



Treasure of the Ton (Heiress #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: A scarred spy, a daring debutante, and a love too dangerous to resist.

Ezra Ashworth, Lord St. George, never intended to return to London's glittering society. Scarred in body and soul from his years abroad serving the Crown, he has no desire to fulfill his duty as Earl—or to take a wife. Especially when the last woman he loved perished under his protection. But when a shadow from his past threatens Lady Evangeline Ravensmere, Ezra has no choice but to step back into the world he abandoned to ensure her safety.

Newly under the guardianship of her brother-in-law, the new Duke of Ravensmere, Evangeline is determined to forge her own path—one that leads to the kind of love she longs for. But when the enigmatic and wounded Lord St. George returns to society, she suspects he harbors more than just old wounds. His secrets tempt her, his presence challenges her, and soon, she finds herself drawn into his dangerous world...and into his arms.

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Chapter

One

1802, London

Ezra Ashworth, Lord St. George, strolled into the Ravensmere coming-out ball far too late for anyone to notice his presence. He moved through the surrounding room, searching for Ravensmere—or as he once knew him, Lord Harrow, back when they were young men. A time that seemed far too long ago to count the years.

He passed a footman and swiped a glass of champagne, taking a much-needed sip. He was back in London and once more thrust into a society he had hoped he'd never have to be part of again.

And yet, with his mother's ailing health, and his own body having suffered too much physical abuse from past employment, he had decided to return to England and take up the post of Earl St. George, as was his birthright. If he could make his mother happy in her dotage, then that would satisfy him well enough.

He spied Ravensmere standing with whom he presumed to be his wife, the duchess. He took in the couple—a handsome pair, to be sure. Duchess Ravensmere more so than he had thought her to be. But then, Ravensmere had always had a liking for exquisite things, and so his wife being no different should not have surprised him.

Ezra started toward his oldest, and pretty much only, friend, slipping through the crowd unnoticed—a trick he'd learned many years ago after working for the Foreign

Office. Thankfully, it came in handy here and now, being back in the vampiric world of the ton .

Ravensmere caught sight of him and smiled before starting toward him.

“St. George. Ezra. How good to see you, my old friend.” Ravensmere pulled him into an embrace.

Ezra patted his friend’s back in return, glad to see him also.

“And you, old friend. How good it is to see you.”

“After all these years you’re back in London. I can barely believe it.” The duke looked him up and down, and for a moment Ezra wondered if he’d ask him to turn pirouette.

“This is my wife, the Duchess of Ravensmere. Rosalind, may I introduce you to my oldest and closest friend, Ezra Ashworth, Lord St. George.”

Ravensmere’s pretty wife held out her hand, a mischievous light in her eye.

“It is very nice to meet you, my lord. My husband mentioned you’d be attending this evening, and you’re very welcome. I hope you’ve come prepared to dance.”

Ezra shook his head, liking the personable and pretty lady who had captured his friend’s heart.

“I must beg to be allowed to rest this evening, Your Grace. I only arrived back in London this morning, and dancing, I fear, shall be beyond my capabilities at present.”

“Not that I mind in the least,” Ravensmere said. “We shall supper together and catch

up. There is much to discuss.”

Ezra nodded, but also knew there would be much to conceal. Parts of his life no good society needed to know or learn of. As it was, the past several months he had tried to forget what had occurred merely to be able to function like a normal person.

So far, he had succeeded well enough.

“Could we perhaps have a quiet beverage in your library? I’m weary, I’m sorry to say, and the older I get the less I’m able to keep up as we once did.”

He hoped his plea to his oldest friend would be approved, but if the duke did state that he wished him unconditionally to attend supper, then of course he would. But he would much rather leave this grand event to those who wished to partake and have a quiet brandy in another, less-populated part of the house.

“Yes. There is time, is there not, my love, before we dine this evening?”

“An hour at least,” the duchess stated, smiling up at her husband, love all but beaming from her face. “Go and enjoy your whisky, husband. I shall see you in an hour.”

The duke leaned down and kissed his wife, and Ezra cleared his throat, having never seen such a public display of affection between a couple so highly positioned in the ton .

It was as refreshing as it was a little shocking.

They excused themselves from the duchess and moved toward the library. The duke spoke on inconsequential gossip, and before they had left the ballroom, they were waylaid several times by His Grace’s guests.

“You go on ahead. The library is just across the foyer, St. George. I shall join you posthaste.”

“Of course.”

Ezra moved toward the library and, pushing the door open, was immediately hit with the sweet scent of leather and books, mixed with a hint of dust.

The best scent in the world, in his opinion—other than that of freshly laundered sheets. He strode over to the unlit hearth and sat on one of the large, wingback leather chairs. He stared at the fire, clean and set for whenever it was required to be lit, and wondered at his life—what he would do now that he was in London.

What his mother wished him to do was more the point.

Marry, of course. So she may settle into the dowager house and enjoy her dotage and time as a commanding matron of the ton .

He smiled at the thought of his dearest mama, who, now that he was home, was able to finally relax and enjoy her frivolities in town.

The door to the study slammed shut and Ezra jumped. The huffing and mumbling of a woman’s voice stilled his reaction, and he sat for several heartbeats, wondering if he was perhaps in the wrong room after all.

“Damn blasted pompous dolt,” the woman cursed.

Ezra narrowed his eyes. Was that a foot stomp he’d just heard? He moved to peek around the leather chair and gaped. A chill ran down his spine, and he swallowed the cry that almost voiced itself. He clasped the edges of the chair, not sure if he wanted to ground himself, keep hidden, or hope the apparition—woman—who had entered

the library would dissipate.

“Selfish snob.”

A chair scraped and Ezra hazarded another peek at the woman, who was striding about the library like a herd of elephants. What was wrong with the chit that she would be so out of sorts?

Not to mention—who the hell was she?

He narrowed his eyes, drinking in her features that were uncommonly like her .

His heart hurt at the thought, and he attempted to shake it aside, to try to not let melancholy overtake his senses.

He had fought hard this past year, trying to move forward, to allow what had occurred to go, as he had been instructed to do. And yet, seeing this vision before him, he was reminded once again of his failure.

Of his inability to seek revenge on those who had harmed those he cared for most.

The woman, pacing before the duke’s desk, and as if sensing she was not alone, looked up and saw him.

He did not say a word. Not that he thought speaking would be at all possible for him at this present moment.

Not that he needed to converse at all...

“Who are you?” she asked, placing her hands on her slender hips and raising one inquisitive brow. “You should have made your presence known.”

Ezra stood—not that he wished to face this goddess before him, but because that was what was done. The right thing to do as a gentleman in polite society and in his friend’s home.

“My lady, I’m Lord St. George. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“We’ve not been introduced properly. I shouldn’t be speaking to you at all.” She sauntered over to him, no matter that her words were less than friendly.

Closer now, he devoured her features, noting that they were uncommonly familiar. Her eyes, in particular, were like looking back in time, and he found himself wanting to reach for her, to hug and cradle her close to his beating heart and remind himself that she was safe.

Alive.

He closed his eyes and fought not to fall into the past.

“Are you well, Lord St. George? Or is the vision of me so grand that you’re like so many of the other fops out in the ballroom, and will pretend to admire my beauty and wit, while really just biding your time until you leave for your whore down in Covent Garden?”

He stared at her, having never heard a woman of her class speak so crassly. “I beg your pardon. Should a young woman such as yourself know such things?”

“Well, when one hears a group of the gentlemen who had only just pretended to fawn all over me and then speak as crassly as I just have, then yes. I suppose I now do know of these things. And I must say, they leave me wanting.”

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Chapter

Two

E vangeline did not know much about who the gentleman lord was or what he was doing in her brother-in-law's library, but she could not deny the fact that his hiding away from the ball—which everyone else seemed to be enjoying—was rather intriguing.

Not that he seemed particularly forward or engaging. For the past several minutes, he had said little and stared most rudely.

Was he a simpleton? Maybe he was stupefied at her beauty. She almost scoffed at the absurd thought. “Are you supposed to be in the library? The duke is with my sister out in the ballroom. Perhaps you ought to return there if you wish to speak to His Grace.”

“The duke will be along shortly. I am awaiting him here.” Lord St. George moved away from his chair—finally—and came toward her. He reached out and clasped her hand, kissing the tops of her gloved fingers.

Something in the way he looked at her when he kissed her made the pit of her stomach clench. He was a handsome man, even if he sported what she assumed to be a nasty gash on his face from some past altercation. The scar gave him an air of danger and mystery, and her interest was piqued.

“You are the duke's sister-in-law?” he queried, stepping back and releasing her hand.

She nodded and fought not to drink in the sight of him like a woman who had not had a glass of wine in several hours. He was tall, muscular, and his face was chiseled so perfectly she had the urge to reach out and see for herself if he were cut from marble.

Above all his handsome looks, however, he was guarded—but his eyes were his best feature. They were the darkest blue she had ever beheld, and looked upon her with kindness. Not an ogre then.

Evangeline decided on the spot that she would like this man, and if the duke was his friend, then he could also be hers.

“I am, my lord. I am Lady Evangeline Ravensmere. My father was the late Duke of Ravensmere.”

His gaze dipped to her lips, and she wondered what he was thinking. A small, pained frown buffeted his brow before he turned on his heel and moved back toward his chair.

“Would you care to join me while I wait for Ravensmere? I was doing nothing in particular, and I would welcome your company. You do not seem too trying.”

Evangeline scoffed and sat across from him. “Well, my lord, you do not know me very well at all. But I will try not to be a trying, feeble woman who distresses and bores you. Will that do very well?”

His brows rose, but he had the grace not to argue.

“You seemed distressed when you entered the room,” he said, changing the subject. “Are you not enjoying the ball? Is it not your coming out this evening?”

Evangeline sighed and slumped back in the chair. By habit, she lifted her feet to sit

beside her and leaned on the armrest.

“It is, alas. But after hearing what those supposed gentlemen admirers had to say, I find it all rather lacking now. I thought men who courted ladies would only do so once they had finished with all that nonsense in the seedier parts of town. It would seem that I am wrong.”

“They are boys, Lady Evangeline. You perhaps ought to look for a man to court you.”

Although shocking, what he said was not untrue. She had thought this evening that the young men who bowed and asked her to dance were as young as she was, but far more immature when it came to their likes and pastimes.

If she had to hear one more thing about hunting season in the country and what good sport it was—although shooting was not for the fairer sex—she would scream.

That she could likely shoot better than any of them, should she be given the chance, was not even a possibility to them. And that type of man could never be her husband. Maybe Lord St. George was right, and she should look for an older gentleman.

“How old are you, my lord?”

He laughed, and although he seemed surprised by his own outburst, he at least continued to smile while he gathered himself. If Evangeline had thought him handsome before he smiled, well—how very wrong she was.

The man was utterly beautiful when he smiled, and she could not help but study his lips for several moments, wondering if they were as soft as she presumed them to be. His eyes lit up and his whole demeanor changed, making him personable and desirable.

Not that she would ever know such facts. He seemed much older than she, and more mature—not to mention he was Ravensmere’s friend. He would not look to her as a possible candidate for his wife. He would more likely view her as part of his extended family, if his friendship with her brother-in-law was as close as she presumed it to be.

“I am far too old for you.”

She frowned, leaning forward to get a better look at him under the candlelight. “You cannot be any older than Ravensmere, and he married my sister.”

“And how old are you?” he asked, as bold as she had been.

She grinned and leaned back in her chair. “How old do you think I am?”

“Eighteen,” he blurted, without a by-your-leave.

“I am two and twenty, my lord. Older than you thought, I should imagine.”

His eyes narrowed on her, and she would have loved to know what he was thinking—what was going on in that mind of his, inside that very handsome head. “You are correct. And I wonder at you only now having your coming out. Are they not the done thing when one is eighteen?”

“That is true, they normally are. But our late father did not care for us much—we being the horrible females he sired—and so we were never given a Season when we should have been. If it were not for my lovely brother-in-law, I should say we would all still be rotting away in the country. Not that I mind so very much the country—I do love the outdoors—but I did wish for a Season, if only to marry and get away from Papa when we did happen to see him.”

Evangeline shut her mouth with a snap, hoping she had not said too much. Sometimes

she had a tendency to speak more than she should, and perhaps now was one of those times.

His lordship stared at her, taking in her words, and she hoped he would not say too much on the subject. Even though she had brought it up, she disliked speaking of her father because it always ended with her being a little too cutting toward the man. And he was now passed, and one ought not speak ill of the dead.

“Well, I am sorry for you if that is the case. And happy that you have at long last made it to London. I do hope you find what you are hoping for this Season, since it has been a long time coming.”

“I do too. And thank you, my lord.”

She liked him very much. He was not what she had been expecting to find in the library, but she was grateful for the distraction. Otherwise, she may still have been stomping about and voicing her displeasure at the world—alone.

At least now, she could voice her concerns to someone who did not seem to want to dismiss them as silly female issues.

“The Season has just commenced, and I am certain that it shall improve—now that I know the true nature of some of my courtiers.” She studied him a moment, drinking in the sight of him and his ruggedness. “You did not care to join the ball, my lord? Is that why you’re secured away here in Ravensmere’s library?”

“You presume correct. But please do not think that it was on account of the ball being in your honor. I am still weary from my travels and did not feel much like socializing this evening. But I did wish to speak to Ravensmere. He is a good friend I have not seen in some years.”

“Well, we are sorry for you not being at the ball, but that is quite understandable. Traveling from Hampshire to London wearied me out, and it took me several days to stop yawning all over the place. Where did you travel from, my lord? York? Scotland, perhaps?”

“Italy.”

Evangeline gaped, having not expected that location as an answer. But with it came an array of questions. “How wonderful. What is it like there? Is it warmer than England? Are the people kind?”

“It is a wonderful place. And should the opportunity ever arise, you ought to travel there. Mayhap your husband will take you for your honeymoon.”

“Perhaps. One can only hope I gain a husband who is willing.”

“Do not marry a man who is not.”

“You make it sound so easy, my lord.” She smiled, and yet, she heard the derision in her tone. So far this evening, she doubted any gentleman would travel past the turnpike out of London.

He nodded.

“Because it is.”

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Chapter

Three

“A h, here you are, my dear.”

Evangeline stood at the sound of her sister’s voice just as the duchess and duke entered the library. “I am here, Rosalind, and I’ve just met Ravensmere’s good friend, Lord St. George.”

Evangeline went over to her sister and stood beside her as the duke poured two glasses of whisky before handing one tumbler to his lordship.

“Come, Evangeline. We shall leave the gentlemen to catch up. You have a coming-out ball to attend.”

“Good evening, my lord. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

His lordship tipped his head in acknowledgment. “And I you, my lady. Enjoy your ball.”

Evangeline left with Rosalind, a little disappointed that she would no longer be talking to his lordship. “What kind of lord is St. George?” she asked. He had never said, and she had completely forgotten to gain that insight.

“He’s an earl. You’ll meet his mama this Season—she’s lovely. Although I daresay now that she has her son back in London, she will be keen to see him married and

settled.”

“I do not think his lordship will be so keen. But perhaps he shall find a woman who captures his attention and heart and make his mama very happy.”

Her sister threw her an odd look just as they reentered the ballroom. “You sound a little wistful, Evangeline. Are you curious about St. George? I daresay he is handsome, eligible, and very appropriate should you set your cap in his direction.”

“Oh no. I do not see him in that way at all,” she lied. Knowing full well that the entire time they were having a conversation, she could not stop imagining what it would be like to be loved in a passionate way by such a man.

Her stomach fluttered at the thought. She had caught glimpses of her sister and new brother-in-law touching, or looking at each other in a way that only married couples were privy to know—and she wanted the same for herself.

To think of Lord St. George as the man who adored her was something she could never imagine as coming true. Whomever caught his heart would be lucky indeed. He appeared stable and kind, handsome, very much appropriate by the ton’s standards...

“There are worse options available,” Rosalind said, as her gaze locked on Lord Templeton, who was walking about the room with a glass of wine he had managed to spill all over the front of his white linen shirt and silk cravat.

“I do not know what I want just yet, and I have several weeks to decide—if I choose any at all this year.”

“That is correct.” Rosalind linked their arms and threw Evangeline a small smile. “And I shall not rush you, my dear. You shall only pick the man who captures your heart, and nothing else will do. And if you have to commit to one, two, or even three

Seasons more to make your choice, then so be it.”

“Thank you for being such a good sister. And my standards are high. I must find a love as grand as you have with Ravensmere.”

“And you shall find it.”

Her sister glanced up as a gentleman Evangeline had never seen before started toward them. He had olive skin, was tall, and wore a shadow of a beard along his jaw. Handsome, too, but would he be as kind as Lord St. George? As personable and open? That was the question.

He bowed before them and Rosalind made the introductions.

“Evangeline, may I present Mr. Fournier. Mr. Fournier, my sister, Lady Evangeline.”

The handsome gentleman—although Evangeline did note that he was not as tall or broad-shouldered as Lord St. George—bowed before her, then smiled as if she were some sweet morsel of food he wanted to gobble up.

Not that she was convinced just yet that she wished to be gobbled up by him or anyone at this ball.

However, the gentleman in the library currently sipping whisky with Ravensmere was another matter altogether.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Lady Evangeline. And I’m thankful to the duchess for the invitation.”

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Fournier. But if you’ll excuse me a moment, I see one of the footmen has had a little accident with the wine.”

Evangeline watched her sister float away as hostess to sort out whatever small disaster had occurred. She turned her attention back to Mr. Fournier, who stood before her, blocking out her view of the dancers.

“You’re spending the Season in town, Mr. Fournier? Are you from London, or do you have property in the country?”

He came and stood beside her, his hands behind his back—which many gentlemen tended to do. She inwardly chuckled, knowing all the little nuances men participated in when in company of a lady.

“I have a country estate, but not in England. A chateau in France, in fact.”

“Ah. I thought I heard the slight intonation of an accent. So you live in France when you’re not scuffing the boards here in England.”

“I do indeed, my lady. My father is French, but my mother was English—the daughter of a viscount.”

“And your home in France—it’s a chateau, which is another name for a castle, if I’m not mistaken.” Evangeline could imagine such a pretty house, so very different to the grand homes that spotted the English countryside. A castle was so much more intriguing.

“You are correct. And my home is no exception. It is a very large castle indeed, and will take some filling up—which, before my mother passed, she was urging me to get on with.”

Evangeline chuckled, liking how forward and open he was already. “I should imagine there are many mamas just like yours who would like the same for their charges—male and female. I suppose that’s what brings you here to London for the

Season.”

“Yes,” he sighed, looking out onto the throng of guests. “But up until my present company, I’ve been very much left wanting. However, I do believe the Season is on the up—especially with you now in society.”

Evangeline smiled, enjoying his flirtatious words. “Why thank you, Mr. Fournier. That is very kind of you to say.”

“And true.”

He picked up her hand and kissed her gloved fingers. Although her stomach did not flutter at his gesture, she was flattered and intrigued by the interest she noted flickering in his brown gaze.

“Would you care to dance with me, my lady? I cannot move on to my next entertainment without waltzing with the most beautiful woman here this evening.”

“I would like that very much.” Mr. Fournier led her out onto the ballroom floor, and they were soon floating and weaving within many other dancers partaking in the first waltz of the night.

“You dance well, Lady Evangeline. We seem to fit perfectly, do you not think?”

She grinned, trying not to blush at his forwardness. Instead of replying—and possibly making the situation more awkward than it already was with his flirtatious manner—she turned her attention to those watching the dancers.

Her heart gave a jump at the sight of Lord St. George standing with Rosalind and Ravensmere, his attention fixed on her, his face severe and expressionless—and yet his eyes watched her every nuance.

Evangeline felt as though, should she make even one miniscule movement, he would know of it.

The dance moved her away from the view of St. George, and she was glad of it. The man was the very essence of the word gentleman, and she wasn't entirely sure she was ready for such a presence in her life.

They had spoken of her marrying a man, not a boy—much like Mr. Fournier, who danced with her now. While he spoke very prettily, paid her attention, and said all the right things, he did not spark much else within her. But perhaps that would change the more she grew to know him.

Certainly, there were gentlemen she had once thought herself a little smitten with who were now cast aside—especially after hearing their atrocious words regarding their nightly pursuits outside of good society.

“I have shocked you with my statement. My apologies, Lady Evangeline.”

Evangeline met Mr. Fournier's eyes and shook her head. “Not at all. But the Season is young, and I'm not looking to make a hasty match. You ought to know that before you say such things.”

“So in essence, you're telling me to stop my bombardment of flirtations or you'll grow bored of me and send me packing for being an annoyance.”

She nodded, laughing. “You state it so perfectly that I could not have said it any differently, Mr. Fournier. I hope you're not disappointed that you will have to stop your flirtations and just be yourself. I much prefer a natural conversation over something forced and stilted.”

“As do I. And I shall promise that I will halt the pretty words. You have my

wholehearted promise on that.”

“Then we shall get along well—as friends. To start,” she said, giving him a little hope.

“Indeed we will.”

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Chapter

Four

Evangeline finished her dance with Mr. Fournier, and he led her over to the side of the room, his attention unnervingly fixated on her. The man was either far too interested in her person or she had some kind of food stuck to her lip.

Self-consciously, she reached up and checked that she did not have anything on her face before stepping back a little to give herself more space. “Thank you for the dance, Mr. Fournier. I’m certain I shall see you about town in the coming weeks.”

“Indeed you will, and I look forward to another dance with Lady Evangeline. I will not dally with your time and not say that I’m seeking a wife, and think that should our future meetings be as enjoyable as this one has been, you shall be seeing me even more than you think.”

Evangeline smiled and held out her hand. He reached for her gloved fingers and kissed them—lingering over them far longer than was appropriate.

“Lady Evangeline, Ravensmere has requested I escort you into supper.”

Lord St. George’s voice startled her, and she wrenched her fingers from Mr. Fournier’s hold. She looked up at the earl and was surprised to see the displeasure on his face, as if escorting her into supper was an annoyance he did not wish to partake in.

“You’re at the ball, my lord. I did not think you were going to attend after our earlier conversation?”

“I was persuaded to come.” Lord St. George glanced at Mr. Fournier, who continued to stand with them, his look of annoyance growing.

“Lord St. George, this is Mr. Fournier. Mr. Fournier, this is Lord St. George.”

“An honor,” Mr. Fournier said, a smirk crossing his mouth before he turned his attention back to Evangeline. “But alas, I must be off. Another ball to attend. I wish you a pleasant evening.”

“And I you, Mr. Fournier.” Evangeline watched Mr. Fournier make his way through the crowd before turning her attention back to the earl. “Shall we join the duke and duchess?”

“Yes.”

His lordship did not say another word, merely led her through the room to the large supper room already filling with guests eager for a repast and a moment’s retreat from the ball. They found Rosalind and the duke waiting for them at a table, four glasses of wine already poured, and—thankfully—Rosalind had procured some of Evangeline’s favorite delicacies since coming to London.

They sat, and Evangeline fought to ignore the large, imposing gentleman seated beside her. There was something about him that made her nervous, and as much as she fought not to be affected by his presence, she felt as though she were on tenterhooks. She didn’t want to stare too long and give the impression of being simpleminded. Nor gape at his height. Nor fixate on his mouth, which remained a very lovely shape.

He would kiss very well, she was certain.

She sighed and picked up her fork.

“Are you not enjoying your evening, dearest?” Rosalind asked. “That sigh was very telling.”

Heat washed over Evangeline’s face, and she fought not to look at Lord St. George, who she could feel was watching her closely.

“I’m perfectly well. Merely growing tired. It has been a busy day and evening, but I’m so grateful to you both. Thank you for the wonderful coming-out ball.”

Rosalind smiled—a proud older sister—and Evangeline was grateful she had believed that was the reason behind her sigh.

For some time they sat and ate, enjoying their roasted duck, sugared pears, and delicate petits fours with the wine, before the music started up again and dancing recommenced.

“And now to enjoy the second half of the ball,” Rosalind said, standing. The duke linked their arms, and Evangeline followed them back into the ballroom, the presence of Lord St. George making the hair on the back of her neck prickle.

She was so much smaller than the gentleman. She was certain he could pick her up and toss her about the room like a doll if he wished. Still, his presence caught the attention of many ladies in attendance, and their appreciative glances were not unnoticed.

“I fear that you shall be tasked to dance very soon if you continue to remain at this ball, my lord,” Evangeline teased, grinning up at him.

He met her gaze, and something in his expression softened when he looked at her—made her stomach flutter sweetly.

“I do not care to dance with any of the ladies present. Bar one.”

Evangeline turned her attention back to the gathered throng, hating the little bite of jealousy that coursed through her at the thought of his lordship interested in anyone here. There was nothing wrong with that, of course. Just because she thought him handsome and so very interesting did not mean he found her the same.

“You ought to ask the lady to dance, my lord. I know you’ve been away from society for some time, but I think it would do you well to have a little enjoyment—maybe just this once.”

“Perhaps she will say no if I were to ask.”

Evangeline chuckled and shook her head. “I do not think she will. I believe you would find many ladies most eager for your hand in a dance.”

“Well then...”

Lord St. George’s hand materialized before her, and she looked up at him, wondering what he was about.

“I could not dance with anyone other than the lady whose ball this is in honor of.” He grinned, and she bit back another sigh, not wanting to give herself away—that her earlier sigh had, in fact, been because of him. “Would you do me the honor?”

Evangeline took his hand far quicker than she probably ought. But then, she was never one to pretend, nor did she want him to rescind his offer and walk away. She wanted to be in his arms. To float about the room and be lost in his warmth and

strength, if only for a few minutes.

His hand clasped hers—gloveless, strong, and large. She went with him without question, fighting the nerves that tumbled about inside.

The first notes of a waltz commenced, and he pulled her into his arms. Even though he was tall, she fit him perfectly well, giving her the ideal opportunity to study him as they danced. To drink in everything she had started to like about the man.

And that was exactly what he was. A man. A virile, fully grown gentleman. No boy. No popinjay who flattered because that was the way they had been instructed to behave around ladies.

He was the kind of man who reminded her of Rosalind's husband. And she wanted one of those for herself. But was Lord St. George the only gentleman in town of his caliber? Surely that would not be the case.

"Thank you for the dance, my lord. Should I forget to thank you after the fact. You dance very well." She met his gaze, and he watched her. His eyes flickered with interest, and yet his face remained unreadable.

He was an enigma, which only made him more intriguing. Not that she believed he wished to be intriguing for anyone. He was paying her a kindness. Dancing with his friend's sister-in-law at her coming out. That was all, and she would be deluding herself to think it went any further than that.

"You're welcome, Lady Evangeline."

She hoped he would say more, but stubbornly he remained quiet, merely moving them about the floor with effortless grace. His steps were faultless, his conduct impeccable.

What would it take to rattle this kind of gentleman? What would it take to rattle him ...

“You’re very tall, my lord. And broad. Has anyone ever mentioned that to you before?”

He met her eyes, his brows raised. “A woman of your breeding certainly has not.” He paused. “Do I intimidate you, my lady?”

“No,” she blurted before even thinking about her answer. But now that she had, the answer still remained true. He did not. And she doubted he would want to hear what, in fact, he did intrigue within her.

Lust.

Appeal.

Hope.

“No, you do not. I think you’re quite charming. And I hope to see more of you during the Season.”

“And I look forward to watching you make a grand match and marry. I know from speaking to Ravensmere that they have high hopes you’ll have a successful Season.”

“Yes, I’m certain they do. And thank you.”

His response dampened her enjoyment. She didn’t want him to stand aside and watch. She wanted him to partake . To throw himself before her and possibly court her too.

Not that she believed anyone else would get a look in should he do so.

Already, she was a little smitten.

And that would not do at all with a gentleman who wasn't interested in return.

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Chapter

Five

The following morning, Ezra sat at the breakfast table going over his morning mail—numerous invitations to the upcoming balls in town.

His attendance at the Ravensmeres' coming-out ball had seemingly been a signal to all the eager mamas of the ton that he was back in London, participating in the Season, and perhaps—just perhaps—willing to secure a wife.

Not that he was looking for a love match or a wife at present.

He would never make that mistake again. Not that he did not wish to feel the all-consuming affections that one could grow toward another, but because his heart could not bear another fracture.

Losing Luisa had been the hardest moment of his life—an impossibility to recover from. He could not marry another woman and love her as deeply as he had loved her .

Selfish, yes, but he could not do it.

He would not survive another loss as great as hers had been.

“Darling, I received a missive from Lady Abernathy this morning saying that you attended the Ravensmeres' ball last evening. I did not think you intended to go?”

He folded up a short note from his steward and slipped it into his coat pocket. “I wanted to see Ravensmere again. It has been many years. And although I did not intend to attend the ball, I happened to join the revelry for an hour or two. But it was nothing, truly.”

His mother waved her own missive in the air before reaching for her cup of tea, her eyes glowing with excitement over the news of his nightly endeavors.

“Well, Lady Abernathy writes that you danced with the young Ravensmere girl. Some say she’s a beauty—and a delightful creature. How did you find her? She’s a duke’s daughter, you know. She would be most suitable...”

He glanced at his mother before picking up his cutlery and digging into his bacon and eggs. “She’s a pleasant woman—not a girl, mama. She’s two and twenty.” He frowned, wondering how he remembered such a detail.

Not that he could easily forget the chit. She was so like Luisa that his mind could not help but demand a dance—to fall back into the past, even if only for a few minutes—and forget the truth in which he now lived.

A truth that she no longer existed within.

“Really?” His mother looked pleased with herself, before she rallied. You are going to try to find a wife, are you not? It need not be the Ravensmere girl. I know that you have only just met, but I so wish to see you settled.”

“Hm. Yes,” he said noncommittally. His mother was not privy to what had occurred in Italy, and nor would she ever be. He did not wish to relive that horrible memory if he could help it. It was bad enough that, at night, when alone in bed, his mind conjured the scene and haunted him.

“Oh, my dearest, this makes me the happiest of mamas . I shall be sure to tell those who need to know that you are back in London to stay—and to settle.”

“Please do not.” He met his mother’s eyes and hoped she would heed his request. “Allow me to work through the Season. Perhaps I shall meet someone who piques my interest—enough for me to court her. And if she is not frightened away by my rough appearance, then we shall see what happens. But I do not wish to be bombarded at every event. I will not go if you are to meddle.”

His mother cast her gaze back to her plate, though he could see she still wished to argue. Still, thankfully, she heeded his warning.

“Very well. I shall do as you ask. But I wish for you to be happy. That is the only reason why I meddle. I do it out of my love for you, my boy.”

Ezra reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I know, and I’m grateful for you. But please—allow me to ease back into society. I have not been part of it for many years, and last night, those short hours at the Ravensmere ball, were quite enough.”

“What are you attending next? The Compton ball on Grosvenor Square? Or the Wilcox event at Lord and Lady Norgrave’s town home? That one is supposed to be quite the affair this year. I heard Lady Norgrave will have their gardens open for dancing outdoors. Can you believe it? It will be like having Vauxhall in the middle of Mayfair!”

Ezra chuckled. That his mama would think something so tame compared to what some of the gentlemen of the ton got up to behind closed doors—or at least down in St. Giles. An outdoor ball did not seem scandalous in the least.

“It’s a masque also, Mama. However will you survive the scandal?”

“Is it?” she asked, clearly having not known.

Ezra handed her the invitation that sat to his right, and she read it, her eyes brightening with excitement.

“Oh, this will be an enjoyable night. An outdoor ball and a masque. What fun we shall have!”

“I have not said I will attend yet.”

“Oh, but you will. And, my dearest, we’re having afternoon tea here today. I thought I should warn you, just in case you see different mamas and their charges calling and fear they are about to accost you in your library, fall to their knees, and beg you to be their husband.”

He shook his head, noting his mother’s jibe and attempt at mockery at the same time. “I will keep to the library and remain unaccosted. You shall be able to enjoy your tea in peace.”

“But you must drop in and welcome our guests, dearest. Even if the young ladies present do not raise any interest in you, it is what is done.”

“So now I am to attend. I thought this was your afternoon tea. I fear this could count as meddling...”

His mother waved his concerns aside. “It is proper etiquette, that is all. The tea begins at two. I’ve had Cook make up some of your favorite shortbreads. I know you’ve missed them.”

Indeed he had—and his mother knew precisely how to lure him from his sanctuary. “I shall drop in and ensure no one has anything untoward to say about your hostess

abilities. But if there are no shortbreads left for me, I shall never attend another of your at-homes again.”

“I will ensure some are saved for you.”

They continued with their breakfast in peaceful silence for several minutes before his mother cleared her throat. “What did you think of Lady Evangeline? Do you think she’ll make as grand a match as her sister last year?”

He could hear the curiosity in his mother’s voice and knew she was hopeful he had liked the young woman more than he was letting on.

Which, in truth, was the case.

He liked her far too much. And the fact she looked so much like Luisa did not help his efforts to keep his heart locked behind a safe door—unreachable and unbreakable.

“She is very talkative and intelligent, I believe. Grateful for her Season. Respectful of her sister and the duke. I think she’s a very handsome woman.”

“Handsome?” his mother gasped. “I’ve heard she’s one of the prettiest women in London this year. I’m looking forward to meeting her—not because you danced with her and attended her ball—but because she’s the sister-in-law of one of your closest friends. And any friend of yours is a friend of mine.”

“Thank you, Mama.” He picked up his coffee and downed the last of it. “Do you have any plans this morning? Or is the afternoon tea your only engagement today?”

“Just the tea,” she said, grinning as he stood. “Wear your new coat from Weston, dearest. It will bring out the blue in your eyes.”

He shook his head. His warning to his mother not to meddle seemingly already forgotten. He walked around to where she sat and kissed the top of her head.

“I will wear what I’m in now, Mama. I will not change ten times through the day like a lady. This is new and will do well enough.”

His mother sighed, and the sound reminded him of Lady Evangeline last night.

He frowned as he moved toward the door, not liking that his mind jumped to her almost unconsciously.

It did not bode well for him. Not this early into the Season, at least.

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Chapter

Six

Ezra inwardly cringed and stood, having left as much time as he possibly could before heading into the afternoon tea his mother had arranged.

He adjusted his cravat and checked his attire, downing the last of his coffee before making his way toward the drawing room to face whomever his mother had invited.

The closer he came to the room, the more pressure settled on his chest. The sound of women's voices, laughter, and everything altogether too feminine bombarded him, and he paused at the threshold, wavering between entering and retreating to his office—or perhaps leaving the house entirely.

His mother would be cross, would likely scold him as she had when he was a boy, but she would also move on from her annoyance quickly enough. He would be forgiven.

“I did not take you as a gentleman who's frightened of a group of women, Lord St. George. How interesting that is to me. I shall keep that little tidbit in my pocket just in case I need it later.”

Ezra spun at the sound of Lady Evangeline Ravensmere's voice. She stood behind him, eyes bright with amusement, a small half smile gracing her lips as she watched him debating between bravery and cowardice.

Not that he was a coward. He had placed himself in many dangerous situations during

his time serving the Foreign Office. But ladies—ladies held their own kind of danger. One he wasn't yet ready to face.

“Lady Evangeline. You indeed have caught me. I was just about to go in and welcome everyone.”

He paused, drinking in the sight of her. The familiarity to Luisa forever made his chest pinch. He ought not to look at Lady Evangeline and think of another. They were both their own people, but he could not help it. Lady Evangeline—alive and well, teasing and sweet—was the very exact likeness of Luisa, if ever he believed in such a thing.

It was uncanny and unnerving all at once.

“Have you just arrived?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Oh no,” she said, waving away his words. “I’m here with my sister, the duchess, but I needed to, ah...” A light blush stole across her cheeks, and Ezra cleared his throat, understanding perfectly why she had left the tea.

“Would you like me to escort you inside?”

She pursed her lips in thought before shaking her head. “No. I’m quite capable of returning to the room. But I would like a tour of the house. It’s quite magnificent. For an earl...”

She chuckled at her own jest, and Ezra could not help but laugh as well. The sound startled him. It had been so long since he’d laughed spontaneously. With the outburst came the guilt that always followed—guilt that he was capable of laughter, of enjoyment, when others under his care were not.

“I’m certain you do not wish to see the house, my lady. You are the daughter of a duke. You’ve seen much grander estates than this.”

“You may be surprised.” Her smile slipped slightly at his denial, and he could not allow that.

“Come.” Ezra held out his arm, and just like the clouds moving away from the sun, her smile returned to its rightful place. “I will show you around quickly, before we both return to the tea.”

“That sounds heavenly, my lord.”

He walked her toward the front of the house and pointed out the dining room, his library, and his mother’s private parlor that overlooked Berkley Square. No doubt, it was a sitting room his mother would miss when she moved into the dowager house. She loved to gossip and watch the happenings beyond her windows at any given moment.

Ezra ensured they kept within view of the servants, not wanting any untoward rumors to circulate should they be seen. He then escorted her toward the back of the house, past the door where his mother hosted her guests, and into the conservatory.

“This is delightful,” she said, letting go of his arm and walking to the fountain. The gentle tinkling of water played its soothing melody, calming his usually guarded soul.

She sat on the edge and ran her fingers along the top of the water. Several golden fish darted away from her touch, and he smiled at the quiet chuckle that slipped from her lips.

“How darling are these fish? We only ever had horses at home. Father would not let us have any pets.”

Ezra joined her at the fountain and sat beside her. “I do not know that I would call fish pets, my lady. That may be an exaggeration.”

“But they are,” she argued, meeting his gaze. “You feed them. You give them a home. You do not mistreat or eat them. What are they, if not pets?”

He supposed she was right. Without thinking, he slipped his hand into the water beside hers, running his fingers through the cool surface. “I concede your point. I have fish for pets.”

She laughed again, and for a moment, he could not look away. She was so beautiful, so kind, so full of life. How could one not stare when faced with such a masterpiece?

“You’re staring again, Lord St. George. If I have to keep reminding you of your conduct when it comes to my person, I shall start to think that your willingness to add yourself to my list of courtiers is imminent.”

“I’m sorry. My apologies, my lady. You remind me of someone I used to know.” He smiled at the bittersweet memory. “I cannot help but look at you sometimes and not think of them.”

She frowned slightly and, before he could stop her, clasped his hand beneath the water. “Why do you speak of them in the past tense? Are you no longer acquainted?”

He wished that were the case. Oh, how he wished it was as simple as having lost touch. “Sadly, no. They passed. And so seeing you is like seeing a...” He could not say the word. He would not voice the cruelty of it.

“A ghost?” she finished for him. “Well then, you have leave to look at me as much as you choose, so long as it does not make you sad.” Her fingers squeezed his, and without thought, he laced them fully with his own. “I only wish for you to be happy,

my lord. I've had my share of sadness in life, and I do not want any more of it."

"So we both have melancholic lives. How droll we must be." His attempt to lighten the mood worked, and she smiled—once again the happy, radiant woman he had met the night before.

"We should make an agreement, my lord. That we will not be so when in each other's presence. That we shall cheer one another should we find ourselves wallowing in the past."

He tipped his head, curious. "Has something untoward occurred in your life that I may know of? I do not wish to pry, but I also do not want to say anything that may injure you."

"Our father—the late duke—did not love us, my lord. In fact, he left us in the country with no plan to bring us to London. I do not wish to suffer a marriage like my mother's. I want a love match. A gentleman who will love any children we may have and be happy with whatever outcome life brings. I do not wish for any of my daughters to be left to rot until they are almost too old to debut in London."

Realizing that he was still holding Lady Evangeline's hand, Ezra let go and pulled out his handkerchief, drying his fingers. "You are not old, my lady. You are but starting out your life and have many wonderful years ahead. Do not lose yourself in the past. There is no future there. I know. I visit it often enough."

She watched him, and he knew she was curious about whom he spoke of—but he could not bring himself to mention Luisa. Somehow it felt wrong to speak of her with another woman. Like he was being unfaithful in some way. Maybe one day, he would tell Lady Evangeline the sad tale. But not today.

"Evangeline, there you are!"

Ezra jumped at the sound of the Duchess of Ravensmere, and so too did Evangeline. Thankfully, they were seated a respectful distance apart—and no longer holding hands, yet still, his heart raced as if he'd done something wrong. Had been caught being inappropriate.

But the sudden interruption startled Evangeline so thoroughly that she lurched on the edge of the fountain and tumbled back into the water, arms flailing as she landed with a splash.

Worse—a small yellow fish flopped from the fountain onto the tiled floor, flapping about as it tried to survive out of water.

“Oh no, my lord. A fish. Help it!” he heard Lady Evangeline yell as she scrambled to her feet in the water, dripping wet and wide-eyed.

Ezra rushed to scoop up the fish and tossed it back into the fountain before turning toward her.

A mistake.

Because when he looked—when he truly looked—what the water had revealed took all coherent thought from his mind.

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Chapter

Seven

Evangeline could not believe what had just occurred.

She stood in the fountain, knee-deep in water that smelled vaguely of weeds and reminded her of the lake back home in the country where she and her sisters often swam.

As warm as the day was, the water was chill, and goosebumps rose on her skin. She watched Lord St. George lift the little fish that had sloshed outside the fountain before tossing it back into the water with a plop.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Evangeline, what has happened?” her sister gasped, rushing toward her—but Lord St. George was already there.

His eyes were wide, his mouth drawn into a tight, distressed line as he reached for her. His hands clasped her waist, and Evangeline fought to ignore the wicked longing that tore through her at the touch. He lifted her from the fountain as though she weighed no more than a feather. Unfortunately, she slipped as she tried to assist, and she landed hard against his chest.

She reached for his shoulders, clinging tightly as her body pressed into his. He was all warm, solid, muscular man—as she already imagined—and her heart beat

erratically within her chest. “Forgive me, my lord. I am not making this easy for you.”

Without a word, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her to a nearby bench, away from the water. She dripped over him, her gown utterly ruined, yet he did not seem to mind. He set her down and stood back, shrugging off his coat before placing it gently around her shoulders.

Evangeline looked down and gasped.

Her gown—soaked through—was nearly transparent. Her breasts, and in particular her nipples, stood erect in the chilled fabric.

She yanked the jacket closed, mortification burning through her body. As cold as she was, heat prickled her skin and flooded her cheeks.

“Thank you, Lord St. George. We shall return your jacket once it is laundered, but I fear we must take our leave before anyone sees what has happened here today. May I impose upon you to ask our driver to come around to the mews? We shall depart from there.”

“Of course I can arrange that, Your Grace.”

The duchess turned to her sister and gave her a comforting smile. “Come, dearest. We’ll walk through the gardens to the mews and leave quietly. No one shall know what happened. Even if it was an accident, I think this is best.”

“Of course,” Evangeline whispered, humiliation still thudding through her veins. Dear Lord, what had he seen?

Everything. He saw every little bit of your breasts, Evangeline—and possibly other

parts of you as well. Thank goodness his jacket is long enough to offer some form of decency.

She inwardly cringed and feared the expression had crossed her face.

“There is no harm done,” his lordship said, reaching out a hand to help her stand.

As much as she did not wish to take it—not because she didn’t want to touch him, but because it would mean looking at him, and that was unbearable—she placed her gloved hand in his.

What must he think of her?

Was he as mortified as she was? Or worse—did he find her lacking?

She wasn’t as well-formed as other ladies in London. In fact, she had often lamented that she was not as womanly as her elder sister. Did he not like what he saw?

Evangeline shook the absurd thoughts for her mind. What did it matter if he liked or disliked what he saw. He should not have seen anything at all!

“Thank you, my lord. That is very kind.”

“It is no trouble.” He turned and left them for several moments, no doubt going to give instructions to the footmen.

“Dearest, your gown...” her sister whispered when they were alone.

“I know. It’s transparent.” Tears blurred her vision, and she blinked them away, determined to maintain her composure. “I think he’s seen everything there is to know about me now. I wish to cease existing—I’m so humiliated.”

“Now, now.” Rosalind gave her a quick hug, knowing they didn’t have long before the earl returned. “All will be well. He is Ravensmere’s friend and will not say a word to anyone. Try not to dwell on it. Think of it as an unfortunate—perhaps even amusing—incident during your first Season.”

“That is easier said than done, Rosalind. It did not happen to you.”

Her sister sighed, then led her toward a door that opened into the gardens. “I have not told you or anyone this, but early in my Season last year, I threw myself at the duke beneath a willow tree. Thankfully, he did not shame me and was a gentleman about it all, just as Lord St. George is being now. Things happen in life that shock, shame, and stir the soul—but they’re not worth your worry. Not when the man in question is honorable. He shall not speak a word about your tumble into his fountain.”

At her sister’s phrasing, Evangeline couldn’t help herself. She laughed, covering her mouth with her soggy gloved hand, the amusement bubbling out of her. “He must think I’m the most uncoordinated, useless female he’s ever met.”

“Why ever did you startle so at my voice? Unless...” Rosalind arched a brow. A look Evangeline did not like and one she also did not wish to answer.

“You were up to something with his lordship that would otherwise not be allowed?”

The heat on Evangeline’s cheeks burned hotter. “Of course not. We were merely talking.”

“A lot can be said with just a few words, sister.”

The sound of quickened footsteps reached them, and they both turned as Lord St. George returned.

“Come. I shall escort you to the mews. Your driver is already en route.”

“Will you please give our thanks and apologies to your mama, my lord?” the duchess asked. “She’s probably wondering what happened to us.”

“I shall speak with her after I see you safely away. But do not distress yourself. My mother will understand once I explain.”

“I’m so very sorry,” Evangeline said as their carriage came into view, rolling to a stop before the mews. The driver jumped down and set the steps, waiting patiently beside the open door. “I’ve wet your clothing, and I do hope I haven’t injured your fish. Will you check to make sure I didn’t land on one in my clumsiness?”

“Of course.”

He smiled—a small, charming response—and Evangeline fought not to think of how well the earl now knew her. How privy he was to her every curve, her everything...

“I will never tell a soul, my lady. You have my word.”

“Thank you.” Heat flushed her cheeks again as he clasped her hand and helped her step into the carriage. Her sister sat across from her, watching their exchange with far too much interest.

“Thank you again, Lord St. George. We shall see you at dinner tomorrow evening, as planned.”

“You will indeed,” he replied to the duchess.

The earl stepped back, and the carriage lurched forward. Evangeline exhaled, relieved not to be facing the man who had seen her practically naked.

She cringed, closing her eyes. Dear Lord, she would never recover from this.

“Would you like to sit beside Lord St. George at dinner tomorrow? You seem to be becoming fast friends, and I believe he likes you.”

“No. I do not wish to sit beside him. He practically saw me naked, Rosalind. I don’t know how I’ll face him again—never mind try to speak to him.” For all his kind words, a man who was not her husband had seen her intimately. How was she ever to recover from that?

“It is not so very bad. Open the jacket and let me take a look at you.”

Evangeline hesitated, then opened the coat.

Her sister’s eyes widened, and she quickly waved her hands. “Cover yourself again, dearest. I do not need to see any more.”

“You see? It’s as bad as I thought.” She threw herself back into the squabs, the urge to stomp her foot at the unfairness nearly impossible to resist.

“His lordship said he wouldn’t tell anyone, and I believe him. Yes, he’s seen all of you—but mayhap it will spark his interest.”

“Do not play matchmaker, Rosalind. I doubt I can even look at him again without thinking of this—never mind trying to make him court me.”

“And if he wants to court you? What will you do then?”

Evangeline fell quiet. What would she do? Did she want him to become one of her suitors? She had teased him about it, but had she been wishing—deep down—that it were true?

What would she do indeed? “I have no idea.”

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Chapter

Eight

The following evening, as planned, Ezra escorted his mother to the Duke and Duchess of Ravensmere's home for dinner. What he had assumed would be a small affair turned out to be quite the opposite. His carriage, along with several others, lined up before the ducal residence, dropping off a steady stream of guests invited to dine.

Many of them, he noticed upon helping his mother alight, were young, unmarried, eligible gentlemen—no doubt all invited for the sole purpose of courting Lady Evangeline.

Lady Evangeline...

He took a calming breath and steeled himself for seeing her again. The image of her standing knee-deep in his marble fountain, water cascading behind her, her gown plastered to her very womanly—and very attractive—form, was still fixed in his mind like a painting.

He doubted he would ever forget the memory, or be able to look at her again without imagining what his mind at this very moment was conjuring.

They walked up the front steps and were greeted by the duke and duchess, Lady Evangeline nowhere in sight.

“Good evening, St. George. Glad you could make it,” Ravensmere said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“It is good to be here. Thank you for the invitation.”

“It is our pleasure, my lord,” the duchess said, offering a polite smile.

He returned the gesture and moved into the withdrawing room, following the stream of other guests. The space was large, a young lady playing the piano while others stood in groups, speaking and observing. A few lingered on the outskirts, preferring to remain apart from the crowd.

One of them was Lady Evangeline, who, at that moment, seemed deeply interested in a potted plant in the far corner of the room.

Ezra frowned.

Taking two glasses of wine from a passing footman, he crossed the room toward her.

“Is that Lady Evangeline hiding from her guests this evening?” He gestured to the room, nearly spilling his wine. “I know I’m not the most adept gentleman at such formal gatherings these days, but I do believe most of the people here this evening are here to see you.”

He offered her one of the glasses. “A little fruit courage, perhaps, my lady?”

She threw him a small smile and stepped toward him, accepting the wine and taking a generous sip. “I do not care for anyone here, my lord. And I’m still mortified that I have to face you.” She paused, a small frown marring her otherwise perfect brow. “My sister said I should forget what happened yesterday, not speak of it again. But I cannot. I’m sorry you had to see me in such a state. I know I’ve shamed myself.”

Instinctively, he reached out and ran a finger beneath her jaw, lifting her chin. At her startled gaze, realization struck him, and he pulled his hand away quickly. “Apologies, my lady. I did not mean to touch you.”

And yet he had. And he could not regret it. Her skin was soft and warm—scalding, even—and the brief contact had awakened something in him. It had been so long since he’d touched a woman, much less longed to.

He gathered himself and pushed back the unwelcome thoughts.

“I merely wished to say... Do not feel ashamed or awkward around me. I would loathe for something so trivial to cause you distress. I’m not concerned by what happened. Nor do I think any less of you for it.”

“You are very kind. I wish I weren’t so hard on myself, but I want to do well this Season. I do not want to shame Rosalind or Ravensmere. The duke has been so very kind to us all.”

“I’m certain his kindness is because he loves your sister and wants the best for her family.”

“That is partly true. But his kindness began before there was anything between Rosalind and His Grace.”

“Ravensmere is a good friend to have.” He turned and scanned the room. Several gentlemen stood watching them, some subtly, others not at all. “There are a number of gentlemen quite fixated on our little corner,” he muttered.

Ezra tried not to be annoyed by their interest in Lady Evangeline—and failed.

He enjoyed speaking with her. She was intelligent, personable, not a silly chit. The

idea that he might be denied her attention because of the constant flow of gentlemen vying for her attention this Season irritated him more than it should have.

The dinner gong sounded somewhere deep within the house, and Lady Evangeline let out one of her familiar troubled sighs. “Well. I suppose we must go in and dine now.”

“I do hope I’m seated near you, my lady. Your company, besides that of Ravensmere and the duchess, is most preferable.”

A small blush touched her cheeks, and he wondered at it.

“I believe you’re seated near Ravensmere, my lord. I do not think we’ll be close enough to even converse the smallest bit.”

Disappointment tugged through him at the news, but he followed the guests out of the withdrawing room and into the dining room before taking his seat. Just as she had said, they were seated at opposite ends of the table. At least he had Ravensmere beside him.

Once the ladies had sat, the gentlemen followed, and the first course—a rich mushroom soup—was placed before them. The savory scent wafted up from the bowl, making Ezra’s mouth water.

“Thank you for being kind to Lady Evangeline,” Ravensmere said softly. “I heard what happened yesterday. I understand she was quite distressed.”

“It is of no concern,” Ezra replied. “It’s already forgotten.”

Ravensmere nodded and picked up his spoon. They ate in silence for several minutes, broken only by conversation about Ezra’s travels and his plans now that he was back in London.

Laughter echoed from the far end of the table. Ezra glanced that way, his eyes narrowing as Lady Evangeline threw her head back in a peal of laughter at something a gentleman seated beside her had said.

“That’s Mr. Fournier,” Ravensmere explained. “He attended Lady Evangeline’s coming-out ball. They seemed to get along well. She mentioned him by name the other day, so Rosalind thought it a good opportunity to have him to dinner.”

“Of course,” Ezra replied stiffly, hoping his interest wasn’t obvious. Lady Evangeline could speak to whomever she wished. He was merely caught off guard by the sound of her laughter. Nothing more. “Lady Evangeline is a lovely young woman. I believe she will marry this Season. I only hope she gains all that she wishes.”

Ezra’s attention shifted again toward her, and he couldn’t help the flare of jealousy that he wasn’t the one seated beside her, enjoying her laughter, her conversation, her liveliness.

Not that he didn’t enjoy speaking with Ravensmere—but this dinner would have been far merrier if they had all been seated together.

“And what about you, St. George?” Ravensmere asked. “Will we be seeing you about town more frequently? It would make many mothers of the ton very happy.”

“No. Not yet. I’m content to watch from afar this Season. Perhaps next year I shall think differently.”

Ravensmere reached out and clasped his arm.

“You cannot allow what happened in Italy to stop your life. That was not your fault.”

As it always did whenever someone mentioned his past, guilt curled deep in Ezra’s

gut. How easily others shifted blame—but it was his fault. He'd failed to keep Luisa safe. He'd promised her nothing would happen, and then something did. Something fatal.

“Ah, my good friend, but it is my fault—and you know it as well as I do.” He reached for his wine and downed the contents, signaling a footman for more. “I must marry one day. But it is not this day. Let me be content with your company and the comfort of this fine beverage, and be done with it.”

Ravensmere looked at him with pity, and Ezra ground his teeth. He did not want pity. He wanted people to hate him as much as he hated himself. Not be kind and feel pity. He deserved none of that.

“Very well. Drink as much as you like. I want you to enjoy yourself—so much so that you never leave England again.”

He nodded. “I'll drink to that.”

Liar...

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Chapter

Nine

Evangeline could feel Lord St. George's gaze drifting to her again and again.

She purposefully tried to ignore the emotions he stirred within her each time she became aware of his watchful eyes.

Excitement.

Expectation.

Hope.

Any friend of Ravensmere's meant that his lordship was trustworthy and well respected. Therefore, should she set her cap for him—should she desire him above anyone else she met this Season—there would be no objections. No reason not to pursue him.

"I cannot thank you and the duke enough for inviting me. It has been far too long since I've enjoyed such fine company."

Evangeline smiled at Mr. Fournier, seated to her right. Of all the gentlemen her sister might have placed beside her, he was by no means the worst option. But his continual need to talk—endlessly—had grown a touch exhausting.

Some people liked to eat in peace.

“We are happy to have you, Mr. Fournier.” She paused to sip her wine. “Tell me, how did the event go after my coming-out ball? Was it as exciting as my own?”

He smiled, and though he talked a great deal, she could not deny that he was handsome.

Still, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Lord St. George leaning back in his chair, drinking what must have been his fourth—or was it fifth?—glass of wine. He was watching her again.

For a man who claimed he wasn’t looking for a wife—and therefore uninterested in her—he certainly looked at her rather often.

Perhaps there was hope for him after all...

“I was wanting to ask if you would care to ride out to Richmond when you are free. We could make a picnic of it, and you may bring your sister and the duke as chaperones, if they’re willing.”

The idea of visiting Richmond Park—where she had never been—sounded heavenly. A small taste of countryside she had missed during the past few weeks in town.

“I would welcome such an outing, Mr. Fournier. I shall send word when the duke and duchess are available. Perhaps the day after next, if the weather holds?”

“I think that would suit perfectly. We shall aim to leave London by ten and arrive in time for luncheon.”

Thankfully, Mr. Fournier allowed her to finish the fourth course of roast pheasant

before Rosalind rose after dessert and invited the ladies to the withdrawing room for music and conversation, leaving the gentlemen to enjoy their port and cigars.

Evangeline joined her sister moments later. Miss Pembroke, who had played the piano earlier, had taken up the keys again, while the other ladies grouped off for soft conversation and tea.

“I think dinner went well,” Rosalind said, taking a seat beside her. “I saw you speaking at length with Mr. Fournier. Do you think he is a prospect for your hand this Season? From what Ravensmere found, he’s perfectly acceptable. Not after an heiress either.”

“That is good to know—that he doesn’t have pockets to let.” She paused. “He’s asked us on a picnic to Richmond. Will you come and chaperone? I would so like to see the park. I’ve never been.”

“Nor I,” her sister said. “I will speak to the duke but I cannot see it as being a problem. It’ll be an enjoyable day.”

Evangeline nodded, happy her sister agreed. “Still, as much as I like him, and look forward to the picnic, there’s no...pull.” Her gaze drifted across the room to where Lord St. George had stood earlier with her and the emotions that rioted within her whenever she was around him. “There’s no spark,” she added. Nothing like what I feel when Lord St. George looks at me.

“And St. George?” Rosalind stated as if she could read Evangeline’s mind. “I saw you speaking with the earl before dinner. How do you feel now about what happened yesterday?”

“Still mortified,” she admitted. “But he told me the same as you—that I shouldn’t concern myself. He’s being very generous. I don’t believe many gentlemen in

London would've handled it the same way.”

“That is possibly an unfortunate truth.”

The gentlemen returned, the scent of cigars lingering in the air as they rejoined the ladies. The duke came to speak with Rosalind, leaving Evangeline momentarily on her own.

She scanned the room, but Lord St. George was nowhere to be seen.

Disappointment trickled through her. Surely he had not left without saying goodbye...

Unwilling to dwell on it in front of others, she excused herself and left the withdrawing room. Her feet carried her toward the back of the house and onto the terrace. She only meant to walk for five minutes—to breathe, to collect herself, to accept that he had gone.

She pushed open the terrace doors and closed them softly behind her. The evening air was cooler than expected, and she wrapped her arms around herself as she walked the length of the terrace.

Then she saw him.

A shadow at first. Then a face revealed by the dull orange glow of a cheroot.

Her heart stuttered in her chest. “Lord St. George. I thought you had left. Whatever are you doing out here?”

A futile question. It was obvious what he was doing. Still, he had frightened her, and her pulse thundered for reasons she didn't care to examine too closely.

They were alone.

Quite alone.

“Smoking.” He held out the cheroot to her. “Would you like to try one?”

“No, thank you. I do not want the cheroot.” But there was something else standing before her that interested her much more.

“You appeared to enjoy your dinner...and your partner.”

There was something in the way he said it—slurred slightly, sharp beneath the words—that made her study him. Even in the dark, she could tell his gaze was unfocused. He leaned against the stone wall as if it were the only thing keeping him upright.

“And I think you enjoyed your wine a little too much at dinner, my lord.”

He grinned—a wicked, boyish grin that stole the breath from her lungs.

“How many glasses did you imbibe?”

He swayed and then slumped against the wall again, tossing the cheroot into the garden. “Several glasses.”

He leaned forward, and for a moment—just one startling, charged moment—Evangeline thought he might kiss her.

Instead, he bopped her nose with his finger. “Are you going to tell me off? Tell me I should not drink so much?”

“No, of course not. I merely?—”

“Because I didn’t say a word about your conduct at the end of the table.”

Evangeline frowned. “My conduct? What do you mean?”

“It is nothing. Forget I said anything.”

She stepped closer, chin high. “I behaved perfectly respectably at dinner. I did not trifle with anyone’s feelings. I did not gossip. I did not drink to excess or speak out of turn. I played the part of the perfect debutante, as I am expected to this Season. If you do not like the person I am, perhaps we should not be friends.”

His features softened, and then—before she could stop him—he reached for her, his hands cupping her face.

“I do not think it’s possible for us to be friends. Not without...” He let her go and stepped into the darkness.

Evangeline exhaled slowly, but she did not follow. “You cannot keep touching me like that. It’s inappropriate. Should you be caught, we will be married—whether you wish to be or not, my lord. I did not suffer all those years under a cold and neglectful father only to be ruined during my one chance to build a good life. An independent and happy future.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I lose myself...in the past. And you...”

“I remind you of someone you used to know. Yes, I know,” she said quietly. A wave of remorse swept over her. He looked foxed and wretched and while she wanted to reach out, hold him, give him leave to touch her, she could not. Not without some promise from him. And that promise, he had been more than forthcoming it would

not be said. “But I am not them. And you cannot be familiar with me as you have been. Do you understand, my lord?”

“I do. It will not happen again.”

“See that it does not.”

Chapter

Ten

Ezra groaned and rolled over in bed, cursing his valet, who had the audacity to throw open the curtains on what was far too bright a morning. After last night's dinner at Ravensmere's and several glasses of red wine, the last thing he wanted to face was daylight.

And yet, he would have to rise and get on with the day. Not to mention he should probably call on Lady Evangeline and apologize again for being such an ass.

He groaned again, cringing at what he'd said to her on the terrace. How he'd practically pickled himself in drink because he couldn't stand watching her being courted by another.

And while part of that had to do with the fact she looked nearly identical to Luisa, another part of him was beginning to question that excuse.

Yes, she may appear the same—visually at least—but her character was different in almost every way. While Luisa had been strong-willed, that was only prevalent with those she trusted. Lady Evangeline, however, was bold without hesitation no matter what situation she found herself in. She spoke her mind, was sociable, and wise, an extrovert to the core. Whereas Luisa had been a guarded soul who needed coaxing to bloom when in public.

He ran a hand through his hair and stared at the ceiling, at a loss. What was he to do

with this inability to think straight when Lady Evangeline was near? She drew his eye without trying, and—damn it—he liked what he saw.

Hell, he liked her.

But he could not court her. To do so would be to place her in danger.

He'd returned to England because of what happened in Italy. Because it was safer here—for him. The lead he'd followed across the Continent on his way back to England, the one who might have revealed who killed Luisa, had grown cold. And perhaps he needed to finally let her rest.

But courting another woman? Letting someone new into his life?

No. He could not do it. He could not place another in danger, have them suffer the same fate he'd lived through—barely—already.

Not to mention Ravensmere and the duchess would never forgive him should anything befall Lady Evangeline. Nor could he forgive himself.

No.

He would have to keep his distance. Be courteous, and nothing more. No more clandestine meetings on moonlit terraces. No more wanting to kiss the chit senseless when he was in his cups.

He groaned, hating himself for the way he continually reached for her. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he keep his hands to himself?

Had it simply been so long since he'd been with a woman that he had no self-control? He craved feminine company. Maybe he ought to go down to Tothill Fields and slake

his lust?—

The thought soured the moment he had it. No. He couldn't do that.

His cock twitched, hard from thinking of Evangeline. With a sigh, he reached for himself, stroking his length until he was rock hard. He closed his eyes, picturing her above him, riding him with her head thrown back in ecstasy as he drove into her, hard and deep, giving her everything she wanted.

The image of her, wet from the fountain, her pink nipples tight beneath her gown. His mouth covering her pink, erect flesh made him spend.

He groaned, body shuddering as pleasure crashed over him.

Afterward, he lay still for several minutes, at a loss with his lack of control. He shook his head and rose quickly from the bed. He stripped the sheets and tossed them to the floor, then walked to his washbasin and began to clean himself up. He threw on a banyan and rang for his manservant to prepare a bath.

The day beckoned—and with it, his need to make things right with Lady Evangeline.

Before he left her alone.

For good this time.

Ezra arrived at the Ravensmere household just in time for afternoon tea. A footman led him to the back parlor that overlooked the gardens, and he paused at the doorway, not wishing to intrude.

“Is there room for one more?” he asked.

Ravensmere stood, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and gestured for him to enter. “Of course. Come in, St. George. Good to see you again. We were just having tea and scones. Please, sit and join us.”

“Thank you. I think I shall.” His stomach grumbled at the sight of the scones with cream and jam. “Good afternoon, Your Grace. Lady Evangeline. I hope I find you both well.”

“We are very well, thank you, my lord,” the duchess said. Her gaze flicked between him and her sister.

The look did not bode well. He hoped neither of the ladies were getting any ideas about him courting Lady Evangeline. He would not put another in harm’s way. Even if he were no longer officially working for the Foreign Office, he still had enemies—those who sought revenge for the work he’d carried out over the years.

Whether justified or not, his past could endanger Lady Evangeline. It would endanger any woman he settled on at this point.

He needed time. A year or two at least to ensure his enemies were at a loss as to who he was or where, that his presence in London didn’t reignite old vendettas. Then—perhaps—he could think of marriage. Of children.

“We’re going on a picnic to Richmond tomorrow, Lord St. George,” the duchess said. “Would you care to join us? I’m certain Ravensmere would welcome your company.”

“Really? And why would you delightful ladies not welcome my company also?”

The duchess laughed and placed down her teacup, her eyes glinting with mischief. “Because I shall be chaperoning Evangeline while Mr. Fournier shows her about the park on horseback. The duke refuses to chaperone, so he will wait by the carriages

and the picnic. You are welcome to come. We can make a merry party of it.”

Mr. Fournier.

Ezra ground his teeth.

Of all the men in London, Lady Evangeline had to entertain a Frenchman? An untitled Frenchman, at that. Even if he did own a chateau, what did that matter? France had hundreds of estates, most passed down through old merchant families, not the nobility.

Lady Evangeline ought to marry someone of her rank. Someone worthy of her name and position.

Like you?

He ignored the thought and masked his irritation with a smile. “I have not been to Richmond since I was a child. I would welcome the opportunity to ride out again. Thank you.”

“Mr. Fournier says he’s having his cook prepare a selection of delicacies for us to try. Have you ever been to France, Lord St. George?”

“I passed through briefly. Spent a day or two in Paris. A grand city, just as London is.”

“I would love to go someday,” Lady Evangeline said wistfully.

Ezra noted the soft look in her eyes and understood her longing. Most women in their society rarely had such adventures—unless their husbands were the sort to encourage it.

“Perhaps you’ll see Paris sooner than you think,” the duchess said pointedly.

Ezra schooled his expression, though Lady Evangeline blushed prettily and looked down into her teacup.

“We shall depart tomorrow at ten to arrive at the park in time for luncheon,” the duchess continued. “We’re sending our servants ahead to set everything up. You may bring a carriage or ride—whichever you prefer.”

“I shall ride down, but bring a carriage just in case the weather changes,” he said.

They enjoyed their afternoon tea and spoke of their plans for the morrow. Ezra couldn’t help but drink in the sight of Lady Evangeline each time he looked at her. Couldn’t help the push and pull that warred within him that perhaps he was being a fool not allowing himself to court her. To be near her and see if they suited. The threat that someone may be still out to rid him of this world was slim. His identity had been top secret, and few knew who he really was. Surely they would have made their presence known should he be in danger still.

Ravensmere stood. “Would you care for a glass of whisky before you go, St. George? There’s something I’d like to discuss with you if you have a moment.”

“Of course.”

Ezra stood and bowed to the ladies. “Good afternoon. I shall see you at ten tomorrow.”

His gaze slid to Lady Evangeline, who was already watching him. He swallowed hard as heat ignited low in his belly.

Then he turned and followed the duke into his study.

Ravensmere poured them each a whisky, then gestured for Ezra to take a seat before the hearth.

“I wanted to ask what you knew of Mr. Fournier. He’s new to London—wealthy and seemingly suitable—but I can’t find much about his past. No family in France, no connections of note. If Evangeline sets her cap for him, I’m worried I’ll be sending her abroad with a stranger. And I don’t like the unknown.”

“I don’t know anything of the man beyond what you’ve already stated. But I can inquire, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The duke shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but Ezra understood. He’d do the same if it were his sister.

“I wouldn’t ask otherwise. But if Evangeline misjudges his character, and it ends poorly... Rosalind would never forgive herself.”

“I understand. I’ll see what I can find. I’m sure all will be well.”

Ravensmere lifted his glass. “I do hope so.”

Ezra however, did not.

Chapter

Eleven

The ride down to Richmond was a pleasant way to spend an hour or so, particularly in the company of Rosalind, while the duke rode alongside Lord St. George and Mr. Fournier.

As much as Evangeline tried not to, she could not help but continually glance out the carriage window—ostensibly to admire the countryside, but in truth, to admire the sight of Lord St. George laughing and speaking with the duke.

She'd never seen him appear so relaxed or at ease. Not that she had known him long, but he always seemed severe, lost in thought—as though burdened by something heavy.

There was, of course, the person he had lost. That sort of grief did not fade quickly. So it pleased her to see that, at least for today, he looked content—happy, even.

Mr. Fournier, on the other hand, rode alongside them but looked far from pleased with his lot in life. In fact, he looked rather put out. Whether that was due to having to ride on horseback longer than he preferred, or due to being forced to make conversation with Ravensmere and Lord St. George, Evangeline could not say. But even from her seat, she could see Ravensmere and the earl making an effort to draw him into conversation.

Mr. Fournier didn't appear the least bit interested.

Evangeline frowned, wondering at his surly mood. After all, he had invited them on this picnic. Perhaps he regretted extending the invitation and was now angry about it.

But that would be absurd and make little sense.

She too had her horse tied to the back of the carriage, along with her sister's, so they could ride after luncheon. There was nothing unusual or improper about their arrangements.

She sighed and leaned back into the squabs, her gaze returning—almost involuntarily—to Lord St. George. She watched the way he sat in the saddle, relaxed yet upright, his form commanding. He had a particularly fine seat, and the way his thighs flexed with each movement of the horse did nothing to diminish her appreciation for the view.

Rosalind grinned and leaned over to peek through the window.

“He’ll catch you staring at his—how shall I put this delicately—mount, and then you’ll be as red as a beetroot.”

Evangeline laughed and covered her mouth with her hand. “Are we talking about the horses, sister, or something else entirely?”

Her sister wagged her brows but did not answer. She merely sat back with a smug grin. “I must ask,” she continued, “for if I didn’t, I would not be doing my duty as your sister. Is your cap set on Mr. Fournier? Or on another gentleman riding alongside us this very moment?”

“I’m not interested in Ravensmere.”

Rosalind scoffed and slapped her knee in mock offense. “I know you’re not interested

in my husband. But there are two other gentlemen outside. One, we know, is interested. The other—I suspect—believes he is not, but is, even if he does not realize it yet.”

“I will not lie,” Evangeline admitted. “I do find Lord St. George most intriguing. That Ravensmere thinks highly of him is in his favor. But I do not believe he’s looking for a wife—not this year, at least. So I would be a fool to overlook the many grand qualities of Mr. Fournier.”

“Of course. It would be foolish to ignore a good prospect. But we know very little about Mr. Fournier. Until he has proven himself sound in character...”

Evangeline frowned. “What are you saying, Rosalind? Everyone says he is wealthy. A gentleman from a good French family. What do you know that I don’t?”

Her sister’s lips pressed into a firm, concerned line. “We’ve heard those things, yes. But no one can confirm them with certainty. And until they can, I advise caution. Do not allow Mr. Fournier—or Lord St. George, for that matter—to persuade you into forming attachments prematurely.”

“You suspect Mr. Fournier of being a fraud? That he’s here in London, pockets to let, searching for a rich wife?”

“I don’t know that to be true,” Rosalind replied. “But I know Ravensmere is looking into his background to ensure you do not make an error we cannot undo.”

Evangeline nodded, grateful for their protection. “To marry such a man would mean living in France. With no family nearby...should things not turn out well...”

“Exactly.”

“I shall not show more interest than I ought,” Evangeline said. “The Season has just begun. And I’ll be certain—through action if not words—that Mr. Fournier understands I have not chosen anyone. Nor may I do so this year at all.” She paused, her gaze drifting back to St. George and the way he rose and fell in his saddle. “I know you do not have concerns about Lord St. George—even though you included him in your advice.”

Rosalind picked up the book beside her and opened it with studied nonchalance. “I didn’t want to seem unfair toward Mr. Fournier. But yes, it is only he that Ravensmere is cautious about. I think, should Lord St. George offer for your hand, my husband would have you walking down the aisle by tomorrow morning.”

The idea was not an abhorrent one.

In fact, it was quite the opposite.

“I won’t do anything that would disappoint you,” Evangeline promised. “Or lead to a marriage I’d regret. I will choose wisely—just as you did. And find a husband who loves me as much as Ravensmere adores you.”

A blush colored Rosalind’s cheeks, and she smiled into her book, making no reply.

“Sister...” Evangeline hesitated.

“Yes?” Rosalind lowered the book to her lap.

“I want to ask something. It’s been on my mind since I met Lord St. George.”

Her sister tilted her head, waiting.

“If I were to fall in love with a gentleman—and if we were engaged or expected to be

soon—is it...acceptable for an engaged couple to share a kiss?”

She felt ridiculous asking the question. But the truth was, she wanted her first kiss. She longed for it. And the idea that Lord St. George could be the one to bestow such a thing made her heart flutter with anticipation.

Rosalind blinked at her, then glanced out the window again, toward the duke. “I will admit,” she said slowly, “I kissed Ravensmere before we were officially engaged. A lapse in judgment, perhaps, but not one I regret.”

Evangeline leaned closer. “So...?”

“If you’re in love with the gentleman,” Rosalind said, “and believe him to be your future husband, I do not think a stolen kiss—so long as no one knows—would hurt anything.”

She grinned.

“But do not tell Ravensmere I said such things. He’ll scold me for encouraging you to be fast.”

“But if I do act fast, I can always say you and Ravensmere were the same.”

Rosalind huffed a laugh. “True. But he would still be mortified. He wants you to make a good, love match, and he’d hate for scandal to ruin that chance.”

“I’ll be careful. I won’t kiss anyone unless I’m certain a proposal is forthcoming—or we’re already engaged.” She hesitated, then added softly, “Do you enjoy kissing Ravensmere?”

A secretive, almost shy expression crossed Rosalind’s face before she masked it.

“When you kiss a man you love, there is nothing sweeter. You shall like it very much.”

Evangeline leaned her temple against the windowpane and gazed outside. Her eyes found the gentleman she was already far too fond of—the dark-haired, secretive lord she ached to know better.

If only he were open to courting a lady this year.

What a shame that he was not.

Maybe she too would require a second Season.

And wait in hope...

For him.

Chapter

Twelve

Ezra tolerated Mr. Fournier on the journey out to Richmond, but the Frenchman made no secret of his annoyance over the duke and duchess inviting others on their outing.

Had the gentleman stated clearly that the picnic was to be a party of four, surely he would have said as much to the duke. Ezra could not see Ravensmere going against another man's expressed wishes.

They arrived at Richmond, and Ezra was glad there were other people to speak to finally—namely Lady Evangeline. Her company was always welcome.

Not that he intended to court the chit or do anything expected of a gentleman during the Season, but he did enjoy her presence. And as she was Ravensmere's sister-in-law, there would always be a natural association between them. He suspected they could be lifelong friends—something he was in short supply of, having lived abroad for so long.

The duchess and Lady Evangeline alighted from the carriage, and Ezra found himself unable to look away as she approached her horse, a sixteen-hand gelding tied at the back. She patted his nose gently and pressed a kiss to his muzzle.

Goosebumps rose on Ezra's skin.

He jumped when Ravensmere clapped him on the back.

“Would you care for a wine, St. George? I know I’m parched.”

“Yes, thank you.”

He joined the small gathering at the table set with several chairs brought along from London. Mr. Fournier, however, forewent sitting—at least beside him—and made a beeline for Lady Evangeline, who was still chatting with the groom.

Ezra watched them, unimpressed. He failed to see the appeal of the whiny Frenchman. And nothing over the past hour, spent enduring sly remarks aimed at him, had changed his opinion.

He would hasten his inquiries once they were back in London and report to Ravensmere. Not that he expected to uncover anything scandalous—Fournier seemed harmless enough—but Ezra still found him a rather irritating gnat underfoot.

“You seem preoccupied with Lady Evangeline, St. George,” Ravensmere said. “You’ve not stopped watching her since we sat down.”

Ezra met the duke’s eyes and tried to school his features, but the knowing smirk on Ravensmere’s face told him he’d failed miserably. “Not at all. I was just thinking Mr. Fournier is not very discreet when he’s put out.” He leaned forward. “I don’t think he wanted me here.”

“I don’t think he did either,” the duke replied, unconcerned. “But alas, he never stated I couldn’t invite others.”

They both glanced in the direction of Lady Evangeline and Mr. Fournier.

“I think he’ll propose,” Ravensmere murmured. “How long do you think it will take before you hear back from the Foreign Office about him?”

“I’ll draft the letter tomorrow. With any luck, I should have word within the month.”

The duke cringed. “That’s a long time in society.”

“It is,” Ezra agreed, “but expected. I wouldn’t worry unless the man proposes—or Lady Evangeline makes it known she wishes to accept.” Ezra flinched inwardly at the thought of such a woman marrying such a man. Fournier was not her equal. Not in character, not in wit, not in rank. And certainly not in what a woman ought to feel for the man she planned to marry.

“Come, Lady Evangeline,” Fournier called. “We shall go for a walk. You’ve been cooped up in the carriage long enough.”

Ezra watched as the Frenchman grabbed her arm and tugged her away from the horse.

His jaw clenched.

The move was too firm, too assumptive. Lady Evangeline may have gone along willingly, but the way he yanked her forward grated on Ezra’s nerves.

Whether Fournier was as wealthy as he claimed or was simply here to snatch a rich wife, Ezra did not care. One thing was clear—he was not the man for Lady Evangeline. And if Ezra did nothing else this Season, he would ensure no betrothal occurred between them.

“Your Grace, would you care to accompany Mr. Fournier and Lady Evangeline while luncheon is served?” Ezra asked, standing and offering the duchess his arm.

She smiled and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. “Thank you. That will suit me very well.”

They followed the pair at a distance. Lady Evangeline never wandered too far ahead, but even so, Ezra noted the way Mr. Fournier kept glancing over his shoulder, clearly irritated by their presence.

Did the man not know that he could not simply disappear into the trees with a debutante for his own amusement?

The cad.

“Are you enjoying your time back in London, my lord?” the duchess asked. “Evangeline speaks highly of you. We’re very happy to have you back. The duke especially appreciates having his closest friend in town.”

“It has been enjoyable thus far, Your Grace. I believe I’ve settled in well enough. My mother is, of course, as pleased as the duke.” He chuckled. “In fact, the Wilcox ball is tomorrow evening, and I believe everyone who is anyone is attending.”

“Oh yes—the masquerade. We’re quite looking forward to it. Neither Evangeline nor I have ever attended one before. We had gowns made especially.”

She smiled, and Ezra’s eyes shifted back to Lady Evangeline. The sisters were so similar in appearance it was uncanny. Still, only one stirred his blood. He frowned, annoyed not just with Fournier, but with himself—for becoming somewhat obsessed with Lady Evangeline’s presence.

They caught up to the couple near a copse of trees where a small group of deer grazed. Lady Evangeline pointed out a young fawn nursing at its mother’s side.

“How lovely they are,” she murmured.

“They are friendly, are they not?” Fournier said, before stepping into the trees.

Most of the deer fled, leaping away in alarm. All but one—a muscular buck with large antlers—held his ground.

Ezra’s spine straightened.

“I think you ought to come back, Mr. Fournier,” he warned. “That buck does not appear pleased.”

“No, all will be well,” Fournier replied. “I shall see how close I can get.”

Ezra moved to stand protectively in front of the duchess and Lady Evangeline, just in case. Before he could say another word, the buck did exactly as feared.

It charged.

Fournier tried to dodge, but he wasn’t quick enough. The animal gored his thigh before retreating and bounding after the others into the woods.

“Mr. Fournier!” the duchess cried, running forward.

The Frenchman writhed on the ground, clutching his leg and shouting a string of profanities no lady should ever hear.

Ezra knelt beside him, took in the damage, and pressed his hand firmly to the gash. The bleeding wasn’t excessive—which was a good sign—but the wound was deep.

“Lady Evangeline,” he said sharply, catching her attention, “untie my cravat and pass

it to me. I need to wrap it around his leg.”

She froze, eyes wide in shock.

“Evangeline.” He spoke more firmly this time. “My cravat. Please.”

She blinked, finally registering his words, then kneeled beside him. Her fingers trembled as she reached for his neckcloth.

She was so close, he could feel her breath against his skin.

Even now—at a wholly inappropriate moment—he could not help but marvel at her beauty. A part of him, deep down, whispered that perhaps Luisa had returned to him in some strange, impossible way.

She fumbled with the knot, her lip caught between her teeth. “I’m sorry, my lord. I’ve never untied a man’s cravat before. I’m not the fastest.”

He groaned inwardly—though not entirely in pain. God help me . Let her never untie another man’s cravat but mine.

Now who’s the cad?

“I’m dying! I’m dying!” Fournier cried.

“You are not dying,” Ezra muttered, winding the cravat tightly around the injured leg. “But in future, perhaps refrain from trying to pet wild animals.”

Fournier groaned, then flopped back onto the grass.

“Oh no! He’s dead!” the duchess cried.

“He’s not dead, Your Grace.” Ezra smirked. “He’s fainted.”

Chapter

Thirteen

"Do you think he'll survive?" Lady Evangeline asked Lord St. George, who stood beside her as the ducal carriage sped back toward London.

"He'll be perfectly well, if he doesn't attempt to pat any more wild animals with antlers the size of swords."

As terrible as it was, his lordship's words made her giggle, and she bit her lip to stifle her laughter at the comedy of errors that had occurred. She turned to glance at the remnants of their ruined picnic, now being cleared away by the servants.

"So much for our day out, my lord. It has been utterly ruined."

"We may still go for a ride, if you wish, before we return to London. There are servants present, so you're well chaperoned."

"I do believe Rosalind has completely forgotten about propriety with Mr. Fournier's injury." She started toward her horse, eager to stretch her legs and explore more of the park. "Come, my lord. I think a ride is just what we need."

"I couldn't agree more," he whispered in her ear as he strode past her toward his mount.

A shiver of awareness slipped down her spine, and she steeled herself to remain

strong against her reactions to this man. She would not fawn over the gentleman, no matter how desperately she wished to. He was so devastatingly handsome, and kind. And his bottom looked far too taut in those buckskin breeches as he swung up onto his horse.

She tried to brush aside the image forming in her mind. What would he look like without all that clothing? She laughed at herself. The idea of ever seeing a man thus was almost too comical to consider. And yet, one day such a sight would become her reality.

She would marry. She would lie with her husband.

And they would be naked. Presumably.

The young groom holding her horse's reins helped her to an overturned tree to use as a mounting block. "Thank you," she said, turning her horse toward the earl. "Shall we go this way, my lord?"

"I'll race you to that large oak in the distance."

Excitement bloomed in her chest. She nodded. "Go!" she cried, kicking her mount into a canter that quickly turned into a gallop. The air whipped against her cheeks, and she felt her hair tumble loose around her shoulders. The pounding hooves echoed through the field, and she could hear the earl fast approaching behind her. It did not take long before he overtook her, laughing as he passed.

She pressed on, determined to win, but as they neared the ancient oak, she accepted the inevitable. She'd been defeated.

Lord St. George pulled his mount to a halt, a wide grin across his handsome face, his hair dishevelled. If she thought him handsome before, he was now downright deadly.

"Better luck next time, my lady. I fear today, at least, I am the victor."

She brought her mount alongside his and, without thinking, smacked his knee lightly with her crop.

"Ouch!" he gasped, rubbing the spot. "That hurt."

"That was for gloating." She reached over and rubbed his leg where she'd struck him, only to realize what she was doing. She looked up and met his gaze and the hunger in his eyes stole her breath. Evangeline pulled her hand away and busied herself with the reins. "So, you're the winner," she said, attempting to shift the suddenly charged air between them. "What do you want as your prize? I'm assuming you'd like one?"

He stared at her, and she couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. Was it the same as her? That this moment, this opportunity, might end in her receiving her first kiss?

She didn't believe he would be so bold. But a lady could hope. Surely she had not misread the hunger in his blue eyes. Since meeting his lordship, whenever she imagined anything remotely romantic with the opposite sex, it was Lord St. George's face that appeared. She couldn't picture another man kissing her, no matter how she tried to manifest the situation.

He rubbed his jaw, a half smile tugging at his lips. "What I want, Lady Evangeline, is too high a price. Even for you."

"You want a monetary sum for your winnings?"

He laughed, loud and carefree, before shaking his head. "No, nothing of the kind. I speak of other celebratory offerings—ones that are too costly to pay." He reached out and tipped her chin upward, his finger grazing her skin before he drew his hand away.

"Tell me what you want, and I shall decide if it's too high a price." She ignored the fact he had touched her again after she'd told him to not to. Not that she didn't want him to touch her, she did, desperately so, but he ought not. Not if he did not want to end up married to her.

"No." The word was final. Unshakable.

She narrowed her eyes, unsettled by his refusal. "I demand to know your price, sir."

"We did not agree to a bet before our race. You owe me nothing, Lady Evangeline."

That answer would not do at all. "It goes without saying that every race has a winner, and the loser must pay a price. It's what is done."

"Not today. Not this race."

He turned his mount back toward the carriage. In the distance, she could see the servants waiting, their preparations long since completed. A deep roll of thunder echoed across the hills and Evangeline looked behind her and saw storm clouds gathering, the curtain of rain sweeping toward them from the south.

"I think we're going to get wet," Lord St. George said. "Come. We'll return to the carriage before the rain reaches us. I'm not particularly fond of a drenching."

"Nor I. Especially after what happened the last time my gown was soaked." She didn't know why she'd mentioned it—the single most embarrassing moment of her life. She couldn't even bring herself to look at him, though she could feel the weight of his gaze against her cheek.

They galloped back to the carriage and reached the vehicle just in time before the heavens opened. They tied their horses quickly to the back of the carriage and

ordered the servants to return home, before climbing inside as the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

Gusts of wind followed, sending leaves skittering across the road, and what had once been a sunny day now turned dark and foreboding.

"Where did this storm come from?" Evangeline gasped, tugging her skirts down after the wind had lifted them above her ankles. She was damp but not soaked, unlike the poor servants who were now exposed to the full force of the storm.

The carriage rolled forward, and rivulets of water streamed down the windows, blurring the view.

"This rain will make the roads slippery," St. George said. "It'll be a slow journey back to town."

"Do you think we'll reach London before nightfall?"

"I hope so. Unless we get bogged."

Evangeline leaned back in the squabs and let the motion of the carriage soothe her. With every turn of the wheel, they were closer to home.

She glanced across at Lord St. George and found him watching her. The moment their eyes met, he turned to the window, though there was nothing to see.

He ran a hand through his damp hair, and something about the gesture made her stomach flutter. He looked...bedraggled. As though he'd just emerged from some scandalous tryst.

"I can only assume, based on your outing with Mr. Fournier today, that he is one of

your leading admirers," Lord St. George said. "Am I to congratulate you on an upcoming betrothal?"

Evangeline hesitated. She knew she ought not discuss such matters with him, and yet—he was her brother-in-law's dearest friend. And he had proven himself a gentleman in every way.

Sadly...

"I do not think so, my lord. I've had doubts for some time, but after today—after seeing how poorly he handled a crisis—I no longer find him as attractive as I once did."

"I'm surprised you did not faint along with Mr. Fournier. Your sister does not seem to possess the same robust constitution as you, Lady Evangeline."

"No, she does not. But I've always been too bold, too eager to experience new things. I suppose, in doing so, I've scraped my knee more times than any of my sisters."

"You have scars, then, my lady?"

"Oh yes. Many." Without thinking, Evangeline lifted her gown and slid her stocking down past her knee. "See this here? I was chasing a butterfly through the gardens at home. I thought it exotic, but it turned out to be a common, brown-winged sort. I tripped and landed on a rock. Bled terribly. Had Mr. Fournier seen it, he would've fainted dead away."

Lord St. George reached forward and pulled her stocking gently back up over her knee. His gloveless hand was warm, but a little rough and the feel of his touch on her skin was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. She clutched at her chest, certain her heart had ceased beating. His eyes met hers before he lowered her gown

back over her knees.

Everything in her stilled.

Her breath caught. Her pulse quickened.

She clutched the squabs, desperate to keep from lurching into his lap like a wanton. One more touch—just one—and she feared she would forget propriety entirely.

And that would never do at all.

Chapter

Fourteen

Damn. Damn. Damn. Let go of Lady Evangeline's silk stocking, you cad! For that matter, let go of her dress.

But he could not.

Something had seized inside him—the overwhelming urge to right her ridiculous wrong—and the sight of her knee, her slim thigh, and those perfect ankles had nearly made him groan. He'd almost dropped to his knees and begged her to give him something—anything—to soothe the ache churning within him.

This only proved what he already knew. He should've gone to the Covent Garden and indulged in a little nightly distraction before joining a picnic with a very pretty, very alluring, and very intelligent woman.

He could feel her eyes on him. And if he looked, if he met her gaze, he knew exactly what would happen.

No. That wasn't true. He knew what would happen—and he couldn't let it. Not with Lady Evangeline. Not with his friend's sister-in-law, a woman entrusted to his care.

But she wasn't safe. Hell, he wasn't safe.

Neither of them were safe in that moment, and something warm and primal inside

him knew it.

“Here I am, touching you again inappropriately. I do apologize, my lady,” he said, keeping his gaze fixated on a window he could not see out of.

“You apologize a lot, my lord. Is it a habit of yours?”

Her teasing tone gave him hope—hope that maybe she didn’t think it anything more than a friend correcting her lapse in propriety.

But the moment he looked at her, he realized his mistake.

She may have spoken with jest, but her eyes burned—with need, with expectation, with hope.

Did she want him to touch her?

Dear God, he wanted to touch her. Almost from the moment they’d met. Once, he’d thought it was because she reminded him of?—

But now... Now he wasn’t so sure his desire stemmed from the past.

She was so very different. Yes, she looked like Luisa, but that was where the resemblance ended. Somewhere along the way, he’d begun to see her as her own person—which, of course, he should have done from the start.

But he couldn’t allow himself the liberty.

He was newly retired from working for the Foreign Office. Who knew who was still watching him? Who might know of his identity after what had happened in Italy?

To be near him in any romantic capacity could be dangerous. He would not put Lady Evangeline in peril.

But dear God, he wanted a taste of her.

“It seems to be a habit when I’m around you,” he admitted, the truth slipping out before he could stop it.

“Really?” she said, her voice low, a seductive edge sharpening each syllable. “You find it hard not to touch me.” She paused. “Interesting.”

“Is it interesting or illogical?”

A small, knowing smile curled her lips. “I think it is both.”

“I don’t know what’s happening here, Lady Evangeline, but I know that it must stop. I can’t promise you anything. I don’t know when— if—I’ll be ready to offer more.”

She bit her lip, then turned to trace a raindrop with her finger as it slid down the windowpane. “How will you know you cannot offer more...if you never try?” She turned back to him. “I may be your soul mate, my lord.”

God help him. How could he tell her that she wasn’t? That he’d buried his soul mate in a foreign grave and left her behind in Italy?

And yet... He couldn’t outright dismiss Evangeline’s words either.

He favored her. She occupied his thoughts far too often. He wanted her. Burned for her. Even now.

“And,” she said airily, “should you dismiss me outright, I’ll be left with no other

choice but to marry someone else. Then you'll have lost your chance to know. I'll become a what if , a past regret possibly. You'll always wonder if you should have courted me when you had the chance."

"I'm not for you, Lady Evangeline. Trust me when I say I keep from you for your own good."

"Keep from me?" she said, grinning. "You speak as if you'd ravish me if I said I wished you to."

Ezra said nothing. To speak would be to confess everything. But he didn't think she was unaware of his thoughts. She could see it, as clearly as he felt it.

Even with all his warnings, even knowing what danger he might bring, he wanted her. So damn much.

"You could do with a good ravishing," he said gruffly, "but I shall, unfortunately, not be the one giving you what you need. That pleasure is for your future husband."

"So you don't wish to ravish me?" she asked, her voice softening. "Am I not what you—or other men—see as...ravish-worthy?"

Ravish-worthy?

Was that even a word? If only she knew the images plaguing his mind. His cock ached, hard and unrelenting. His muscles strained from the effort not to move— not to gather her in his arms and kiss her until neither of them remembered who they were. To lift her soft muslin skirts and slide his fingers into her warmth... To make her shatter in his arms.

He ground his teeth. "You are very ravish-worthy, Lady Evangeline. Don't ever

doubt your allure.”

“I’ve wondered, since I’ve been in the country so long...perhaps my Season will be unsuccessful. Maybe I’ve left it too late. An old maid in the making.”

“You are far from an old maid,” he said, his voice hoarse. “If I were not a gentleman, I’d move to the seat beside you and show you exactly how wrong you are.”

She grinned, as if she didn’t quite believe him. And it gutted him. He wanted to prove her wrong. Wanted to shatter every ounce of doubt she held about her worth.

Do not kiss her merely because she reminds you of who you lost.

He shook the thought aside. The more he came to know Evangeline, the more distinct those differences became.

And damn it, he was different too.

“You’re very kind, my lord,” she said after a pause. “And should I be gullible, I’d believe you.”

She turned her gaze back to the window, and with it, the conversation seemed to close.

But Ezra couldn’t let it end like that.

For several minutes, they sat in silence, the rumble of the carriage wheels the only sound. Her profile was serene... but something tugged at her. Concern, perhaps. Doubt. Disappointment.

He leaned forward and gently clasped her hands.

“Evangeline,” he said quietly, “look at me.”

She didn’t move.

“Please.”

Slowly—excruciatingly so—she turned to him.

“Yes?” she said, watching him with a glimmer of trepidation.

He took a steadying breath. “I will kiss you. Here and now. Just a friendly kiss, so you may experience what it will be like when your perfect husband finds you.”

“I do not want to make you do anything you don’t wish to do, my lord,” she said softly. “I won’t be anyone’s charity.”

He shook his head. “I do not kiss you out of charity.” His voice dropped low, serious. “Of everything that will happen here this afternoon...know that for certain.”

Chapter

Fifteen

Everything within Evangeline stilled at Lord St. George's words. Maybe a little part of her had guilted him into kissing her, but now, seated before him, watching him look at her with such hunger that it stole her wits, not to mention her breath, she could not regret her actions.

And no one was forcing him, as he stated, she had to believe that was true. That he wanted to kiss her out of his own desires and needs and nothing else.

She drank in the sight of him, his chiseled jaw, his lovely, soft-looking lips, and perfect brows that sat above almond-shaped eyes of the darkest blue. She wanted to reach for him, run her fingers through his thick hair and pull him close, kiss him as much or as little as she wanted, whenever she wanted, for however long she wanted.

She desired him, and there was no denying that.

Even if it were scandalous behavior and went against her decree not to cause any trouble for her sister and the duke. But one kiss in a carriage as they traveled back to London could not hurt anyone. No one knew what they were doing inside the vehicle. There would be no scandal, merely pleasure.

"You are going to kiss me..." She bit her lip, nerves fluttering in her stomach. "What if I do not know what to do? What if I do it wrong?"

"You will not do anything wrong. You'll find that kissing will come naturally in time."

She threw him a disbelieving look. "I would believe that, if I were to kiss a gentleman every day for practice, but I cannot do that, so I may be terrible at it with you and still terrible at it with my future husband."

He pulled her closer still, his large, warm fingers warming hers. "You will be perfect at it, I promise."

She nodded and watched, transfixed, as he moved toward her. She did the same, thinking that copying him would be her best course of action, and thankfully that seemed to be the right thing to do.

"Relax, Evangeline. You'll like my kisses, I promise."

The sound of her name on his lips sent a shiver down her spine and goosebumps to lift on her arms. Her fingers tightened about his as his lips, as soft as she assumed them to be, swiped against hers.

She gasped at the first touch of a man in such an intimate caress. Lord St. George brushed his mouth against hers again, and Evangeline copied his movements. His breath teased her lips and hunger balled in her stomach with the need for more.

The earl pulled back, and their eyes met, and she wondered what he was doing. Was there more to kisses than the teasing one he'd just bestowed? Had he finished? Oh, please don't let it be so.

"Blast," he whispered, before his hand clasped the nape of her neck and he kissed her.

Hard.

There were no soft swishes of lips this time. No slow seduction of the mouth, teasing, guiding. Oh no. His lordship kissed her as if she were his lifeblood, commanding her to yield to his superiority and taking more than she'd ever imagined possible.

Evangeline reached for the lapels of his coat, needing to secure herself, ground herself from the firestorm that erupted within her. His kiss was everything she had ever hoped and more. Seductive and sweet all at once. His tongue teased hers, and tentatively she copied his movement, eliciting a moan from his lordship that went straight between her legs.

She closed them, attempting to soothe the ache his outburst had caused. Her nipples hardened, the soft cotton shift doing little to lessen the tension building within her.

"Tell me your name," she managed to gasp as his kiss continued to spin her out of control.

"Ezra."

She liked his name, strong and powerful as he was. "Kiss me more, Ezra."

He needed no coaxing. He kissed her again, his fingers spiking into her hair, clasping it with enough tension that he tipped up her head to guide her to do as he pleased. He kissed his way down her throat, her shoulders, running the tip of his tongue along her shoulder blade.

She gasped, having never been in such a great tweek.

"Yes," she moaned, unable to stop the plea that voiced itself. She held on, relishing the feel of his mouth against her skin, teasing her flesh. He kissed around her bodice, shamelessly paying heed to the tops of her breasts. She bit her lip, wanting him to touch her, everywhere, but unable to voice her wants.

She could not be so bold or wanton, and yet, right at this moment, should he ask for more, she wasn't certain she could deny him anything.

"You smell like jasmine and sin," he breathed against the top of her breast. She slipped her hand into his hair, fisting it as she held him against her.

Perhaps she was a wanton all along, and there was no use fighting the urges that burned within her body. All had to be normal for a woman. There was no way one could feel so good, and that emotion be a vice.

His lordship moved and came to kneel before her. His change of position placed him between her legs, and he was hard against her, his height placing his eyes level with hers.

"I told you I did not kiss you out of pity." He reached for her again and she was lost. Lost to a world of passion and need and wanting to revel in this sweet, intoxicating world forever.

His mouth took hers in a searing kiss that stole the last of her wits. She allowed herself to fall, to let go and simply feel all that he offered.

"Ezra," she moaned when his hand slipped along her waist to cup the bottom of her breast. The intimate touch soothed a little of the need overwhelming her, but still it wasn't enough.

She wanted more.

"I should stop. This has gone too far." Yet his words were the opposite to his actions. His strong hand pawed her breast, his thumb and forefinger finding her nipple with expertise she would later wonder about before he squeezed it through her gown.

She moaned, pressing into him, needing the satisfaction of his touch. He left her mouth, moving down her neck, his hand clasping the bodice of her gown and sliding it down.

The cool air kissed her exposed breast and heat kissed her cheeks. She did not look, merely closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel all that he was doing to her. His warm mouth covered her nipple, sucking her, his tongue flicking her sensitive flesh. It was too much, and moisture pooled at her core.

She wanted him so desperately.

She clutched him, pulling him close, and he pressed her back against her seat, his body cocooned between her legs, pressing and teasing her needy flesh as his mouth lavished her breast.

"This is too much," she managed to say, overwhelmed by what he was making her feel.

He pawed and kissed her, and with his body pressed hard against hers, warmth overwhelmed her. A pleasure unlike anything she had ever known pulsed from her core out to every part of her body. Evangeline clung to him, seeking the pressure of his body as pleasure rocked through her blood.

"Ezra," she gasped, unsure of what she was doing but feeling so much unexplained euphoria that she was dizzy.

"I like my name on your lips." His words, dark and commanding, thrummed through her like a second release, and she could barely breathe, nevertheless respond. She had never felt so utterly wonderful in her life. How had he made her feel thus with just a touch, with just a kiss?

The man was a marvel. And she was utterly besotted with him.

"I like your hands on me too."

He growled against her breast, leaving one last kiss on her nipple before he pulled up the bodice of her gown and fixed her dress back in place. He pulled back and sat on the seat across from her, adjusting his cravat. His eyes were dark, wild with need, and she knew what he was feeling.

For he had made her feel wonderful, and she had little doubt that he wanted her, wanted to do more, to press further. And right at this moment, should he ask, she could not say that she would deny him anything.

The outskirts of London passed by the window outside, blurred by the falling rain, and yet all of the world and its troubles seemed to dissipate with their cocooned selves. She wanted to stay here forever. Just the two of them.

"One kiss as I promised. Did that suffice, my lady?" he asked, once again the composed earl he normally was.

Evangeline sat up and attempted to appear the same, although inside she was all sixes and sevens. Her blood was aflame, her body lethargic with release, and yet her mind raced for when she could kiss him again. Seek him out to have more of this wonderful man all to herself.

"It sufficed very well, thank you, my lord. I do believe you're quite proficient in the art."

His lips twitched. "Do not tease, madam. I'm balancing on a knife's edge."

Evangeline schooled her features. That worked perfectly well for her too.

Chapter

Sixteen

They arrived back at the Ravensmere London home just as dusk began to settle over the city. Ezra led Lady Evangeline up the stairs and escorted her inside to ensure her safe return. Upon entering the foyer, he handed his greatcoat and hat to a waiting footman, ignoring the fact that Lady Evangeline was also slipping out of her cloak and gloves, the scent of jasmine teasing his senses and making him wish they were still ensconced in the carriage.

Alone.

Voices came from the library, and Lady Evangeline started toward the room, knocking before the duke bade her enter. Ezra followed, wanting to find out what had happened to Mr. Fournier and to assure the duke and duchess that Lady Evangeline was home safely and unharmed.

Not un-kissed, but that was another matter altogether the duke did not need to know about.

Ever.

"Evangeline, you're home. I'm so sorry, my dear. In all the chaos that happened this afternoon, I left you behind." The duchess came up to her sister and embraced her before leading her over to the hearth and seating them together.

Ezra took a single chair, hoping that he'd schooled his features enough that the duke did not see the guilt clawing at his back over his actions in the carriage.

Kiss the chit indeed. Not only that, but he'd rubbed up against her, so much so that he was certain she'd climaxed. Not that she'd admitted to such a thing, but her moans and sighs of delight were proof enough. His kisses may be enjoyable, but they were not that gratifying.

"Mr. Fournier—how is he? We've been worried about him all afternoon."

"He is well and has returned home. A doctor was called and has just left after updating the duke. Mr. Fournier had several stitches, and the doctor informed him he was fortunate the injury was not worse. He could have been killed, he said. Mr. Fournier, I believe, feels very foolish and has been ordered to remain home for the next week or so."

"Well, that is good news," Lady Evangeline said, smiling at her sister before her gaze drifted to him.

Just as it was wont to do these days. Heat licked up his spine and he cursed himself for the weak man he'd become when it came to Lady Evangeline. But he could not help it. She was so alike to Luisa that his heart gave a thump whenever he saw her. But it was not only that. The passion that flared between them in the carriage was most usual.

As much as he had adored Luisa, the visceral need, the fire that lit within him whenever he was within touching distance of Lady Evangeline was not what had occurred before.

His past affection had been muted compared to how he was feeling now. Did that mean anything? Did it mean Luisa was not his soul mate as he'd believed? Did it

mean that Lady Evangeline was? He did not know what the hell any of it meant, nor did he have the answer, and the guilt that plagued him for thinking in such a way broke him in two.

How could he be so unfaithful to Luisa's memory when she had died because of him? What a bastard he was and deserved nothing good in his life.

"I hope you do not mind, Your Grace, but we did ride about Richmond for a time before traveling back to London. I will admit that we were caught in a storm, which has followed us back to town, and we were forced to travel together in the carriage."

The duchess glanced at her husband before meeting Ezra's eyes. "We trust you, Lord St. George, to act the gentleman. And that Evangeline has arrived safely and seemingly unscathed from your troublesome delays with the weather, I see no reason to chastise you or my sister or be concerned. What say you, Duke?"

The duke nodded. "Yes, I agree. I'm glad that everyone is home and that, after the day we've had, Mr. Fournier will be well again, and everything can go back to normal. The Season is chaotic enough without these kinds of things happening in one's life."

"Well, I'm tired and I wish to bathe before dinner, so I shall excuse myself." Lady Evangeline stood. "Thank you for escorting me back to London, Lord St. George. I believe we'll see you at the Wilcox masque tomorrow evening?"

He nodded, his mind a flurry of thoughts on what Lady Evangeline would look like naked in a bath. Her hands running over her soft skin, soaping up her womanly curves, washing her most private of places.

His body hardened and he crossed his legs, knowing he could not leave for several minutes unless he wanted to out his attraction to Evangeline.

An attraction he must fight for his own sanity—and to keep her safe.

"I will also excuse myself. I shall see you at dinner, my dear," the duchess said, leaning down to kiss the duke.

For a moment Ezra stared in shocked silence at the casualness of their public display of affection before they were left alone. The duke threw him a smirk and stood before pouring them both a glass of brandy.

He handed Ezra a crystal tumbler and he drank down the portion in one gulp.

"Easy, St. George, or I'll have to send the doctor to escort you home as well."

He laughed and placed down his glass before leaning back in his chair. "What a day. And I cannot lie and say I shall not be pleased to see the end to it."

"True," the duke agreed. "Mr. Fournier —what a fool the man is. One should never think they can pet a wild buck. I've never seen anything so stupid in my entire life."

Ezra chuckled at the memory, not that it was amusing. Not really. It could have ended quite badly. "He's an idiot. You're not really considering him as a prospect for Lady Evangeline, are you?"

"No, and nor do I think she's truly interested in the gentleman either. But he's kind enough and keen. He will be heartbroken, of course, when she chooses another, but what can one do? The choice is hers, after all."

Ezra was glad to hear it. Not that he particularly liked the idea of her choosing anyone. A contradictory thought to what he constantly told himself when it came to her.

That she's not for him. That she would be better off—and much safer—to be as far away from him as possible. Certainly, marriage to him would not end well if those who sought to injure him further discovered his identity and traced him to London.

He felt the duke's attention on him before he said, "Why are you interested in who's courting Lady Evangeline? Are you considering putting your hat into the ring? I know you to be a sensible, honorable man. I would not disapprove."

"No. I'm not willing to court anyone at present." He frowned and knew he needed to give his friend a reason behind his aversion. Certainly, it was not because he did not like or lust—he did—after the chit, but that he could not see another woman's life taken while in his care. He could not suffer through losing another whom he loved.

"There is something that you must know about me, Ravensmere. A secret that must stay between us. You cannot mention it to the duchess, and if I have your word on that, I shall tell you the reason why I will not be courting Lady Evangeline—or anyone else—in London this Season. Or mayhap the next."

The duke leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers. "I'm listening, St. George."

Ezra ran a hand through his hair and thought where to start. "I suppose the only way is to be blunt and straightforward. While I was abroad, it was not to sow my oats or enjoy the warm waters of the Mediterranean while working for the Foreign Office, but because I was a King's Man. I was based in Italy, and while I cannot go into detail as to what my role was in the country, needless to say, I found myself in a position of weakness that took the life of a woman I was going to marry."

He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat at the memory, guilt prickling along his spine that he was still alive while she was not. Her family devastated and ripped apart—all because he dared to love her.

"I placed her in danger, knowing that being with me was not safe. Of course, I looked a little different to how I do now—I had a beard and long hair abroad—and as far as I'm aware, my identity was never breached. But that may not always be the case. If anyone from that time knows who I am, it places those around me now in danger. My future wife, whomever that may be, included."

"You were a spy?" The duke looked confounded before he shook himself from his shock. "Good God, man. I'm both proud to know you and concerned at the same time."

"Intelligence states that my identity is safe, and I do not look the same, so it would be hard for those who knew me in that position to recognize me now. But still, it's a concern that I must heed."

"But if it is safe now, why hold back from possibly marrying? I can speak from experience that it's a wonderful constitution, and one that I wish I had entered sooner. With the duchess, of course."

"Of course." Ezra chuckled, knowing the duke was well pleased and happy with his lot in life. "I cannot put another at risk. Certainly not a lady I may love."

"Well," the duke said, sighing and rubbing his jaw. "That will leave Lady Evangeline most unhappy."

The duke's words made him start. "Whatever for? I do not understand."

"Well, it is clear that Lady Evangeline likes you very much, and I think she silently hopes that you'll commence a courtship. One that, even knowing all that I do, I think you should begin. You cannot worry about a situation that may never occur. And I'm certain that if you were in danger, the Foreign Office would have notified you by now."

That was true, of course, but still, the idea of suffering the pain he endured with Luisa... No. He could not live through such heartache again.

And to see the beautiful, lively, passionate Lady Evangeline maimed—or worse, a condition he dared not imagine—sent a cold shiver down his spine and dread to settle in his stomach.

"I wish to give it a year or so before I move forward with my life. I will know by then if I am safe to court a woman of my choice."

"And if Lady Evangeline marries no one this year and waits for you..."

"I do not wish for her to do that. She may find a gentleman who loves her as he ought. She should not waste her time waiting on me. It may come to pass that I never marry."

"Would you like for me to convey your aversion to marriage so she continues to look elsewhere?"

"Yes, thank you. I think that would be best. But please, keep the reasons behind my decision between us."

"Of course. I shall not mention a word on that." The duke stood and picked up his glass. "Another brandy, perhaps? I think we deserve one, do you not agree?"

"Of course," Ezra replied, only too happy to imbibe. "And then I must be off. I'm in need of a bath and change of clothes myself after being caught in the rain this afternoon."

The duke handed him his drink. "So long as you did behave yourself in the carriage, St. George. Danger or notwithstanding, should anything have happened, all of what

you said would be a moot point."

The duke threw him a pointed glance and Ezra schooled his features. "Nothing untoward occurred," he lied, hoping his friend believed the falsehood.

For he certainly did not.

Chapter

Seventeen

The ducal carriage rolled to a stop before the Wilcox masque ball, the lineup to alight from the carriage taking several minutes due to the size of the ball and the number of guests partaking in the grand event.

Evangeline waited for the duke and duchess to descend before following them, their gowns of fine silk and gold and blue satin were elegant and among the most beautiful dresses and dominoes she had ever worn in her life. She felt like a princess, and the excitement that bubbled through her veins at the forthcoming event could not be doused.

A small part of her could also not wait to see if Lord St. George would attend as planned. After their stolen kiss in the carriage yesterday, she had thought of little else.

He had stated that he'd kiss her once and that it would not occur again, but the memory of his hands over her person, his ability to make her lose all sense of control... Well, she could not believe they would end their one interlude at that number.

Surely he had been jesting. There was no reason why he could not kiss her again. She wasn't asking him to marry her.

They entered the house and slowly made their way toward their hosts where they paid felicitations to Lord and Lady Wilcox before entering the ballroom.

Evangeline gasped at the sight that beheld them. The ceiling was decorated with black tulle, the hanging candelabras unlit, and only standing ones surrounded the ballroom floor, giving the room a dark and mysterious air. The night's theme was dark and decadence, and Lady Delacroix had outdone herself in capturing the very essence of that vision.

"How marvelous, Evangeline," Rosalind said, smiling.

Evangeline chuckled, almost too eager to join in the revelry. They made their way through the throng of guests, stopping to speak with friends of the duke and now her sister as well.

Evangeline stood beside them but did not engage in the conversation. She was far too busy admiring the beautiful gowns and sparkling jewels the ton was showcasing this evening and the masques that gave an air of mystery.

"This is too magical," she said.

"As are you," a deep, seductive voice said at her side.

Warmth ran through her veins, and she turned to meet the eyes of a gentleman. The masque he wore covered half his face, leaving only his lips visible, but she knew those lips—and the voice that accompanied the words.

"My lord, I did not think you would be so forward with your compliments, not after telling me your aversion to courtship only yesterday, even after our kiss," she whispered.

His eyes narrowed, and he tipped his head.

"Remember, St. George? One kiss and no more. You therefore should not be so

forward with your compliments."

He nodded. "Ah, of course," he said remembering finally. "A mistake, my lady. One that I intend on remedying immediately. Come, take a turn about the room with me."

She set her hand on his arm and allowed him to guide her away for their stroll. A mistake? He certainly seemed confident of his words yesterday. How was it that he was having a change of heart. Unless...their kiss had sparked a truth within him and now he could not live without her. They moved about the room, and Evangeline struggled to tell who anyone was at the ball. Not even Lord St. George at her side was easily discernible, nor did he appear to be as tall as she remembered...

He covered her hand with his, holding her at his side, and as much as she liked his lordship showing affection, he really ought to know better than to be so forward at a ball.

"Shall we dance?" It was not a question that he waited for her to answer. Instead, he swooped her out onto the dance floor just as the first notes of a waltz started to play.

Evangeline forgot about the few doubts that plagued her mind and threw herself into the dance, wanting to enjoy her time with Lord St. George, especially when he was in more of a congenial mood to the possibility of them courting.

"Did you enjoy our kiss, Lady Evangeline?" he asked, dipping his head to whisper the words against her ear.

She nodded and felt heat kiss her cheeks at the memory of just how much she had enjoyed their moment of madness. "I did, but you said you would not kiss me again, so I must admit your interest here tonight is a little confusing, my lord."

"I thrive on chaos, my lady. What is life if it's not filled with a little danger?"

"I did not know kissing me was dangerous, my lord."

"Oh, it's very much so—for you at least." He paused, placing the appropriate space between them once more. "At least in terms of what society expects from a woman such as yourself. I speak of those dangers, of course."

"Of course." Evangeline studied Lord St. George and trepidation twisted in her stomach. Perhaps the gentleman she was dancing with was not whom she believed him to be.

She studied his lips, hating herself for not being more certain. Had she inadvertently told a stranger of her and Lord St. George's inappropriate actions in the carriage? She could be ruined. Her sister would be devastated. The duke and duchess would be ashamed. Her chances at a happy, loving marriage would be taken from her.

"Hyde Park is very beautiful. Did you enjoy our picnic there yesterday?" she asked, hoping he would correct the location of their luncheon.

"I did indeed, and I was pleased to escort you home, as short as the carriage ride is from Hyde Park to Mayfair."

Evangeline tore herself from the gentleman's hold, but before she could move away, he clasped her tight against him again, forcing her to continue the dance.

"Shshsh, Evangeline. My sweet—or perhaps I ought to say wicked—little minx. Do not make a scene. I would hate to have to hurt you."

"Pardon, my lord?" Evangeline did as he said, not wanting to cause a scene, but everything within her told her to run, to flee.

"So, you enjoy kissing Lord St. George. Or me, as it were assumed."

She stilled, her blood running cold. "You're not Lord St. George?"

He laughed, and the sound was sinister and far from amusing. "No, of course not. But there is something you can do for me so I shall not have to hurt you—or your family. I know all about pain, and as much as I'm willing to inflict it, I'd prefer not to, you see."

She swallowed, her mind racing at his threat. Would this man hurt her siblings? Her brother-in-law? Lord St. George? Who was he, and what could he possibly want with her? She was a nobody and knew nothing.

"I do not understand, my lord."

"Well, let me explain." He spun them about in the dance and laughed, all pretense now gone. The man was an actor of the highest quality and had even fooled her.

A stupid mistake. One she should have been more heedful of.

"Lord St. George took something from me, and while I cannot have it back, I can make the playing field even. An eye for an eye, if you will."

"You seek revenge?" she asked, not wanting to be part of this ploy. Not in any way. Nor would she help this man hurt Lord St. George. His lordship had already suffered in his past, and while she did not know what that suffering entailed, she would not add to his hardships.

"I will not be part of anything of the kind. If you wish to settle a debt, whatever that debt may be with Lord St. George, you should seek him out yourself and remedy the problem you face."

The gentleman grinned down at her, and his eyes—which she had thought were Lord

St. George's—now looked foreign and unknown. Cold and distant.

"Oh, I will remedy the debt, you may be sure of that. But if I were you, I would keep my distance from his lordship. Death follows him wherever he goes, and innocent lives are stolen because of it. I would hate for the same to happen to you. You're such a pretty little thing, too." The pressure of the gentleman's hand on her back increased and he pulled her closer. "You remind me of my sister. How sad you make me."

Evangeline bit her lip. At a loss as to who this man was or why he was being so cruel. "While I do not know what happened between you and Lord St. George, I do not think whatever you have planned is an intelligent choice."

He laughed. "Lord St. George will get his comeuppance, and you shall help me achieve it. Or you too will face the pain I have suffered."

"I cannot," she said, standing firm.

"But you will, as you must."

Chapter

Eighteen

Ezra arrived late to the ball and, upon entering the room, found Lady Evangeline dancing with a gentleman who was sporting the same domino as he was this evening.

He stilled at the inappropriate distance the gentleman held Lady Evangeline, and then shook the thought aside. She was not his, and the Duke of Ravensmere could speak to her regarding propriety while dancing with other men.

He swiped a glass of wine from a passing footman and started to make his way about the room. His gaze continually slipped toward where Evangeline danced a waltz with the unknown gentleman, and her riveted gaze unsettled him.

Was she captivated by this new gentleman admirer? Had his words of remorse and determination to keep her at a distance that he'd explained yesterday to the duke been conveyed? Had she finally agreed to look elsewhere for a husband?

Was she moving on from him? As she should, so why did the realization feel like a hot poker to his neck?

He groaned and downed his wine before finding another footman and partaking in another glass. It was good that she was surveying her options, allowing other men to form an attachment to her and her to them. That was why she was in London this Season—to find a husband. A love match, which seemed to be what she desired most.

He came to stand beside Ravensmere and glowered at Lady Evangeline and her favored gentleman like a child denied his dessert at dinner. What the hell was wrong with him? He could not keep denying himself a future with anyone—not just Lady Evangeline—and then be put out when the lady in question found another to marry.

He was being absurd and vapid, and it needed to stop.

Make a choice already, man, and run with it.

Yes, but what choice would that be? To find a woman to marry and bear his children. Place another innocent person before a danger they did not know of or see coming.

Already such a future ruled out Lady Evangeline. He liked her far too much already, and he feared that friendship was morphing into something so much stronger.

Damn it all to hell. Whatever would he do?

"I heard from my contact at the Foreign Office and Mr. Fournier checked out," he said to the duke when he was free of his conversation. "But I do not know this new gentleman. We may have to investigate another if their closeness is any indication."

The duke looked out to where Evangeline danced and frowned. "Hmm. I do not recognize the gentleman, but then, this evening knowing who anyone is is difficult."

"He seems a little too close, do you not think?" Ezra mentioned, hoping the duke would do his duty and speak to Evangeline about propriety—something she seemed to have forgotten.

The couple turned in the dance and Ezra stilled at the sight of the gentleman's hand—or more to the point, his thumb rubbing circles over where he clasped her back.

The fiend dared touch her so intimately.

"Hmm," the duke said, his gaze dipping to the familiar clasp on Evangeline's back also. "I shall have Rosalind talk to Lady Evangeline."

The dance came to an end and, surprisingly, Evangeline pulled away from the gentleman, dipped into a curtsy, and fled to the opposite side of the room.

Unease ran down Ezra's spine. "Excuse me a moment, Your Grace. I shall return momentarily." He strode around the dancefloor since the next dance, a set of reels, had commenced. He spied Evangeline slipping through a side door of the ballroom and quickened his pace to catch up. The darkened passage, by the time he stepped into it, was vacant of Evangeline, but he heard the distant closing of a door and started in that direction.

He found a small room at the end of the passage with a dim light flickering beneath the door. He knocked, but hearing no reply, opened it. The sight of Evangeline sitting before a hearth that had long burned down to smoldering coals unnerved him, and he couldn't help but fear something was untoward.

"Evangeline, are you well?" he asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him.

She gasped at his words before she slumped in relief to find that it was him. "I am well, Lord St. George. I just needed a moment's peace."

She had slipped off her mask, her eyes this evening shadowed to suit the darkness of the theme. She looked beautiful, seductive, and utterly captivating.

Hell, how could he keep away from her? How was he to stop himself from wanting her as he did?

An impossible task.

"I saw you dancing this evening and then I also saw you flee. I was concerned."

"You should not be concerned, my lord. I'm perfectly well. You ought to leave before someone finds you here with me and we're compromised. I know you do not wish to marry me."

Her blunt words rang with hurt, and he hated that he'd upset her with his honesty. "It is not that I do not desire or like you, Evangeline. But that I'm not ready to be a husband. There are things in my life that I cannot control and need to be certain of before I offer anyone my name."

She stared at him, nonplussed. "And that is all very well. In that case, you ought to go. I wish to be alone." She waved her hands in the direction of the door, which he ignored.

He ought to heed her words, but nor did it feel right to leave her upset and out of sorts as she was. "I am your friend. I do not like to see you so discombobulated."

"It is nothing. A gentleman was a little forward with me, and that was all. I wanted a moment to calm my nerves—a moment that you're now interrupting."

He stilled at her words. "Who was he?"

She waved his question aside and stood before striding toward a window that overlooked part of the side garden, not that much was visible at this hour of the night. "It does not signify who he was or what he said or anything, but I think you should leave. I will right my nerves and return to the ball and continue my search for a suitable husband—just as you asked me to do."

"I do not wish for you to settle for a husband who is not who you truly want. If you do not find a love match this Season, there is always the next."

"I'm already an old maid by society's standards and getting close to not being considered a viable option for any gentleman looking for a wife to start a family. I do not have the luxury of postponing my search for a husband, unlike the gentlemen of my acquaintance who somehow seem to have years ahead of them. Take Lord Chesham, eighty if he is not a day younger, and rumored to be attending the masque to search for a new bride. Yet women such as myself are forced to marry young." Evangeline pinched the bridge of her nose, clearly frustrated. "Leave, Lord St. George. I'm not in the disposition for company right at this present moment."

He turned to leave and managed to make it to the door before he stopped. "I do not wish for you to be angry with me. I thought we were friends."

"Oh please," she scoffed. "Friends?" She laughed, the sound mocking, and he could not understand why she was being so cruel. "We are not friends. I'm a lady whom you find attractive enough to kiss in a moment of madness in a carriage, but you are not interested in me. Not truly. You do not want a wife—which I cannot force you to have. God forbid a woman make a man marry before he is ready—but friends? Not really, and nor do you truly think that is the case. We speak when we're in the same proximity of each other, you offer to dance with me and are polite, but friends we are not."

He went to her, hating that she dismissed what was between them. He clasped her hands and shook them a little to make her look at him. "You are my friend, and I did not kiss you out of pity or anything else. I kissed you because I wanted—no—I needed to kiss you, to taste your sweet lips." He reached up and ran his thumb along her bottom lip, soft and pliant as he remembered. "I want us to be friends so I may be around you as much as I can. You make me want things that I thought I would never want again. Even if the timing is not right, do not doubt what you make me feel."

"And what is that, St. George, that you feel?" the angry tenor of Ravensmere bellowed from the door.

Chapter

Nineteen

"Y our Grace," Evangeline yelped at the sight of the duke and her sister standing in the doorway to the room. The duke's deep scowl and pointed stare at finding them alone was clear to see on his features, whereas her sister gaped at the sight of them.

Evangeline moved away from Lord St. George and clasped her hands before her. "I left the ball a little distressed after a dance and Lord St. George found me. That is all that happened. There is no need to be so severe with either of us being found..."

"Alone." The duke pulled Rosalind into the room and closed and locked the door. "What do you have to say, St. George? You're supposed to be a gentleman, a close friend of mine. Dear God, what made you think going after Lady Evangeline where you were caught alone was a good idea?"

"It is not as if we were caught kissing."

"And yet," the duke said, striding over to them. "I know that you have, after walking in on your little conversation." He turned to St. George, his eyes wild with temper. "You lied! You told me nothing happened between you and yet you've kissed..." He paused. "Where did this occur?"

The duke watched them both for an answer, and yet, Evangeline could not form the words to speak. She'd never seen His Grace so wild with temper, and she certainly didn't want to add fuel to his already burning wildfire of rage.

"I kissed Lady Evangeline in the carriage while bringing her home yesterday afternoon."

The duchess tried to bite back a smile, but Evangeline did not miss it—and nor did the duke, who frowned at her.

"You will marry Lady Evangeline. I cannot have word of you molesting my unmarried, debutante sister-in-law in a carriage alone, might I add, and then not marry her."

"Of course, I understand," St. George said without question.

Evangeline gasped, having never heard of anything so preposterous. "I will not marry Lord St. George just because we kissed in a carriage. A kiss that no one saw," she whispered wildly, not wanting anyone else who may be lurking about in the shadowed hallways to hear. "Rosalind, do speak to the duke and make him see sense."

Rosalind came to her and reached for her hand, squeezing it. "If this should get out, if a servant saw you on your travels back to London yesterday, then you will be ruined, and I cannot allow that. I agree with the duke. You must marry the earl."

"He does not love me," she whispered to her sister, hoping she would see sense. See the absurdity of this decision.

"That as it may be, sister, the decision is made. You both chose to be reckless yesterday and then tonight we've found you alone. And after what we heard... Well, this is the outcome of that decision."

Evangeline ripped her hand out of her sister's clutch and stepped away, not wanting to hear such absurdness. "You kissed the duke before you married him, before he

offered you anything, and yet you'll force me into a decision that I do not want."

"You do not?" Lord St. George blurted before looking chagrined. "That is to say, I thought you did not dislike me..."

"That is entirely beside the point," Evangeline said. "You do not want a wife, and you do not love me, and now you're being made to marry me. This will not end well for our future situation."

"Well," the duke blustered. "I'm sorry, but I overheard what his lordship said, and I now know that there was familiar relations between you in the carriage. Neither of you have a choice."

"I will do what's right."

Evangeline huffed out an annoyed breath. What was right for him and the situation, but where did that leave her? She was told by the stranger this evening to keep away from Lord St. George, if only to keep her family safe. And she was attempting that, and somehow now she had made it all worse.

To be married to him was not keeping away from him. Not that a small part of her wasn't thrilled to be marrying St. George. Who would not want to marry a man of such refinement? But still, she did not want to place her sisters in danger. Nor did she want to marry a man who could one day resent her for being his wife. No one forced into the marriage constitution was happy, she was certain.

You could always tell St. George of the threat this evening.

The idea wasn't without merit, and she decided it was her only way forward. Perhaps he could help her. He would not let anything happen to her or her family, surely.

"I expect you to call tomorrow morning to discuss the marriage contract, and we shall have the banns called. In three Sundays from now, you shall be married," the duke stated, his tone brooking no argument.

"Oh my dearest sister, congratulations," Rosalind said, pulling her into a quick embrace. "I'm so very happy for you," she whispered into her ear. "I know you shall be very well pleased married to his lordship."

Evangeline nodded, and deep down too hoped that would be the case. But a marriage of convenience, forced to wed due to an arcane law of propriety for unmarried ladies, was ludicrous. Not to mention the danger that now shadowed her every step.

"I wish to speak with St. George before returning to the ball. Will you allow us a moment alone?"

The duke looked to the duchess, and with the slightest nod from Rosalind, he relented. "Very well, but no more than five minutes, and if you're not back at the ball by then, we shall return and there will be hell to pay."

"We shall not be long," Evangeline promised, waiting for her family to leave. Once the door closed behind them, she met St. George's eyes. "There is something you need to know about the gentleman who danced with me this evening. I do not know who he was, nor do I think I've met him before, but our dance was not the reason why I was so out of sorts when you found me. Why I was cutting with you, my lord."

"We're engaged, Evangeline. You may call me Ezra."

The fluttering in her heart was not welcome. She could not be excited to have leave to call him thus going forward, not when there were other more serious issues at play.

"What did the gentleman say to you?" Ezra continued, watching her far too keenly

than she liked.

"He threatened me to keep away from you. That if I did not want to be hurt, or my family, that I ought to keep my distance from you. That people who are near you end up dead." She bit her lip, hating that she allowed a stranger to threaten her. Never had she been spoken to thus, and as much as she liked to think herself strong, there was something about the man's threat that seemed genuine and one she could not ignore. She could not place her sisters at risk, should the crazy man from earlier in the night be telling the truth.

"You see, that is why we cannot marry. I do not know your past, and while I know you've had a significant loss in your life, I do not know the particulars of that time. What did the man mean, Ezra? Will my family be hurt, or worse, killed by merely being around you?"

She met Ezra's eyes and found his face had paled. Without thought she reached for him. "Ezra, say something. I do not know what to do."

A muscle worked in his jaw and finally, at length, he spoke. "We will marry, and I shall find out who this fiend was this evening who dared threaten anyone of my acquaintance." Without warning he pulled her against him, held her against his chest. She welcomed his embrace, having been at sixes and sevens with worry in the short amount of time since she'd spoken to the stranger. To have Ezra's arms around her was a comfort she did not know she needed.

"Nothing shall happen to you or your family. Nothing. I shall not allow any harm to come to you. I shall find out who this bastard is, and I will rid him of this earth, I promise you that."

She looked up at him and could see he was in earnest. "You cannot kill a man. You'll be sent to the colonies, or worse, hanged."

"Do not think of him again. All will be well."

She debated arguing the point that the situation they now found themselves in would not be all well or so easily dismissed. "I'm sorry that you have to marry me, but you did follow me in here, so it is not entirely my fault."

"I do not blame you," he whispered, his thumb on her back rubbing against her silk domino and making her skin prickle in awareness. "I followed you in here, and I kissed you yesterday. If it is anyone's fault for the position that we now find ourselves in, it is because of me."

"So you're not angry?"

"I'm not against marriage, Evangeline. I merely did not wish to marry yet . But," he sighed, leaning down to kiss her lips softly. Her body roared to life, and even though she tried to extend his kiss, he pulled back. "Marry we must, and soon. Four weeks is too far away if I wish to keep you close and safe."

"You believe we should be married earlier?"

"I do."

Chapter

Twenty

Although Ezra could not place what shifted in the short amount of time that he was holding Evangeline, suddenly he wanted to keep holding her. To forget about the ball that celebrated just a few walls from where they stood. To stay here, holding his betrothed, drinking in her beauty and warmth.

A surge of protectiveness came over him, and he swore that nothing would come to harm her, or the family she loved so very dearly. No nameless and faceless—at present—nemesis would ever lay one finger on her person.

"Have I told you this evening how very beautiful you are? You should not wear a masque to hide such features. They ought to be adored, even if from afar."

A light blush stole over her cheeks and she stared up at him with such longing that heat knotted in his stomach. He pulled her closer still and could not deny himself a taste of her before they returned to the ball.

He dipped his head and kissed her again. Yesterday's embrace in the carriage was far too short, and not nearly long enough. In fact, married or not, Ezra had to admit that he'd thought long into the night over their interlude and knew that it was only a matter of time before he kissed her again.

No matter the lies he told himself—and her—his willpower was not so strong that he could keep from her forever. Although he wasn't sure if this desire was love, it was

something dangerously close. Mayhap it was a good thing that they would be married so he could get his fill of her whenever he wished, forgoing any scandal.

She kissed him back, her fingers slipping about the lapels of his coat and holding him near. She made a little whimpering sound—a plea if he ever heard one—and he could not deny her.

You only have five minutes...

He ignored the warning and swept her up into his arms, walking her over to a nearby sideboard and setting her atop it. She did not question his motives, but merely continued to kiss him.

Her lips were soft but insistent, her tongue teased his with restraint. Hunger warred with the knowledge that they did not have time, that he could not stay here more than he'd promised.

Still, he wanted her.

"Ezra," she moaned when his hand slipped about the underside of her breast, cupping what would soon be his to enjoy nightly. "We should return to the ball."

"I know," he breathed against her lips, pinching her nipple softly through her gown.

She gasped, pressing herself into his touch. He was hard, his cock pressed against his silk breeches, and he ached for release. He pulled her to the side of the cupboard and settled between her legs. Even with all the material that separated them, pressing against her sex gave him something of a moment of relief.

But it was only short-lived. She slipped her legs about his waist, her foot pressing against his buttocks and urging him forward.

He swallowed a moan. The axis on which his restraint balanced toppled and fell.

Evangeline threw back her head, his name a plea on her lips as he rolled his cock against her mons. Although he could not feel the particulars of her sweet spot, he knew she ached for him, that if he were to reach beneath her gown and feel her, she would be deliciously wet.

He stilled, breath ragged against her cheek. Someone had threatened her. A nameless enemy had whispered death into her ear. And here he was, seducing her like a fool instead of protecting her like a man should.

Without thought, his hand reached for the hem of her gown. He touched along her leg, wanting to feel the softness of her flesh, the slippery glide of his hand over her silk stocking. She opened for him like a flower and he clasped the underside of her thigh, squeezing it before reaching around to touch her mons.

"Sweet, Evangeline, I harbored a guess you wanted me, but I did not believe it would be this much."

"Mmmm." Her response, deep and seductive, went straight to his balls. "Well, it is." She reached between them and settled her hand over his, helping him, guiding him to pet her sex. "Make me feel like you did yesterday."

Dear God, he had made her come... He'd believed he had, but he could not be certain, and at that time he definitely could not ask. "We do not have time." Still, he slipped his fingers over her engorged nubbin, between her wet folds, to tease her aching flesh.

"I want you. I ache for you so much." Her free hand slipped about his neck and clasped the back of his hair. "I want you inside me."

He kissed her deep and long, giving her partly what she wanted by dipping a finger into her heat. He fucked her, wishing silently that it was his cock that pumped into her cunny and not his hand. "I want to be inside you too."

She moved her hand away and pressed against the falls of his breeches. Ezra sucked in a startled gasp, pressing into her hold like a man starved of touch.

And in a way, he was. It had been almost two years since he'd been with a woman. Far too long if he were to keep any semblance of restraint.

Something that was clearly lacking right at this moment.

Danger lurks. You should not be here. This is reckless.

"I dreamed of you last night," she admitted, her fingers wrapping about his cock—as much as they could with him still wearing his breeches—and stroking him. He moaned, kissing her with a rawness, a madness that would not abate.

She pulled back, that seductive, deep laugh unlike anything he'd ever heard from her before, and yet, he could not get enough of hearing it.

"Do you not want to know what I dreamed of?"

"Hmmm. Is it safe to tell me since we're already late to return to the ballroom?"

She grinned, a naughty smile that told him more than words that he was in trouble with the woman in his arms. Far more trouble than he'd ever been with anyone else.

"Possibly not, but now that we're to be married, I do not see any harm." She gasped when he dipped a second finger into her heat. "Does it involve me fucking you with my hand, my lady?"

She bit her lip, her eyes heavy with need. She was close to coming. He could sense it by her sex and the trembling of her body.

"Yes, but more than that." She met his eyes and he could see she was warring with how to say what she wanted. "That is to say," she moaned when he curved his fingers and teased her from within. "That is to say, I dreamed of you in my bed. Touching me like this, and taking me." She paused, gathering herself. "While I do not know what such undertakings involve, I have a little more sense of it now."

"And are you still unsure you wish to marry me?" he questioned. Why, however, he could not make out. They had to marry, there was no question about that. But why did he care if she was unsure or not? Up until tonight, marriage to Evangeline was a non-starter, but now that he must, he didn't want to hear of her having doubts. Or not wanting to be his wife.

He wanted her in his bed—that was clear in how hard and full of need she made him. The choice had been taken out of his hands, and he could not be displeased with what their marriage would entail.

Days and nights of similar encounters... Years of pleasure, so long as he rid them of whomever threatened to steal such a future from him again.

"Of course I'm unsure still, but then we do not have a choice, do we?"

It was not the answer he wanted, but he relented and did not push her for more. "We do not," he said.

The pressure of her hold increased and he undulated into her hand. "You'll make me spend if you continue to rub my cock, Evangeline." He gasped when she did not relent. "You're a quick study."

"I'm not a young woman, Ezra. I'm not ashamed to say I have read some material on the situations involved with the marriage bed, but this has exceeded my expectations, and I find that I do not wish to stop. I want to do more with you. Here and now. I want you to want me as much as I want you."

"Oh, I do want you, but we must go back."

Just then, the sound of footsteps coming up the passage alerted Ezra, and just as the door swung wide, he managed to wrench Evangeline from the sideboard and back on her slippered feet. Her gown, thankfully, fell about her ankles as if nothing untoward had occurred.

The displeased and suspicious glower from the Duke of Ravensmere, however, said without words that his quick actions had not fooled the duke—and he was more than aware of what had been happening.

"We were just coming." Ezra took Evangeline's hand and pulled her from the room, ignoring the fact his cock was erect and pressing against his falls. He pulled his domino farther about his front to hide his manhood, but he knew the duke had seen.

He just hoped no one else would suspect before their announcement was made publicly.

Chapter

Twenty-One

The following morning Ezra arrived at the ducal residence and went over the marriage contracts with Ravensmere. The terms were straightforward, and he was surprised that Evangeline came with more of a dowry than he had believed.

"There is just one other thing that you need to be aware of before I have the contracts written up to be signed."

"And what is that?" Ezra asked. Not entirely put at ease by the duke's somber tone.

"The Ravensmere daughters have three illegitimate sisters living in London. The late duke had them with his long-term mistress, and well, I think you ought to know of them before we proceed, even though the marriage between you and Lady Evangeline must go ahead after what happened after the picnic..." The duke cleared his throat.

Ezra raised his brows, having not heard of the extended family attached to the Ravensmere name, but then he'd been a long time away from society. "Lady Evangeline has never mentioned them. Does she know they exist?"

"No, she does not. And we have an agreement since the duchess's Season last year that they would not cause any trouble for the duke's legitimate daughters. Not that I think that they would, in any case. They seem well-rounded and kind women, even if they're born on the wrong side of the cloth."

"I shall not mention it to Lady Evangeline, but I do believe she ought to be told. I'm assuming the duchess knows of them?"

"She does, and she wishes to meet them, but I do not think that would be such a good idea. The Ravensmere women have giving hearts, and it would be only a matter of time should the duchess meet with her half sisters before she would move them all in here and demand that I too host them a Season each as well."

Ezra chuckled, and yet, he could understand that the duchess wished to meet her siblings. They shared a father, and obviously the duchess did not blame the girls for being birthed by the duke's lover. But kind or not, scandal traveled fast in London. And if someone was already watching him and now Evangeline, this knowledge—if leaked—could become a weapon.

The sound of Evangeline's voice floated into the library and everything within Ezra stilled. A hunger, that had not doused itself—not even after a good night's sleep—stirred, and he knew he had to see her before he made his way home.

"There is something that you are also in need of knowing, Your Grace." Ezra sat back in his chair and hoped what he was about to divulge did not upset Evangeline. He had not asked her permission to share, but in this case the duke needed to know, especially since it involved their family. Although he'd hoped he'd never have his past bleed into his new life, that promise meant little when the past came knocking with threats and shadows.

"Last evening, Lady Evangeline was warned by an unknown guest at the masque. The man told her to keep away from me or she or her sisters could be harmed. I have a notion that this is somehow connected to my time abroad working for the Foreign Office, and that they have found me here in London. It was one of the reasons why I did not wish to marry, for I did not want to put anyone in danger. But with my hands tied in that regard?—"

Not that he was regretting being betrothed to Evangeline. Not after last night. There was much to look forward to. "But with the threat toward Lady Evangeline's sisters, who include the duchess, I thought you ought to know."

"The blaggard," the duke bellowed. "Who was it? Do we have any idea?"

"None. He wore a masque and pretended to be enamoured of Lady Evangeline for a time. I was hoping that I may speak to her before I leave and possibly get more information from her?"

"Of course. And I shall ensure my burliest footmen accompany the ladies wherever they go and increase security at the ducal estate here in Mayfair and in the country."

"I think that would be wise." Ezra paused. "I'm sorry that my past employment has caused these troubles for you and your family. I did not intend this to be an issue, and I thought I had time to ensure my cover was not blown, but it seems that whoever it is that's threatening Lady Evangeline knows who I am and is out to get to me through her."

"You should not be in this position and I'm sorry this is happening. Are you going to inform the government of this threat?"

"I already have, and they have men on the case, but still, I'm wary, which is to be expected." A racing carriage through Grosvenor Square had him glancing up briefly to the window, his heart stalling, until it passed. He was too on edge. Too much at stake.

Footsteps sounded and a light knock followed on the library door before the duchess poked her head into the room. "I'm off for the luncheon at Lady Kenworthy's home. Evangeline is upstairs in the drawing room. She did not feel like attending after all." The duchess spied him and smiled. "Good morning, Lord St. George. How lovely to

see you again."

"Good morning, Your Grace," he said.

"I shall accompany you," the duke said, standing. "I trust you can find the drawing room, St. George, and behave yourself while you discuss the matters at hand with Lady Evangeline."

"Of course," he said, even though a part of him fought to control the unhelpful, lustful thoughts that accompanied his mind whenever he thought of Evangeline.

After last night, touching her and bringing her to release, well, he ached to do that again.

And more.

Ezra followed the duke and duchess into the foyer and then proceeded upstairs. He walked along the corridor, trying to remember the way to the private parlor that he'd not been in for many years. Not since before he had left for the Continent.

He found the parlor and for a moment watched Lady Evangeline, who sat near a window, looking out over the square, her face serene, a small, wistful smile on her lips.

She was so beautiful and reminded him of the last time he'd seen Luisa admiring her family's garden before he'd escorted her out for a carriage ride that ended her life. Panic assailed him. He would not allow the past to repeat itself.

Not again.

He knocked and she jumped at his intrusion. "May I come in?" he asked, pushing the

door wide so she could see who was there.

Her face lit up and she gestured for him to enter. "Of course." She stood. "I did not think I would see you again so soon."

"Was that who you were looking out for on the street?" he teased, closing the door behind him and already regretting his promise to the duke to behave.

Her cheeks turned a pretty pink and he went to her, needing to have her close. The emotions that tumbled about inside him were as unexpected as they were unwelcome. He had not expected to feel as attached to anyone—nevertheless a woman whom he was now betrothed. It left him feeling nervous, and even more so since there was a threat that he knew of but could not dispense with.

Not yet at least.

"No, of course not." She chuckled and sat again on the window ledge. "I suppose I'm a little paranoid. With the gentleman last night knowing who I was, I thought to watch the house today and see if I spied anyone suspicious lurking about in the bushes or behind the trees in the park, but so far I've only seen a nanny be chased by her charge and a bird mess on a gentleman's shoulder, much to his displeasure. Although I cannot shake the feeling that I am being watched." She shrugged. "You probably think I'm being foolish, do you not?"

"Not at all," he disagreed, hoping her intuition wasn't right. "It is not a bad idea to keep watch, but the duke is increasing security here, and you ought to let others keep guard. Go on about your day and your Season and forget this madness. You do not need to have the concern on your shoulders."

She turned to look at him and an overwhelming urge to hold her came over him. He would not let anything happen to her. He would not lose another woman to anyone

seeking revenge upon him merely because of what his job entailed.

"I do not want my sisters to be injured, and while I know we must marry, I feel as though I'm taunting the gentleman now to do something—to act out—because I have not heeded his words." She paused, her voice softer. "And what if something happens? What if marrying you puts them all at risk? How would I live with that?"

"He would not dare touch one hair on your head, nor your siblings. The duke and I will keep you all safe. I promise." He inwardly swore that this time it would be different. This time he would keep his promise and not cause any more heartache for anyone.

Without thought, he reached out and slipped a stray piece of her hair behind her ear. It was a pretty golden, sun-kissed color that he couldn't wait to see down about her shoulders.

She watched him, a small knowing grin lifting her lips. "Why are you here alone with me again? Does the duke know you're up here with me?"

"He does, and he gave me permission to come talk to you about last evening with the stranger, but I no longer want to discuss the fiend. We should not let him ruin the small amount of time that we have together."

"The duchess is out for lunch, but the duke is downstairs. I do not think we ought to do anything but talk."

"The duke went to lunch also."

"Oh..." Her attention dipped to his lips and hunger knotted in his stomach.

Damn, where was his control? His honor to his friend that he would keep his hands to

himself?

He did not want to be restrained by either right at this moment—and something told him that Evangeline knew that very fact as well.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

E vangeline did not know entirely what was happening to her, but what she did understand was that her body came alive whenever she was around Ezra.

Her betrothed.

Although she did not want to be married under the circumstances in which they were being made, the fact that he was here, visiting her, gave her a little hope that perhaps their future would not be as bleak as she imagined.

He had not wanted a wife, and she had not wanted a husband who did not adore and love her. To be forced into marriage merely because their secret kiss was revealed was not the ideal start to a marriage.

And now this exterior threat who wished her to keep away from him... Well, she could no sooner keep away from him than she could not draw air.

She liked him. Far more than she liked anyone else of her acquaintance, and while she would not admit to such feelings to him, they were there, and she could not ignore that a small part of her was happy they were engaged.

Even if he were not.

She was a terrible person for feeling that way and ought to stop inwardly gloating that

she had secured the hand of Lord St. George.

"I am sorry that the circumstances in which we're being wed are not ideal, but I promise I will try to make our marriage not tiresome for you."

"You do not tire me, Evangeline. Not at all." He reached for her hand and played with her fingers, a small frown between his brows. "While I may not have wanted a wife, I also did not want to see you married to anyone else. Each time I saw you dancing with another, I wanted to rip you from their embrace. So perhaps that we are now engaged and my hand has been forced, it has saved me from making an even grander mistake than what we're about to do."

"A bigger mistake? How so?" she asked, needing to know what he meant, to hear everything he was thinking.

"A bigger mistake in the fact that I would have lost you to another. That you would have married and moved away, and I would not have seen you. Talked to you. Danced with you." He met her eyes, his a stormy blue she could lose herself in. "Kiss you whenever I wanted."

"You enjoy my kisses, my lord?"

He nodded, leaning forward and just about touching his nose against hers. "I like kissing you far too much."

"Are you going to kiss me now?" Her body sizzled to life and she reached for him, slipping her arms about his neck and pressing herself against him. She forgot where they were, sitting in the window before Grosvenor Square, or the threat they now lived under, but nor could she raise an ounce of care to what anyone else thought or saw.

They were engaged. He was hers and she was his. Let the people talk if they were nosy enough to be watching the ducal home.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" he asked in all seriousness.

She drank in the sight of him. As much as she was scared for what their marriage would be like—she still wanted him more than she had desired anyone in her life. That had to count for something and be a blessing in an otherwise discombobulated pairing.

"Yes." Evangeline doubted there were any women in London who did not wish for Lord St. George to kiss them. There was a danger about him, a wildness that she had glimpsed at Lord and Lady Wilcox's masquerade ball that she wanted to see again.

She wanted to feel the passion that she roused within them both. He was addictive, her own vial of laudanum.

"Well, since we're betrothed I suppose I can indulge you this once." He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers.

Something within her snapped at the feel of his mouth on hers, and she kissed him back with all the passion she could muster. And with Ezra, there was much of that. She kissed him, mimicked all he had taught her the last two times they'd kissed, and her eagerness paid off.

He kissed her back, swept her up into a world in which she forgot herself. This kiss was never sweet, no slow seduction—it was hot, wild, and tainted with a need that was all consuming. She could not deny herself of him.

She was two and twenty after all. She had waited so long to find a husband, and to have one that made her feel so wonderful inside. A boon she could only dream of and

be thankful for.

He pressed her back against the window frame, his hand slipping against her waist to cup her breast. She moaned into the kiss and he pulled back, dragging her from the window and toward the settee.

Evangeline went with him, did not question his motives or plan. He sat and looked up at her, his eyes heavy with desire. She went to sit beside him, but he wrenched her onto his lap instead.

She chuckled, but soon sobered when his warm, large hand clasped the hem of her gown.

"You cannot do that here. The door is unlocked."

"Let me remedy that." He picked her up as if she weighed nothing but a feather and set her on the settee. He strode to the door, the snick of the lock the only sound in the room other than her rapid heartbeat.

His gaze bore into hers as he slowly returned to her side. "I promised the duke I would not touch you. I fear, Lady Evangeline, you're going to make me a very bad man."

She shivered at his words and bit her lip. He looked wild and untamed, and goosebumps rose on her skin with expectation.

"How bad can you be?" She wanted to know everything and anything she could about what a future between them could be like. Already she was addicted to this side of marriage. If he were to fall in love with her, dote on her, she would be lost forever.

"Very, very bad." He knelt before her on the floor and pushed her to lean back against

the chair. She did as he asked without question, her body alight with anxious expectation.

His gaze bore into hers as he placed his hands on her knees, slowly pressing her legs open. Even with the yards of material, she felt exposed by his action, and heat kissed her cheeks.

He did not stop watching her as he reached around and clasped the back of her knees, pulling her toward him a little. She made a little squeak of alarm and his lips twitched.

"Do you trust me?"

She nodded, although she had not the slightest idea what he was about to do, but something told her this was naughty and not at all allowed for a couple just newly betrothed. This was not what she was supposed to be doing with a man who was not her husband—or in a parlor in her sister's home.

What if someone walked in? Or her sister caught her? What if, and yet, she did not care and nor could she stop him. A wicked fascination had taken over her and she could not deny either of them.

"I trust you," she answered when her tongue decided to work.

"Good girl." He slid her gown up over her knees, exposing her silk stockings. He leaned down, his mouth pressing hot, wet kisses on the sensitive inner skin of her thigh. His mouth paid homage to both legs, his fingers playing with the ribbons that held up her stockings.

She watched him, unable to tear her gaze from his determination and patience. Unable to comprehend that there was a man between her legs kissing his way up her

body.

A shiver shuddered through her, and she wondered if she would survive his plan. Evangeline could not stop squirming. An inkling of what he was about to do had taken flight in her mind and would not abate. Surely he would not. It wasn't possible what she was envisioning... The thought was too preposterous. And yet, he continued to kiss his way up her legs, his tongue sliding against her flesh as if she were a goddess to be worshipped.

He was too much—the hunger in his eyes, his focus on her was overwhelming—and she was unsure she would survive years of being loved by this man. Already he consumed far too much of her thoughts, and his actions so far had left her a little obsessed.

Her gown bunched about her waist, and he pushed it back farther, exposing her crotchless drawers. Evangeline could not speak, merely held her tongue, hoping he liked what he saw and that she would not die of embarrassment.

Ezra threw her a look that conveyed his pleasure and determination.

Dear God, he was deadly handsome.

He dipped his head and brushed his lips over her mons and she gasped, lost to the sensation that shot through her body. She clutched the back of his head, her fingers fisting his hair, grounding herself against him, sure it was the only way in which she could stay on earth.

For surely, she was going to heaven.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Damn, Evangeline tasted like woman and sin. He was hungry for her, his body aflame with need and recklessness that he could not halt.

He wrenched her to the side of the settee, kissing her sweet flesh like a man starved. She rocked against him, her startled gasp—deep and guttural—sent heat to his cock. He ached, his dick like a rock as he licked her sweet notch until she ground against his mouth. “That’s it, Evangeline, take what you want.”

Seek your pleasure.

Your sweet release.

He licked her nubbin, sucking her little pleasure point into his mouth until she moaned. “Ezra, oh yes.”

He could not stop, no matter the danger that continued to lurk within their lives, or the possibility of them being caught by staff at any moment. Perhaps a part of the excitement stemmed from the unknown, the trepidation that they were not alone in the house. But he wanted her to shatter against his mouth, feel her release tremble against his lips and he could not stop until she did.

"You taste so good. Tell me you like my mouth on you."

Her eyes met his as he kissed her sex, hers heavy with desire. "I like your mouth on me," she answered without shame. "I like everything that you do to me."

"Do you?" He leaned back on his heels and slid his thumb across her nubbin, rolling it beneath his pad. "You're so wet. You want me, do you not?" He did not need to hear the answer—he could tell that she did. Still, he wanted to hear her say the words, even if only to heighten his desire.

"I do. I do want you," she repeated.

He slipped two fingers into her heat and pumped his hand, watching her laid bare to him, her legs spread, her pretty, summery gown bunched about her waist, her cunny his to tease and taste.

The sight was too much, and he could not deny himself a moment longer. He ripped his falls open, and took his cock in hand, stroking it and imagining things that he wanted to do to her but could not voice lest he scare her.

A flicker of guilt tugged at his chest. What if someone meant her harm because of him? Because of his past? The danger had never felt more real. And yet, here he was, incapable of letting her go. Forcing her into a marriage because he could not keep away.

Evangeline watched him with keen interest. "You're so large. May I touch you also?"

Before he could answer, she sat up and reached for him, pushing his hand aside to stroke his length. He closed his eyes, relishing the feel of her teasing him as he had done her. He was in trouble. He wanted to come. He wanted to flip her over on the settee before him and fuck her senseless—sheath his cock in her tight, hot cunny and ride her until they both shattered.

"So soft and yet hard. What a marvel."

She brushed her lips against his and he lost himself in a kiss for several heartbeats. He mastered her mouth, their tongues teasing, their breath mingling in the passionate embrace. He nipped her lip, before licking it better before she pulled back.

"I want to feel you against me. I want you inside me, Ezra."

"I cannot take your maidenhead here and now. That should be for our wedding night." But damn it he wanted to. His body roared to do as she asked, to deny her nothing, even for his own selfish pleasure.

"Must it be then? We're to be married. Does it really matter?"

"It matters to me."

She pouted and pulled him close until the tip of his cock pressed against her folds.

"Don't do that, Evangeline," he groaned. "I have very little control as it is and I do not want to fuck you here."

For one fleeting second, he imagined the door bursting open—not with her brother-in-law's fury, but something far worse. A faceless man in a domino, just like the one at the masque. His blood chilled, even as his body burned.

A wicked grin lifted her lips. "What if I want you to take me here?"

"You want me to fuck you? You do not wish to be made love to?"

"Are they different?" she asked. "What do you prefer?"

A good question. One he could not answer. He had never made love to anyone. Or at least, what he was feeling right now with Evangeline was new and unknown. The feelings and emotions coiling within him were unfamiliar. And that in itself prickled him with guilt.

"I cannot fuck you. You're a maid. I might hurt you."

She scoffed at his words and moved his cock to her entrance, rolling the head of his length around her sex. "Ohh, that feels so good..."

He bit back a curse and breathed deep, tried to resist the rioting emotions that fought to overtake his control. "He clasped her hips and held just far enough away to kept her safe.

"We have all our lives to make love in bed. Right now I want you so much. Right now I want you to fuck me."

"You don't know what you ask," he growled, pulling her down onto the floor with him before flipping her around to lean up against the settee, giving him the perfect view of her pert ass.

"I do know what I want and what I want you do to. I'm not a child."

No she was not.

He leaned against her back and suckled the lobe of her ear into his mouth before giving it a teasing bite. "This may hurt at first. Are you sure you want me to do this?"

"Yes," she gasped, reaching back to clutch the back of his neck. "I want you so much I ache."

"I'm going to take that ache away." Ezra pressed her down onto the settee and positioned his cock at her entrance. He slipped the head of his manhood inside, stilling a moment from the sheer sweet sensation that ran up his spine. He leaned back, enthralled by the sight of his cock pressing between her glistening folds, opening her like a flower to be plucked.

"Fuck yeah," he breathed.

She cried out into the cushions as he stretched her to fit him, her fingers clutching the seat as he pressed slowly into her.

"You'll take all of me." His words were a promise, and he would sheathe himself to the hilt. She was so wet. And with even pressure, he made her his. Fully seated, he stilled. He breathed through the riot of emotions overtaking his body. He wanted to thrust into her—take her—fuck her like the madness that overtook his mind.

Instead, he waited. Let her adjust.

She pressed back against him, seeking him deeper, and his control snapped. He clasped her hips, pulled out, and thrust into her. Pumped his cock into her hot, tight sheath and lost all sense of self.

"So, so good."

She moaned into the cushion. "Oh yes, this is what I want. I want this. More, Ezra." Her plea was too much to deny.

He claimed her, marked her as his from this day forward. No matter how they had come to be engaged, he could not regret having Evangeline. She was marvelous and he wanted her in his bed.

He reached around and rolled the pad of his fingers against her sex, teasing her as he took her from behind.

His mind blanked. He was certain he saw stars.

"Tell me you like it. Tell me you like having me inside you."

She moaned, her hand slipping over his and guiding him to tease her flesh. His cock hardened further, and he took a calming breath, trying to deny himself what his body craved.

Release.

"I love having you inside me," she moaned, pressing back. "I thought this would hurt, but it's wonderful. I want more."

And he would give her more. Anything she wanted.

"Come for me," he commanded, feeling his balls tighten. He had never felt this way—wild and out of control, an obsession that even this coupling would not sate.

"I want to," she gasped into the cushions. "You feel so good, Ezra."

He rolled his fingers with more determination, taking her in a rhythm that left him all sixes and sevens. He leaned against her back, breathing in the pretty jasmine scent of her hair. He kissed the light sheen of sweat that settled on her neck.

"Come for me, Evangeline," he ordered. "Be a good girl and do as I say."

"Yes," she answered, breathless.

And then he felt it. The small tremors that grew and seized his cock. Evangeline screamed his name into the cushions, muffling her cry as he fucked her through her release. His balls ached. His cock, rigid, rode out her climax, reveling in the push and pull of her body around him as she worked herself upon him.

So damn hot. Bold. And his.

Mine...

His release roared through him and he called out her name again and again as he came, spent into her sweet heat, pumping his seed into her body.

He held her waist, used her as support as his knees buckled under the sweet relief that swept through him. He pulled out and slid her gown down over her bottom, then kneeled behind her, watching as she slowly gathered herself and sat on the floor facing him.

"Well I never," she said, her face flushed, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Nor I," he murmured, leaning forward and stealing another kiss.

His body was sated, humming with pleasure, but his mind churned. What had he done? Even after such release, he felt it—that quiet dread gnawing at the edge of something good. She was more than desire now. She was a risk. A need he could no longer deny. And if something happened to her...he would never forgive himself.

Unsure where his need to touch her, to show affection, was coming from, but knowing he could not deny himself anything when it came to the woman before him.

His future wife.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

Later that afternoon Evangeline bathed and prepared for the evening's ball to be held at Lord and Lady Abernathy's home, just across the square from where they lived.

Her body was still thrumming from her afternoon with Ezra. She sat at her dressing table and picked up her brush, running it through her hair while she waited for her maid. Her mind was lost to the memory of what they'd done. The fiery passion. The undeniable need that came over her and would not be sated until he gave her what she craved.

Him.

The idea of being married to such a passionate man was one she had hoped for but had not pinned all her hopes upon. But to feel as she did when around her future husband...there was hope that their union may turn into love.

A shame that beneath that hope, a chill lingered—a reminder of the masked stranger's threat. A warning she could not simply forget, no matter how Ezra made her feel.

A knock sounded on her door and her maid entered, carrying her dark-pink silk and tulle gown for the evening, along with her sister, who strode in after her.

"Ah good, you've bathed. I had hoped to speak with you before we head down for dinner."

"Of course." Evangeline turned to face her sister, who went and sat before the unlit hearth.

"May you leave us, please, Clare? Evangeline will ring when you're needed again."

"Of course, Your Grace." Her maid dipped into a curtsy and left the room.

"What is wrong?" Evangeline asked, her heart skipping at the seriousness of Rosalind's tone. She hoped that the duke and duchess had not heard of her interlude with the earl that afternoon. She had not thought any of the staff were loitering about, but one never knew in these grand houses.

"It has come to our attention that the stranger who accosted you at the Wilcox masque ball could possibly be as dangerous as he threatened. Therefore, on any excursions—shopping, walks, or rides in the park—you will be accompanied by Henry and Charles, two of our burliest footmen who have agreed to protect us should we need it. Also, the duke has sent word to the estate to increase staff and security until we return at the end of the Season."

"I think that is wise." She frowned at the idea of being harmed due to a situation that had nothing to do with any of them. "Do you truly think the man seeks revenge so desperately that he would injure innocent people? We have not done anything to him." Her voice faltered, remembering the glint in the stranger's eyes. The certainty in his threat. This was more than idle vengeance. There was purpose behind his cruelty. A message meant for Ezra.

But what had Ezra done to deserve such treatment? She could not fathom such hate.

"I think when people are hurt and unable to forgive, then yes, they're capable of anything. We must be on our guard."

Evangeline nodded. "I shall ensure I do not place myself at any risk, but I'm sure Lord St. George shall look after me."

Her sister grinned. "I'm certain he shall." She paused. "How did your visit with him go this afternoon? My lady's maid mentioned he stayed for quite some time..."

Heat kissed Evangeline's cheeks, and she stood, moving over to her bedside table and readjusting the books that were stacked there. "We spoke of many things," she said, remembering her face buried in the cushions as he took her with a savagery that made her ache deliciously. "We discussed the wedding and important things like that."

"You're lying to me. I can tell."

Evangeline heard her sister's footsteps but could not turn to face her. If she did, Rosalind would know the truth, and she did not need to be scolded for being so reckless.

Not when she had so little control where Ezra was concerned. Not when the world outside their embrace seemed far more frightening than the consequences of giving in.

"Evangeline, look at me," Rosalind demanded, and without waiting for her to reply, clasped her shoulders and turned her about. Her sister took in her features, before her lips thinned into a displeased line. "You did more than kiss the earl. I can see it written all over your guilty face."

"I did not mean for anything to happen. It just kind of did." Evangeline promised she would stop lying to her family. She had instigated everything that had happened in the parlor, teased Ezra until he dared not refuse her. She was a wanton and ought to be scolded.

"Did you sleep with him? He promised the duke he would not touch you."

"Please do not say anything." Evangeline reached for Rosalind. "It may ruin their friendship, and we're to be married anyway. It does not matter now. All will be well."

Even as the words left her lips, she wondered if that were true. What if the threat lurking in the shadows succeeded in driving a wedge between her and Ezra—or worse?

"And what happens if something awful happens to St. George and you're unable to marry, but you find out you're expecting? You'll be ruined, along with our sisters at home."

The idea stole her breath. Not just her reputation, but the reputations of her sisters. They'd be condemned alongside her—all because of her heart. "Do not scold me, Rosalind. I know you were no saint in London with the duke before you married him," she said in an attempt to make herself feel better. "I said I'm sorry, and I am, but I cannot change how I feel about my betrothed. I think... I think that I'm falling in love with him, and so to deny myself anything when it comes to him feels wrong and I simply cannot do it. I'm not strong enough."

Rosalind sighed and slumped onto the bed. "That I unfortunately do understand. But do be careful. Until you say those vows, you are putting yourself at risk and I do not want to see you hurt—or our sisters."

"I do not know if I can deny myself anything when it comes to St. George. I'm not myself when I'm around him. He makes me feel things I did not know were possible. I think I'm a little fanatical, Rosalind."

Her sister laughed, shaking her head. "Do not give him so much power over you, Evangeline, even if you continue to feel all of those things. He does not need to know

how much he consumes your thoughts."

Her sister was right. She would try to keep her obsession with her future husband more to herself than anyone else. "I will. I promise." She paused. "And I shall take care when at balls and parties, make sure I'm never alone and at risk of the man who dislikes St. George so much."

"I do wonder what happened in Lord St. George's life that makes him have such an enemy. I've tried to get the information from the duke, but he will not say a word. I know he knows—well, I'm certain he does—but he continues to say that some loss occurred that the earl blames himself for, but nothing else. Maybe he does not know either."

"That is all Ezra has told me also. And maybe we shall never know." But a growing part of her wanted to. Needed to. If she was going to marry Ezra, she had to understand the danger they were walking into. Because it wasn't just his life on the line anymore.

"Hmm." Rosalind stood. "Well, we best get ready for dinner and the ball this evening. I shall see you in an hour downstairs."

"I shall see you then." After ringing for her maid, Evangeline returned to her dressing table, glad she'd spoken to her sister and that she now knew of what she'd done with the earl. She did not like keeping secrets, especially from her siblings.

Her maid entered and closed the door behind her. "How would you like your hair this evening, my lady?" she asked, coming to stand behind her.

"Up this evening. And maybe in the Grecian style we saw in the Lady's Magazine . I wish to feel like a new woman this evening."

Her maid raised her brows but didn't say a word, merely went to work setting her hair as she wished. Evangeline watched and marveled at her maid's skill. Expectation and butterflies bumbled about in her stomach at the thought of seeing Ezra again. He'd looked so disheveled that afternoon, his lips reddened from their kisses, his eyes dark and wild with need, hair askew after she'd run her fingers through it.

She shivered at the thought and hoped she could keep her promise that she'd made to her sister. She truly needed to behave, and yet, there was something about her betrothed that made her want to be naughty.

How deliciously fun it was to be bad.

She'd always been such a good daughter and sister. But then all of them had been. They had tried so desperately to win the love of their father, a futile hope that had never come to fruition.

But with Ezra, already she felt he cared for her and that initial affection would lead to love. She had to believe it would. She had spent so much of her life feeling despised—besides her beautiful sisters—she could not endure a lifetime of a husband who tolerated her, but nothing else.

Ezra would not do that to her.

Unless this stranger did something to take that future from her. Unless the past Ezra refused to speak of returned to haunt them both.

"Should I use your pink sapphire jewels this evening the duchess gifted you? The necklace and earbobs will go perfectly with the gown, Lady Evangeline."

She nodded, knowing tonight was the perfect event for such accessories. "I think so, yes. They would be perfect."

Her maid finished her hair, and she dressed for dinner, knowing she would change yet again before they went out to the ball.

Soon—very soon—she would see Ezra again. And by tonight, the ton would be aware of their betrothal. They could dance twice without raising any eyebrows. They could speak and stay together all evening.

Unless something—or someone—tried to stop them.

She shook the troubling thought aside. No, that would not happen. Ezra and the duke would keep them safe, she had to believe that. She could not be so close to happiness to have it ripped from her before they had even begun.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

The ball was in full swing by the time they arrived. The evening air was scented with fresh-cut blooms, and soft music filtered out through the tall windows, golden light spilling onto the gravel drive like honey. This evening Lady Halverton had decorated her entertaining rooms with foliage, giving the appearance that they were all dancing within a beautiful garden full of blooms.

Inside, the ballroom ceiling was strung with garlands of spring flowers, ivy curling up the columns and across doorways. A subtle scent of roses and jasmine perfumed the air, mingling with the warmth of candlelight from the chandeliers overhead. Evangeline's gown of pink silk suited the colorful display of attire that the guests had chosen to wear for the spring-themed event, and the room looked like a bouquet of flowers.

"Come, Evangeline, we shall go speak with Lord and Lady Carrisford, whom I see standing near the terrace doors.

"Of course." Evangeline followed her sister and the duke, but after greeting Lord and Lady Carrisford, she stood aside, watching the ball and constantly checking the entrance foyer for one particularly tall, handsome betrothed who was now hers.

So far, she had not seen him anywhere, and she could only assume he had not arrived as yet. She hoped he had not been waylaid for too long. She desperately wished to see him again.

Already her body felt on edge, expectation thrumming through her veins at being near his side, sharing a stolen glance or touch.

She could barely wait.

She spied a hobbling gentleman coming her way and felt her eyes widen when she realized it was Mr. Fournier.

"Lady Evangeline," he said, attempting to dip into a bow, but struggling since his injury to his leg.

"Mr. Fournier, good evening. And while I'm happy to see that you're out in society again, do you think you're ready to be at a ball?" She leaned close to ensure privacy. "Your injury, sir. I hope that you are healed."

He threw her a look that said more than words that she did not need to be concerned. "All is well, my lady, but I thank you for your concern." He paused, shuffling to stand at her side. "Although it would be remiss of me not to congratulate you on your forthcoming marriage to Lord St. George. I read it in the paper this morning. Quite surprised to see the announcement, but that is the way this society plays. If you're absent, you miss out."

Evangeline threw him a sympathetic smile. "I'm very happy with my choice, Mr. Fournier. Thank you for your kind best wishes."

He gave her a small smile, but she could tell he was disappointed. The poor man, for all his silliness, he was kind enough. "Well, I shall not waste any more of your time. I shall be off. Ladies to court and all."

Evangeline laughed and watched him hobble away. The room glimmered with elegance, silk and tulle worn by the ladies tonight sweeping across the polished floor

as couples danced in a whirling blur of color beneath a canopy of flowers. The hair on the back of her neck prickled and she looked toward the ballroom doors and saw the reason for her reaction.

Lord St. George stood at the threshold, his eyes pinned on her before he stepped within the crowd and started her way. She took a calming breath and attempted to calm her heart. The man was so commanding, so handsome, and looking about the room she noted she wasn't the only lady to have marked his arrival.

Still, the announcement of their betrothal was public now, and the ladies looking upon him like a little sweetmeat to nibble upon would have to cry into their handkerchiefs, for he was hers.

All hers, and she would not share him. Not ever.

"Good evening, Your Graces," he said, coming up to their small party before turning to her. "Lady Evangeline, good evening to you also." He picked up her hand and kissed her silk glove, his eyes meeting hers, the kiss upon her hand lingering far longer than it ought.

His attention on her reminded her of them earlier when he was doing something else with his mouth before meeting her eyes. She shivered at the memory and couldn't help the small, knowing smile that tweaked her lips. "Lord St. George. So glad you could make it. I did not think you were coming. We've been here a half hour already."

"I was at my club and was waylaid." He did not elaborate, merely came to stand at her side. He picked up her hand and kissed it before slipping it about his arm. "What did Mr. Fournier want with you? I see he's here, yet hobbling about like a man who was gored by a wild buck."

The condescension in his tone was clear to hear and she shook her head. "Do not be

mean to the man. I think he feels a fool enough without others teasing or talking about him so."

The earl's lips twitched. "I saw him kiss you. Did he say anything?"

"Only words to congratulate us on our betrothal." She drank in the sight of Ezra, wishing they were anywhere but here. Married already would be a boon—at home, in their private quarters. "He was disappointed that I've agreed to become your wife, but gentleman enough not to say anything cutting about our betrothal."

"As he should."

Evangeline narrowed her eyes on the earl, wondering why he seemed a little out of sorts. "Is everything well, my lord? You seem a little distracted."

He shook his head. "Not at all. Everything is as good as it can be."

"What do you mean by that?" She waited for him to reply, and still he remained annoyingly silent. A muscle worked in his jaw and she knew for certain there was something amiss. "Ezra, what is wrong?" she asked outright.

He looked about before he pulled her away a little from the duke and duchess. "You marrying me is placing you in danger. You ought to marry a safe and besotted gentleman like Mr. Fournier. To do so would ensure your safety, and possibly in time give you the love match you want."

Dread settled in her stomach and she clutched herself there to fight off the nerves that made her head spin. "I do not wish to marry Mr. Fournier, or anyone else, and certainly not after what we've done together, my lord. Have you forgotten already? Am I so easily shirked?"

He looked at her then. Pain resonated in his blue eyes, but she could not understand what was happening. Why was he saying such things?

"I'm sorry, Evangeline. I worry for you, and I feel guilty that I've forced you into this marriage, that is all. I have not forgotten anything of what we've done."

"So you'll marry me still?" The thought that he wouldn't sent a chill down her spine. What would she do if he called off the engagement? What if she became pregnant with his child? She would be ruined and her sisters along with her. Even the duke and duchess would find it difficult to face society with a scandalous relative.

"Yes, yes, of course." He reached out and slipped a stray length of her hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry. I'm concerned and guilt-ridden this evening, but know that I shall not abandon you. I would never do that to you."

She sighed in relief, glad to hear that he would not. "I will be careful and follow the rules you and the duke have put in place to keep us safe until this mysterious man from your past is dealt with."

He nodded, frowning out toward the throng of guests.

Evangeline rallied to ask what she desperately wanted to know. "Will you tell me why you have enemies? What happened when you were abroad that this threat has followed you home?"

A muscle worked in his jaw and he stared ahead, and for a moment she thought he would not answer. "Come," he said, pulling her toward a side door of the ballroom and away from the entertainment. The sounds of the orchestra grew muffled as they slipped away. He walked quickly through the house until they were making their way through the back gardens toward the mews. "My carriage is parked out here, and if you wish to know the truth of my past, it's best we leave and return to your home.

We'll send a note to the duke and duchess that you left the ball due to a headache or some such."

Evangeline dared not argue, no matter how much she had looked forward to celebrating their first evening as an engaged couple with the ton . Instead, she climbed up into the carriage and sat in silence as they made their way across the square to the ducal estate.

"We could have walked home," she mentioned when they pulled up before her sister's home.

"I will need my carriage in any case to return home, so it was easier to secure it now." A footman opened the door and Ezra climbed down before reaching back in to help her alight.

They made their way indoors, and her stomach rumbled, having missed supper. "Can you have tea and some sandwiches sent in to the upstairs parlor, please, James?"

"Of course, my lady," the footman said before heading back toward the kitchen stairs.

Evangeline started up the stairs and could feel Ezra behind her. The weight of his words settling about her like stones. Was his past bad? Would he always live under this cloud of danger?

Whatever it was, it made her feel as though what she was about to learn about his past would change everything about their future.

Chapter

Twenty-Six

Evangeline decided not to sit on the settee they had occupied only earlier that day and instead went and sat at the small ladies' desk. The walnut piece was petite and refined, adorned with ivory-handled quills and a single pressed flower sat upon some letters—a clear sign it was for the duchess's private correspondence.

Ezra sat across from Evangeline and prepared himself to tell her the truth of his life. At least the parts she needed to know. Of course, she could not know everything—no one could—but he could settle some of her doubts and explain the predicament they now found themselves in.

She sat and watched him, her beautiful features making him forget for a moment all the troubles that weighed them down at present. He could lose himself in her eyes, her sweetness. Just being here with her, alone and betrothed, made him want to forget the outside world and only make her happy.

"I'm ready to hear what happened, Ezra," she said, giving him her full attention.

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "When I lived abroad, I worked for the Foreign Office in the capacity of a King's Man." He went on to tell her where he was stationed and the amendment to his features so he could remain anonymous. He told her what she could know, while also keeping certain facts to himself.

"A spy?" She looked at him as if he had sprouted a second head.

He could not blame her. The position he once occupied abroad wasn't the norm, and very few people of his ilk were hired for such roles.

"I do not know what to say," she said. He could see her mind was racing, thinking, jumping to who-knew-what imaginations. "So the gentleman who threatened me obviously knows who you are. Does that not help somewhat in finding out who he is? I should imagine your circle of trusted people was small. One of them has obviously tattled as to your identity."

"No one in Italy knew who I was, hence why I'm at a loss as to who this could be." Other than Luisa, whom he'd told, but she had passed away. She would not have broken his trust. She had loved him. He ran a hand through his hair, hating that the guilt of her death still plagued him. The flickering fire in the hearth cast shadows on the walls, matching the darkness that gathered inside him at the memory. A sure sign that her death would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Well someone knows." She paused, frowning in thought. "I want to help, but all I can tell you is the man had long, dark eyelashes and lips similar to yours. It's why I thought it was you at first, but otherwise he was unrecognizable, even though he did not correct me when I assumed him to be you. He sounded British, but he could have been attempting that accent, I do not know."

A troubling fact that did not make Ezra feel any better. "You cannot tell anyone of what once occupied my time. There are people looking into this threat, and we shall be rid of him soon enough."

"You are not going to kill him, are you? For all his anger toward us, I do not wish anyone to die."

"If he lays one hand on you or your family, he will face the full wrath of myself, before the law has a hand in his future." That Ezra could promise, and nor was he

mincing his words. "I lost one person under my care in the past. I shall not lose another. Certainly not the woman who is to be my wife."

She threw him a small, secretive smile before glancing down at the desk. She frowned and picked up a missive that was addressed to her, one she could only assume her sister had forgotten to give her. Evangeline broke the seal and opened it.

"Who is the letter from?" he asked.

Her scowl deepened. "It's a note really, just a few words, but..."

"May I read it?" he asked.

Evangeline looked at him and her eyes cooled of emotion. "It says that you were engaged to be married when abroad. That your fiancée died at your hands." She paused. "Is that true?"

Ezra reached for the missive and read it quickly. God damn it, he'd not meant for Evangeline to find out about his previous engagement this way. He'd wanted to tell her, to explain... The missive trembled slightly in his grip as if the very memory of Luisa's death had found its way into the ink.

Then why haven't you told her everything already?

He placed the missive back on the desk and faced her. "I was betrothed, to a woman named Luisa Rossi. She was of similar age, and I cared for her deeply. And because of my position, she was killed. An error I live with daily and one I will not have happen again. I will not tolerate or give an inch to any fiend who dares threaten you as they did her."

"You were engaged?" she repeated, shock registering on her face. "Did you love

her?"

Oh bugger. He'd not wanted to answer that question. Not when, up until now, they had not talked or discussed the emotions or feelings that swam between them. Or what he had felt in a life that felt like a hundred years ago.

"I cared for her deeply and I suppose I will admit to being in love with her. I do not say that to hurt you, Evangeline. It does not take away anything that is happening between us. We're separate to my past."

She looked down at the note, but he could see she debated his words. "And if I was to say that I think that I'm falling in love with you, what would your response be? Will you tell me that you feel the same as you did to your betrothed back in Italy? Or will you tell me what I already fear is true?"

Fear is true? Whatever was she thinking? "Evangeline, what I feel for you is independent to what happened in my life before I returned to London. Do not ask me of that time. I was a different man then. I thought I could control things that I could not. Perhaps even arrogant that nothing would occur other than to me. I do not want to answer that question because I do not think it's something that ought to be discussed."

"Because you do not want to admit that you loved Miss Rossi and you do not love me. That our marriage is being forced upon us because we were caught together and our kiss became known. Just admit it," she said, her tone cold, her eyes devoid of emotion. "Admit that while you may like me very much—and I do not doubt you desire me—you do not love me. And I would be a fool to think that this betrothal is anything but an arrangement that keeps scandal from the Ravensmere and St. George doors."

Ezra leaned forward, needing her to understand. "While I do not know what I

feel—we've barely known each other a month—I know that I like you. That I look forward to being married to you. I want you, always. The sight of you even now makes me want to reach for you, to hold and kiss you. Is that not enough to start a happy marriage?"

She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, placing space between them. "I have little choice now but to accept such a start, do I not?"

The room seemed to shrink, heavy with the unsaid words and lingering silence between their conversation. "Evangeline, I have a past. A past that I cannot change, and one that is over. I do not want us to be at odds over this. There is no need to be that way."

"You were so against marriage. Before our kiss you mentioned that you were not looking for a wife, and now I hear that you were engaged. How do you think that makes me feel? While I know you have a past, and I know I made a mistake by asking you to kiss me at Richmond, a small part of me hoped..." She paused, looking across the room away from him, gathering herself. "I suppose a small part of me hoped that I would win your affection and you would change your mind. That you would ask me to be your wife because you wanted me to be—not because we were forced. And while that did not happen, to hear that you loved another so much that you wanted her to be your wife, while I will only become the next Countess St. George because my guardian found out we'd kissed—well, it's humiliating, not to mention heartbreaking."

Ezra stared at Evangeline, unsure as to how to make this right. The truth was as she stated, but that did not mean it would always be like this. "In time my affection for you—and I do have much toward you, I would not have kissed you, I would not have been drawn to you had I not liked you—will grow." He sighed. "I did not think to meet a woman such as yourself when I came back to London. I did not know I would be drawn to you as much as I have been. Please do not be distressed over what you've

learned this evening. I will try to make you happy, I promise."

Evangeline looked back at him, but he could see the doubt, the hurt in her gaze.

"There is little I can do about it now in any case. We are betrothed and there is nothing to be done about that."

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

The following two days Evangeline kept to the house and asked Rosalind that she be excused from any of the events that they were to attend. Rosalind had been sweet and allowed her time away from society, and thankfully did not press to know what was troubling her.

Which unfortunately was quite a lot.

The ballroom glittered with candlelight, the chandeliers reflecting hundreds of fractured points of gold across the parquet floors and gilded cornices. Rose-scented air floated past from great urns overflowing with spring blooms—peonies, tulips, lilacs. The orchestra at the far end of the room played a light, elegant strain of violins and flute, their sound almost drowned beneath the low hum of conversation and the shuffle of satin slippers across polished oak floors.

She stood on the fringes of the ballroom floor, sipping a glass of ratafia and watched those enjoying a minuet, but in truth she saw very little. Her mind could not settle on what Lord St. George had said. Or more to the point, what he had not.

He did not love her.

Their marriage would not be a love match, and may never grow into one. And although she would marry him—she had little choice in the matter—a hollowness had opened within her at his words and would not close.

She did not want to be the only occupant in the marriage to be in love.

For she had fallen in love with him, possibly from the first moment she had seen him. How could one not marvel and fall under the spell of such a handsome man? A man with a good heart, even if that heart had been given away to another some years before, and one that he now did not have to give.

To her at least.

Did he still love Luisa? Did he still mourn her? He had not wanted a wife, so she could only assume that was one of the reasons—other than his occupation as a spy.

She stiffened, the fine hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. The heat of his touch burned through the sheer muslin of her sleeve, too deliberate to be accidental before the deep, whispered words at her side stole her breath. Evangeline went to turn, to face the nameless foe, but he clasped her arm and jerked her to remain forward.

"Do not turn, my lady, but I hear you have not heeded my warning. There will be repercussions for not doing as I said."

She pressed her lips together, forcing down the scream that clawed its way up her throat. Not here. Not now. But dear God, she wanted to cry out. "With one scream you'll be outed, sir. Do not threaten me."

He laughed, his hand on her arm pinching the delicate skin. "If you do, I have in place my revenge on Lord St. George—and you, now that you're betrothed to the murderer. Such an action would be ill-advised."

Evangeline remained silent as she took in his words. Murderer? Whatever did he mean by that? "What do you want?" she asked.

"Good, that is the response I would prefer to receive." He paused. "I just wonder, Lady Evangeline, if you've ever asked Lord St. George what Miss Luisa Rossi looked like?"

Evangeline frowned. "Looked like? What does that have to do with anything?" What an odd thing to say—and what did it matter what the late woman looked like? This fiend made little sense.

"I do not mean to hurt you more than you're already hurt, no doubt by knowing of the earl's past abroad, that has injured your heart. I watched you this evening and I can see that you're troubled."

All true—and she could not deny what he was saying. But nor would she give him any indication that his words cut her heart to threads.

"The earl gravitated to you almost the moment he met you. Did you not wonder why he could not leave you alone?"

Evangeline blinked back the tears that threatened, having this stranger whispering awful things in her ear. Words that questioned her worth, her hope for a happy marriage with Ezra. "That is between his lordship and myself, sir. You will not be privy to the feelings that we have for each other."

He laughed, and the sound was void of amusement. Instead, she shivered at the cold calculation in his tone. "Feelings?" He chuckled again. "Ask Lord St. George to see the small, miniature portrait of Miss Luisa Rossi he carries with him always. When you do view this small portrait, then you will know why Lord St. George favored you above anyone else. Even I struggle with the thought of hurting you because of how you look—but do not be fooled. I will get my revenge, one way or another."

She felt him move away and she turned, only catching the sight of a tall, dark-haired

man moving off through the crowd. She watched as long as she could before he was gone. His scent—something sharp and foreign—lingered in the air long after he disappeared into the throng.

Evangeline bit her lip, knowing she should have screamed for Ravensmere. But she could also not ignore the stranger's words.

Did St. George carry a small portrait of his lost love?

Why was that so important for her to know?

She spied St. George before he saw her as he moved through the throng of guests. He appeared so perfectly at ease, so painfully unaware of the chasm now yawning between them.

He was looking around—maybe he was searching for her—but she couldn't help but feel like second best. That perhaps he was, but if his lost love were here, she would never have been given a second glance.

She was not the first. And she would never be the only. That truth settled like ash in her chest.

Stop it, Evangeline. You're being silly and jealous of a woman who no longer walks the earth.

Still, the jealousy and hurt that rose within her—that he'd loved Luisa, and that he didn't love her—was a hard medicine to swallow.

From a few steps away she watched St. George wish her sister and brother-in-law a good evening, before his attention moved to where she stood. He threw her a small smile, but the turmoil, the fear that clawed at her meant she could only stare back, her

mind working furiously with what to do.

Should she ask him about the miniature portrait?

Of course you should. You need to know what the portrait looks like...

The earl excused himself from her family and joined her, picked up her hand and kissed her gloved fingers. "You're beautiful this evening. I have missed you these past days. The duchess said you were indisposed."

"Ah, yes, a megrim," she lied, not wanting to tell him she'd stayed away because she could not face him. Did not know how to act around him now that she knew of his affections for another.

She had always believed that when one found the person they wished to spend the rest of their lives with, they also found their soul mate for the first time. That he had loved before hurt. As much as she did not wish to feel slighted, her affections for him were engaged—fully engaged—while his were not.

The scent of violets from a nearby bouquet did little to soothe the ache twisting in her chest. How could one not feel like they were making a mistake—one she could now not remove herself from?

He watched her and she fought to school her features to look the pleased and delighted fiancée toward the man before her. A kind and passionate man who made her feel wonderful. But was that enough? She wanted more. She wanted him to love her. Why did such an outcome have to be so difficult to procure?

"You are out of sorts. I can see that you are. Tell me what is wrong?" he asked.

Her hands trembled, the glass of ratafia dangerously close to slipping from her grip.

She rallied her nerve and met his eyes. "Are you carrying a miniature portrait on you right now of Miss Luisa Rossi?"

Ezra's face paled and she knew the answer to her question before she could say another word.

The stranger's suggestion to her to ask proved correct. And no matter what he said—denial or admittance—she knew that he did. While he may not have the miniature on him at this moment, he certainly still had one of his past love.

"Pardon?" he asked, clearly taken aback. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked about. "Whyever would you ask me such a strange question?"

"Do you?" she asked again. "Show me if you do. I want to see the portrait."

"Evangeline..." he started in a cajoling tone. "Whatever has brought on this request? What has happened? How do you even know..." He shut his mouth with a snap and stepped back, realizing what he'd said.

"How do I know that you have an image of your betrothed?"

"She is no longer my betrothed. You're my future wife, no one else. Please do not speak in this way." He reached for her and she pulled away.

"Do not touch me at present." She paused. "I want to see the miniature. Stop stalling and show me now before another word is spoken." She held his gaze and refused to blink until he relented. Thankfully, he did. Sighing, he reached into the inside of his jacket and pulled out a small, circular frame before handing it to her.

He did not say a word, and Evangeline flipped it over and stared at the image staring back at her.

An image she could not fathom as real.

The resemblance was uncanny—frighteningly so. It was not merely similarity. It was duplication. A mirror. A cruel joke played by fate.

Miss Luisa Rossi was indeed as beautiful and timeless as she feared, her eyes sparkling with love and affection. Was Ezra there the day the miniature was painted? Something told her by the look in the woman's eyes that he was.

But looking at the picture, something else became perfectly clear.

He had not fallen for her. He had fallen for a ghost wearing her face.

She could not marry St. George. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Ezra remained silent as he watched Evangeline look down at the miniature portrait he kept of Luisa in his pocket. Not so much of a reminder of the woman he'd lost, but as a reminder to always remain on guard—or the precious souls who could be taken from him at a moment's notice. The weight of his past pressed against his chest like a stone, unrelenting, unyielding.

Like the woman before him, who also was now in danger merely because she was associated with him.

But how had she known he carried the miniature? His mind tumbled about with different scenarios before it latched on to one that made sense—the only answer as to what was going on.

Gabriel Rossi.

He was here. In London. And he was the unknown assailant who was after revenge. Everything fell into place. The hatred. The singling out of Evangeline. The woman he supposed Rossi believed he was replacing his sister with.

He could never replace Luisa. She held a special place in his heart all for herself. But that did not mean he did not have room for others in his life. In his future.

He'd thought he'd never care for anyone else ever again. But he was wrong. Now,

standing before Evangeline, watching the heartbreak swamp her features at seeing Luisa's face, he knew he cared for her far more deeply than he ever believed. It wasn't just guilt that twisted through him now—it was the terrifying realization that losing her might undo him completely.

“Say something,” he said. “Anything, please,” he begged, needing her to speak, if only to move them forward, to repair the damage he'd caused.

She looked up at him, her hand stretched out with the miniature sitting upon her palm. He took it back and slipped it into his pocket.

“That image, that portrait looks as if I sat for a likeness.” She pursed her lips and her eyes welled with unshed tears. “I understand now. I know why you gravitated toward me, just as he said you had.”

The floor beneath him felt unsteady, the ornate ballroom spinning slightly as his certainty fractured. “When did you see him again?” he asked, closing the space between them.

Evangeline moved away, her eyes narrowing in warning. “It doesn't matter when. But I understand now. You never wanted to be around me for me. You would never have even bothered with me had I not looked exactly like the woman you loved and lost.”

She pushed past him, heading toward the side door of the ballroom, and Ezra followed. She didn't stop, not even when he called her name.

She reached the end of the passageway and turned toward the front foyer of the house. “Do not follow me, St. George. I do not want to be around you right now.” She stopped so suddenly he nearly collided into her. “In fact,” she said, turning to face him. “I do not want to be around you ever. The betrothal is off. I will not marry a

man so obsessed with a woman who is no longer alive that he would marry the only other one who looked like her. How could you?”

Ezra’s chest clenched. Not because she’d refused him—but because he knew she was right.

She turned and fled toward the door and he followed, trying not to make his chase of her through the house obvious to those who lingered outside the ballroom. But he knew their interaction—and the charged energy between them—would be the talk of the ton come morning.

She didn’t wait for his carriage to be called, instead starting across the road and into the park, her direction toward the ducal estate obvious.

“Evangeline, you cannot leave without alerting the duke and duchess of your departure, nor is returning home through the park a wise idea.”

“You’re following me, which is also not a wise idea, and yet we both persist,” she threw over her shoulder.

He bit back a curse and followed, eyes scanning the tree line. Every dark shape and flicker of shadow made his blood run cold. The threat was no longer distant. It was here. And she had just dismissed the one man who could protect her.

It did not take long before they reached the ducal estate. Arriving without notice, no footman came to open the door. Evangeline merely stomped up the steps and opened the door herself. Ezra followed, and upon entering the foyer, ignored the startled glance of the footman and grabbed Evangeline’s hand, dragging her into the library.

“Please do not get angry with me. Everyone has a past, Evangeline. I cannot help that I have had one.”

She rounded on him, her face a mask of hurt. He hated that he'd hurt her. And yet, what could he do? There was nothing to be done, no reasonable answer to her questions that she would accept or that he could give.

“Why are you here? Leave. There is nothing for you here. I'm not Miss Luisa Rossi, no matter how much you wish that I were.”

“Please, Evangeline. I did not offer you my hand because of how similar you appear to Luisa.”

“No?” she asked. “Did you or did you not first notice me, want to be around me because of my appearance and how close it resembles your late betrothed—whom, I might add, you were in love with.”

Her voice broke on the word love and he reached for her, but she slapped his hands away.

“Answer the question, Ezra.”

He swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He didn't want to answer that question—hell, he didn't want to admit anything that could further tear them apart.

“Evangeline, please.”

“Do not Evangeline please me,” she yelled, startling him. “Was your attraction to me due to how I looked like your late betrothed? Answer the question, my lord.”

Ezra cleared his throat, loathing the answer he was about to voice. “At first, yes. That is true.” Her eyes widened and she took several steps back. “At first, mind. But it has been some weeks since I have seen you for who you are—not just what you look like. Yes, you are similar to Luisa. But there are aspects that are different that I adore.

Aspects of your character and heart that have captured mine. Please know that what I say is true.”

She shook her head, her mouth set into a displeased line. “Would you have kissed me, felt drawn to be around me had I not looked like her?”

“No, I would not have. But listen—” he began when she started for the library door. She managed to open it but he was behind her, slamming it shut and pressing her up against it.

“As soon as our lips touched, everything changed. While I drank in the sight of you because you reminded me of my past, the moment I kissed you, I knew you to be you—not her. I want you, Evangeline. No one else. I want to marry you.”

She trembled, and he dipped his head to kiss the arch of her neck. “Please, believe me. It’s you, Lady Evangeline Ravensmere, whom I want to marry. whom I want in my bed, not the past that cannot be undone.”

“But you wish that it could.” She turned and with all the force she could muster, pushed him away.

He stumbled backward and grabbed the wingback chair to stop himself from falling.

“This farce of a betrothal is at an end, and with it goes the risk to my family. I will not marry a man whose sole interest in me was because I reminded him of his dead fiancée.”

Ezra flinched, but he could not blame her. “We’ve been intimate. What if you’re expecting?” he threw at her, desperate to keep her.

“I’m not. I started spotting this morning, and if my cycle runs as it always does, by

tomorrow I shall be in full bleed. So do not worry about that.”

“We cannot call off the marriage. The scandal will ruin both families.”

She shrugged and reached for the door. “I do not care. I’m returning to Hampshire—away from you, and away from London. As far as I’m concerned, my lord, you can all go hang.”

With her words, she turned and fled, the door slamming against the wall.

Ezra walked to the door and spied the duke and duchess, no doubt within full hearing of what had just been said.

He watched Evangeline storm up the stairs, disappearing from view. And for the first time in years, the tearing in his chest opened back up to the size of a crevasse—and this time, he feared it would never close.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

Evangeline rang for her maid, wanting her to pack her things so she could leave London. Put distance between herself and the pain. Get far, far away from Lord St. George and the wound he'd inflicted on her heart. She walked about the room, stacking her books, moving trinkets—small, pointless movements to mask the storm inside her—but otherwise unsure where to start first.

The door to her room opened and her sister entered, closing it softly behind her before coming over to her. She pulled her into a warm embrace, and Evangeline did not fight the comfort her sister's arms brought.

It was only when someone held her that the tears threatened to fall. Her heart raced, pain crawled up her throat, and her chest ached with each second that passed.

"What happened, dearest? We saw you leave the ball in a hurry and followed, and well, we heard the conversation..."

Evangeline pulled back and walked to her dressing table, picked up her handkerchief and dabbed at her cheeks. "I'm a fool. He doesn't love me. I'm some ghostly reminder of his past love, his late betrothed. That is the only reason why he gravitated toward me, felt inclined to kiss me, and ultimately didn't fight the duke's order to marry. It's all wrong, this whole fiasco, and I will not marry him. I will not marry a man who did not want a wife, and then only agreed to take one because I looked like the one he lost. I would rather be cast out of society forever than enter a loveless, hollow union

such as that."

Rosalind sat on the settee before the unlit hearth and clasped her hands in her lap. "He said his initial attraction was based on his late betrothed, but that it has changed these past weeks, to be genuine affection. Do you not believe that to be true?"

"I do not." Evangeline joined Rosalind and sat, staring at the Aubusson rug as if it might somehow give her magical insight into how men's minds worked. But right now, she didn't think they worked at all.

"He may say all he likes that he sees me now as Evangeline Ravensmere, but how will I ever know for certain? I will not. There is no way he can prove his change of thought." She shrugged, the weight of the evening pressing heavily on her shoulders. "I'm sorry to have disappointed you and the duke. I did not mean for any of this to happen and well... I think it would be best if I returned to Hampshire."

Rosalind gasped and reached for her hands, clasping them tight. "No, dearest, you will marry—and you will marry for love. You cannot return home just yet. You must try to find some solution for you and the earl. I know you love him, and I do believe he loves you in return, even if he has not said it. He looked devastated when you left him in the library just before. I have never seen a man so broken."

"He's only broken because I look like Luisa Rossi, and he does not wish to lose her a second time."

Rosalind frowned. "Surely you do not look so alike for him to think that."

"I saw a portrait, Rosalind. We could be twins—and I do not say that with any jest." The image was seared into her mind. And every time she looked in a mirror now, she feared she would see the reflection of another woman's ghost.

"Evangeline, do think clearly. You may be carrying his child."

"I am not. I spotted today, and that always signals the start of my courses." She paused. "And only you and the duke know what has happened between me and St. George. No one else. The servants are not whispering, or my maid would have informed me should they suspect anything untoward. I therefore believe I should be able to remove myself from this betrothal and return home. Please, Rosalind, do not make me stay and marry him. I cannot bear loving a man who does not love me back. Or, at least, only cares for me because I am his second chance at the past."

"I do not think St. George sees you like that, Evangeline. You are your own person—and he has seen that. Yes, you may look similar, but you are here. You are alive. Do not let the ghost of the past steal your future. As sad as what happened to St. George is, the young woman is not coming back. She is no threat to you, dearest, and you ought not to start fighting ghosts."

But wasn't that the worst kind of rival? One who never aged, never disappointed, never left his heart? "It is better this way in any case," Evangeline said, standing and moving to her dressing table where she began pulling out the pins in her hair. "The man who seeks revenge on the earl will now not be interested in harming any of my family. With the betrothal at an end, Lord St. George can concentrate on finding out who that man is—and not worry about any of us being hurt." A long curl landed on her shoulder and she stared at it. A soft, girlish ringlet. The kind Luisa might have had. "It's better for everyone this way. I shall be able to find a love match." Even though she had long known she loved Ezra. But if the feelings were not mutual, what joy could there be in that? "And Lord St. George will be able to finish grieving his late betrothed, remove the threat that has followed him to England, before he seeks out a new wife and future. One, preferably, who does not remind him of his lost love."

Even to Evangeline, her tone sounded jaded and cold, but she could not help it. Could

not stop the pain that ripped through her chest, leaving it open and weeping.

While she would return home, heal, and maybe one day fall in love with a man who loved her as she deserved, a little part of her would always break at the memory of Ezra. Of what could have been—had she simply been someone else.

"If that is what you truly wish to do, dearest, I shall not stop you, and nor will the duke. But I think we should hold off announcing the end to your betrothal. Return to Hampshire, and we shall come up with some excuse for your absence. And with any luck, some other scandal will rock the ton and your betrothal will be long forgotten. St. George can deal with his past here, and then choose what he wishes to do."

"Choose what?" Evangeline asked, turning to look at her sister. "I will not take him back, Rosalind. You would not have married a man who loved another and then used you as a substitute for what he had lost. To think, that each time he kissed me, every caress, every word... Well, I cannot help but think none of it was for me. He's a liar and I'll never forgive him."

"I think that you should take some time to process everything you've learned today. And when you're not so hurt and shocked, then that is the time you ought to make a decision about your future. Until then, we'll not say a word to society. They do not need to know everything all the time."

"Thank you, Rosalind. I do not know what I would do without you." Her sister stood and came over to her, and leaning down, pulled her into a quick embrace.

"I shall always be there for you, Evangeline. And all our sisters. And while I do see your point of view and sympathize with you regarding all that we've learned, I can also see Lord St. George's as well."

Evangeline took in her sister's words but did not respond. She would take the time.

But her heart had already made its decision. He did not love her. And nor could she make him fall in love with her without always wondering if he thought of another whenever he looked at her.

No. There was no future between them.

"So I may go home to Hampshire as I wish? May I leave tomorrow? I would like to return home now if I could. I no longer wish to be in London."

"Of course, dearest. I shall order the preparations this evening and you shall leave first thing." Her sister paused. "Would you like to inform St. George of your leaving, or would you like the duke to break the news to him?"

"The duke, if you will." Cowardice, perhaps—but her dignity had already taken enough of a beating. She could not face him. Not yet. Not again. She needed time. And the journey home would grant her that.

Morning could not come soon enough.

Chapter

Thirty

"Evangeline's left?" Ezra slumped back into the chair before Ravensmere's desk, staring at his friend. The words felt like a blow to the ribs. Had he truly just told him such news? He shook his head to clear his mind, unable to comprehend that she was gone and that her threat of last night was wholeheartedly true. "Where?" he asked. "Why didn't you send for me before now? I would have come here, talked to her—this isn't right, Ravensmere, and you know it."

The duke sighed and ran a hand across his jaw. "I did not want Evangeline to go any more than you did, but Rosalind insisted. Do not fear. She's only returned to Hampshire, and I've sent a trusted Bow Street Runner with her to keep her safe. Nothing will happen to her, and I expect in a few days to get word that she's back at Ebonmere Abbey, safe and sound."

A cold chill ran down Ezra's spine and he leaned forward onto his knees. "What runner is this? Are you certain he's legitimate?" The image of Evangeline—alone, upset, and unknowingly watched—gripped him with sudden dread. She was traveling far from him in the company of someone he did not know, and the threat still loomed. Even now, society would not yet know their engagement was at an end, and they had agreed not to say anything. The man who wished him harm was still out there, unaware of the changed circumstances of their courtship.

Not that he would allow the change to remain. He would marry her. He must. He could not think of a life that did not include Evangeline in it.

"My steward found him late last evening and he's checked out, St. George. Do not worry, I have not placed Evangeline in danger."

"I know you would not purposefully do so. But the unknown threat was at the ball last evening—told Evangeline things of my past which has ensured her fleeing today. A past that holds no sway on my future, for it cannot be changed, as you know. But she is hurt—and if that man knows she's traveling alone, guards or not..." He shook his head. "I fear what he may try to do."

"I know what occurred at the ball last night. But please know—Evangeline is safe and well and merely needs time. I do believe she'll come around and see sense. Like you said, the past cannot be undone." Ravensmere paused. "Rosalind mentioned you have a miniature portrait you carry of Miss Luisa Rossi. May I see it?"

He cringed at the fact he still carried it this morning, even after everything that occurred last night. Ezra pulled it out of his pocket and slid it across the table toward the duke. The duke raised his brows but did not pick it up nor look at it.

"What?" Ezra asked, a frown creasing his brow. "Why won't you look at it?"

"Even after last night and all that was said—all the hurt inflicted in this room—you continue to carry the portrait. Are you certain the past is where it should be, St. George? You certainly seem to be holding on to it close to your heart."

The pit of his stomach dropped at the duke's words and he understood how it looked—and what Ravensmere was saying. "Old habits die hard, but I will lock it away today and never look at it again. I give you my word. Carrying it on me was unconsciously done, and I apologize."

The duke nodded and finally reached for the miniature. His eyes widened. He cleared his throat. "I can see why Lady Evangeline is so upset. They are so similar they could

be the same person. I fear your winning of Lady Evangeline's heart may be the hardest assignment you've ever been faced."

Ezra stood and walked to the window, looking out over Grosvenor Square. "I fear that it will be also. But I will not fumble this assignment, I can promise you that." He turned and faced the duke. "I'm going after Evangeline. Be prepared to travel to Hampshire for a wedding in a matter of days."

"We shall follow you into the country tomorrow, so there is no time lost between now and your marriage. I have faith you will make amends and soothe her fears. I trust you to make her happy."

"I will not let you down, Ravensmere." And nor would he let down Evangeline. Not ever again.

The White Hart Inn stood modest at the edge of the main road into town, its weather-worn exterior glowing amber in the twilight. Smoke rose from the crooked chimney, and the scent of roasting meat drifted on the breeze.

Evangeline arrived at the inn for the night, her stomach cramped from lack of food and her bottom sore after several hours in the carriage, feeling almost every divot and stone on the road. She jumped down, her maid already outside stretching and waiting before they started indoors.

"I shall procure you a room, Lady Evangeline," Mr. Smith announced, the man who Ravensmere had hired to keep them safe.

"Thank you," she said, watching him enter the inn while she lingered outside, letting the remaining sunlight warm her face and the fresh, country air clear her thoughts. She could barely wait to arrive home, see her sisters, sleep in her own bed. Only then, once she was home and alone, would she allow herself to grieve. To mourn the loss

of the only man she had ever truly loved.

Mr. Smith returned and joined them near the carriage. "There is a room that has an ante-chamber for your maid. Would you like me to escort you upstairs?"

"Yes, I think that is best," she said, starting for the inn.

The interior smelled of pipe smoke, roast mutton, and spiced wine. The floors were well-swept but worn, the low beams darkened by years of smoke. Locals murmured near the hearth while tankards clinked behind the bar. Evangeline climbed the narrow stairs, the wood creaking faintly beneath her slippers.

"It's room two, my lady." His voice was closer than she expected.

She reached the door and stepped inside, moving to the windows to place distance between herself and the guard. "This will do very well. Please secure your own lodgings for the night."

"I shall be staying in the passage, my lady. I'm not to leave you alone."

Evangeline didn't argue. He was following orders and doing his duty, not unlike any soldier. "Very well, thank you. Please close the door on your way out."

He nodded and complied. Her maid inspected the adjoining chamber, just off the hearth. Evangeline turned to the window. No matter her relief at returning to Hampshire, a part of her heart had been left in London. Did St. George know by now that she had left town? Did he care?

Something deep inside whispered yes. But the louder voice, the wounded one, insisted otherwise.

She slumped into a nearby chair and fought not to let the emotions of the past days catch up to her. Not here. Not now. She wanted to be home when she cried. Not in some random tavern in the middle of the English countryside.

A light knock at the door pulled her from her reverie. "Come in," she said.

Mr. Smith opened it, and a young maid entered behind him, carrying a tray of food. "Your dinner, my lady." The girl placed the tray beside the fire. "I shall bring up your maid's meal straightaway."

"Thank you, that is very kind."

Her guard stood at the door, watching the interaction with quiet contemplation. A cold shiver ran down her spine at the disinterested look that crossed his face before he blinked—and it was gone.

Evangeline waited for them both to leave before she sat and picked up the napkin, laying it across her lap. Perhaps her guard was simply tired. Or perhaps he did not like being sent out to babysit a duke's ruined daughter.

One more day, and she would be home. Then everyone could return to their normal lives—even the man at her door.

But she... She would have to start over. Without Ezra. Without her heart.

Chapter

Thirty-One

The following morning, Evangeline sat in the carriage and fought off the boredom that threatened to send her into a deep slumber—just like her maid, who sat across from her. Clare had not stirred in over an hour, and as little as Evangeline had slept the night before, she doubted she would find rest now. Not with her thoughts tumbling as they were.

“We’ll be at the ducal estate by sundown, my lady,” Mr. Smith said, seated across from her.

A change from earlier—he’d insisted on joining her inside the carriage before they departed the inn. At the time, it had seemed odd, but not enough to refuse him. “When will you return to London, Mr. Smith? Or are you to remain at the estate for the forthcoming weeks?”

“I will return immediately upon our arrival.” He glanced toward Clare, then leaned forward and unexpectedly poked her maid’s arm. “She’s out cold.”

He laughed, but the sound held no humor. If anything, it made her stomach twist. “Please do not poke my maid,” Evangeline said, reaching across to clasp Clare’s limp hand. “Clare? Wake up. Are you well, dearest?”

“She’ll not wake,” Mr. Smith said calmly. “Not with all the laudanum I slipped into her tea this morning. She’ll sleep for hours.”

“Pardon?” Evangeline jerked back, her spine going rigid. She met his eyes directly and saw nothing but blankness behind his eyes. “What do you mean you slipped laudanum into her tea? Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because she was in my way,” he said simply. “And I wanted to have a frank conversation with you without her interference.”

Evangeline tried to make sense of his words, but her mind faltered. Whatever was he talking about? “You’re able to speak freely in front of my maid. There are few secrets between us.”

“No.” His lips twisted into a smile. “I did not want her to bother me while we spoke.”

There was something about his mouth...a familiarity she couldn’t ignore. Without a second thought, she reached for the carriage door, suddenly certain of where she’d seen that smirk before—beneath a mask. Pretending to be someone else.

Evangeline managed to get the latch loose, but before she could throw it open, his arm locked around her waist and threw her back against the squabs. She cried out as pain shot through her spine. He leaned over her, one finger jabbing awfully close to her face.

“Do not try that again, Lady Evangeline. You do not wish to make me any angrier than I already am.”

She swallowed her fear and nodded, willing to say whatever was necessary to keep herself and Clare safe. “What do you want, sir?”

“Nothing you can bring back. But that doesn’t mean I can’t make others hurt as much as I and my family have suffered.”

“Who are you?” she asked, needing to know. She had to know.

“Gabriel Rossi,” he said evenly. “Miss Luisa Rossi’s eldest brother. A man who lost his sister—and all because of Lord St. George. A man who now intends to take what that bastard holds most dear, just as he took what I loved most.”

A chill swept down her spine and her thoughts scrambled.

“Miss Rossi was your sister?” Her heart hammered and a loud ringing sounded in her ears. “I’m very sorry for your loss, Mr. Rossi. I know that could not have been easy.”

He glowered at her, disgust clear on his face. “I do not want your pity, Lady Evangeline. I want your life. Nothing more, nothing less. And I shall make it painless—unlike my sister, who was shot, bled out without anyone to help her. To hold her hand as she lay dying.” He leaned forward again. “Lord St. George does not love you. You’re merely a replacement. A dressing to heal the wound he feels at the loss of my sister and his precious beloved. A woman he failed to protect, as he’d promised he would.”

His words were like a knife through her chest, but Evangeline forced herself to remain calm. She had to keep her wits about her. However was she to get herself out of this? “This is madness, Mr. Rossi. I have not done anything to your family. I do not deserve this... Surely, if your sister knew how you were treating me, she would be ashamed...”

“Do not speak of Luisa!” he bellowed, so loud the carriage walls echoed with it. He grabbed her arms and wrenched her back once more, slamming her into the cushions. “You sit here, alive—a real-life replica of my sister—and you dare try to guilt me into changing course? I’ve long since stopped caring about what is right and wrong. And I shall kill you, Lady Evangeline, if only to ensure St. George does not get what he wants. That bastard always lands on his feet. Not this time. This time, I shall cut

him off at the knees.”

Evangeline’s mind spun. Think, Evangeline. Think. What can you do? “Mr. Rossi,” she said, her voice trembling. “You are surrounded by my staff. You won’t get away with this madness.”

“I do not care if I get away with it or not,” he said, voice void of emotion. “That is the point you’re missing, my dear.”

He let go of her and slumped back against the seat, exhaling hard. His face was damp with sweat, his expression carved from grief and rage.

At that moment, Evangeline felt any hope begin to slip through her fingers. This man was unhinged, cursed by grief and the inability to let go of someone he loved.

She knew St. George struggled with the death of his betrothed still, and so she could only imagine how much worse it would be for her family. But did that mean Ezra could not move forward? Could not love again?

“Luisa would not want you to do this, Mr. Rossi. This is wrong, and you know it.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but he did not look at her, merely stared out the window, as if lost in the past. “If only I could ask Luisa, Lady Evangeline. What her thoughts would be. But I cannot, can I? Because she’s dead. Cold in the ground. Never to feel the sunshine on her face again. And all thanks to that bastard St. George.”

Dear God. What am I going to do?

Mr. Rossi reached into his coat and pulled out a flintlock. Evangeline froze, her pulse pounding so loudly she could hardly think straight. He didn’t raise the weapon—merely laid it across his lap, as casually as a man might rest a glove.

But the threat was clear.

“You see,” he said, voice low and calm, “he should never have come back to London. He should never have found you. And he certainly never should have tried to replace her.”

“I’m not her,” Evangeline whispered, her throat raw with fear. “You know that. You see that.”

His gaze flicked to her face. “Yes,” he said quietly. “That’s the problem.”

The carriage hit a rut in the road, jostling them both, and Evangeline’s eyes darted to the door. She glanced to Clare, still deeply asleep, her lips slightly parted, unaware of the danger only feet away. She could not leave her friend.

“You’re going to write a note,” Rossi said. “You’re going to tell your family you wish to be alone. That you’re safe. That you need time.”

She didn’t move.

“Now.” He picked up the flintlock and pointed it at Clare.

Evangeline’s blood turned to ice.

“I will not ask twice, Lady Evangeline.”

With shaking hands, she reached for her writing box, her mind racing, desperate for something—anything—to delay him. Mr. Rossi smirked, satisfied, and leaned back as if the matter were settled. But Evangeline vowed in that moment, she would not die in this carriage. And she would not let Clare suffer in her place.

She would not die for a ghost.

She began to write.

Chapter

Thirty-Two

Ezra had missed them at the White Hart Inn by barely an hour. The innkeeper informed him the Ravensmere carriage had departed southeast, which reassured him somewhat—they were still headed in the direction of the estate.

But his stomach churned with unease. The fear wouldn't abate, the knot of dread that Evangeline was in danger growing by the minute. That his hunch that the man escorting his betrothed was Gabriel Rossi who might use an innocent woman to exact revenge. To pass Ravensmere's checks into the guard's character meant Rossi was up to his old tricks and manipulating how people viewed him. And Luisa's brother was just sinister enough to do something so reckless. So unforgivable.

He'd always been too reactive, too impulsive, and up until her death, Luisa had been the only guiding hand in her brother's life. She'd kept him grounded, kept him from slipping over the edge.

But there was no one stopping him now.

Ezra urged his fresh mount into a gallop, forcing speed from the beast while praying he didn't drive it to collapse before he found her.

He came to a split in the road and pulled the horse up sharply. The animal panted beneath him, flanks heaving, as Ezra scanned the path. Right would take them directly to the Ravensmere estate, deep into Hampshire. Left veered off toward less-

traveled country lanes.

But that was where the fresh wheel and hoof tracks led.

Ezra swore under his breath. He's not taking her home. Of course not. Why would he, when he intended something far worse than a family reunion?

He turned his horse left and pushed forward again. For miles, doubt gnawed at him. Had he misread the signs? Were they actually headed to the estate after all? Had his own mistakes—his refusal to speak the truth, to be honest with Evangeline—now cost her and him everything?

A chill rippled through him. He would not lose another woman he cared for.

Loved.

Damn it, he loved her.

And he would not let her suffer the same fate as Luisa.

Ezra slowed only once more, straining to hear anything beyond the birdsong and the breeze stirring the leaves. But there was nothing. Only silence. He pressed on. Then—movement ahead. A flicker of black through the trees.

A carriage.

His heartbeat kicked up. He leaned forward and urged his horse into a gallop. After what felt like an endless chase, the familiar black Ravensmere carriage came into view. Relief slammed through him. He'd found her. For now, there was still a chance.

"Stop the carriage!" he bellowed.

The carriage rumbled on for another dozen yards before lurching to a halt. Ezra remained mounted, his pistol drawn but hidden, heart pounding as he scanned the treeline. He needed Gabriel to listen. To be reasoned with. To be stopped.

“Gabriel!” he shouted. “Come out. I know you're in there.”

No sound came in return. Then the door creaked open. Gabriel Rossi stepped down—but not before dragging Evangeline with him, his hand tangled cruelly in her hair, holding her before him like a shield. Her face contorted in pain.

Fury ignited within Ezra. He would not let this stand. Gabriel might walk away today, but not unscathed.

“Well, well, well,” Rossi sneered. “If it isn’t the bastard who killed my sister. Finally, after all these years we meet again.” Rossi glanced about. “No guards? No allies? You found me all by yourself? Your intelligence must have improved since Italy.”

Ezra didn’t rise to the bait. “What are you doing, Gabriel? This isn't who you are. This isn’t what Luisa would’ve wanted.”

Gabriel's grin twisted with madness. “I’ll do whatever I like. You won’t walk away untouched a second time, St. George. That is your name, is it not?”

“It is. And if you think Luisa didn’t know who I truly was, you’re wrong. She knew everything—there was very little I kept from her.”

Gabriel’s face hardened. “Pity you didn’t tell her how to stay alive.”

He yanked a flintlock from inside his coat and pressed it against Evangeline’s side.

Ezra froze, memories of arriving too late to save Luisa flashing through his mind. Of

his heart, her lifeblood stretched out over the street where she'd been slain. "She's innocent, Gabriel. If you want someone to blame, shoot me. Take me. But leave Lady Evangeline alone."

"No, Ezra!" Evangeline gasped, her voice raw with panic. "Don't say that. Don't?—"

Gabriel wrenched her head back, drawing a scream of pain from her lips. "Shut up."

Ezra's entire body tensed. "Let her go, Gabriel. This won't end the way you think. Killing her will not bring Luisa back."

"And neither will your cowardice," Gabriel barked. "You failed Luisa, our family. Just as you're about to fail the Ravensmeres."

Ezra's heart pounded like a war drum, every instinct screaming at him to act—but one wrong move, and she'd be gone. Gabriel's hand twisted in Evangeline's hair, yanking her head back, while the barrel of the pistol pressed hard into her side.

She didn't cry out. She didn't struggle. Instead, to Ezra's astonishment, she looked up at her captor with something that stopped even him cold—pity.

"You're right," she said softly. "You failed Luisa."

Ezra tensed. What is she doing?

Gabriel stilled.

"I forgive you, Gabriel," she whispered, her voice shaking. "And I know Luisa would too."

"Don't you dare speak her name," Gabriel spat.

“I am her,” Evangeline said, and Ezra’s breath caught. “Can’t you see it? I’m here, speaking to you. Your sister.”

Ezra saw Gabriel’s fingers twitch. His breathing turned jagged. The pistol faltered, lowering ever so slightly.

“I’m Luisa,” she said again, her voice low, coaxing, haunting. “You are not the brother I loved. Not like this. You would never hurt someone like this. Never.”

Ezra’s grip on the reins tightened. His muscles bunched, ready to spring. A shiver stole up his spine at hearing Evangeline attempt an accent that was Luisa’s natural tenor. He watched her, enthralled, almost able to believe that what she said was true and his past was before him once again, speaking from the grave.

Gabriel blinked. His jaw trembled. The pistol dipped again.

“I loved you,” Evangeline said, a thread of anguish in every syllable. “But I don’t know who you’ve become.”

Gabriel’s mouth opened, then closed. The weapon slipped from his hand, and he released her as if she were fire, stumbling back with a strangled cry. He dropped to his knees in the dirt like a man broken from the inside out.

Ezra moved.

He was off the horse and on Gabriel in a heartbeat, rage and relief crashing together. He slammed the butt of his pistol into Gabriel’s jaw. The man slumped sideways, unconscious before he hit the ground.

And then Evangeline was in his arms.

She stumbled toward him, and he caught her against his chest, holding her tight, pressing her head beneath his chin, as though he could shield her from the very memory of what had just occurred.

“Evangeline.” His voice cracked. “My God, you’re safe. You’re safe.”

She clutched the front of his coat, burying herself in him. She shook in his embrace, the aftermath of terror finally breaking loose in her limbs.

“You found me,” she breathed.

“I will always find you,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I thought I’d lost you again. I would have torn the world apart if I had to.”

She didn’t answer—only held him tighter, her fingers curling into the lapels of his coat. And there, surrounded by the wreckage of what might’ve been, Ezra felt her tremble against him. And then, finally, allowed herself to cry.

Chapter

Thirty-Three

Thankfully, the detour Rossi had made placed them closer to the ducal estate, and after winding their way through a series of country lanes, they arrived at Ebonmere Abbey before nightfall.

Ezra held back as Evangeline was greeted with delighted squeals, a flurry of questions, and the warm embrace of her sisters. She took it all in stride, never once revealing the turmoil she had endured at the hands of a madman.

A man who, at this very moment, was on his way back to London—tied up to within an inch of his life and secured at the rear of the carriage. Ezra had sent Evangeline's maid with him, charged with ensuring his instructions were followed and that Gabriel Rossi was deposited at the nearest watch house for safekeeping... At least until Ezra decided what to do with him.

With a mix of relief and bone-deep amusement, he watched her surrounded by so much love and affection—everything she deserved, and especially today.

He drank in the sight of her. No matter what she might say, no matter how she might still protest, he knew now—without question—that what he felt for her was true. It was love. A love so fierce and rooted in truth that he feared, had he met her after Luisa, he would have been torn with choices no man wishes to make.

He hated himself for even thinking such a thing. But he could no longer deny the

truth of it: the woman before him—smiling despite the weariness in her eyes and the disheveled curls left by Rossi's rough treatment—had never looked more beautiful.

Ezra stepped out of the drawing room and waylaid a passing maid. "Have a bath prepared in Lady Evangeline's chambers. A clean shift and turned-down bed, if you please."

"Of course, my lord," she said with a curtsy before hurrying off.

He returned to the threshold of the drawing room, leaning against the doorframe as the sisters continued their chatter and affections. Evangeline caught his eye, and at that silent exchange, he decided he would interrupt.

"Come, ladies," he said gently. "Your sister has had a trying day and needs her rest. Tomorrow, when she's had a good night's sleep, you may ask her all the questions you like."

Lady Angelica arched a brow. "You are not married to our sister yet, my lord. We are more than capable of looking after Evangeline."

Ezra pressed his lips together, not wishing to cause offense, but before he could reply, Evangeline stepped forward and disengaged herself from her sisters. "Now, now, Angelica. Play nice, my sweet. I am very tired and in need of sleep. I shall see you all in the morning."

A murmur of protests sounded from the girls, but they did not argue, merely allowed Evangeline to leave. He took her hand and led her from the room. "I'll stay with you tonight. I want to ensure you sleep without fear."

"Thank you," she said softly, not arguing the point.

Upstairs, footmen moved to and fro, carrying buckets of hot water for her bath. Her eyes lit up at the sight of the steaming tub set before the fire, and Ezra moved to draw the curtains closed. When the last servant left, he turned and locked the door behind them, securing the space. He didn't care if the staff gossiped. Let them.

"Can you help me with my gown, Ezra?" she asked, giving him her back.

He crossed to her, surprised—and quietly grateful—that she hadn't asked him to leave. They'd barely spoken since the ordeal, and he hadn't known how she felt. Whether she still wanted him near. He worked the hooks at the back of her gown, sliding the fabric down to pool at her feet, his fingers deftly loosening the laces of her stays.

"I'm sorry, Evangeline," he said quietly. "For everything. I put your life at risk, and I hurt you. I don't know how I'll ever make it up to you."

She said nothing. Merely stepped out of her shift, removed her stockings and slippers, and stepped into the bath. The water lapped at her skin as she sank down, and still he could not look away. She was perfect. She was everything. And even now, weary and worn from the day, he wanted her more than ever.

"You can wash my hair," she said softly. "That will be a start."

He knelt beside the tub, his lips twitching into a faint smile as he reached for the soap. "I love you," he said simply. He met her startled gaze and hoped she knew his words as truth. "I know I cannot prove to you that you mean everything to me—not in a single day—but if you give me a second chance, I swear you'll never doubt it again. I will love and will dote on you every moment we're given. You are loved, Evangeline. Because of who you are. Not for a resemblance. Not as a replacement, but you."

She watched him for a long, silent stretch before sitting up, sending water sloshing over the sides of the tub and soaking into his breeches. He didn't move. Everything hung on what she would say next.

"I'm sorry too," she whispered, her voice low. "I let my own insecurities—what I never received from my father, from any man—poison how I saw you. I told myself I wasn't enough. That no one would ever see me as more than second best. And I placed all that onto you...and that wasn't fair. I know better now. I know you see me. And I love you, Ezra. So very much. I don't want our betrothal to end."

"I want that too." He pulled her gently into his arms, brushing his lips over her damp cheek, her temple, and finally her lips. "I love you for you. I'm in love with Evangeline Ravensmere. Not a ghost from my past, but you."

Tears shimmered in her eyes and she glanced down. "I'm ashamed I ever let myself be jealous of a woman who didn't deserve my anger. Not when she suffered so much."

"I failed Luisa," he murmured, cupping her cheek. "But I will not fail you. I cannot lose you, Evangeline. I would die if anything happened to you."

"But it didn't," she said firmly, clasping his jaw. "We're safe. We're happy. And I cannot wait to marry you."

"The duke and duchess will arrive tomorrow. Is that soon enough?" he asked. "Because I will not wait another day to make you my countess."

Her smile bloomed like spring and everything for the first time in weeks felt right. "Tomorrow sounds perfect."

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 3:56 pm

They were married by noon, and by the afternoon the duchess was hosting an impromptu wedding breakfast for the family and staff who joined in on the celebrations.

The large dining room at Ebonmere Abbey was a riot of laughter and chatter, the long table dressed in white linens, fresh blooms spilling from silver vases, and plates heaped with meats, tarts, and sweet cakes.

Evangeline sat beside Ezra at the head of the table, her fingers loosely twined with his. Every so often, he'd look at her, a soft smile playing about his lips—one that made her heart twist and flutter all over again.

“You’re staring at me again,” she said, leaning in with a teasing smile.

“I’m allowed. You’re my wife now.” He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Besides, I’m trying to memorize every freckle and curve so I don’t ever forget just how lucky I am.”

Evangeline flushed and shook her head, laughing. “You’ll have ample time to memorize them, my lord. A lifetime, I believe.”

He nodded solemnly, but his eyes danced. “That still doesn’t feel like enough time.”

They were halfway through the final course when Ezra leaned in closer, his voice low. “Sweetheart?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to alarm you, but...” He hesitated, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. “You mentioned in London that you’d started your courses, but you haven’t said anything since. Last night there was no sign...”

She blinked, taken aback. “No...I have not.”

Ezra stilled. “And have they started today?”

She sat up straighter, heart giving a sudden, unexpected flutter. “No... No, they have not.” There was a long pause as they both stared at one another. Her breath caught. “Ezra, I—I thought it had started. I only spotted for a day. I did not think...”

He was on his feet before she could finish, his chair clattering to the floor as he reached for her. “You’re with child?” he whispered, breathless. “We’re having a baby?”

“I—I think so,” she said, stunned joy blooming behind her ribs.

Ezra laughed—deep and unrestrained—before scooping her up in his arms and spinning her about, drawing startled gasps and delighted laughter from her family around them.

“My beautiful wife!” he called out, triumphant. “The new Countess St. George!”

The duchess clapped her hands in delight while her sisters jumped to their feet, rushing toward her. Evangeline clung to her husband, laughing as tears of joy pricked her eyes. “Put me down, you ridiculous man!”

“Never,” he whispered, holding her tight. “You’ve given me everything, Evangeline. I never thought I could feel this happy again. I love you. With everything that I am.”

She cupped his face, brushing her thumbs along the curve of his jaw. “And I love

you. For exactly who you are, flaws and all.”

He kissed her, slow and sure, not caring in the least that the whole of the house was watching. Their future stretched out before them—wild and unknown, but full of hope. Of love. And for the first time, neither of them feared it. Together, they had everything.