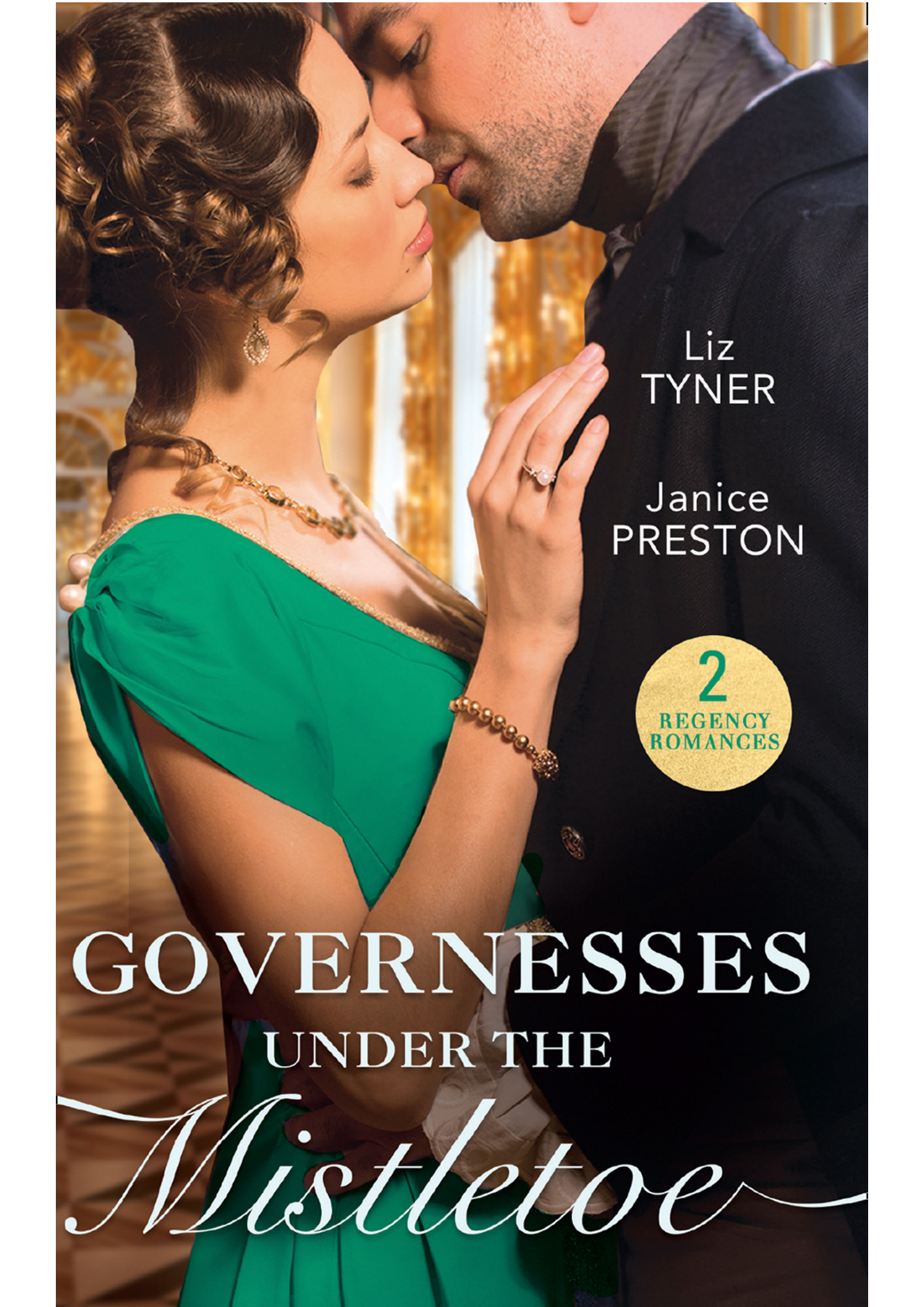




Liz
TYNER

Janice
PRESTON

2
REGENCY
ROMANCES

GOVERNESSES

UNDER THE

Mistletoe

Liz Tyner

**Governesses Under The Mistletoe:
The Runaway Governess /
The Governess's Secret Baby**

«HarperCollins»

Tyner L.

Governesses Under The Mistletoe: The Runaway Governess / The Governess's Secret Baby / L. Tyner — «HarperCollins»,

A Regency Christmas to Remember! When Isabel Morton's desire to sing leads her from a prospective governess post to a disreputable establishment in London, she's rescued by dashing William Balfour. But when her saviour is accused of being a party to her misfortune, it's Isabel's turn to save William...by becoming his bride! But can they find a way to live happily ever after as husband and wife? New governess Grace Bertram will do anything to get to know her young daughter Clara. Even if it means working for Clara's guardian, the reclusive Nathaniel, Marquess of Ravenwell! Nathaniel believes no woman could ever love a monster like him, until Grace seems to look past his scars to the man beneath...Could there be a Christmas happy-ever-after for this beauty and the beast?

About the Authors

LIZ TYNER lives with her husband on an Oklahoma acreage she imagines is similar to the ones in the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Her lifestyle is a blend of old and new, and is sometimes comparable to the way people lived long ago. Liz is a member of various writing groups and has been writing since childhood. For more about her visit liztyner.com.

JANICE PRESTON grew up in Wembley, North London, with a love of reading, writing stories and animals. In the past she has worked as a farmer, a police callhandler and a university administrator. She now lives in the West Midlands with her husband and two cats and has a part-time job with a weight management counsellor (vainly trying to control her own weight despite her love of chocolate!).

GOVERNESSES
UNDER THE
Mistletoe

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JANICE PRESTON

MILLS & BOON

ISBN: 978-1-474-08540-3

GOVERNESSES UNDER THE MISTLETOE

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Published in Great Britain 2018

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

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Liz Tyner

In the arms of Prince Charming...

When Isabel Morton's desire to sing leads her from a prospective governess post to a disreputable and dangerous establishment in London, she's rescued by dashing William Balfour. But when her savior is accused of being a party to her misfortune, it's Isabel's turn to save William...by becoming his bride!

Brought together by fate and now bound by a vow, it's time for these two strangers to explore the unexpected passion of their new marriage—and find a way to live happily ever after as husband and wife!

Dedicated with gratitude to Laura McCallen who helped me find the story I wanted to tell.

[*Chapter One*](#)

Isabel watched from the window as the older couple's driver stepped on to his carriage perch and called to the horses. She'd not believed her luck when she'd spotted the man and woman waiting for their carriage to be readied. It had taken her all of a minute to find out their destination and pour out her sad tale.

She didn't want to think of what might happen when the other coach arrived in Sussex without her. But the family could find another governess. This was her one chance. Her chance to soar.

Isabel turned to the man whose eyelids almost concealed his vision and the woman who matched him in age, but her eyes danced with life. Isabel clasped her hands at her chest and promised herself she would never again lie, except in extreme circumstances such as this. Taking a deep breath, she let the words rise from deep within herself. 'You have saved my life.'

A barmaid, hair frazzled from the August heat, stood behind the couple. She looked up long enough to roll her eyes heavenward.

'Miss...' the wife patted Isabel's glove '...we just could not bear that your evil uncle was selling you into marriage to a man old enough to be your father—and your betrothed a murderer as well.'

'Thank you so much.' She sighed. 'If my parents were alive today...' they were, but they'd understand and forgive her once they discovered how famous she'd be '...they would fall upon their knees in gratitude for your saving my life.'

The barmaid snorted and Isabel sighed with emphasis, knowing she mustn't let the couple notice the scepticism.

'You're sure if you go to London with us, your family will give you a home?' the wife questioned.

'Oh. Yes.' The word lengthened to twice its usual length. 'Aunt Anna, my mother's sister, who has no idea of the tragedy that has befallen me as my great-uncle would not allow me paper or ink, would give me refuge in a heartbeat. I have always been her favourite niece, of course. It is just that my uncle told her I was...tragically killed in a fall from a horse, trampled by hooves and had to be immediately buried because the sight was too exceptionally hideous for anyone to see as I would not have wanted to be remembered as such.'

The woman's eyes could not have been more kind. 'Tragic.'

'Yes. Frightfully so.'

The man arched one brow, enough that Isabel could see the scepticism. 'We will certainly deliver you to your aunt in London,' he said. 'To her doorstep.'

'I will be in your gratitude for ever.' Oh, good heavens. That might not end well as she had no aunt in London. 'It is near Charles Street—Drury Lane.' She almost shivered, just saying the words Drury Lane. Not that she was going to be an actress. Oh, no. Not something so disreputable as that. Her voice would be her fortune. Her very best friends, Joanna, Rachel and Grace, had told her time and time again at Madame Dubois's School for Young Ladies that she could sing better than anyone else they'd ever heard. Even the headmistress, Madame Dubois, had commented that Isabel's singing voice was bearable. Since Madame Dubois had called Grace Bertram 'passable,' whom Isabel thought favoured a painting of a heavenly angel—then to have a bearable voice was the highest praise from Madame Dubois.

She'd been so lucky Mr Thomas Wren had heard of her when he attended one of the school presentations. Now he was her patron—albeit a secret patron. She would be the lead of his new musicale. She would sing her heart out. Even though her voice was not perfection itself, something about the way she sang stirred people. When she was performing, others would listen and eyes would water. Nothing made her happier than when someone gave her that rapt attention and they were brought to tears. She loved making people cry in such a way.

She gathered her satchel and linked her arm around the older woman's. 'My Aunt Anna will be so grateful.'

'We must meet her and make sure she will not return you to that dreadful man.' The woman's voice oozed concern.

Isabel leaned forward and batted her lashes. 'Of course. You simply must meet my aunt.' Easily said, albeit completely impossible.

The couple's meal was left behind, crumbs still clinging to the man's waistcoat, and they spirited her to their carriage.

When she stepped into the vehicle, she slumped a bit, keeping the man's frame between her and the windows of the coaching inn. It would not do for anyone from the other carriage to note her leaving before the end of the brief stop. She grasped her satchel and settled into the seat, ever so pleased to be leaving the governess part of her life behind. True, she had enjoyed the friendships of the school. But as she became closer and closer to graduation, she'd felt trapped. Mr Thomas Wren's notice of her was indeed fortunate. Apparently another student's father had informed him of Isabel's voice. Mr Wren had known the rules of the school and had known to be secretive in their correspondence. He'd offered her the lead in a new production he'd planned.

She could barely concentrate on the task at hand for thinking of the good fortune of her life. This change of carriage would even make a grand tale. She could imagine recounting the tale of how she stowed away, risking all to travel with a couple she could but hope was reputable, and who transported her at great personal risk to help her achieve her life's dream.

Isabel spoke as quickly as the wheels turned on the carriage, not wanting to give the couple a chance to think too much of the events of the day. She recounted honest tales of her youth at the governess school, leaving out the parts about the visits to her parents—and keeping as close to the facts as possible. She had already used her share of untruths for the year and it would not be good to blunder at this point.

* * *

When the carriage neared Drury Lane, Isabel kept one eye to the road, knowing she must make a quick decision.

A woman wearing a tattered shawl and with one strand of grey hanging from her knot of hair walked near an opening between two structures. Isabel saw the chance she had to take.

'My aunt,' she gasped, pointing. 'It's my aunt.' She turned to the man across. 'Stop the carriage.' He raised his hand to the vehicle top, thumping.

She bolted up and tumbled out the door before the conveyance fully stopped, scurrying to the woman. 'Aunt. Aunt,' she called out. The woman must have had a niece somewhere because she paused, turning to look at Isabel.

Isabel scurried, then darted sideways behind a looming structure, running with all her might, turning right, then left. When she knew she was not being chased, she stopped, leaning against the side of a building. She gulped, and when her breathing righted she reflected.

She would become the best songstress in all London. She knew it. Mr Thomas Wren knew it. The future was hers. Now she just had to find it. She was lost beyond hope in the biggest city of the world.

Isabel tried to scrape the street refuse from her shoe without it being noticed what she was doing. She didn't know how she was going to get the muck off her dress. A stranger who wore a drooping cravat was eyeing her bosom quite openly. Only the fact that she was certain she could outrun him, even in her soiled slippers, kept her from screaming.

He tipped his hat to her and ambled into a doorway across the street.

Her dress, the only one with the entire bodice made from silk, would have to be altered now. The rip in the skirt—thank you, dog who didn't appreciate my trespassing in his gardens—was not something she could mend. She didn't think it could be fixed. The skirt would have to be ripped from the bodice and replaced. That would not be simple.

How? How had she got herself into this? Oh, well, she decided, she would buy all new clothing when Mr Thomas Wren gave her the funds he'd promised.

Yet, she didn't quite know where to begin in her search for him and she'd have to find him before nightfall. She would certainly ask someone as soon as she left this disreputable part of London. The dead fish head at her feet didn't give her the encouragement she needed.

But then she looked up. Straight into a ray of sunshine illuminating a placard hanging from a building. A bird on it. She didn't have to search. Providence had put out its golden torch and led her right to the very place she was searching for. This sign—well, the sign was a sign of her future. This was Mr Thomas Wren's establishment. The man with the ill-mannered eyes had gone inside but still, one did sometimes have to sing for unpleasant people and one could only hope they gleaned some lesson from the song. She had quite the repertoire of songs with lessons hidden in the words and knew when to use them.

She opened the satchel, pulled out the plume, and examined it. She straightened the unfortunate new crimp in it as best she could and put the splash of blue into the little slot she'd added to her bonnet. She picked up her satchel, realising she had got a bit of the street muck on it—and began again her new life.

Begin her new life, she repeated to herself, unmoving. She looked at the paint peeling from the exterior and watched as another man came from the doorway, waistcoat buttoned at an angle. Gripping the satchel with both hands, she locked her eyes on the wayward man.

Her stomach began a song of its own and very off-key. She couldn't turn back. She had no funds to hire a carriage. She knew no one in London but Mr Wren. And he had been so complimentary and kind to everyone at Madame Dubois's School for Young Ladies. Not just her. She could manage. She would have to. His compliments had not been idle, surely.

She held her head the way she planned to look over the audience when she first walked on stage and put one foot in front of the other, ignoring everything but the entrance in front of her.

As she walked through the doorway, head high, the first thing Isabel noticed was the stage. A woman was singing. Isabel concealed her shudder and hoped her ears would forgive her. She supposed she would be replacing the woman. The songstress's bosom was obviously well padded because it would be hard for nature to be so overzealous, but perhaps it had been to make up for the error of her voice.

A man with silver hair and a gold-tipped cane sat gaping at the stage. The woman put her arms tighter to the side of her body and bent forward to emphasise her words.

Isabel turned her head. She could not believe it. She would have to have a word with Mr Wren about this, although—

Then her eyes skipped from person to person to person. It would take more than a word. Men sat around a table playing Five Card Loo, but it seemed only pence were on the table.

The men at the game could not decide whether to watch the stage or their hand. Two women obviously championed their favourites, alternately cheering and gasping at the cards. Then the game ended. Whoops erupted. A man stood, bowed to the table, and waited. The other players reached into their purses, took out coins and handed them to the women. The winner put his arm around the women's waists and led them through a curtained hallway.

She let out a breath and all her dreams fluttered away with it.

* * *

William strode under the faded placard and stepped into Wren House, giving himself a moment to let his eyes adjust from the bright August sun to the dim light of a world only illuminated because men needed to see the cards in their hand. He'd have to go to a stable to get the scent of Wren's out of his nostrils.

If his father knew this was where Cousin Sylvester spent every Wednesday night, things might have been different. But now Sylvester had Marvel and Ivory, the two best horses in England and the only ones whose eyes flickered regard when William neared them. The beasts would always stick out their necks for a treat when William appeared. 'Spoiled,' the stable master muttered each time.

William always replied, 'And worth it.'

William surveyed the table, and spotted his cousin immediately. Sylvester mumbled a greeting and two others looked over, recognising William and giving him a grunt of their own before they returned to the cards. William jerked his head sideways, motioning for Sylvester to join him. The answer, a quick shake of Sylvester's head, and a brief upturn of the lips, didn't surprise William. He took a seat near the corner where he could watch the room. He didn't want anyone at his back. A woman on stage finished singing, thankfully.

He ordered an ale and when the barmaid brought the drink, her brows lifted in question and she looked to the curtain at the back. He shook his head, smiling to soften the refusal. His fingers clasped the mug, but as he lifted it, he paused. Sticky residue lay under his touch. Jam? He gazed into the liquid, half-expecting to see something floating, but nothing looked alive in it. Then he sat the mug back on the table.

A perfect ending to a perfect day, but Marvel and Ivory were worth it.

And having a roof over one's head did have some merit.

William's father had visited early in the morning and had pontificated well into the day. The Viscount had picked a fine time to regain an interest in life and an excellent plan to disinherit his only son. The Viscount knew the entailment laws as well as anyone. He had to leave his property to William. But he could, however, lease his nephew the estate for the next fifty years. Upon the Viscount's death, William would receive the proceeds of the lease. A bargain to Sylvester at one pound per year.

If his father had mentioned that once, he'd mentioned it one hundred times. And he'd had no smell of brandy on his breath.

The inheritance could be dealt with later. Marvel and Ivory were already gone from the stables.

Sylvester smirked at the cards, but William knew the smugness was directed his way. No hand could be that good.

William glanced around and, even though his eyes didn't stop until they returned to his mug, he noted the woman sitting on a bench at the other side of the room. She sat close to the wall, her body slanted away from the group of men. The shadowed interior hid more of her than it revealed. He was certain she had a face, but she'd pulled the bonnet off-centre and it perched askew so he couldn't see her features unless she turned his way. If not for the plume, he wouldn't have noticed her.

In one movement to relax his frame, he twisted his chair just a bit in her direction so he could stare forward, but see her from the corner of his eye.

The barmaid sauntered by him. He waved a coin her way and asked for another drink, discarding any thought of asking for a clean mug. He didn't imagine she would take kindly to that, particularly when he saw the crust at her fingernails.

He thought the lady at the bench was above the others in the room, particularly by the way her back didn't leave the wall behind her and her hands gripped the satchel as if it might protect her. He wondered why she stayed.

The barmaid plunked another mug in front of him and brushed against his side before leaving.

Nothing floated in the liquid. Nothing stuck to his hand. He would take that as an omen that the ale was—he took a drink and smothered a cough. The mug's contents could have been watered down more. He hoped his tongue hadn't blistered. The owner apparently didn't mind if his customers wobbled a bit and knew drink could loosen the ties of a purse.

The door opened and light dappled across the bonnet the miss on the bench wore. She turned towards the light. For an instant he could see wisps of her hair. Copper.

He took a small sip. The ale tasted better than it had before.

Copper. Just under the ghastly plume. His favourite colour of hair—now. He didn't think he'd ever seen a woman with just that shade of hair. A shame the bonnet covered it.

Someone from Sylvester's table belched and the woman with the falling plume stiffened even more and twisted away from them.

William noted the dress. Not quite the dash of colour his sisters insisted on. It reminded him of something he might see on a miss at a country fair, yet not a walking dress. Not a soirée dress either. He could see underskirts peeking from a tear in the skirt. All his muscles stilled. A woman would not be going about with such a rip in her skirts. Particularly not one sitting so straight and gloves locked on her satchel.

He stood, mug still in hand, planning to offer her his assistance. At his movement, her eyes darted to him. She took in a breath and the back of her head bumped against the wall.

He gave her a grim-lipped smile. The woman didn't want him to approach her, obviously. Perhaps she was at Wren's hoping to find her husband. In that case, William certainly didn't want to draw notice her way. He sat the mug at the table and moved to stand at Sylvester's side.

Putting a hand on the woollen shoulder of Sylvester's coat, William leaned forward. 'I must talk with you.'

'Anything you have to say,' Sylvester's voice boomed, 'you can say in front of my friends.'

'I'm sure I can,' William answered. 'But I thought we might step out to speak of family matters.' Sylvester had to have noticed if the Viscount was sotted when he gave the horses away.

'These men are like family,' Sylvester answered. 'Only better, because they do not gift me with horses not worth feeding.' He spoke to the man on his left. 'Did I tell you my uncle gave me two horses? Broken-down old things. I could hardly refuse them and hurt the man's feelings, particularly if his mind is clear as a cloudless day.'

Sylvester wouldn't have said the Viscount's mind was clear if it wasn't true. 'I will take them off your hands.'

'Oh, I could not do that to you,' Sylvester let out a breath. 'I'll just keep them for now, though I don't see feeding them like they're used to. A bit on the plump side. A few less rations will be good for them. Or maybe I should just put them down.'

William tightened his grip on Sylvester's coat. 'You will feed them properly and you will care for them.'

Sylvester laughed. 'Just having a jest with you, dear Cousin. I know those beasts are your favourites. Your father does as well. Can't think what he's up to.' He brushed a hand over his chin, tugging at it. 'Or maybe I can.' Sylvester spoke to the other players. 'If Cousin William doesn't get it on his mind to marry and have an heir, sadly, the title will pass to my son, should I have one, and I intend to have a full brood. I can't think if I were in his boots that would be difficult. I'd be wedded, bedded and enjoying the bondage of matrimony, although that is not how I put it to Uncle. I told him I'm deeply in love and near to proposing. And I am.' He smirked again. 'Deeply in love with William's inheritance and near to proposing to...' Looking around the table, he asked, 'Any of you have an unmarried sister who wants a husband?'

'Not that we'd let wed you,' one of the men answered. The rest laughed.

'I will have Marvel and Ivory back.' William released his cousin's shoulder.

'Well, I'm going to wager the horses if I run out of funds. Of course, with the way my luck is going tonight, I'll own everyone's livestock before I leave.'

'I'll buy them from whomever you lose them to.' William leaned forward and briefly met eyes with the others at the table. 'If any of you men win those horses from Sylvester, I'll buy them from you at double what you'd get at Tattersalls.'

The others grinned, chuckling.

'That's why Uncle is concerned about you, William.' Sylvester pulled out a card, waved it for others to see the back of and then dropped it on to the table with a flourish. 'You're planning to buy a pair of old horses not worth a pence when you might be able to win them with a single game of chance. Yet, you gambled away a carriage once. You've even lost your own boots and then threw in

the stockings. It's all a game to you, but you don't care if you win or lose.' He raked in the coins. 'I play to win.'

'I enjoy the sport,' William said. He'd had enough of the night.

Turning to leave, he made it as far as the door before looking back at that feathery trimming. His youngest sister had once pulled such an adornment from his middle sister's bonnet and the roof had barely stayed on the house in the aftermath.

He retraced his steps to the sticky mug. He sat, staring straight ahead. The joy of being called a wastrel by one's father meant William could sit all night watching a plume on a bonnet. He tried to imagine the bird that lost the feather, but he could only see a caricature of a bird prancing, preening, and sprouting a blast of unnatural feathers from its head, while wobbling under the weight.

He needed to stop with the ale.

The singer returned to the stage and opened her mouth. He would not call it singing, exactly, but if one didn't care much about quality of voice, then it could pass the time. He swatted at a fly that landed on the edge of the mug. Just because he didn't want the drink didn't mean he intended to share.

The woman with the tear in her dress adjusted the bag in her lap. The singer hit a high note, or had her foot mashed by a carriage. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could do the same for his ears. As the note ended, he opened his eyes while pulling the cleaner mug to his lips. His hand stopped when he caught Miss Plume watching him.

She looked away and his hand moved again. He finished the drink, not tasting it. He would wait until her husband arrived to take her home. If the husband walked in with some woman hanging on him, William would make sure to give the man a reminder of propriety. A man didn't embarrass his wife so. To let her wait alone in a place like Wren's was unforgiveable.

William looked directly at her, not able to see through the glove on her left hand, or into her mind to see what memories resided there.

He eased back in the chair. He wasn't leaving until she did.

* * *

Isabel knew the man who wanted his horses was aware of her. But he was hoping to get his stock returned and he wanted them fed properly. The other men even seemed more decent after he'd spoken with them. When she'd noted him walking to the door, leaving, fear tremored in her midsection and she'd had an urge to follow, not wanting to remain without his presence. But he'd paused and returned to his chair. He must want to be certain he received those horses.

She peered around her bonnet brim, searching for Wren.

Mr Wren should be about. Earlier she'd asked that barmaid and the woman had glared and mumbled that he'd be in when he walked in. Wren had told Isabel he would meet her. He'd said he spent each day working, except when he attended Sunday Services. She no longer believed that, unless he attended with her aunt.

The one, William they'd called him—his face had pinched when the singer got stuck on that dreadful note. Apparently he could hear quite well. And when he'd opened his eyes and caught her examining his expression, he'd looked startled.

He was rather ordinary except for those legs that didn't want to fit under the table, but yet, he made her feel safer.

Then the barmaid approached and brought him another mug. He'd not requested it, but he took it. The woman brushed a lock of his hair over his ear, which hadn't needed touching, but Isabel couldn't blame the woman. That hair did make a person curious about what it felt like.

The woman whispered something to him. He laughed, changing everything in his face, and creating the same thump in Isabel's heart that she felt when the music was perfect. His smile could carry its own tune.

He saw Isabel watching. He gave a flicker of a smile and shrugged his shoulders.

She ducked her head, pleased not to feel so alone.

The barmaid was a tart, but Isabel couldn't blame her for noticing him. He was the only man in the place who didn't make her feel like bathing.

The door opened and she saw the familiar checked waistcoat of Mr Thomas Wren, his eyebrows as light as the gold buttons on his coat. She wasn't as impressed with the fastenings as she'd been before.

* * *

He made his way to her bench, his grin almost suffocating her. She scooted away, gently wedging the soiled side of her satchel in his direction as she put it between them. Half her bottom was already off the bench, but she could not let Mr Thomas Wren's breath closer. Apparently he'd had something to do with the fish she'd seen in the street.

She forced a positive lilt to her voice. 'Mr Wren, I do believe you forgot to tell me something in your letters.'

'No.' His eyes widened. 'I can't think I did.' He put an arm at the back of the bench. He could not possibly have eight hairy fingers on one hand, but that's what it felt like when his knuckles brushed at the top of her glove. 'You really do sing quite well, Miss Morton, and I am happy to have you on my stage.'

'You mentioned a suitable chaperon.'

'Why, yes, I believe I did. And if you look around, you'll notice there are plenty of women here to...'

She lowered her chin, but raised her brows at him. He didn't appear chagrined at all. Instead, he grinned while his eyes devoured her.

The air in the room boiled into her and she could hardly force the words past the sweltering heat. 'I fear that on the way here,' she spoke, 'I realised that I cannot forgo my duties as a governess. I will not be able to accept the position.'

She didn't know how she'd manage or what she'd do. She had hardly enough coins in her satchel to buy bread. She could only hope for another married couple to notice her and this time she would tell the truth. Some of it. She hoped she had not totally used her portion of lies for the year.

'Oh, my.' Wren's words mocked themselves. 'I seem to recall in your correspondence a distinct aversion to those duties and a sincere wish to follow your true talent. And you are quite talented, Miss...Morton.'

'I can't. I wouldn't be—'

He leaned forward, his voice covering her with fumes of the summer heat. 'I am saddened. But I admit, I considered the possibility you would not wish to continue in our bargain.' He stood, his tongue clucking as if he'd caught her doing something terribly wrong. He whisked one hand to the bottom of the satchel and the other over hers on the grip. Involuntarily, she jerked her hands from his touch.

Brows lifted, he turned, striding away. 'Come with me to my office and I will see what we must do now.'

'We can discuss it here.' She stood, running a hand down the side of her skirt, hoping to pull that rend together just a little more.

He paused, turning back. 'Will you be needing funds to return to your home?' His voice faded so low that she read the words on his lips more than heard them.

He hadn't given her money for the trip to London, saying he'd once done so and the woman he'd hired never arrived.

She couldn't answer.

'Then come with me,' he continued. 'We can discuss it in my office. The funds are in my safe.' He looked to the window. 'The hour is getting late. I hate to think of you alone on the streets, in darkness and finding your way. It's not safe at night for a woman out and about. Just last month, one

of the women, Molly, went out. They found her the next morning, bruises on her neck. Blood on her hands. Buried her in a pauper's grave.'

Before she answered, he was at the curtain, her satchel clasped in his hand.

She stood, glancing around, hoping no one would see her follow. She would be ruined. If she wasn't already. But it was better to be ruined than buried in some lost grave. She didn't quite think Mr Wren would be rushing to see that a proper burial would take place.

She watched his retreating coat. She would never again complain about being a governess.

He had the only funds she had—hidden in the bag. An unmarked grave would not quite fulfil her dreams. She followed, planning to grab the satchel as soon as he released it and run.

Stepping through the curtain and into a cramped office, relief brightened her spirit. A copy of a Mrs Radcliffe novel lay on his desk. Surely a man who liked to read had some refinement.

* * *

'Please sit.' He indicated a chair, one rung missing from the back. She did, noting he sat the satchel down at his right side, his body between her and the bag. He still stood. He turned.

'I don't believe you realise what position you put me in.' He shook his head while picking up the novel. 'We can't have that.'

'I just—' She moved to rise, the fish smell wafting over her.

He crashed the novel to the wall. Before she could believe what her eyes told her had just happened, his hand clamped on her shoulder. The surprise and force thrust her on to the wooden chair seat.

'I—'

'You wish to hear me out.' She could feel all of the fingers again. This time they pressed. Pinched. His hand slid, not releasing, until his thumbnail rested in the soft skin at the base of her jaw. He took a step, moving his body forward, still beside her, her head held back by his thumb. Her backbone firm against the chair, him above forcing her neck back. He untied her bonnet strings and pushed it to the floor.

Her mouth dried. She could breathe—just. Her hands clasped his wrist, pushing. But she could not move him.

'Sweet, you have to understand, I looked for a long time to find just the right woman. Just the right blend of woman. Taller than most so she stood out. A haunting voice that could also trill in happiness. A look of freshness. Eyes that made a man think he could see her wanting him. Lips that he could imagine on his body.'

'No,' she gasped.

'Do not interrupt.' He put his other hand over her mouth and leaned closer. She shuddered. All of his bulk loomed over her, his cheeks ruddy. 'You understand that even the other women would increase their coin by satisfying your cast-offs. You would even be a boon to them.' He paused. 'Feel free to nod.'

He took his hand from her throat, but not her mouth. One of his legs pressed against hers.

'Nod.' His eyes glistened with an intensity that covered her like the coil of a serpent's skin against hers.

She didn't move. Her lower face was in his vice-like grasp. She could feel the pressure of his thumb. The tightness. But no pain. Nothing hurt. Nothing. Except she could not breathe.

His clothes rustled and he moved so that she could see nothing but his face.

'You understand, I have to have you. I have no choice. No choice. I've spent too much time finding you and waiting on you.' He reached to his waistcoat and a thin sliver of steel flashed in front of her. The blade pressed at her neck. 'Nod, Sweet.'

She did—the barest amount.

‘You understand there are rules one must observe to work here. You will learn them in time.’ The knife moved, tracing the circle of her neck. ‘Nod, Sweet.’ He moved her head up and down with his hand. ‘Get used to that.’

She remembered how easy it had been to convince the couple of a lie. She nodded, moving her hand from his wrist. He trailed the blade in the same way of an artist’s pen making swirls on a page. He slipped the tip to her shoulder. ‘You don’t have to worry about me hurting your face, permanently. But a man might be aroused by a gentle scar trailing away under clothing.’ The blade caught her sleeve, but rested at skin, pressing. Testing. Drooling, he stared at the blade. ‘He might wonder where a scar led. Where it ended.’

The blade pressed harder, and the sleeve pulled, fabric falling away—no barrier to the steel. Pressure flared at her arm.

Spit pooled at the edge of his lips. ‘Scars, in their way, can be beauty marks.’

* * *

William glanced across at his cousin. Sylvester scratched his earlobe, stared at the cards, and grumbled.

Something had thumped in the back, but none of the others’ attentions wavered from the cards.

Miss Plume was beyond the curtain with Wren. William tapped the side of his mug and pushed his chair back, standing. With the woman on the way to finding whatever she looked for, he had no wish to continue enjoying the smell of worn boots.

He stared at the curtain, unable to move, imagining the look on the woman’s face as she’d left the room. Wren had swooped up the bag and darted to the back. Miss Plume had hesitated before moving.

He shrugged, noting the worn threads where so many had touched the curtain before him, but striding towards it.

He walked through and saw several doors. This would not be the time to open the wrong one. Ignoring his misgivings, he pressed a hand to the first door and pushed it.

Wren stood over a woman, a blade at the woman’s arm. Instantly, it moved to her throat. In seconds Wren could slice and nothing would be able to erase the moment, ever.

William’s breath left his body. His mind took a moment to adjust to the sight his eyes tried to make sense of. The woman was one movement from death. Wren’s face had the look of a rabid animal, all thoughts absorbed by the sickness. No way to understand reason.

William could not move forward to rescue the woman because Wren could act on impulse. The knife pressed against the slender neck. Wren could kill in the moments it would take William to close the distance. A jolt against Wren’s arm would press the blade into skin. She would be dead and nothing could ever change those seconds.

Chapter Two

Wren increased the pressure of the blade. Isabel’s pulse thumped against the tip.

‘My pardon,’ the man at the door spoke. ‘I didn’t realise this was a private conversation.’ Nothing flickered on his face. He didn’t even seem to see her.

‘Get the hell out,’ Wren rasped.

Isabel swallowed. Could the man not understand there was a blade at her neck?

‘I certainly will,’ the man at the door spoke. He leaned back a bit, turning his head.

His hand tightened on the door and he was going to leave, letting Wren do as he wished. She could tell. The stranger had not once looked at her eyes.

‘But, I was thinking of making an investment.’ Soft words from the man at the door. His body stilled before turning in her direction.

Finally, he noticed Isabel. His brows lifted and he wet his lips. He appraised her in the same way a butcher might decide which chicken was to be the first to the block. A nausea filled her.

‘I would like to invest, Wren.’ He chuckled. ‘And all it would take would be a bit of pleasure to convince me.’

‘I need no investors.’ The knife didn’t lessen. ‘I own everything under this roof. Everything.’

‘True enough,’ the man spoke. His eyes were again on Wren. ‘I hear nothing but good about this establishment. Nothing. And an investor like myself feels a bit left out.’ His gaze locked on Wren’s face. ‘I have a good bit of coin. A good bit, and I certainly can find better ways to spend it than on gaming.’

The pressure at Isabel’s throat lessened.

‘A man cannot have too much coin,’ Wren said. ‘But he can have too many women about.’ At those words, the knife jabbed forward, tapping Isabel’s neck like a pointed fingernail with a razor at the end.

The stranger’s eyes widened and he caught his breath, speaking as he exhaled. ‘Don’t damage the goods, Wren.’ His voice strengthened. ‘Wouldn’t want to hurt an investment.’

Wren took the knife from Isabel’s neck, looking at it as if he’d forgotten he had it in his hand.

In that moment, the man threw his body in front of Isabel, knocking her backwards with a crash.

For less than a second she could only see the ceiling. She pushed herself up, scrambling to her feet. Wren’s back was on the desk and the stranger’s right fist plunged into Wren’s face.

Wren rolled, falling from the desk, kicking the man’s ribs when he moved forward. But the stranger only turned with the blow. He continued forward, driving on to Wren, using his body as a battering ram. His left hand gripped Wren’s neck and he rose, just enough for leverage, keeping Wren pinned to the floor.

The stranger’s fist rose and hammered Wren’s face, pummelling a groan from him.

She could not bear it. ‘No,’ she shouted, the words more a scream than a command. ‘Stop. No. I beg you, please stop.’ The words could have carried to the top of the Tower.

She shuddered, her voice now pleaded. ‘Please stop.’

The stranger looked at her. His eyes held no recognition of the moment, but his fist stilled on the upswing. Nothing from inside him acknowledged her words, but he stopped pummelling. Again his arm moved up, ready for a downswing.

‘No...’ The word pulled her last thread of strength.

* * *

William stopped, pulling the world around him back into focus. The woman’s body trembled in a circular motion. Another second and she would topple. Dazed eyes locked on him, but he didn’t think she truly saw anything.

William lunged upwards and scooped the knife from the floor so Wren couldn’t grab it. He had to get the woman away from the place. Neither she nor his family would be helped by tales of these events.

In one stride, William had a hand at her shoulder. ‘Miss?’ He tightened his clasp.

She blinked, but didn’t speak and her glance fell to his hand.

‘Miss?’ he repeated. ‘Where do you live?’

He released her shoulder and took her chin in his gasp, pulling her gaze to his. His heart slammed against his ribs with a stronger punch than any Wren had managed.

Seizing her around the waist, he lifted her to the door. Stopping outside, he let her feet flutter to the floor. She kept moving downwards and he pulled her up, tight against him. Her colourless face wasn’t far from his own, yet she offered no resistance.

He had a knife in one hand and a woman in the other. The door still open, he led her to the taproom, trying to keep her on the side opposite the patrons.

Everyone in Wren’s looked towards the curtain when he strode through. They’d heard the commotion apparently, but hadn’t moved. Sylvester’s cards fluttered to the table.

A customer entered at the door. Light filtered on to the woman's hair, showing the unusual colour to all in the room. The stranger stared at William, unmoving. Uncertainty stilled him as if he couldn't decide whether to enter or run for safety.

Sylvester's voice jarred the moments, reminding William of the others. 'Cousin—you must introduce us to your friend.'

'Yes, I must.' William tramped forward. 'Just not today.'

He glared at the man at the door, gesturing him aside—and then Will realised he gestured with the knife. He dropped the weapon and the man jumped backwards, pulling the door with him. William stopped the swing with his boot. The man darted away.

Sprinting the woman into the fading sunlight, William moved towards his carriage. He shouted to the driver, 'Just go. Keep us moving.' The driver stared, then his posture straightened and his chin snapped up in agreement.

Once inside the vehicle, William reached across her to lower the shade on her side. She gasped and the sound slashed into him. She pressed against her side of the carriage.

With the same control he'd used when he spoke to Wren, he turned to her.

He opened his mouth to ask her where she lived, but closed it again. He could not deliver such a bedraggled miss anywhere. She'd been so prim on the bench. And her dress had been ripped even then.

'You must stop shaking.' He spoke in the tone that could soothe two sisters trying to strangle each other over an apricot tart.

One at a time, he reached for her hands, holding tight to one when she tried to pull away, but freeing the other. He couldn't have her darting from the door of a moving carriage.

He stared at the slice on his own knuckles and then remembered her arm. If it had meant losing the horses to put himself in Wren's while she was there, then he would thank Sylvester—at least silently.

He reached into his pocket and took out a handkerchief. Even in the darkening light, he saw the moisture, but the wound on her arm only trickled blood.

He pressed and waited, making sure it wasn't serious. 'Just relax,' he spoke in the apricot-tart tone, 'you'll be all better in a minute.' If it would have been his sister, he would have started singing a nursery song, because it always worked, even if they complained about the nonsense.

'You're hurt,' she said.

Relief flooded him. She was aware of something other than the fright.

'I'm fine.' He daubed at the dried blood on her shoulder. 'My horses give me worse bruises and we call it fun.'

She looked at the handkerchief and then her shoulder. 'Oh,' she squeaked, not in pain, but surprise.

'Yes.' He pressed the cloth at her injury again, not really needing to. 'But it will mend quickly. I'm sure you've had worse.'

She reached up to relieve him of the cloth and for a moment their fingers tangled, then their eyes met, and she breathed in and pulled away.

He hated to move, but he did. He would ask her the location to deliver her and he would see that she arrived safely. Even if it was some distance away, he could direct the coachman easily enough. But his question changed before he spoke.

'Why were you in Wren's?' he asked.

She gazed at him. 'I was seeking work there.'

He'd been so wrong. His voice strengthened and the first words he thought flew from his mouth. 'In a brothel?'

Life returned to her eyes. 'You insult me.' She straightened. 'Do I look like someone who would —?' Her eyes opened wide. She cried out, using both hands to pull the dress over her bare shoulder, then adjusting her grasp, pulling the rip in her skirts closed. 'Do I look like a...fallen woman?'

'Not... No. No. Not at all.' She looked well past fallen, but he had learned as a youth that a pre-emptive reassurance was easier than stopping tears.

'I must go back,' she said. 'You must take me back to that terrible, forsaken place.' Her eyes widened. Pleading. 'I need your help.'

'No. You are not going back.'

'You don't understand. I left my satchel. All I have in the world. A dress. My funds.' She held the handkerchief at her shoulder while reaching to clasp his wrist. Her eyes searched his face and then she sighed, and relaxed.

Letting her hold him, he extended an arm around her shoulders, barely touching, but close enough that he could free her hand of the fabric and hold it in place for her.

'Is it a great sum of money?' he asked. She certainly shouldn't have been in Wren's if she had funds.

Her voice barely reached him and her head tilted so he couldn't see her expression. 'It's not truly all I have in the world,' she said. 'It is not truly all I have. It is just the rest of my things are on the way to Sussex.'

'How much did you leave in Wren's?' he pressed.

'My songs. A dress. A fan which had paste jewels on one edge. Hair ribbons. Enough to buy a bowl of soup.' She made a fist. 'I cannot believe I left the fan. The fan was a gift from three dear friends, but I'm sure they would understand if I sold it to buy food.'

She tensed, moving to stare at him. 'I am not a tart. I am not a fallen woman. A Jezebel. Or whatever else. I am a...' Her chin rose. 'A singer.' She lowered her face. 'Or I was to be. That evil debacle of a man was to pay me to sing.'

'You sing?'

She looked directly at William. 'Yes. Songs. To sing songs. Wren hired me. He'd promised me wages.' She snorted, then caught herself. 'I do have a good voice and the wages were not such a large amount to make me suspicious.' She straightened her fingers, saw blood on the gloves and shuddered. 'I have always been told my voice is a gift.' Her words faded away.

Her hand rested in her lap and her head bowed. 'My songs are in that satchel. With a picture my friend Grace drew of us singing and laughing with Joanna and Rachel.'

'So you are a Songbird.' He reached and tugged at the fingertip of her glove. She didn't need to be staring at blood.

'Not any longer,' she said, pulling away to remove the gloves herself and fold them.

'Nonsense. Don't let one person stand in your way.'

'It's not one person.' Shadowed eyes stared at him. 'It's everyone. Everyone says I should be a governess. Everyone. And this proves it.'

'This proves nothing of the sort.' His words were firm, but Isabel discarded them with a wave of her folded gloves.

'I will never sing again,' she said. 'Madame said it would be the ruin of me and she didn't know I listened so I suppose she was right. I just couldn't believe it—until now. She was always right.'

She met the view of the brown eyes. 'Even when we didn't let Madame Dubois know she was right—she was right. I should have learned from my friend Grace how things go awry.'

'And what has happened with this friend, Grace?'

'She explained to me how...' She fluttered her hand at her head before pulling the bodice of her dress for more covering and leaning against the inside of the carriage which smelled a bit like a blacksmith's shop. 'People make mistakes. And I see now that perhaps I should have been happier about my chance to be a governess. Not everyone is so fortunate to have the parents such as I do

who are willing to send a daughter away for education.’ She winced. ‘But I wanted to sing. I truly did. For audiences.’

She remembered the joy flooding her when music sounded. ‘I had to know. Wren and I exchanged many letters and I believed him reputable. I had to know if he had a true job for me. I might have suspected that it would be all for naught, but all my life I would have wondered. Perhaps it is worth the risk of death to know.’

‘No. It was not.’

His words brooked no argument. She examined him through the fading light. He sat, unselfconscious of her perusal, and it didn’t seem that she was being impolite or forward, but just learning what he looked like and trying to learn his thoughts.

But she had to think of her future now.

‘I will send a post telling how I was waylaid,’ she said. ‘I will leave out certain parts and I will hope that Madame Dubois accepts it, and will again reference me to a family. I will be a...’ She shut her eyes and forced out the words. ‘A governess.’

‘The children will be fortunate to have you.’

‘I must hope I am allowed to regain my position.’

‘A governess could sing to her charges.’

‘Of course.’

‘Sing for me,’ he said.

‘No.’

‘Please.’

She tried, but only three words came out before her mouth dried. Her voice wavered, cracking, and no longer sounded her own.

‘I never want to sing again,’ she said. ‘I sang because *la vie est trop courte pour boire du mauvais vin*. I wanted a chance to drink the good wine.’

‘The results can be the same. But do not give up something you love—something so sweet as song.’

‘My voice has always brought me notice,’ she said. ‘Always, and so many times Madame told me that pride goes before a fall and that it doesn’t cushion the ground a bit.’

‘Songbirds don’t have to remain on the ground.’

‘My wings have been clipped,’ she said.

‘I will find you a safe place to have the good wine tonight and tomorrow you may send the post to your friend. You will have many chances to make the children happy in your care.’

‘If you would just deliver me to a place where I might find suitable lodging.’

‘I know of only one place that would have what you need. My sister’s home. She’s married and too proper for good health. Tomorrow, my sister can quickly send a messenger to your destination and make up some folderol about how you aided her, causing you to become separated from your carriage. She’ll even put together a new garment for you. This will only be a small detour in your travels.’

She let out a breath. ‘Thank you.’ The words hurt her throat. Wren must have pressed against it more than she’d noticed. She trailed her fingers over her neck, searching for a cut but finding none.

He leaned forward, sliding the wood aside which covered the small trap window. ‘Sophia’s,’ he called out. But before he closed the window, he added, ‘Slowly,’ before glancing at Isabel and smiling.

That one word wrapped around her, suffusing her with wellbeing.

He relaxed to put an arm at the back of the seat, not touching her skin, but enveloping her all the same. ‘So, Miss Songbird, let us introduce ourselves on the way. Just listening to your speaking voice is quite the treat.’

[Chapter Three](#)

The carriage creaked to a stop and instantly Isabel saw William’s eyes shutter, then he straightened, slipping his arm from behind her.

‘If you will wait for a moment,’ William said, hand on the door. ‘I’d like to send my sister’s butler on an errand so you can go into the house without being seen. It’s better if it’s assumed you arrived with Sophia.’

He lowered his voice. ‘And you can trust the coachman to keep his silence, I assure you.’ Jumping out, he exited into the dark night. She pushed her hand against the warm leather of the seat, loneliness creeping about her. She wished he hadn’t left her—now the memory of the knife resurfaced.

She was alive and, except for a detour, her life was going to continue on just as planned. Now she could embrace being a governess. She’d seen the truth of what a singer’s life was really like. Her mother had warned her countless times that people assumed all singers were really paid to do other things. That hadn’t mattered then, but now it did.

She shuddered and opened the carriage shade. Enough light filtered from the moon so she could see a mansion. A mansion. William hadn’t told her his sister was wealthy. Immediately, she dropped the shade and worked with the pins in her hair, ignoring the sting the movement caused to her arm.

She was arranging pins when the door opened and William looked inside. His lips quirked up. ‘Songbird, do not do yourself up too pretty. My sister is used to looking at me.’

Her hands stopped. ‘I’m a sight.’

‘You—’ he reached in, took her hands and pulled her with him, as he backed from the carriage ‘—are a sight like a swan in the moonlight. And all swans do not have their feathers always perfect. Sometimes the birds flutter about and feathers fly everywhere, but not for one moment do they stop being swans.’

‘You’re quite flattering.’

‘You deserve it,’ he said, leaning low so he could speak quietly as they walked up the steps. ‘But with three sisters, I’ve had lots of practice, not that they don’t deserve it as well. But my sisters gave me a list once.’

‘A list?’

‘Yes. A list of compliments. They had sat around one evening and decided what wonderful phrases they should like to hear from me instead of my asking if they had memorised their lessons, or practised pianoforte or were kind to each other. Every time I corrected them in any way, I was to repeat one of their compliments and add one of my own.’

‘I should have liked to have had a brother like you.’

Opening the door, he ushered her inside. ‘Sophia said she married in spite of having a brother and Rosalind claims she and Harriet are unwed because if I am among the best of men, then she fears for her sanity should she end up with someone only twice as good as I am.’

Gazing at him, she tried to think of suitable words to thank him for what he’d done. But her voice fled. She brushed a hand to her neck, wishing she could find something to say that explained what she felt.

‘Oh...’ Gently, he took her hand from her throat and his forehead almost touched hers. ‘Please don’t look so stricken.’

‘I owe you—’ she breathed out ‘—so much.’ She clutched his lapel to remain upright.

With the lightest touch at the small of her back, he kept her steady, his whisper caressing her. ‘I would have done the same for anyone.’

She tightened her clasp on his lapel. ‘That only makes you...even better.’

He shook his head, darting a glance upwards, before returning his gaze to hers. ‘I’m only two whiskers away from being a drunken, gambling, rakish, penniless, thankless, conceited heir to a viscount. Please don’t let anything else get out about me and ruin my carefully earned reputation.’

‘You were the only one who came to my rescue and I screamed. I’m sure I did.’ She flattened her palm against the wool of his coat. ‘I’m so fortunate you were there.’

‘I just wish...things had been more like you wanted,’ he said and his eyes fell to her arm.

'I couldn't have...' She tugged at the gown's shoulder, aware that only a bare inch held the garment. 'It was almost worth it to know there are men like you in the world.'

He grunted a denial and he watched her hand struggle with the fabric. 'Do not think about that, Isabel.' His words softened into a whisper. 'It is beyond your repair.' He took a smallest lamp from the side table and held it aloft so she could manage the stairs.

When they reached the sitting room, he led her to an armed chair upholstered in burgundy. He lit another lamp and put it on a table at her side.

'I'll get Sophia,' he said, leaving.

She'd expected him to ring for a maid, but he'd acted much like someone of her own means would. Her mother's maid-of-all-work wouldn't have been roused this late in the evening because it would have taken more time than the simple task of fetching someone.

Isabel glanced around the room and found it little different from her parents' home. The lamps were more plentiful and the painting above the fireplace had quite a large frame, but other than that, the chamber could have been in a country squire's house.

William returned, and shook his head. 'She has to put her hair up.'

Immediately Isabel took in a breath.

'Do not concern yourself,' he said, his face reassuring. 'It's Sophie. My sister. The one with—'
'With...?'

A woman walked in, hardly looking old enough not to have her own governess. Her hair frazzled around its pins. The dressing gown had the same capped sleeves of a day dress, but the drape and sheen of a something one could wear at a soirée.

'With the most beautiful smile in the world,' William continued.

William introduced them, talking as smoothly as if they were at a morning call and the day was dawning with the promise of sunbeams and wildflowers.

When Sophia saw Isabel, her mouth opened and she said nothing at first. Then she said, 'Your arm... I must get a cloth to clean your arm.'

Isabel stood. 'It's dried now. And only stings a little. Your brother saved me.'

'Oh, him.' She shrugged the words away. 'I slipped and fell into a stream head first and he tugged me home by my ear because he said I scared him so.' She thrust her hand sideways, giving a punch to William's arm. 'I still haven't forgiven him for making one ear crooked.'

William examined her ears. 'Yes. Hideous. Makes me shudder.'

Sophia waved his words away and stepped towards Isabel. 'So let us get you all mended.'

'Soph—' William interrupted. 'There is one other thing. I would not want to send a rider in the darkness, but you must pen a quick post in the morning for delivery to her employer. Just make up something about her rescuing you and a companion from a horrible attack of wasps or something and how she could not leave you abandoned... You know, the same story you told Aunt Emilia.' He winked. 'It is a shame to let such a tale fade away when it could be used twice.'

Sophia shook her head. 'I don't think Aunt Emilia believed me.'

William snorted. 'I know she didn't. She told me I must get you married off immediately, so I looked about and tossed a suitable fellow your way.'

Sophia raised her chin, smiled and added drama to her voice. 'And all it took was one dance and he was smitten.'

'See, Miss Morton...' William tucked his hands behind his back '...she is good at folderol.' He turned to leave, then stopped and looked at his sister. 'You might let Aunt Emilia know of the tale. Just in case.'

'I shall. But she'll not be awake early in the morning. She's attending a dinner at the Brownings' tonight and she'll not be the first one to leave as she has put on her marriage-mart gloves again. She thinks our sisters should not rusticate away in the country.'

'She may be right.'

‘Oh, please.’ Sophia’s voice turned whimsical. ‘Once it’s known that Ros and Harriet are interested in courting, Aunt Emilia will be sorting out the proposals and you will be complaining because the suitors are not worthy. Aunt Emilia is planning to get an early start on the Season. Even the people who have been in the country for the summer are returning to be at the dinner. Apparently it is quite the event because they all wish to discuss Nash’s plans for our town. We can’t let Bonaparte outshine us.’

‘I’m surprised I found you at home.’

‘Only because I do not wish to get into a heated discussion about architecture or Napoleon and prefer to spend the evening with my smitten husband.’

‘Now you will be hearing about Nash’s plans from Aunt Emilia, or her battle plans for capturing beaus for our sisters.’ He raised his chin and smiled at Isabel. ‘Our aunt does like to go about. Even though she has a home in the country near my father, she prefers her residence here. She considers good society vital.’

‘Which means she has to ignore tales of my dear brother,’ Sophia inserted.

He inclined his head to his sister and Isabel. ‘And now your dear brother must take his leave as I trust two such enterprising women will have this night well in hand.’ His glance lingered on Isabel’s face, then her injured arm.

‘Miss Morton, it might be best if you stayed at my sister’s an extra day or so, unless you have a dress with long sleeves with you. That cut on your arm might raise questions.’

‘Yes,’ Sophia inserted. ‘I’ll be able to get you a gown with longer sleeves, but wearing too much covering in this heat might cause more notice. You even have a slight bruise...’ She tapped a spot near her cheek. ‘But after all, the wasps were chasing me at a rapid pace before you flung your bonnet like a sword and frightened them away.’

William’s smile turned to Isabel alone. ‘Do not let her get too carried away or she will have you saving scores of infants and battalions of soldiers, and it will get difficult to remember the details.’ He leaned so close to Isabel that she could feel the flutter of his lashes, but the motion was in her chest. Almost whispering, he said, ‘But don’t even tell her one tiny little untruth and expect her not to remember every last detail.’

‘I heard that,’ Sophia said, voice loud. Then she resumed her regular tone. ‘It’s true.’

William murmured assent and spoke to Isabel. ‘I regret we met under such unpleasant circumstances and I hope you forget all about this night soon.’

The doorway framed him, then he left. His footsteps faded into distance and the room became just a room and she could feel the bruise on her face without touching it.

* * *

William trod down the stairs, forcing himself not to turn around. He rang for the butler and waited, tapping the wall against the pull.

Finishing the last two buttons of his coat, the butler arrived and asked, ‘Yes?’

‘I realised my sister has a friend visiting, so I’ll not be staying.’

‘Yes.’ He pulled his coat tight.

‘Watch over them.’

‘I always do.’ The knowledge of the first time William had visited Sophia in the middle of the night with his own key and nearly got his head bashed in by the servant reflected from the man’s eyes.

‘I know.’ William stayed a second longer, acknowledged the memory with a grim-lipped smile and walked out into the night.

The bolt in the door clicked.

William looked at his carriage, the three-quarter moon and the houses with mostly dark windows.

He heard the woman’s voice again and turned to the open window well above him. Murmurings and a ‘Goodness!’ from Sophia, and then more murmurings and a shocked exclamation. Sophia should

know better than to let in the night air, but he stood until one of the carriage horses whinnied and then he turned to go home.

He sat in the carriage, crossed his arms and leaned back into the leathered cushions. A hint of her rose fragrance remained in the vehicle. The knowledge of how close he'd been to leaving Wren's earlier in the night gnawed at him. He needed to push all recollections of the past hours away and think of nothing but the fact the woman was safe, alive and cared for.

The vision of her face when the knife had been at her throat stayed in his mind. He'd been so close to walking out the door and the Songbird's life would have been altered for ever. If not for the wagging feather, he would have.

He ran a hand over his knuckles and swollen fingers, inspecting them. When they healed, he might visit Wren again.

Then he brushed a smear of dried blood away. But before the singer left London, he would make his way to his sister's house and ask Isabel to sing something for him. He smiled. He imagined them standing side by side at his sister's pianoforte and music filtering through the room.

* * *

The thought remained in his head until he walked inside his parlour. The view from the window was not fascinating, but he never seemed to tire of it. He stood at the middle of the three windows looking down and could hardly see outlines in the darkness below. Another row of town houses, just like his. Another row of windows, just like his. He didn't care to see the interiors of them or what lay beyond the panes. He feared he might see a rug, just like his. But he knew he wouldn't see furnishings like his. The room had almost none except for the two tables, the stiff-backed chair and a pretence of a desk with serviceable lamps. The servants' quarters were better fitted than this room, he hoped. The starkness suited him. Kept him from getting too close to the memories of the past where the picture of home could be painted by the fripperies spread about and the little flower shapes sewn into table coverings.

None of that appeared in his domain and his bed was the only softness in the entire house. A large beast of a bed that had once been his grandfather's and had been no easy chore for the workman to reassemble.

But he didn't want to go to bed because he kept reliving the quiet moments with the woman in the carriage, trying to think of the exact tilt of her nose. The colour of her hair was easier to recall and in all the upheaval he wasn't quite sure what had happened to the plume.

He shook his head. He was standing at the window, thinking of a bit of fluff just as a schoolboy would do. His head must have been hit harder than he realised. But the moment he'd stepped into the room at Wren's and seen the knife and her eyes widened in fear had left more than a few scrapes on his hand. The knowledge of how fast a person's life could turn to dust shook him. Now his insides shivered.

His eyes flittered to the decanter on the side table. Half-empty. The servants were not allowed to refill it until it became completely empty. If his father had walked into a room in the family home and not found it full, someone would have heard about it. If not everyone.

His father. William wished the man still looked at the world through hazed eyes.

William resisted the urge to walk forward and put a boot through the bottom glass. That would change the window, but as soon as a servant became aware, the window would be fixed.

One by one he could smash out each pane, yet the world would go on as it always did before. He could not change the way the world rotated and even if he broke the glass, other people would rush to bring the order back.

And his father, after years of a waking sleep, had truly awoken and decided he needed order back and he wanted the world on his path, a path he'd ignored the presence of for years. His father didn't remember the broken panes swept into the dustbin. He didn't remember the shattered glass.

Now, the Viscount just cared that his son be married and provide an heir. He had instructed William much like he might tell him to go to a sideboard and pick a confectionery.

The man planned to force marriage on to his son by any means possible—taking the rents William lived on would accomplish a lot. Removing the funds wouldn't hurt William alone, though, and William knew it. Twelve servants lived in the town house. Thirteen if he counted the little child he pretended not to know about—a boy who had some claim on the cook the housekeeper had hired the year before. He'd only found out about the lad because one of the servants had hidden a badly written note near William's pillow. Apparently life always didn't run smoothly among the staff either.

William took the decanter and filled his glass almost to overflow—just to see how close he could get to the edge without a spill. He placed the decanter on the table and slowly brought the liquid to his lips, not spilling a drop. He drank the liquid in one gulp, enjoying the burn.

The glass still in his hand, he stretched and strode to the windows. The servants needed their employment.

William would somehow get the horses back, then he would attend a soirée and dance with all the unwed ladies. Give his father some hope. Fruitless hope, but it wouldn't do to torment the man.

Everyone would be happy. William would find a way to have the horses returned to the stables. His father would believe a search for a bride had commenced. Sylvester would know his son would inherit the Viscount's title. Everyone satisfied if not happy. End of plan.

* * *

William slept well into the next morning and lingered through his morning wash. His dreams had been of birds fluttering about with feathered bonnets.

When dinnertime came, he would be at Sophia's house. He pulled a book from the table where it had sat for a year, planning to read enough of it so he could say he'd finished, then he would return it in time to sit for a meal with his sister, and her guest, and hopefully an evening around the pianoforte. It was only natural that he might want to visit and make sure their plans were progressing well and offer assistance.

* * *

With the mostly finished book tucked under his arm and his chin feeling raw from the second shave of the day, he strode to the front door when a carriage pulled to the front of the house.

Sophia didn't have a town coach. It could only be his father.

William put down the book and walked to the staircase before the butler could answer. The front door shook with a violent knock.

William opened the door. His father brushed by him, bodies connecting as a shove, and William stepped back.

His father raised his eyes to his son's face, slammed his beaver hat and gold-tipped cane into William's hand and said, 'Get used to that.' He continued up the stairs. 'I will see that if you are not hanged, then you will be transported. It is apparently your wish.'

Transported? Hanged? His father was daft. Completely. The years of liquid grief had turned his mind into pudding.

The Viscount rushed ahead, more at a run than William had ever seen him. William followed, knowing he didn't want his father's conversation carried to the servants' quarters. His father stopped inside the parlour, whirling around. 'You thankless piece of conceited tripe. You've gambled your name away and mine, too. Generations of our heritage. Destroyed. For ever. By you. I thought you cared more for your sisters than this.'

William put the hat over the globe of a cold lamp and propped the cane against the wall. 'What are you talking about?'

'My sister—' his father jabbed his own chest '—my sister, Emilia, came to me in tears. You are less than a son.' He splayed his hands, fingers arched. He pulled in air through his teeth. 'You called

my bluff, only it was not bluff. I merely threatened to circumvent the inheritance laws. But I had no need. You were quite willing to take care of that yourself.'

'I've done nothing wrong.' His voice grated on each word. 'I only wished for the horses.'

The Viscount whipped his head away from William and stared to the windows. 'I cannot even bear the sight of you.' His words raced. 'I didn't think you would perhaps jump to marry someone suitable, but I didn't expect you to destroy our entire heritage.'

'I've done no such thing.'

His father waved his hands in the air. 'You wanted to make sure no woman would consent to wed you. You abducted a woman in daylight, in front of as many witnesses as you could find.'

'Abducted? Are you foxed?' His voice rose. The man had lost his senses.

'Do not try to turn this back at me.' He rushed by William and to the windows. He stretched his arms at each side of the window, as if holding himself erect. His head dropped.

'Your Aunt Emilia has even begged to say that you were with her to save you. But I have forbidden it. Besides, too many have seen you.'

'The woman was attacked.'

'Attacked? Of course she was attacked. It's said you near dragged a reddish-haired woman screaming from a brothel.'

'No.' William's throat clenched. 'No.'

'Why am I not surprised? I have heard. Always I have heard. I have heard of the night you were foxed and fought the Duke of Wakefield's brother. I have heard of your gambling. But I never thought you to be so low as what transpired last night.'

The Viscount put closed fists over his eyes. 'My son,' he gasped out the words. He pulled his fists away, eyes reddened. 'I caused this. I caused it.' His voice cracked, then gained momentum. 'But I can correct it. You will vacate the premises by the end of a fortnight. I suppose sleep in your new carriage. I do not wish to see you again.' His lips trembled. His voice had the same fury as when he had told William to take the ring from Will's mother's finger on the last night of her life.

The jewellery had slipped easily from her finger and he'd felt as if he had stolen her last breath.

Pushing the memories aside, William turned so he would not see his father's face. The same vice clenched him that had surrounded him so many times before, only this time, he had to use all his might to push it away so he could speak. 'What happened?'

'Tonight,' the older man said, 'I have lost my only son. I could not sup with someone such as you.' He stepped around William, pulling his hat from the shade and grasping the cane.

William turned. 'Father. What is going on?'

The Viscount took his hat, and clenched the cane. 'I must blame myself, William. But it does not change a thing. I shouldn't have mourned your mother so long. I should have opened my eyes before it was too late. But it is now too late.'

He stepped forward, but lowered the walking stick. 'Oh, you showed me. You really did. But I will not ignore such behaviour. No longer. This was beyond the pale. Even for you.'

William squinted at his father. 'The woman is safe at Sophia's house. I took her from Wren's, but she wished for me to.'

'Sophia?' His father started. 'What does she know of this?' His fists clenched. 'I could pay the hangman myself for you attacking an innocent woman.' He stepped back. 'Your sisters. Think of your sisters.' He dipped his head. The room was silent. 'This will reach their ears. They'll be humiliated.'

Attacking an innocent? His father believed William attacked Isabel? The vice gripped again.

'The whole town will hear of it.' His father's voice ended on a high shriek. 'Apparently the talk of your—behaviour became the centre of the dinner. Your aunt was mortified. The whispers have already started and will become shouts. She came to me in tears. She found Sylvester and he agreed that you dragged a woman from Wren's. He said he was so shocked he didn't think to chase you and rescue her until after you had spirited her away in your carriage.'

‘I didn’t do anything wrong.’

‘All the men saw you leave carrying a woman of quality from Wren’s. A copper-haired woman with a bruised cheek. The men at cards heard her scream. Saw her in tatters. Blood on her sleeve. You forcing her out the door and into the carriage. Leaving a knife behind. It is thought her body was tossed into the Thames.’

‘Oh...’ William stepped back, reaching a hand to the wall, steadying himself. ‘No. No. It is not that. I didn’t—’

This... This would destroy his sisters.

‘You will never step foot in my house again. You will distance yourself from your sisters for their sake. I hope you care enough for them for that.’ His father’s eyes twitched.

Events of the night before careened through William’s head. He’d done nothing wrong, except perhaps in letting Wren escape a magistrate, but he’d not wanted any notice of the night.

Now his name would be destroyed. The tales of his past weren’t enough to grieve his sisters, but with this added, everything would be embellished. The tarnish would never be cleansed.

William took in a breath. ‘Father.’ He laughed, but could barely manage the sound. ‘That is so absurd.’ He waved a hand. ‘She was to meet me, but was early and confused at her direction. When she was alighting the carriage, a dog, obviously trained by a cutpurse, ran out and startled the horses. The culprit knocked her about, but Isabel fought back before running into the back door of Wren’s. The criminal chased her and caught her there.’ He hoped no one had truly noticed her in the shadows before. But he doubted they had. At first, the bonnet had hidden her face and covered her hair. She’d remained in shadows, her presence overridden by the woman on the stage. Then, when he’d moved her outside, her clothing dishevelled—everyone had noticed them and the light reflected on her hair when the door opened.

He took a breath, gathering his thoughts. ‘The driver had to keep the horses steady while fighting off the dog and didn’t realise Miss—’ If he’d heard her surname, he’d forgotten it ‘—my Isabel had exited the carriage and been attacked.’

His father stared. ‘And why would a woman of quality be wishing to meet you there?’

‘We had corresponded. We were to go to Gretna Green. I plan to wed her, but could not start out with her in such a state. That is why I bought the new carriage. To elope. She is waiting at Sophia’s to recover and then we will marry.’

The heat of the day had collected in the room and the Viscount rubbed sweat away from his forehead with the back of his hand.

‘She is alive? A reddish-haired woman?’

‘Very much alive. She is a good woman. I wish to marry her. We are betrothed.’

His father examined William’s face. ‘Without so much of the piffle spread in—did you attack her?’

‘No. I could never do that.’ He used his eyes to convince his father. ‘She didn’t realise where she was.’

‘You believe her?’

He nodded. ‘She is a country squire’s daughter. She had no notion.’

‘From the country, you say?’ He shut his eyes. ‘And you have been corresponding with her and she agreed to meet you—’

‘Father. We have corresponded many times while she trained to be a governess. We were not certain, with the differences in our station, that people would accept our union. So I thought it best, to avoid dissension, to present Isabel as my wife.’

‘You can produce her for view?’

‘Of course.’

The Viscount slammed his cane against the door frame. ‘I will remember this story well enough. I cannot have my only son accused of defiling a woman. I cannot.’

‘I didn’t. When she didn’t meet me as planned, I found her crouching behind Wren’s and without thinking I took her through the place, hoping I might see the cutpurse and have him contained.’

‘I could not believe what the others are saying, but I have heard the tales of your courting the women of the demi-monde. You are known in every gambling hell and tavern in London. And yet, you say you were with an innocent miss. If she weds you I will know you tell enough of the truth. If she doesn’t, I forbid your name spoken to me and I’ll not have it said in my presence that I have a son.’

He stopped mid-turn to the door and then returned his gaze to William. ‘Should I trust you enough to spend the day at the club laughing at the tale Sylvester is telling because he thinks to get me to switch funds his way and a jest got out of hand?’

‘Yes.’ The word had the strength of a church bell.

He turned his back to his son. ‘I will explain this fluff to your Aunt Emilia and she will begin combating the tales. But you must produce this sweetheart of yours and she must be at your side. And she’d better have red in her hair.’

Every rail on the bannister sounded to have received a thwack from the cane as the Viscount left the house.

William went to the window. His mouth was dry. He put a hand on the wooden shutter running the length of the door. No, the houses across the way were not like his. He swung his leg back, planning to kick out the window, but returned his boot to the carpet. He could not. If he did, they would think him the one cracked and no one would believe him innocent.

He would marry. Isabel must understand. His future depended on her saying yes.

Chapter Four

The clean dress looked more mending thread than cloth, but it did wonders for Isabel’s spirit. She held the skirt away from her body and curtsied to her image in the mirror. She dreaded sitting down to dinner with Sophia and her husband because she’d never eaten in such a fine house and she hoped she didn’t embarrass herself.

A maid knocked, then entered when Isabel answered. ‘Miss, you are requested to the mistress’s sitting room.’ The woman darted away before Isabel moved.

Truly, she didn’t want to step outside the bedchamber. But she must. She must put on a brave face and accept her fate as a governess. Quickly, she practised the brave face in the mirror and then she laughed at herself. To be safe was all that mattered.

She would regain that governess position without losing her reputation. Her parents had sacrificed so that she might attend Madame Dubois’s School for Young Ladies and have the best education they could provide. She could not reward them by failing to be able to care for herself.

When she walked into the sitting room, Sophia wasn’t present. A lone figure sat on the sofa. William, legs stretched, his gaze on some distant thought. Her spirit leapt. Isabel rushed forward to thank him again. William rose from the sofa, legs straightening in a controlled slowness.

She lost her thoughts. She’d not seen a man such as him. Ever. He could have trampled any man in one of her novels. This lone man had saved her against a man with a knife. His inside was as magnificent as his outside.

A true rescuer in gentleman’s clothing. The cravat, perfect. The waistcoat under his dark coat gold with matching buttons.

‘I do not know how I will ever thank you,’ she said.

His lips thinned, then turned up. He kept his gaze on her. His eyes had no true happiness in them, but his mouth seemed determined to laugh.

‘Marriage?’ he asked.

She leaned forward. ‘I didn’t hear you.’

He clasped his hands behind him. ‘Will you be so kind as to wed me? Vows. For ever. All that nonsense.’

She needed two tries before she could speak. For ever? Nonsense? 'You did save my life,' she said. 'Perhaps I could stitch you up a rather nice nightcap. My father quite likes the one I did for him.'

'We have quite a kettle boiling around us,' he said, leaning his shoulders forward and tipping his head close to hers. He smelled better than any perfume she'd ever scented. Perhaps like lilacs, but not flowery. More like something to deflect the scent of shaving and masculinity and things that might tempt a woman.

Yet the words he spoke had no sweet fragrance in them.

For ever? Nonsense? She had dreamt of true love. Of all that 'for ever' and 'nonsense'. And even asked that if there were angels up above, one might send a nice vicar or soldier her way. He didn't need all his teeth, or hair or even the usual number of fingers or toes, and this man seemed to have all that, whereas a man missing a few parts might be more willing to share all his love to find a wife. She wanted someone who gazed upon her as a shining star. Someone who could shower her with love...and perhaps not be found in a brothel. Although she could not complain he had been at Wren's the night before, but still that didn't induce her to wed him.

She put a firm, competent look on her face. 'I am quite good at making stockings which keep the feet warm on a cold night,' she said.

He shut his eyes briefly and pulled back, lips upturned, as if they knew no other direction. 'You would not ever know I was about. I doubt I would be home enough you'd notice. You would be a governess of sorts still, but it could be for your own children. One would hope for children to be a part of the endeavour.'

Oh, that was what this was about. The man needed some sons and perhaps he'd only been at Wren's and not noticed the many fine places where a decent woman could be found.

'Children?' She looked past his shoulder to the wall. 'You're not unpleasant to look at,' she said. 'I could recommend several young women who are now at Madame Dubois's School for Young Ladies who would be quite good wives.' She appraised him and fought to keep speaking. William had helped her most efficiently and she should do the same in return. 'What colour hair do you prefer?'

He appraised her, eyes lingering at her head. 'A copper colour. Like sunlight has softened it.'

'Um...' She looked at him. 'I admit, my hair is a good shade. I have heard that all my life. And I can understand you might think to have children with this colour of hair, but it is indeed a bit rare and one cannot count on such a thing.'

'Probably a bit much to expect the sky-blue eyes to go with it.'

Her stomach curled, making it hard to maintain her composure.

'Yes, I'm a bit of an aberration.'

'A lovely aberration.' He paused. He looked at her without flirtation. 'And your voice. I like your speaking voice. It doesn't grate on my ears.'

'Oh, my...' She put her hand to her bodice and ducked her head in the way she did when someone praised her singing. 'You are quite efficient with the compliments. I hope that is one of your own and not from the list.'

He nodded and his lips turned up at one side before speaking. 'You would be surprised how many times a woman's voice has grated on my ears. I have three sisters, remember. So when I called you Songbird, it was not idle. But it would be best for us to wed.'

She put her palm out, touching his coat just above his elbow, giving a brief pat, trying to ease the rejection. Oh, candlesticks, no one would ever believe she had refused a viscount's son. 'You do not have to concern yourself with my honour. Your sister has agreed to help me get to Sussex. If that does not work out, I can return to my parents.' She could not go home in disgrace though. She would have to find a post.

'I am not concerned only about your honour.' His eyes sparkled and his lips, still firm, returned to their rueful smile.

'I know a quite lovely girl of near marriage age,' she said. 'I could see that you have an introduction. Blonde hair. Eyes the same colour as mine.'

'Do they sparkle quite as well as yours do?'

'I'm sure when she looks at you they will quite outshine...' She paused. Cecilia was so sweet and kind and rather younger. An older rake would not do at all. 'She may not quite suit you, though. I think perhaps all my friends remaining at the governess school might be young for you and the ones who graduated with me are quite busy. Perhaps, um...' she stumbled '...a nice widow. A woman with some—knowledge. More your age.'

'I'm twenty-four. Not quite ancient.'

'Oh,' she muttered, 'I thought you older. At least thirty. Closer to thirty-five.' Particularly if he seemed desperate to find a wife.

One brow rose.

'I suspect you have rather included many adventures in those years. I do seem to remember asking if it was your first time at that horrible place and I think you answered that you were long past first times at anything.'

'Except marriage. It would be my first time at marriage.'

'I fear you do not understand the concept.'

'I disagree.' He took a step away. 'I have seen it quite close. Love and all that...conflagration of mindless emotion.' He stopped. 'Isabel. I am quite slogging in the wrong direction. I hate to tell you what has transpired, but I feel I must...'

'The talk is out about my misfortune.' She met his eyes. They confirmed her words. She continued, 'You are asking for my hand in marriage to save my honour.'

He was valiant. No knight could surpass him.

His eyes shut. 'Not entirely.' He stepped forward.

Again, when he stood so close, something about him distracted her thoughts and took them as directly as one might take the bridle of a horse and turn its face in a desired direction.

'I would hope that I would be so noble as to marry to save you, but I am not sure.' He took her fingertips. She could not move.

Now he spoke softly, conveying the importance of his words with his gaze.

'It is said that I ravished you in Wren's. I spirited you out by force. The dishevelment. The torn dress.'

'You didn't ravish me. You rescued me.'

'Yes. But to have that untrue story—no matter how it is said—your presence in such a place will cast aspersions on you. I would prefer us both to get out of this as best as possible. I would not wish to spend the rest of my life with the lingering question in the minds of others as to whether I truly attacked you or not.'

She balled her fists within his hands. 'I will tell them. I will tell them all.'

'You may,' he said. 'Other questions will arise that neither of us particularly care to be subjected to. You will be seen as a woman afraid to tell the truth about a wayward viscount's son for fear of repercussions. I do not have a...' He searched for a word. 'A sombre past.'

Her stomach bunched into a gulp and then bounced from one side of itself to the other. 'William, I fear you would not make a good husband.'

'I know I would not. That is one of the reasons I have not considered marriage in the past. I think it a suffocating, strangling gaol. It is not a leg shackle. It is a throat shackle. I have said it is likened to having leeches attached to bleed the body dry and leave it a desiccated shell. Much like the body left behind centuries after death.'

She pulled her hands away. 'You have worked long on this proposal?'

'Twenty-four years.'

'Am I the first to hear it?'

‘Yes. This is a first.’

‘I dare not ask...’

‘I don’t think I should talk of my life if we are to be married. Last night I thought never to see you again so I didn’t care overmuch. If we might be seeing each other at a marriage ceremony, then I don’t care to discuss how I spend my nights.’

‘The socks and night caps would probably not make a good gift for you.’

‘No.’ He gave the saddest smile she’d ever seen. ‘All that I ask is that you stand at my side and answer a few words.’

‘Those vows and nonsense?’ She might end up the desiccated shell, but she was not quite doing as well on her own as she’d hoped. And she had no desire at all to be a governess. None.

‘Yes.’ He stood. ‘I see a bit of concern on your face. But you do not have to worry I will be a brute like Wren. I will not...be unkind.’

She didn’t speak.

‘Ours would be the most perfect of marriages.’

She lifted her brows.

‘Yes. If you have need of me once we are married, you will only have to give a note to my butler and he will see that it is delivered and I will read it immediately. We won’t see a great deal of each other. I truly do not like to be home.’

‘You did rather help me,’ she said. When she looked into his eyes, it was as if they begged her to say no. Forces behind him pushed him her way, much like a pirate would shove a person into the deep. ‘Do you not think you are making a terrible mistake?’

He shook his head. ‘All my sisters’ lives I have been there for them. Perhaps even when they had no one else. I have had one unselfish task, only one, and that has been to see that they are safe and have a home. When that is provided, they content themselves. I cannot bring disgrace upon them. A few tales about my revelry doesn’t hurt—that is shrugged away. But that I might harm a woman would not be tolerated. A man who hurts weaker people for his pleasure is condemned. His family—particularly sisters of a marriageable age—would be tarnished.’

He moved to the window, looked out, shook his head and returned to her. His smile was directed inwards, but the question in his eyes was for her alone.

‘Can you not think of another solution?’ she asked.

‘Not at this moment. If I could, I would give it.’

His words rested in her like a wooden ball rolling down a stair, clunking to the bottom.

‘If you do not wish to wed,’ he said, ‘I understand. But, Sophia will be damaged if you do not. So will my other two sisters and my Aunt Emilia. My father will manage to consider Cousin Sylvester his heir. I will be tossed from my home. At least half of the servants will be without employment.’

‘You do not play on someone’s sympathies...do you?’ She brushed her fingertips over the sleeve of his coat. They had only met the night before, but they were not strangers. Nor friends. Nor enemies. But they had shared a moment of decisions together that few ever faced and her life would plunge one direction or the other based on her response.

‘And there is the fact that I found you a place to stay last night. Although I understand if you have no wish to marry,’ he said. ‘I certainly can understand that. Perhaps better than anyone.’

That he could understand her wish not to marry ‘perhaps better than anyone’ was not a resounding push in his favour.

‘I must give this some thought,’ she said. ‘But you should give it a great deal more consideration as well. Marriage is about love and holding the other person in the highest esteem. At least it is for me.’

‘As a governess you would not be allowed to have a marriage.’

‘I can eventually leave a governess post. Or I might fall in love with a tutor, or stable master, or linen draper—on my half-day off. And if that person loves me back, just a little, it is more than you’re offering.’

'I'm wealthy.'

She paused. One shouldn't marry for money. But one shouldn't overlook funds either. 'How wealthy?'

'My children will have a governess. A tutor. And if you wed me—' He shrugged. 'Your children will have a governess. A tutor.'

'My son would be a viscount,' she mused.

He frowned. 'Bite your tongue. There is never any rush for that.'

'He would. Just not until he was very old.'

'So we will wed.'

'My daughters would be able to have the finest things.'

He nodded. 'I can also ensure that you have reputable avenues for your talent. I would consider it a way of thanking you for taking on the misfortune of marriage.'

'I don't— Marriage is not such a thing.' She turned away. 'As your wife I wouldn't wish to sing. That's over for me and I can accept that easily.'

'You would be giving your chance at love away, but it would enable more choices for the children you might have. A sacrifice, for sure.'

The clouds inside her head cleared. A mother did such things, or should.

'You may wed me,' she said. She could pretend. Perhaps if she didn't pay attention to the marriage words they would not quite count as much and she could pretend to be a governess with the children away on holiday. That could be pleasant. And she would not mind to have a little family for herself. And if the boys favoured him, oh, she would preen, and it would not be a problem for the daughters to inherit her hair colour or his.

'I don't see that either of us have many other choices. You are all the things a woman would want in a husband,' she said, giving a smile that didn't reach her heart. 'And all the things she would not.'

* * *

Isabel sat at the writing desk which had been moved into the room. She didn't feel like opening the ink bottle. She'd never written a letter while wearing a borrowed chemise, but the garment would do her well to sleep in and by the time she woke, her own laundered dress would be dry. She didn't have to worry about choosing matching slippers, as she should be pleased her slippers were mostly free of the muck.

She would be quite the lovely bride in the patched-together dress. Her marriage would take place some time the next day as William was getting the special licence and telling all his friends how delighted he was to be married.

She could marry, or, she could go home in disgrace.

She chose to take the stopper from the ink bottle. The letter would be easiest. She would write her parents of how wonderful everything was as she had met the man of her dreams... She shut her eyes and tapped her closed fist at her forehead. Oh, this news had to be delivered in a letter. They would never believe it if she said it to their faces.

Or they might.

She remembered her father picking daffodils for her mother each spring. Roses in the summer. Walking hand in hand in the crisp autumn air and calling her the best gift of his life—one he could hold each day of the year.

Her parents loved her. She knew it. But when they looked at each other an affection shone in their faces, along with something else. It was much like a clockmaker might want to see how the mechanisms worked to turn the hands of a timepiece. Isabel had imagined how it would feel when her own husband cherished her so.

When she had realised that she was being trained to be a governess and a governess didn't have a husband, she'd felt tossed into a rubbish heap. She could never be loved in the same manner her parents loved each other. She'd put all of her spirit into her song the next time she sang—the very

first time she had noticed tears in a listener's eyes. Her dreams had soared. Singers could marry. They could have their own family.

She imagined the devotion she wished for. She began to write. The man she wrote of in the letter was so deeply devoted that he could not bear to be away from his beloved one moment more. He had cherished her from afar...

She tapped the nib against the inside of the bottle, planning just how it would have been.

Her parents had missed one of the events where the school had let her sing, so that was where she had met William. And he had been instantly smitten. Tears had flooded from his eyes—no, scratch that. He had shed one lone, intense tear as he had thanked her for the overwhelming performance and called her a songbird. She smiled when she penned the word songbird. He had called her Miss Songbird.

She dipped the pen again. He'd begged, yes, begged that they might correspond. She had refused, most assuredly, but he had managed to get his letters to her, and after great personal dilemma, she read them. Slowly her heart had melted—but, no, she'd insisted, she could not neglect her dream to become a governess. Over time, however, his devotion had overtaken her and she had agreed to wed.

* * *

William stared at the darkened ceiling in his bedchamber. The ceremony would be in a few hours.

He'd not slept at all. He'd kept remembering the deep love his parents had had for each other and then his mother had died. The world had gone silent that night after her last breath. Then he'd had to remove her cherished ring from her finger. None of them had been the same after that night. His father began to substitute liquid for air.

Love had destroyed his father. Took him from them in the guise of drink. But William didn't blame his father for that weakness.

William had heard the noises the second night after his mother's death and crept to his mother's room. His father had been huddled on the floor, arms around himself, rocking. He'd been crying out his wife's name over and over.

William had pulled the door shut and walked the hallway. Silence had followed, and permeated deep into the walls around him. In the days afterwards, he'd watched the family move about and it had felt as if he watched a play. He could see the actors and hear them. But he wasn't even standing near the stage.

He rolled in the bed, kicking the last of the covers to the floor.

Marriage. Children. Such a risk.

But he didn't love Isabel, so marriage could not destroy their lives. He would not allow her to love him either. He imagined himself standing beside Isabel as the vicar asked—

He had forgotten a vicar. No one might be standing there to marry them.

He'd been so concerned with getting the special licence, the town coach, and telling as many people as he could think of to expect the happy event, he'd forgotten someone to make the words official.

Within moments, his boots were on and his shirt stuffed into his trousers. He tied his cravat as he rushed down the stairs and he had no idea of how to progress but he was certain the butler would know of someone who could perform a marriage.

The butler chuckled as he gave William direction to a vicar's home.

* * *

William had had a bit of difficulty finding the house in the darkness, but he banged on the door. He heard a voice grumble out, and then he waited, rubbing his chin, feeling the stubble.

The vicar, a wisp of a man, finally appeared, his hair falling in snowy frazzles around his face and a scrap of a belt around his nightshirt covering. Without speaking, he waved William inside.

'I have a special licence.' William shot out the words. 'I need to be married quickly.'

'Is the babe arriving now?' the vicar asked, tugging the belt tight.

'No,' William said, taking a step back. 'There's no child.'

'Well, then, what's the rush?' He squinted.

'I'm marrying today and I didn't remember I needed someone to speak the words.'

'Are you going to battle?' the man questioned. 'Leaving soon?'

'No.' William shook his head. 'I just need to be married.'

'Ah.' Again the man tugged on the tie at his waist and then stepped back, peering through squinted lids. 'You might come back after breakfast and I'll decide then.'

The speck of a man was saying no? 'It's your job.'

'A young man pounding on my door in the middle of the night when there is not a babe arriving before morning makes me concerned that he might not be considering the options.'

William tightened his stance. 'I cannot go into the details. Just tell me who might be able to say a few quick words to take care of this for me.'

'I suppose you should prepare us a pot of tea and tell me about it.'

'Tea?' William gasped out. 'I do not know how to make tea.'

The man grunted. 'And you expect to be able to handle a marriage?'

'The servants will handle the tea.'

'Would you like my advice?' the vicar asked.

'No. But if I stand here much longer I suppose I will be hearing it.'

'Yes. And I know how to make tea, so I do have more knowledge than you on some things and I am not rushing about in the wee hours. So perhaps you should come in.' He walked away as he talked. 'You owe me that for waking me. And if your reason for pounding on my door has merit, then I can take care of the marriage for you.'

William ducked his head, stepping into the scent of tallow candles and well-settled dust. A floorboard creaked under his foot.

'Come into the kitchen with me and I'll light a candle,' the vicar said. 'Don't bother bolting the door. I always open it anyway, no matter what kind of person is pounding.' He chuckled in William's direction.

After the kettle started, he whisked a glass and wine bottle from a shelf. After placing the glass in front of William, he poured without asking and then concerned himself with his own drink.

'So,' the older man asked after he finished preparations and settled to sip his tea, 'what is all the rush about?'

'A young woman and I need to be married. We do not wish for any tales about us to be spread.'

'A compromising position?'

'You could say that.'

'Perhaps you're overreacting. Tales can fade.'

William snorted. 'Not this one.' He leaned forward. 'I know what I am to do. We are to be married and we won't cause interruption in each other's lives.'

'I have never heard of a marriage which does not cause some interruption in life.'

'I have the funds to see that it happens,' William said. He stopped. 'I am very adept at dealing with such things. I can live separately if needed.'

'Marriage. The specialness in part is that it cannot be walked away from. That is what makes it different than, say, not marriage. Love is fickle, though.'

'We are not in love.'

The vicar sputtered into his tea and set down his cup.

William continued. 'We are in agreement. She and I have discussed it. I told her what nonsense love is.'

‘Ah.’ The vicar nodded. ‘You shouldn’t have told the truth on that. Not even to me. But if she agreed with that, then I suppose she will have no one to blame but herself.’ He chuckled, and mumbled, ‘Do not expect that reprieve, however.’

‘Isabel is not like that.’

‘You’ve known her long?’

‘Long enough.’

‘A lifetime can be not long enough to know what a woman is like before you marry her—from what I’ve seen.’

‘The woman I am going to marry is...’ He paused. ‘She’s almost alone in the world, or that’s how she feels. I don’t want her to be alone. I may not be able to give her everything, but I can give her a home, safety and a haven. She’ll have servants. Children, perhaps.’

In a flash of memory, he could see his parents laughing at the table and then his father throwing crockery about after her death, acting in the same manner as Rosalind when she’d been cross. Only he could not send his father to his room and tell him that the governess would not be reading him a bedtime story.

His father had never even raised his voice before his wife died. Never acted anything but sensible and selfless. Then he’d become senseless—and selfish.

William’s eyes flickered to the small man who stared into him. ‘I need to marry her—for my own purpose, but it is not an entirely bad thing for her. Without me, she will likely remain unmarried and not have children of her own.’

‘Why do you think she won’t find someone else? Is she unappealing?’

‘I wouldn’t say she is unappealing. In fact, she is too appealing—to be safe—alone in the world. It isn’t beauty, though I am not saying she isn’t.’ William smiled, staring at the empty glass. ‘She has this copper-coloured hair.’ He held out his hand, thumb touching forefinger, making the movement as if holding a strand. ‘The light shone on it and she had her bonnet off, and the other men saw it and they saw her eyes, and ten years from now, she could walk into a room and they will remember her.’

‘There are other ways to protect a woman besides marriage.’

William let out a deep breath. ‘Not this one.’ He put the glass on the table and leaned back, stretching his legs. ‘Not this one. She’s been at a school in the country or she would have had suitors lining up. Even at the school, someone found her who wished to take advantage.’

The minister stood. ‘You think to love her later.’

‘No.’ William breathed out the word. ‘I don’t. That could never happen.’

‘If she is so appealing—’ He moved, standing by a shelf with a basin on it, keeping his back to William. ‘Another man should easily fall in love with her.’

‘That’s true. But I’ve seen what love does—I’m not in favour of it.’

‘My wife might agree with you,’ he said. ‘But you might fall in love if the two of you are married.’

‘No. I do not have it in me.’ William considered the words.

‘How does she feel about you,’ the vicar asked, ‘this daft woman who has agreed to wed you?’

‘She doesn’t know me.’

The man turned around, wiping his hands on a cloth from beside the basin. ‘I would say she doesn’t.’ He peered at William’s face and reached under the shelf and pulled out another bottle from the dark recesses. He popped the cork and put the bottle on the table between them. ‘Drink up and tell why I should perform this ceremony.’

[Chapter Five](#)

Isabel examined her patched dress and stained shoes. She’d once wondered what she’d choose to be married in. It wasn’t this.

Her invisible groom’s father, Viscount Langford, sat in Sophia’s overstuffed chair as if it were his throne. He patted a chair arm and stared, emotionless.

‘It’ll just be a few minutes more,’ Sophia said, perching at the end of the sofa and resting one hand on the brocade between them. The other hand held a fan that flitted more than any butterfly wings. ‘And William will be here. He’s not really late yet.’

Isabel raised her head in acknowledgement.

‘If he doesn’t appear, I will find him and drag him here myself.’ Langford stood, walked behind the sofa and patted his daughter’s shoulder.

‘This almost reminds me of the day—’ Sophia stopped fanning, glanced at her hand, then spoke to Isabel. ‘One day, in the past, my sisters and I waited for Father and William to return. It was in August, too, and a much warmer day than this.’

‘Do not speak of your mother today,’ the Viscount commanded. ‘If she were here, William would have married long before now.’

Isabel stood, turned to the Viscount, gave a small bow of her head, and put a smile on her face. ‘William—’ she fluttered her hand over her heart and paused ‘—was waiting for me. His whole lifetime. So it will not concern me to wait a few moments for him.’

Thoughts flickered in his eyes. ‘Welcome to the family. I do beg your pardon if anything I have said this morning offended you and I beg forgiveness for the errors I have made in bringing up my son, which I feel are about to be visited on your head.’

She gave the assured blink she used for the audience before she sang. ‘Then when my husband does not do quite as I expect, I will keep my words kind to him and my ire will be directed in your direction.’

He turned halfway from her. His voice was soft. ‘Do as you must.’ Then he turned back to her. ‘Isabel, I will be prepared for your visits.’

Laughter sounded as a door on the lower floor opened. A scattershot of noises sounded.

Sophia and the Viscount looked around as if a gunshot had landed nearby and no one knew which direction it came from.

Sophia’s words were a whisper and she looked to the ceiling. ‘Thank you.’

The Viscount turned to the wall and sighed, then said, ‘What did I do?’

Isabel could not think which face to use and she settled on the one she used at the governess school after she sang and everyone praised her.

William appeared at the doorway, with two men behind him, one with a book under his arm. William hadn’t shaved. Isabel couldn’t concentrate on the greetings around her, but examined William. He only looked her way a half-second or less. Blazing determination flashed in his eyes. The same stare he’d had when he’d pounced on Wren.

Then the cleric made some jest about reading the right portion of the prayer book. William glared and the other man’s eyes darted downwards, but his smile beamed. She wondered if the Book of Common Prayer had a section for words said at funerals because that would be the only jest she could think of to use.

The wedding would not fool anyone present that it was a love match. She in her patched clothes and him appearing as if he’d just rolled from a bed.

She glanced to the door. A quick dart and she could be down the stairs. She opened her mouth, thinking to conjure up another aunt. She could rush away to retrieve her aunt to attend the wedding, but then she shook the thoughts away. William had saved her and he wished to protect his sisters.

The cleric spoke to William, patting him on the back. William swayed and she could have sworn the older man gripped the back of his coat to hold him steady.

Now she knew why men often had a friend at the side when they spoke their vows.

‘Let us begin.’ The cleric moved, directing the other man to stand by William.

‘Miss,’ the cleric said, taking the Book of Common Prayer from under his arm and looking to the vacant spot beside William.

She bit her lip and looked at the empty place at William's side. She would be standing there a long time.

She moved into place, but not quite. Another person could have stood between them. Stepping sideways, he put his hand around her waist. For a moment his fingers rested at her side. Then a tug and she had no choice but to follow his clasp. She squeaked and her feet caught up with her body.

They were close. Very close. And he was strong. Her hip tingled where it brushed against his side. The tingles spread around her body. This could work.

The minister opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Then opened it again, looking at William and not at the book. Then he shook his head.

'We shall proceed.' William spoke. It wasn't a question. He dropped his hand away from Isabel, and cleared his voice.

Internally, Isabel stumbled, but nothing changed in front of her face so she didn't think she'd really moved. She leaned closer to him, her bare arm against the sleeve of his coat, and she took in an easing breath.

The Book of Common Prayer opened and the world outside the windows stopped. Isabel became a wife and she couldn't hear the words but his arm rested against hers, comforting.

In the last dress and pair of shoes she would have ever chosen, she wed William, and even though he looked as if he'd fallen from a horse and smelled of an alehouse, he'd charged a man with a knife to save her and he'd married a stranger to protect his sisters. She stole a glance at him. Behind the ragged façade, she was certain some part of him wished for the marriage. He'd pulled her to his side and she'd felt it.

* * *

William listened to each word, committing them to memory. Blast. He had not expected them to sound in his head as if blared from a trumpet. Nor had he expected them to sound so real and sincere.

Words. They were just words. But they weren't like any he'd ever heard before. He was listening to a decree of the rest of his life. Vows of spiritual portent, spoken from a prayer book, with family around, to bond. Marriage had not been invented by a sane man. The vicar was right after all. The process was necessary for the sake of the children and the record-keeping of whom they belonged to. One didn't want to pass a title too far from the lineage.

She stood beside him, chin high, eyes forward, pale and...kissable lips.

He'd never kissed her, though it wouldn't be a problem. He'd held her in the carriage. If not for her misfortune, he would have kept the coachman driving circles in the town all night. He never seen a woman so just right as her. Tall enough for him. Short enough for him. Curved and straight enough. Just right.

All things considered, Isabel was a fortunate choice. His thoughts raced among the other ladies of his acquaintance. What if he had rescued one of them? She would be standing beside him now.

He imagined someone else at his side and felt a shudder. He had certainly missed cannon fire on that regard. At least fortune had chosen Miss—Isabel. He had forgotten her name again, but it would not be a concern now. She was Isabel Balfour now—which didn't quite seem to fit her. Yet speaking the vows with someone other than her would have been—unfathomable. In relief, he huffed a sigh—just at the moment the vicar pronounced them man and wife together.

His sister hissed.

The vicar tutted and William shut his eyes. That was something that could not be explained away.

Then the vicar prayed over them. And prayed. And prayed. The ceremony ended and the air dripped with the heat of the day.

William glanced at Isabel. No songbird's feathers had ever drooped more. A stab into his midsection. Guilt. Remorse. Anger at the ironic situation. All flashed into him.

She looked at him and when her eyes met his, the wilt disappeared. In his whole life no woman's eyes had ever pinched in such a way when she gazed at his face.

Pleasantries sounded and everyone disappeared from the room, except William, his wife and his father.

The Viscount's eyes rested on Isabel. 'I wish you both all the best. And I am pleased to have you as a daughter.' He took her left hand and pulled it to his gaze, looking at her wedding band. His eyes darted to William's long enough to spear him and back to her simple gold band, then to her face. 'Isabel, if I can ever be of any assistance to you in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me. I will accept your criticism freely and direct it in the proper direction.'

He looked at his son. 'Let me know when the heir is on the way.'

William blinked once in acknowledgement that he'd heard and his father left the room.

'Well, we are married,' his Songbird chirped, but her profile had quite a strong jaw. William offered his arm. She took it without looking in his direction and then a sigh exploded from her lips. If candles had been lit nearby, that blast would have easily extinguished them.

This would require something expensive or rare. It always worked for his sisters.

'Perhaps we could take a ride in my carriage and I might select a gift for you,' he said.

'Oh... Thank you so very much, but I do not need a thing. Your sister has sent for my trunk—she is so thoughtful. She also instructed a burly footman to Wren's as I mentioned that my satchel is there.' She paused. 'She is quite thoughtful.' Her face ever so innocent, she sighed.

'I didn't mean it the way it sounded,' he said. 'I was merely thinking how fortunate I was to have you by my side instead of someone else.'

'I am sure that is how everyone took it. Husband.' She stepped to the stairs and he followed. 'For ever...nonsense...' She sighed again, much in the same way a cat's hiss might turn into a growl.

Chapter Six

He'd taken Isabel around London after the marriage even though she'd refused to shop. He'd made sure she could later and let her know where he had accounts.

At his town house, he'd shown his bride to her room. She'd immediately spotted the trunk and while the door hadn't slammed in his face, or even shut, it had been nudged his direction, but his boot had stopped it. He'd left her when she'd hugged a dress to her face and the sniffles had started. It wasn't even a pretty dress. He'd had a good look at it when he'd said her name and she'd flung the clothing past him.

So, he'd moved to his room, took off his boots, stripped to his shirt and trousers and lay on the bed, giving her some time to orient herself before he returned.

Isabel was more in agreement with his plan for marriage than anyone else he could have chosen. She'd not even wanted to shop with him. And the little nudge of the door hadn't been an accident. She would be the perfect wife once she stopped sniffing and throwing things at him. He didn't blame her.

He would make it up to her. He would.

He promised he would get her a beautiful piece of jewellery soon. If there was one thing he had learned, the bigger the mistake; the bigger the gift. And sometimes it was best to wait before delivery so that it didn't get thrown back.

He shook his head. He was a rake. What kind of rake was reluctant to visit his own wife's bed on their wedding night? It was just that she'd felt so fragile in the carriage. And then the tears. She'd hugged some garment and cried. He didn't wish to cause her more pain and so soon after the attack. She had to be bruised as she'd fallen to the floor. His own ribs still hurt.

The turns of the past few days passed through his mind and he realised he hadn't slept the night before, and his eyelids weighted him down until a sound woke him.

Tap. Tap. Tap. He looked to the door. No servant would be...on this night.

Tap!

He opened the door, and a rigid, wan face glared. 'It is my wedding night and I would prefer to get some sleep and I cannot because I feel like you are going to slip into my room any second.' She paused. Her hair had been taken from the knot and cascaded about her shoulders. 'Where have you been?'

Just enough light illuminated her to give her the gentleness of a lost waif.

'I fell asleep.'

'Well, that is a good plan.' She whirled away.

He took a step, following her. He reached to clasp her arm. 'Please.' Gently, he led her back to the chamber.

'My ribs,' he said and patted over them. 'I should have told you.' In truth, he'd had many worse bruises, but a woman shouldn't be alone on her wedding night. Neither should a man for that matter. 'And I didn't ask about the cut on your shoulder.'

'It's well enough.'

He led her beside the light and her hair showed glints of the copper. 'Isabel.' He touched the strands, letting them slide through his fingers, and he remembered a tale of a woman whose hair was so alive that she could let it down at her window and a prince could climb it to be at her side. He felt like the man trying to find the princess.

Burying his face against the silkiness, he slowly pulled her close, breathing in the soap-clean scent mixed with a reminder of spring flowers. Just right. She was not just right. She was perfection.

'I told the truth about the sigh,' he said. 'I thought of my misfortune, should someone else have been at my side at that moment.'

'Surely you—'

'I could not imagine how lucky I was to have you there instead of anyone else.'

* * *

Isabel put her palms out and a fortress of male was at her fingertips. Instead of fear to have a male so close, his strength flowed into her.

'Are you hurt badly?' she whispered.

He rested his face against her hair. 'It does not hurt at all, but...you're certainly making it feel much better.' His thin shirt was no barrier to the chest beneath. Warmth raced from her fingertips into her heart and she splayed her hands to feel more. She had not realised. He had not looked so formidable only inches away, nor so gentle.

Kisses sprinkled her whole body with sparks of warmth.

He stepped aside, pulled off his shirt and leaned into the light. Purpled skin, half the size of a boot.

She reached out, swirling her hand along just above the skin, not touching. 'I am so sorry.'

'I'm not.'

He clasped his hand over her wrist and moved her hand to the centre of his torso, just above his waistband. He pulled her hand close. Her fingers spread naturally, fitting against the taut skin. He trailed her fingers upwards, moving them over the ribs, the orbs, the lines and swirls of his chest.

Silken. Taut. Flexible and firm.

She'd never heard a song written about such an experience, never understood why people acted in manners not suitable to their station. In one brush of her hand against William's chest she understood things no one could have explained if they'd spoken for a million years.

Like a creature burrowing against another for shelter, William put his face closer to hers. 'Isabel... Is...I don't think we've kissed before. I wanted to—I wanted to lean towards you and kiss you during the wedding. I ached to do it.'

He loosed his clasp and took his hand away, but her fingers stayed above his heart. He touched his lips to her nose, petal-light, brown velvety eyes watching blue.

‘Our first,’ he whispered. ‘But do not try to keep count, because if you can do so the night will be counted a miserable failure in my eyes.’

The world disappeared when he pulled her close and melded her into his arms. Her mind could not think past the feel of being held and she became light as thistledown, and wafted along on the warmth, held aloft by the rushing breaths. The soft brush of lips against lips joined them in a world of nothing but their heartbeats.

She didn’t know when the sash on her gown loosened and the garments fell away. But somehow, without her knowledge, William removed her clothing and his, and lifted her to the bed.

Their bodies twined close, skin heating skin, and for once, warmth on an August night soothed.

He paused, pushing himself up so that she looked into his eyes. The darkened room didn’t allow her to see the exactness of his features, but she could visualise him easily. His lips were parted and he studied her face, then moved to the side enough that he could reach to her cheek. She didn’t feel the touch, but his hand heated much like sunbeams travelling over the skin.

His fingertips dropped to her skin, moving to her jawline and down her neck to her shoulder. He trailed down her arm and took her hand, putting it against his cheek, moving to place a kiss against her palm. The bristles of his face mixed with the softness of his lips. She traced his jaw, taking in the transition to a world she’d not known existed. Tendrils of his hair brushed against her knuckles.

‘Isabel,’ he whispered, so softly she knew it was not a question, but a caress with words.

He moved forward to kiss her, but something inside her had changed so that the tilt forward seemed to take a thousand moments, but she savoured each one.

His lips, warm and moist, took her thoughts away so that she could only feel.

His hands brushed over her breasts, bringing the feel of a caress to her entire body. He outlined her hips, her stomach, and pulled her against him, his hardness between them.

Again the warmth of the night became a balm as the slickness of his heated body bonding to hers swathed them in a cocoon of togetherness.

When he entered her, the murmurings whispered into her ear made her feel more protected and loved than she’d ever imagined at any moment of her life.

In some knowledge she didn’t know how she’d gained, William did all he could to protect and cherish her with his body.

* * *

William stood at the side of the bed, looking down. His head kept lowering as he fell asleep on his feet and then he’d raise it and jolt himself awake. She lay so still and looked more fragile than any glass figurine with her resting lips, the lashes resting over closed eyes and the skin pale in the moonlight.

He leaned over her and brushed a kiss at her hair, hoping she would wake. She didn’t move. Then he brushed a knuckle against her cheek, and her eyelids flickered and she rolled over.

Stepping away he turned, controlling his breathing. She was well. She would remain well.

He should have met Isabel in her chamber. Even after she’d knocked on his door, he could have easily walked her back to her room and then left as she fell asleep.

He was not cad enough that he could ask her to leave his bed, and he didn’t think she had plans to go. If she had, she would have left earlier.

He could not become attached. He could not experience anything deeper than he might feel for any other person. To care enough that you didn’t want to hurt someone was how it should be. But he could not care enough that the person could damage him. If he had learned one thing in his life, that was it.

He didn’t don his trousers or shirt, but slowly began gathering his clothing. Devil take it. His face itched. He touched it again. This would be the second day without shaving and he simply could not stand another moment of it.

But he couldn't ring for his valet and ask the man to simply ignore the woman in his bed—the wife in his bed.

This was what the vicar had meant about marriage, but William had been too absorbed to see. A wife did differ from a mistress. He'd not expected that since no love was involved.

The simple act of declaration of marriage in front of a few witnesses and it wasn't just nonsensical words. But he had suspected that all along.

His thoughts had tried to warn him when he'd not been able to think the night before. He'd babbled on to the vicar as if he'd swallowed a crate of ale, but he'd not had any spirits until the one before the wedding, hoping it would steady him. The portent of knowledge, and the sleeplessness, had taken him out at the knees and gutted what was left of his thoughts.

This oddness, at seeing Isabel asleep in his bed, helpless in her slumber, was a reminder of all the conflagration he'd experienced during the past days. Surely, soon this would dissipate. Distance would help.

With his clothing bundled in one hand and his boots in the other, he made it out the door and pulled it closed behind him. In the hallway, he dressed, resting his back against the wall as he tugged on his boots.

Marriage had reduced him to—secreting himself out of a married woman's bed in the night as if she might have a husband appear at any moment.

He would have to find another place to stay, at least temporarily until he had accepted the routine of someone living in his house. But he could not turn to his friends. He would be the laughingstock. So, Will, wife toss you out on the wedding night? What didn't you know how to do?

He would go to his sister's house. He wouldn't have to explain there. It wasn't as if he hadn't stayed there many times before when he'd been playing cards with her husband, or talking with her, and the night had flitted away. The servants always let him in as if he owned the property.

* * *

Someone knocked at the door and Isabel's eyes opened wide and she pulled the covers to her neck, feeling the strange slide of bed fabric against bare skin. She was in the middle of a monstrously large bed, she was naked and she was alone.

'Yes?' she asked, that being the only word she could think of. William. He didn't wish to startle her.

'Pardon.' A male voice, rising high at the end, as if his foot had been trampled. Not William. 'Later, sir.'

Oh, that was most likely William's valet to wake him.

She looked around the room. He was not about, nor were his boots, nor any sign of the clothing, except hers.

Well.

She jumped out of bed, dressed as best as she could and darted to her room. How did one approach the servants and ask where one's husband had wandered off to? She could not pen this in a note to the butler.

Back in her chamber, she sat on the mussed covers where she had tossed about the night before waiting to see if Mr Husband remembered he had got married. She reflected on what a small bed the room contained. Oh, it fitted her shape perfectly, but didn't quite measure up to his chamber.

Little embers grew inside her, fanned by every deep breath she inhaled.

She stood, arms crossed, and examined the bed. The room was not nearly as nice as she'd thought it the night before. Oh, it was beautiful and pleasant, all the things a woman could wish for if she had not awoken alone in a much larger tester bed.

No lovely posts raising high in the room to declare the owner worthy of the best.

She tamped her hand over the covers. Lumps under. She was certain.

This was what he had meant about marriage. The tenderness of the night before was like the empty—smaller bed. It had...a rather nice cover, but underneath it was just workable. Nothing alive in it.

Oh, what a fool she was for neglecting to believe the truth told to her.

She whirled around, saw her face in the mirror and picked up her brush and pointed at the reflection. 'He told you. He didn't wish to be married. Vows and nonsense. Vows and nonsense.' She combed her hair and reminded herself that it was not his fault. None of it. He had rescued her.

They had met in a brothel, lest she forget. He was not a saint. He was probably back at Wren's hoping to...win something.

She put her brush on the table.

It wasn't as if she cared for him overmuch. Her feelings for him only stemmed from the fact that he had saved her life. He could have turned and left her to Wren. None of the other men there had even noticed her—so she was indeed fortunate he had seen something other than his ale and the lightskirt trying to entice him.

This day would have started very differently if not for William. Very. She didn't want to contemplate how. She would be in worse shape if she'd returned to her parents. Disgraced. And only disgraced might be an overly hopeful thought.

She looked around the room. He'd married her. Kept her from being a governess. She needed not be so harsh on him. Not that there was a thing wrong with being a governess. She just didn't wish to be one. Or at the moment, a wife.

She refused to sigh and hissed instead.

Her stomach plagued her. The same way it had hurt the morning after her parents had left her at Madame Dubois's School for Young Ladies. They had waved goodbye and said it would not be long before they would be back for her. And she'd really thought they would leave and realise how they could not continue on without their one and only child and return. Even the next morning she had expected them back at any moment and was reprimanded by Madame Dubois for running to the windows.

She had just known they would miss her so badly that they would return. Every day she had expected her mother to rush in, tears streaming down her face, arms outstretched, and pull Isabel close and say she could not bear another moment without her precious daughter.

Finally her parents had returned on the appointed day and the hug had been tight, the smile sincere, and then they had all got into the carriage and Isabel had talked and talked and talked and her mother had not once mentioned the absolute misery of having Isabel away from home. Not once.

Isabel had been the most wonderful daughter ever on holiday from the school, showing her parents all the things she had learned. She had assisted her mother without being asked and had even helped the maid-of-all-work, who had said Isabel was the best child she'd ever seen and that she had missed her terribly and it was so good to have her home again. The maid-of-all-work had hugged her three times when she'd first seen Isabel. Three.

And then when the holiday was over, her parents had taken her back to Madame Dubois's School for Young Ladies Who Were Tossed from Their Homes and left her again. Isabel had not spoken on the trip and she didn't think her parents had even noticed. Again they had waved goodbye and smiled at her.

Then Grace had rushed to Isabel and had hugged her and said she had missed her. Joanna and Rachel had mentioned how much they had missed all their dearest friends.

Still, Isabel had not felt as alone the first day of the school as she did on her first day of marriage. No noise of other students chattering and playing reached her ears. No instructions shouted about. Perhaps she would have liked being a governess more than she realised. Over time she would have sneaked into those children's hearts and they would have missed her terribly on her half-day off.

[Chapter Seven](#)

‘William.’ His sister’s voice.

The door opened a peep. He raised his head from the pillow.

‘William.’

‘Stubble it, Soph. I’m trying to sleep.’

She was halfway into the room. ‘You look hideous.’

‘Thank you. Go away.’ He kept his eyes shut. Feigning sleep never worked, but one could hope.

‘The maid told me you were here,’ Sophia called out rather more cheerily and loudly than necessary.

He tamped the pillow with his hand, still not looking at her. ‘She was right.’

‘I was married a whole week before I showed up on your doorstep and you sent me right back home again.’

He felt the depression of the mattress as she sat.

‘So what did you do?’ she asked.

He didn’t answer.

Then she laughed. ‘Oh, I remember. At the wedding. Oh, that was endearing.’ She mocked a man’s gruffness. ‘I now pronounce you married.’ Then her voice rose and she emitted a very feminine, six-syllable sigh.

He half-opened one eye. ‘I meant nothing. I was pleased to be wed and thankful I had found Isabel. I sighed because it had taken me so long.’

‘Didn’t take her long to toss you out.’

‘She didn’t.’

The mattress shifted as she rose. ‘I’m sure she didn’t.’

‘Send some hot water this way.’

‘I think I shall visit Isabel.’

He opened his eyes and snapped out the words. ‘I forbid it.’

‘Mmm...’ she said at the doorway. ‘Remember what you said to me? That sometimes it was fine for me to pretend to be wrong even when I was right because sometimes men were just too thick-headed to see what a treasure was before them.’

‘I would have said that the sky was made of gooseberries if it would have convinced you to go home.’

‘The sky is made of gooseberries, but you may stay as long as you wish. I will send some water for you, though, because you have a forest growing on your face—’ The last of her words were lost in the closing of the door.

This would not do. He merely suffered from the shock of the wedding and the fact that the country miss had not known the proper rules of marriage. A wife didn’t visit her husband’s bed. And he had simply not been thinking when she appeared or he could have handled it so diplomatically and swept her up into his arms and whisked her down the hallway into her room.

He realised he had to go home. He’d had some rest now and he could see things much more clearly. Once he got the ragged mess of a beard taken care of he would go home. He would explain the way of the ton to her. Bedchambers were sacred by morning light. He could no more stay in her bed and risk the ladies’ maid walking in than she could stay in his bed and be awakened by the—

Oh.

* * *

Walking inside the doorway to his house, the familiar scent of lemon let William know his housekeeper had been working.

His steps lightened as he moved to his private chambers to drop off his coat and then he would find Isabel.

Inside the room, he stilled. He could see nothing different. Nothing. Yet, he felt he'd stepped into someone else's room and not his own. Perhaps it was some lingering perfume or just the knowledge that she'd been there that disconcerted him.

But he supposed it was normal. Even his sisters rarely visited his town house and he'd invited no other woman inside, ever. The servants were mostly hidden in their duties. Sylvester sometimes visited, but was never invited. One allowed for Sylvester.

The room was no different. He was no different. And the woman in his home had no ties on him other than the fact that they had married. An arrangement that would suit them both for their futures. The vows were just words. But very loud ones, he admitted. Ones still ringing deep within.

William had escaped the need for courtship. He was as pleased with his wife as if he had chosen her from a fashion-plate magazine. The house was certainly big enough for the two of them, though he wasn't certain how he would have felt if he'd walked into the bedchamber and she'd been inside.

Well, he smiled, shutting his eyes briefly. He wouldn't have minded in one regard. His shoulders relaxed.

He examined the room. The bed. The walls. Everything was the same. Except the folded paper on the nightstand. He moved to it, picking up a note.

He stared at the words decorated with swirls and loops. She'd asked for his presence in her bedchamber.

Well, if one were to lose one's privacy, then it could have a pleasant side.

A night of little sleep with all the events around him—well, two nights of little sleep had disconcerted him. He must not let his imagination take him down some path that only he saw.

If she asked him of his whereabouts in the night, he would tell her. He would reassure her that he would bring no disgrace on her.

He strode the hallway to her bedchamber just as a maid exited the door and his eyes flickered to the servant. She scurried away, but his hand went out, stopping the door before it closed.

Isabel hummed beyond the door, unaware of his presence. The sound flashed into him like a gunshot wrapped in velvet. He could not move. Her voice, even without words, controlled his heartbeats and whispered endearments.

His fingers tightened on the wood and he listened, his body swathed in the sense of song and Isabel.

Oh, he had not planned for this.

The humming stopped suddenly and he blinked, deserted.

He stepped inside. Isabel stood in front of the window. Light haloed her copper hair and emphasised the contours of her clothing.

One blink of the lashes over azure and his words fell to their knees. 'Good morning.' He could think of nothing else.

Her smile knotted around him and he had to shake himself internally to step back into his realm.

'I have a plan.' She moved as if a wind had lifted her an inch taller. 'A plan you will like so much.'

Yes. He stopped the word from falling from his lips. He needed to hear her voice. He waited.

'I will change my name.' She clasped her hands to her chest. 'You can tell everyone I am away visiting my family and then, after time has passed—' She shivered with excitement. Her eyes shone. 'You can tell everyone I am dead.' She tilted her head to the side. 'You cannot marry again, but...' she shrugged one shoulder '...you do not want a wife.' Then her face brightened. 'I will tell only my family and my dearest friends I am still alive.'

Dead. Dead? The word flamed inside him, dried his mouth, slapped him back into the world he'd left behind. He didn't know if he'd spoken or not. And her face, it didn't shudder in fear at the words passing through her fragile lips, nor did she gasp at the finality of what she said.

'Yes. I will change my name, alter my hair, use face powder, perhaps spectacles and I will find a reputable place away—far away.'

She might have said more. He could not comprehend. His legs tightened. He turned himself into a wall of stone. 'No.'

'Why is that not a grand plan?' Eyes clear and innocent fluttered at him.

He took everything he felt from his words and his body, and made himself an empty slate. 'I need an heir.'

She put a hand on her hip and pointed out the window. 'Tell your cousin to get married. It shouldn't all fall on your shoulders.'

'It doesn't work that way and you know it.'

'I was not born to be a governess. But I don't think I was born to be a wife either.' She indicated the inkstand. 'I was just writing to my friend Joanna and I didn't know what to tell her, so I told her almost nothing but that I was married and would write more later. That is when I realised how confused I was with the events raining about like a tempest. We don't know each other and yet we are married.'

'I know you well enough. You are a good wife—these past few hours. I see no reason for that to change.'

She cleared her throat, which if he was not mistaken was a feminine growl. The sound pulled him back into the light.

'It's not working out too well,' she said.

'I thought you might want to stay in London, if for no other reason than to sing again.'

She shuddered. 'I do have a good voice, but singing doesn't appeal any more. I cannot bear the thought of it.'

She stepped back into the light, rubbing under her chin. 'Some moments I can still feel the knife. Mr Wren had watched me from the audience and I had not suspected it anything but enjoyment of the song. And he had such other plans. I walked about with pride, singing, and I was no different than a hare playing in a field being watched by a hawk.'

William's mind raced ahead. His mouth dried. The thought of other men viewing Isabel tumbled around inside him. He would certainly make sure she had a strong servant with her when she ventured about and he'd tell the coachman personally to keep close to Isabel when she was outside the house. He didn't want any harm to come her way. Instantly, he added plans to tell the butler to hire a sturdy servant who could always be spared when Isabel went out.

She waved a hand. 'I will disguise myself if I leave London. You will not have to fear anything. And if by some chance I am recognised you can merely say some sort of truth. Perhaps that I disappeared and you lied to protect me. That you feared me mad.' She smiled. 'A dead, mad wife would surely cause you no censure, but sympathy. If I need to act like Lady Macbeth, I can. I am quite good with theatrics.' She shivered and let her hands wrangle over each other.

'You are quite good with the imagination.' He'd seen the same smugness she wore on each of his sisters' faces—when they were not listening to a word of reason and had no intention of unlocking their ears.

'You're needed here,' he continued, his words almost a retreat because dealing with his sisters had taught him that was the best way of attack. 'While you were born to sing, I was born to be a viscount, to produce children and take care of the properties that I inherit. And I rather hoped you would help with some of the parts of that which I cannot possibly manage alone.'

Her hands stilled, but remained clasped. She looked at the floor. 'I am sorry that my leaving will prevent the heirs, but I do not know how I could leave children behind, so...perhaps I should go soon.'

'It doesn't work that way, either.'

She twirled and plopped down on the bed. 'I have your interests at heart, of course. I know you do not want to be married.' Her shoulders wobbled, but it wasn't in weakness, more of a stance he'd seen on a bull as it locked hooves into the ground, ready to charge ahead.

Life with Sophia, Rosalind and Harriet had prepared him for this. 'You are very correct.' His sisters would have pulled a face, but Isabel had not heard him make that same remark a score of times.

He gave her a chance to absorb how correct she was, then added, 'We do not have to think of ourselves as married. We are merely two friendly people under the same roof.' With his sisters, he would have retreated before they realised they'd been contradicted, but they were used to his instruction. Instead, he planted his feet firm. 'Friendly.'

Dismay flitted across her face, but then she looked up.

Her shoulders relaxed. 'But I could go for a while to the Americas. Do not rule out the value of having a wife who doesn't live in the same country.'

This would not be the time to agree. 'I want you with me.'

'But you left. In the night,' she said.

'I went to Sophia's.'

'You left.'

'Yes. I felt the need to.'

'I understand.' Her lips tightened after speaking. She looked at the healing mark on her arm. 'I suppose it is all right.'

'We hardly know each other.'

'Which can only be corrected one way.'

He moved to her and knelt on one knee. He clasped her fingers and waited until her eyes met his. 'I do not have it in me...to form a close attachment.'

'Not if you are leaving before morning.'

He squeezed her fingers, hoping to soften the determined chin with his earnest words. 'I can't change the side of the world the sun rises on. I can't change much in this life. I had thought to love before, but I discovered it cannot be done.'

'Give me a chance. Just to know that you like me would be pleasant.'

'I do like you, Isabel. Of course, I do.' Of course. Of course.

'Then why does it matter that I stay?' she asked.

'I need an heir.' The next words almost hurt his mouth and he chose them carefully, realising them for the first time himself. 'And I would not mind some respectability in my life. While I don't intend to become a doddering old saint, I would like, should I have children, for them to have a pleasant childhood. I would like them to have a mother, and a woman trained such as yourself would be the best, absolute best, mother a child could have.'

She lowered her chin and gazed up. 'I was not the top student at the governess school.'

'I'm sure you'll make a good mother.'

She looked at the side table. 'If they were my own little ones, I think it might be wise if a true governess were hired—I did not pay as much attention to the lessons as perhaps I should. I planned to forget every study as soon as I walked from the door.' She clucked her tongue. 'Sometimes my plans are successful.'

'You'll be able to love the children and that's what's important.'

'Of course.' Her smile beamed. 'I did like it when a new student arrived and I loved them all. Miss Fanworth sometimes chose me to take them around the first few days, but she never chose me to help them with lessons.'

'I can help with the studies,' he said, leaning just close enough that he could get a whiff of roses. 'And you can bring sunshine into their lives.'

'I could.'

He rubbed the knuckles of her hand against his cheek. 'And why don't you get a larger bed—one big enough for two to be comfortable?'

A quick dart of her head took her full expression from his view.

'And would you be spending the night in it?'

‘It would not do for a lady’s maid to walk in to help you wake and find me half-naked.’

‘My parents were quite comfortable to sleep in the same room. It is not entirely unreasonable. A servant can wait until summoned.’

‘But the town house is large enough for comfort. In the country, roosters crow to wake the house. Here, servants open the curtains.’

She took in a breath and her eyes didn’t return to him. ‘It is indeed unfortunate that no roosters are about.’ Pulling her fingers from his, she tapped her chin. ‘But, in that case, I want to keep my present sleeping place. In the night, I need to be able to feel both sides of the bed.’

‘I understand.’

She took in a breath and moved her body aside and hopped to her feet. ‘So do I. I will not trouble you. You will not even know I am here. I will send notes to the butler when I need something from you and he will relay it. You need not see me except for the briefest moments and a few events needed for respectability. I know that I owe you and I will repay you in heirs.’

At the door, she grasped the frame, but turned to him. ‘Please do not get too attached to me as I do think the idea of moving and changing my name has much merit.’

In two steps he was at the door.

‘Is—’ He put his hand over the one she rested on the door frame, holding her steady. ‘You must give me your word you will not act on that thought.’

‘I would ne—’

‘Isabel.’ Innocent, innocent, innocent eyes stared at him. ‘Your word.’ He could not risk her rushing off to some destination only she thought wise.

A frown. A pause. ‘I will not leave.’ She met his eyes. ‘I will make this my home. I will make this a home.’

Chapter Eight

Isabel listened to the clattering of the carriage wheels over stones and the sound vibrated into her ears and stayed. The maid sat beside her. The servant was a good two score older and would be the proper chaperon. Isabel didn’t want to be alone. Choosing whom to call on was easy because the only person she knew was William’s sister and the driver knew the direction there.

She had to get something in her head other than the repeat of marriage vows and a sigh. And the memory of William’s eyes begging her forgiveness while his words ran through her like a pike.

The maid darted a look at Isabel.

‘It is just...nothing...’ She kept her next sigh internal. It was nothing. Her marriage. Nothing. She felt no different. Just odd. Everything around her except her clothing was different. Even her name.

The clatter of thoughts in her head didn’t cease when the carriage stopped. She didn’t want to leave the vehicle, but she put her hand on the door, and descended.

She had to speak to someone and William’s sister was most likely to understand. Besides, Sophia already knew the details and Isabel would not have to guard her words.

Once inside Sophia’s home, she was taken to the sitting room with light-coloured walls and matching brocade on the sofa. This was a far cry from Madame’s school where all the furnishings could withstand constant use. In the centre of the room, a small table for a tea service had an oval rug under it and two chairs were aligned for easy conversation, with the sofa just on the other side in case two more people wished to join in.

This was the same room she’d visited before, and yet, she didn’t recall any of it.

She waited, careful not to disturb anything. A clock pealed in the distance and a dog barked several times, then stopped.

Finally Sophia entered the room, steps slow. She took a breath. ‘He is not here.’

They only knew one person in common. Thoughts buffeted Isabel. Sophia thought William had already left the marriage. ‘I know.’

Sophia's lips turned up. Her face eased. 'He was here. Almost all night.' She added the last words quickly. 'He has a chamber of his own here. He often comes to the house early in the morning and sends his coach home. Then we have breakfast and he falls asleep, and slips out in the evening.'

Sophia indicated Isabel sit, but Sophia remained standing.

'Does he talk much?' Isabel asked, making herself comfortable.

'No. But we don't have a lot to say. It is almost like a pair of slippers who've been stored side by side. He goes his places and I go mine, but we spend time together while nothing else is happening.'

'Oh.' Isabel imagined herself as another pair of slippers. Now she understood the marriage William wanted. But she preferred to be the same shoe and match. The one that was part of a pair.

She dismissed her thoughts. The marriage was still fresh. It would take at least a few days for him to understand how wonderful it was to have a wife. A cold thought hit her. Just as it had taken her parents a few days to understand how much they missed her and return.

Sophia interrupted Isabel's memories. 'William says you have a voice like a songbird.'

'I am pleased with it.' Isabel smiled.

'Would you sing something for me? I would like to hear it.'

Isabel opened her mouth, then stopped. Never before had she felt the slightest hesitation for singing. If someone asked a question, she had to prevent herself from giving the answer in song.

Shaking her head, she touched her throat. 'I can't. Today I woke up with a soreness and it would hurt to sing.'

'Later, then?' Sophia asked.

'Of course.' Isabel smiled, but her thoughts didn't match her face. Her desire to sing had fled in the same way a clock that had ticked a whole lifetime suddenly stopped and would not work again. She could not bear the thought of being watched while singing. Just could not. And it had been her favourite part of the performance before.

'I look forward to meeting your sisters and your husband,' Isabel said, turning the conversation in a different direction.

Sitting in the chair adjacent to Isabel, Sophia shrugged. 'You'll know sooner or later—my husband and William do not get on overly well. They are friendly.'

'It is not uncommon for a man to not think someone good enough for his sister.'

'It's not that.' She waved away the words. 'My husband is a few years older and he treats me as if I were born on a cloud and my feet shouldn't touch the ground. He feels William does not take life seriously enough.' She grimaced. 'William does take life seriously. Too seriously, I think.'

That was not quite how Isabel saw him. She raised her brows in question.

'He is quite determined to wring all the excitement out of it he can,' Sophia said. 'He may be out at all hours but it is a seriousness in itself—to grasp the spice of life. I became aware of it about a year after our mother died. He does not talk of what he does much. Sometimes he checks with the man-of-affairs to see how the finances are going and watches over what our sisters are doing. He has been counting on Aunt Emilia to find them matches. Usually, he is ready to sleep when he is here as he has been awake the night.'

'I do not know where he is right now, but he's not at his town house sleeping the day away.' She smiled to take any censure out of her words. 'But you know how we met so it is not as if it is a love match. I don't think he quite wants that.'

Calling it a friendship was even an overestimation. She would have liked nothing better to have been discovering his life from him, but instead she sat with his sister.

'I once had hope...' Sophia ran her fingers along the wooden arm of the chair, letting her words fall away into the room. 'I am only a year younger than he and closest to him. I was twelve when our mother died and our father grieved so much that William had nothing to do but take things in hand. My brother was quite the stickler with us. As he watched over us and made certain our lamps were out at a decent hour, he then bribed the coachman to take him about. He was tall even then and

his ready smile helped get him wherever he wished to go. He told me the older men had no trouble testing the young pup's mettle and challenging him to keep up with them.' She grimaced behind her smile. 'He did, I'm sure.'

Isabel remembered his form flashing across in front of her as he tackled Mr Wren. 'Did he ever have cause to fight with someone?'

'I would imagine he did after our mother died. He would say he fell from a horse, and yet, he'd taken Father's carriage. The stories he tells me are all suitable for a grandmother's ears. My husband has privately mentioned a few escapades of my brother and they weren't saintly. William laughs it away when I ask and will not give a direct answer.' She paused. 'He never angers with me, except when I would jest at him about one of my friends hoping for his notice or ask him when he might marry. That is the only time he would anger. He would stay away longer as well.'

Isabel straightened her shoulders. William married because of his love for his sisters. He protected them. He wouldn't have wed her if not for the disgrace that would have been visited upon him and his family otherwise. She mustn't forget that.

'I do not want to be too inquisitive.' She used the same downward chin movement and the tilt of her head that could capture an audience's awareness. 'But has he ever been in love before?' Her demeanour was relaxed, but her heart braced for the reply. If he had been in love once, then he could fall in love again.

The thought jarred her. She wanted him to love her. Very much. And it was not as if she loved him. She'd been serious when she mentioned wanting to leave. Leaving could be much happier than loving someone who gave the highest regard to a friendly marriage. A Mr Grebbins.

Sophia laughed, leaning forward. 'You do not have to be jealous. I can assure you. Not long ago I asked him the same question. If you could have seen his face, you would have known he told the truth. He told me to bite my tongue. I have never known of any woman he has mentioned by name, although my husband has heard that William attended Drury Lane with someone on his arm.'

'I am so relieved.' Her shoulders dropped, but her smile might not have fooled friends who had seen her perform. William had not been in love. He'd started his adulthood earlier than many, yet had not even mentioned a woman by name to his sister.

'Does the—?' Sophia started, but then shrugged away her words.

'What?' Isabel asked. 'Please tell me what you were going to say.'

'I was going to ask about the ring. If he has mentioned it, or if you have it and have chosen not to wear it. I have not seen it since the night our mother died. William surely has it still.'

Isabel forced her hands to remain still and her eyes not to glance at the plain band on her finger. 'I haven't seen it.'

On the table beside her, Sophia touched the base of the lamp, turning it, staring into the glass. 'Our mother always wore the ring. The night she died, I was at the door because I'd heard a flurry of movement and knew something had happened. Father insisted William take the jewellery. Told him he must marry some day and it would be his wife's. William shouted he could not take something she loved so much. Father insisted.'

Isabel glanced at the gold band on her finger. It was like her own mother's wedding ring and her mother's band was a reflection of love. Now, the gloss on Isabel's seemed a jester's laugh, as practised as the words of songs.

She remembered the expression on her parents' faces when they saw the other person enter the room—enchantment.

Kind Mr Grebbins and his wife had visited her parents often and both had the kindest words. Mrs Grebbins reminded Isabel of a fluffy hen clucking, preening happily in the sun, but almost unaware her husband was in the room. Mr Grebbins smiled often, in the way of a grandfather not seeing much more than a blurred shape.

Isabel had overheard her mother and father discussing how lonely the couple was. Mr Grebbins's first wife had died in childbirth and his heart had died with her. He'd married again, but he'd never danced with the same dash as he had with his first wife, nor had he laughed so heartily. He made the best of it and didn't bemoan his lot in life as Mrs Grebbins was a good sort, he was a good sort and that is what good sorts did. They had spent thirty years of their lives together. Good-sort years.

Mr and Mrs Grebbins had always ambled back to their home—silent—their shadows remaining alone, never touching.

Love is priceless and cannot blossom for every couple, her mother had said, and then her parents had shared a lingering glance.

At William's town house, when Isabel had left, William had wished her well with all the courtesy of Mr Grebbins suggesting to his wife they might leave before darkness descended.

Chapter Nine

Matrimony didn't agree with him. In fact, the whole house seemed out of sorts since his marriage. A fortnight should have been enough time for them to adjust. If it had been a manor, he would have called it Bumbling Hall. Cook didn't seem able to adjust to the circumstance of his asking for breakfast.

'My apologies.' The servant bowed her head as she exited his breakfast room, after replacing the drink. 'I brought you the mistress's chocolate and she does not wish for hers to be spiced as you do.'

He nodded, taking a sip from the glass left behind. The chocolate still wasn't correct. He tasted it again, drinking half of it to see if he could discern exactly what error had been made. He paused, realising why it tasted bland. His cook had not made morning chocolate for him in years. The only time he drank it was at Sophia's and he'd got used to the way her cook prepared it. If he ended the night at his own home, he sipped a brandy as he prepared for bed.

He left, returning to his sitting room. The newspaper lay on the table, but he had no wish to read it. He preferred his news from the club, either by men who had participated or men who'd seen it. Almost always the stories varied, but he sorted out the truth from them.

He picked up the print anyway. Reading through it, he then slapped it back down. Old news. He should have taken to the clubs. He would not make such a mistake tonight. All his friends would be abed now so he had no reason to trot out.

Sylvester had congratulated William on finding a bride who didn't curtail the nights out and said he planned to do the same.

He looked closer at the arm of the chair and pulled a bit of feather from it, then flicked the fluff aside.

William wasn't even certain if Isabel knew he was home or not.

Isabel was not like his sisters, always managing to burst upon him with some question, or leave this or that frippery for the servants to put away.

Moving to the door, he opened it and returned to his chair.

* * *

She'd not spoken with him since she had suggested she could leave and change her name. Perhaps that had been too imaginative, but still, she'd offered.

William had left each night at dusk since their wedding night, until the last one. He'd been arriving home some time after midnight because she'd listened and he didn't return before she fell asleep.

She could not imagine that Husband would be expecting her to provide an heir without his help. She'd also kept the smaller bed and although it had started as a rebellion of sorts, she'd considered it carefully and kept the plan. She looked at the paper in her hand, blowing to dry the inkspot she'd mistakenly made. Well, her penmanship never would win any notice.

She would not be able to send this letter to Grace. She hoped that Grace might meet William some day and draw a picture of him. Grace could sketch up anyone's face so quickly.

After Isabel realised she was to be married, she'd written to Grace, Rachel, and Joanna. Isabel had spent the entire day writing to everyone she knew—making sure they all knew of her good fortune so they would not suspect she'd made a judgement in error. She'd only admitted to Grace that the marriage was not exactly a love match, but more of a union of two sensible people in exact understanding of each other. Isabel's teeth had ached after writing the letters, but she was certain it conveyed a certain sophistication and a smattering of newly gained maturity.

Isabel knew she was indeed more fortunate than Grace, with the uncertainty of finding a child, and how horrible it was that Grace had not been able to keep the little one in the first place.

'Isabel.' William's voice interrupted her thoughts. She started. She hadn't heard him enter her sitting room. Her throat tightened and she nearly knocked the paper from the table. She caught it in mid-air and looked his way. His white cravat looped in a single knot. His face was freshly shaven, which jolted her. The other men she'd met had never looked anything but whisker-peeled after a shave.

She couldn't stare, he'd think her a twit. If she spoke, well, then she'd have to find words somewhere within her and she couldn't think of any.

'You look lost.' He took a step inside. 'What are you thinking of?'

Grace. Grace could rescue her once again. She couldn't tell him of Grace's misfortune, but she could talk of her schoolmate. 'My friend Grace, and how she used to make up tales about how the owner, Madame Dubois, obtained the governess school. My favourite was that she was a highwayman in her youth and robbed a merchant of all his gold. But one of the girls said her father insisted that the land was once owned by a peer. Madame spoke so elegantly, and I knew she was from France, that I could believe her somehow close to the aristocracy.'

Isabel picked up the paper she wrote on. 'Madame didn't like my favourite songs and told me I was only to sing ones approved by Miss Fanworth. Miss Fanworth approved few I liked.'

Isabel thought back to the excitement of watching the girls laugh and gasp when she sang the most gruesome songs, or sniffle when she chose a mournful tune.

But she had no more wishes to perform. The night at Mr Wren's had cured that.

'Are you settling in to your satisfaction?' he asked, lowering down into the easy chair across from her. The undersized chair gave him the appearance of even longer limbs.

'I am.'

'I don't know if I'm doing so well,' he said, laughing quietly. 'I've been home more these past few days than I'm used to.'

Her brows rose. 'You're serious?' He'd hardly been home at all.

'Usually I'm at Sophia's house. The club. Lord Robert has gambling events which last all night to several days, and he prefers them away from his home, so he finds a place where we can stay comfortably during breaks in the play.'

'Do you not like the town house?'

'It has my bed, a roof, room for the servants. That's all that matters.'

'It's a little sparse.'

He looked around the room. 'I suppose. I don't like tripping over furniture or lots of little cloths decorating here and there in a room.'

'Would you mind if I added just a few things?'

'Whatever you want to do is fine with me. Just not too many things that look like undergarments tossed about.'

'Table scarves?'

'That's why I have the inside shutters on the windows. I didn't want the look of chemises or a grandfather's coat hanging out to dry.'

'You've succeeded. It looks like you've either just moved in or are about to move out.'

He laughed, stretching one leg. 'I suppose you could be right on both counts. Sometimes that's how it feels.'

She studied him to see if he told the truth.

'Don't be concerned,' he said. 'I'll be visiting my father soon and I'll make sure the town house is in my name completely so that it can be yours for the rest of your life. You'll always have a home of your own now.'

'But, I...' She'd wanted him to say a home of their own. It wasn't as if she wanted him to say he loved her, but they were living together, married, and she wanted him to feel as if he belonged with her. 'I want you to like the house.'

His eyes wandered around the room. 'I like the windows in the front and I don't see you changing them.' He brushed back the hair at his temple. 'If you dislike the house, I can set my man-of-affairs on the search for another.'

'Oh, no.' She raised both palms. 'I just want you to feel like it matters to you. Like a home should feel.' She paused. 'I would hope.'

He put his elbow on the arm of the chair and raised his hand to prop his chin on it. He settled into the relaxed pose and watched her. 'It already feels more like a home than at any other day since I've moved in. No one moved above stairs before you arrived. Now, servants rush by with a plate of food leaving an aroma of a cooked meal behind. Or I hear you moving, or see you in the hallway and your cheeks light up just the barest, and your eyes smile, and I feel I've been bestowed a piece of treasure no one else even knows exists.'

She saw glints of a similar treasure behind his eyes.

'Thank you.' Warmth infused her cheeks, but she wasn't embarrassed.

'A songbird. Who doesn't have to be caged. Who flits around and brings cheer. In this instance, my father was right. Marriage is an honourable state.'

* * *

He stood, planning to bend down to kiss her, but if he did, she might think it a sign of more affection than he could give.

He walked by, hoping she would retire early, and moved to his bedchamber.

William opened his nightstand drawer. Isabel had taken him at his word about penning notes. He lifted the last note passed along by the butler, opened it and read again. Isabel mentioned at both the beginning and end that it wasn't necessary for him to attend Lady Howell's soiree. He returned the note to the others, then flipped through them. The one before had mentioned the dress she'd purchased while out with his sister and she'd suggested the garment as suitable for an evening event. She'd also mentioned her wish to show them as deeply in love to the ton so no one would ever, ever hint of any impropriety of the past. For his future sons and daughters. Sisters. And himself.

Nothing truly personal was in the notes, yet he'd kept each one. The words of each breezed into the mind as if dashed from a smiling pen. Yet when he read the pages one after the other, the breeziness seemed procured.

Sadness touched him. Probably leftover-marriage tightness. He'd privately asked one of his older friends about the feelings a man might have after the deed was done and the answer had been little more than a shoulder shrug, and a discourse on the sanctity of friendships away from home, good libations, and how a lizard had been on the wall in 1797, or was it ninety-eight? That had helped tremendously and convinced him to spend another quiet night at home.

Waistcoat unbuttoned, he opened the bedchamber door, stepping into the hallway as Isabel rushed from her own room, a blast of feathers on her head. Even her reticule was feathered. He hoped there were no winds.

He paused as she caught sight of him. 'I thought to tell you I don't wish to attend Lady Howell's dance.'

Her lips rose at the sides. 'I don't either.' But something beyond the sky-blue eyes dimmed.

He didn't want to attend that soirée, but blue was his favourite colour, particularly when it had the sparkle of gemstones. He even liked the darkening blue of the sky before a storm. But he didn't like the dreary blue of sadness. 'But perhaps we should go.'

Her eyes brightened, then faded. She clasped her reticule in both hands. 'I do not know. It will...I don't want people to think I have married you for your...'

'Good looks?' he asked, raising his brows.

She opened her mouth briefly. Her cheeks reddened. She walked forward and slapped his arm lightly with the bag, causing a wisp of feather to break free and float between them.

'Oh, be serious,' she said, leaving, 'no one will think that.'

Chapter Ten

William didn't know if Isabel was aware he'd entered the parlour. He'd stopped at the doorway, watching. She was dressed for the soirée early, waiting for him.

She gazed out the middle window of the three, framed by the opening. If butterflies could become women, then Isabel had once had wings. It wasn't that she flitted around, although she could. Her reddish hair had the splash of colour that caught the eye and perhaps the same texture of a wing. The pale ball gown had hardly any hue in it except for the two flowing ties that attached at the back of her sleeves and flowed behind her. The fluttery azure fabric trailed down the back of her gown.

How did one manage a butterfly?

'Shall we leave?' he asked. Her reticule and fan lay in the chair beside him. To see someone else's property so at home in the chamber surprised him.

She didn't move. 'I suppose it is time.' She drew in a breath. 'I should not be worried. In the past, I stood in front of people easily. It's just now, it seems more daunting. The only person there I will know is your sister and she has said that her husband will certainly ask me to dance. I've met him.' She looked at her accessories. 'I do wish I didn't feel so much that I will be noticed out of kindness or curiosity.'

He leaned against the frame. He couldn't suggest they stay home that night. She needed to be comfortable in society and, with her nature, she would be as soon as she had a chance.

William snorted. 'You will dance many times,' he said. Cousin Sylvester would be sure to ask her as well. 'If my cousin approaches you, he will push the conversation in the direction of Wren's. He is an inquisitive little snipe, but we are related and he does have my horses.'

She turned, the fluttery ribbons of her sleeves emphasising movement. 'I won't mind.' Then her eyes widened before closing tightly. 'But sadly...' An internal wind buffeted her. Then she gazed again at him. 'But how can I talk of such an event at a soirée? I was indeed too frightened to move. If not for your presence, I would have expired from fright.' She touched the tip of her glove to her eye and wiped an imagined tear.

He watched and she gazed back. Within moments, her eyes saddened so much he wanted to reach to her, but then her lips turned up. 'I have heard but never tested it, that men do not always know how to speak with a tearful woman and might change the subject quickly.'

'You're quite good. How does one know if the tears are real?'

'They're real,' she said, lifting her brows. 'Always.' Isabel stared at him with wide-eyed innocence, causing him an inward chuckle. Sometimes her naivety appeared skin-deep to him. He wondered, if under the fluff and nonsense, hidden even from herself, an old spirit fought to reconcile with the world.

He held out his arm. 'Shall we leave?'

Her silent laughter brightened the room. She twirled and then closed the distance between them, the scent of roses swirling in the air.

He lifted the reticule and fan, holding them in her direction. She took them.

'Do you need anything else before we go?' he asked.

'Might you fetch me a compliment?'

Lightly he rested his hand at her back, the contact warming him and bringing a flush to her cheeks. He closed out all other moments by leaning in, whispering so his breath touched her ear, 'Compliments could not even begin to do justice to what I see.'

Her fan tip moved up, sliding down the smooth skin of his cheek, and stopping just over his heart. 'I think you managed it quite well.' She examined him. 'And I suppose your words of flattery are always real?'

'Never doubt them.'

She gave a tiny joust with her fan before putting it to her side. 'I won't.'

She turned, preceding him, and his fingers stretched so that the ties from her gown slid through them like gossamer.

* * *

Isabel gauged everyone in the room had known each other since before she was born. She was certain even the younger women had inherited some knowledge of each other well before birth. One woman raised a glass to her lips and three glittering bracelets slid on her glove. Four musicians played and only about twenty people bustled about in the room.

William led her to a woman and introduced her.

'So at last we meet your love,' the lady responded.

William's smile beamed. But his expression froze for just that instant the word love lingered in the air.

Their eyes caught. 'Yes, we have not been wed long,' she said, looking adoringly at him. Now wed caused his warm brown eyes to have flecks that looked like spear tips. She didn't wish to end the evening impaled so she struck the offensive words from her vocabulary.

Apparently, he didn't like profane speech.

'Ah.' A voice at her elbow jarred her. No one had been standing there a second ago. 'I believe no introductions are necessary for me,' the voice said.

'They are.' William's smile never faltered, as he introduced his cousin to her.

From a direct view, Sylvester's delicate features and long-limbed stance would have made artists ask him to pose, but when his head turned and she saw his profile Isabel noticed that, when in shadows, he could have passed for a well-attired weasel, in a handsome sort of way.

'May I have the first of what I expect to be many, many dances throughout the years?' Sylvester bowed as he spoke.

William answered as Sylvester finished the question, 'As long as you mind your manners.' The commanding inflection in his voice couldn't be mistaken.

'Correct,' Sylvester answered, holding his arm for her to grasp. 'I could never do anything else with my enchanting new cousin.'

Sylvester whisked her away for a dance and she dodged his conversation easily. One didn't attend a governess school without having lessons in how to handle impertinent questions.

When the dance ended, he led her to the refreshments, and she suspected it was because the other guests had abandoned the area to begin a reel.

'I am impressed,' he said. 'Both with my cousin's choice and your ability to dance, not just with your feet, but with words as well, manoeuvring the talk back to me each time I spoke of Will.'

'The two of you are quite close and I'm sure you know all there is to know of him and only wish to learn my thoughts on the matter. I assure you, I feel the deepest loyalty to William Balfour.'

He grinned in response. 'My loyalty to him comes and goes, and I know it is not possible yet for you to have found out all the cracks and crevices in our world.'

'I would like to never find them out. So you may keep your silence.'

'Ah, Cousin. You speak the impossible.' He handed her a lemon drink, which surprised her as she expected him to give her the punch. 'I was merely a pawn in the elders' plan to shake William into the game of producing an heir. William may have let it slip to Mother that he never, ever intended to

go through the uncertainty of watching children mature and having the responsibility. He may have felt that Harriet's birth contributed to his mother's illness. Everyone else thought so.'

'Your mother would scheme so?'

'It is not scheming—it is her family concern. She feels she didn't assist William enough when his mother died and she is making it correct now.'

The pianoforte sounded and the violinists began. Sylvester stepped closer so he could hear her.

Isabel took in a breath. 'He was hardly more than a child when his mother died. He couldn't have been expected to handle it all on his own. And yet I understand he certainly did much of it.'

'I would say he did all of it. Including the care of his father. The Viscount was near bedfast after the death just because he could not go on. My own mother had her hands full with her family and could not help. William had three sisters. Grieving.'

'He grieved, too.'

'I doubt his sisters let him.' Assured words.

She indicated a glass of the drink for him, but he shook his head.

'William often confided to me he expected never to marry,' he said, 'and part of that was because he wished never to have the worries of children. When I heard you were trained as a governess, the marriage made sense. A woman experienced in care for little ones. William has said to me many times that he managed his sisters and he does not wish to become a parent again. After Harriet got lost in the woods, I heard his recriminations to himself. When Sophia noted how dashing the foxed soldier was and thought he might need a wife to write to, William rushed straight to Mother to get her help. He now has enlisted her assistance on getting the other two wed also. Said she had had good luck with Sophia's marriage.'

She could not follow his conversation well because her mind had fixed on the first part of it. 'I don't think that my training as a governess mattered.'

'I would not bet the stables on that. Not that I do not think any man would find you appealing for a wife.' His cheeks reddened. 'But William was sincere in his intention not to wed. But I can see —' His face brightened more and he reached for the glass nearest and gulped down some of the lemon drink. Made a face and looked at the glass and swallowed as if trying to get the last vestiges from his taste. 'A governess. A person to care for the children. You know what I mean.'

'Yes. But, he is close to his sisters.'

'In a distant way. He is nearer Sophia now that she has married and has a husband to care for her. If you'll note, even the horses, Marvel and Ivory, were at his father's home. William prefers a wide swathe around him.'

'Thank you for keeping your cousin's confidences.'

'I have,' he said, leaving and tossing a wink her way. 'With family.'

He moved to the outer doors where William now stood and both began talking.

She didn't doubt a word Sylvester said. William had put some distance between himself and everyone else. It could have started when his mother died, or when he realised she was sick. Or earlier. It didn't matter.

Isabel took the lemon drink, finished it and noted the punch with reluctance. She was not sure how it had been mixed. She had heard the drinks ladies mixed for themselves often had more strength than what might be found in the men's glasses.

Isabel reached for a drink. The punch had its use. She was stranded in a sea of jewellery and wanted something to float about on.

On her first day at what she'd then called Madame Dubois's School for Abandoned Young Ladies, her parents had done exactly the same. They had introduced her, smiled all around and then she'd been on her own.

Her mother had made her leave her doll at home, telling her that she was all grown up. She didn't know what had happened to that plaything, but it would be nice to have her now, except, she supposed, the punch was the more mature version.

The liquid slid into her stomach, marking progress with heat. No, she'd never had any drink mixed quite so liberally. Putting the rim of the glass to her lips, she took an even tinier sip than before. Oh, she could quite shake the jewellery if she wished to.

More dancing. The music was quite good. The dancers were quite accomplished. The world was quite perfect around her. Just like the first day of school. Society, even a children's one, didn't allow cowering in the corner. Sipping very, very slowly, she examined the room, ignoring the glittery baubles.

This event was to set the stage for the rest of her life. She smiled and replaced the glass, reminding herself that no one could see beyond a confident smile into quivering insides.

Something bumped her from behind and she turned, a turban brushing her face. White hair straggled from the head-covering and one eye had a milky frost and the other a clear chill.

'Pardon.' The woman spoke. 'I have no time for proper introductions. One of my many faults. Not that I have many.' She looked to her right. 'You're not dancing. You should, you know. Does wonders for the complexion. I swear by it.' She chuckled. 'I'm at least eighty and I don't look a day over seventy-eight.'

'I would agree.'

'And your name is?'

'Isabel Balfour. I am married to the Viscount's son. He is—'

'Wait.' The woman raised a hand, stopping the words. Her gloves swallowed her thin arms. 'You may call me Lady Howell. If you forget, just think of a dog and its bark and then its howl at the moon.' Her nose wrinkled. 'That's how I remember it.'

She looked at Isabel's stomach. 'And are you increasing?'

'No. No.' Isabel narrowed her eyes, whispering.

'Well, you better get your mind to it,' the older woman said, voice strident. 'That's your duty now. Heirs.' She put a gnarled finger out. 'I had six in the first six years of marriage. Not many can carry that feat off. The trick is that the first one was very early—very early.' She leaned in and grinned. 'The second—I wasted no time.' She counted on her fingers. 'Three and four, twins. Five, well, what can I say, I had too much wine in celebration of finding a wet nurse for the twins. By six I put my foot down and said, I'd done my duty. I told Lord Howell to keep his distance. He howled.' She patted Isabel's arm. 'My favourite thing to tell people is how Howell howled. He never recovered fully.'

'I do think it would be nice to have children.'

The woman's lips tightened and her lower jaw jutted forward as she appraised Isabel. 'I recommend you stop at three. By the fourth child, they tend to put a strain on your temper.' She turned away.

Isabel heard her mumble as she left. 'The little chit cannot carry on a conversation.'

Then Lady Howell walked up to another sea of jewellery. The music ended and words jumped out from within the room. 'William Balfour's wife doesn't know her place in society.' All the faces turned Isabel's way.

The musicians even stared at her. How could they know who the woman spoke of? But apparently they did. They'd probably played at many soirées for the same people. This world was no bigger than a teacup and she was being examined as a speck in the bottom of the cup.

William stepped to her elbow and took her hand to pull it to his lips, then tuck it at his arm. 'Yes, she does know her place, Lady Howell. It is at my side.' He shot a look at the musicians and the next song began softly, easing the silence. 'Now we must be leaving, Lady Howell. Duties await us.'

* * *

He stood by his bed, hand on the post. He hadn't known the right words to say in the carriage and he suspected there weren't any. At least not that he could think of.

Leaving her alone at the soirée had been a mistake, but he'd been trying to get those horses—which could have waited.

He wanted to make it up to her. Neither of them deserved what had happened. At least she didn't. Society was not always easy for women who didn't live in it from birth.

Isabel shouldn't be belittled, except perhaps for keeping that ridiculously small bed.

Ridiculously small.

Somehow it had become a battlement. A territorial stake of some sort that he didn't understand. Why, the whole house was hers to command. Everything but his personal effects. And the valet. And the butler. But he wasn't certain she quite understood about the butler.

He pulled the tail of his shirt from his trousers. His boots were already put away. Reaching for his dressing gown, he placed it over the back of a chair and moved to the hallway.

'Isabel...' he opened the door and stuck his head in, inhaling the scent of roses and soaps '...it's too early to sleep.'

'No it's not. Not for me. Go away.' She rolled, putting her back to him. 'I have a headache that starts at my feet and goes straight to my forehead. The slippers were too tight.'

He left the door open. Moving to a chair, he picked it up and placed it closer to the bed. He sat, clasped his fingers lightly and stretched his legs, one foot moving to her counterpane. His heel rested at a covered mound which hid her leg.

'I know you're here for your duty,' she said.

'If I must, I must.'

He moved his feet to the floor, scooted his chair closer and pulled the cover from her foot and took it in his hands. Warm and delicate. She slid her foot aside, but he caught it. Covering her foot with his grasp, he kneaded the bottom with both thumbs. Her foot tilted towards him.

He pressed against each muscle, easing away tension, rubbing over the skin, soothing it.

'That is better than a warm bath,' she said.

He reached out, caressing the other toes with the same care. 'Is your headache any better?'

'I had thought not to wear those slippers again, but I do like the colour and if you could do this afterwards, I might keep them. Would save you the cost of another pair.'

'But is your headache any better?'

'I am not sure.'

He continued, sweeping his hands to ankles, kneading and rubbing. 'I suppose it will take me a while to get there, but I shall.' He continued sweeping his hands just above her heels. 'But not in that bed.'

'So,' she said. 'You will not do your duty while I am in this bed.'

He nudged her foot. 'Duty. That word is hideous.' He stood. 'Move over.'

'I thought you said...'

'Duty has nothing to do with it. Share the mattress.'

'There is not room in this bed for two people. It only holds me.'

'I noticed. Give me some room.' One knee on the bed, he wedged himself in beside her, tossing the covers away and rolling her to face him. 'See, it holds two people, except for my feet.' He moved one leg up and draped it over her thigh and adjusted close. The same delicate scent he'd noticed when he'd walked into the room engulfed him. 'I'm sorry you didn't enjoy the soirée. I didn't either.'

'I thought Lady Howell's invitation sincere.'

'It was—for her. If it makes you feel better, she has called me a tosspot and I believe she called my father a lovestruck chit.'

'It doesn't. Now I feel sad for you and your father. Well, for your father.' She snuggled. 'Are you a tosspot?'

‘Who knows?’ He shrugged.

Chapter Eleven

Arms tightened around her, embracing her so completely she could feel nothing but maleness and heartbeats. A wall of strength caressing her with the lightest touch. She’d never felt so safe.

Her hand clasped his side, over the cloth of his shirt, and her fingertips brushed back and forth, the friction the cloth created under her hand bringing his skin alive to her touch. ‘Do you think you are a tosspot?’

‘You are intent on that question.’

‘And you do not wish to answer.’

His chest moved with a slow intake of breath, giving her room to get closer and yet, when he breathed out, she remained burrowed against him. ‘I drink more than many, but not as much as I did. Several years ago, I noticed my friends were sotted every night and I was there as often as not.’

The room was silent before he continued, his words pulling her inside his thoughts. ‘I wondered if I could go a fortnight without drink. On the sixth day, I was at the club and the scent of spirits lingered in the air so much I could think of nothing else. I was surrounded by desire for it. I ached for it.’

He stopped speaking. She pressed at his side. ‘Well?’

‘Sylvester put a drink in front of me and I sat with it for hours. But I refused. I went to Sophia’s and slept a few hours until morning and then drank chocolate while I waited for her to wake. I drank possibly three glasses in three hours of waiting for my sister who’d decided to sleep in. Luckily, her cook makes very good chocolate.’

‘I didn’t like it so well as what the cook makes here. Your sister’s burns the mouth.’

‘Ah, yes. It’s very good.’

‘Did you finish the fortnight?’

‘Of course. I didn’t doubt it. I refused to let my want for it overcome what I truly desired and my biggest want was to be in control of the liquid. I didn’t have to drink. Since then I have not felt as if it matters so much whether I have drink or not. On occasion, I even have a child’s drink called milk. I have also discovered that one of my servants can take a jug to a home just outside of town and find water that tastes wondrous and refreshes my thirst better than anything. It is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.’ He laughed. ‘I can be as particular about the water I drink as some men are about their brandy. Makes all the difference. Even the tea is better.’

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