheeks turned pink and her breathing deepened. It wasn't the earl's lips she imagined kissing hers, as well as the rest of her body. It wasn't the earl's hands that she pictured caressing her body.

It wasn't the earl that she desired.

She shook her head. Perhaps passion would come and if the duke's current interest began to wane, then it wasn't as though Lexie couldn't change her mind and dally with the earl to see if she might actually prefer one over the other.

Perhaps a bit of jealous rivalry wouldn't be amiss.

Thus emboldened, she changed for the musicale that evening and told herself that if she wished to make a firm opinion about who she wished to ruin her, she had better make sure the man she chose was worth the scandal that would surely ensue.

CHAPTER 5

Dominic had matters that required his attention elsewhere, namely who was responsible for the theft of the information in his journal, but rather than assisting Amos and Devon in trying to track down the culprit, he found himself at this blasted musicale, searching the faces of everyone who walked in the door and hoping he was correct that Miss Givenwald would be attending that evening.

It was rather annoying that he was so eager to see one particular woman when he could have his pick of any number of ladies who didn't require this much effort. But somehow, quite without his knowledge, Miss Givenwald had managed to bewitch him with her cunning wiles and her devastating beauty. She was a siren, sent to destroy him, and yet, he couldn't seem to stop the downfall that he knew was inevitable. All he wanted to do was run headlong into the flames of disaster and become consumed by the fire.

He knew it wasn't wise to engage in any kind of flirtation with the threat of his own ruin so close at hand. What currently stood between him and Miss Givenwald was categorized as anything but innocent. Every time he recalled the events from their brief interlude at Vauxhall, lust shot through his body. It was a dangerous game he was playing because if his enemies discovered his interest in the lady, they wouldn't hesitate to use it against him and put her in peril.

He should leave. Now. Make his excuses to his hostess and walk out the door and join his future successor.

Dominic was considering doing just that when a flash of pale pink muslin caught his

attention. He knew in an instant that it was Miss Givenwald because of the flash of her light hair and the broad smile on her perfect lips. What he didn't care for was the man at her side. In truth, they seemed rather familiar with one another and considering the way her companion glanced down at her enticing bodice, Dominic had no doubt that his thoughts about the lady were as licentious as his own.

His fists tightened as he remained along the edge of the room and tried to pretend as though he was listening to what his host was saying about his recent hunt in the country when he couldn't have cared less.

He prayed that he'd caught the man in a break from his recounting as he asked abruptly, "Who is that man who just arrived? I don't recall seeing him in society before."

Then again, Dominic corrected himself, I don't recall bothering to notice him until he began to covet something that belongs to me.

His older companion raised his quizzing glass and narrowed his eye to assumably, gain a better perspective. To Dominic, monocles had been a useless invention. Why bother with one glass when the eyes were obviously made for two?

"I believe that is Francis Marcomb, the Earl of Lindley."

Dominic absorbed this information. "His father passed just recently, did he not?"

"I believe it was a few months ago, yes."

Deciding he would look into Lindley's circumstances a bit further at a later date, Dominic was about to take a seat in close enough proximity to keep his focus on Miss Givenwald and her companion who had taken their seats with her chaperone, and yet, retain a firm distance until he could catch the lady alone.

“Odd that Lindley hasn’t been in society much before now, but then it was rumored that his father was mad.”

Pausing, Dominic wondered why his host chose to add that particular bit of knowledge. “Was he? I’m afraid I can neither concur nor deny the accusation as I have not always been faithful about moving about society until recently either.”

His host shrugged. “It would not surprise me if all of us discovered we were a bit unhinged at times, especially under the influence of drink.”

As he chuckled, Dominic had to quirk his mouth. “That is certainly a theory I could stand behind. Too many spirits have been known to make fools of us all.”

As they parted ways, Dominic took a seat toward the back of the room, but where he could keep Miss Givenwald’s graceful neck in his perfect line of vision. He had never cared for the shade of pink on any lady, believing it appeared too innocent when experienced women were more to his liking, but with the material draped on her form, everything was designed for seduction.

He clenched his jaw, deciding it was going to be a long evening, especially if he had to continue to observe the earl’s interest in her. He leaned over more than once to whisper in her ear, and Dominic did not approve of the action.

Mine.

The word reverberated through Dominic’s head until he wished he had thought to bring a flask of brandy to the entertainment. But then, he would have likely imbibed too much and allowed his annoyance to become public and that would not do. He might want Miss Givenwald in his bed, but that did not mean he had to announce his intentions to everyone present. Besides, Avalon would be disappointed that he couldn’t contain his baser urges any more than that. The master of the East End

would never allow himself to lose his composure.

And yet, Dominic was beginning to discover that his heart had never been in danger before now. While he was a long way from being in love with Miss Givenwald, she was the sort of woman who could turn him inside out and beg for her hand before he quite knew what had happened. Already he was more disturbed by her presence than he felt comfortable. Women had always been a pleasant and delightful diversion and nothing more. It might sound crass, but that was the way he had always preferred things. He had enjoyed the separation of the proper side he showed to the world as well as the darker nature that he allowed to roam free in Whitechapel.

Although he'd told himself he wanted to settle down with a nice, biddable wife, Miss Givenwald was the sort of woman who tempted him to embrace his villainous side. And he could tell she enjoyed it.

As the first lady took her place at the front of the room and began to showcase her talents at the piano, Dominic told himself that he should keep his focus elsewhere and forget about troublesome ladies in pink that tested his resolve.

But he doubted he would have much luck.

He was here.

Lexie had yet to spy the Duke of Cuthbert, but she could feel his gaze upon her because the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end in warning. Or anticipation. It really could be either.

When she had arrived at the musicale that evening, she hadn't expected to greet the Earl of Lindley quite so quickly. It was as if he'd been waiting for her arrival because almost as soon as she'd walked in the door he was bowing over her hand and offering a polite greeting to her chaperone. Of course, Aunt Bonnie was more than happy to

encourage his attentions and as he escorted her toward the front of the room to gain the best seats for viewing the entertainment, Lexie tried to imagine him in the same role as the duke, pressing her up against a tree and ravishing her with passionate kisses.

She tried desperately to feel the same swirling heat in the center of her belly, but unfortunately, the same emotions felt a bit flat. However, with just the prospect of the duke's presence in the air, her heart had begun to race and a bead of perspiration had broken out on her upper lip. It was as if she was burning up from the inside out.

Gathering her fan from her reticule, she lightly waved it in front of her face.

“Are you feeling warm?”

She waited for the shiver to crawl over her skin at the soft whisper from the earl's breath, but again—nothing. Frustrated, she exhaled heavily and paused her fan. “It would seem so.”

Rather than appearing insulted by her sarcastic tone, the earl chuckled lightly. “You are more entertaining than the current performers.”

She decided that his statement needed no reply, so they fell silent. However, as the minutes wore on, Lexie was starting to feel as though she might expire on the spot. A trickle of perspiration trailed down her spine, and she was surprised that for such a cool autumn evening she could be so hot. Perhaps she was coming down with some sort of illness?

But then, when there was a break for the guests to engage in some refreshments, Lexie stood with the excuse of stretching her legs and turned to look behind her.

Immediately, her gaze locked with that of the duke and a fresh wave of heat slammed

into her.

She wavered slightly on her feet, the impact so great.

“Are you quite well?” the earl asked at her elbow .

She watched the duke slip toward the terrace doors, and her pulse instantly sped up.

“I think I’ll just get some air...”

She started to go but he grasped her arm. “I shall join you?—”

“That’s not necessary,” she said almost too quickly, because he frowned slightly. She glanced at her aunt who was engaged in conversation with another matron and was grateful she hadn’t been overheard because her aunt would have surely considered her refusal as rude. “I would appreciate a bit of punch, if you don’t mind?” she added gently.

“Of course.” He smiled, and as soon as he left her side, Lexie made her escape.

Walking out onto the dark terrace, Lexie scanned the area, thrilling when the shadows separated and she was staring into the handsome visage of the duke.

He didn’t give her a chance to speak, he merely crushed her to him and set his mouth on hers in an almost bruising kiss that caused her toes to curl in her slippers and her fantasies to soar. She clutched his broad shoulders and could tell that there was no need for padding in his jacket. She was feeling nothing but hardened muscle.

Just as quickly as the kiss started, he was setting her back from him. “We have to quit meeting like this,” he teased in a husky voice.

“Must we?” The words had escaped her before she had time to reconsider such a bold

query.

His dark eyes caught the light from inside the house behind them and flickered with a wicked gleam. “I suppose that depends on how far you want to take these little interludes.”

“I—”

Lexie wasn't sure what she had been about to say because it didn't seem that any sense was functioning at this point at all. Not only that, but in the span of a single blink, the duke had melted back into the shadows just as the earl appeared at her side with a glass extended to her. “How are you feeling now? ”

Her lips still tingled from the duke's kiss. “Better,” she murmured and forced herself to sip on the punch. It slid down her throat and pooled in her stomach with a sour comparison to the excitement of being with the duke.

As the instruments began to signal the start of the next half of the entertainment, the earl held out his arm to her. “Shall we?”

She inclined her head and accepted his proposal, although it was all she could do not to glance back at the terrace as they departed.

Thankfully, the second half of the musicale passed with less discomfort, but she figured out why when it had concluded. The duke was no longer there.

It caused her no end of annoyance that he should kiss her with such wild hunger and then abandon her after things were starting to get interesting. But then, she supposed it would have been rather difficult to find another excuse to part ways with her aunt and the earl without being too obvious about her intentions. While she claimed she didn't care about her reputation, she had yet to defile herself thoroughly and until that

happened, she had to be mindful of her actions. She couldn't be too defiant.

As the earl's coach came to a halt at their townhouse, her aunt bid the earl a good evening and glanced at Lexie in a meaningful way before she disappeared up the stairs. It seemed to be a silent warning to be on her best behavior if she wished to snag a titled gentleman for a husband, and it was apparent that her aunt approved of this one, which meant Lexie should as well.

Forcing a pleasant smile on her face, she looked at the earl and again, wished that he stirred some sort of fiery sensation within her that could rival that which the duke flamed inside. But there was nothing beyond a calm acceptance of his presence. "I should like to call upon you tomorrow to go riding, if that is amenable to you?"

Lexie inclined her head. "I should like that."

He lifted her gloved hand and pressed a gentle kiss on top, but by the glimpse of determination in his gaze, she knew what was coming next. "Might I kiss you goodnight, Miss Givenwald?"

She swallowed the regret that rose in her throat but pushed it down firmly. Perhaps this was her chance to say for certain she felt nothing for the earl. In answer to his query, she stepped closer to him and lifted her face.

He bowed his head and as she closed her eyes, she waited for the spark, the electricity to flow through her veins. But other than a brief pressure to alert her that he had done the deed, he pulled back and her eyes fluttered open. She tried to hide her inner disappointment and she must have succeeded because he smiled broadly, as if he had pleased her greatly and touched a hand to his forehead. "I shall await tomorrow with renewed vigor upon seeing you again."

As he entered the coach and it rambled away, Lexie knew she was in trouble.

“I daresay you shall have a proposal from the earl before month’s end,” her aunt chimed up proudly the next morning at breakfast.

Lexie’s head was pounding from a sleepless night, making her a bit more irritable than usual. “What if I don’t wish to marry him?” she countered.

“Of course you shall,” her aunt immediately contradicted. “He is as good a choice as anyone else who has shown interest in you.”

Lexie picked up her toast and her knife, slathering the bread quite liberally with jam as she spoke. “What of the Duke of Cuthbert?”

The older woman instantly set down her fork with a decided clatter. “We have already discussed this, Alexandra. He is not a suitable match.”

Lexie cringed. “Because he is a duke? I can understand your hesitation.” She knew that sarcasm would not help her case, and yet, she had been unable to resist goading her aunt further.

This time the chair was scooted out with a scrape against the wood floor. “I can see you are in a disapproving mood this morning. I shall retire to my room a bit early.” Tossing down her serviette, her aunt quit the room in a huff.

When she was alone, Lexie pushed her barely touched food aside and sat back in her chair with a sigh. She told herself time and again it wouldn’t do to get on her aunt’s bad side, but neither could she understand how a duke’s attentions might be considered less than those of an earl when titles were all anyone in society seemed obsessed with.

Pushing back her chair, Lexie decided to take a walk in the gardens. Although there was a chill to the air, she welcomed the clarity she hoped it might bring. She had no

idea why she continued to think about the duke when they had done nothing more than share a couple passionate kisses. Perhaps that was all he was willing to give and Lexie had set out with the intention to gain nothing more, but now things were starting to get complicated. With her aunt's interference, she would surely push this union between herself and the Earl of Lindley, which Lexie had not yet decided if she liked or not. He had definitely paled in the shadow of the duke the night before. But then, there was no fiery embrace from Lindley in which to compare. She might be thought too bold to make the first advance, but it would be the best way to decipher which man she might wish to pursue. If he was just as intriguing as the duke, then she could, hopefully, set aside this current interest in him and the harmony between her and her aunt would be restored.

Starting to shiver, Lexie decided to make her way back inside and get ready for the earl's arrival later that afternoon.

A few hours later, with her aunt out on more calls, Lexie received the earl in the front parlor. He turned upon her entrance and she had to admire the way his light hair was brushed back from his forehead, as well as the green eyes that crinkled slightly at the corners and lit with approval when she walked in.

He took her gloved hand and brought it to his lips. "You look enchanting. That shade of blue is an admirable choice, although I have no doubt you can wear any color and make it appealing."

Lexie inclined her head. "Thank you for the compliment." She took note of his charming manner and admitted that he was starting to rise in her esteem.

"Shall we?" She accepted his arm and he led her outside to his high-perch phaeton. He glanced upward at the cloudless sky. "I realize that it might be a bit cool to ride without a covering, but I have ensured every effort has been taken with your comfort in mind."

She spied the warming brick on the floor and the heavy fur coverlet in the seat and nodded her approval. "That was very considerate of you, my lord." She dared to lean toward him slightly. "I am sure with your presence beside me to keep me warm I shall be well enough."

He seemed pleased with her comment, rather than shocked or annoyed, so she took that as a positive sign.

Helping her alight, he sat beside her and with a flick of the reins, they began to meander through the traffic on the road.

Lexie had always enjoyed the sound of horses' hooves striking the cobblestones and with the ease with which her companion held the ribbons, she decided she would like this outing more than she might have anticipated.

As the earl steered them into Hyde Park, she marveled at the trees that were still trying to cling on to their autumnal leaves, some of which hadn't lost all of their color. The towering branches created a canopy of beauty as they joined the line of carriages and riders out to enjoy the nice weather before winter set in and travel would become a bit less enjoyable due to the cold.

As the afternoon wore on and she and the earl chatted about mundane topics, she decided she was quite enjoying herself. A natural smile had started to cross her face, and she found the earl conversed quite openly and with a wit she had not expected during their short acquaintance.

She was laughing at something he said when a movement brought her attention around to the opposite side of the carriage.

Immediately, her breath caught and the merriment froze on her face.

“A lovely afternoon, is it not?”

The Duke of Cuthbert cut a dashing figure atop a black stallion. He wore a black beaver hat and a three-caped greatcoat. He seemed larger than life, overwhelming her senses like some dastardly villain from a Gothic novel. At first glance, she had to wonder if her aunt was right and she would do well to steer clear of him, but she could not ignore the sudden pounding of her heart nor the increase of her pulse which, sadly, did not occur with the easy conversation she'd had with the earl. The two men were like night and day and she found herself drawn toward the darkness.

After staring in silence for a moment, the earl finally responded. “Good day, Your Grace.”

By the tight way he spoke, it seemed as though it was more of a dismissal than a greeting, but as Lexie finally found her voice, she managed to ease her companion's direct comment. “It is, indeed. But then, autumn is my favorite time of the year.”

“As is mine,” the duke returned with a glimmer in his dark eyes that caused her hands to clench in her lap. “There is nothing quite like the end of an era to await the chance for a rebirth in the spring.”

Her lips quirked. “How very poetic of you, Your Grace. Is society aware of your hidden talents?”

He mirrored her expression. “I have many talents, Miss Givenwald, although most I choose not to reveal. ”

She was quite enjoying this flirtatious banter, and when the earl attempted to interject, she smoothly spoke over him.

“I suppose we should be?—”

“Whyever not, Your Grace? Are you afraid that they shall be rejected? I can’t imagine you having any such insecurities.”

He lifted a brow. “Everyone suffers from some form of doubt, Miss Givenwald.” His gaze boldly traveled up and down her frame, and she found that she was no longer feeling any sort of chill from the air. “Surely there is something that even you might fear?”

As his focus hesitated on her mouth, her lips parted in invitation. Her body went so far as to sway slightly toward him. “I cannot think of anything at present,” she returned breathlessly, finding that with him so near, she wasn’t coherent of thought.

“We have taken up enough of your time.”

Lexie had to hold out a hand to steady herself as the earl abruptly set the carriage into motion. She told herself not to look back at the duke, but she made the mistake of doing so, only to find that his intense stare continued to follow her.

CHAPTER 6

Since his intentions to settle down and do his duty to the duchy, Dominic had joined more society events than he had been comfortable attending. But riding through the park during the hour of the fashionable set was not something he had ever contemplated. However, since he was so deprived of Miss Givenwald's company and eager to catch a mere glimpse of her blond head, he had dared to enter the realm of the forbidden. Although he carried a respectable title, his name was besmirched to the point that his article had received very little interest. Most of the matrons that had daughters of marriageable age wanted them to make a suitable match, one that wasn't littered with scandal and speculation as they would have to suffer the same if such a union was made.

This should have made Dominic angry that most weren't able to see beyond their prejudices to get to know the man behind the grand estates and wealth that he carried. Unfortunately, that was the only motivation for some and how he had been able to cancel most of the interest with a flick of his wrist.

But Miss Givenwald—she was different from all the rest. From the beginning, she had seemed drawn to him in spite of his dark reputation. He had to wonder what she would think of his dealings in the East End but decided that even she might have her limits of tolerance when it came to a gang leader in London's underworld.

As the earl's carriage turned a bend and took the lady from his view, Dominic reluctantly turned his horse around and started to head for the exit. There would be no further opportunity for him to engage with the lady as her companion had made it quite clear that his attentions were not welcome.

Dominic's jaw clenched in irritation. Surely Miss Givenwald wasn't considering accepting the earl's suit, as it would be a jest to allow someone like the seemingly straitlaced gentleman to pay her court. While he did not know the lady that well, it was obvious that she would tire of him soon enough. A man like Lindley could not keep a woman like Miss Givenwald satisfied for long, whereas Dominic would gladly accept the challenge.

Again, he reminded himself that until this nasty business with his journal had been resolved, he needed to keep his attention focused not on pursuing the delights of Miss Givenwald. Thus, he steered his horse toward his townhouse where he would secure his mount and change his attire, returning to the visage of Avalon.

As he made his way to the Crown & Sceptre, he headed for his office and paused the moment he entered. "Bloody hell," he muttered beneath his breath as the entire space had been thoroughly ransacked. Books and papers were scattered all over the floor, his entire desk with open drawers and in a state of pure upheaval.

He scrubbed a hand down his face as a dry voice said behind him, "I just sent a messenger to fetch you."

"Yes, well, as you can see, there is no longer a need for that," Dominic returned evenly as he faced Amos. The eyepatch was secured over his left eye while the blue one on the right narrowed in displeasure .

"Don't get angry at me when you are the one who has chosen to brush aside the need to correct this latest threat."

"I haven't brushed it aside," Dominic snapped, and then just as quickly, he corrected himself with a scowl. "At least, not completely. I certainly don't understand what the thief might be searching for now. They have already made off with the pages needed to secure the ease of conscience from the names written in that journal."

Amos looked at him intently for a moment and then said, “Devon and I have a theory about that.” He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a letter that he passed to him. “This should offer some further insight into the matter.”

A shiver of apprehension traveled up Dominic’s spine, but it turned into rage when he read the few familiar scribbled words.

I recently discovered you in a compromising position with a member of the fairer sex. I wonder how much this individual might pay to keep this information away from the papers...

He clenched the missive in his fist. “Alert every Blue Boy that we have a blackmailer on our hands. This now extends further than me. He has threatened a lady.” Seeing red, Dominic nearly tossed the letter into the nearest fire, but then he refrained, reminding himself that it had served him well in the past not to destroy any sort of evidence that could be used to condemn anyone else. This man certainly wouldn’t receive any quarter from him.

Fortunately, while Dominic had employed secure tactics for himself, this cretin had still managed to gain enough content that it would cause undue suspicion regardless of his recent efforts to keep his name from being completely besmirched in the papers.

Amos inclined his head. “Consider it done, Avalon.”

Whenever his pseudonym had been called before, Dominic relished it, had enjoyed the sense of power and mystique that it had brought with it. Now, he only felt dread and the feeling that he stood to lose everything he might hope to gain .

Including Miss Givenwald. He had never allowed any woman to worm her way under his skin the way she had managed to do in such a short time. He didn’t know when

they had gone from casual acquaintances to the verge of lovers, but he vowed to protect her name at all costs. Her reputation would not suffer because of his failure to secure it.

But in order to do that, he realized that he could not succeed without her assistance. She would have to be told of the threat and thus, Dominic might be forced to combine his two worlds for the first time. Could he trust her with such a monumental secret?

It appeared he didn't have much choice.

Lexie could hardly contain her excitement as she walked through the front doors of the Theatre Royale at Drury Lane that evening. It had long been her desire to attend a London play and the fact that *The Tempest* by Shakespeare would be performed made her anticipate the evening that much more.

The only downfall was that she was attended by her Aunt Bonnie and the Earl of Lindley. Just once, she would like to go somewhere without either her aunt or a maid acting as a constant chaperone. It gave ladies little chance to get into trouble or flirt properly when they were constantly being supervised, but she supposed that was the point. Her aunt would surely make her wear a chastity belt otherwise, regardless if the practice of protecting one's virginity for modesty reasons had gone out of fashion some years prior.

Making their way to the private box the earl had secured for their use, Lexie was about to walk through the private curtain when a flash of movement at the edge of her vision caught her attention. The towering figure could not be mistaken. As her suspicions became correct when the duke turned his head and pinned her with an intense stare and then disappeared down the hall opposite, she found she could not ignore the summons.

"If you would excuse me," Lexie said to her escort. "I think I should like to visit the

retiring room before the performance begins.”

Without waiting for her aunt to say that she would join her, Lexie hastily made her way out of the box and toward the hallway where she had last seen the duke. Her heart was pounding in time to her footsteps as she turned a corner and expected to see him standing there, ready to pull her into his arms for another devastating kiss, but of course, that was not what happened. The hallway was nearly deserted, other than a few patrons who had not yet taken their seats to watch the show.

Disheartened, she wondered if she had mistaken the silent signal the duke had offered to her. However, she noticed the sight of his dark cloak whipping near the edge of the stage entrance.

Glancing behind her, Lexie warily moved forward, grateful that there was a barrier to keep her from being seen heading down to the lower level of the theatre. Her hand was shaking as she lifted it to hold on to the wood to peer behind the stage. Suddenly, her waist was grabbed from behind as a hand moved to clasp over her mouth.

“Don’t scream,” came the husky command.

She nodded, and he jerked her into a secret alcove beneath the stairs that led backstage. It took Lexie a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. She blinked a few times, striving to get the duke’s face into better focus, but it was still a menacing shadow, the hard lines of his face looking more pronounced than before. But as he removed his hand from her mouth, she thrilled when the one about her waist remained.

She wondered if he would kiss her now, and lifted her chin slightly in the hope that he would understand her invitation. “How do you always know where I’m going to be?”

His dark eyes glittered for a moment, but then he spoke and his tone was far from seductive. "I need to speak with you about an urgent matter."

That was a bit disappointing, and she had the impression that what he was going to say wasn't something she would care to hear. "What is it?"

The hand on her waist moved to encompass her upper arm. His other hand gripped the opposite side. "There could be danger to your reputation." He paused, as if waiting for a shocked gasp. When she did nothing, he continued, "Someone has discovered us and has threatened to reveal us."

Lexie waited for more, but when he fell silent, she asked, "Is that all?"

He frowned. "Isn't that enough?"

Her lips twisted. "If I cared that much for my reputation, do you think I would have allowed your attentions in the first place?" He seemed to consider that, so she moved a bit closer to him. "The truth is, Your Grace, that I don't care one whit about scandal. I actually encourage it if it will get me what I want."

She could tell that her bold words had surprised him. "Every woman has a care for their reputation. It is the one thing that will secure them a prominent match."

She shrugged. "I'm not most women. I don't care about marriage, but I do want to enjoy all the pleasures that life has to offer."

He stared at her. "How does one so innocent know of such things? Or is it too much to presume that you are an innocent?"

"To that end, I am, but I don't intend to return to my boring life in the country without experiencing passion and all those things I've heard whispered about in the

servants' quarters when no one thought I was around." She closed her eyes momentarily. "When I heard the maids talk, I felt... something burst to life inside of me. Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon." She glanced back at the duke and found him looking at her oddly now. "I do apologize for speaking so boldly. But while every other lady in society prefers to remain proper and perfectly staid, I am not afraid to speak plainly."

He shook his head slowly. "You are unlike anyone I have ever met. The most practiced courtesans aren't as bold with their words as you are."

"Does that turn your head aside?" she asked softly.

"On the contrary," he returned with a whisper. His hand lifted and he slid it along her smooth cheek. "I am held quite fascinated. It has kept me from trying to find this villain that dares to threaten me. Instead, I am continuously drawn to where you might be."

"Are you?" Lexie could not believe her good fortune. To hear that her desires might be reciprocated by this man was infinitely more pleasing than the finest gowns or jewels that she might acquire.

"Yes."

Her breath left her lungs in a rush at his freely given response. "Then perhaps we should make a plan to meet in a more... quiet setting."

At that moment, the opening instruments began to ring out, as well as the muffled voices of the actors and actresses who had taken their place on stage. Although it had promised to be one of Lexie's favorite performances, she was willing to forgo one dream for the passions of another.

His focus dropped to her parted lips. “Indeed.” When Lexie thought he was going to kiss her, he stepped back and released his hold. “But not yet.”

Disappointment shot through her, but she tamped it down and focused on the promised interlude to come. Patience had never been her strong suit, but she felt the duke would be worth the wait. The way her body responded to him with a simple caress told her that it would be aflame with more.

“Do you have so many enemies that you must walk with such caution? ”

His jaw clenched and he turned away. “You have no idea the limits of my depravity.”

Oh, but she hoped to find out. “Is that so? Tell me what could be so terrible that they would not only wish to destroy you, but me by association as well?”

This time his face was a mask of cold indifference as he approached her. “What I am about to say cannot be repeated under any cost. Do you understand?”

She would have considered his harsh words to be exaggerated, except she knew him well enough already to be aware that he was not the sort of man who made more of something than what it truly was. “I understand.”

He studied her for a time, as if trying to discern her loyalty. He must have decided he believed her, or else had no other option, as he said, “I am the Duke of Cuthbert to high society, but to the outer parts of London that do not belong to the ton , I go by the title of Avalon, the leader of one of the most notorious gangs in the East End underworld.”

At this, Lexie did find her lips curving into a smile, thinking for certain this was a terrible jest. But when his eyes did not even change from the same serious mien, she realized that this was no joke. He was telling the truth. Immediately, her interest

toward him was piqued even further. “That is remarkable,” she breathed. “What an exciting life you must have led.”

If he hadn’t already understood that she was different from so many other ladies, he might have shaken his head in disbelief at her reaction. Instead, he merely said, “It has been a rewarding occupation, more so than a birthright I never wanted and didn’t earn.” He glanced away and then returned his attention back to her when he had recovered whatever mental hurdle he’d just encountered. “But those days are behind me now. Or, at least, I am trying to leave them in the past, but someone is determined to make my withdrawal from that position a bit more difficult than I had hoped. ”

“Avalon.” She said the name and nodded her head. “I like it. You must take me with you when you return to the East End.”

He snorted. “Absolutely not. It’s no place for a lady. It is filled with thieves and cutthroats eager to rid someone of their finery, or worse.”

The implication was not lost on her. “If you are with me, I shall not have to worry, would I? That is, if you are as powerful as you claim?—”

He shoved a hand through his hair. “Have you not heard anything I said? You are in danger now because of a brief encounter with me. If you are recognized, the threat would undoubtedly grow exponentially worse.”

“The danger doesn’t scare me—”

“But it should,” he returned firmly.

Her blue eyes widened almost innocently. If he didn’t know better, he might have believed her actions were genuine. As it stood, he was starting to realize that she was destined for trouble. “You are reported to be dangerous, and yet, I’m not afraid of

you.”

Dominic couldn't stop a chuckle. “Then you would be the first, and also, quite mistaken. I have dismissed men for much less.”

She gave a small pout, but instead of annoying him, he found the action sent lustful imaginings to his nether regions where he pictured that tempting mouth doing other things. “You said it yourself I'm not like most women. I can handle my own.”

A little demon suddenly appeared on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. Let's put that theory to the test. He lowered his voice. “Is that so?” Then he reached out and brought her flush against him. Pushing her until her back was against the wood frame of the stairs, he lowered his mouth to her ear. “And what if I wanted to have my wicked way with you? How would you defend yourself against someone stronger?”

She didn't seem fazed as her blue eyes regarded him steadily. The only indication she gave that she was disturbed at all was the slight flutter at the base of her neck. “If I have to tell you what I need to do to turn a man's interest aside from lust, then you have never been the recipient of unwanted attentions.”

He lifted a dark brow. “Touché.” He tried another tactic. Reaching stealthily into his jacket, he had the blade of his dagger pressed against her pulse. “And what if I were to attempt something more sinister?”

He had to admire her spirit, because again, there was no visible sign of any inner struggle other than the fact that her breathing had turned harsher. “I would call out for you.”

He tilted his head to the side. “And you think I would immediately rush to your aid like some daring knight of old?”

“No. Your appearance would only serve to distract the assailant so that I could retaliate.”

As his gaze flickered, he was impressed by the fluid motion of her hand when she easily captured his blade and held the point against the center of his throat.

“Is that convincing enough for you to take me with you?”

Dominic allowed a smirk to steal across his lips. “I admit that not many people surprise me, but it is apparent that someone has taught you the art of self-defensive tactics.”

She handed him the blade and he slipped it back into his jacket. “I can also shoot a pistol and a bow if the occasion calls for it.”

His focus drifted down to her bodice where the gentle swell of her breasts tempted him beyond almost all rational thought. “You are a remarkable woman, Miss Givenwald.”

Her lips twitched, bringing his focus to her mouth. “I am glad you noticed, Your Grace.”

Still standing ever so close together, he knew that should they remain in such a compromising position for much longer, they had the risk of being caught. As it was, her absence was likely already noted. Reluctantly, he moved back. “You should rejoin your party.”

“If you insist,” she returned coyly.

A low growl emanated from the back of his throat, and for a moment, he hardly recognized it as his voice. “You are a vixen.”

“Only with you,” she whispered lightly and then brushed past him.

When she was gone, it was as if the air had been sucked out of the alcove. Dominic almost collapsed against the wood, although he did reach out a hand to try to gain control of the raging lust that was coursing through his body. He wondered if Miss Givenwald understood the effect she had upon him and how dangerous her abilities could be to anyone else.

When he imagined her offering the same flirtations to another man, he didn’t like it. At all. In truth, it made him see red, and that was a hazardous reaction to anyone who knew what Avalon was capable of doing.

Dominic left the alcove, but rather than remain for the play, he took his leave, knowing it was best for all involved that he did so.

CHAPTER 7

By the time Lexie had returned to the box, her aunt was at sixes and sevens. “Where have you been?” she demanded in a harsh whisper. “The earl did not seem pleased that you were gone so long.”

“I wasn’t feeling well,” Lexie hedged, although it wasn’t a complete untruth. She had been quite disoriented around the duke. It really was a shame that he was a wastrel as her aunt had claimed and would never be approved as a prospective suitor. The idea that he would actually follow through with finding a wife at all was almost too humorous to take seriously. As a leader for such a well-known underworld organization, she couldn’t picture him in any role other than the one he had mentioned. She could be wrong and he would be a doting father and attentive husband, but it would take someone equally ambitious to tame such a wild soul. She knew she would be the perfect complement to him because her spirit was just as untamed and free, but it would take nothing short of a miracle to convince her aunt that he was a good match.

As Lexie took a seat next to her escort for the evening, she tried to act as apologetic as she could. Although she knew that she could never engage with the earl on any level further than a friendly acquaintance, she did not wish to injure his feelings in any way.

Her chagrin was genuine when she said, “I am sorry for my tardiness, my lord.”

He glanced at her with an expression of understanding, but the tight smile on his mouth would suggest he wasn’t as composed as he wanted her to believe. “I hope that

you are feeling better?”

“I am, indeed,” she returned with a bright smile, hoping that it would ease some of his annoyance.

“Wonderful.” His smile was almost cunning when he added, “In that regard, I shall allow you to make up the slight by attending a luncheon with me tomorrow.”

Lexie tried not to appear too disappointed. “That sounds lovely.”

“I am glad you think that spending the afternoon with some fellow members from Parliament sounds so appealing,” he returned dryly.

She laughed lightly, but her heart had abruptly jumped into her throat. “Are you sure that it would be acceptable for me to join such an esteemed group of gentlemen?”

“Naturally,” he returned evenly. “Your wit and charm will keep them well entertained and the focus off of me and what I hope to accomplish during my tenure in the House of Lords.”

She glanced at him curiously, momentarily taken off guard by such a cryptic statement. “What is it that you are hoping to accomplish that you think will be met with such resistance?”

He gently patted her hand. “Think no more on the subject of politics. We are here to enjoy an entertaining program. I should regret it if you missed the performance of one of Shakespeare’s most notable works.”

Lexie inclined her head and fell silent, but as the play in front of her unfolded, her focus was far away. Not only was she still reeling from her encounter with the duke, but now she had to wonder about the man at her side and the strange way he was

suddenly acting. It seemed out of character from the usual way he spoke. But perhaps he was merely irritated at her, and combined with an important meeting the following day that could ease his way into the favor of his fellow peers, or see him cast to the sidelines, he was feeling the press of success.

She could certainly understand the desire to be accepted. For years she had attempted to gain her father's attention, and once she had, she had been overjoyed at the sensation she'd felt when they had begun to converse on a mutual level. She had been reluctant to leave his estate for fear that when she returned the ease with which they had begun to share each other's company would become strained, but her aunt had been a force to be reckoned with when she'd come for a visit and insisted that Lexie have a proper season and the chance to ensnare a husband.

At first, Lexie thought her father was going to forbid it, and she almost wished that he had except for the restlessness that had suddenly taken hold of her when she pictured the wonders that the city would offer. Although London had not disappointed in the least, Lexie was starting to feel the slight pang of homesickness. Once she accomplished the ruin she had set out to do, she could return home and live in quiet solitude with her father until the end of his days and then continue the same quiet existence with the memories of her youth to sustain her through the remainder of her own.

For now, she pasted a slight smile on her face and cheered with the curtain finally went down, although she had failed to absorb much of what had actually occurred.

As the earl escorted them back to her aunt's townhouse, he captured her hand while her aunt ascended the steps and disappeared inside. "I hope you know that I think a lot of you, Miss Givenwald."

Lexie tried not to jerk her hand away. Instead, she inclined her head, not daring herself to return the compliment and give him the wrong impression, that his feelings

were reciprocated when she had already decided that they could not be.

“I will count the hours until we are reunited.”

She nodded. “Good evening, my lord.”

He released her, and she did not tarry as she entered the sanctuary. Releasing a steady breath as she walked into the foyer, she was handing her outerwear over to the footman when her aunt said, “I daresay you shall be a countess before the month is over.”

Lexie blinked at her. “Surely you jest. The earl and I have only encountered each other a handful of times thus far.”

“That may be,” she concurred. “But I can tell he is enamored of you. Well done, my dear.”

As her aunt retired, Lexie could feel her heart deflate slightly. Although she had promised the earl that she would attend him on the morrow, perhaps it would be for the best if she declined. She did not want to chance her aunt accepting a proposal on her behalf without any intention of following through with it.

Her steps were heavy as she made her way to her chambers, but when she fell asleep for the night, it was the duke’s face that carried her into dreamland.

Lying in his bed that night, Dominic stared at the canopy above and willed himself to shut his eyes, but the blessed relief of sleep would not claim him. He kept seeing Miss Givenwald’s passion filled face and the way she’d moved toward him when they had kissed.

He ground his teeth together as his unruly cock started to twitch with renewed vigor.

It had been that way all night. He hadn't made it to his carriage to come home, having taken his hard member in hand in a dismal alley outside of the theatre like some lust driven lad who couldn't control his urges .

He wanted to snort at the irony. He was supposed to be the experienced one, and yet, for someone who claimed they were untried, Miss Givenwald had a certain talent for making him breathless with desire. He chased after her like a hound after its master. He had never before allowed himself to lose such focus, and especially now, when danger was standing at his doorstep.

He kept waiting for the blackmail that would surely arrive from the thief who held the pages to his journal, as well as the proof about his own misdeeds masquerading as Avalon. Dominic realized now what a ruthless risk he'd taken as the leader of the Blue Boys, but at the time, he'd wanted to lash out at his sire, even though he'd long been cold in his grave. Finding some way to rebel against the loss of his brother and his mother's abrupt withdrawal had sent him into a tailspin of which he couldn't find a way to stop. He had thrived on the intrigue and danger until recently when he had started to realize that he could do more good by taking up the reins of the dukedom and trying to bring his mother back to life.

It scared him because in some ways Miss Givenwald had done the same to him. His heart had started to beat in his chest for more than just vengeance or predatory means. He actually wondered about what the future might hold walking the halls of his estate and sipping on coffee in his study.

A muffled noise somewhere in the house immediately sent Dominic sitting upright. Something told him he wasn't just hearing things, so he quickly reached for the pistol he kept under his spare pillow on the bed and got to his feet. Although he normally slept naked, he had left his small clothes on hoping that they might calm his raging erection. Thankfully, this distraction seemed to work where the other idea had failed and he was primed and ready for a fight in spite of it.

Grabbing his dagger from his washstand, Dominic slowly opened his bedchamber door just wide enough to listen. It didn't take long because it sounded as though a muffled conversation was ensuing from downstairs. He couldn't make out who the voices were, but he intended to find out.

Walking on steady but silent bare feet, Dominic was careful to avoid places that might make any sort of sound. While most of the townhouse was made of marble, he was cautious as he prepared to confront the intruder.

The faintest glow came from his study, and as Dominic drew closer, he knew this was the villain he'd been looking for. This wasn't some random thievery at play. His eyes narrowed as he searched the darkness around the hall before he slowly slid his head around the corner to peer inside. He saw one shadow and it appeared to be searching his desk for something. Curious, as Dominic decided the cretin had already taken anything of value, he trained his pistol on the agitated shadow.

However, the moment he cocked the weapon, movement instantly ceased. But rather than fall to his knees and beg for mercy, the scoundrel actually spun around and cast a blade straight for Dominic, landing an almost perfectly precise throw just inches from his head.

The shadow darted for the open window, but Dominic was ready for him. He fired the gun and was satisfied by the grunt of pain that followed. He ran toward the curtains that were flowing in the cool autumn breeze, but when he glanced outside, the stranger had vanished.

Dominic uttered a curse as he glanced down at the sill. He lowered his hand and his fingers came back with blood, proof that the assailant hadn't disappeared without a scratch.

A shuffle near the study door brought his pistol back around. Although the bullet had

already been spent, staring down the muzzle of any weapon surely made one think twice.

The housemaid, Elizabeth, instantly gasped in alarm and held up her hands in supplication. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I had found it difficult to sleep and then I heard the shot?—”

He glanced at her nightdress and wrapper, her long, dark unbound hair and childish face, and blew out a steady breath and lowered his gun. “That seems to be the trend this evening,” he muttered.

“Your Grace?” she asked, confusion in her voice.

Ignoring her query, he walked over to his desk to inspect the damage, but other than a few things scattered about haphazardly and a couple drawers disturbed, there didn’t seem to be any other damage done.

Dominic glanced at the window. Other than the blood staining the sill, of course, and his own anger that he hadn’t been prepared for a second attempt to rid him of his personal effects. After this latest threat, it was obvious he would have to hire some security until the threat was vanquished for good.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, he walked over and secured the window as best he could. He considered dragging the settee over to sit in front of it but discounted the notion. The thief likely wouldn’t make another appearance so soon. But just in case...

He addressed the housemaid. “Send for the watch and wake the servants. I shall apprise them of what has happened and offer further instructions.”

Her dark eyes were wide and she quickly nodded her head obediently. “Yes, Your Grace.” She hastily padded away while Dominic paced his study and waited for

reinforcements to arrive. It was going to be a long morning, but undoubtedly a longer afternoon because he would have to pay a visit to Amos and discuss these latest developments. Whether he liked it or not, his focus was going to have to be fully on the thief and what he thought he still required in Dominic's possession.

An image of Miss Givenwald floated through his mind, but he pushed it firmly aside. He'd learned long ago that duty came before passion.

Lexie sank down in a chair in the parlor with a dejected sigh. She had managed to make it through the luncheon that Lord Lindley had escorted her to, smiling and chatting her way through the entire affair with the poise of a seasoned debutante. The earl, however, wore a perpetual frown on his face and looked as though he'd woken up on the wrong side of the bed that morning.

When curiosity got the better of her on the carriage ride home, she asked, "Is something wrong? You've seemed out of sorts all afternoon."

His lips thinned tightly. "It was a stressful affair. I had to conduct business while entertaining."

She accepted his explanation without hesitation. "I can certainly understand the hardship of trying to differentiate the two. My father often had meetings at the estate where I was to play the gracious hostess at his side while, at the same time, attempt to blend into the wallpaper."

His brow deepened into a frown. "I hope that wasn't the impression I gave."

"Not at all." She waved a hand and offered a genuine smile. "I was just replying that I understood the strain you must have been under."

He seemed to relax. "Thank you, Miss Givenwald. I do appreciate it."

Not for the first time she tried to find some way to get her body to respond to the slight curl of the light hair near his ears, or the flash of interest in the earl's green eyes, but darkness always intruded in the form of the duke. The intensity of his smoky gaze and his brown hair taking on the shade of the moonlight on an evening terrace.

She scoffed at the poetic image she'd created in her mind, even if it was true.

"Do you find something amusing?"

Lexie immediately realized her error and quickly tried to think of a rejoinder. "Merely that I wonder why we try to impress all these stuffy gentlemen when it is obvious that you, like my father, are men worthy of note without having to go through all the pomp and circumstance that is deemed necessary to gain their attention."

His mouth kicked up at the corner, his sour mood seemingly all but forgotten for the moment. "I do enjoy the bold way you speak, Miss Givenwald. I find it highly refreshing and a trait that I should hope to admire for a long time."

She stilled. She did not dare ask him to elaborate on that statement, for it was dangerously close to a marriage proposal if he was speaking so far into the future. Her aunt would be delighted by the prospect, of course, and insist Lexie do everything in her power to encourage the actual words, but she could not find the enthusiasm that such efforts might warrant. Her heart continued to war with her mind, and she clung to that semblance of independence with everything she had. If she were to succumb to the marital state, any chance that she might have to experience the true pleasures in life would be stripped away from her. Although the earl was pleasing to look upon, he did not cause the stirrings of lust in her chest as the duke did and that was the side she yearned to explore in great length.

The carriage fell into silence as the earl deposited her at her aunt's townhouse, but before she departed, he grasped her hand when she would have stepped to the ground. "I should like to remain in your esteem, Miss Givenwald."

She inclined her head. "There is no threat otherwise, my lord."

He seemed to relax slightly. "I'm glad to hear it." She was released, but before she could escape into the house, he spoke through the open carriage door. "I would like it if you might go riding with me again tomorrow afternoon?"

Thankful that she would have a welcome respite to think things through, she nodded. "Until then."

She forced herself to slow her pace and not sprint into the sanctuary of the house. But now that she was by herself, she slumped in a chair and worried her lower lip. If she kept stringing along the earl, she was going to start experiencing guilt, and she didn't want to get to that point. She wanted to seduce the duke, ruin herself, and return home with a pleasant smile on her face knowing that she'd accomplished what she'd set out to do.

As she lounged in the parlor, she wasn't surprised to find that her aunt had left for the afternoon, which gave Lexie some dedicated time on her own. With the prospect of boredom looming, she decided that she would set out on a journey.

Ever since the duke had told her of his alternate identity, she had been highly intrigued, but she knew that he wouldn't speak of it again. However, if there was the chance she could be in danger because of him, it stood to reason that she ought to understand what she was dealing with. How far did his power actually reach? She didn't think that he had stretched the truth to enhance his own importance, but what did she know other than what he chose to tell her?

Asking a servant to gather her cloak and bonnet, the footman was about to send for her maid, but Lexie stopped him. “This is a call I should like to make on my own.”

He appeared perplexed for a moment but then inclined his head. “Of course. I will instruct the coachman to ensure that you are?—”

She held up a coin and he paused. “What I require is your discretion.” She held the shilling out to him, and he pocketed it, remaining silent. “Good.” She smiled broadly. “I shall procure a hackney.”

She started to go, but again, she was stopped. “Should something untoward occur?—”

“You had nothing to do with it. Rest assured, I will carry all the blame should something happen, but I don’t foresee any trouble.”

With that, Lexie trotted down the steps. She was thankful that it was a pleasant autumn day, but with the gray clouds starting to thicken on the horizon, she had no doubt that rain would soon be a problem. Hopefully, it would wait until the evening when she was safely back inside. Either way, she was an Englishwoman and rain was a rather common occurrence. Having lived in the country most of her life, she knew how to handle herself in all sorts of weather. It was not a deterrent when it came to satisfying her burning curiosity.

She had never hailed down a public carriage before, but it turned out to be quite easy enough. As she started to get inside, she asked to be taken to the Duke of Cuthbert’s residence.

The driver spat out something that looked quite unpleasant and said, “Don’t know o’ a toff by tha’ name.”

She tossed a shilling to him, which he grabbed with lightning-fast accuracy in midair. “I’m sure you are resourceful enough to figure it out.”

She shut the door of the conveyance and after a moment’s pause, there was a slight jerk as they set into motion.

It was a particularly uncomfortable ride, a marked difference from her aunt’s well sprung and finely upholstered coach. But at least it was offering her the anonymity she was looking for when they paused a short time later.

She stuck her head out the window. “Have we already arrived?”

“Aye.” Another undesirable spit. “But ’e’s just left.”

She frowned as she surveyed the front of the townhouse. “I see no carriage pulling away from the curb.”

He pointed toward the mews where a man was leaving on horseback. “That’s the man you’re lookin’ for.”

Lexie caught a glimpse of simple attire before the rider disappeared around the corner. “Are you quite sure?”

He looked at her directly. “When you’ve given as many rides as I have during all hours o’ th’ day an’ night, you start t’ notice things. ”

She lifted a brow, realizing that he had a point. “Very well then. Follow him.”

He narrowed his gaze. “I don’t give anyone rides for free, even ladies.”

She sniffed. “Then it’s a good thing I don’t intend to take advantage of your lovely

generosity. Now, go before we lose him.”

He gave a flick of the reins and she had to hold on to her bonnet to keep it from jumping off her head. “Scoundrel,” she mumbled under her breath, but decided she would let the slight pass, so long as she gained what she wanted.

CHAPTER 8

When the Crown & Sceptre proved fruitless, Dominic headed for Amos's residence. Very few people knew where his second-in-command laid his head at night and just as it was imperative that Dominic had never been caught unaware, Amos employed the same discretion. With several places to escape if things became too heated within the underground, Dominic knew them all and was confident he knew where he could find Amos.

He was correct and as he knocked on the door with a special coded rap of his knuckles, it was opened. The burly man stood there, his blue eye in sharp contrast to his dark skin and the eyepatch on the opposite side of his face. "I thought I might be expecting you."

As Dominic walked inside, he said, "You've already heard?"

"News travels fast, don't you know. Or have you been too preoccupied with your light-haired vixen to remember that?"

Dominic immediately bristled at the mention of Miss Givenwald. "She is a vixen, that I won't deny, but I am still the same man who leads this operation and you will show me the proper respect or I might be tempted to rid you of your other eye. "

Rather than get offended or angry, white teeth flashed on Amos's face in a broad smile. "She really has gotten under your skin."

"You have no idea," Dominic muttered irritably. Rather than sit down, he remained

standing and set a hand on the edge of the doorframe that led to the modest bedchamber. Other than a shaving set and a few other toiletries, no one could guess that Amos lived there, although this had been his primary residence for more than three years. There were no personal touches on the walls or scattered about. It was perfectly stripped of anything that might be used against him. Dominic wished he might have had the same luxury to pattern his own life after Amos, but splitting his time between the underworld and that of a dukedom was a bit more complicated.

Preferring to delve into the topic of the thief, rather than face his fascination with Miss Givenwald, he looked steadily at Amos. “I shot the bastard, the proof was in the blood left on my windowsill, but I have not yet figured out what he might have been searching for. He already has the pages from the journal.”

“Jewels? Coin?” Amos guessed.

“No. This wasn’t about money. If he wants that, I’m sure he will blackmail me for it soon enough.”

“Hmm.” Amos’s brows drew together. “It would have to be something rather damning in order for him to take such a risk so soon after he obtained the journal.”

“At least I’ve made it even harder for him to steal something else. Bow Street has set two men to watch my residence outside at all times and the servants are alternating on the inside. If he makes it through again, he will have to come in through one of the chimneys.”

Amos snorted. “Perhaps he will embody the spirit of St. Nicholas and do just that.”

The image caused Dominic’s lips to twitch. “Then I shall just have to ensure roaring fires are lit in each one every night. ”

A chuckle was the reply. "I had no doubt you would discover a solution to the problem."

"Perhaps in something so ridiculous in nature, but when it comes to uncovering what else he wants, I shall have to remain in ignorance."

Seriousness returned to Amos's expression. "There has to be something you're missing. Some vital piece of information that you don't think matters. It could very well be the key to ending all of this."

He exhaled heavily. "I will return home and search through all the family gemstones and documentation to see if anything might jog my memory or seem out of sorts. But first I will head to the pub to see if there is something I overlooked there."

"I doubt there is anything the thief failed to get last time, but it wouldn't be amiss to check things thoroughly." Amos tilted his head to the side. "Once you discover who it is, do you plan to turn him over to the authorities, or the Blue Boys?"

Dominic clenched his jaw. "It would depend on how far he pushes me. If he harms Miss Givenwald you already know my answer to that."

There was a pause and then Amos asked, "Have you considered we might have another traitor in our midst?"

Shaking his head, Dominic said, "After what happened last time, I believe I made my sentiments perfectly clear on how I deal with anyone who betrays those who are loyal to Avalon."

Amos nodded. "You did, indeed."

A slight knock came at the door and Dominic was instantly on alert. He straightened.

“Were you expecting Devon?” he asked tightly, referring to the other man’s son.

“No.” Amos jerked his head. “I’ll take care of this. And if not, you know when to jump in.”

Dominic stealthily took his place behind the door as Amos answered the summons.

Until that point, Lexie had been congratulating herself for being so intelligent, or rather, she supposed she ought to thank the hackney driver who had deposited her at this ramshackle building with a smirk and a tip of his hat with half of her purse weighing down his vest pocket. However, she had considered it money well spent for cornering the fox in his own hole.

She waited patiently to greet the duke with a knowing smile on her face. Instead, she was greeted by a rather intimidating man with an eyepatch. She would have taken a step backward in surprise if it wasn’t for the fact he was revealing the most enchanting blue eye. Somehow, that made him appear a bit less menacing. And knowing that she had witnessed the duke stride into this very door, she knew he was still here somewhere, unless he’d ducked out a back entrance, in which case, she would soon appear very foolish.

“Good afternoon.” She waited for a reply, but his face was as stony as when he’d opened the door. She cleared her throat. “I was looking for... Avalon.” She nearly stumbled over the duke’s identity, recalling his pseudonym at the last moment.

“What do you want with him?” the man opposite asked in a gravelly voice.

She lifted a brow and replied primly. “That, sir, is between me and him.”

One moment, Lexie was waiting for the other man to speak and the next, her arm was grabbed in a bruising grip and she was hauled inside the room, the door slamming

shut behind her. “What the devil are you doing here?”

As a hard body pressed her against the wood of the door, Lexie had to sigh inwardly. This was much better. She would certainly rather face the stormy glare of the duke rather than the dangerous glint in that single blue eye. “Ah, there you are,” she said breathlessly .

“You didn’t answer my question,” he nearly snarled.

She forced herself not to pout, but she wasn’t very happy with his reception. She had been expecting him to applaud her on her quick resolve, instead he was acting like an angry father whose child had done something naughty. “If you wouldn’t crowd me, then perhaps we might have a civil conversation.”

He pushed away from her with another growl, but pivoted back around a short distance away, the first man watching her with something akin to curiosity, as if she were some sort of oddity at the local fair.

She smoothed her cloak and patted her hair and then said, “I didn’t figure you would tell me more about yourself than you did at the opera so I took it upon myself to learn the full truth and what I actually have to fear.”

“Is that so?” The eyepatch swiveled in his direction and an unspoken message appeared to pass between them. Afterward, the duke returned his gaze to her. “You don’t understand anything, and by coming here you might have just secured your fate. It’s best if you leave and pray that no one followed you like you have me.”

Lexie’s jaw went slack. This reunion wasn’t turning out how she’d imagined at all. But what he didn’t know was that she had never been one to back down, and certainly not without having the last word. “Before I go, I would be asking myself how it was that I discovered your location in the first place.”

She turned on her heel and had her hand on the knob when a voice spoke up behind her. "I am rather curious about that."

She slowly turned to face the man with the eyepatch. Narrowing her gaze, she lifted her chin and said, "I don't think we've been properly introduced."

He gave a chuckle and then murmured something to the duke that she wished she had been able to overhear before he bowed as gallantly as if he were in the midst of an elegant ballroom and he'd claimed a dance. "Amos, at your service."

"No last name?"

His face retained the smile but his eye flashed with warning. "Amos is fine."

She gave a slight shrug and attempted to quell the sudden unease that slithered down her spine. He had the same power of intimidation as the duke. Thankfully, she had been bullied by her father for years so she was used to the gruff demeanor most often associated with men. "Very well." Gathering her resolve, she kept her focus on Amos and purposefully ignored the duke. "The hackney driver happened to see... Avalon leaving his residence in... er... another section of town, but he immediately recognized him. And he seemed to act as though it wasn't a secret that he tended to leave the house at all hours. He claimed that having driven a hackney as long as he had, not much escapes his notice."

"Interesting." Amos appeared thoughtful, and then he turned to the man at his side. "Did you realize you were being observed?"

The duke set his hands on his hips and set his jaw. "It would appear I was not as circumspect as I believed. I have become too careless over the years, which is why it is a good thing I'm handing the responsibility over to someone who isn't bedeviled at every turn these days." He pinned Lexie with a glare, and she had the feeling that

remark was mainly meant for her.

“Say what you will, but you will find that not much intimidates me.” At least, not outwardly.

“I am beginning to see that, yes.”

The low murmur slid over her skin like the finest silk and caused her to shiver slightly.

“You’re cold.” He moved toward her, and although she was perfectly fine, he removed his jacket and laid it over her shoulders. He turned to Amos. “I’m going to escort the lady home?—”

She shook her head. “I didn’t come all this way just to be rebuked for my actions and sent back to my room like some recalcitrant child.”

His glare was hard. “I will not have you traipsing about Whitechapel.” His eyes flicked over her attire. “And especially not dressed as you are. You would become an instant target in your finery.”

“Then procure me something else to wear, because like it or not, until I discover everything there is to know about the threat to my life, you’re stuck with me.”

She was the most obstinate, stubborn, irritating woman he’d ever had the misfortune to meet.

And yet...

Dominic couldn’t help but admire her bravery, however foolish, the pert line of her nose, the mutinous set of her chin, and the sparkle of life in those blue eyes. She was

so tantalizingly beautiful that he wanted to gather her into his arms and kiss her until they were both clinging to a tenuous strand of self-control.

But since he was forced to retain his distance, for Amos's sake if nothing else, Dominic sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was about to say he wasn't going to argue with her any longer and she would be going back to Mayfair if he had to drag her there kicking and screaming, but then Amos interjected. "I can help with that."

Dominic jerked his head around. He had never known the other man to cart about women's apparel to produce at a moment's notice, but nothing would surprise him. Amos was prepared for most any situation that presented itself, no matter how odd it might seem at the time.

He returned from his bedroom carrying a simple brown linen. He held it up, and Miss Givenwald boldly walked forward. "Thank you, Mr. Amos." She shot Dominic a triumphant look before she glanced toward the bedchamber door. As Amos waved a hand, she disappeared inside .

As soon as they were alone, Dominic walked over to him. "Have you lost your bloody mind?"

Amos snorted. "I can see why you have lost some of your focus lately."

"And yet, you decide that it is best if she trots after me like a pup after its master in the most dangerous part of the city?"

"Wasn't it your townhouse in Mayfair that was broken into this morning?" Amos pointed out.

"And my office just before that," Dominic returned with a snap.

Amos shrugged. “It’s better to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Or in this instance, you can protect her better if she is with you rather than running all over the East End ducking around corners trying to keep you in sight.”

Realizing that Amos had a point, Dominic leaned his head back against the wall. “I must have really done something unforgiveable in the past to suffer like this now.”

“I wouldn’t see any hardship in keeping Miss Givenwald close. She is quite comely.”

Dominic gave a sharp bark of laughter. “That is the worst part of all.”

“You told me you wanted to take a wife. She’s as good as any.”

“A suitable one,” Dominic corrected. “I have yet to discern if the lady is that, and finding a way to corner me like a fox in its own den is not the way to endear herself to me.”

Amos lifted a brow. “You would get bored with a chit that did everything you asked of her, admit it.” As Dominic remained silent, he pointed toward his bedchamber. “I guarantee that one will keep you heading for her bed night after night.”

Dominic stared at the closed door separating Miss Givenwald from his view as if he could look hard enough and peer through to the other side. In the short time they had known of each other’s existence she had managed to find a way to entice him. She was everything that he’d ever wanted—in a mistress. But then, he hadn’t been searching for a wife to settle down with until recently either. It could be that she would be the perfect choice as a bride, and as Amos said, Dominic doubted the passion that flared between them would ever wane. It was too strong, something he’d never felt before with any other woman.

He was still fixated on the woman behind the door when it suddenly opened and she

popped her head around the frame. For the first time she appeared a bit uncertain. “I am having a bit of... trouble getting the hooks attached in the back.”

Before he quite knew he was moving, Dominic’s footsteps were taking him closer to her. She stepped out of the way as he entered the room and shut the door behind them. He had been in Amos’s bedchamber a handful of times and thought nothing of it, but with this tempting vixen standing in front of him, he found the room had suddenly gotten smaller and the bed was the only thing he could seem to focus on. His breathing turned shallow and it took a moment for him to remember why he was there.

She turned her back to him hesitantly, revealing the borrowed dress gaping at the back. He could see the laces of her stays beneath and rather than hooking the dress, he imagined sliding the offending garment off her shoulders and slowly removing the rest of the clothes from her until she was standing there in nothing but her stockings and shoes.

He tried to swallow but it was difficult to manage as his throat had closed up on him.

He reached out his hands and blinked when he realized that they were shaking. What the hell was wrong with him? It was as if he was the inexperienced one in this scenario. She seemed completely unaffected. But as he reached out and brushed a finger across the bare skin of her smooth spine, she flinched and he could tell she wasn’t as composed as she might pretend.

This knowledge made it possible for him to concentrate enough to finish fastening her dress. Afterward, he didn’t immediately move backward. Instead, he allowed his hand to brush the side of her slender neck. He heard a sharp intake of breath, and he leaned down to kiss his way along the smooth column. Her hair was pulled up into a simple knot, and he imagined removing every single pin, allowing the length to flow over her naked breasts and along her shoulders. He would wrap the length around his

hand, fisting it in his palm as he drew her head back and smothered her mouth with so many kisses that she started to beg him for mercy.

“Your Grace?”

It was the unsure tone of her voice, along with the sound of his title crossing her lips that caused him to step backward before he turned his dreams into reality. He had not lied when he told Amos this was a dangerous game and Miss Givenwald an equally dangerous woman. “Let’s go.”

He threw open the door and breathed in a great gulp of air as he forced his raging desire to return to a dull simmer.

He couldn’t even look at Amos as he waited for his quarry to join him. She retained his jacket and he noted that she had left behind her cloak with her dress. That was good because it was also of fine quality and would do nothing but alert all of the thieves in the neighborhood like a red flag taunting a bull if she were to don it once again.

He finally glanced at Amos and offered him a curt nod as he opened the door and waited impatiently for Miss Givenwald. She had paused by Amos. “Thank you for your assistance.”

He grinned and it annoyed Dominic more than it should. “Anytime.”

As Dominic lightly grasped her arm to propel her outside, he was trying to think of where they might go, where she would get in the least amount of trouble and it might pacify this insatiable curiosity she had. He certainly wasn’t going to take her to the Crown & Sceptre. There were too many people who knew Avalon for him to be comfortable with parading about a woman as lovely as Miss Givenwald. Although no one would bother her with him at her side, it was when he wasn’t around that

concerned him.

With a considering frown, they had moved into the open when the first gunshot rang out.

“What—?”

Dominic uttered a curse as he threw his body over Miss Givenwald to absorb any further impact that might be coming. Amos’s door flew back open and Dominic quickly hauled her back inside just as another bullet shattered the wood against the frame and they slammed the panel shut.

CHAPTER 9

Lexie put a hand over her chest where her heart was about to beat out of it. “I suppose that answers my question... about the level of danger I could be in.” She was having trouble catching her breath. But although the experience was terribly frightening, there was a certain... thrill that she couldn’t seem to shake off.

She glanced at the duke, but he was otherwise quite steady and composed, apart from a thunderous expression on his face. She wondered if his anger was directed toward the assailant or her, but there was no time to think on it because it was obvious he was also a man of action.

He kept hold of her arm as he hauled her toward the back of the small apartment. Amos was on their heels. “Amos, go to the Crown instead, he covered her hands with his own. One of them was over his steady beating heart. “I have to keep my distance or else things will go further than I intend. And with the way I’m feeling right now, I can’t promise that I will be as gentle as you need me to be.”

Lexie wasn’t frightened. She moved toward him. “I want it all.” She brought one of his hands to her breast. “I want this.”

“You’re an innocent,” he rasped. “You don’t know what you want.”

She lifted her face toward him. “I set out to seduce you the moment I saw you walk into that ballroom. Trust me. I know what I want and that is you.”

CHAPTER 10

She was sorely testing his resolve. Dominic was doing his best to be a gentleman and not take advantage of the situation, but she was making it deuced hard to retain his distance. It didn't help matters that his cock was pulsing with a demanding urgency that almost surprised him. Not since he was a young man out trying to turn every woman's skirts upside down had he felt this all-consuming need to possess another human being.

But Lexie wasn't just anyone, was she? She was incomparable to anyone else he'd ever met and part of this reason his body was a raging inferno whenever she was near.

He recalled their first meeting with vivid clarity. He had noticed her regard and had taken it upon himself to watch her from afar. She had instantly captivated him with her beauty, but it was so much more than that. It was like she'd cast a spell over him and ensnared him in her web and no matter what he did to try to break free, she merely spun the web around him even tighter.

He wanted nothing more than to sink himself into her wet heat. He had never pleasured a woman to the point he'd nearly lost control of himself at the same time, but he had come perilously close to doing just that. Every bit of her was perfection.

He wanted all of it.

Daring to reach out a hand, his fingers had nearly reached her when there was a knock at the door. He froze midair and abruptly recalled how perilous their situation

was. Anyone could have burst inside and he wouldn't have been aware of the danger. He shouldn't have allowed his guard to slip for one moment, and yet, he'd allowed lust to overrule his sense. It could have been a deadly mistake and was an error he couldn't repeat.

He spun around and answered the summons, not sure if he was relieved that they'd been interrupted—or annoyed by Amos's timely arrival. The dark-skinned man walked inside purposefully, but when he spied Lexie, who was looking rather disheveled and thoroughly loved, he shot a knowing glare at Dominic.

"Not now," he growled in warning and then moved further into the room, determined to keep as much distance between him and the lady as possible to get his mind back in proper working order.

Amos said nothing more but his expression toward Dominic said it all. "The Blue Boys are gathered at the Crown & Sceptre, awaiting further instruction. I decided not to involve the watch unless you thought otherwise."

"No. Their services are best served on the other side of town where their pockets can be greased well enough. In the East End, the Blue Boys are the law. I just need someone I can trust to escort Miss Givenwald back home safely."

Standing silent until this point, Lexie stepped forward, but before she could utter a word, Dominic said firmly, "I will ensure that a few Runners watch your aunt's residence at all times, but the less time you spend in Whitechapel right now, the better. While the assailant likely already knows your identity, or soon will, you are better protected in polite society."

She crossed her arms. "And you don't know horrible things happen there?" She snorted. "If you believe that, then you have obviously never heard of the Hellfire Clubs."

Dominic frowned, as he knew all too well the sort of illicit entertainments that Sir Francis Dashwood had partaken of nearly a century prior. He was also aware of more current events that transpired in London, but he decided it was best not to reveal all of his knowledge.

Amos sent another speaking glance at Dominic. “This one has a mind of her own. And a voice that she’s not afraid to use.”

Lexie appeared placated. “At least someone can appreciate my personality.” She sent an equally critical look toward him, and Dominic was beginning to think that they were in league against him at this point.

He set his jaw as Amos said, “If you are ready to depart, my lady, I can get us to a hackney.”

Dominic glanced at her gown and said, “Not without changing first.”

She stalked toward him and snatched her gown from the chair before she flounced off to another part of the cottage. Silence lengthened in the room until her return.

She tossed down the serviceable dress, thoroughly ignoring Dominic as she addressed Amos. “Lead the way.” She lifted her skirts with determination, as if she couldn’t rid herself of Dominic’s presence quickly enough.

He certainly couldn’t let her depart on such sour terms.

He moved forward and grasped her arm. “Amos, if you don’t mind giving us a moment?”

The other man offered a slight nod and removed himself from the modest cottage. Once Dominic was alone with Lexie again, he grasped her by the upper arms. “You

have to know that going back to Mayfair is the only option available right now. ”

She tilted her defiant chin into the air. “I know that you can’t wait to be rid of me.”

He had to laugh at that. “Sweetheart, that couldn’t be further from the truth. I would like nothing more than to keep you under me until you are screaming my name in pleasure.” He could see a slight flush crawl into her cheeks, her lips parting slightly. Immediately, his flaccid cock began to arouse with renewed vigor. “But since I have no option other than to send you away until I have found a way to deal with this criminal, I am forced to think of your welfare. No one here knows the double life I lead except for Amos, and now you. That is powerful knowledge that could be used against both of us if it is discovered by this assailant. He has already taken something precious from me. It would be a shame if he absconded with a second.”

Allowing his affection to float in the air between them, Dominic saw some of the frustration leave the stiff set of her shoulders. “When will I see you again?” she whispered.

And then it all made sense. She didn’t want to leave—because of him.

His heart swelled with emotion that he dared not name this early into their association, but it was swiftly becoming apparent that they were starting to form a bond that was special and perhaps, even unbreakable. They were already facing adversity, and instead of pulling away from one another, they were lamenting the fact they had to part.

He cupped her cheek with the palm of his hand and ran his thumb over her lower lip. He vividly recalled the taste of her mouth and the scent of her womanhood. They were both equally intoxicating, and he knew he would carry the memory of her passion with him long into the night and for the long days to come.

“I will never be far away. Trust me on that.”

She exhaled on a shuddering sigh and as she pulled back from him, he released her. When she turned and walked out the door, Dominic wondered if his heart was leaving too.

“I can tell Avalon cares a great deal for you.”

Lexie glanced up at Amos. It was the first time they had spoken to each other since he'd procured a driver and they started the return to the fashionable area of London. She folded her hands together in her lap. “Something tells me there is a hidden warning in that statement.”

His smile was broad and it made his eyepatch look more menacing than before. “You are more perceptive than most women he has taken to his bed. And intelligent.”

“I haven't been in his bed.” Yet.

“It's only a matter of time,” he announced, as though reading her thoughts. “He may seem impenetrable, but he has not been without strife in the past. He has dealt with a lot and kept his heart carefully guarded for a number of years. He kept his liaisons brief because he knew it was imperative that he do so. There was only one woman who came close to turning his head, but her heart was already spoken for by another.” Immediately, the green-eyed monster of jealousy wanted to rear its ugly head. Thankfully, his next words set Lexie's mind at ease. “Rest assured, she is happily married and Avalon realized that what he felt for her was more akin to respect as opposed to love.”

Feeling irritated, she tilted her head to the side. “You seem to know a lot about relationships, Amos. Tell me, have you ever been in love yourself, or do you like to offer advice on something you know nothing about?”

A flash of ultimate sorrow touched his single blue eye before he said quietly, “I have known a great love, but it was not something I could protect. She lost her life giving birth to my son. I have never fully recovered from her loss. ”

Guilt instantly washed over her. “I’m sorry,” Lexie said sympathetically. “I didn’t realize?—”

He shook his head. “It was a long time ago, and yet, the grief still strangles me now and then as if the wound was as fresh now as it ever was.” He seemed to fall into some dark cavern in the recess of his mind for a moment, and then he recovered and turned his focus back to her. “What I’m trying to say is that when it comes to the all-consuming love that I discovered all those years ago, a man is likely unable to recover from the devastation should it occur. I don’t want to see the same thing happen to Avalon. He has done a lot of good for the people in the East End, although most of it was rumored to be in a bad light. The Blue Boys aren’t the ruffians that they portray themselves to be. If they rid the city of anyone, it is the dregs of society that are better served beneath the ground.”

She shuddered at the thought of anyone’s life coming to an end. “How can you say that? It was someone’s child, a son, a brother, a friend. And yet, no one thinks twice when it comes to deciding their future is not worth saving?”

He inclined his head. “What if it was your daughter, or sister, or friend who suffered at the hands of a man intent on rape? Or perhaps murdered someone you held dear for the sake of their own personal enjoyment? To me, that is just as wrong and you know that the courts aren’t always just.”

Lexie did know that. She had long understood that if there was wealth or prestige involved, the local magistrate was often inclined to look the other way. She sighed heavily. “I wish there was another way, some sort of justice system that could give everyone a fair trial. Let their peers decide their innocence.”

“I would be inclined to agree, and while I know you don’t approve of our methods, until that time passes, that is what the Blue Boys are here to do.”

Lexie looked out the window, feeling tears springing to her eyes for some reason .

“At least we have never employed a trial by ordeal, forcing the accused to hold a hot iron or dip them in water until they confess their sins. We deal with most criminals by humane methods and very rarely enact any sort of punishment that the local assizes couldn’t assign if it were ruled by someone who enacted judgments fairly. But the current rules have been in place for far too long. It’s time for a change.”

She turned her focus back to him. “In that regard, I do appreciate you trying to make London a better place for us all, and perhaps Avalon will use his persuasion in higher places to get others to listen to that same argument.”

As the carriage came rumbling to a halt, Amos glanced out the window. “You will understand if I can’t escort you to the front steps, but you will find your aunt’s townhouse is just a short distance away down the mews.”

She reached out a hand and set it on his arm. “I believe that you are a good man, Amos. I also know that you will take care of Dominic.” She decided not to dance around his true identity any longer, as he would soon be putting the former part of his life into the past where it belonged. “Bring him back to me.”

Amos seemed almost uncomfortable with the praise, but he gave a sharp nod and said, “I give you my word.”

As she stepped to the ground, he added, “I will make sure you make it inside without incident. By tonight, you can be assured there will be guards posted, but they won’t be noticeable by your aunt.”

Lexie shut the door and started walking back to the townhouse. The sun was just starting to slide onto the horizon. It had been a decidedly strange afternoon, to be sure. But while some of it was terrifying, like being shot at and hiding in a dark, cramped section of wall and hoping she wasn't discovered, there was also the passionate encounter she'd shared with Dominic. Her body warmed just recalling the way his hands and mouth—and that gloriously wicked tongue —had worshipped her with such expert precision. She was quite sure the experience would live in her dreams for many nights to come and would never fully fade.

As she made her way in the front door of the townhouse, her aunt immediately appeared in the foyer. "My God! Where have you been? You leave the house without a proper escort and hie off to Lord only knows where! Have you lost your senses?"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Bonnie." Lexie hoped she offered the proper amount of the remorse that she wasn't really feeling. "I merely wanted to walk for a while on my own without any distractions or concern for the time."

Her aunt looked her over carefully from head to toe and noticed that her hair was down. "Where is your bonnet? And when did you remove your pins?"

Lexie almost lifted her hand and touched her bare head, but she refrained at the last moment. "I forgot it," she lied smoothly. In truth, she hadn't given it a care when she'd been intent on chasing down the duke. How much had transpired since then! "And I felt like being free, like I used to be in the village."

"This is London, not some country hamlet," her aunt chided. "You must learn to keep these fanciful daydreams to a minimum if you hope to ensnare a proposal from Lindley."

For a moment, Lexie was sure her heart came to an abrupt halt. She had completely forgotten about the earl. But considering what had happened between her and

Dominic, she could no longer pretend any sort of affection for the earl. Her aunt would be displeased to be sure, but it was a topic of conversation they would have at another time. Now certainly wasn't it.

“You are fortunate we don't have any plans this evening or I would be hard pressed to keep them for fear you would not be ready in time. Instead, I suggest you change for dinner. It will be ready shortly.”

With that, Bonnie flounced back the way she'd arrived and Lexie breathed a sigh of relief. She had managed to weather the storm, but she couldn't help but wonder what was brewing on the horizon.

Thunder shook the entire structure, but Dominic was oblivious to the rain pelting the window beyond his office at the Crown & Sceptre. Unfortunately, the storm had caused any search for his assailant that night to become a slow crawl, and he was starting to lose patience. Amos and the rest of the Blue Boys gang had thought it best that Avalon remained in public view until they apprehended the criminal. To be so brazen as to attempt murder in the middle of the afternoon, they were all unanimously convinced that someone had to have recognized the gunman, or else they could finally offer some valuable information that had been lacking until that point.

Dominic was a man of action. He wasn't used to standing and cooling his heels, waiting for some sort of word. It made him restless, agitated. It was bad enough that his passions had yet to diminish toward Lexie and whenever he thought of her delectable body, the taste of her beneath his tongue, he groaned in frustration. He wished for this ordeal to be over if he had to walk out onto the street and open his arms wide and let the criminal finish what he'd started and put Dominic out of his misery. It would almost be preferable to standing there and wondering what Lexie was doing—and who was paying court to her.

He hadn't had much luck investigating Lord Lindley except for the fact his father had

recently passed, which everyone knew. He wanted to know if the earl had any dark secrets he could use against him, then Dominic would ensure Lindley was thoroughly warned away from the woman he was quickly starting to consider his. He had never cared much for other people encroaching on his property, and while he didn't consider Lexie in the same category, he was determined that she would soon be his in every way that mattered.

But he could do nothing until he was free from this deadly threat. The idea that Lexie could have suffered a fatal injury because of the hatred one person held for him was not something he was comfortable with. He wouldn't have been able to live with the guilt if the bullet had met its mark.

At least he knew that she would be safe for now. He had made sure that before Amos left Mayfair the two Runners he'd hired to watch over her were paid handsomely for their time. She would not be without protection. And when all of this was over, he would make sure she never had to suffer such chaos ever again.

A knock at the door had him turning expectantly, but it wasn't Amos who entered, rather his son, Devon. The younger version of his father, Devon was just as loyal and could be counted on to assist Amos with the continued work in the East End once Dominic had stepped down from his duties.

"Nothing yet?" he asked.

"No."

Devon appeared just as dejected, but then, Amos had forbidden him to go out to search for a prospective murderer when he had a wife and a child on the way. He claimed it was too dangerous, and Dominic couldn't disagree. He knew Amos didn't want his grandson or granddaughter to grow up without a father, so he'd slowly been tightening the reins of what he allowed his son to take on.

Grateful that he wasn't left to his own thoughts, Dominic grabbed two tumblers and said, "Have a drink with me." He set one down in front of Devon and grabbed a bottle of fine French brandy off the shelf behind him. He splashed two fingers' worth into each of them and paused, deciding that four might be better for this occasion.

He set the decanter down and lifted his glass. "To Amos and the Blue Boys. Let's hope they discover something of value before the day is out."

Devon said nothing but downed his glass the same time Dominic did. Although the burn helped to calm him slightly, it wasn't nearly enough. He gestured to the bottle. "Care for another?"

In reply, Devon shrugged and held out his glass. "Why not?"

Dominic chuckled. "Good man."

A short time later, Dominic decided that the swirl of heat in the pit of his stomach was a good indication that some of his tension was starting to ease somewhat. He could tell Devon was feeling the same effects because he had slouched in the chair across from him, his hands linked loosely over his abdomen.

Rather than dwell on Amos and the danger he was currently facing, Dominic decided to return to the one subject regarding which he could use some much needed advice. "How did you know you were in love when you met your wife?"

Devon glanced at him curiously. Rather than answer directly, he asked, "Are you telling me you think you are?"

He gave a snort. "I wouldn't go that far just yet, but lust is definitely in the equation."

"Ah." Devon nodded. "That is a misleading emotion as it is the first step toward the

ultimate downfall of every man.”

“Truly?” Dominic drew his brows together. “And here I thought it was just nature’s way of wanting us to procreate.”

“I suppose that is true as well,” Devon concurred. “But the strong sensation of lust that overrules all the other senses is generally not that simple.”

“And your conclusion is that if you cannot rid your mind of one particular person that it must be love?”

Devon seemed to consider this at length, and then said, “If your thoughts are continuously consumed with her and you know you would do anything to ensure she remains yours, then yes, I believe that is the proper definition. ”

Dominic wasn’t so certain. It sounded more like a case of intense pursuit to him.

“At least, that is how it was for me. It could be different for everyone.”

That made more logical sense to Dominic, although he would be lying if he said that ever since he’d met Lexie his every waking moment had been filled with images of her. She had managed to filter into his dreams as well. He couldn’t seem to escape her. It sounded as if she was the one obsessing over him. And she had admitted her fascination with him from the first moment they’d met.

He lifted the nearly empty bottle at his side and held it up with a crooked grin. “Might as well finish this off.”

Devon held out his glass. “Hear, hear.”

CHAPTER 11

Lexie woke up to the sound of her windowpanes rattling and rain lashing against the townhouse. She lay in bed, staring at the canopy over her head, and released a heavy sigh. She had passed a sleepless night, but as much as she had attempted to get some rest, her body refused to cooperate. She kept thinking about Dominic and the danger he was in.

She pondered the possible reasons that might have tempted him to put himself in such turmoil. Surely he had to have known that attempting to live a double life as he had, eventually his luck would run out. But perhaps the problem had been that he didn't care.

Her chest ached thinking that he thought so little of his own life that he was willing to sacrifice himself to save others. Did he enjoy playing the part of the martyr, or was there another reason that had caused him to invent Avalon?

The Duke of Cuthbert was certainly turning out to be a more complicated man than she had initially envisioned. She would be better off if she forgot him completely and turned to someone like the earl, a man who didn't crave the chaos that Dominic obviously did .

And yet...

She closed her eyes, her body turning warm and languid as she recounted the passionate events that had transpired before Amos had arrived at the cottage. Her breathing deepened as she imagined Dominic there with her, flicking his thumb over

the hardened peak of her breast. She could almost feel his lips on her neck, his hot breath speaking illicit words in her ear.

And she would never forget that wicked tongue...

She moaned lightly, her hand sliding beneath the coverlet. She pressed her palm against her mound and rubbed gently, but it wasn't enough. Dreaming of Dominic being there was not the same as his actual presence.

Her hand fell away and her eyes opened in frustration. She didn't know when she might see him again, and she wasn't sure her patience would be able to last until she did. She desired him with a need like nothing she'd ever felt before. She had always known something dark and delicious lurked beneath the surface of her skin, and now that she had dipped her toes into the well of those secret desires, these feelings would not abate so easily.

Throwing back the covers, she slid her legs off the edge of the bed and decided it must be time for her to rise, although there was surely not much to look forward to on such a dreary day.

The thought had just slipped through her mind when the door opened and her maid rushed in looking quite harried.

"Jane? Is something wrong?"

"No, miss. Your aunt just wanted me to make sure you were up and made ready. Your father should be here shortly."

Immediately, everything in Lexie's brain came to a screeching halt. "My father is coming to London? But he hates town."

“All the same, that is what I heard.” The maid removed a pastel yellow gown from the wardrobe and held it out for her perusal. “This has always matched your coloring quite nicely, and not everyone with light hair can manage to wear yellow so beautifully.”

As Jane chattered on, Lexie was still trying to process why her father might be making the arduous journey to London, his words, not hers. The only times he would come to the city were to consult with his solicitor or other business that could not be taken care of through his estate manager.

Something very important must have prompted this sudden visit.

All at once the fine hairs on the back of her neck started to rise on end, as if warning of a dire prediction. “Is my aunt still in residence?”

“Yes, miss. She is in the morning room. Shall I send for?—”

Lexie grabbed her wrapper and donned it over her nightdress. “No need. I shall see her myself.”

The maid cast her a horrified look before Lexie padded downstairs on bare feet. Lexie had never roamed about the townhouse in such a lax manner, as she knew it wasn’t looked upon very kindly by her aunt. She believed that no one should leave their bedchambers unless they were properly attired. She might normally agree, but with this sense of foreboding tugging at her, Lexie decided she would risk her aunt’s ire this time.

Striding into the morning room, she found the silver-haired lady just where Jane said she would be. She was reading a local periodical, but Lexie didn’t waste any time in asking, “Why is father coming here?”

The paper was lowered and a critical frown followed when her aunt took in Lexie's state of undress. She gave a sniff of displeasure but set aside the paper. "Good morning to you too," she admonished. A dainty brow was lifted. "I asked your father to come to London to discuss your future and the prospect that you are about to squander. After the way you went galivanting around London without a proper escort yesterday afternoon, the threat to your reputation is the next step on the road to ruin. Since I would be failing in my duties as a chaperone should that happen, I have enlisted the assistance of your sire to convince you that a match with the Earl of Lindley is a solid one and worth devoted consideration. The earl will be joining us for supper this evening at which time your father will have the chance to decide for himself."

By the time her aunt had finished, Lexie's ears were buzzing. She could not believe what she was hearing. "You shall force me to marry the earl?"

"I will do no such thing," her aunt returned sourly. "But your father might. I have given you several weeks to choose a suitor, and the earl practically dropped into your lap and yet you would ignore such a handsome man in favor of a life of spinsterhood?"

Lexie wasn't sure there was anything wrong with being a spinster. All the unmarried ladies she'd met had never appeared that distraught with their fate, and yet, she was expected to marry for the sake of merely doing so. "I don't love the earl."

"Affection will come in time, and if it does not, that is not what unions are based on. They are utilized as a way to populate the earth as God intended and nothing more."

She couldn't believe her aunt actually accepted as truth that marriage was nothing more than a tool, like a rake or a hammer. To Lexie, it was the turning point to happiness or dismay. And while she did admit she admired the earl and he had some good qualities, he did not make her heart beat fiercely, nor was he the one she wanted

with every fiber of her being.

A sudden idea bloomed in her mind, and although Lexie didn't know if her plan would work or not, she had to try. "Would you be averse if I invited another potential suitor this evening?"

Her aunt's interest immediately rose. "I didn't realize someone else had come to call on you."

She didn't want to mention the duke's name and have her aunt reject it out of hand, so she had to make sure she presented a convincing argument to get her consent. "I have long admired the Duke of Cuthbert, and while I know you are not favorable to him, he does hold a lofty title and wealth. Surely that carries some sort of sway, regardless of his reputation."

Her aunt's face turned stony. "Your father may not think so."

"But he would be welcome to come and let father decide for himself which man he prefers?"

It took a moment for her aunt's face to relax once more, but she finally relented with an irritated sigh. "If it will silence your insistence on the matter of the duke, an invitation shall be extended to him as well. I will ensure it is delivered this afternoon."

Relief flooded Lexie, but it was short lived. She couldn't be assured that Dominic could make dinner this evening if he was still tied up trying to locate his attacker. But she had to have hope that he would be there, or else all might very well be lost.

And to make sure her aunt didn't go back on her word, Lexie returned to her chamber and penned a quick missive to Amos. If there was anyone who might be able to get a

message to Dominic, it was him.

“Jane.” She handed the letter to her maid who was patiently waiting to assist her mistress. “Please see that this is delivered to the Crown & Sceptre by way of a private messenger boy.” As the maid reached for the letter, Lexie closed her hands over hers. “It must go with the utmost discretion. Do you understand?”

The girl nodded. “Yes, miss.”

As she left, Lexie leaned back in her chair at the desk and prayed that her fate wasn’t sealed just yet.

Dominic was roused by the sound of a slam of his office door at the Crown & Sceptre. His head shot up as his hand reached for the pistol on his desk where he’d finally passed out from a combination of drink and boredom.

He narrowed his eyes but when his focus became clear, he eased the grip on his gun. “Amos,” he grumbled. “Must you be so damned loud?”

“I have a missive for you from Miss Givenwald.”

Immediately, any last dregs of exhaustion faded as he snapped to his feet and took the letter that was handed to him. He ripped it open, expecting to read about a ransom note or something equally disturbing. As he scanned the few lines, he realized he wasn’t that far off the mark. “Bloody hell.”

“What is it?” Amos asked, concern lacing his tone. Dominic had to snort because it appeared that Lexie had already managed to sneak her way into Amos’s regard in a short amount of time, a feat that was near impossible for most.

“She requests that I attend a dinner at her aunt’s house this evening. It seems that her

father will be in attendance, as will the Earl of Lindley, as a prospective bridegroom.”

Amos nodded. “Are you going to go?”

“How can I refuse under these circumstances?” He sank back down and shoved a hand through his hair. “This couldn’t have come at a worse time.” He looked at Amos. “I suppose since I wasn’t notified that nothing of import was discovered last night?”

“I’m afraid not. We have a few leads that the Blue Boys are looking into, but the man is good at covering his tracks.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m glad that you and Devon were able to keep yourselves entertained. I met him when I came in as he was stumbling out the door and holding his head and grumbling.”

“We were able to pass the time, yes,” Dominic said without any hesitation, but then he returned to the main topic at hand. Scrubbing a hand down his face, he added, “The last thing I wanted to do is cause more trouble for Alexandra and her family, but neither can I allow them to browbeat her into forcing her hand into marriage. Unfortunately, I never had the chance to investigate the sudden resurgence of the earl properly since I’ve been focusing all our efforts on our assailant. All I know is that Lindley’s father passed, he inherited the title, and came to London, apparently, to whisk Alexandra out from under me.”

Amos snorted. “I doubt that was his objective.” He lifted a brow. “But what happens if the decision comes to pass that she has to choose between you or him?”

“Then, of course, I shall win,” Dominic said firmly. “You know I don’t take defeat lightly when it is something I consider mine.” He frowned. “I will just have to ensure I am cautious this evening. Not only will I be taunting the criminal by returning to society, but that leaves everyone here vulnerable to attack should he decide to strike again.”

“There is no need to worry about us,” Amos said confidently. “I have things controlled here.”

Dominic walked over and clapped the other man on the shoulder. “I know you do. And once Devon is recovered, offer my apologies for the headache he will surely be nursing all morning.”

With that, he departed the pub, careful to take the long way to his current lodgings, where he grabbed a change of fashionable clothes that he’d stowed there. He normally waited until he returned to his townhouse to become the “duke” again, but he considered it best if he did so on the carriage ride there.

Careful to be more aware of his surroundings than before, Dominic hailed a hackney. By the time he arrived at his townhouse, he stepped down out of the hired conveyance and gained a surprised look from the driver. He tossed a guinea in his direction. “For your discretion.”

The man quickly tucked it away. “As ye wish, guvn’r.”

As the hackney rambled away, Dominic spied a man standing on the corner and recognized one of the Runners he’d hired to keep watch of his residence while he was away. Walking toward him now, Dominic saw the man straighten and incline his head respectfully. “Your Grace. Welcome back. I’m happy to report that there have been no changes. All has been quiet in your absence. ”

Dominic decided to omit the part where he’d been shot at in Whitechapel. It was no wonder things had been calm back in Mayfair. “That is good to hear. Continue your vigilance. It is needed now more than ever now that I’ve returned.”

“Of course.”

Satisfied that he would be alerted to any sign of trouble, Dominic intended to check in with the Runners who were watching over Lexie's residence that evening. Surely he could find an opportunity to slip away unnoticed at some point. Perhaps when he claimed to use the necessary.

Heading for his study and taking care of a few things that needed his attention, Dominic sat back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. There was a time that he would have lived for this sort of danger, but there was too much at stake now. He was attempting to recover his ruined reputation, now more so than ever because he didn't want to drag Lexie into the title of duchess where she would immediately face strife. She might believe that she could handle all of the whispers that came along with being the Duchess of Cuthbert, but his mother had faltered under the strain, which was why no one had seen her in public for nearly a decade. Although he vowed that he would not be the sort of wastrel that his father had been, he couldn't pretend that his sire's personality wouldn't resurface now and then. It was bound to happen at some point or another because the same blood flowed through their veins. As much as he might not like it, Dominic had always known that. It was why he had allowed his baser urges to lead him for so long. Ironical that as soon as he'd made the decision to leave all his sordid past behind, it dug in those wicked clutches and refused to abate.

But he would prevail as he always had. He hadn't become the leader of the Blue Boys by giving up and allowing defeat to reign supreme.

The same could be said for Alexandra and her family. He would prove that he was the man intended for her hand.

He isn't coming.

Lexie paced the length of the front parlor as she waited for her aunt to tell her that the duke had sent his regrets. All afternoon she'd been on pins and needles, fearing that

something terrible had befallen him or all the sweet promises he'd whispered to her had been fabricated. He would not be there to save her from her father's harsh demands.

The Marquess of Singleton had yet to arrive, and Lexie had nearly convinced herself that she had been worrying for nothing, that her sire would decide it was too much of a nuisance to try to intervene, as he normally had when she was young and the governess had approached him with one complaint or another. From an early age, she had always been a troublesome child. Perhaps that is what she learned from being the result of an older woman who could not withstand a later in life child and a man who was weary of trying to father a son and when he was finally blessed with a baby, it was not what he'd been hoping for all those years.

That was another truth Lexie had grasped from a young age. She'd been a disappointment from the beginning because she had the wrong anatomy.

Her aunt slapped down the newsprint she had been attempting to read and said crossly, "Please stop that incessant pacing back and forth. You are making me dizzy."

Lexie reluctantly flopped down in one of the chairs near the fireplace, which earned her a chiding glare from her aunt, but thankfully the lady kept her thoughts to herself with pursed lips.

A short time later, the sound of carriage wheels stopping in front of the townhouse had Lexie jumping to her feet and crossing the room to the window. Pushing aside the heavy drapes, she spied her father's crest on the carriage door. Her heart managed to lodge itself in her throat. After all this time he still intimidated her because she felt as though she had to continue earning his regard.

She let the drapes fall back into place. "Father is here."

“I suspected he would be here soon. Alexander was always prompt. It was a trait I admired most about him when he was courting my sister.”

They both waited patiently for the marquess to be announced. As her father entered the parlor, Lexie couldn't help but notice how he didn't look altered at all. He still retained the physique of his younger days, the result of being an avid sportsman and devoted rider. His hair was still dark except for the slight hint of silver at his temples. He held himself with all the air and confidence of a seasoned aristocrat, proof that nothing had changed. She waited while Bonnie greeted him formally, and then his gaze flicked to her. She looked for any sign of affection in his regard, but there was nothing save indifference. At least he acknowledged her, which had been a difficult task to accomplish for many years. “You look well, Alexandra.”

“Thank you, Papa. As do you.”

And that was it. That was their grand exchange of affection after a few months apart. She had no doubt that had it not been for her aunt's insistence he come to London, he would have forgotten he even had a daughter until it was time to attend the wedding and sign the dowry over to her husband.

“What time is dinner?”

“In an hour,” Bonnie replied factually. Apparently, she was aware of the marquess's cool demeanor as well. “Would you care for some port while you wait?”

He took a seat on the settee. “No, thank you. I just want to meet the prospective suitor for my daughter and return home.”

“Are you not weary from your travels?” her aunt asked. “I had one of the guest rooms prepared?—”

“I will have to return to my estate this evening,” he returned in clipped tones. “I’m a very busy man. ”

Lexie wanted to laugh at that, but she dared not express her true opinion for fear of risking his wrath. Or worse yet, his complete intolerance. But while he was dedicated to being fully immersed in his ledgers, he always made time to visit some of the local widows. No doubt he wanted to return to ensure that his bed didn’t grow too cold.

She hated how bitter that sounded, but she wondered if he ever truly mourned her mother’s loss, or if he decided it was another aspect of a disappointment in life and ensured that he was kept well satisfied in all other matters.

“Of course.”

At the sound of more commotion outside, Lexie’s heart gave a flip, but when the earl was announced, she had to force a smile on her face as he entered the room.

He was as cordial as always, of course, and bowed over her hand in greeting. He did the same to her aunt and when he was introduced to her father, it was obvious he did not break character even when the marquess immediately set to questioning him about his family and his status in society. To some, the directness of his queries would have been construed as bold, if not downright rude, but it didn’t faze Lindley. Her aunt appeared pleased by the encounter, and Lexie could feel her stomach churning with nerves. This was not how she had wanted this evening to start.

She kept glancing at the clock and wondered if she had told the duke the correct time, but she was sure that she had done so. However, with each minute that passed, her hopes were starting to crash against the rocks like a giant wave of destruction. He really wasn’t going to come.

“The Duke of Cuthbert.”

Immediately, her spirits brightened and Lexie rose to her feet as the man who had tormented her thoughts since the previous evening strode into the parlor. He was breathtaking in his black and white finery, but she knew that he looked equally compelling in simple attire as well. He had the air of authority around him that could not be denied, the look of both predator and prey.

Her gaze was the first one he caught when he entered and he dared to give her a consolatory wink. It was quick, a simple flash, but she caught it and her heart soared.

CHAPTER 12

It was easy to see the look of relief on Lexie's face when Dominic was shown into the parlor by one of the footmen. It was not mirrored in her aunt's expression, however, nor that of the earl, the older man, whom Dominic guessed was Lexie's father and the reason for her anxious note, was the only one who appeared unconcerned. His identity was confirmed moments later after introductions were made.

As a duke, Dominic had the highest rank in the room, and yet, the Marquess of Singleton did not appear to care one way or another as he offered a chilly exchange and started an inquest that made Dominic lift his brow. "I suppose you are another contender for my daughter's hand? The monetary value of a union would benefit you greatly, no doubt."

Dominic wanted to laugh. He was a cheeky bastard and more arrogant than anyone Dominic had ever met. "I have plenty of funds at my disposal, Lord Singleton. I have no need of a pretty dowry to turn my head."

"Is that so?" The marquess didn't seem convinced. "Then what, pray tell, has convinced you to look in Alexandra's direction? "

Rather than reply directly, he turned to her and said, "Tell me what you see, Lord Singleton, and perhaps you will understand the qualities that have initially drawn me to her."

His words appeared to please Lexie, but when he returned his attention to the

marquess, he didn't appear amused. The earl, however, was almost preening, as if he had done something of note while Dominic had made a terrible faux pas. But if there was one thing Dominic did not do, it was cater to anyone, no matter their station in life. Generally, it was the other way around and even then, he did not expect the sort of domineering submissiveness that the marquess seemed to expect.

They were saved any further stilted conversation by the announcement of dinner, although the tension in the air was still palpable. As the highest-ranking member of the group, he was expected to escort their hostess, Lady Devonly. Next, it was Alexandra and her father, followed by the earl.

At the table, Lexie's aunt had maneuvered the seating so that the marquess occupied the head of the table while Dominic was on his right. Bonnie sat beside him while the earl was across the table and Lexie was as far from him as possible, next to Lindley.

He glanced at his hostess and easily read the confirmation on her face. He inclined his head, allowing her the win in this particular match, but he had dealt with people much more manipulative than this. He was up for the challenge.

As the first course was brought out, the marquess turned to him. "Tell me about your family."

"My father is dead, as is my brother. My mother still lives, but she prefers the solitude of the estate."

The other man nodded. "I cannot agree more. I have never cared for London."

"Not even its diversions?" Dominic dared to ask.

Silence prevailed for a moment as the marquess looked at him with slightly narrowed dark eyes. "At times, they can be of note, but no. There is nothing like the peace of

nature. ”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the earl piped up. “I have long enjoyed riding around the countryside.”

Dominic wanted to laugh aloud. He would bet his entire stable of horseflesh that Lindley was terrible in a saddle and knew little to nothing about proper stock. Deciding to put that theory to the test, he clasped his hands before him and asked, “Tell me, Lord Lindley, when it comes to temperament and conformation, which do you prefer?”

To be fair, the earl didn’t hesitate. “I would choose an animal to be socially acceptable of all else, as not to disrupt the wellbeing of my other cattle.”

“And what of his hooves?”

At this, he blinked. “The hooves?”

“Yes. They must be properly kept and groomed. If not, there will be signs of chipping and cracking, which will lead to the loss of integrity, a disaster for anyone looking to keep good breeding stock certainly, but for other reasons as well.”

The earl cleared his throat. “Naturally, that is important,” he murmured.

Just as I thought. Not a clue.

“It seems you are well versed with your stables.”

Dominic turned to the marquess. “Indeed. I pride myself on my stock. It is an importance that my father passed on to me.” He paused for effect. “Among other necessities of life.”

He murmured something noncommittal, but Dominic could tell he was making an impression, whereas the earl was falling flat. If Lindley didn't yet understand that he was being bested, when he glanced across the table and saw the pinched expression from Lexie's aunt, that was all the confirmation that he required.

Taking a moment to dare to meet Lexie's gaze, he saw those blue eyes were focused on him, her lips curved slightly upward in a pleased smile. If anything made him feel as if he could conquer the world, it was that simple acknowledgment.

He offered her another wink and he saw the color rise on her cheeks in response. The action did not escape the earl's notice, as his jaw visibly clenched in annoyance.

By the time the main course was served, Dominic was confident that he was winning this particular war. He had carried most of the conversation with the marquess, and while Lexie's aunt had done her best to draw the earl into the exchange, he was soon dismissed by both men. He realized that her efforts were because of his reputation, believing Lord Lindley to be a more suitable choice for her niece. What the lady didn't know was that Dominic had already sampled some of Lexie's delights, and there was nothing short of the end of the world that would cause him to release her to another man.

Lexie had held no doubt that Dominic would be able to win over her father. He had managed to secure the regard of one of the most notorious underground gangs in London in the guise of Avalon, so why should he not be able to do the same, even with a gruff man like her father?

She had noticed the irritated look from her aunt several times, as well as the way Lord Lindley had fallen silent and stared at his plate as the duke and her father had spoken with knowledge about several subjects from politics to personal estate matters. It was as if they were at a gentleman's club rather than in the presence of ladies where such subjects were commonly barred for fear of delicate feminine

sensibilities. However, Lexie was well aware that her father considered matters of business to be more imperative than that of a woman's presence, so it had never bothered him to speak of it in front of her. When she had finally realized that and begun to acquaint herself with the same topics, he had finally begun to pay her any sort of notice, other than as someone who lived in the same house like one of the servants .

She fully expected her father to give his blessing to the duke, and she couldn't be more thrilled with the outcome. Although she hadn't wanted to injure the earl, it was time that he understood which way her heart was leaning, and as much as she'd tried to get her emotions to sway toward him, it wasn't anything more than a polite acquaintance.

When it came time for Lexie and her aunt to leave the table so the men could enjoy some after dinner discussion, her father stood as well. "There is no need for any further pretense. We all know what brought us here tonight." Silence enveloped the table as he tossed down his serviette and turned to Bonnie. "I appreciate the fine meal and the efforts you have put into this endeavor, but I have made my decision. I should accept the Duke of Cuthbert's suit over that of Lord Lindley." He glanced at the earl. "I think you have a fine character, but you are not a match for my daughter. You would soon learn that if you were to spend more time together. She has a strong temperament, and it will take a man equally capable of the challenge she would present as a wife. I believe the duke to be better suited for the role."

He started for the door, but Lexie's aunt chased after him. "What of the rumors about?—"

The marquess sighed heavily as he paused. "I am convinced that you have been speaking to that incessant gossip, Margaret Limewood, which has put these thoughts into your head. I instructed your sister to cease all ties with her, and it was one of the best decisions she ever made. I suggest you do the same for your own peace of

mind.”

As he departed, Bonnie’s mouth fell open, either in outrage or shock, Lexie wasn’t quite sure.

“I think that is my cue to depart,” the earl said stiffly. “If you would excuse me.”

Bonnie was still stumbling over her own tongue as she rushed after Lord Lindley.

Lexie turned her head and locked gazes with Dominic. He reached her in two lengthy strides and clasped her hand in his warm palm. “Come with me,” he whispered.

She eagerly followed him out the terrace doors of the dining room that led to the gardens. They walked a short distance, until they were cloaked in darkness and out of view of the house before he set her against the trunk of a tree and captured her lips with his own.

After a passionate kiss that left them both breathless, he released her and muttered, “I have thought of nothing but this—but you—since last night.”

“The same for me,” she whispered urgently. “I wish there was somewhere we could be alone.”

His eyes flashed in the darkness, and she spied the hunger lurking just beneath the surface. “As do I, but there is still work to be done.” He moved away from her with obvious reluctance and said, “The attacker is still wandering the streets.”

Lexie was disheartened to hear this. “He wasn’t captured?”

“The rain impeded any progress that might have been made,” he noted with a downturn of his mouth. “But with any luck that will soon change.”

She ran a finger down the front of his waistcoat. “I do hope the criminal is caught before our vows are spoken.” She lifted an inquiring brow. “Unless you weren’t intending to heed my father’s blessing?”

He captured her mouth in another drugging kiss that left her knees weak. “I will ensure that the first of the banns are posted this Sunday.”

She gave a small pout. “We must wait three weeks before we can marry?”

“Anticipation, my dear,” he returned smoothly. “And trust me when I say you shall have plenty of it so that when that day arrives, you are running into my arms.”

She quite liked the sound of that .

His focus flickered to someplace over her shoulder. “I will be right back.”

She glanced behind her but could see nothing in the shadows. “What is it?”

“I need to speak with someone I hired to watch the house.” He set a finger under her chin. “I wasn’t taking any chances with your safety, and I trust most of the Bow Street Runners.”

She nodded. “I understand. I shall wait here until you are finished with your meeting.”

He kissed her forehead and then melted into the shadows.

As she waited for him to return, she wandered about the gardens. She rubbed her arms, and although the night was cool, it wasn’t overly so. The rain had ushered in more changing colors on the trees, but it would be some time before the winter season set in.

Her steps crunched on the small pebbles as she made her way back to the main path that wound through the garden. She didn't notice that there was an echo until she glanced up and spied Lord Lindley striding toward her. She stopped. "My lord. I thought you had already left."

"I was intending to," he said evenly. "But your aunt persuaded me to seek you out for an audience."

Lexie withheld a sigh. She didn't know why her aunt was so determined that she procure the hand of the earl, but she would speak with her about it first thing in the morning. She was going to marry the duke, and nothing would change her mind.

"Lord Lindley?—"

He held up a hand. "Don't say anything. Just listen to what I have to say."

She crossed her arms and waited patiently.

He exhaled sharply. "I know I must pale in comparison to the enticement that the duke presents. He is a mysterious man with dark secrets. It makes for an exciting prospect, but trust me when I say he will break your heart. I know I shouldn't speak so openly, but I care about you enough not to allow that to happen. You must reconsider his suit for your own sake."

Lexie couldn't be upset with him. She reached out and laid a light hand on his forearm. "I appreciate your concern. Truly. But I am old enough to make my own decisions, and if they turn out to be the wrong ones, I'm the only one that has to live with those choices. It's not up to you to rescue me."

He looked as though he wanted to argue the point or say something further, but in the end, he nodded. "Very well. I can accept defeat, but just know that should you change

your mind, I would carry you over the border to Gretna Green this very moment.”

Lexie knew she had nothing to fear from the earl, but the way he spoke caused a shiver of apprehension to travel up her spine as if he’d threatened her, rather than offered a solution to a problem. “Thank you, my lord. I shall consider your advice at length, but do not hinge your hopes upon me. It would be best that you seek out the attentions of another.”

There was a flash of something in his gaze, which she couldn’t quite decipher, and then he turned on his heel and walked away.

She stared at his retreating back until he’d disappeared, unease remaining with her long afterward. When Dominic returned to her side, she jumped in alarm. He instantly frowned. “Are you well?”

“I think so.” She shook her head and decided it was best if she didn’t tell him about the encounter with the earl. It would solve nothing and likely just make Dominic angry. “What did the Runner have to say?”

“Not very much. Things have been particularly quiet here, which should be a good thing. I shouldn’t want any harm to come to you or your family.”

“I am lucky to have such a hero to champion our safety,” she teased.

He snorted. “Hardly a knight. If so, my armor would be so tarnished that it would never shine again.” He lowered his head. “But I vow that I would climb any tower to get to you.”

Lexie liked the sound of that and allowed him to kiss her again before he led her back to the terrace doors with a murmured farewell.

Once the duke was gone, Lexie entered the house and found her aunt waiting on her. She looked agitated as she paced the length of the hallway near the foyer. Lexie stopped and approached her. "I hope you aren't upset about this evening, but I told you that the duke has been misjudged. He is an honorable man, and I feel we would make a better match than myself and the earl. I'm sorry if you are disappointed by that."

Her aunt shook her gray head and said, "I can't think on it any more this evening. I need to go to bed." With that, she climbed the stairs to her chamber.

Lexie followed a short time later, hoping that the light of day would also shed a new perspective on her aunt's outlook. If not, the days before her wedding to the duke would be filled with continual strife, and she certainly didn't want that.

As Dominic headed for his townhouse, his mind was racing. He hadn't wanted to alarm Lexie, but he had the feeling that the Runner wasn't telling him everything. He had seemed particularly nervous, as if he might have been threatened, which made him wonder if his original suspicion that the villain was someone within polite society might still ring true.

He couldn't just sit around and do nothing. While Amos was taking care of the East End, as the Duke of Cuthbert, Dominic should have no trouble making his way to a few gaming hells. He had learned a lot over the years by listening to casual conversations. When drink was involved, men were wont to have as loose tongues as ladies who loved to gossip .

Still wearing his formal dinner attire, he ordered his carriage brought around and he headed for one of the most notorious hells that catered to some of the most daring and wealthy patrons. However, it was also one of the worst dens of iniquity that he had ever entered. Debauchery was as prevalent there from the coins that flowed freely as the cards.

As he walked in the front door a short time later, Dominic was greeted with the overwhelming odor of cigar smoke and raucous laughter. Ladies were draped over more than one gentleman, their scantily clad attire making them eager to rid them of their coin for another reason entirely. And as some of the couples stumbled up the stairs, Dominic had no doubt that most would be successful in their endeavors by the end of the evening.

He walked over to the bar and ordered a gin. He needed to keep his wits about him this evening, so he'd ordered something that didn't affect him as badly as brandy or scotch.

Sipping from the glass, he glanced about the assemblage and attempted to pick out the people that he knew. Most were known to him, but not all of them. The ones who were familiar, he knew were inveterate gamblers and womanizers, so it wasn't surprising to find them in this establishment.

As for the rest...

Dominic slowly began to move about the room, as if he were deciding which game he would like to join, but in reality, he was paying keen attention to what was going on around him, listening to the conversations buzzing about and waiting for something to strike him as out of place.

Thankfully, he didn't have long to wait.

A quarter of an hour had passed when he glanced up and saw a disheveled gentleman returning from some adventures upstairs.

Lord Lindley.

Dominic was somewhat surprised, considering the man acted as though he was head

over heels in love with Lexie. But then, after tonight, perhaps he'd realized that his chances of winning the lady's hand were futile after all.

Careful to keep his focus on the man without giving himself away, Dominic edged around a faro table and slid into a recently empty spot. He tossed a few coins down as the earl joined a hazard match behind him. Seated diagonally from one another, it gave Dominic the perfect vantage point to overhear the man's conversations without appearing to care about anything but the play before him.

For a time, they were each involved in their respective games, but then Lexie's name was mentioned and Dominic was suddenly very alert.

"Were you able to secure Miss Givenwald's regard this evening?"

Dominic didn't recognize the slurred voice of the speaker, but he did hear the maliciousness to the earl's tone and he didn't approve. "I was currently delayed, but I don't intend for this slight setback to stop me."

"What do you intend to do?"

"That is for me to know and for you to mind your own business."

"A little touchy, aren't you?" The other man sniffed, as if offended.

"I don't care to air my grievances about this club," the earl snapped. "I just want to play hazard and win some blunt."

There was a slight guffaw. "At least you're confident about your skill at the table."

Dominic heard a gurgled noise, as if the earl had captured the other man about the

throat. "I'm confident about all my abilities, and I will have words with anyone who suggests differently."

The other man appeared to stumble as he was released. "You bashtard. You better not lay another hand on me!"

As the man stalked away, Dominic noticed that the earl remained calm but slowly got up and followed in the same direction.

Dominic quickly tossed down his cards and scooped up his few winnings. He'd heard enough. Returning to his carriage, he instructed his driver to take him back to home where he penned a missive to Amos. While Lord Lindley might not be connected to his assailant in any way, he decided that he was worth some further investigation. Especially if he intended to continue pursuing Lexie.

But that wouldn't last long because Dominic intended to put a stop to that.

CHAPTER 13

The next morning, Lexie was bombarded by her aunt. She entered her chamber when Lexie was still asleep and threw the curtains open. “We are going shopping.”

Still trying to drag herself to the land of consciousness, Lexie murmured, “Is there a special occasion coming up of which I am not aware?”

“There is to be a ball at the end of the week for which we shall need something spectacular, but that isn’t the reason I wish to go to St. James’ today.” She turned to her with a bright smile. “I have it on good authority that the earl shall be out in his phaeton and you wouldn’t want to miss the opportunity to make a good impression after last night’s unfortunate dinner. There may still be time to salvage the disaster that the duke presented to your father. I daresay I have not witnessed such skill when it comes to mockery of one’s own significance except on the stage.”

It was all Lexie could do not to sigh. While she should just go along with her aunt’s enthusiasm, she found that the rebellious streak she had always possessed wanted to dig in her heels. “Might I ask why you are so set on me marrying the earl when I have clearly chosen the duke’s company? And whether you approve of my father’s decision or not, he has apparently offered his preferred choice as well.”

Her aunt shook her head. “That is because you refuse to give Lord Lindley the opportunity to impress you properly. You seem determined to turn your focus toward the duke when I have warned you against his salacious nature time and again. Mark my words, you will come to regret trusting in a man like that.”

Lexie frowned. “You almost speak as if he has wronged you in some manner.”

“Not just me,” the lady returned emphatically. “All of society is aware of his current ruse and they are not pleased that a man of such high standing—a cousin to the king—should act out in such a way. It’s quite regrettable.”

Reluctantly pushing back the covers, Lexie moved her legs to the side of the bed. “You ask me to give the earl a chance and yet, you don’t seem willing to do the same for the duke.”

“Because I am well aware of his nature,” her aunt snapped. She paused and appeared to collect herself. She moved toward the bed and sat down next to Lexie. Taking her hands, she spoke in a calmer tone. “It is my responsibility to see to your welfare, my dear. If I did not do my utmost to protect you I would be failing in my duties.”

Some of Lexie’s frustration subsided in the face of her aunt’s empathetic demeanor. She squeezed her hands lightly. “I appreciate everything you have done for me thus far, Aunt. You have taken me in and done your best to lead me through London. But I am old enough to know my own mind and I have chosen the Duke of Cuthbert.” When her aunt would have spoken, she rushed on. “I will continue to be cordial to the earl, but you must rid your mind of a union between us.”

She looked as though she might argue the point further, but in the end, her shoulders slumped slightly, as if she were defeated. “While I appreciate your candor and your steadfastness toward a man who does not deserve the title of a gentleman, I will not press the issue any further.” She tilted her head to the side. “However, I would still like to see what new bonnets are out for the upcoming winter season, if you are still amenable?”

Some of the tension eased from Lexie’s shoulders as she offered her aunt a smile. “I would love nothing more than to spend the day with you.”

Once Lexie was attired in a light blue gown and royal pelisse, a smart straw bonnet trimmed with velvet ribbon on her head, she entered the carriage after her aunt, who was similarly attired in a dark orange shade that complemented her features.

They chatted about neutral topics on the way to the heart of the shopping district in fashionable London and visited the millinery, Locke & Co, where they each procured a new velvet bonnet lined with silk. After that, her aunt mentioned some new perfume, so they dropped by Floris, another long-standing staple of the city.

From there they visited a haberdashery and her aunt's favorite modiste where Lexie was fitted for a new ballgown to wear to the upcoming ball. While her aunt was busy trying to decide what she wanted to wear, Lexie meandered about the store and inspected the various bolts of fabric that were laid out on display. There were the usual pastels that young, unmarried ladies were expected to wear, and more daring, bold colors that Lexie had always yearned to try, but had not yet had the opportunity to do so.

As she turned, she happened to catch sight of movement from the corner of her eye. She glanced outside and spied Lord Lindley striding purposefully down the pavement. She quickly darted out of sight in case he might see her as well, but when he walked past without hesitation, she breathed a sigh of relief. She was having a nice day with her aunt and didn't want it spoiled by the arrival of the earl. Lexie wouldn't normally have had an issue with the man if her aunt wasn't so determined to become a successful matchmaker. But when his name was pressed upon her so often, it was difficult not to lament ever meeting him.

“Where shall we go next?”

Lexie turned when her aunt approached and looped her arm through hers. “I say it's about time for tea, don't you?”

“Splendid!” Her aunt smiled broadly. “We shall visit Fortnum & Mason.”

Lexie was quite sure that the earl would not be sitting down to have tea or a Scotch egg, as he had appeared in a rush to get somewhere, so her aunt’s suggestion was a rather welcome respite.

However, as they arrived at the front doors of the establishment, a gentleman standing near the entrance greeted them with a polite bow. “Lady Devonly. Miss Givenwald.”

Lexie’s heart sank as she exchanged a similar reply to Lord Lindley. She turned to her aunt who looked entirely too innocent not to have set up this fortuitous meeting ahead of time.

The earl held out his arm to her. “Shall we enjoy the rest of this pleasant autumn day?”

Before Dominic had retired the night before, he’d left strict orders with Amos to have one of the Blue Boys trail Lord Lindley. Something didn’t set well with regard to the earl, but he couldn’t pinpoint what it was exactly. Although he might not be the thief that Dominic was after, he decided that he was worth watching.

With Amos as the messenger for Avalon, Dominic had received word that the earl had left the house. While he hadn’t expected his movements to take him to the shopping district of Mayfair, Dominic’s jaw soon clenched with annoyance when he discovered his intended target .

Apparently, the decision from Lexie’s father hadn’t been enough to persuade the man that she was already spoken for. However, since the first of the banns had yet to be read regarding their engagement, it wasn’t official.

That didn't mean he couldn't intervene now.

Jogging across the street, he caught up to the trio before they were able to disappear inside. Grasping Lexie's other elbow, he said, "I'm terribly sorry I'm late, my dear, but London traffic and all that."

The look of surprise on her face quickly melted into relief, and he could think of no other compliment that he could have received. Unfortunately, that sentiment was not reciprocated by the earl nor Lady Devonly, who both glared at him as if he were the interloper, rather than the two of them conspiring to keep him separated from Lexie. They would soon discover that he didn't take defeat lightly.

He smoothly took the lead with Lexie, keeping her snugly against his side.

"How did you know we were going to be here?" she whispered as her chaperone and Lord Lindley fell slightly behind.

"I didn't. It just happened to be a lucky coincidence."

"A lucky one, indeed." She sighed heavily. "I was hoping my aunt would desist with her insistence that I wed the earl but she will not be abated. This entire tea was staged for his benefit, I'm sure of it."

This information did not set well with Dominic. "I wonder what benefit she would have to see you as the Countess of Lindley? I would think she would be ecstatic with the title of duchess instead."

Lexie rolled her eyes. "She claims it's your dark reputation. She doesn't trust you." Her gaze traveled up and down his chest. "Honestly, I can understand her hesitation." She scrunched up her nose. "But that won't stop me from pursuing you. "

He chuckled deeply at that. "I love how possessive you are of me." He would have loved to continue their flirtatious banter, but he knew their solitary time was running short. They were already being shown to a table. "Can you meet me tonight?"

He could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. "That depends. Where?"

"Make your way to the mews behind your aunt's house at midnight. I will arrange the rest."

She lifted a brow. "A secret rendezvous. How delightful."

Dominic knew she would be the death of him, but he still couldn't seem to get enough of her. "I wish that were true, but there are things of import we need to discuss."

She gave a mock sigh. "Pity. I was looking forward to being ruined."

Dominic nearly groaned, stopping himself just in time. "You will come to regret those words someday," he promised.

She gave a slight shiver, and he eagerly awaited that day more than ever. He could easily fantasize about all the ways he would have her begging his name, but he reluctantly pushed those details aside as he faced off with the earl and his faithful cohort. As he met the vehement glare of Lady Devonly, he could only wonder at the reason for her hostility toward him and the way she defended the earl's cause. There had to be another reason other than Dominic's reputation as the reluctance for her niece to marry him, especially now that her father had given his consent to the match.

He reminded himself that it wouldn't matter how much she disapproved of their union, for once the banns were read, they were as good as joined in matrimony.

He looked at Lexie and a thought occurred to him. He hadn't ever asked her to be his. It had just been assumed after the marquess had offered his blessing. She didn't seem to mind that he hadn't gone the romantic route of falling down on one knee and professing his undying devotion. But although he was obsessed with having her in his bed and admired her fortitude, Dominic wasn't sure that he would go so far as to say he was in love. That was a strong sentiment that he had never taken lightly because he knew that once those words were spoken, nothing would ever be the same.

And it wasn't always a good thing.

Lexie had been dreading the tea after Lord Lindley's arrival, but with the impromptu addition of Dominic, she quite enjoyed herself. Her aunt, however, was highly displeased and couldn't keep her opinions to herself as they returned home.

"The nerve of that man to intrude in such a way!"

Although she knew she ought to placate her aunt, Lexie was annoyed by her aunt's refusal to accept the duke when she had just promised her earlier that morning that she would say nothing further on the matter. Then again, that was likely because she knew the earl intended to meet them and she believed she might yet have her way. "He is my intended, Aunt Bonnie. If anything, the earl was the one who was encroaching."

Her aunt's mouth fell open. "He is the sole of propriety, unlike Cuthbert who has likely not known a day of modesty in all his years." She shook her head. "A disgrace to the English nobility."

Lexie held her tongue as her aunt continued to rant on about the wonderful qualities that Lord Lindley possessed and how evil the duke was in comparison. By the time they arrived at the townhouse, Lexie retired to her room under the guise of a megrim, but it wasn't far from the truth. She wasn't sure how much more of her aunt's

haughty demeanor she could withstand. Perhaps Dominic had some relation she might stay with while they waited to marry. Surely such a situation would be preferable to her current one.

At least she had that evening to look forward to. She was eager to see Dominic again already. It was as if she couldn't get enough of him. He was quickly becoming as essential as the air that she breathed and the blood that ran through her veins.

And his fiery kisses...

Her stomach did a little flip, wondering if he would allow a brief tryst. She certainly approved.

The afternoon passed with devastating slowness, but after dinner, her aunt eventually retired for the evening and Lexie did as well. At least, that was what she had led the older woman to believe. Instead, she donned the same light blue gown she'd worn earlier that day, but instead of the pelisse, she opted for a dark cloak. Without a bonnet, she raised the hood to cover her light curls and quietly made her way down the servants' stairs to the kitchens at the back of the house just as the clock in the foyer struck the midnight hour.

She ensured that she hid a key under a specific rock near the back door in case one of the servants was roused in the middle of the night. That way, if she was locked out for some reason she could get back inside.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness outside as she tried to separate the shadows attempting to play tricks on her from those of true shapes. It helped that the moon was large this evening—a harvest moon—as it helped to guide her way and make out the larger shape of the hired hackney sitting a short distance away.

Her heart immediately began to pick up speed as she drew closer and the door

opened. A hand extended from inside and she grasped it without hesitation. As she was pulled into the dim interior, the door shut behind her and the vehicle set into motion as she was clasped in a pair of strong, warm arms.

As Dominic's mouth descended on hers, she met him hungrily, desperate for this meeting to become more than he claimed it would be. She wanted nothing more than to cling to him forever, but he slowly released her. However, she noticed that a seductive gleam remained in those captivating dark eyes. "You are entirely too tempting for my good sense," he murmured as he gently slid her off his lap to sit on the seat next to him.

She scrunched up her nose. "I don't think you would appreciate a proper lady."

He appeared to consider this for a moment, and then he gave a mock wince. "No doubt you are correct about that. To my everlasting damnation."

She laughed and then sobered when he didn't join in her merriment. "Oh, dear. Is what you have to say that terrible?"

There was a pause before he said, "It's regarding Lord Lindley. He's dangerous. I overheard him speaking about you at a popular gaming hell last night. He seems quite obsessed with you."

"I might have guessed that on my own," she murmured dryly. When he glanced sharply at her, she held up her hands in supplication. "He has not done anything unseemly, but the way he continues to pursue me is very disconcerting, as well as my aunt's continual desire to see us together."

His eyes narrowed, and she couldn't help but think how dangerous he appeared in that moment. But rather than being afraid, she wanted to throw herself into his arms again. It was all she could do to refrain and keep her focus on the matter at hand.

“Have you ever asked yourself why that is?”

She shrugged. “Not really. As far as I am aware they had not known each other before I introduced them.”

He didn’t appear convinced. “My instinct is telling me that there is a deeper connection there, but I cannot fathom what it might be. Perhaps she was good friends with his father and feels some sort of responsibility to see him settled after the former earl’s death.”

“But why me?” Lexie wondered aloud. “He might have his pick of any other debutante in society. ”

“You are readily accessible,” he returned. “And perhaps there is a reason for the haste.” He leaned back against the seat and added, “I will hire a private investigator to look into the matter at length first thing in the morning.”

She nodded. “I would certainly like some distance from Lord Lindley. You cannot imagine how grateful I was for your intervention this afternoon.”

He reached out and lightly set a finger under her chin. “I will always watch out for you.”

She leaned into his embrace. “But who will watch out for you ?”

He smiled and then retracted his hand. “Right now, your safety is my priority. I cannot confirm that I was the intended target of the assailant until he is found and questioned thoroughly by the Blue Boys.”

“Don’t you mean tortured?” She gave a shudder.

He didn't deny nor confirm the accusation. "He attempted murder. That sort of slight cannot be ignored. Especially by Avalon."

She swallowed hard over the lump that had suddenly clogged her throat. "I understand. I know what sort of reputation he must portray."

"Not for much longer," he noted softly. "Once this mess is behind me, I fully intend to retire Avalon and allow Amos full rein."

"You couldn't have chosen a more respected successor. I'm not sure if that is the character you wanted to portray, but Amos seems like a good man."

"He is. He has been loyal to more men than me and never broken anyone's trust." He sighed. "I think he needs the Blue Boys as much as they need his steady guidance."

Feeling as though most of the important things had been said, she moved closer to him. Laying a hand on his forearm, she lifted her gaze in a sultry manner and slowly moved her fingers up his arm. "I am sure we have a bit more time together if you wanted to make use of it."

He reached out and pulled her to him almost roughly. She gasped, the blood running hot in her veins. "You don't have to tell me twice. It was all I could do to restrain myself until now."

CHAPTER 14

Dominic knew he was playing with fire, but he kept telling himself that he intended to marry Lexie, so what was a bit of enjoyment before the vows were spoken? They were just words, right? In his heart he already knew this was the only woman for him even if he was too anxious to actually put a name to what he felt.

Smothering her with kisses until she was moving restlessly beneath him, Dominic slid his mouth to the side of her neck where he sucked gently, but not too hard where it would leave a mark. While he wanted nothing more than to show the world that she was taken, especially for Lord Lindley's benefit, he also didn't want to give her aunt any reason to bar her in her room.

Instead, he tugged down her bodice where he chose to offer little love bites along the tops of her breasts. As one rosy nipple popped free, and then the other, he could feel his cock swell to engorged proportions. She was so beautiful, and the way she clung to him so shamelessly proved this was a union that would never become tiresome. She was passionate and responsive to his every touch. He didn't have to ask what she liked, because she was eager to explore it all .

He sucked each one of those tantalizing pert tips until they became hard points. Then he used his thumbs to toy with them while he tasted the line of her collarbone and the delicate shell of her ear. He found nothing lacking on her, and when he dared to reach down and lift her skirts to slide a hand up her smooth thigh to the center of her desire, he groaned when he discovered that she was hot and wet, almost pulsing for him.

He slid a finger along the seam of her sex, and she moaned in the most delightful

way. He didn't waste any time starting a tantalizing rhythm that soon had her moving restlessly on the seat. "Dominic..." she breathed.

It was the single most erotic thing he'd ever heard in his life.

He rewarded her by molding her breasts with his hand while the fingers of his other increased their pace. It wasn't until he kissed her soundly that she abruptly stiffened and then went languid in his arms as her body shook with her release.

He watched the play of emotions on her face, her lips slightly parted, her eyes closed and her cheeks flushed from the rush of pleasure that poured through her veins.

For the first time in his life he was humbled, because he knew he was the first man to ever behold such exquisite torture, because it was nothing short of that. Knowing that he held such beauty and passion in his arms and could not take things further made him reluctant to take her back to her aunt's house. He wanted nothing more than to whisk her across the border to Gretna Green, the banns be damned, but he knew that he couldn't act on such selfish impulses when there was still a possible killer on the loose. He didn't want to secure a bride only to have her ripped from his grasp by tragedy. The amount of grief he would feel would be devastating. He wasn't sure he would be able to overcome it if harm befell Lexie.

As he removed his hand from under her skirts and reluctantly straightened her bodice, her eyes fluttered open. The pupil nearly eclipsed the brilliant blue of her gaze. "My God. That was..." Her focus turned distant and he smiled.

"I'm glad you approve."

"Is it... always like that?"

Allowing some of his male prowess to rise to the forefront, he said, "It is when you're

with me.”

She grasped his lapels. “Then I’m glad I made that choice.”

He chuckled as she brought him to her for a kiss that was full of renewed hunger. When she released him, he couldn’t stop a slight wince.

Her eyes widened. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” It’s just my hard cock and the yearning to spill myself inside of you. “I will be fine given enough time.”

She was more observant than he might have given her credit for as she glanced down and saw the decided bulge in his trousers. He certainly wasn’t prepared for her hand to slide down and grasp him through the material. He immediately hissed, and she quickly drew her hand away. “I know I hurt you that time.”

Through gritted teeth, he said, “No. It didn’t hurt. On the contrary, I enjoyed your touch very much.”

“Oh.” She lifted a brow and he watched her hand return to his hard cock. It was as if he was watching a moth growing closer to a flame and unable to do anything but watch it burn. Except this time, he was the moth, helpless to stop her. “Show me what to do,” she urged softly.

Dominic was close to erupting, so he knew it wouldn’t take much to send him over the edge into oblivion. And since he was selfish enough to want to feel her virginal hands on him, he undid the flap of his trousers. When his engorged manhood sprang free, her eyes widened slightly, but she did not hesitate to reach for him again.

The sight of her delicate fingers wrapped around him made the tip glisten with

moisture. He placed his hand over hers and guided her in a smooth, even motion that was slowly making his head spin out of control. His body tightened, perilously close to a powerful release as she quickly caught on to the rhythm and began to stroke him in earnest.

“Ah, yes. That’s it,” he coaxed. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

His breath was coming in great heaving pants, and he focused on the delicate curve of her face, the swell of her breasts, and the memory of how she had come apart in his arms. Within moments he was jerking his hips as white-hot jets of his orgasm began to pulse out of his cock.

When he was sated, he withdrew a handkerchief from his waistcoat and began to clean himself. Lexie moved her hand back, but he caught it before she could go far and brought her hand to his lips for a slight kiss. “Thank you.”

Her lips quirked with amusement. “Thank you .”

Laughing, Dominic realized that he didn’t want this night to end. He found Lexie to be, not only completely and utterly passionate, but she was not some shrinking violet when it came to intimacy. She approached everything with a fascinating curiosity, and he found that intoxicating. There were not many ladies of the ton who were untried and expressed the same sort of enthusiasm that she had shown tonight. He was confident that their bed would never be cold and unfeeling, and for the first time in his life, Dominic was looking forward to the wedded state.

There was still one other problem that needed to be solved.

“The first of the banns will be read this Sunday.”

She nodded. “Yes. That is the plan.”

“After that, I was hoping that you might consider leaving London and staying at the estate with my mother. I am growing weary of your aunt’s continual matchmaking schemes for the wrong man, and I would feel more at ease with you out of the city where I know you would be safe.”

She was silent for a moment, and he wondered if he hadn’t been too highhanded, but when she reached out and touched his jaw with a light hand, he knew he didn’t have to worry. “I would love nothing more than to meet your mother and see where I shall be soon calling home.” Her hand fell away. “But how can I leave and enjoy tea and cakes when I know you are still risking your life?”

“There is no need to worry over me. I have faced worse adversaries than this. Trust me when I say this is not the first time I’ve faced the barrel of a gun.”

She winced. “If that was supposed to make me feel better, you failed miserably.”

“It was supposed to convince you to leave.”

She closed her eyes, as if searching for strength. “I will go if Lord Lindley and my aunt get too much to bear after Sunday. That’s three days from now. Do I get that long?”

He smiled. “You are a tough negotiator, but one so beautiful that I can’t seem to say no to anything she asks of me.”

“Alexandra! Have you been listening to anything I’ve said?”

Lexie glanced up at her aunt with what she hoped was a look of chagrin. They were in the parlor working on their prospective embroidery hoops, but her thoughts had drifted, as they had done so often this morning.

After she'd parted ways with Dominic and made her way back in the house and up to her room without incident, she'd found it difficult to fall asleep as her body was still humming with the delight she'd experienced in his arms. All morning, as she'd performed her ablutions and taken a warm bath, she'd sighed, thinking of his arms wrapped around her, but more than that, his wicked fingers bringing her body to such heights of ecstasy that she had found it difficult to put her feelings into words. All she could say was that being with him was wonderful and she was looking forward to the life they were going to build together. He hadn't approached her with a romantic proposal or professed his undying love, but neither did she care if there was a grand gesture attached to their union. So long as she could call herself his bride, that was all that truly mattered.

It had humbled her when he'd asked her to move to the estate, even if he had not planned to do the same just yet. She was curious about his mother, but she knew there would be plenty of time to make her acquaintance after she could be assured that Dominic would live to see another day. It unnerved her to know the assailant was still out there roaming the streets and watching from afar, waiting for the moment when he might strike again, except this time, be successful in his endeavors.

She shuddered to think that if something happened to Dominic, she would have no other choice but to wed Lord Lindley. While she hadn't thought he was the worst choice when they'd first met, after what Dominic had revealed to her, as well as her own personal experiences, she was coming to believe that he wouldn't be a good choice at all.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Bonnie. I fear I was woolgathering."

The older lady harrumphed. "You've been doing that all morning. I daresay your head is in the clouds, and I can only guess as to the reason behind your sudden inattention."

Lexie said nothing, deciding it was better that she remained silent or suffer another lecture about how terrible the Duke of Cuthbert was while extolling all the dramatic qualities that the earl possessed.

“I shall be out this afternoon making a few calls.”

Lexie waited to see if she would be forced to attend as well, but when she said nothing more, she inclined her head. “I am sure I can find something to entertain myself here.”

“I had no doubt of it. You are a smart gel. For the most part.”

Only her aunt could manage to add a compliment and then end on an insult. With a roll of her eyes, Lexie returned to her embroidery and decided to put her aunt’s opinions to the side of her thoughts.

Later, when Lexie was left to her own devices, she decided to pen a letter to her father. She had never had much of a chance to talk to him during his hasty visit and she had thought to thank him for his intervention on the duke’s behalf. She was grateful that he had taken her side and she intended to express her gratitude. She didn’t expect a reply, but at least she could hope that it would go further to bring their strained relationship even closer.

A footman appeared at the doorway of the parlor as she was finishing up her missive and announced the arrival of Lord Lindley.

She wasn’t thrilled to hear this, but she knew she had to be polite. If she turned him away, she knew she wouldn’t hear the end of it from her aunt even if entertaining the earl sounded completely dull in the extreme.

She waited patiently for him to enter the room and as he bowed over her hand, she

greeted him coolly, so he would understand this was a social call and nothing more. Perhaps since they were alone together, she could stress the importance of his acceptance of her betrothal to another.

“I trust you have been well, Miss Givenwald?” he asked cordially as he took a seat on the settee. He was near one end, obviously expecting her to sit beside him, but she perched on a chair opposite.

“I have, thank you.” She clasped her hands together in front of her. “I’m rather glad you stopped by today. I have been meaning to talk to you about?—”

He exhaled heavily and smiled so broadly that she was momentarily taken aback by his immediate reaction to what she had yet to say. “I feel the same way.” He moved to kneel in front of her. “I knew I could not wait any longer to ask you to be my wife.” He reached into his vest pocket and withdrew a lovely emerald ring surrounded by sparkling diamonds. “This was my grandmother’s. I vowed never to give it to anyone unless I was confident in my love for her. And the truth is, I love you, Alexandra. With all of my heart. Will you not make me the happiest of men and say yes to my proposal?”

Lexie wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole, but since she didn’t have any hope of that occurring, she reached out and slowly closed the lid of the ring box. The earl looked confused at first, and when she disentangled herself from his presence and moved to the other side of the room, she turned to see that he was still crouched on the floor as if in disbelief that she hadn’t leaped with joyful glee into his arms.

“I am honored by your proposal, my lord, and had I not already been engaged, I would happily accept your offer, but you have to understand that I am spoken for. I have accepted the Duke of Cuthbert’s suit.” She paused and hoped she was letting him down gently enough. But either way it couldn’t be helped. He needed to realize

where her heart stood.

He said nothing for a moment and then slowly stood. Tucking the ring back into his vest pocket, his lips tightened. "I am sorry to hear that. I think you are making a mistake. You don't know who the duke really is."

"I know enough," she countered. She couldn't very well tell him that she knew of his secret dealings in the East End, as that would not only break his confidence and trust in her, but it could be detrimental if that sort of information fell into the wrong hands. She was wont to believe the earl might just be underhanded enough to take out his frustration on the duke by revealing Avalon's true identity to his enemies.

"I don't think you do." He stepped toward her, his face a mask of intensity that nearly caused her to take a step back, but she held her ground. "He is a charlatan who spins a web of lies. I have it on good authority that he masquerades about Whitechapel under a pseudonym with a gang known as the Blue Boys. He is dangerous, and you would do well to steer clear of him. "

A sudden frisson of unease trailed up her spine. She was afraid that if Lord Lindley knew about Dominic, it would soon spread throughout the rest of London and that would be perilous in the extreme. "How did you hear about this?"

"I have my sources," he returned cryptically. "The point is that you are choosing the wrong man to share your life. He is a confirmed libertine. He will only bring you heartbreak where I can offer you security and stability." He reached out and grasped her hands. "Don't discount my offer just yet. Give it some thought. You will see that I'm right."

He released her and offered a slight bow before he turned on his heel and quit the room.

After he was gone, Lexie realized that her legs could no longer support her. Sinking down into a nearby chair, she put a hand to her stomach which was also suddenly queasy. Closing her eyes to gain some of her faltering fortitude, she wondered why the earl's visit had disturbed her like it had. It certainly had nothing to do with the proposal, which was more of annoyance at this point. It was the fact that he knew about Avalon.

Deciding that she had to warn him of the latest threat, Lexie grabbed her cloak and headed for the front door. She encountered a footman on her way. "If my aunt returns before I do, let her know I stepped out for an errand."

Without waiting for a reply, she rushed down the front steps and proceeded to hail down a hackney.

Since she had already been told before that most of the drivers knew more than just the streets of London, but where most of the occupants lived, she said curtly, "To the Duke of Cuthbert's residence," and then shut the door firmly behind her.

Dominic had been in his study for most of the morning attempting to work on some sadly neglected ledgers for his country estate when he was interrupted by his butler. "There is a lady here to see you, Your Grace. She doesn't have a card but claims that her name is Miss Givenwald."

He immediately got to his feet. Thus far, he'd failed to alert his staff to his upcoming nuptials, but since his focus had been on other things at the moment, he decided it was the best time to alert the servants. "Send her in at once, and alert the rest of the household that she is to be my wife and the next Duchess of Cuthbert. The first of the banns are set to be posted this Sunday."

The butler's eyes widened momentarily, and then he bowed respectfully. "Of course."

As he left, Dominic couldn't help but wonder what Lexie might have to say. Whatever it was, it surely wasn't good news, or else she wouldn't have risked her reputation or her aunt's wrath by coming to his home.

However, all that concern and doubt fled when she walked in and pushed back the hood of her cloak and revealed those lovely bright curls. He could see the glimpse of a darker orange gown beneath her outerwear, and he was transfixed at once by the desire to slowly peel it from her body. He had lain awake long into the night, burning with need for her after they'd parted. He wanted nothing more than to drag her into his arms now, but the look of uncertainty on her face gave him pause.

He frowned. "What's happened?"

"Lord Lindley just paid me a visit."

His scowl deepened.

"He asked me to marry him?—"

A low growl of predatory possessiveness rose from within. "I'll kill him."

"I told him I was promised to you," she said firmly, and some of his anger abated. "What disturbed me was that he said he knew who you really were. He knows about Avalon, the Blue Boys, everything."

Dominic stilled. "How could he know? "

"I asked him that, and he claimed he has his sources, whatever that means." She moved toward him and clutched the lapels of his jacket. "I'm worried. What if he threatens to send this information to the papers? Or worse?—"

He put his hands over hers. “Don’t concern yourself. All the earl wants is you, and if he thinks he can drag me down to get to you, he will. I think it is more imperative than ever that you leave the city so that he cannot disturb you with such threats any longer.”

She lowered her gaze and exhaled slowly. “I am starting to think you might be right. I haven’t yet discussed his visit with my aunt, but I have the feeling I already know what she will say.”

“Then it seems you have your answer.”

She returned her blue gaze to him, and he could feel a pang in his chest, as if he were shot with Cupid’s own arrow. “I dread the thought of leaving you.”

“I told you this is not the first time I’ve faced a challenge and I’ve never backed down from one before. I will prevail over this one too.” He shrugged. “If things get too heated, I will petition the king for his assistance. He is my cousin. Surely a family tie should count for something. But that is a last resort and only if it means keeping you free from harm or the damage Lord Lindley could cause. Anything I might suffer would pale in comparison to an injury to you.”

She leaned toward him, until her head was just beneath his chin. He inhaled deeply of her scent, the floral perfume of her hair, and vividly recalled the smooth feel of her as his mouth had moved across her skin in the carriage. She was intoxicating and he couldn’t seem to get enough of her.

“I will tell my aunt that I am leaving her house after the first of the banns are read.”

Dominic closed his eyes in relief. He hated to wait two days for her to head for the country, but since it was likely the best he could ask of her, he murmured against her hair, “I will content myself with that.” He pulled back slightly. “I have to return to

Whitechapel tonight. Amos sent an update and it's time I joined the efforts whether anyone wants me to or not. I need this bastard off of the streets and out of my life."

She swallowed visibly. "I understand even if I don't like it," she whispered.

He bent down and kissed her long and slow. It still made his body burn with unrequited need when they parted, but he couldn't resist tasting her, no matter the cost. "Thank you for warning me about Lord Lindley. I will continue to keep watch over his movements. I hired a private investigator to delve into his past. There is something about him that bothers me but I have to discover what it might be. I will send you back in my coach so that you will have adequate transportation to the country." He moved to his desk and penned a quick missive before folding the paper and handing it to her. "Give this to my mother. I should offer her some sort of explanation, and you will arrive before I have the chance."

"She won't mind that I'm descending on her without warning?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. She might not move about in society any longer, but she will be thrilled there will be a new duchess to take her place."

She couldn't resist embracing him once more before she moved away and walked to the door. Pausing at the frame, she turned back to say, "I know you will figure out what troubles you about the earl. After all, you found a way to change my mind about marriage and I thought that was an impossible task."

His laughter followed her as she departed, after murmuring for his ears alone, "And I'm grateful beyond measure that I did."

CHAPTER 15

When Lexie returned to the townhouse, she was grateful that her aunt had yet to return. As she instructed her maid to pack her things, that she was going to be staying at the duke's estate until their marriage, she was quite sure the girl's mouth couldn't have dragged the floor any further. However, she quickly removed her trunks and began to take care of packing.

While she was doing that, Lexie penned a quick missive to her father to apprise him of the change. She hesitated, wondering whether or not she should tell him of her aunt's steadfastness in selecting the earl for her hand, but since she didn't want to cause additional strife within the family, she decided to leave her frustrations unsaid and noted that since her quest for a husband had been solved, she was content to enjoy some time in the country getting to know her future mother-in-law.

By the time her aunt returned, Lexie was sitting in the parlor and trying not to fidget.

She heard her aunt's irate tone in the foyer as she inquired about Lexie's whereabouts and stood as the older woman entered. "Alexandra, what is this I've heard about—" She stopped when she spied the personal traveling valise at her feet. "What is this? And why is the duke's coach parked out front?"

Lexie could find no other way to tell her, so she replied bluntly, "I'm going to the Cuthbert estate. The duke mentioned how lovely the chapel was on the grounds, so I decided it would be ideal for our wedding. I shall remain there until our vows are spoken."

It took a moment for her news to sink into the other woman's consciousness, but when it did, her face turned a mottled shade of red. "Absolutely not! I forbid it!"

She had known this wouldn't be easy. Withholding a sigh, she gathered her bag and moved forward. "I appreciate your kind hospitality, Aunt Bonnie, but the choice has already been made. I do hope that you won't be angry at me for too long and will attend our nuptials. I know you have never cared for the duke, but trust me when I say Dominic is not the villain everyone portrays him to be. In two days, the banns will be read."

"I knew his influence was strong, but I had no idea you had fallen to such an extent!" she said in aghast. "I shall have to write your father at once and explain the situation in grave detail?—"

"I believe father already gave his opinion on the matter," Lexie interjected smoothly. She bent down and offered a slight kiss to her aunt's cheek. "I'm sorry you're disappointed, but I have to follow my heart."

Taking a deep breath, she hastened her steps until she was ensconced in the coach. She heard her aunt calling after her, but she rapped her knuckles on the roof and the carriage rocked into motion. She dared to peek out the window coverings to see her aunt holding a hand over her bosom, as if she was in danger of having an apoplexy.

Lexie let the curtain fall. She couldn't falter or she would be made to suffer greatly for this show of rebellion. No matter how much guilt wanted to suffocate her, she had to stay strong. The vision of Lord Lindley was enough for her to clench her fists at her sides as the wheels kept turning. Nevertheless, she had never imagined things might have gotten so bad at her aunt's house that she should be forced to flee like some sort of criminal who hadn't done anything more than fall in love.

Immediately, Lexie held a hand to her stomach as the butterflies went wild.

Was it love that she felt for the duke?

She had certainly never felt such a strong emotion as the one that rose within her when he was near. But was it purely passion that she was confusing for something more?

Her mind whirling, she reminded herself that her first instincts were generally accurate and she hadn't hesitated to think she loved him. So it must be true.

She leaned her head back against the velvet squabs and appreciated the well sprung coach as it carried her farther from London and closer to her future. It had once looked exceptionally bleak and forlorn, but as she imagined the life she would share with Dominic, any doubts or sour outlook she might have held before started to melt away. A smile broke out on her face when she imagined filling the nursery with their children. And when she thought of the excitement to be had in sharing his bed, her cheeks warmed with eager anticipation.

In this moment, it was looking to be a very bright future, indeed.

Dominic slammed the door of Avalon's office at the Crown & Sceptre and grabbed the first thing his hand touched then hurled it against the wall.

Naturally, it was a nearly full bottle of fine French brandy.

What a damned shame. But more than that, he was filled with anger toward the man who threatened everything worth meaning in his life. There had been no further movement from the man who had tried to kill him and it appeared he had covered his tracks quite well. The Blue Boys and Amos had questioned nearly everyone in Whitechapel already, and even with Avalon's fierce influence, causing most of the pub owners to quake in their boots when he walked in the front door, either someone had been paid rather handsomely to retain their silence, or the villain had just...

vanished.

Somehow, Dominic doubted the latter was the case. He'd known a few illusionists in his time, and the magic was all smoke and mirrors. Granted, a lot of it was very well accomplished, which proved that this was not an amateur criminal they were dealing with. For the first time in his life, Avalon was dealing with someone on the same level. If they were on the same side, as Mr. Porter had been, then no harm done. He would have embraced a powerful ally. Unfortunately, this was not the case. This man was intent on seeing his demise, and Dominic was furious that he couldn't figure out why.

"I see we won't be sharing a bottle together this evening."

Dominic turned at Amos's dry tone. The dark-skinned man was leaning against the frame, his visible blue eye narrowed in apparent displeasure. Dominic snorted. "It would appear not," he snapped. He shoved a hand through his hair. "I have not faced an adversary like this before. I shouldn't allow the influence this man has to bother me to the point I lose my temper to such an extent, but it is not just my life he is posing a threat to any longer."

"He will expose himself sooner rather than later," Amos said matter-of-factly. "They always do."

Dominic's mouth thinned. "I daresay I always believed I was in better control of my destiny, but this man has proven otherwise."

Amos crossed his arms. "I don't understand what you are doing back here. If you are hoping to transfer power to me and start a new life with Miss Givenwald, you should focus your efforts in that direction."

"I plan to do that," Dominic returned evenly. "But I cannot rest until this criminal that

would see me dead is disposed of properly. I will not be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my days and wondering if I will receive a demand for blackmail the moment my guard is lifted.” Feeling a burst of restless energy, Dominic started to pace the floor. “I just don’t know what I’m missing. Generally, Avalon would have this mess taken care of within a day’s time. The fact that it is taking so much longer does not bode well for my last hurrah as the Blue Boys leader.”

“You still have not uncovered anything at your residence in London?”

“No. The Runners I hired to watch everything claim that all is quiet and there has been nothing untoward since the incident that night.” He frowned. “What keeps unsettling me is the Earl of Lindley. There is something that doesn’t sit right about him and his refusal to accept defeat of Miss Givenwald’s hand to me. But again, as yet, there has been no alarming report.”

“Perhaps we should do some investigation of the earl on our own.”

Dominic’s brow rose slightly. “I’m intrigued. What do you have in mind?”

“You mentioned that he appeared to have a favorite gaming hell he liked to frequent. Perhaps we need to become devoted patrons of the establishment. If Lindley isn’t who you are looking for, then perhaps he is aware of who is.”

Mulling this possibility over for a bit, Dominic nodded. “I agree.” He started to head for the door and then paused and glanced at Amos. “How do you imagine you will blend in to the rest of the assemblage? That eyepatch will be easily recognizable.”

“Not if I wear a hat and keep it pulled down low.” He offered a wink. “You are not the only one who is familiar with being covert. There are many times when the color of my skin does not endear me to others, but with the right number of shadows, I am capable of moving about wherever I wish.”

A grin stretched over Dominic's face, and he clapped Amos on the shoulder. "I see why Mr. Porter trusted you like no other. Your fortitude is what has always made you such a valuable asset to me." He started for the door. "Let's win some blunt, shall we?"

Avalon strode into the gaming establishment, Amos following a short time later with the subservient demeanor of a lower-class man looking to improve his current circumstances.

Dominic took a seat at the faro table while Amos lurked about the edges of the room as though uncertain where he wanted to throw the small amount of coin that he couldn't afford to lose. Dominic had to admit that he played the part of the miserable wretch quite well, and while Dominic retained the air of intimidation befitting his reputation in the East End, they had yet to encounter Lord Lindley.

As the minutes ticked past, Dominic was about to fold, regardless that he'd had a hand sure to win the growing pot before him, when he overheard a particularly interesting conversation nearby that caused his ears to perk up and the fine hairs on the back of his neck to rise on end. "Poor Alfie. Blasted fool was pulled from th' Thames this morning. I 'eard 'e was almost unrecognizable."

"It was only a matter o' time before 'e succumbed to th' drink an' fell into th' bloody river," his companion muttered.

"That's no' what 'appened. I 'eard 'e was stabbed and then tossed into th' water like yesterday's refuse."

"Harrumph. That doesn't surprise me. 'E always kept terrible company, like tha' toff whot was always paying 'im. 'E should 'ave been more careful."

The rest of the conversation faded, but Dominic had heard enough. He tossed down

his cards and headed for the front door with purpose. He got into the hired hack and waited for a few moments until Amos joined him. The only explanation he offered was, “We’re going to the morgue.”

Lexie awoke as the coach lurched slightly. She blinked away the sudden confusion and glanced out the window where dusk was starting to take form. Dominic had told her that his estate was a day’s ride from London, so there would be no need to stay the night at an inn, for which she was grateful. She wasn’t eager to stay by herself with no further protection, not even her maid, who had stayed behind at her aunt’s house. Jane would surely not have been allowed to join her, but again, Dominic assured her that there was no need for concern, that all her needs would be met when she arrived at Greenlawn.

She wondered how they had adopted such a simple name for a powerful ducal estate. It sounded pleasant enough, but not nearly as intimidating as she might have imagined it could be. Dominic’s family was cousin to George IV, as well as all the monarchs who had come before the current king.

Nevertheless, she was filled with apprehension about the imposing structure she would soon see, because it was imperative that she make a good impression on, not just the servants, but Dominic’s mother. She didn’t want to make a misstep that could jeopardize her connection to the duke.

Glancing out the window, she was thankful to see that any further autumn rain had decided to hold off. English roads could be questionable at best, but when they were filled with rivulets of water, the journey could be rather difficult.

However, as the carriage started to slow, she had to wonder at the reason for the delay. Perhaps a broken wheel or loose harness around one of the horses might have impeded their journey. She waited patiently as they rolled to a stop, thinking that the driver would soon apprise her of the issue. But when the door opened and it was

another's intense expression that she saw, her mouth gaped open in surprise. "Lord Lindley. What on earth are you doing here?"

"Saving you from a grave error," he noted, and then proceeded to climb inside with her.

By this point, Lexie had to admit that his insistence was starting to get ridiculous. It was frustrating enough that he couldn't seem to accept her at her word, but when he had to chase her down when she had made it perfectly clear whom she had chosen, her patience was wearing thin. She no longer decided that she could be the biddable lady that her aunt expected of her.

Pointing toward the door, she ordered firmly. "You need to leave, sir. I daresay I will not say it again, but you must desist with your suit. It is futile, and I will not endure it any longer."

He reached out to grasp her hands. "Miss Givenwald, you must allow me to beg your reconsideration. I love?—"

She withdrew her palms. "I am seriously given to wonder about the state of your mental health at this point, as well as that of my aunt, for I have no doubt she rushed to you with the express purpose of bringing me back home. But I shall not be browbeat in this manner. I will marry the duke regardless of what either of you say to the contrary. Do I make myself understood?"

He stilled and sat back calmly. His expression became a mask of indifference, although he spoke with perfect clarity. "I explained to her that there are other suitable ladies who would be overjoyed to accept my suit, but she will not listen."

Lexie shook her head, truly perplexed now. "I cannot understand why you do not stand up to my aunt, but I know she can be quite tenacious. But trust me when I say

you are free to choose another. I will certainly speak to her on your behalf, although since most of my arguments have fallen on deaf ears, I have to wonder if it will do either of us any good.”

His focus turned distant. “She is set on the match and no one else will do.”

She started to feel the prickles of unease crawl up her spine. She couldn’t say why that was, as Lord Lindley was perfectly amenable. He hadn’t raised his voice or begged her to run away with him and elope. In truth, he seemed resigned to his fate, but the reason for his devotion to her aunt’s wishes was something she could not fathom. It was as if he was beholden to her in some manner, and the only way to placate her was to do whatever she wished.

“Can you tell me what my aunt has done to earn such dedication from you? There must be a reason, as I cannot believe that you truly love me when I have not done anything to garner the same emotions.”

His gaze lifted to her and he sighed, his shoulders slumping, as if he had failed some monumental task. “I owe her everything.”

She waited for him to say more, but when he didn’t, she softened her tone and said, “You can tell me. I will not judge you for whatever wrong you might have done in the past. We all have our own personal transgressions to atone for in some way or another. If my aunt has assisted you in that regard, then I can certainly see how you would feel this overwhelming loyalty toward her. But it is misplaced. There is nothing that anyone might have to do if it causes this much devastation and chaos. I was forced to leave London because she was driving this issue into the ground and I couldn’t bear it any longer. Do not let her browbeat you into doing something you do not want to do.”

“It’s too late for that,” he murmured.

Suddenly, the door was wrenched open and Lexie faced the barrel of a pistol held by a masked figure. She looked at the earl in outrage. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, as the assailant grabbed her arm and roughly pulled her out of the carriage.

Outside, she saw the driver and the Runner, who had joined them on the journey, held at gunpoint by two other riders.

Panicked, she pulled on her arm, but the captor’s grip was strong and unrelenting. “Release me!”

She was hoping that a firm tone would work to gain her freedom, but it didn’t faze the man. She looked over her shoulder at the earl, but he was careful to keep his focus fixed on the ground. As she was dragged toward the assailant’s horse, Lexie realized that if he tossed her over the saddle, her fate was sealed.

Praying that her actions would work, Lexie lifted her foot and brought it down hard on the man’s boot. She was afraid it wouldn’t be enough to distract him, but the slight grunt was enough for his hold to loosen enough where she could bring up her knee and jam it into his groin. He doubled over, and she didn’t waste her chance to grab the pistol that had fallen out of his grasp.

She spun around and aimed the barrel at the earl. “Leave us!”

He blinked in obvious astonishment—and then gunshots began to ring out.

“Run!” The Runner shouted at her over the sudden barrage of bullets zinging around them as a battle ensued from the rest of the men.

As Lord Lindley rushed toward her, she didn’t think twice as she pulled the trigger.

She didn't wait for the smoke to clear as she tossed down the weapon and ran in the opposite direction. She lifted her skirts and rushed off into a section of nearby trees, hoping that she would soon be able to disappear.

She ran through the brambles that clawed at her skirts, and although there was still a bit of daylight left to guide her way, she knew it would be best if night fell. That way, it would make it harder for someone to follow her tracks .

At one point, she thought she could hear the sounds of pursuit behind her, but then her heavy breathing drowned out any further sounds. Her stays were suffocating, and she wondered if she might pass out from her exertions, but she couldn't stop. Not yet. Not until she could be assured that she was free of danger.

Seeing signs of a village just beyond a clearing, Lexie dared to dart out into the open. She was alert for the sounds of hoofbeats, should her captors decide to make an unwanted appearance.

Her heart was nearly hammering out of her chest as she rushed to the first cottage that she came across and pounded urgently on the front door. Desperation clawed at her, but she refused to give in. Tears sprang to her eyes as the door was opened and she was greeted by a woman with a tidy bun and wearing an apron.

“What in God's name?—?”

“Please. Help... me.” Lexie gasped, before she collapsed to the floor. The last thought she had as gentle hands reached out for her shoulders was that it was very possible that she had killed a man tonight.

CHAPTER 16

Dominic entered the morgue with Amos at his side. It hadn't been difficult to gain entry at such a late hour once the undertaker's palm had been greased with enough coin to placate his interrupted sleep. It had taken longer than he'd wanted to learn the name of the man in charge of caring for the local bodies until family had been notified of the deceased and burial arrangements could be made, but the trouble had been worth it. As he looked into the bloated, pasty face of the man who had been pulled from the river, he realized that this wasn't some simple drunken accident. The large, gaping hole in his chest where a knife had once protruded was evidence enough that he had been murdered.

And Dominic had a good idea who was responsible.

He handed the undertaker another guinea. "Ensure that he is not laid to rest until I can discover his assailant."

The man quickly pocketed the coin, but he looked somewhat confused. "Whot business does a man like ye 'ave wit' a man like Alfie Davidson?"

Dominic took a step closer. "That is for me to know and you not to speak about to others. Do I make myself clear? "

The man's face instantly paled and he nodded. "O' course. Upon my word."

"Good. You better make sure of it."

As Dominic left the morgue, Amos started to chuckle as they entered the hired hackney.

“What?” Dominic asked darkly.

His companion shrugged. “Nothing. Merely that you are just as demanding as Avalon as you are as the Duke of Cuthbert.”

Dominic snorted. “What can I say? Old habits die hard. I was raised to ensure people listened to me. It’s only of late when I feel that I’ve lost some of that talent.”

“Ah. You are speaking of Miss Givenwald?”

“Indeed.” He shook his head, his lips quirking at the memory of the woman he was about to call his bride. “I cannot imagine how I survived this long without her guidance. At least, that is how she acts when I dare to mention any sort of danger.”

Amos crossed his arms. “It’s probably not wise to show her all of your scars then.”

Dominic gave a mock wince. “She would forbid me to leave the house after we are wed, no doubt.” He thought of her ripe breasts and the way her cheeks had flushed when he’d brought her to the heights of pleasure. “But then, I’m not sure I will want to venture very far once the vows are spoken.”

Amos laughed.

Wishing to change the subject, or else Dominic might be easily coerced to ride to his estate and join Lexie at his estate, he asked, “How is Devon getting along? I know it is nearly time for his son’s birth.”

“It could be a daughter,” Amos pointed out. “And I know he would be glad for

either.” He exhaled heavily. “To answer your question, he has been quite distracted, so I have forbidden him to join any more exploits until the babe makes his or her appearance in the world.”

Dominic nodded. “I would say that’s wise. ”

“I can’t believe I am going to be a grandfather,” Amos said softly. “I never thought I would stop grieving my wife, but I admit that the thought of looking upon an innocent face and seeing those eyes shining with new wonder out in the world has lightened my heart more than anything else ever could.”

Tilting his head to the side, Dominic said, “I never took you for a poet, but that was quite eloquent.”

“Sod off,” Amos growled, although his lips twitched with amusement.

By the time they had returned to the Crown & Sceptre, dawn was starting to make a faint appearance. The red rays turning the horizon to fire causing Dominic’s chest to tighten suddenly. “Red skies in the morning, sailor’s warning,” he murmured.

Amos followed his gaze and said, “That might be true on the water, but we are on land.”

“Never discount the turn of the tide wherever it is,” Dominic returned evenly. “These superstitions have guided me well over the years. A powerful storm is brewing. We cannot discount it out of hand because we aren’t on board a ship in the ocean.”

Amos inclined his head, obviously adhering to the seriousness in Dominic’s tone.

As his successor departed, Dominic realized that although he was starting to feel the effects of a long night, he was a long way from sleep. His mind was whirling now

that the sky had warned him of impending danger.

He thought of Lexie traveling alone, but he kept reminding himself that one of the best Runners in his employ had joined her on the journey. There should be no reason why she couldn't make the trip without incident.

And yet...

Dominic knew he couldn't ignore the warning in his gut. However, if something had happened in London regarding the Duke of Cuthbert, he had a messenger boy he trusted who would deliver a message to him. Since there was no new correspondence on his desk, he had to content himself that Lexie was safe and unharmed.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he decided that if he was going to have a clear head to continue this investigation into the earl, he needed to try and get a few hours rest.

However, the moment he had the thought to leave, there was a brisk knock at his office door. Bloody hell.

When he strode across the room and spied the young boy in his employ, his stomach sank as he accepted a sealed missive before the boy scampered off again.

Dominic ripped open the letter and read the few hastily penned lines from the Runner he'd assigned to travel with Lexie.

Set upon by bandits. Fight ensued. Lady escaped. Believed to be unharmed.

Bloody fucking hell.

He crumpled the note in his fist. Was it too much to ask that Lexie be kept out of harm's way? Or was he meant to endure this crushing weight of guilt for not

escorting her himself when Avalon needed to be present to end this blasted nightmare?

Wasting no time, Dominic slammed the door shut behind him as he rushed to leave. He wasn't sure where he intended to go, but hopefully his gut would lead him in the right direction.

Lexie awoke to a single ray of sunshine burning her eyelid before it was hidden by heavy clouds. The window she was staring at did not immediately look familiar, and as memory began to resurface, she sat up with a gasp.

She was in a small bed with a straw mattress and a worn, patched coverlet that appeared to have been lovingly handmade at one point. She lifted a hand to her bodice and found that she was still fully clothed, to her everlasting gratitude. Whoever must have taken her in was honorable and not of a mind to cause further havoc.

Setting her legs over the side of the bed, she tested her strength and found that after a moment of uncertainty, her weight easily held. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed the hair from her face. However, a quick glance at a mirror on a modest dressing table showed that she looked as terrible as she'd feared. Her gown was ripped in several places from her late-night escape through the forest, and her hair was in terrible disarray. She couldn't attempt to repair it since several of the pins she'd used to secure it were missing.

At least her pelisse was still mostly intact and would protect her from the worst of the elements. Taking down the rest of the pins, she let her blond hair fall around her shoulders. While it wasn't proper for ladies to go about in such a state, it was better than the mess it was when she'd first risen.

Combing her fingers through the mass, she decided that she was presentable enough

to greet her hostess without looking as though she'd fled Bedlam.

Opening the bedchamber door, five pairs of eyes looked up when she appeared. The small dining room held four children and a woman who looked vaguely familiar. They were seated around a crude, wooden table and eating something out of a bowl, likely porridge. It smelled heavenly. But then, with hunger gnawing at her stomach, Lexie would have been happy with gruel.

"It's good to see you up and about, miss." The lady rose to her feet and walked over with a warm smile. "Won't you join us for some breakfast?" She waved a hand toward the empty chair, and Lexie tentatively walked over.

"Do you not want to save this spot for your husband?" she asked.

The lady gave a kindly smile, and Lexie decided she was correct in thinking that she was as nice as she'd hoped. "No need for that. I've been a widow these five years past." She retrieved another bowl from the cupboard, as well as a spoon and set it before Lexie.

As she waited for the woman to ladle her out some of the porridge, she realized that all the children, none of whom looked to be over ten years of age, were looking at her curiously, as if she were a deer out in the forest and they were afraid to move for fear of spooking it.

"Good morning," she offered, making sure that she caught the eye of each of the two boys and girls who sat there. She also thought of how inconsequential her current situation was compared to what this lady had to endure, raising four small children on her own. All Lexie had to worry about was marrying a wealthy duke and spending the rest of her life in luxury.

As the porridge was set before her, her hostess added, "My name is Margaret

Michaels. These are Frank, Jeremy, Anne, and Mary.” Each of the children nodded when their name was mentioned.

As Mrs. Michaels resumed her seat, Lexie said, “My name is Alexandra Givenwald.”

The lady seemed hesitant to speak, but then she asked, “Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but was there a reason you appeared in such distress last evening?”

Lexie wasn’t sure how much to reveal, so she told a partial truth. “My carriage was set upon by bandits.”

The woman shook her head sadly. “How dreadful for you.”

“It was... regrettable,” Lexie hedged. “Is there anyone who might be able to give me a ride to London?” She had already decided that she couldn’t arrive at the duke’s estate looking like she did. She would only give her future mother-in-law the wrong impression, that she was trouble, and that was the last thing she wanted. Not only that, but she had no idea what might have happened to her trunks.

“I could inquire at the local pub?— ”

“No!” Lexie softened her tone when the lady fell abruptly silent. “I mean to say, I don’t wish to alert anyone to my presence here if it can be helped, in case the bandits are after me.”

Margaret nodded. “I understand your unease. I will ensure that any inquiries I make are discreet.”

Lexie relaxed slightly. “Thank you. I do appreciate your assistance. You will be compensated for your trouble.”

“There is no need for that. It shall be a blessing to assist you. I consider it my Christian duty.”

Lexie inclined her head respectfully and then turned her focus to her breakfast while Mrs. Michaels ushered her children to gather their things and head out to school. All except for the youngest girl, Mary, who was not yet of an age. However, she joined her mother as they departed for the village nearby.

While they were gone, Lexie paced the small parlor and finally perched on a chair to await Margaret’s return.

When the door opened a short time later, a gentleman in simple clothing was behind her. “This is Angus Johns, a... personal friend.”

Lexie was a bit surprised when the widow glanced at the comely middle-aged man and smiled. But it was the favor in her eyes that told Lexie more than words might regarding how close their friendship actually was. It seemed that he held the same regard, for the way he worried his cap in his hands told of his uncertainty.

“He has to go to Merton to visit a sick relative and said he could give you a ride in his wagon that far if it suits you.”

Relief flooded Lexie’s chest. “That would be wonderful. Thank you so much for your consideration.”

Mr. Johns looked particularly uncomfortable with the compliment. He ducked his head and then glanced at Margaret. “I’ll just be outside when you’re ready.”

As he left, Lexie moved to Margaret and removed the reticule that had been tucked into her skirts. She removed a few coins and set them into her palm. The lady gasped and tried to refuse the offering, but Lexie clasped her hand around them. “Please. I

would not have known what to do without your hospitality.”

Torn between her pride and the gift, the lady finally relented with a heavy sigh. “Thank you, Miss Givenwald. Safe journey. Rest assured that Angus is an honorable man.”

“I had no doubt of it.” Before she left, she turned back to her hostess. “If it isn’t too bold of me to say, I can tell he thinks a lot of you. Perhaps it might be time to consider taking on another husband?”

The woman’s face bloomed with red as she clenched her apron. “I appreciate the council, Miss Givenwald. Perhaps I will give it some thought.”

It had been months since Dominic had set foot on Cuthbert property. As he rounded a bend and the familiar limestone estate came into view, all he could think of was the way his heart pounded. It was as if his father was still alive and he would soon cross words with the older man. Time had changed many things, but not the insecurities that still ran rampant throughout his chest. It was one of the reasons that he eschewed walking through the familiar front doors and crossing the black and white tiled floor. He abruptly turned into a younger man at home from school and trying to prove his worth to someone who would never approve of the man he was struggling to become.

Another reason it was difficult to come back here was the reminder that he was never supposed to hold the age-old title that had been passed down through generations. While Dominic was a rightful member of the family, he wasn’t the true duke. That honor had belonged to his brother, Edmund, but with his death the duty had fallen to him. It had taken Dominic a long time to finally concede to the cruel hand that fate had dealt to both of them.

It wasn’t until he’d matured that all the uncertainty and guilt he’d felt over being the Duke of Cuthbert had waned and he’d accepted the inevitable outcome. However, it

still pained him whenever he thought of his mother, the shell of the woman she had once been. Before her marriage to Dominic's father, he'd heard stories of the vibrant and lively lady she had been in her youth. But after so much time under the domineering thumb of her husband, her spirit had finally broken and she'd turned into the subservient and docile woman she now was.

It hurt Dominic to think of Lexie forced to give up the fiery passion that was prevalent in her heart. If he thought there was the slightest chance that he would turn into his father and make her suffer after their marriage, he would never approve of their union. But while his parents had wed for convenience, he believed that his union with Lexie would be vastly different.

He would do everything in his power to prove that it was.

As he handed his riding gloves over to the butler, he asked curtly, "My mother?"

"The duchess is in the drawing room," came the equally cool reply. Until now, Dominic hadn't considered replacing any of the servants, but the butler had served his father and if he hoped to make any changes to the stiff atmosphere in the house, some things would have to change. Since this wasn't his main priority for visiting this moment, he strode down the hall.

He took a deep breath before he turned the corner and entered his mother's sanctuary. She had always spent an exorbitant amount of time in the green and yellow drawing room. Although she hadn't entertained guests in years, preferring the company of her own solitude, he wondered if perhaps she stayed here to remind herself of good times now past, and perhaps wish that they could be so again.

When he set his eyes on the petite woman with dark hair mixed with varying shades of gray and pushing a needle through an embroidery hoop with a neutral expression on her face, he realized that his hopes might be rather farfetched. She looked just as

she had the last time he had left her.

“Hello, Mother.”

She paused and looked up, her dark eyes crinkling in the corners when she spied him. “Cuthbert. How lovely to see you.”

It was always so formal in this place. His father had been gone for twenty years, and she still refused to call him by his Christian name, determined to refer to his title, as his father would have demanded.

Clenching his jaw, he walked over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. He wasn’t surprised to see a few more wrinkles than before and he was not ignorant of the fact she had lost another stone. He realized in that moment he’d been so intent on his own devices as Avalon, he had failed to give his mother the recognition she deserved. She needed the love and attentiveness that her only surviving son could provide and he intended to right this wrong, along with so many others, very soon.

She set aside her embroidery. “Shall I ring for some tea?”

He shook his head as he sat down across from her in one of the matching wingback chairs close to the hearth, in which a cheery fire burned. It was the only bit of happiness he could find the moment he’d entered these hallowed walls. Pushing aside such unforgiving thoughts, he said, “No, thank you. I am afraid I cannot stay long.”

“Of course not, dear. You are a busy man. I shouldn’t expect you to entertain me any longer than necessary.”

There was no sarcasm or hatred in her tone, just a calm acceptance. He hated it. “I would spend more time if I could,” he felt compelled to add. “But I’m afraid there is a bit of trouble in London that draws me back to the city.”

“I’m sure you can handle whatever it is. The Eastland line is known for its fortitude and courage. ”

“Indeed.” He ground his jaw. “I had hoped that someone might have arrived before me, but I see that she has not.”

She tilted her head curiously. It was the only sign thus far to prove that she wasn’t an automaton, wound up every now and then with the same responses. “Who, dear?”

“Someone who means a great deal to me and who I intend to make the next duchess.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “You are betrothed?”

He loved the slight tinge of hope in her voice, however stilted, as if it had been too long since she’d felt the emotion. “I am. The first of the banns are to be read this Sunday. However, I feel she might be in danger. She was due to arrive last night with a note to you explaining who she was, but my coach was set upon by bandits. I fear for her safety.”

“Of course you do.” She reached out a hand and laid it gently on top of his. It was so slight that for a moment, he couldn’t comprehend what she was saying, his focus on that small show of affection he’d thought had disappeared. “I will be overjoyed to meet her when you can be assured that all is well.”

He squeezed her hand in reciprocation and reluctantly got to his feet. “I will return as soon as I’m able. Sooner, rather than later, I hope.”

“God speed, my son.”

Dominic was back on his horse and heading back to London before he felt he could properly breathe again. Even then, he allowed a few tears to fall unchecked.

CHAPTER 17

By the time he returned to London and made his way back to his lodgings in the East End, Dominic was ready to fall into his bed. He'd gone to his townhouse and checked for any messages and then made his way to the Crown & Sceptre, all without any further notice, until he was forced to retire and try again the following morning.

The rain that had been threatening with the red skies since that morning had finally opened up and drenched him completely through. He was dripping as he walked inside the cottage and removed his hat and overcoat. He was intending to strip the rest of his clothes when he caught sight of movement.

He immediately reached for his pistol, but before he could withdraw it, a small, wonderful voice said, "Dominic. It's me."

Forgetting that he was exhausted, he was hit with a burst of energy as he crossed the small confines and gathered Lexie into his arms. Holding her tightly against him, for fear she was nothing more than an illusion that would dissipate the moment he released her, he spoke harshly, "Dear God, I have been going mad looking for you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know what to do when we were beset?—"

He silenced her with a devastating kiss. At least, it was for him, because it had been entirely too long since he'd tasted her sweet lips. "You are not to blame. I'm just glad you're here now."

She clung to his shoulders. "I am too. Please don't leave me."

“Never,” he murmured, as he kissed her again.

Her breathing was harsh when they parted. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded.

“We need to talk about?—”

“Later. Right now, I just need to feel you against me. I need... you.”

Dominic was only human, and he could deny himself of her sweetness no longer. They were to be married. The wedding night would just be earlier than planned.

He slipped an arm under her legs and lifted her. Although the small bed he utilized wasn’t the fashionable one he’d envisioned laying her upon for the first time, there was almost something symbolic about making love to her in such modest surroundings. She was the reason he was leaving all of this behind. It suited that she should be part of that transition.

He set her down at the edge of the mattress and continued kissing her as he slowly removed her pelisse and tossed the garment aside. She shivered slightly and he wondered if she was cold, but then he realized that the reason for the chill was her dress. He paused to glance at her attire and saw the stains and rips to the delicate material.

Immediately, his grip tightened on her hips. “What in God’s name?—”

She placed a gentle finger over his lips. “Not now.” She urged his head back down and he went willingly, but he vowed that he would return to the topic of her ruined dress before the night was over.

But since it was past repair ...

He grasped each side of the muslin and rent it perfectly down the middle. Discarding the two sides, he leisurely took in the curves of her body outlined by her stays and the delicate chemise beneath. Her stockings and boots would be the last things he removed.

Preferably the former—with his teeth.

The image of her naked body finally displayed for his viewing pleasure made him want to quickly divest her of the remainder of her clothing, but he was determined to make this moment last. He'd been granted the honor of her body, and he didn't intend to rush this gift.

He gazed intently into her eyes as he slowly undid her front lacing stays. The tops of her full breasts were proudly displayed as he worked to free them from their confines. When he finally tossed the garment aside, he could clearly see the rosy tips of her nipples, taut and eager for his attentions.

He was more than happy to comply.

Bending down, he sucked one of them through the thin lawn of her chemise and then turned his attention to the other. She moaned and the sound was music to his ears. He was sure he'd never heard anything so beautiful before her passionate responses. He was certainly humbled by them.

Grasping the edge of the last layer of clothing that kept her hidden from his hungry view, he fell to his knees and felt his cock harden to the point of pain as he stared at the apex of her thighs where a dusting of light hair covered her feminine mound. He licked his lips, eager for another taste of her.

Urging her legs apart, he kept her chemise held up around her hips as he leaned forward and began to feast.

Lexie's eyes rolled back in her head at the first swipe of Dominic's tongue on her cleft. It was just as intoxicating as it was the first time he'd pleased her in such a wicked manner. But truly, could it be called wicked when it felt so good ?

She gasped when he bit down on the sensitive bud and she threaded her hands through his dark hair. She wasn't sure if she was trying to push him away or draw him closer. Coherent thought was starting to slip away, and she was falling into the passionate abyss.

Time after time, she drew closer to the precipice until her body tightened in anticipation of something wonderful. "Dominic..." His name was a plea, or a benediction, as her legs started to quake. Her hips rocked back and forth, riding him, as her head suddenly fell back and she cried out incoherently as her core pulsed with white hot pleasure. Time seemed to cease as she became lost to the ecstasy.

When she was replete and languid, her body thrumming in the aftermath of her orgasm, Dominic crawled back up her body, but this time, he took the chemise with him and removed it from her body. He didn't let her gain her breath before he was teasing her breasts, molding the flesh beneath his palms and sucking the tips until she started to feel the familiar pull of desire licking at her midsection.

He eased her onto the mattress and left her long enough to rip his shirt off and throw it aside. She was panting, her chest heaving with each inhale and exhale, as he held eye contact and bent down to remove her boots, and then taking his torturous time, began to remove her stockings with his teeth. It was one of the most erotic things that she could have ever imagined, but she knew there was so much more he intended to teach her.

She couldn't wait.

Once she was fully unclothed, he instructed, "Turn over on all fours."

For a moment, she was confused, but then he gently nudged her hip and she moved as he asked. The mattress dipped with his weight and his hands came around to cup her breasts. As he toyed with them, lightly pinching her nipples, he whispered in her ear, “Let me know if it gets too intense, but I want this to be a night to remember, not about pain, but pleasure.”

She nodded her head, her hair falling over her shoulders, but not for long. He gathered the length in his fist, but that wasn’t the first thing that registered in her scattered thoughts. She felt something nudging the entrance to her womanhood and while it was a foreign sensation, it wasn’t uncomfortable. In truth, it was quite... nice.

As he moved his fingers slowly out and back in, her lungs caught.

She supposed it was a bit more than nice.

As he started to tease her feminine walls with his fingers, she was startled when he began to give her playful little nips on her neck, her back, and even her buttocks. But the pressure starting to build inside of her eclipsed all else.

“Come for me again, Alexandra.”

She had always hated her full name, but the way Dominic growled it, she found it was terribly sensual, and his slight command had her body urging to return to the precipice.

As his other hand grasped her hip, his fingers dug into her flesh and the combination of sensations coursing through her body was almost too much to bear. She was dizzy, her eyes glazed and unfocused, and her hips started to slam back into the friction he was creating inside of her. With a cry, she splintered apart, her body soaring to heights she’d never dreamed.

He toyed with her breasts and made the sensation last even longer, until she was so relaxed that she wasn't sure she could endure anything more.

She was hardly aware of him removing his fingers and urging her onto her back once more. She wondered if this was what it felt like to take laudanum. Her eyelids were heavy and her limbs felt leaden and so lax that she wasn't sure she could stand if she had to do so .

Her lids fluttered, and she saw Dominic above her. She reached up to his face as there was another intrusion below. She gave a slight gasp as she was penetrated, but the discomfort quickly passed and he bent down and kissed her. Her head swam as he thrust into her over and over until finally, he gave a hoarse shout. The muscles of his neck tightened, as well as those of his arms, and she had to admire his strong chest with its light dusting of dark hair that trickled down past his navel and below to where they were joined.

She was amazed at such an intimate act, never dreaming that she would ever allow herself to be with anyone in this manner. It was a breach of everything she'd held dear—her privacy, her independence.

And yet...

As she watched Dominic take his pleasure and spill himself inside of her, then collapsing on top of her with heavy breaths, she thought it was the most magical thing she could have ever shared with someone. With him.

He lifted himself up on an elbow and looked down at her in concern. "Are you all right?"

She smiled. "I'm perfect." And she realized she spoke the honest truth.

Dominic had meant to be gentler with her, but the sight of her luscious derriere and her dripping wet core had him losing his sanity more quickly than he'd anticipated.

Dear God, had any of his previous lovers showed the enthusiasm that she had shown him tonight? Or perhaps it was that none of the other women he'd bedded before could come close to comparing to Lexie. He was fascinated by every soft sound that she made, the nails that dug into his scalp, and the sweet release that had nearly caused him to ejaculate in his trousers .

He'd removed them in record time, unable to stop himself from taking her completely. The tip of his cock had instantly tingled and he had to grit his teeth to last as long as he had. And when he had finally allowed the release, it was the most powerful one he'd ever had before. He'd seen spots dance in his vision, his body threatening to pass out from the sheer intensity of it.

He was still vibrating in the aftermath, his cock fully satiated.

Rolling over to his side, he brought her with him until they were facing each other. Grabbing the coverlet at the foot of the bed, he brought it over them, knowing that now that their passions had cooled, so would their bodies.

Lifting his hand, he set the back of his knuckles against her jaw. "I didn't hurt you?"

The smile had yet to leave her face, and his male pride wanted to applaud. "Not at all."

"Good." He released a breath and gathered her close in his arms.

They clung to each other for a time and then, as much as he hated to drag reality back into this moment, wanting to hold on to it for as long as he could, he realized that they were still facing a very real threat.

“I know this might not be the ideal time to discuss this, but I need to know how you got back to London.”

Some of the happiness fled from her expression and he had never hated himself more for being the cause of it. “You are right. We should talk.” She sat up and brought the coverlet up with her. He should have known that she might be feeling a little self-conscious about her nudity.

He got up and retrieved her chemise and handed it to her.

“Thank you.”

Slipping his trousers back on, Dominic decided this was for the best. He might be satisfied now, but he had no doubt that it wouldn’t take long for his cock to stir with interest once more at being this close to such a delectable woman as Lexie .

She sat with her knees bent, her arms hugging her legs, while Dominic lounged on the edge and waited patiently.

“Where to begin...” She clearly was conflicted about what to say.

“Hey. You can trust me.” He reached out and cupped her cheek. Rubbing his thumb along her lower lip, he found that words failed him, but he hoped that his gaze would portray whatever strength or support she might need to continue.

She covered his hand with hers. “I know. That’s why I’m here.” After drawing a deep breath, she said, “You already know that the earl paid me a visit this morning with a proposal of marriage.” She shook her head. “It is honestly hard to believe this all happened in one day.”

He nodded in understanding. “Go on.”

She kept hold of his hand as she said, “When I returned to the townhouse, I immediately instructed for my belongings to be packed and loaded onto the coach. Shortly after that, my aunt returned home, and as you can imagine, the conversation did not go well.” She frowned. “I can’t understand why she cannot accept that I chose you and not Lord Lindley.”

Dominic had his suspicions about that, but he said nothing. And he wouldn’t do so until they could be confirmed.

“She was so harsh, and I realized I was glad I was leaving, that I’d made the right choice.” She looked to the side, as if replaying the events in her mind. “What I never dreamed was that the coach would be stopped by Lord Lindley and a gang of bandits.”

He had to remove his hand because his fist suddenly tightened. “What did you say.” It wasn’t a question, but a demand, a statement of fact that he intended to react upon given the first opportunity.

“He said that my aunt was set on a match between us and no one else will do. He also said that he owed her everything and it was too late to disavow her wishes.”

“What else? ”

She shook her head. “We only talked for a few minutes in the carriage, and then the masked men with him started to drag me toward their horses. I knew that all would be lost if they took me, so I fought back.”

The terror that shot through Dominic at the image of her risking her life was not something he wanted to ponder for long.

“The Runner you’d sent with the driver yelled at me to run, so I did.” She closed her

eyes momentarily. “I fear for what happened to them. They were outnumbered three to two.”

“Don’t fret about that. I only employ the best. They will have been victorious, of that you can be assured.”

“I hope so.” Her tone was soft, full of remorse, and Dominic had to admire her more for her selfless consideration of others. “I ran toward the forest and got lost in the woods. Thankfully, it was getting dark and by the time I stumbled across a cottage, I was hoping I hadn’t been followed. There was a widow there who took me in and took care of me for the night. This morning, she helped to secure a ride to London where I hired a hackney and made my way here.”

“I’m surprised you remembered how to get here,” he noted.

“Me too, truth be told.” She snorted. “And I’m glad I was able to find a loose window and climb inside with not too much effort.”

“A loose window?” he murmured. “And here I thought I was adequately secure in my hiding place.”

He was hoping to bring the smile back to her face with his teasing, and he was glad to see his ploy worked when her lips quirked with amusement. “That may be true, but you seem to forget that I am not without my cunning wiles.”

His nostrils flared. “Aye. I certainly know it now.”

His masculine pride flared at the rise of color on her cheeks, but then he recalled a very important detail he hadn’t yet shared with her. “Do you remember when I told you Lord Lindley had been speaking to a man at a seedy gaming hell? ”

“Yes.”

He was reluctant to relay this bit of information, but he knew it was imperative. “The man in question was found in the Thames. He’d been murdered. A knife right through the chest.”

Her jaw went slack and she visibly paled, but she kept her overall composure. “How do you... know?”

His mouth thinned into a tight line. “I saw the body at the morgue as well as gave strict instructions that it is not to be moved until I can discover who was responsible. He might be our only proof and it will still be difficult to point the finger of blame.”

She reached out and grasped his hand. Her eyes were blue pools of fear. “I don’t like this, Dominic. Whoever is threatening you is not above murder. The fact he nearly succeeded with you once already is frightening enough. Can’t we just run away together? I have heard that America is quite nice?—”

He put a finger against her lips. “As tempting as your offer is, I will not spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. I have to end this, and I will not flee like some coward. My honor would never allow it. I am the Duke of Cuthbert. You will be my duchess. We must set an example that we won’t be cowed, either to our peers or the commoners that live beyond the area of Mayfair some people prefer to focus their attentions on. If more people took a stand against injustice, then perhaps things would not be as bad as they are.”

She placed her palm against his slightly rough cheek. Tears swam in her vision. “I knew from the first moment I saw you that you were an honorable man.” She let her hand fall away. “But I cannot rest easy with us separated from each other. You have to let me stay in London. With you.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “You are putting me in a precarious position, and you in irrefutable danger. I’m not sure I can agree?—”

Her eyes flashed as she leaned closer to him and let the blanket fall away, exposing her breasts. He was captivated by their perfection and abruptly found that whatever they had been discussing was suddenly moot. When she laid a gentle hand on the front of his trousers, he found his mind was wiped clear of any memory at all. “I promise I will make it worth your while, Your Grace,” she purred.

He could feel his cock respond immediately. With his chest heaving, he glared at her. “I knew from the first moment I saw you that you were a devious vixen.” As more blood pooled in his manhood, he hissed through his teeth. “And thank God for it.”

CHAPTER 18

L exie stretched the next morning and inhaled the heavenly scent of eggs and bacon. If she had to hazard a guess, Dominic was cooking, although it might not be a full English breakfast. With the limited supplies he had at his disposal at this hideaway in the East End, she doubted that he had that sort of luxury currently at his disposal, but she was glad for anything that he might offer, because she had spent the night with him and that was all she could truly ask for.

She smiled and wiggled her toes, if just to ensure that she hadn't passed away the night before from all of the pleasure Dominic had showered upon her. After a second round of lovemaking, he'd heated some water for a hip bath and by the time he assisted her with that, they had managed to tumble back into the bed for a third round.

Her body was definitely letting her know what had happened, and she loved every moment of it. Every twinge told her that she belonged to Dominic, every knowing glance he shot her way told her that he belonged to her. She was confident that their marriage would be a successful one. It wouldn't be full of lies or deceit. They would enjoy companionship, desire, and although she knew it wouldn't be perfect all the time, the tough days would make the good ones that much sweeter.

"Someone is happy this morning."

She raised her arms above her head and smiled at Dominic as he carried a plate to the bed and sat it down beside her. "Breakfast in bed?" she asked with a teasing lift of her brow.

“I might be a scoundrel, or perhaps a villain to some, but when it comes to you, I am your humble servant.”

She laughed, finding it so easy to do with him.

She kept the coverlet about her breasts as she sat up and accepted the offering. “I’m impressed, Your Grace. You can cook.”

“I have learned to take care of all my own needs through the years as Avalon. It would certainly cause a bit of tongues to wag within the gang should I move about with a valet at my side.”

“Indeed,” she concurred. She took a bite of the fare and closed her eyes with a slight moan. “It’s delicious.”

He leaned forward and gave her a kiss. “So are you.”

She gasped in mock outrage. “Sir! You are entirely too bold with your tongue.”

He wagged his brows at her. “And you love it.”

She wrinkled her nose in return. “Yes. That I do.”

He kissed the tip and then moved away from her. The moment he did so, there was a knock at the cottage door. Immediately, he was on alert. “Stay here,” he ordered firmly.

“I can’t really go anywhere at the moment.” She gestured to her state of undress.

He frowned slightly, and then said, “We will rectify that issue momentarily.” He left her alone and went to answer the summons.

Lexie forgot about her tempting meal in favor of the sudden visitor. The hunger that had rumbled in her stomach fading with the concern that something was amiss.

However, when Dominic returned a short time later, there was no apprehension on his expression. “It was Amos’s son, Devon. He came to tell me that he is a new father of a baby daughter.”

Lexie’s lips curved in a broad smile. She had no idea who Devon was, but if he was anything like Amos, she knew that she would like him. “How wonderful! Did he call a name?”

“Annalise.” Dominic said nothing more and the look on his face seemed almost perplexed. “I never thought I would be envious of another’s happiness but I find myself in the position of wanting that sort of outcome for myself when I had never allowed such a possibility to cross my thoughts before.”

She loved that he was opening up to her like this. It gave her further hope that their marriage would not only survive but thrive. “You will make a wonderful father someday. I have no doubt of that.”

His mouth kicked up in the corner. “I believe you are right, because I have picked an exceptional woman to become a mother.”

Her breath caught, abruptly pulled into the strong emotions that his statement invoked.

Feeling that the air in the room had become thick with the words neither of them yet had the courage to express, Dominic cleared his throat. “Finish your breakfast and I will procure you something to wear.”

I love you. I love you.

I. Love. You.

Dear God, how difficult was it to say? Perhaps he could understand if he didn't mean what he was expressing, but everything within him claimed that it was true. He loved Lexie with all of his heart and soul. And yet, he couldn't manage to speak three little words that carried so much meaning. Was he scared to speak his heart's desire? Surely maturity and the confidence in what he felt toward Lexie would push aside any lingering doubts that he'd endured thus far.

And yet...

The words wouldn't form.

As he left the cottage intent on doing as he'd promised and secure some gowns for Lexie to wear, he decided that his hesitancy was due to the current danger he'd embroiled them in. Until the threat to his life was abolished, he couldn't do anything further to secure his love for her. Unfortunately, time was running out. He had wanted to do right by Lexie and have the banns read properly and with no doubt as to the legitimacy of their promise to marry. However, now that they had shared a bed, and it was unlikely they would be able to make their claim in person at church as they'd planned, it seemed he would have to procure a special license to wed as soon as he was able to appeal to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The thought wasn't unappealing in the least. That just meant she would be his duchess sooner than originally anticipated. Thinking of her in his bed, stretching out along the sheets in all her glorious naked beauty made him eager to return to her side and perhaps spend this soggy day inside wrapped in each other's arms.

The end of a knife abruptly pierced the side of his throat. "Where do ye think ye're goin', guvn'r?"

Dominic inwardly cursed his inattention. It was becoming more frequent. And more bothersome. Without turning toward his captor, he drawled, “I’m afraid I don’t?—”

“I know ye’re not who ye claim t’ be.” The other man spat on the ground at his feet. “I know th’ truth, Avalon. Or should I call ye, Yer Grace?”

Dominic instantly stilled. Was this the man who had been creating havoc in his life? If not, he was certainly working for the man responsible. Lifting his chin as much as the weapon would allow, he returned in his best ducal tone, “You seem to be well informed. I would have the name of your source.”

“Not so fast, guvn’r. I think I’ll lighten yer purse an’ then?—”

Taking advantage of his slight inattention, Dominic spun around and had the assailant pinned against the brick wall of a nearby building, the knife wrenched from his grasp and placed near the bottom of his scruffy chin. He looked as though he’d crawled out from the gutter, his clothes rumpled and dirty and the stench coming from him nearly made Dominic retch. “Now, I am going to tell you what is actually going to happen unless you want this blade to slide into the lower half of your jaw and make it impossible for you to threaten anyone ever again.” He narrowed his eyes and nicked the flesh enough that a trickle of blood slid down his throat. “Then again, that idea holds quite a bit of merit on its own.” When the man didn’t beg for his life or plea for his release, Dominic wondered if he was losing his power of intimidation. He allowed the tip of the blade to go a bit deeper, until the man winced in pain. “Tell me who wants me dead or you will soon find yourself in the same state.”

This time, there was a flash of fear in the dull brown eyes that faced him, and Dominic realized that the reason for his delayed reaction was the glossy effects of opium. It dulled the senses and turned the most reputable men into scoundrels. He’d witnessed it too many times to count.

“I don’t know ’is name,” muttered the man.

“Perhaps not,” Dominic said smoothly. “But you do know how to contact him.”

Blinking, the man nodded.

“Then that is sufficient for me.” He pocketed the knife and grabbed the man by the collar. “Don’t try anything stupid.” He proceeded to drag the assailant behind him. Finally, he had the lead he’d been searching for. Sadly, this meant his daydream of spending time with Lexie would be delayed, but he vowed that once this nightmare had concluded, he would have plenty of lazy days to spend in her arms.

Lexie paced the length of the cottage several times over. She was forced to wear her ruined gown for lack of anything else, as Dominic had yet to return.

He’d departed hours earlier.

While she’d eaten a hearty breakfast earlier that morning, her stomach was churning, threatening to empty what might be left inside of it.

Something dreadful had happened. She was sure of it. Otherwise, he would have returned. Naturally, she feared the worst, that the assailant had managed to succeed where he’d failed before and Dominic was lying in a deserted alleyway somewhere breathing his last.

The image was terrifying and not something she wished to dwell on, but as time passed and he didn’t return, she couldn’t help but think the worst.

When there was an abrupt knock at the door, Lexie immediately rushed over, expecting to see Dominic standing there with blood covering him and barely clinging to life, but instead, it was Amos. His eyepatch hadn’t really bothered her before, but

for some reason, it looked more ominous now. “Dominic...” She reached out and grasped the lapels of Amos’s jacket, barely able to breathe her lover’s name.

“He sent me to collect you.”

Relief flooded her but was quickly replaced with anger. Releasing Avalon’s trusted confidante, she accused, “I have been out of my mind with worry! He better have a good explanation for not being here on hands and knees.”

His mouth kicked up at the corner as he brought forth a brown wrapped parcel. “How about you put this on and you can ask him the reasons yourself.”

Lexie snatched the gift and opened it to reveal— “He expects me to wear this?”

Amos lifted a brow. “He said it was the price to pay for allowing you into Avalon’s inner sanctuary.”

She blinked. “You’re taking me to the Crown & Sceptre?” She never thought Dominic would allow her to step foot past the threshold. Whatever must have occurred must be very important indeed. Perhaps he’d finally discovered the identity of his assailant.

She suddenly forgot about the ridiculous gown she was about to don and quickly changed into the nun habit. Rather ironic, considering she wasn’t Catholic. But she would play along with Dominic’s rules for the game if it meant learning what had happened.

Amos was careful to survey the area beyond the cottage before he allowed her to follow him the few blocks to the popular East End pub. For a Saturday night, it was relatively busy inside, the noise almost deafening as Lexie followed respectfully behind her host, careful to keep her head down and portray the modesty of her

costume.

While some of the din quieted to a dull murmur when she entered, it didn't take long before the crowd erupted into cheers and whistles of approval. Apparently, they weren't worried about their eternal souls if they were eager to welcome a fallen nun into their midst.

Moving past the merriment above, she glanced toward a set of stairs that led down and heard the unmistakable sounds of shouting coming from below. "What's going on down there?" she whispered to Amos.

"Bare knuckle fighting."

"Oh." Lexie was curious despite herself. She'd heard of such events before but had never had the opportunity to witness such a violent sport. But since she was more interested in what had befallen Dominic, she said nothing more as Amos paused before an unmarked door.

He rapped sharply on the door, and it was opened in short order by a man who looked as though he'd had several bare knuckle matches in his day. The hard glint in his eyes was not very welcoming, but when his gaze flicked over her, he opened the door wider to allow her entrée.

She tentatively walked over the threshold and discovered that the room was filled with four more men similar to the one who had answered the summons. More interesting than that was the beaten man who was tied up in a chair, his head lolling on his shoulders as he tried to remain upright. If that wasn't horrifying enough, Lexie's glance slid to the man beyond the captive.

Dominic.

But no, that wasn't right.

This was Avalon, the famed criminal of the fearsome London underworld. Which meant that the men surrounding him in silent reverence must belong to the Blue Boys gang.

For a moment, Lexie wasn't sure if she was impressed—or some other sensation that she couldn't quite name.

As Avalon turned around and pinned her with a blank expression, as if he hadn't just made love to her so passionately earlier that morning, she decided that her first reaction was annoyance. However, since he had to play a part to continue this ruse, she clenched her fists at her sides and held her tongue.

“Ah, here is your redeeming angel, Mr. Dartmouth.” He waved her closer. “I realize it is the job of the priest to deliver the last rites, but since this is the best I could gain on such short notice, perhaps she can pray for your miserable, worthless soul.”

Lexie had no idea how to properly pray for someone who was about to meet the Lord, but surely something would come to her. It was regrettable she didn't have any rosary beads, but she wasn't sure the man would notice at this point .

She kept her focus carefully averted from Dominic as she approached the man in the chair. She knelt by his side and made the sign of the cross. “Dear Heavenly Father?—”

“Damn your eyes, Avalon!” he abruptly growled, blood-laced spittle flying from his lips and landing on her habit.

Lexie gasped, but before she could react, she was jerked aside and Avalon took her place. Setting his face directly in the other man's sight, he snapped, “ Where . And

perhaps once you kindly offer that information, I will ensure my Boys let you disappear from London. For good.”

Dominic had never hated Avalon more than he did in this moment. He had hoped to spare Lexie the dark truth of his past, but there was no help for it. Mr. Dartmouth had refused to speak without a priest present. While Dominic knew it was a ploy to bide some time in case the man he worked for decided that his life was worth sparing, he’d had no choice but to play along with the ruse. Thus, he’d sent Amos out to procure a nun’s habit and retrieve Lexie, the only woman he could trust to not expose all of his secrets.

He hadn’t missed the flash of recognition in her gaze, nor the anger and frustration that had followed. She didn’t approve of Avalon and he would be inclined to agree with her. While the Blue Boys weren’t as ruthless as they had been made to appear, their actions had to be brutal on occasion out of necessity to keep the peace. That didn’t make it right, but it was one of the things that had to be done.

He hoped he would be able to soothe Lexie’s frustrations, but for now, he had to concentrate on the matter at hand. He was so close to uncovering who intended him harm and he couldn’t allow that information to be ignored.

After a bit of blubbering and a few curses for good measure, the man lifted his head and glared out of the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut. “We meet every Wednesday mornin’ just before dawn at th’ bridge crossin’ over th’ Serpentine in Hyde Park.”

“What does he look like?” Dominic was done asking questions. Now they were demands if the man valued his life.

“E’s a toff. Neat beard. Yellow hair. But a nasty disposition.”

Dominic searched his brain to see if that description met anyone of his acquaintance,

but he was drawing a blank. Perhaps because his mind was racing with too many possibilities to light on one for too long.

Retrieving the knife that Mr. Dartmouth had initially used on him, he grabbed his arm and brought him to his feet. He shoved him in the direction of one of the Blue Boys. “Take care of this one.”

Without a word, the men of the gang removed themselves from the room with their captive in tow.

The moment they were gone and the door shut, leaving him along with Amos and his fiery nun, she wasted no time in demanding, “What are they going to do to him?”

Rather than reply directly, he wondered what sort of opinion she held of him. Allowing his lips to twitch, he asked, “Does it matter? The world would likely be a better place if he was no longer involved in it.”

“But that’s not for you, or anyone else, to decide,” she returned emphatically.

He considered allowing her to continue thinking the worst, but he already had the answer he’d been searching for. “No. He will be set free, but for society’s sake, it will appear as though his body washes up on the shores of the Thames so that he can start anew. Let’s just hope he makes the right choices this time.”

Some of Lexie’s fury abated, but he could tell their discussions were far from over. He glanced at Amos. “Might I have a word with the lady in private?”

Amos inclined his head. “Of course. I’ll just be at the bar should you need my... assistance.” With a brief clearing of his throat that seemed as though he was trying to withhold a chuckle, he took his leave.

Once Lexie was alone with Dominic, he started to speak, but she did so first. “It’s Lord Lindley.”

Dominic frowned. “What do you mean?”

Her expression changed from avenging angel to one of abject concern. She rubbed the sides of her covered arms. “The man in the park. It was the Earl of Lindley.”

He stilled. “Are you quite certain?”

She nodded her head. “The description suits him.”

“As it does most of the men in London.”

“I saw him one morning.”

At this, Dominic felt a shiver of disquiet settle over him. “Go on.”

“It wasn’t long after I’d made my way to London. I was walking along the same bridge he mentioned over the Serpentine. I glanced up and saw a man standing in the shadows and thought he looked rather menacing. It must have been Mr. Dartmouth.”

“And the earl?” he prompted when she hesitated.

“It was foggy that morning and difficult to see. He nearly ran me over with his horse. It was how we initially met.” She visibly shuddered.

Dominic scrubbed a hand down his face. “I would be lying if I said it didn’t make perfect sense. But I was so blinded by my jealousy of him trying to win you over that I missed the signs that were right in front of me.”

Her blue eyes were shining with moisture that he couldn't discern when she glanced at him. "You were?"

"I was," he admitted. Slowly moving closer to her, he added softly, "I nearly went out of my mind, consumed with thoughts of you night and day. I still am. "

He was granted a slight upturn of her lips, and he breathed a sigh of relief. "I was worried about you today."

He reached out to cup her cheek with his hand. "I am sorry about that. But Mr. Dartmouth caught me unaware as I'd left the cottage and I knew I couldn't let him go until I had gained the information I needed from him."

She nodded. "I understand that now, but—" She turned her head to the side and moved away slightly. Ice abruptly trailed in his veins and clenched over his heart. "Being here, seeing how real Avalon actually is—I've learned something."

He swallowed hard over the lump clogging his throat. "Oh? And what is that?"

She reached up and slowly removed the hood of her habit, and then she slowly removed the rest of the covering until she was standing before him in nothing but that tempting, thin chemise. "I find it all rather... erotic."

This abrupt turn clenched Dominic's chest until he found it difficult to breathe.

She returned to him and lowered her hand, allowing it to trail across the front of his trousers. He was instantly aroused, his cock pulsing with interest.

Not until she started to remove the buttons and slipped her hand inside to tease him with her bare hand did he find something to grasp onto. Thankfully, his desk was nearby and he clutched the edge. No doubt his knuckles were already white because

all the blood had drained from his body to pool in the vicinity of his manhood.

“I should like to suck the cock of such a powerful, domineering man.”

He wasn't feeling very powerful in that moment, but neither did he care. “As my lady commands.”

As she dropped to her knees, he ground his teeth together, and when her lips surrounded his length and slid with perfection, he groaned.

CHAPTER 19

Ever since Dominic had pleased Lexie with his mouth, she had been eager to do the same to him, but she hadn't been sure if she could be that bold.

However, there was something so dangerous and... forbidden about Dominic in that moment—or rather Avalon —that had warmed her midsection with surprising intensity. Perhaps it was the nun's habit she wore that was so taboo, but she was on fire for him when she ought to have been abhorred by his harsh behavior. Then again, the man he'd captured had tried to murder him, so perhaps his retaliation was mild in comparison to some.

Knowing that he had cheated death once again was enough for her to appreciate that he was standing there in front of her, healthy and virile, and the overwhelming urge to pleasure him had taken hold and refused to let go.

“Tell me what to do,” she purred, her tongue circling the head of his erect cock.

“Everything,” he rasped, but then he urged her to take him into his mouth once more where he showed her with his hips what he enjoyed.

It didn't take Lexie long to mimic the rhythm, as it was the same movements when he made love to her. Grasping his thighs, her nails digging into the fabric of his trousers, she found her own hips starting to move in time to every rhythmic motion she made with her mouth.

She moaned in the back of her throat as she increased her pace. Dominic's hand

wound into her hair, and she looked up to see his head was slightly back, his muscular throat exposed, the veins popping out on the sides of his neck. Knowing that she was the reason for his excitement built her own to a fever pitch, until her core was aching to be filled by him.

She wanted his hands on her breasts and his cock between her thighs and the image of them together the night before made her almost desperate for the same.

Her head was gently pulled back, and Dominic urged her to her feet. His dark eyes were almost eclipsed by the black pupils. “If you keep doing that, you’re going to make me come and that isn’t how I want things to end.”

Turning her around to the desk, he urged her legs apart. He set a hand at the apex of her thighs and rumbled his approval. “You’re so deliciously wet.”

Her breath was coming in short pants and when he began to slide a finger along her center and his other hand toyed with her aching nipples, she knew she was about to come apart in his arms.

“Not yet,” he ordered, and moved away from her.

She cried out at the loss, but when she could feel him position himself at her entrance, she held her breath, waiting for the glorious moment of their union. When he thrust forward with a determined slam of his hips, she clutched the desk. Meeting his every advance with eagerness, she could feel something building inside of her, something dark and tempting.

He bent down and nuzzled the side of her neck and then turned her head so he could kiss her with all the wild abandon that was bursting inside her .

All at once, the inferno swept over her and consumed her with its intensity. She

closed her eyes as the pleasure washed over her like nothing before. Her legs and arms shook as her body no longer became her own. She belonged to Dominic. She was completely and irrevocably his.

Within moments, he was grasping her hips and spilling himself inside her with a deep, guttural shout.

The only sounds in the room were their harsh breathing as they struggled to return to normal.

Eventually, he slipped from her and Lexie mourned the loss. She had never imagined sharing such a deep, personal connection with anyone, and yet, he had managed the impossible and awakened something inside of her that she would never be able to lay to rest again. It was both frightening and thrilling all at once.

She allowed her chemise to fall back to her knees, and as she turned around to face Dominic, he was fastening his trousers. If anyone were to enter the office, they would likely think that Avalon had just enjoyed a meaningless tup with a local whore, but the look of possessiveness in his gaze was not something she might expect he would share with anyone else.

“You are a magnificent creature,” he whispered. “Vixen.”

She smiled and went to retrieve her discarded habit. Lifting it, she asked, “Is this all you plan for me to wear from now on?”

“I would prefer you wear nothing,” he returned with a heated look. “But since I would have to have words with any other man who dared to look in your direction, I suppose I will have to content myself with proper attire. And no, the costume was just for Mr. Dartmouth’s benefit. And apparently mine as well.” He scratched his jawline almost absently. “I had no idea nuns were quite so seductive.”

She smacked him playfully on the arm. “I am not sure it’s all of them.”

“I would have to agree.” He sighed heavily. “It’s just one. ”

He was bending down to give her a kiss when there was a knock at the door. He moved back with obvious reluctance as Lexie donned her attire and he called out to the visitor.

Amos entered with a carefully neutral expression. “Sorry to...er...interrupt, but this just arrived for you from your personal messenger.”

He moved to hand the sealed missive to Dominic while Lexie tried not to prove what had happened by the warmth that abruptly tried to suffice her cheeks.

As he tore open the letter, Lexie couldn’t stop from asking, “A personal messenger?”

“A loyal street urchin,” Dominic clarified, and then began to read. It didn’t take long before he was folding it back. “It’s from the private investigator I hired to look into Lord Lindley. He seems to have some very interesting information to share and is requesting a meeting in the morning.” He sighed. “This means I will have to return to my townhouse.”

Amos inclined his head. “I will watch over Miss Givenwald.”

Lexie stepped forward. “Pardon me, but I’m standing right here and I will be going.”

Dominic had known that would be her reaction, but he had been hoping they wouldn’t be forced to argue after the magical joining they had just shared. “Alexandra?—”

She pointed a finger at him. “No. You don’t get to use my father’s tone to try to

browbeat me into doing what you want. I am going with you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, aware that he was fighting a losing battle, but he had to try. “Don’t you have a care for your reputation? You know things are a lot more complicated in polite society. If you were discovered at my townhouse without a proper chaperone?— ”

“It means little to me since we are to be married.” She quirked a brow at him. “Our understanding is still valid, is it not?”

“Of course, but I feel it would be safer for?—”

She went on as if he hadn’t spoken at all. “I will need something appropriate for traipsing about Mayfair, and since I have no idea where my trunks have gone, I leave it up to you to take care of that.”

With that, she moved to stand by Amos, as if they were a united front and Dominic was the single one who was setting his foot down on the subject.

However, when Amos just shrugged, Dominic realized that he truly was overruled. “Fine,” he snapped, determined to have the last word. “But you do not stray from my sight.”

She smiled in a brilliant manner, her lashes fluttering almost innocently when he knew the opposite was true. “Of course. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere other than at your loving side.”

As Dominic escorted his “nun” back out of the Crown & Sceptre, leaving Amos behind in case there were any further developments, they returned to the cottage without further incident. He gathered a few things he might need for the journey back to the heart of London and after Lexie had changed into the same torn gown she’d

worn when she'd arrived, they set out for Mayfair. By that time, some of his frustration had subsided.

In the hired hackney, Dominic sat back against the squabs. "Come here." He was glad that she didn't hesitate but moved across the seat to lie in the crook of his arm. "How long have we known each other?" he mused aloud.

There was a pause, and then Lexie gave a light laugh. "You know, I have no idea, but it seems like forever, doesn't it?"

"Indeed." A smile tugged at his lips. "It has been an adventure, to say the least."

"Our odd courtship can be stories that we tell our grandchildren someday."

He heard the teasing tone in her voice, but something about the image of his estate filled with their grown children and the next generation of the Eastland line struck a chord in him that caused a bit of bittersweet melancholy. "I always imagined my brother, Edmund, with that sort of future. Sometimes it seems that I stripped him of the joy he was meant to have."

Lexie stirred at his side and then her blue eyes were looking at him with empathy. "That's not fair to say. You did not steal anything from your brother. He died, and there was nothing you could do to prevent it."

"I wonder if that were true," he mused aloud. "Granted, I could not cure him of the illness that struck him, but perhaps I could have prevented my father's mistreatment and he might have been stronger, more resilient."

"You cannot blame yourself. It's wrong to do so," she returned softly. "There are times I wish that my mother was still here, but while my father was dreadfully cold after her death, I had to keep reminding myself that it was his anger and hurt that

caused him to treat me that way. It was nothing that I did—or could prevent.”

He gently turned her around to face him. He hoped that his tone, if not his expression told of his sincerity when he murmured, “I should not wish to treat you in such an offhand manner.”

“You won’t.” She smiled. “And if you do, rest assured I will inform you about it at once.”

He laughed. “I have no doubt of that.”

She returned her head to the crook of his arm. “By the way, I am still owed a proper proposal from you.”

“Although we have given each other our word?”

“Yes. I’m not asking for the romantic gesture with flowers and all the prose, but surely bending one knee?—”

He had to laugh again. He was sure that his future would be filled with many moments like these. With a smile curving his own lips, he promised, “I will give it some thought.”

Lexie awoke with a start when a housemaid entered her chamber and began to tend the fire. “What time is it?”

The sharp demand caused the girl to start. Spinning around, she nearly dropped the poker in her grasp. “A quarter to eight in the morning, miss.”

Since Dominic didn’t have the meeting with the private investigator until nine, she realized she had time to get dressed and join him. Breathing a sigh of relief, she

asked, “Forgive me. I was just worried I was late for... something.”

The girl smiled warmly. “Not to worry, miss. The duke informed us that we were to wake you by eight and ensure you were dressed and ready to go by half past ten.”

“I see.” She glanced toward the wardrobe.

“The modiste sent over a few gowns this morning, as well as several undergarments. It’s quite a trousseau.” Her grin widened.

Lexie hadn’t been expecting that much generosity. A single gown would have sufficed. But considering she was to be his duchess in short order, she decided that it was a gift she would accept with undying gratitude.

“Shall I draw you a bath?”

The very image of soaking in a steaming tub was too heavenly to resist. “Yes, please.”

In short order, several footmen were summoned to bring steaming pails of water to her chamber where a copper tub was filled to the brim. As the housemaid helped her to undress, she began to show off all the wonderful accoutrements that the duke had purchased for her use. From a new dressing table set with silver combs and shiny new pins and perfume from Floris, she had never felt like such a princess. Too much of this luxury and she could get used to it.

What made it more special was knowing that Dominic did it all out of devotion. He might not have told her he loved her, but his actions bespoke of a man besotted and she would take that offering and run with it.

As a long-sleeved lilac gown with embroidered yellow flowers was brought forth

from the wardrobe, Lexie gasped at the beauty of such a garment. It was so much nicer than the bland shades that her aunt insisted that she wear. But she supposed as a betrothed woman, she had more freedoms than before.

Eagerly donning the soft, cotton undergarments and the silk stockings, she slid her feet into a new pair of leather slippers. Once the maid had pulled her hair back into a simple chignon, Lexie was shocked at the difference in the mirror. After trudging about in the wilderness and pretending to be a woman of the cloth in the East End, it was nice to be reminded of her true identity. If Dominic was nothing but a poor church mouse, she would not have cared in the least, but neither was she going to take such fine things for granted ever again.

At precisely half past ten, she was heading down the stairs.

Dominic was already waiting in the foyer in a three-caped greatcoat and a beaver hat in his grasp. She could tell by his movements that he was anxious to be on the move, but when he glanced up and spied her, all of that seemed to dissipate.

“I shall have to give the modiste a sizeable donation for her wonderful choice.” His gaze swept her from head to toe and she suddenly wished they had more time to be somewhere in private.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” She offered a slight curtsy. “You are too kind.”

“Trust me, my reasons are purely selfish.” He leaned closer to whisper for her ears alone. “I will enjoy removing every stitch from your delectable body.”

Lexie’s breath caught as a footman came over and handed her a new fur lined cloak. As she walked out into the dreary, gray day, she hardly even noticed that rain still hung heavily in the air. She barely felt the cold as she threaded her arm through Dominic’s and he led her to his coach. But then the driver tipped his hat to her, as

well as the familiar Runner sitting beside him. “It’s good to see you again, miss.”

Her mouth fell open slightly as she nodded in reply. She didn’t find her voice until Dominic joined her in the carriage and they set into motion. “So much has happened that I completely forgot to inquire if they made it safely away from the bandits.”

“Yes. All is well, although they have not yet forgiven their lack of duty where you were concerned.”

“It was not their fault they were outnumbered and caught by surprise. We all were.”

He tilted his head to the side. “It is good of you to be so forgiving.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she returned. “They are not to blame for the earl’s actions.”

Dominic inclined his head as they made the short journey to the private investigator’s office. As he helped her down, she asked, “Was there a reason he didn’t meet you at your townhouse?”

“I requested that we adjourn here,” he replied. “Thus far, all of our conversations have been by private messenger to ensure he wasn’t suspected of working with me. However, he wrote that it was necessary that we meet in person for what he had to share.”

“Oh, my. It must be rather imperative.”

His focus was intent as he said, “Let us hope so.”

Dominic had donned his best attire, ensuring that he looked the part of the duke as he entered the investigator’s office. It seemed to work, because the secretary behind the desk before a closed door looked up in near alarm. “Might I help you, sir?” the young

man asked with a slight tremble to his tone.

“I am here to see Mr. Martin. I’m the Duke of Cuthbert. He is expecting me. ”

“Oh... Of course. Go right in, Y-Your Grace.” He added a light bow for good measure and Dominic snorted at the action. It was the one thing he hadn’t missed while playing the part of Avalon. True, he was revered in the East End for his exploits with the Blue Boys, but he found it easier for people to talk to him on a singular level, to express their anger and frustrations when they believed he was one of them. As a duke, most people made a clear path for him and barely made eye contact, let alone carry on a normal conversation.

He took a breath and opened the door to the investigator’s office, hoping that the reception he received here would be different.

“I’ll be with you in a moment.”

His mouth quirked upward when a hand lifted as a wiry haired man with gray hair hastily wrote something on a sheet of paper. When he was finished, he glanced up and set his wire rimmed spectacles to the side. His clothes were rumpled and he looked as though he had seen the bottom of a bottle one too many times, but his focus was clear when he welcomed Dominic. “Your Grace. Thank you for coming to see me. I realize your time is valuable, but I vow I will make it worth your while.” He waved a hand. “Please.” He seemed to come to his senses and realize that Dominic wasn’t alone because he added, “Good day, miss.”

She murmured an equal greeting in return. Dominic could read the question in the other man’s eyes as they sat down across from his cluttered desk and he shut the door behind them. In some sense, this office nearly mirrored the one Avalon used and it made him want to smile, because it proved that Mr. Martin might know what he was doing after all. “Feel free to speak freely in front of Miss Givenwald. She is soon to

be my duchess, although we have not yet had time to properly announce our betrothal.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Ah, my felicitations to you both.” As he resettled himself at his desk, his wooden chair squeaked with protest, as though it had witnessed many days such as this in the past. Dominic waited patiently for him to return his spectacles to his face and gather the information he needed. “Yes, yes. Here we are.” He handed a paper to Dominic, which he accepted. Glancing at the paper, he had no need to read it because Mr. Martin explained everything in great detail. “That is the official death record of the previous Earl of Lindley in the private care of an asylum by the name of?—”

“I am aware of the previous earl’s madness,” Dominic interrupted. “His personal trials are not what I asked you to investigate.”

“Indeed. But you will find that is not all I discovered.” He handed him another sheet of paper. “This document states that his son, Francis Marcomb, was also interred in the same institution.”

At this, Dominic stilled. “What are you getting at?”

Mr. Martin folded his hand together “Rumor has it that the earl’s son was also afflicted, that he never spent time on the continent at all, that his condition was covered up from an early age to prevent gossip and conjecture that he wouldn’t be fit to inherit the title. He was granted the freedoms to do so, however, but that is not the most intriguing part. I happened to stumble across some information claiming that Francis Marcomb met his death shortly after he gained the title, after his father was dead.”

Dominic’s gaze narrowed. “Do you have proof of this?”

“A miniature.” He handed it over. “Apparently, Francis and one of the women in charge of the facility were having an affair and it was not known until after the scandal threatened to ensue.”

As Dominic inspected the image in the small frame, he frowned and then handed it to Lexie so that she might see what he was thinking. “This is not the same man who claims to be the current Earl of Lindley.”

“Precisely,” Mr. Martin concurred. “It appears we have an imposter in our midst. ”

Dominic sat back in the chair, feeling as if some of the wind had been knocked out of him. “If he is not the true heir, then how could he make such a claim? Who is he really?”

Some more paper shuffling on the desk. “That was a bit more difficult to uncover. It took some time to ferret out what had actually happened to the earl’s son. Until I received the miniature from Francis’s lover, I did not know what to look for. But soon the pieces began to fall into place. There was an incident at the Lindley estate. It appeared that a footman had been set upon by thieves and murdered, but upon further review, it appears that the man who was found was the true heir and the assailant had smoothly stepped into the role of earl. Not many people could dispute the claim, since Francis had been sent away for several years and there were marked similarities between these two men, so no one thought to question the claim. But I have taken the liberty of doing so.” He glanced at Lexie before adding a bit delicately, “I took the liberty of having the body exhumed and positively identified as that of Francis Marcomb. It should be circulating through the papers this very afternoon, if not already. That, Your Grace, is why I wanted to meet with you so urgently. If this charlatan believes you are aware of his true identity, you could be in grave danger, indeed.”

CHAPTER 20

As they left the investigator's office and entered the carriage, Lexie found herself quite speechless for the first time, possibly in her lifetime. "That was... unexpected," she murmured.

"Quite," Dominic returned with a hard line to his lips.

"But I suppose it does reveal why Lord Lindley might resort to violence to protect his secrets." She winced. "Or rather, the man pretending to be the earl." She sighed. "I should like to unravel this mystery."

"As would I," Dominic said firmly. "It would mean that I might have the chance to put all this nastiness behind us and start anew. Until then, there can be no hope of a union. It is much too dangerous. If something happened to you, I would never forgive myself."

Lexie's heart stopped at the thought of not marrying Dominic. Her situation might very well be precarious because they had lain together. She supposed that being sent home in disgrace would certainly gain her father's attention at long last. And until then, she had claimed not to care for her reputation. She still didn't, but she did care about the duke.

"It would help if I knew the connection between this Lord Lindley and my aunt."

"Regarding that," Dominic said slowly, "I might have a bit of insight."

Her eyes widened slightly, suddenly more intrigued than before. “Do tell.”

“I told you that I used to have a journal in my possession where several scandals were written. It was something I had gained from my predecessors but some weeks ago, it was stolen out of the safe in my house. I am still puzzling on how that might have occurred.”

“Someone who was skilled at the art of picking locks, I would imagine,” Lexie noted.

“It would appear so,” he returned dryly. “But the point is that while I didn’t study the journal at length, I made it a priority to write down a few things that I thought could be of note and secured a copy. While I’m not in possession of the original and would prefer to have it returned, I thought it would be a good idea to have a duplicate in case something happened to the first one.”

“A good foresight on your part,” she agreed. “Where is the copy?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is where it gets a bit complicated, I’m afraid.”

She didn’t like the sound of that.

“After the original was stolen, nearly out from underneath my nose, I decided it would be best if I didn’t keep it close at hand. But nor could I trust that it would be safe at the Crown & Sceptre.” He looked at her steadily. “I hid it beneath the interior of the mantel in the parlor at your aunt’s house.”

“Oh.” Her heart couldn’t have fallen further at her feet. But she was quick to rally. “We have to retrieve it, of course, so I will simply go to my aunt?—”

“Not a chance in hell.” She blinked at the vehemence in his tone. “After what she put

you through, I would not put it past her to lock you in your room and force the local vicar to wed you to the false earl.”

“But the union wouldn’t be valid without a legitimate bridegroom,” she pointed out. “We have to get it back because it sounds as if that is the only way we have any hope of solving this puzzle and ending this nightmare.”

“Perhaps,” he murmured. “But I will not have you entering that front door without me present. Forgive me, but I do not trust your aunt any more than I trust Lord Lindley.”

She shrugged. “Neither do I, to be honest. For years, I hardly spoke a handful of words to her. My father preferred his estate, and she remained in town. But when I became of age, she decided it was imperative that I have a season and make a suitable match. Had I known the choice was to be solely hers, I would have rusticated in the country.”

“You wound me greatly.”

She rolled her eyes. “I do not refer to our association, naturally. I chose you above the earl. And I knew my instinct was right, as it always has been.”

“Mine as well. Which is why we will have to figure out another way to obtain the copy.”

Lexie thought for a moment, tapping a finger against her lips. Snapping her fingers, she said excitedly. “Every Tuesday afternoon she calls on her friend, Margaret Limewood, and they chatter on about the latest gossip. Perhaps I might gain entry to the townhouse then.”

“It might work,” he said thoughtfully. “As long as she hasn’t already turned her servants against you.”

“I doubt that would be the case, especially with my former ladies’ maid, Jane. We were rather close. She would not betray me.”

“But she is not the only one present,” he remarked. However, since he must have realized that they already had a tentative plan in place, he added, “As luck would have it, tomorrow is Tuesday. We shall bide our time until then and strike at the opportune moment.”

For the first time since they’d left Mr. Martin’s office, Lexie could feel some of her excitement return. “You make it sound so devious.”

She was rewarded by the spark of lust in his dark eyes. As he reached across the carriage to pull her onto his lap, she gave a squeal of delight. “Oh, I intend to be devious with you every single day once we are wed.”

“Why wait?” she teased darkly and ran a finger lightly over the tops of her breasts.

She could almost see the calculations in his head, deciding whether or not he had enough time for a little tete-a-tete in the carriage before they returned to the townhouse. Unfortunately, it didn’t appear to be in her favor as the coach slowed to a halt.

“The worst blasted timing,” Dominic growled. Lexie barely hid a smile as she crawled from his lap and returned to her seat, appearing as a respectable lady by the time the door opened and a footman presented himself to assist her down.

When she was on solid ground, she turned to look over her shoulder at Dominic with a coy look of promise. Instead, something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye.

Sunlight glinting off a pistol.

Dominic saw Lexie's face turn white before she shoved the footman to the ground, shouted at the driver, and proceeded to dive back into the coach—just as a bullet slammed into the door, just inches from where she'd been standing.

He knew he would recall this moment with vivid clarity and heart-stopping fear at a later time, but right now, he was more concerned about getting Lexie to safety .

He pulled her into the coach as another bullet struck the side of the conveyance. She gave a cry and covered her head with her hands, crouched down on the floor of the vehicle. Dominic covered her body with his own, but made sure to glance out the window to see the cloaked figure across the street fleeing in the opposite direction as the Runner who had been atop the coach began to give chase. A quick glance showed that there was no further threat at the moment, so he hastily went into action. "Let's go!"

He grabbed hold of Lexie's hand and pulled her behind him as they flew up the steps to his townhouse and slammed the door behind them before the butler had a chance to react properly.

"Was that gunfire I heard, Your Grace?" the man asked in alarm.

"It was," Dominic snapped, furious at the situation and even more livid that Lexie could have easily been injured. Or worse. This had to end. "Send for the watch. I will not stand for such daring exploits in front of my blasted house. Something must be done."

The servant immediately went into action while Dominic hauled Lexie with him to his study. Shutting the door firmly, he led her to the chair in front of his desk and urged her to sit. Then he went over to the sideboard and poured them both a drink which he took back to her. "This should settle your nerves."

“Thank you,” she murmured. Rather than sip the brandy, she downed the entire glass. She coughed and sputtered from the burn it would have caused, but she didn’t seem as fazed by that as the events of moments before. “It has to be Lindley, doesn’t it?” she asked hoarsely.

“I can’t think of anyone else it could be after what we just learned from Mr. Martin. And it’s apparent he is willing to become more brazen to ensure his secrets are well preserved.”

She leaned back against the chair, her face an expressionless mask .

Dominic set aside his drink and knelt in front of her. “What’s going through your mind right now? No doubt you wish you’d never met me.”

She looked at him steadily and he was glad to see some of the color returning to her cheeks. “Actually, I was wondering if getting shot at was all it took to get you down on one knee, after all.”

Despite everything, Dominic found himself laughing. He didn’t think it could be possible after such a shocking turn, but it was why he knew he had to keep Lexie in his life. She managed to bring out the best in him when he didn’t want to be that good. When Avalon wanted to stand up and cause havoc, she somehow managed to settle him, to maneuver his thoughts from something deadly to a bit milder.

He straightened slightly but ensured that he was still on one knee. “While this isn’t the most romantic of settings for an official proposal, since I’m here, I might as well take a lady’s advice.” Holding her left hand in his, he sobered and added, “Miss Alexandra Givenwald, will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife, my duchess, my partner for the rest of my days?”

She swallowed hard, and her eyes filled with moisture that she blinked away as she

leaned forward and placed her lips gently against his. With her blue eyes shining almost miraculously, she whispered, “I will.”

Dominic’s heart took flight, soaring above the heavens with a joy so profound, he was certain he had never experienced its equal. He hadn’t realized how much he’d needed to hear those words from her, nor how much he’d actually need to speak them for their promise to each other to become real, but somehow, it did.

“Thank God,” he whispered, and kissed her with a raw abandon that surprised him. It was as if he was baring everything to her: his heart, his soul, even his bruised past. It all belonged to her, and he couldn’t be more grateful.

He wanted to extend this moment, to draw it out as long as possible, but there was a brisk knock at the door and he knew their time had come to an end.

Withdrawing, he stood and braced himself for the barrage of questions that were sure to follow. “Enter.”

As the butler announced “Constable Pierce,” Dominic waited as the man strode forward and bowed sharply. “Your Grace.” He flicked a glance at Lexie, who had risen from her seat.

“This is Miss Givenwald, my future duchess. You may speak freely in front of her.”

“Of course.” His demeanor didn’t change as he inclined his head politely toward her. It meant that he wasn’t interested in the pleasantries and took his job seriously.

After a brief recounting of what had taken place, with Lexie giving most of the descriptions, the constable folded his notepad and pencil and tucked them away. “You realize this gives us very little to go on,” he remarked.

“Perhaps,” Dominic returned. “But what if we were able to give you a suspect and a possible motive for such misdeeds?”

Once Dominic had relayed the information from Mr. Martin, the constable seemed interested, but the frown on his face was one of skepticism. “This is a very serious accusation, Your Grace. And I must discover some significant proof before I can point the finger of judgment at a member of the peerage.”

“I will secure what you require,” Dominic vowed. “I am tired of living in this villain’s shadow while he threatens our very lives.”

“Of course.” Constable Pierce nodded then turned to Lexie with a considering expression. “Are you the same Miss Givenwald who is related to Lady Devonly?”

She nodded. “She is my aunt. ”

“I thought that might be the case.” His mouth thinned in a line before he added, “I am given to understand that she has been overset over your sudden disappearance. She has been in contact with the authorities in the belief you have been absconded with.” He looked back at Dominic. “Although I can see that is not the case.”

“Thank you,” Dominic murmured.

Lexie offered him a smile. “I planned to call upon her tomorrow to reassure her concern.”

Appearing satisfied, the constable tipped his hat and left the room.

Once he was gone, Lexie turned to him. “I suppose it’s inevitable that I go see Aunt Bonnie tomorrow since she has sent the watch after me.”

He reached out and gathered her within the circle of his arms. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he murmured, "Patience will seize the day. We just have to endure until then."

What he didn't say was that while the Duke of Cuthbert had to act with propriety, the same did not have to be said for Avalon and the Blue Boys.

Tonight, they would act.

Lexie paced her chamber that evening wearing one of the new nightdresses that Dominic had procured for her. She had rather hoped he might call on her and remove it, but it was past midnight and she had yet to see a shadow beneath her door.

She had made sure to keep the lamp beside the bed burning so he would know that she was up, but... nothing.

Perhaps he believed that the stress of the day had been too much and she needed her rest. If so, he didn't know her at all. She was restless and spending some time in his arms would go far to alleviate some of her apprehension about the following afternoon when she would return to her aunt's residence. She nearly expected constables would be lining the streets when she arrived, prepared to take either her or Dominic, into custody.

When did everything become such a mess?

She never imagined that by coming to London, she would uncover so many secrets. And she had the feeling she had barely scratched the surface when it came to all of the intrigue that the city held.

Deciding that she wasn't going to wait for Dominic to come to her, Lexie threw on her robe and opened her door. She listened for the sound of stirring servants, but

hearing no one about, she crept toward the bedchamber of the master of the house. It was the only door at the end of the hall, just down from hers.

She raised her hand to knock, but thought surprise might be the better option, so she tested the handle. It opened to a darkened room and she frowned. Surely, he hadn't already turned in while she was going crazy such a short distance away.

However, while her eyes were still adjusting, she caught sight of movement just before her mouth was covered with a strong hand. "What are you doing here?"

Dominic slowly removed his hand and as she glanced at him, she noticed that he was dressed in finery, from the red waistcoat and the crisp white cravat, to the black jacket and trousers. Her mouth went slack. "I think the question is where are you going?"

He set his jaw but must have decided he couldn't withhold the truth from her, or wouldn't do so, because he gave a heavy sigh and said, "I am going back to the gaming hell to see if I can't find Lindley?—"

She gasped and grabbed hold of his jacket lapels. "Are you completely mad ? He nearly succeeded in killing us both today!"

His dark eyes held a hard glint. "But he didn't, and by the time I get through with him, he will wish he had."

She glared at him. "You were just going to leave and not tell me? Keeping me ignorant of such foolish actions? "

"I am better prepared this time." He moved his jacket aside so she could see the pistol tucked into his waistband. "And Amos is gathering the Blue Boys at this very moment."

“Is that wise? They don’t know who you really are.”

She could see the muscle working in his jaw. “Then it’s time they did. I’m tired of concealing who I am and worrying that my sins will find me out. The only way I can move forward, that we can move forward, is for everything to be revealed. I see that now.”

She was already shaking her head. “That is not a good idea at all. You are opening the door to more trouble if you do that. Now if Avalon decided to masquerade as a peer, that is something else entirely and would be a much better option than laying yourself bare.” She could see that he wasn’t convinced, so she added, “If you are concerned that I won’t respect you because you chose to keep those two worlds from colliding, trust me when I say I understand the reasons completely. You did as well. I don’t know what’s changed.”

Some of the tension visibly left his broad shoulders. “I’ve changed and I just want it all to be over.”

Her heart went out to him. She knew this was a vulnerable side to him that he rarely let anyone see. But he was trusting her with his weakness. It was humbling. “So do I, but not like this.” She moved back slightly. “You are not going there alone. Like it or not, we are in this together now, and from now on.”

He snorted. “You are the one who is speaking madness now. As if I would allow you anywhere near that place.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m afraid that is the price you must pay unless you want me to scream and wake this entire household from their slumber. By the time we explain what is transpiring, dawn will likely be making its way over the horizon and then it will be too late to do anything.” She made a show of glancing at the clock on the mantel, although she couldn’t possibly read it in such dim lighting. But the effect

achieved what she'd intended. "And the longer we stand here and argue the matter, the more precious time is being lost."

He stared hard at her. "You are the most infuriating woman I've ever known."

She merely lifted a brow and waited.

It took a handful of seconds before he snapped, "Fine. Get dressed."

She wanted to smile in victory, but she kept her expression carefully bland as she started to walk away. Before she did, he grasped her arm and said, "You will have to dress the part. We are not going to afternoon tea."

She catalogued the new gowns she had in her wardrobe. "I think I have something that will work."

He released her and said, "I will be waiting by the back door. If you haven't joined me in ten minutes, I'm leaving."

Lexie wasn't surprised that he gave her an ultimatum, and she didn't intend to take any longer than necessary to don the black chemise and the red corset, although it did take a bit of maneuvering to lace it and then properly attach it in the front.

Slipping on a pair of black boots and leaving her hair to flow freely around her shoulders, she tiptoed down the back stairs. When Dominic spied her, his gaze narrowed. "Where on earth did you get that?"

"The modiste." She offered a mock curtsy. "It was meant to be a seductive surprise after we married since you seemed to like my nun habit so much, but I'm forced to spoil it tonight."

His nostrils flared and his focus seemed to be homed in on her full breasts. “It isn’t spoiled because you will wear it again when we are alone. But sadly, at that time, it won’t be on for long.”

Lexie’s cheeks warmed at the promise in his tone, and together, they headed out into the chilly autumn night.

CHAPTER 21

Dominic didn't like this. At all.

He knew that Lexie was more than capable of handling herself. Or rather, she believed that she was, but Dominic had dealt with enough bad people over his tenure as the leader of the Blue Boys to understand the game that was required to stay alive. It was only recently that his concentration had begun to slip.

He thought of what she had said about acting as though Avalon was playing a part and realized that she was right. It was best to keep his two worlds separate and allow one of them to slip from existence. If not, he was in danger of losing everything.

His lack of regard toward self-preservation was another reason he needed to secede his position of power in the East End. For so long it had been the one constant in his life, the sole purpose for which he had kept waking every morning and facing each day. He had wanted to make a difference, to find the respect he always felt he'd been denied from his father. But none of that mattered any longer. He just wanted to live in peace and contentment with Lexie, the woman he loved. And hopefully, draw his mother out of the shell she'd retreated into for so long .

As the hired hackney deposited them at the gaming hell, Dominic turned to his lovely companion. "Do not stray from my side for any reason. Is that clear?"

He could tell she had to stop the urge to roll her eyes as if she was a child being reprimanded. "I promise."

Feeling as though that was the most trustworthy answer he might receive, he stepped to the ground and headed for the front of the establishment. However, when he spied a familiar figure melting into the shadows of the alleyway, he pulled Lexie in that direction.

“I didn’t know you were going to bring company,” Amos noted, his brow lifting above the eyepatch.

“It’s not as if I had much choice in the matter,” Dominic muttered.

“It’s lovely to see you again too,” Lexie said brightly.

Another figure emerged from behind Amos, and Lexie recognized him as the scarred man from the Crown & Sceptre. He didn’t bother with any sort of recognition toward her, but he narrowed his gaze on Dominic. “Avalon.”

“Graden.”

“The other men are assembled and ready for the call when you give the signal.”

Dominic nodded and turned to Lexie. “Shall we?”

She fluttered her lashes at him. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He rolled his eyes and led the way into the establishment. “Is this your first time in a gaming hell?”

She gave him a tolerant look. “I might not look the part of a lady right now, but I can assure you that I was raised as one, so the answer would be yes”

“Then this is likely to be quite a thrilling experience for you,” he muttered.

“Really?” She scrunched up her nose. “I might enjoy it a bit more were we not looking for a possible murderer and charlatan. ”

“Indeed.” He took a quick glance around the assemblage through the heavy cheroot smoke. The scent of spirits was also stronger than usual, giving credence to the fact that they should remain there as little as possible. And considering the open, leering glares that were directed at Lexie, his hand ached to remove a few of them.

He kept a hand possessively about her waist as he headed for a faro table. He generally had good luck overhearing conversations when he joined a current game, so he took a seat and draped Lexie across his lap so that everyone there would know that the lady was taken.

Thankfully, she didn’t seem to mind and as he tossed down a few coins to enter the pot, he acted as though he was nuzzling her neck when in reality he murmured, “See if anything unusual stands out to you, or better yet, if you spot our quarry.”

She gave a breathy sigh as he gently nipped the side of her neck with his teeth. “Anything for you, my love.”

His chest clenched at the endearment, although he told himself she was playing her part and it didn’t mean more than that. But he hoped that someday it would.

As the minutes ticked by, Dominic started to feel the tension of their quest pressing down on him. He was eager to draw Lindley out of hiding and he had actually thought that maybe Lexie’s presence there might help to do just that. But that was on the off chance that he actually decided to pass through the front doors. He could already be halfway to Scotland for all Dominic knew.

“You bastard .”

At the sound of a familiar snarl, Dominic's lips curved. Then again ...

He didn't even look up to acknowledge the speaker to his left, just kept his focus on the cards in his grasp. "Good evening, Lord Lindley."

"You have some bloody nerve coming here with Miss Givenwald and—" He paused, as if astonished at what he was seeing. "Making her dress up as your whore!"

A sudden hush descended around the immediate area, and Dominic decided that he could withstand a slight against him but where Lexie was involved, he wasn't about to stand by and allow such disrespect. She jumped to her feet, as if prepared to defend her own honor when Dominic tossed down his cards and slowly rose to his full height. He had never failed to intimidate his enemies before, and he didn't appear to fail now, for Lindley acted as though he would move back a step, before he decided against it and stood his ground.

"Tell me, my lord —" he added with intended emphasis. "Where were you this afternoon when an attempt was made on my life?"

The face before him snarled with an almost animalistic rage. He wasn't trying to hide his outward emotions, a mixture of pure contempt and malice. Dominic no longer had any doubt that this man—whoever he really was—was capable of murder. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" Dominic challenged. He waved a hand toward the closest exit of the club. "If you are so adamant that you are not responsible for any wrongdoing, then why don't we discuss this outside?"

"Why?" His eyes narrowed in obvious distrust. "Just so you can find a way to dispose of me and have a clear path to Miss Givenwald?"

Dominic had to snort. “That’s the most ludicrous?—”

“Admit it. You’re scared of our connection. That is why you tried to send her away from London.”

The look in his eyes was almost crazed at this point, and he feared that Lindley would do something incredibly foolish. Dominic’s hand slowly moved toward the side of his jacket that concealed his pistol. Unfortunately, Lindley must have garnered his intentions, because he reached out and grabbed Lexie’s wrist and pulled her to him, setting a pistol of his own against the bottom of her chin.

The room exploded with screams and shouts as everyone seemed to understand that a challenge was brewing and didn’t want to get in the middle of it. Within minutes they were the only ones standing in the midst of the once crowded atmosphere.

This is... unfortunate .

Lexie had imagined this evening going much differently, where she and Dominic surprised Lindley and took him down amidst a burst of fanfare and applause. Well, perhaps, not quite to that extent, but she didn’t foresee a circumstance where she was going to be facing down the barrel of a weapon either.

Thankfully, she hadn’t come ill-prepared. She had learned that from Dominic. All she had to do was wait for the opportune moment.

“Let her go. Your quarrel is with me.” The quiet tone in Dominic’s voice sent chills up her spine. It sounded more menacing than if he’d shouted a demand for her release.

“I don’t think I will.”

As Lindley started to drag her backward, she wondered if she should act now or wait. In the end she decided that there was no time like the present.

She removed the knife she'd tucked into the bottom of her corset at the same time she rammed her other elbow into his stomach. He gave a grunt of pain and while he was still recovering, she spun around and lashed out with the blade. She could feel it make contact with something soft, followed by an angry howl, but she didn't get to see what she'd cut as Dominic grabbed her around the waist and all but hauled her out the door. It nearly shut behind them before a bullet shattered the edge of the frame and sent shards of wood raining down on them .

Once they were in the alley, the shock of what had almost transpired started to sink in. Lexie found that the noise around her started to dim and become suddenly hollow and distant. She could tell that Dominic was yelling orders at someone and there was a flurry of movement as several men rushed back into the club. However, when Dominic came over to ask how she was doing, she couldn't seem to make sense of her own words.

What was happening to her?

She slowly started to sink, and then she realized that her legs were giving away beneath her. She was going to fall.

Strong hands came up to her shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. It did nothing. Suddenly, a terrible scent came up to her nose and all the sounds around her came rushing back.

She blinked and waved a hand in front of her face as the toxic fumes caused her eyes to water. But at least her legs were steady again.

“Have you never had to use smelling salts before?”

She looked at him curiously. “You are asking me that?” She glanced at the vial before he settled it back in his vest pocket. “My question is why do you have it? Are you prone to fainting spells?”

He snorted. “I keep it handy for damsels in distress.”

She rolled her eyes. “You surely don’t mean me. It must have been for all the ladies that fell at your feet before now, I suppose.”

He looked at her in a tolerant manner. “Let’s just agree it was fortunate I had it with me tonight or I would be scooping you up off of the dirty ground right now.”

She crossed her arms. “At least I would have my dignity.”

“That is not in question,” he stated firmly. “It took courage to act as you did.”

“I just hope it doesn’t cause any lasting damage.”

“I do,” he replied uncharitably. “He threatened you. That is enough for me. But considering the slash you gave him was along his cheekbone, the only thing he will suffer is some wounded pride. At least, until he is tried for the murder of the true Lord Lindley.”

She gave a slight shiver. “Do you really think he was responsible for the earl’s death?”

“Unless someone else has a better motive.” He put an arm around her shoulders as Amos returned to join them in the alley. “Graden and the others have Lindley subdued. Do you want us to... question him here or take him to Bow Street?”

Dominic shook his head. “Bow Street can deal with him.” He glanced at her. “We’ve

done what we needed to do tonight. I'm going home and sleeping next to my lovely betrothed. Tomorrow, we finish this."

By the time they returned to his townhouse, Dominic was feeling the effects of an exhaustive night. But at least he could rest a bit easier knowing that Lindley would soon be in irons and Lexie was safe.

His heart had stuttered in his chest when he'd seen her reach for the back of her corset and when she'd brought up a knife and moved with such skill and precision—he hadn't known whether to be horrified or impressed by her fearlessness. She was everything he hadn't known he'd wanted in a partner. In a wife. But she was the perfect fit for him.

As they returned to his townhouse and made their way through the back entrance and trudged up the stairs, Lexie started to part ways at her chamber, but he wasn't having it. He kept a firm hold on her and said, "I meant what I said about us not being apart tonight."

She didn't resist but went willingly.

When they entered his chamber, she glanced around. "I didn't get a chance to appreciate the sheer enormity of this room earlier." She looked at him over her shoulder with a coy lift of her brow. "Quite impressive."

And just like that, all the weariness he'd been feeling faded into glorious oblivion. "Come here." He reached out and pulled her against his chest. "This nightmare will be over soon and then we can truly look forward to a future together in harmony."

She laughed lightly. "Do you truly think so?"

He looked down into her tempting face and curved his lips with amusement. "I

suppose ‘harmony’ isn’t the most accurate description of what life will be like married to you.”

She wound her arms around his neck. “Harmony is entirely overrated. I love these adventures with you.” She paused and seemed to reconsider her statement before she amended it. “Not entirely, perhaps, but when it comes to walking through East End pubs in a nun habit, that was rather interesting.”

He laughed and it felt wonderfully good to do so. “Not a single day will ever be dull with you by my side, I’m sure of it.” He kissed her lightly on the lips and then tapped her playfully on the tip of her nose with his finger. “Let’s get out of these annoying clothes, shall we?”

“That sounds lovely.” She turned her back to him. “Would you mind helping me with my laces?”

He trailed a gentle finger along the top where her black chemise laid low on her shoulders. “It shall be like opening a package on Christmas,” he mused aloud. “And the gift of you is the best thing I shall ever receive.”

She sighed as the laces started to loosen. “I quite like being compared to a present.”

“Christmas isn’t the only holiday where I can enjoy unwrapping you,” he murmured huskily. He started to place a line of kisses from one side of her neck to the other and all along her exposed skin. With each kiss he made a list. “There is Boxing Day... my birthday... Saint Valentine’s Day... Easter...Saint Patrick’s Day... ”

She gave a throaty chuckle that shot straight to his groin and hardened his cock even further than it already was. “I don’t recall gifts on Easter and certainly not Saint Patrick’s Day.”

“Then we shall begin a new tradition. Rest assured, my lady...” he murmured as he started to lick and tease her way across her skin. “We will enjoy many new things.”

A feminine shriek awoke Lexie the next morning. She cracked open an eye to see a horrified housemaid quickly turn away from the naked couple wrapped in each other’s arms in the bed. Thankfully, nothing was showing but a tangle of limbs, but it was enough to cause a scandalous reaction. “I’m terribly sorry... Your Grace... but I was just intending to... refresh the fire...” She wrung her hands in front of her and seemed unable to move.

“Thank you, Bessie. You may go,” a husky voice said from behind Lexie.

As if a fire had suddenly been struck beneath her heels, the servant left the room like her very life depended upon it.

Lexie put a hand over her eyes and had to laugh. “No doubt our escapades will be the talk of the household this morning.”

“I don’t rightly care.” Dominic pulled her back against him, and she couldn’t resist snuggling into his masculine warmth.

She was surprised how awake she was considering it didn’t seem to be much later than dawn and she had passed a rather vigorous night with the duke. She sighed in contentment and breathed in his virile scent, the one she had come to associate with the aristocrat and the East End villain. Both were impossible for her to ignore. She might have thought she was torn between two lovers, but thankfully, Avalon and Dominic were one in the same. And after last night, she considered herself a very lucky woman, indeed.

But with the dawn’s light, so came the reminder return of their plans for the day. As much as she hated to go, she murmured, “I should be getting back to my chamber.”

“Because you are worried about Bessie?”

She smiled. “No. Because I should prepare myself if I happen to face Aunt Bonnie again.”

At that, Dominic turned her around to face him. If it were possible, he was even more handsome this morning with his hair in disarray and his dark eyes smoldering as they lit on her. He no longer attempted to conceal his innermost thoughts from her. She could read the love and adoration there if he hadn’t yet spoken the words aloud. “You will not be alone today.”

“I know,” she admitted. “But it is still causing me no end of qualms. Especially if what we find in the journal is as damning as I’m afraid it might be.”

“Then we will deal with that revelation. Together. I won’t allow you to face what scandal might arise.”

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the mouth. “You will just allow me the scandal that might arise from our time together in this bed without the benefits of marriage vows, is that it?”

He glanced down between them. “Oh, there is something arising, but it’s not scandal at the moment.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed away from him as she rose from the bed. If she didn’t force herself to do so, she had the feeling they wouldn’t get anything accomplished today. Her body protested, of course, urging her to return to the man who had propped his head on his hand and looked at her with seductive intent, the gleam in his eye particularly tempting, but she tied her robe about her waist. “Good day, Your Grace.”

As Lexie returned to her room, she was thankful that her maid had not yet chosen to appear. She needed a few moments to compose herself after such a blissful night spent with Dominic. She feared that her happiness would soon be ripped away, half expected it, and yet she couldn't say why. Perhaps it was because for the first time in her life she was truly content and eager to live the rest of her life with Dominic, when before, she had been anticipating a temporary ruination filled with a lifetime of melancholy memories.

When she felt as though she could properly comport herself without either blushing or bursting into tears, she rang for a bath. Taking a breakfast tray in her room, she finally left the confines of her bed chamber when it was nearly the noon hour. When she inquired after the duke, she found Dominic in his study. She offered a light knock and entered the room at his summons.

He glanced up from his desk and instead of a smile, he wore a look of concern. He set aside his pen and offered his undivided attention. "I was starting to wonder if you were avoiding me."

She shook her head. "Not you." She closed her eyes to brace herself. "I just want today to be over."

He got up and moved toward her. She told herself she didn't need the comfort that his arms surrounding her provided, nor the warmth that his strong chest created, but together they were the safe haven she was starting to rely on. He gave her the strength she didn't know she had needed before now. "It will be over soon," he whispered into her upswept hair.

She leaned back and wiped at her eyes. "I don't know when I started to turn into a despicable watering pot, but here we are."

He grasped her chin lightly. "I love you no matter what you are."

Lexie gasped. There it was. The three words she'd been waiting so desperately to hear and he spoke them as if he'd said them a hundred times before. She wondered if he realized he'd even done so, but she could see the truth shining in his gaze.

“I—”

“Your Grace. There is—er... forgive the intrusion.” The butler cleared his throat as Lexie was released .

The duke took a respectable step back and addressed the servant with a mixture of tolerance and patience. “What is it?”

“Your solicitor, Your Grace. He said you were expecting him.”

“And indeed, I was. Send him in if you please.” He glanced down at Lexie as the servant departed. “Forgive me.”

She waved a hand. “I’m better now. All is well.” She wanted to reassure him although her heart was still anxious about the encounter to come.

He hesitated but gave a reluctant sigh. “I’ll collect you when it’s time to depart.”

CHAPTER 22

The timing was regrettable, but for what Dominic needed to discuss with his solicitor was far from it. He had to ensure that if something were to happen to him, Lexie would not suffer any ill effects from associating with a known criminal in the London underworld. He couldn't do much until after they were wed, but he could alter his wishes where she would have continual protection so long as the funds in his will might allow it.

At least he wouldn't have to worry about any more banns being read. He had managed to procure a special license just that morning which would give him leave to marry Lexie any time they so chose. He would have her as his wife today if she might allow it, but with the turmoil of retrieving the copy of the journal from her aunt's townhouse, he knew she was apprehensive.

He hoped that the copy was still where he'd carefully tucked it out of sight the night he'd met her father at dinner, and that it would shed some light on why Lexie's aunt and the false Lord Lindley were so closely entwined. He was eager to make his way there now, the time moving much too slowly for his tastes, whereas the night before, he couldn't have captured enough hours to hold Lexie in his arms.

He slid a hand down his face and thought of when he'd said he'd loved her. Just as their engagement hadn't been full of flowery prose, neither had his grand declaration. It had slipped out before he'd had a chance to think better of the poor timing. The look of shock on her face hadn't been completely unexpected and he was confident she was about to return the sentiment before they were interrupted.

He intended to do it all over again, just as he'd gotten down on one knee in front of her in this very room and amended his proposal, he would ensure that his love was showered upon her with jewels or roses. Not thrust upon her or shouted in the throes of passion as some men of his acquaintance mentioned they were wont to do. Dominic had never thought such declarations seemed sincere when clutched in such lustful abandon. He had certainly never claimed such a strong emotion when he'd lain with any other woman. However, he had considered it when he'd looked into Lexie's enchanting blue eyes and saw her light hair spread across the pillow beneath him. He had wanted to say so many things in that moment, but all that he could think of was how beautiful she had appeared. And that is what he'd said. At least the words had rung true.

"Your Grace."

Dominic turned at the sound of the solicitor's voice. He was an older man, having handled the Cuthbert estate for a number of years, even before the death of Dominic's father.

He inclined his head. "Mr. Michaels. It's good of you to come on such short notice."

"You mentioned in your missive that it was of the utmost importance." The other man bowed respectfully in turn. "And I dare not ignore such a summons from Your Grace."

Dominic smiled tightly. This was one of the reasons he had chosen to create the persona of Avalon. He wanted to be respected for more than just a title, and although it had taken some time and effort, he had managed to do so. His men respected him, of that he had no doubt. And he was also confident that Amos would be the best leader to ensure the same ethics that Dominic had tried to build were put into place. The Blue Boys were forced to have a strict reputation in which to gain order, and Amos was fearsome for the appearance of his eyepatch alone. Many people

speculated on where he'd received the injury and although Dominic was aware of the fight that had taken one-half of his sight, Amos did not let the affliction deter him in any way. He was still the best man for the position.

He sat down at his desk and waved a hand for the solicitor to take a seat before him. "Shall we get started?"

It didn't take as long as Dominic had thought to take care of the few issues that had been a concern. He was fortunate for that since it was nearly time to intrude on Lady Devonly's house.

He made his way to his chamber and was temporarily distracted by the neatly made bed that had not been nearly so smoothly put together a few hours before. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to think of Lexie and how much she had changed him in such a short amount of time. He'd wanted to relinquish his identity as Avalon, but he hadn't yet released his heart. That was all due to her tenacity and wit.

When he went to her room to collect her, he was relieved to see the same, spirited woman he had first met. The uncertainty she'd worn that morning had concerned him greatly, but it appeared she had rallied and was, yet again, ready to take on the whole of London. She was wearing a deep plum gown with cream lace adornment about the bodice and hem. She looked entirely too delectable to let out of the house. He considered just escorting her back to his chamber, but he knew they would never rest soundly until this intrigue had concluded .

"Shall we?" He held out his arm to her and she cocked a brow at him.

"How gallant, Your Grace. I should be delighted."

As they headed down the stairs, she slipped on her cloak while he donned his greatcoat. A glance outside earlier had not shown rain, but the heavy autumn clouds

did not look very promising.

As they entered his coach, they headed across Mayfair to her aunt's house. He noted that she continued to seem calm, but he wanted to ensure all was well, so he noted, "It won't be long now."

"Yes." She exhaled heavily, the first indication since he'd collected her that perhaps she wasn't quite as composed as she would like him to believe. "I daresay I nearly paced a hole in the carpet waiting, but now that we are moving, I am a bit more at ease."

The coach paused on the opposite side of the street as they had initially agreed, and together they descended upon Lady Devonly's townhouse.

Lexie was feeling a bit of trepidation, but she was feeling determined to unfold this mystery and expose the charlatan for who Lindley truly was. If her aunt was part of this intrigue then she would be forced to do the same to her, regardless of the guilt that was starting to rise and suffocate her. Her father had paid for her time in London, but Aunt Bonnie had been the chaperone she'd required in order to make the journey to begin with. She would not forget that kindness, but neither would she forget how her aunt had tried to browbeat her into accepting a man who wasn't even who he claimed to be. She had to know why.

At the door, they were greeted by one of the footmen. Of course, he recognized her as it hadn't been so long since she'd been staying there. "Miss Givenwald, I fear your aunt is not here?—"

"I am aware," she said, swiftly moving past him. "I need to... grab a few things I forgot in my haste to depart the other day."

She started for the stairs and looked at Dominic, who gave a helpless shrug and

muttered. “Women.” He rolled his eyes and headed for the front parlor. “I’ll just wait for her in here.”

The servant was still gaping with his mouth open as they parted ways, effectively descending on the household with nary a care.

Lexie waited at the top of the stairs for the footman to depart and then she quickly retracted her steps and headed for the parlor where Dominic was just removing something from inside the chimney. “Is it still there?” she whispered urgently.

He wiped off the leather-bound journal but held up the item in question. “It is. Shall we see if we can discover something interesting?”

She eagerly made her way to his side and together they began to flip through the pages. With her heart pounding, Lexie could hear every tick of the clock as each page turned to reveal... nothing. She was starting to lose hope that Dominic might not have recorded the lost scandal, but then there it was in stark black and white.

For an instant, Lexie wasn’t sure she was actually reading what she thought she was. But there was no denying the facts when they were in plain sight. “Oh, my God. The earl had an elder son who was illegitimate.”

“It would appear so,” Dominic noted evenly. “Bonnie had an affair with the mad earl, apparently before he was struck with his affliction. It doesn’t say who the mother is, but I think that is no secret now.”

“George is the rightful heir to the Lindley estate. Henry promised me that on his deathbed.” Lexie glanced up to see her aunt standing in the middle of the room, a pistol held in her grasp. She shook her head almost sadly. “You should have been a biddable girl and did as I asked and none of this would have happened.”

“You wished me to marry my cousin? A man I did not love?” Lexie demanded harshly as Dominic shut the journal and moved slightly in front of her.

Her aunt shrugged. “I married my husband for advantageous reasons, and a cousin is no bother. Many in society do the same. He carried on with other women outside of our marriage bed, and I did the same with Henry.” She sighed. “It was regrettable that he started to lose his mind, because we had a mutual affection for one another. I bore his son and passed it off as that of the gardener to save his marriage. Besides, my husband would have never believed George was his. It had been months since we’d shared a bed. Everything might have been perfect, but then Henry’s wife started increasing with that brat of his, and I knew George didn’t stand a chance. Until recently.” She waved her pistol, and Dominic stiffened.

Lexie saw him slowly reach for something hidden beneath his jacket, but she placed a steady hand on his arm and gave a gentle squeeze. He stilled. “What happened?”

“After Henry’s brat was confined to the same asylum as his father, I knew my opportunity had finally arrived. I intended to give George the life he’d been denied for so many years. Once I learned the heir was to be freed after Henry’s death, I knew it would be easy enough for him and my son to trade places.” She frowned. “It was going well enough, but then I heard that the cretin had taken a lover and had a miniature done of his likeness. While he shared certain characteristics as my George, the features were different enough they could be identified. That is why I had to dispense with the traitor once and for all.”

Lexie gasped. “You killed the earl?”

“I killed an imposter, a lunatic who should have remained where he was while my son inherited everything in his stead.” Her aunt narrowed her eyes on Lexie. “I had picked the perfect bride for him too. I knew your father had planned a pretty dowry for you and George’s future would be secure at the match. But you had to be so

disagreeable when George did everything perfectly to win your hand.”

Lexie saw her aunt’s finger twitch near the trigger of the weapon and knew she wouldn’t hesitate to kill either one of them. She’d done it before. She would certainly have no qualms about doing it again with such a singular mindset.

It was time she was disillusioned from her imaginary fairy tale ending. “Your son is at the Tower awaiting sentencing.”

It took a moment for her aunt to react. When she did, her eyes blinked rapidly and then she appeared confused. “No. That’s not possible. I taught George what to do, how to act. He would never make such a grave error when we are so close to victory.”

“It’s true.” Dominic’s commanding voice interceded for the first time, gaining her aunt’s full attention. “We were at one of his favorite gaming hells last night, and there was a confrontation.”

“Stop it!” The lady put her hands over her ears, temporarily moving the pistol barrel away from her intended victims. Dominic swiftly retrieved the item from inside his jacket pocket and held it securely at his side. It was a dagger.

Lexie thought she might be sick, imagining the way events could play out this day.

“My George would not allow himself to be caught out in the open in such a way!”

“If you don’t believe us,” Dominic returned evenly. “Then call the watch and inquire for yourself.”

She recovered enough to aim her gun directly at Dominic. “You would like that wouldn’t you? To be able to declare victory over a poor, helpless man like George! It

was bad enough that you stole Alexandra from him and the money she would bring to their union. You are nothing but a selfish, useless waste of society.” She cocked the hammer back on the pistol. “Avalon.”

Dominic froze, his entire body tensing. “What did you say?”

“You heard me,” Lady Devonly nearly spat. “I was the one who bribed your housemaid to gain access to your safe and remove the journal. I knew all about it, of course. I’d heard the rumors for years from George. He might not have grown up in my care, but I ensured that I became a part of his life. He spent a lot of time in the East End and made several acquaintances. He was the one who recognized you as the Duke of Cuthbert.” Her smile was almost cruel. “But I dispensed with that horrid journal, and together we tried to do the same to you, but you just wouldn’t die.”

“I understand the frustrations,” Dominic muttered dryly. “I am quite determined to stay alive that way.”

“Apparently,” she snapped. “But no longer. If what you say about my George is true, then it doesn’t seem as though I have anything left to lose anymore. I am nothing without my boy.”

Dominic saw her intent to fire the weapon in time. He released the dagger he’d held at his side and let it fly. The handle neatly knocked the pistol out of Lady Devonly’s grasp and gave him enough time to run across the room and tackle her to the ground. She tried to retrieve the weapon, but his strength and weight were no match for her own, and Dominic overpowered her easily enough.

Lexie was quick to react as well and threw open the doors to the parlor as she shouted for help. Two footmen soon appeared in the doorway and blinked in surprise at the sight of their mistress being pinned to the floor by the Duke of Cuthbert.

She hastily explained the situation, and they gathered Lady Devonly from the floor and took her out of the room and outside to Dominic's coach. He turned to Lexie. "It would be best if you didn't come with us. The horrors of the Tower are something I would spare you from. I will hail a hackney for you. "

He could tell she considered arguing with him, but she slowly gave a nod. "Very well. In truth, I could use a drink."

His mouth kicked up in a grin when he would have imagined it impossible to do so. "I daresay I could do with the same. Pour a brandy for me, and I will join you at home shortly."

As he escorted a scowling and sour-faced Lady Devonly all the way to the Tower, he followed that up with a stop to the palace to see the king. If he had any hope of ensuring that the two people responsible for all his turmoil would be properly reprimanded, he needed the backing of the Crown.

Once that task was over, Dominic sat in the coach and let his head fall back against the velvet squabs. For the second day in a row, weariness like he'd seldom known stole over him, but the instant he walked into the townhouse and spied Lexie, he was cured from any ill that might have afflicted him before then. She was a sight to behold, and he still couldn't believe his fortune that he had managed to secure the hand of such a remarkable woman.

While it hadn't been the first thing he'd intended to say to her, he walked into his study where she held out a drink to him, he said, "I would marry you this instant if you were agreeable."

She sipped from her drink and appeared to consider the prospect for a moment and then shrugged. "Very well."

He sputtered on his drink, the fire coursing down his throat enough to rival that of the twitching cock in his trousers. “Pardon?”

She set down her glass and wound her arms around him. “It has been a day that I should like to forget for all eternity. But the prospect of becoming your wife makes it a bit more bearable.” She sighed. “And while I would be glad to drag some poor, hapless vicar here to perform the ceremony, I think I should like to leave London, for good, if possible, and live in boring contentment at your estate for the rest of our days. A new start with the man I love.”

Dominic had been listening intently to her, until the very last. “What did you say?”

She scrunched up her nose. “You heard me. Now truly, take me home.”

“I’ll be glad to do just that.” He nuzzled the side of her neck. “But there’s one more thing I have to do first.”

CHAPTER 23

Dominic stared out the window of the Crown I am sure of it.”

“I have no doubt of it. If she managed to capture your heart, she can work miracles and God only knows that our family could use some of those.”

After exploring the rooms of the main part of the house, Lexie found her way outside. She had already spied the stone chapel on the property and her heart warmed knowing that is where she would share her vows with Dominic.

What currently interested her was the enclosed gazebo with its round roof peeking out among the back gardens. Making her way along the expanse, she noted the dormant flowers that would bloom again in the spring. She had never been much of a horticulturalist, but she attempted to guess what flowers might sprout where as she passed.

She was pleasantly surprised to find the gazebo had been well maintained. The smooth parquet floor had been carefully preserved and the glass shone in the late day sun. The padded benches inside the enclosure beckoned her and she couldn't resist the urge to sit down. Running a hand along the bright colored pattern, likely inspired by the Asian influence that had struck the country like a whirlwind, she appreciated the mix of red and gold that mingled quite nicely with the wood beneath her feet. She already decided that this would be one of her favorite retreats. She could imagine lounging here with a plate of scones and reading a novel. She might become sleepy and even rest her eyes for a time.

“I half hoped you were playing hide and seek.”

Lexie glanced up and spied Dominic and her heart clenched in her chest as it always did when he was near. “Why is that?”

“So I could have the pleasure of finding you, of course.”

She laughed. “It seems you did that anyway,” she noted. Turning serious, she asked, “Did you work things out with your mother?”

“All is well.” He grasped her elbow. “But I am more interested in us and this moment.” He held out his hand and she spied the most luxurious golden ring with an emerald set in the center.”

“It’s... breathtaking,” she murmured.

“It’s yours.” As her gaze clashed with his, he added, “A gift from one duchess to another.”

Lexie didn’t know what to say. Her throat had suddenly closed up at the lovely sentiment she’d been shown. “Please tell her thank you on my behalf.”

“I told her that is what you would say.” He glanced around the gazebo and smiled broadly. “I couldn’t have picked a better location for this.” He bent down on one knee and began, “Miss Alexandra Givenwald, would you do me the honor of?—”

She fell to her knees in front of him. “Give me the ring.” He handed it over obediently and she slipped it onto her left ring finger. “It’s a perfect match.”

“As are we,” he murmured softly. “The villain and his vixen.”

She lifted a coy brow as she wound her arms around his neck. “Sounds like an interesting story.”

“But how does it end?” he asked.

She appeared to think of that for a moment and then said, “Happily ever after? ”

He chuckled. “Entirely too cliché, my dear. What about happily for now?”

“No. That makes it sound as though there is some terrible tragedy about to befall the couple.”

His lips twitched in amusement. “Then what do you suggest to close out the tale?”

She placed her lips against his and offered a light kiss before she drew back and said, “How about just... happy?”

“One word? You don’t think it’s missing anything?”

She shook her head. “Not when it’s the two of us. Happy is all we need.”

EPILOGUE

The wedding ceremony of the Duke of Cuthbert and Miss Alexandra Givenwald would likely be considered a quaint affair by most in society, but the bride and groom decided that it fit their needs perfectly.

With no one but the bride's father and the groom's mother in attendance, the ceremony was held on the bridegroom's ancestral property that spanned generations. The bride was resplendent in a cream gown with a golden lace overlay, and the groom was striking in a pair of black trousers, a golden waistcoat, and a deep blue jacket. Together, they embodied the appearance of a fairy tale couple. Only the few closest to them would know the truth.

It was so much more.