



Rakes and Radishes
SUSANNA IVES





Rakes and Radishes

By Susanna Ives

When Henrietta Watson learns that the man she loves plans to marry London's most beautiful and fashionable debutante, she plots to win him back. She'll give him some competition by transforming her boring bumpkin neighbor, the Earl of Kesseley, into a rakish gothic hero worthy of this Season's Diamond.

After years of unrequited love for Henrietta, Kesseley is resigned to go along with her plan and woo himself a willing bride. But once in London, everything changes. Kesseley—long more concerned with his land than his title—discovers that he's interested in sowing wild oats as well as radishes. And Henrietta realizes that gothic heroes don't make ideal husbands. Despite an explosive kiss that opens her eyes to the love that's

been in front of her all along, Henrietta must face the possibility that Kesseley is no longer looking to marry at all...

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Author's Note

The existence of Neptune was mathematically determined before the actual planet was observed through a telescope. For many years, astronomers had noted inconsistencies in the orbit of Uranus and some theorized that the variation was caused by the gravitational pull of an unseen planet. In 1845, John C. Adams, a young Englishman, accurately calculated the location of Neptune and sent his work to Sir George B. Airy, the Astronomer Royal of England. Unfortunately, Airy refused to confirm the location with a physical observation. A year later, French mathematician Urbain J. J. Leverrier, working independently of Adams, predicted Neptune's location. In September 23, 1846, using Leverrier's data, German astronomers at the Urania Observatory in Berlin confirmed Leverrier's computation.

Source: Smith, Bradford A. "Neptune." World Book Online Reference Center. 2004. World Book, Inc. <http://www.worldbookonline.com/wb/Article?id=ar386900>

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Chapter One

Norfolk, England 1819

Lord Blackraven could see her from the rocky cliff. She walked, trancelike, into the murky ocean of her doom. The moonlight illuminated her pale skin as her raven hair floated on the water. He jammed his heels into his stallion's ribs, sending the beast sailing over the ravine. The branches slapped his face, keeping him from his beloved. He screamed her name wildly, "Arabellina! Arabellina!"

She heard his call but mistook it for the fevered voices in her confused mind. Lord Blackraven was never coming back. He was dead. Stabbed. Every dream of happiness lay buried with him. She took a long breath, her last, and sank into the swirling waves, the stone tied to her feet taking—

A quick motion in the periphery of Henrietta's

watering eye yanked her attention from her book. Had the mail coach come? She anxiously peered out the window to the cobblestone road just beyond the ivy-covered garden gate.

No mail coach. Just her elderly neighbor standing in her worn, sagging morning dress, shooing chickens off the road with a straw broom. Henrietta's heart sank. The mantel clock chimed the hour, sounding like two spoons being clanked together ten times. The mail was twenty minutes late! This proved what she always suspected, that the Royal Mail Service held a personal grudge against her.

Nestling back in her chair, she drew the thick woolen blanket about her to shield herself from the ever-present draft in the old parlor, and returned to the last page of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*.

She took a long breath, her last, and sank into the waves, the stone tied to her feet taking her deep into the sea's turbulent belly.

"Arabellina! No!" Lord Blackraven scrambled down the rocks as the last bit of Arabellina's raven hair disappeared under the foaming waves. He

dove in, grabbing her sinking body and pulling her up.

In her confused state, Arabellina fought his arms. He lifted her shaking body to the surface and wiped the curls from her face, his eyes frantically searching hers.

“Am I dead? Is this heaven?” she asked.

“No, my love. It is I, Lord Blackraven. I’ve come back for you, my darling. I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

Henrietta closed the book, wiped her weeping eyes with the sleeve of her muslin gown, and peeked out the window again. A chicken and a few fat, dirty sheep. But no mail coach.

Oh, hang it!

She exhaled, blowing stray black curls off her forehead. In just three days she had gobbled up the novel while waiting on a letter from her cousin Mr. Edward Watson. Now she would have to wait another year for her next book—and pray to God that Edward’s letter would arrive first!

She tossed the finished volume onto the side table

with its sisters. She had promised to smuggle the books to the other ladies in the village. They, too, were wild to read Mrs. Fairfax's latest gothic creation, even if they had to hide the sensational volumes under their beds or in their sewing boxes. Henrietta had no need for such measures. Her father gave little notice to his daughter's reading habits, too lost in his theoretical world of numbers and space.

She watched the diamond-shaped patches of sunlight shining through the crosshatched panes of the ancient parlor window, exposing every flaw in the newly painted walls. She sighed, frustrated. The clean lines and airy colors of the Greek classical style didn't translate onto the low timbered ceilings and pitlike fireplaces of Rose House. Henrietta could feel the medieval ghosts of old sitting about some great table, pounding their ale mugs in disgust at the new cool mint walls with delicate faux gilt. This room—this house—was hopeless. No paint, classical vases or Grecian sofa could hide its Tudor quaintness. Her best efforts only looked like an annoyed pig dressed in a silk gown.

She returned her gaze to the window. Outside, spring was barreling in. Little green buds bulged from

the rose bushes, all the animals sniffed each other, and the village men walked about encased in dirt, holding hoes, with copies of Lord Kesseley's latest planting guide in their worn pockets. Everywhere, undeniable signs of spring, but Henrietta's heart was still stuck in winter, waiting. Why hadn't Edward written?

Henrietta rubbed her late mother's pendant as if the tiny ruby necklace could ward off her misgivings. If a letter didn't arrive soon, she might resort to Arabellina's tragic example. She closed her eyes, imagining herself weighted with sorrow, stones sewed to her scarlet gown, wading into the rocky oceans of Italy.

Her raven hair flowed loose in beautiful silken curls, not frizzing as it usually did in the salty winds. Her ivory skin glowed, unmarred by the blemish on her chin that had popped up overnight.

"Henrietta, I mean, Arabellina. Don't do it. I love you!"

Arabellina turned. Towering high above her on the rocky cliff's edge stood Lord Blackraven, who looked suddenly like Mr. Edward Watson. A black cape billowed in the wind behind him. His beautiful

mahogany locks blew about his face, and the moonlight illuminated those intense, heavily lashed green eyes that made her heart flip-flop.

"How can you say you love me when you never wrote? Every day I waited for a letter that you were safe in London and not robbed by some highwaymen, left to die alone on a deserted road. One small poem of how you dreamed and yearned for me every moment we were apart. But nothing! I'm so devastated. How could you leave me in this barren place?" Arabellina looked at the waiting waves, swirling and foaming about her.

"Stop! Don't take your life! I wrote you every day. Poems and poems."

"I never received them."

Lord Blackraven paused, biting his index finger as Edward was prone to do. Then he said, "It was the Royal Mail Service! That villainous Royal Mail! Why I could crush him—it— with a—a large rock."

"A large rock?"

"The Royal Mail is quite huge. It carries 500,000 letters a day. They employ 150,000 horses each year."

"Never mind the mail service! You said to wait, and for weeks I've waited and waited!"

"The mail's come," interrupted Mrs. Potts.

The rotund housekeeper stood at the parlor entry, drying a large wooden spoon with a rag, an infuriatingly knowing look in her eyes. Beyond the window, the mail coach rattled and crunched up the cobblestones past Henrietta's house. Passengers clung to the top and edges. How could she have missed it?

Henrietta feigned a bored yawn. "Already? My, how late the morning has grown."

"Hrmph," the housekeeper said and left. Cruel woman.

Henrietta willed herself still until Mrs. Potts's footsteps echoed in the back of the house. Then she flew up to her chamber, threw on her pelisse and bonnet and rushed back down, slowing to a casual saunter as the massive front door thudded closed behind her. All of the neighbors were leaving their homes, as well, and heading up the street. The arrival of the post was the most exciting part of everyone's day.

The mail carriage paused before a dirty, narrow pub

that seemed to sag under the weight of four floors of filthy, shuttered windows. The hunched postmaster, pub owner and sometime barber limped out with the village mail. A young mail boy high up on the perch threw down a knotted yellow bag and waited. The postmaster heaved his small bag into the air three times before an exasperated passenger, hanging off the side, snagged it. The carriage jerked to a start and thundered down the road, kicking dirt and loose cobbles behind it.

Everyone followed the postmaster inside the ancient pub that smelled like a thousand years of bad fish and hops. He dumped the mail onto a battered old table, then held each letter to the tip of his nose, slowly reading each address and putting it into the correct pile. The villagers looked on, speculating which child, grandchild or physician had sent a letter. It was the same conversation every mail day of every year.

Henrietta lingered about the entrance, trying not to appear eager.

The door swung open and the reek of livestock and mud assaulted her nose as her neighbor's tall form ducked under the doorframe. He wore his usual ensemble of muddy doeskins and a worn green coat.

Shaggy chestnut curls sticky with perspiration and in terrible need of a barber fell into his gray eyes. Fuzzy side-whiskers softened his otherwise hard, lean face. Judging from the dirt under his nails, one would think he hadn't a passel of farmhands and tenants and was reduced to planting crops with his fingers. His hound Samuel, a big boned, thick brown dog of no obvious breed, trotted in behind him, sniffing about the floor.

When Samuel saw Henrietta, he scrambled around his master's boots and jabbed his nose under the hem of her skirt. She knelt, letting the happy hound give her wet licks on her cheek. She looked up. Kesseley stared down at her, unsmiling. His face wore that tight expression again, chin high, eyes hard—the look she always pretended not to notice. If only he could be a tenth as pleased as his dog to see her.

“Good morning, Samuel, and you too, Kesseley.” She rose and gave him a nervous smile.

“You look like you've been enjoying yourself this morning.”

“I was in the fields.”

“Where else would you be but in your beloved dirt?” She chuckled, hoping he would do the same. Instead, he looked down at his mud-caked boots, a frown

bending his lips.

"I'm finishing the planting," he said. "We're starting a new crop rotation schedule this year."

"The one from...Flanders?" His head jerked up, a light sparked in his eyes, and Henrietta felt her heart lighten.

"I thought my talk of farming bored you," he said.

"Still, I remembered every word." She touched his wrist. A wave of gentle warmth moved through her. She missed the times when it was so easy between them. "I suppose you will be leaving for the Season in a few days."

"Yes."

"I've made you a little surprise present, but you must come to the house to get it."

Finally a grin, albeit a tiny one, crossed his face. "Henrietta? A secret? You know you can't keep secrets. You might as well tell me before you blurt it by accident."

"That is not true. I keep many secrets from you. You just tend to remember the unfortunate surprise present for your ninth birthday."

"Just tell me."

"But I won't." She wagged a teasing finger before

his face. "I will make you wait in unbearable anticipation."

"Do you want me to tell everyone how years ago you tried to run away with a traveling production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* masquerading as a fairy, and I had to dash off to Ely to save you?"

"You always hold that over me, don't you?" she cried, in mock annoyance, but then giggled. "Well, I daresay, I would be leading a much more exciting life traipsing around England in gaudy green pixie wings than stuck *here*."

His eyes flashed. "Yes, you've made it quite clear that you don't care for our village or..." He halted, but even so the arrested words hung in the air, so loud he could have shouted them. *Or me. You don't care for me.*

That familiar, prickly awkwardness filled the air.

"A diary!" she cried, trying to recapture the previous moment when he had been smiling. "I made you one. That's the surprise." She opened her palms and shrugged her shoulders. "You are right, I can't keep secrets."

"A diary?" He hiked a brow.

“Since you are going to London for the Season to find, well, a wife, I thought that you could write about when...when...” Oh Lud, suddenly her present seemed like the stupidest idea she’d ever had. “When you meet *her*,” she finished.

“Her?”

“Your future wife. So you can capture the moment forever in your heart and never let it fade away.”

The muscles at the back of his jaw twitched. She felt so foolish. She just wanted him to fall in love with a wonderful lady as she had fallen in love with Edward. “I’ve done the wrong thing again, haven’t I?” she said.

“No, it’s nice. Thank you for thinking of me.”

“I always think of you,” she whispered. “You’re my dearest friend.” Why did they have to keep up this nonsense? Why couldn’t he be easy Kesseley again? Edward was making her sick with worry and she had no one to confide in.

“That’s four pence for these letters and a journal, Miss Watson,” the postmaster called out.

Henrietta rushed forward, put her coins on the table and scooped up a large bundle of mail. Surely one letter was from Edward! She started for the door, then remembered and turned back to Kesseley, who still

waited for his mail. "Please come by before you leave."

"Of course."

She bent down to Samuel, who had rolled on to his side, exposing his belly for a good scratch. She cupped her hand and pretended to whisper in the dog's ear, but kept her eyes on Kesseley's face. "You'll make sure he doesn't forget, won't you?"

He yelped.

"He said yes." Kesseley chuckled. A chuckle! She grinned to hear the comforting sound again.

"I can always count on dear Samuel." She curtsied and then hurried outside, her mind quickly returning to the matter of Edward and his lack of correspondence.

She eagerly shuffled through the letters.

Then again.

And again.

And one more time to make sure.

Nothing. Just the March edition of *Town and Country*. She turned it over and shook it. No letter from Edward fell out.

It felt like a foot had stepped on her heart and flattened it. Now another dull, useless day stretched out before her like a play seen over and over again: going through the household accounts, sewing for the

Foundling orphanage, fighting with Mrs. Potts over supper, discussing her father's mathematical theories over burnt mutton, and reading Edward's poems by the candlelight until she fell asleep. She began to trudge home, resigned.

"Henrietta! Wait!" Kesseley ran out of the pub to catch up with her, waving a journal, faithful Samuel at his heels. "I'm in the *Journal of Agriculture!*"

He popped the page with his knuckle. Henrietta leaned over and read, "Increasing Turnip Yield by Addition of Ash Constituents" by the Earl of Kesseley. Why couldn't she get any good news? Then pride in Kesseley's eyes made her feel guilty for her jealous thought.

"Kesseley, that's wonderful."

"Come, let's have a glass of ale or tea to celebrate."

But all Henrietta wanted to do was go home, curl into a small ball under her blanket and feel sorry for herself. "Thank you, Kesseley, but I—I don't feel so well."

Concern leaped into his eyes, and he seized her arm. "Did you get some bad news?"

"No. I just have a headache. Congratulations again." And she meant it. She knew from her father's struggles what it meant to have one's work published. She gave

his hand a reassuring squeeze, then let go. "Do come by before you go. I will give you the diary. You needn't write about your wife, perhaps just crop rotations or ideas of future articles."

"Henrietta, wait—"

"I'm so sorry, I have to go." She pulled away and continued home to her haven of self-pity. She could feel him watching her leave, disappointed. Guilt flopped about like a fat fish in her heart. Why did he always make her feel so awful about herself? She never wanted to disappoint him, yet inevitably she did.

Maybe she should go back and have one small cup of tea. But then he would go on and on about the minute details of ash constituents, whatever they were. She didn't have the energy to feign interest in Kesseley's many agricultural experiments. Not today. She would make it up to him on another occasion, she promised, trying to make herself feel better, even as she knew she had made that same promise many times before and never fulfilled it.

At home, Henrietta threw her bonnet on the sofa so hard it knocked off the silk irises she had sewn on to it.

She sat down, put her chin on her hand and let her thoughts swing from guilt over Kesseley to anxiety about Edward.

Edward had been in London for six weeks now with no word. "He said he loved me, to be patient," she reminded herself, remembering the evening his lips had descended upon hers. The gentle pressure, a tingle up her spine, his warm mouth tasting of cream and wine. Hushed strains of a violin and the murmur of guests had floated into the garden, breaking the quiet wintry November evening. Everything had disappeared when his lips touched hers. Years of wanting and dreaming were over, and now they would begin their lives together.

But he really should have written by now. London was full of fashionable, beautiful women who loved poetry—and handsome poets.

No! He was busy in London seeing to his late father's estate and finishing another volume of poetry for his editor. He hadn't the time to write, and she should think herself a selfish creature indeed to impose upon his time.

Then that little voice, the one that snickered like a childish tattler, said, *you know he never formally*

proposed to you.

Ugh! She slapped her forehead with the mail, trying to swat the little voice silent.

She took the mail upstairs, knocked on the library door and slipped inside the nebula of papers and books composing her father's existence. Celestial maps and charts covered the dark paneled walls and arching windows. Haphazard piles of papers rose from the floor, making it treacherous to walk, never mind sweep. In the center of this galaxy of disorder stood her father, Walter Watson, a striking gentleman possessing a hawklike nose, wild graying curls, and eyes that seemed perpetually lost in some inner calculation. He hunched over a large table, scribbling notes, across from where his noted astronomer colleague, Mr. Pieter Van Heerlen, sat. Much more fastidious than her father, Mr. Van Heerlen had neatly stacked her father's books and papers to one side in order to make a clean surface on which to work. He was a rather slight, fair gentleman of about five and thirty years. He possessed those intense Germanic blue eyes, further amplified by thin, round spectacles. He had come for a "mere" week's visit over a month ago to "glance" at Mr. Watson's work. Ever proper, he

rose and stiffly bowed for Henrietta. She curtsied in reply.

“You appear flushed, Miss Henrietta. I hope you have not strained yourself.” Mr. Van Heerlen seemed to operate under the assumption that Henrietta was a delicate, shrinking flower—the kind pressed and eternally kept in a glass picture box.

Her father dismissively waved his hand. “Oh don’t worry about Henrietta. She is forever tromping about the fields with Kesseley. She wanders home covered in bugs and mud.”

Mr. Van Heerlen’s eyes narrowed with disapproval.

“That was years ago, Papa. When I was a girl,” Henrietta corrected. She didn’t want to upset Mr. Van Heerlen, for he was a very influential astronomer in the German scientific community and could establish or destroy her father’s professional reputation with one word. “I just went to get the mail.”

She kissed her father’s cheek and handed him his letters, all under Mr. Van Heerlen’s scrutinizing gaze.

Mr. Watson put down his pen and wiped his inky fingers on his vest. Henrietta cringed at the black streaks, knowing she had to oversee the laundry the next day. He looked at the address on each letter and

then placed them on a pile of other unopened letters, all accounts for her to sort and balance. The last letter, however, he eagerly tore open and read, the paper trembling in his fingers.

“What is it, Papa?” she gasped, aroused from her doldrums.

“Mr. Van Heerlen! You did it! We have an appointment at the Royal Observatory!”

He handed the letter to his colleague, who read it aloud in his crisp Flemish accent.

“Dear Sirs,

I have read your appeal for an appointment. Though Mr. Van Heerlen and I have had differences of opinion in the past, I am obliged to grant my esteemed colleague an audience in the later spring...”

“This could be it, Henrietta. What your mother and I always wanted. That we weren’t wrong assuming an unfound planet explained the perturbations of Uranus’s orbit. No, they said, it’s a moon or a comet. We knew nothing could alter the orbit of a planet of such size and mass, unless it was another object of equal or greater size and mass. It just makes sense. I just wish that...”

Mr. Watson's jaw started to tremble. "I wish she could have been here."

Henrietta wanted to hold her papa and lean her head on his chest but felt restrained by Mr. Van Heerlen's presence. "You would have made her proud, Papa," she whispered instead.

"Would I?" Mr. Watson covered his mouth with his hand and gazed at his papers. She could still see her mother's old calculations among the new work. Tears formed in her father's eyes, but he blinked them away. "We must get to work. I must not disappoint her."

"I shall tell Mrs. Potts to set a special table for this evening," Henrietta said, in an attempt to excuse herself.

"Yes," Mr. Van Heerlen said at the same time her father cried, "No, no. We need your help."

Her father grabbed a chair, brushed away the papers piled on it and set it beside Mr. Van Heerlen. Then he handed Henrietta an old dented pen he found under his scribbled pages.

Henrietta waited for her father's instructions while he shuffled through his papers. Beside her, Mr. Van Heerlen twitched, fuming in silent disapproval. After a long, uncomfortable minute, she opened *Town and*

Country, hoping the latest doings of Lady Sara would divert her self-conscious thoughts.

Henrietta, like all the village girls, kept up with the illustrious debutante. To them, Lady Sara wasn't a duke's daughter who had grown up in a vastly different world of luxury and social connection, but a bosom friend whom they could freely praise or censure. Henrietta had heard from an old friend who possessed a tenuous familial link to the famed beauty that Lady Sara hid a copy of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* under her mattress. In Henrietta's mind, their mutual love for Lord Blackraven made them literary sisters at heart.

Henrietta scanned the page for Lady Sara's name, finding only boring gossip about the Regent's old fat uncles. Who cared for them anyway?

"Henrietta, what is the eccentricity if the minimum distance to the sun is 2,737,827,391.4477095 miles and the maximum distance is 2,822,788,999.2901435 miles?"

Henrietta asked her father to repeat the major and minor axes, while she scratched out the formula along the margins of her journal.

"0.011214269," she said.

Mr. Van Heerlen released a low, annoyed sigh. Oblivious to his colleague's discomfort, her father kept calling out problems to her. "So what is the distance from a center to a focus?"

She turned the page and wrote *O* then stopped. Beside her pen, Lady Sara's perfect oval face, with her sad, dreamy eyes, was framed in a heart, linked to another heart containing a rather handsome gentleman. Lady Sara had a beau! Henrietta drew the candle, spreading light across the page. There was something familiar in the suitor's intense gaze. She looked closer, leaning down until her nose was almost touching the page.

Edward!

"Miss Watson," she heard Mr. Van Heerlen say, "are you well?"

She felt his tentative hand touch her shoulder.

"I don't know! I don't know!" she cried, gulping air as if she were drowning. She put her hands on her ears but couldn't silence the terrible realization spinning in her head. Grabbing the journal, she flew from the chair, away from Mr. Van Heerlen's touch, and ran down the hall to the safety of her chamber. She could hear him calling after her. She closed her door and slammed the

lock in place. Then she sank to the floor and splayed the magazine upon the carpet.

Those at White's will be disappointed to learn the headstrong Lady S-a has rejected all suitors and has fallen under the spell of a handsome gentleman poet from Norfolk. A Mr. E-d W-n. The Duke of H-n reluctantly acknowledges the ardent suitor after a foiled attempt to run to Gretna Greene. It is expected their betrothal will be announced at the end of the Season, giving time, the duke hopes, for a more qualified suitor to win her affections.

Henrietta's body convulsed with sobs. She stumbled to her bed, rolled herself into her blanket and smothered her cries in her pillow. Years of memories slid across her mind, incoherent things: the wind swishing under their feet in the swing, a tiny emerald that fell from his pin, the poem he hid in her book. And now he would run off with Lady Sara! He couldn't have known her for more than a few days before they made for Gretna Greene. She felt the same sense of helplessness as when she'd spent days by her mother's deathbed, unable to make her well and unable to stop the pain.

No! She just couldn't let go. He was as vital to her as her heart or lungs. What would be left of her if he took all her hopes away? A shriveled, old spinster living in a decrepit house, caring for her eccentric father, thinking up the courses for dinner and shooing away chickens with a broom.

She curled herself around her hurting heart. Warm tears slid down her face, wetting the sheet under her head. She rubbed her mother's pendant. Henrietta hadn't ached so much since the day her mother finally slipped away. She and Kesseley had quietly sat with their bare feet in the Great Ouse River and listened to its gentle trickle. A blue moth lit upon his finger. He lifted it onto her shoulder, letting its wings brush her skin.

"Kesseley," she whispered as if he were there. "It hurts so much. She shouldn't marry him. She is supposed to marry a duke or an—"

Then the idea came as clear as the day the numbers had leaped from Kepler's pages and formed a perfect ellipse around the sun.

Kesseley dug his boot tips into the dirt of his tenant's

field as he tried to keep an upset ewe captive between his knees. He bent over her hoof, scraping the mud off with his finger and cursing to himself. *You're a sap, a fumbling, cabbage-headed sap. You can't forget about her, can you? You should have stayed away from the village, but you couldn't leave her alone.*

"Forget her," he said aloud.

"What's that you say?" Simmons, his portly tenant, called from several sheep away.

"Nothing. I'm talking to myself."

"The only intelligent conversation a man can have."

"Aye." The ewe bolted away from Kesseley, turned and bit into the hard bone of his shin. Hissing a quiet curse, he bent in pain while the ewe looked on with round, fearful eyes. Kesseley took a slow breath between his teeth. He'd known that fear as a small boy, terrified and huddled, waiting for his angry father's blow. Kesseley reached out and softly scratched the thick pile between the ewe's ears. "Calm down, my girl. Calm down," he whispered, stroking the frightened creature until she trusted him enough to expose her favorite rubbing place below her ear. Then Kesseley raised her foot again and ran his thumb across the

tough cartilage of her hoof. It crumbled like brittle straw. "Poor girl, no wonder you're ill-tempered." He called out to Mr. Simmons, "It's foot rot. She needs to be separated."

Mr. Simmons wiped his sweating, red brow. "I knew it! They probably all have it."

Kesseley bent to look at another ewe, but stopped. Along the wooden fence, Henrietta approached, cradling a stack of books in her arms. The wind blew her blue pelisse back, exposing the outline of her trim legs and waist. Black curls fell loose from a knot on her head, falling down her back and dancing about her fair face.

Oh hell! Kesseley sucked in a large breath and wiped his hands on his coat. *Whatever she wants, just refuse.*

But her large dark eyes were glassy, and scarlet blotches—the ones that always came out when she cried—spotted her cheeks. Kesseley raced to her.

"Good God! What is the matter?"

Her chin began to tremble. Little teardrops rolled down her face. She tried to speak, but nothing came out, just an awful squeak.

He stood there, his arms dangling about his body,

feeling as useless as when he was a small boy trying to comfort his mother as she cried over some cruel thing his father had done. Kesseley hated feeling this way, hated it all the way down to his soul. He enclosed her shoulder in his hand. She felt as delicate as baby chick feathers.

“Henrietta?” he said softly.

“I was w-wondering if I might t-talk to you?” She looked at Simmons’s wide backside leaning over an ewe. “Perhaps somewhere else.”

“Yes, of course!” Kesseley reached for her books but she held them tight, taking his arm instead. He led her along the old path they had run along every day as children, over the wooden fence and into the thicket of trees surrounding the banks of the River Ouse. Samuel scurried behind, sniffing mole holes and suspicious clumps on the path.

The afternoon sun was low, illuminating the majestic oak growing along the shores of the river. They had always met here—until that Wednesday last year in early autumn.

The oak leaves had finished their fiery show and begun to fall from the branches. He and Samuel were walking out to the fields after a morning meeting with a

stonemason concerning repairs to Wrenthorpe. They came upon Henrietta sitting by the banks, bundled in a brown cape, her hands around her knees. He restrained his hound and observed her from behind the oak, letting her beauty fill him. He had not seen her since last Sunday at church, which was unusual, for they seldom went that many days without speaking.

Then as if she could sense him, or smell Samuel, she turned her head. "Were you watching me?" she asked, a little stitch appearing between her brows.

He felt stupid being caught red-handed and tried to play it off as a joke. "Yes, I'm spying on you."

Her face remained solemn.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" he asked.

She paused, then smiled the beautiful smile that caused his heart to palpitate. "Please," she said.

He sat beside her, so close their shoulders touched. Samuel lay at his feet, scratching his neck with his hind paw.

After the normal exchange of "how are yous", she became quiet, watching the orange and yellow fallen leaves drifting on the river's surface. The cool, breezy weather had reddened her lips and cheeks, and sunlight reflecting off the water made her eyes sparkle

like deep amber. He had been working on the words he would tell her in the coming spring. About how he had finally rescued Wrenthorpe from his father's suffocating mountain of mortgages, and that he expected his harvest to increase even more when he began a new crop rotation technique. He believed he could properly support a wife and family. But as he gazed at her face, he realized he couldn't wait those few months. The winter loomed too long when he could keep her warm in his arms...his bed.

"—I want to ask you a question." A drop of perspiration rolled down his forehead.

She smiled and raised her brow. "Yes?"

"I...that is, would you..." His mouth went dry. He couldn't form words, he was so nervous.

In frustration, he slid his hand up the back of her neck, feeling her silken curls on his skin. Her eyes widened as he drew her to him. He reassuringly stroked her cheek with his fingers and careful to be gentle even though his body seemed to be exploding under his skin, he placed his lips on hers. She remained still, not responding to his tentative caresses. He panicked. Did she not feel anything? But then she sighed, low and soft. Her fingers tightened

about his biceps and she pulled him close. Her lips returned his kisses with a growing hunger as she pressed the peaks of her breasts against his chest. "Henrietta," he murmured, then sunk his tongue into her mouth, tasting her, plundering her. But she let out a small cry and slid away from his arms.

She stared at him with large eyes. Her breasts rose and fell with each rapid breath.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you." He reached to take her back to his heart. "I love y—"

"Oh God!" She bolted up and began scrubbing her mouth with the back of her hand as if to eradicate the memory of his touch from her skin. "What have I done?" she cried. "And with *you*."

Samuel began whimpering.

"Please, Kesseley, I thought we were friends."

"But I felt...that is," he began. "I thought you liked my kiss. I thought—"

"No." She shook her head. "Edward and I are in love. We're going to London together after his book is published."

"What?" he cried, hearing the roar of his own blood rushing in his veins. "You love him? When did this happen?"

“For a while now.” She swallowed and gazed out at the horizon. “I—I just couldn’t tell you. I’m sorry.”

Since that day, he felt as if they were in a play of sorts where they pretended to be friends, as if nothing had changed. They still spoke the same lines, had the same smiles, but some cold, invisible fingers held them each at an emotional distance.

He wasn’t as good as Henrietta at pretending that all was well. In his dreams she came to him and they would lie under this oak. The waters would flow by as he unlaced each stay, one by one until she was free, her body moving under him like the current, his lips sunk into the soft valley between her neck and shoulder blade, the rise of her nipples against his chest, his thighs sinking—*Whoa there, Kesseley. Easy!*

She seemed so delicate as she stood before him now, her arms wrapped about her, staring out at the water.

“Would you like to talk about it, Henrietta?” His voice cracked like that of the awkward adolescent he still felt like inside.

She stepped into him, leaned her head onto his chest and wept. He closed his eyes and put his arms around her, shielding her, pulling her closer as if to

squeeze out her sadness. *Oh, my dearest love.* But again, she stepped away.

She pulled out a small, torn piece of paper from her sleeve and gave it to him. "This was in *Town and Country*."

His fists balled with anger as he read the words. How could Edward so easily toss away everything Kesseley had ever wanted? "I'm sorry," he said gently, handing the paper back. It slipped from her fingers and sailed over the water and away.

"All that time, I thought—oh, Kesseley, it was supposed to be me. Why couldn't it be me?" She looked at him expectantly, as if he could say something to make it all better. Nothing could take away the pain of being unwanted. Even now, when Henrietta, who told him she could never return his feelings, came crying, all he could do was take her into his arms. This was the closest he'd ever come to having her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again.

She continued. "It isn't fair. He shouldn't be marrying her. She's a duke's daughter. It's an unequal match! Neither partner will be happy after the first shine of love is gone. She can never understand his spirit, his passionate heart, like I can." She clenched her hand by

her heart. “She should—and I thought this quite randomly—she should marry an earl like you. And then I realized, she should marry *you*.”

“Pardon?”

“I said, she should marry you.”

Her hopeful eyes gazed at him unfazed, oblivious to her slide into madness. He ran his finger under the edge of his cravat. “Henrietta, I believe you are a little distraught.”

“No, it’s true! I have thought about it, and I am convinced it is a just solution.”

“You can’t make two people fall in love just because you think it’s a good idea.”

She shook her head. “But she is beautiful! All the journals rave about her radiance, charm and accomplishments. My friend Charlotte is married to Lady Sara’s cousin Nigel and assures me Lady Sara is the most ravishing creature she has ever beheld. How could you not love her?”

“Because I’ve never met her.”

“But you will in London.”

He flung out his arms. “She loves another.”

That didn’t faze Henrietta. “It’s a temporary infatuation. Despite his brilliant poetry, Edward is just a

plain mister. You must remind her of her station, her noble duty. You must—" Henrietta's eyes narrowed, "—*steal* her."

"Absolutely not!" That was *de trop* even for crazy Henrietta.

"Fine! What if you steal her just long enough for Edward to come back to his senses? Then you won't have to marry her."

"But Edward never had any sense to begin with, so I don't see how he could come back to it."

She paused, then the edge of her lip drew up in a coy smile. "Oh, I see," she said. "You don't think you can take her from Edward?"

"That's not fair!" he warned, backing away. "How can you use my feelings—"

"You could be handsome. Very handsome and—and dashing, if you tried. Just look— look at you." Her nose wrinkled as if he were a rotting cabbage.

He looked down. What was wrong? A few mud smears on his trousers. He twisted around to inspect his coat tails. Maybe something was peculiar there? A few grass stains, nothing to cause such evident offense. "What?"

"You're so provincial! When you get to London, go to

Schweitzer and Davidson. They're all the crack, I've heard. Go and tell them you're hopeless."

Kesseley thought of his father's closets, filled with hundreds of cravats, gold and diamond pins and shining shoes—never mind the tenants' homes falling in or the barren fields. "You don't know what you are talking about."

"I do! Charlotte says her cousin Nigel said that Lady Sara's mother heard from Lady Sara's lady's maid that Lady Sara hides *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* under her mattress. So it's very easy—you must become dashing and handsome like her hero, Lord Blackraven."

"Henrietta, you're a little upset, and you're not being rational."

"But you can be Lord Blackraven! You're so clever. It will be easy for you. You just have to turn your mind to it. I mean, look what you've done getting Wrenthorpe set to rights."

He wasn't going to argue that last point.

She pulled a leather volume from her pile. "So, in *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*, Lord Blackraven is dark and brooding, just like you were when all those weevils ate your peas that year. He saves Arabellina's

life only to find out she is engaged to his half brother. Lord Blackraven tries to avoid Arabellina, but his passion grows. She resists him because he has a terrible reputation, and she feels honor bound to marry his half brother who everyone thinks is good, but who is really evil. So, Lord Blackraven kills his half brother. It's not murder though—"

"Please stop. Where did you get these?"

She drew up tall, jutting her chin out. "They're mine. I read *novels*."

"This Lord Blackbird, you really admire him?"

"Lord Blackraven," she corrected. "He is romantic, I suppose." She looked beyond the river, over the patchwork of fields stretching to the horizon. "He lets me escape, feel passion, be me—the real me—not the lady trapped in this village, listening to the same boring gossip over and over. I thought my life would be so much more than it is. I refuse to believe *this*—" she motioned about her, "—is all it will ever be."

Kesseley studied the weeping willow branches dipping into the water, and the silver minnows darting about the shores. Then his gaze moved beyond the tranquil river to his fields. When he had inherited his estate, the fields hadn't been plowed in three decades

and a hoe could barely break the hard, eroded surface. Now neat rows, sprouting with tender green wheat stretched to the horizon. He couldn't understand Henrietta, that she would sacrifice this paradise. He examined her face, blotched and stained with tears. What would make this woman happy?

He took the volumes from her hands. "I will read them," he said quietly.

Henrietta's face brightened. "So you will help me?"
"No."

"Give me my books! I should have known. You're so uncaring. Edward will marry Lady Sara, and I will be stuck in this awful place for the rest of my life with all these sheep and chickens and nothingness." She buried her head in his chest, drawing her arms around his neck, and clung to him, weeping. "It hurts so much. How could he do this?"

Just walk away. This is not a good idea.

He tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "Now, if I read these books and happen to become dashing and mysterious, and Lady Sara naturally falls in love with me without any effort on my part, then I am absolved of any guilt."

She raised her head. The smile that wavered on her

trembling lips as tears still streamed her cheeks was like the sun coming through the rain.

You pathetic fool. You're going to let her break your heart again.

Chapter Two

A chilly wind blew over the flat, crop-lined fields. Henrietta snuggled against Kesseley's side to shield herself from it. He was as big as a mountain and just as strong. He never seemed to mind cold or wind or rain. Instead he walked about, head tilted to the sky with an exhilarated smile while the elements battered his face. He covered her hand in his large, roughened one, his warmth spilling into her body like a tide of relief. Kesseley always made everything well.

Always.

Ugh! Remorse knotted in her belly as the realization sunk in—she was using him again. She didn't mean to. Truly. It had just seemed like such a good idea an hour ago.

And why was he always so willing? In a small way, she wished he had said no, a true, resounding, unequivocal “no” that she couldn't wiggle away from. She might, well, respect him more if he didn't always crumble to her wishes. Hot shame ran through her. She missed her step, stumbling slightly, but Kesseley held

her up, keeping her from falling.

"Are you well?" he asked, his eyes filled with genuine concern.

She shouldn't be doing this. She was a horrid person to abuse his feelings. Poor, loyal Kesseley.

She would tell him she'd changed her mind.

Yes, she would.

Right now.

She opened her mouth, and breath rose from the back of her throat, but no words formed. His eyes searched her face with the same seriousness he reserved for examining worm-infested crops or sick sheep, checking for the smallest detail to cause alarm.

"I'm fine, thank you, just a rock," she murmured. A ring of hazel circled his pupils, blending to gray on the edges. Had they always been that way?

He nodded, trusting her explanation.

You're a horrid person, Henrietta.

They didn't take the nicely paved road. Instead, he tromped with her through the muddy footpaths and drainage ditches running along his fields while Samuel followed behind, sticking his nose under the hem of her gown. Kesseley swept his arms in broad motions over the land, explaining that here he would grow wheat and

there, clover. Henrietta smiled, which encouraged him to expound upon his grain production theories and the mixture he would feed his cattle. This led to the design of the new outbuildings he was going to construct to better compost the animal manure and refuse. He had the same passion for farming that Edward had for poetry. And that she had for Edward.

How could she be so cruel? How could she abuse his affections?

Wait! Why should she feel miserable because she *might* be using Kesseley? What if, by sharpening him up, giving him a little town bronze, he won a beautiful wife to love him like he desired and deserved. He would make an excellent husband and father, so caring and attentive. Thinking in this light, Lady Sara or some yet unknown lady's future happiness depended upon Henrietta. And in the end, Kesseley would thank Henrietta, else he would have never met his perfect wife.

She looked up at Kesseley. He raised a suspicious brow.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked.

"Because you are a wonderful man. Kind and patient and—"

“Gullible.”

“I was going to say intelligent.”

“You can stop now. I said I would read your novel.”

“And Lady Sara?”

“She may love me if it is her inclination.”

“Don’t forget about Schweitzer and Davidson.”

“Now you’re doing it a bit too brown.”

Was she? His jaw clenched, but the edge of his lips trembled, trying to smile. The knot of guilt around her heart eased. She cuddled closer to him. The setting sun shot long rays of light, casting gold and pink shadows on the clouds. Before them, the land gently rolled to the horizon, dotted with white sheep, like a pastoral scene woven in a tapestry. Lovely, but it wasn’t enough.

The sun had set before they came to Henrietta’s home. Kesseley could see the distant towers of Ely Cathedral rising over the gables of Rose House, black against darker hues of dusk. The golden light of candles and fires spilled from the windows into a garden filled with rose shrubs dormant with winter. For as much as she complained about her drafty antique home—forever

asking his opinion of this paint, this pillow, whether to put this strange bauble on the mantel or on the round marble table—he liked it as it was. Kesseley felt comfortable here, for the most enjoyable times of his youth were spent inside Rose House's crooked walls, away from his raging father and the despair engulfing his mother. He never spoke of the horrors inside his own home, wanting to pretend they didn't exist as he and Henrietta sat together in Rose House's dark paneled parlor. They would spread a copy of *Tristram Shandy* across their laps, their legs touching and their small feet dangling off the sofa's edge, both of them covered in biscuit crumbs. After his father's death, his mother insisted everyone, including Henrietta, call him Lord Kesseley, but back then he was still just Tommie to her. It was so natural and easy between them. And in those dark years before his father's passing, everything else in his life had seemed so hard.

"Oh, I forgot to tell Mrs. Potts to set a special table," Henrietta said, banging her hand on her forehead. "Mr. Van Heerlen wanted to celebrate. I hope I have not angered him."

"I thought he had left."

"No, he keeps putting it off and now he and Papa

were granted an appointment at the Royal Observatory. I wouldn't be surprised if I find Papa has invited him to live with us. Though I doubt Mr. Van Heerlen would accept. I would live in Amsterdam or Brussels a thousand times over boring old England."

Kesseley didn't agree with her. He was sure Van Heerlen was quite willing to remain in boring old England. "Is he bothering you?"

"Yes, he is quite annoying, but I can't tell Papa because his success depends on Mr. Van Heerlen's approval."

He grabbed Henrietta's hands. "Ask me to dinner," he ordered.

She gasped. Kesseley assumed it was in response to his chivalry until she said, "Wait! Lower the edges of your mouth a bit more. It's more demonic, like Lord Blackraven. I wish you could see yourself."

"What? Who's Lord Blackraven?"

"Lord Blackraven...the book you're supposed to read...Lady Sara. Oh, never mind." She shook away the thought. "Very well, please come to dinner. Just be delicate. Mr. Van Heerlen could really help my father and that means everything to me."

"I'm delicate. I mean, I can be delicate."

“And don’t talk of birthing bovines like last time.”

Henrietta left the gentlemen downstairs in stiff, awkward conversation. She told them she needed to change. Now fifteen minutes after her maid had left, she still sat at her commode, dreading having to go downstairs and play the charming hostess.

She wore her new gown in honor of her father’s good news. The dress was lower than any in the village, exposing a generous amount of her breasts. This was supposed to be for Edward. For the man she loved. As she’d hemmed it a week ago, she had imagined the skirt’s ivory shimmer cast in candlelight, sweeping over the floors of Edward’s London home as they welcomed their literary guests to some party or such. She would have hung on his arm, saying so casually, “Have you read my husband’s latest volume?” or “Did you not read my husband’s reviews in the newspapers?”

My husband.

Hot tears formed in her eyes. She rubbed her mother’s ruby pendant.

Oh, Mama, just get me through this evening without breaking down.

Downstairs, Henrietta surveyed dinner—a sad meal for a celebration. Boiled lamb floated in a muddy sauce of limp celery. What looked like herrings hid under thick mustard butter. Greasy duck. A soggy head of cauliflower and a bowl of quince pudding. She wished she had remembered to tell Mrs. Potts to prepare something fancy. They must look like flats to the eloquent, continental Mr. Van Heerlen.

Mr. Van Heerlen waved off the footman and drew out Henrietta's chair.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you are accustomed to finer food in your travels," she said, trying to point out that while their table was not so elegant, at least she perceived the difference.

"It is not the food I enjoy, but the company." Mr. Van Heerlen's cheek brushed her ear. His skin felt soft, as if he had just shaved.

He took the seat to Henrietta's left, while Kesseley unceremoniously dumped his large frame in the seat to

her right. Samuel curled up at his feet.

The footmen brought forth the vinegary red wine and poured it into everyone's glasses. How Henrietta wished she could have sent the servant back for a prized Spanish red or such. But they never had anything so impressive, just the wine available at the merchant's in Ely.

"Mr. Watson, may I be so presumptuous as to give a toast on this momentous evening?" Mr. Van Heerlen appealed to her father.

"Please, consider Rose House as your own home," her father replied.

Mr. Van Heerlen stood and held his glass before him. "A-a-astronomy," he began.

"Pardon me, I am a little nervous this evening. Astronomy is the work of envious mortal men, whose eyes are always lifted to the heavens, enchanted by her beauty and mystery. She lures us, seduces us, whispers in our ears that inside her whirling wondrous world is everything we long for, everything we lack. Nothing in this world can hold to the beauty of the stars, no art, poem or music. And we astronomers grow jaded, discontent in our skins, finding this world vulgar and base."

He paused. Henrietta thought he was finished and started to raise her glass, but he cleared his throat and continued. "At least that is how I felt when I received an invitation to Rose House. For Mr. Watson declared a preposterous thing for a relatively unknown astronomer. He had mathematically proven another planet existed behind Uranus. Of course, this had been speculated for years, but always came to nothing. My first thought—I shamefully admit—was to decline the invitation. But something, I dare not say what, told me to accept. A divine intuition, some would say."

Kesseley's chair creaked as he settled deeper into it. He ran the fingers of his free hand under his cravat. He looked at her, his gray eyes appearing black and almost dangerous in the low light. She could see his pulse throb along his neck. Her gaze drifted down his sloppy cravat to his chest. Was it still the skinny flat board of a boy's? From the rise of his coat, she could only imagine that it bulged with hard muscles. Heat crept up her body as if the door to his bedchamber was cracked open and she accidentally saw inside as he dressed. Her mind wandered into this forbidden chamber, where he waited in only his pantaloons. He let her fingers run up the contours of his naked arm,

over his shoulder and down the hard ripples of his chest. Then she rose to her tiptoes to place a light kiss on his lips, his arm reaching around the small of her back, pulling her closer, deepening the kiss like that day by the Ouse when—

What am I doing?

Was I kissing Kesseley in my imagination? And liking it? Stop!

Still, that heavy warmth lingered in her most private place, like the afterglow of an extinguished candle. She wished Mr. Van Heerlen would finish the toast. It was dragging on forever, and she needed to wash away these disturbing feelings with some strong vinegar.

She quickly put Edward in Kesseley's imaginative place. Remembering the feel of his lips, she became lost in her memories. Mr. Van Heerlen's voice drifted in her brain like music from a far room. Kesseley kicked her foot under the table. She jerked to attention just as Mr. Van Heerlen said her name.

"Miss Watson, this lady with hair and eyes as dark as the heavens and skin as luminescent as the sunlit moon, took the pages from her father's hand and explained the heavens to me, as if they were her home, like an ancient goddess. As her fingers slid along the

diagrams, charting the stars, I admit that after a time, I knew not what she said. My heart ached, bereft of its secret she unwittingly stole. The silent beauty of stars.”

Mr. Van Heerlen looked deeply into Henrietta’s eyes. A question. A silent proposal. Henrietta swallowed down her gasp. Hot crimson blotches broke across her face.

“Mr. Van-Van H-Heerlen,” she stuttered. Dear God, she never once conceived that he might have affection for her! Affections she couldn’t possibly return. Yet, her father’s future depended upon him. “Those are beautiful words, but—”

“I don’t understand,” Kesseley said. His face looked comically lopsided with one brow furrowed and the other one raised.

Mr. Van Heerlen cleared his throat. “What do you mean?”

Kesseley pushed his plate up and put his index finger by his glass. “First, you say that no beauty on earth tempts you. Only stars.” He drew an invisible line from his glass to his fork. “Then I get confused, because you claim Miss Watson stole your secret—your love of the stars. Was that a compliment for Miss Watson?”

"I was merely comparing Miss Watson to the beauty of the stars."

"That is what I thought, but the syllogism is not correct. You see, you have made no true comparison. You should say—'I love stars, stars are beautiful, Miss Watson is beautiful,' and by means of the goddess analogy, you could say Miss Watson is a star. Then it would be a logically correct statement that you love Miss Watson. She is everything you lack." Kesseley neatly charted this on the table linen with his index finger.

Henrietta kicked him so hard the table shook. Samuel yelped.

Mr. Van Heerlen appeared unfazed by the transitive declaration of his love. "Thank you for the lesson, good man. Are you a philosopher?"

"No, just a farmer tilling up this base and vulgar world."

Seeing Mr. Van Heerlen's eyes narrow, Henrietta interceded. "Lord Kesseley is a bit of a scientist as well. He had an article in a recent agricultural journal. What was it about, Lord Kesseley?"

"Increasing Turnips Yield by Addition of Ash Constituents," he replied flatly, then nothing more.

Hadn't he said he would be delicate? Well, this moment would be a perfect time to begin.

"And what does that mean?" she said, a little pointy edge to her voice.

Kesseley took a deep breath and began in a monotone, like a child prodded by his parent. "Everyone has assumed that manure with the correct ammonia ratio, when stored, produces enough nitrogen to make soil fertile. However, I found with my own manure that my crop yield actually diminished. So I conducted an experiment with my turnips. I discovered that adding ash constituents from the previous crop to your manure gives you a better yield. For instance, if you have one field you fertilize with just manure and another that you—"

"Fascinating," the famed astronomer said in such a way as to intone the opposite.

"You are in many journals all over the world, are you not, Mr. Van Heerlen?" Henrietta asked, trying her hardest to keep the conversation diverted from her.

"Yes, of course. My comets. I have—"

"Those comets were discovered over a decade ago," Kesseley said dismissively. "Do you not follow the work of our Astronomer Royal, John Pond? I have

read his articles in the Royal Academy's *Philosophical Transactions*. Is it not fascinating, his work with observation using mural circles?"

"Yes, a brilliant man," Mr. Watson agreed, with a duck wing in his mouth.

Mr. Van Heerlen's Flemish accent hardened. "No, I do not work with Mr. Pond. Our studies are quite different. Although a gifted astronomer, he is—in my opinion—too slow to embrace the advances of the Germans. We have debated this point, as gentlemen, of course."

A slow smile crossed Kesseley's face. His chair creaked as he leaned back, widening his stance, his fingers tapping the table. "No doubt having the credit of discovering a new planet will prove your superiority."

She wasn't sure what passed between the two men, but each looked unflinching at the other, lips tight. For a moment, she thought it wouldn't be unthinkable for one to leap over the table and throttle the other.

"Lord Kesseley, did I not tell you that Papa and Mr. Van Heerlen have an appointment at the Royal Observatory in a few weeks?" She grasped at conversational topics, trying to sound light.

"Well, this works out perfectly. Henrietta will be away

in London, and you two may work in silence, undisturbed by the beauty of Henrietta's stars—although I prefer to say the beauty of her face. But, you see, I am far more direct than yourself, Mr. Van Heerlen."

"London?" Mr. Van Heerlen asked her.

She shook her head. "I don't know what—"

"You promised Mother to be her companion for the Season. We've gotten the London house ready for you and engaged a box at the opera. The Season has already started. It's too late to go back on your word." Kesseley stared at her with a dead serious expression on his face, as if to say, *how could you forget?*

She wanted to leap from her seat and embrace him, perhaps even kiss him like she had in her imagination.

London! Edward!

I'm going to get Kesseley the very best bride in all of England—Lady Sara, of course! He will be the handsomest gentleman on St. James! I will pull the full romantic moon down from the heavens for him and throw in Sirius to boot. We star goddesses can do these things!

Chapter Three

Kesseley had finished his morning rounds and couldn't procrastinate any longer. The new drainage ditch had been staked out, and the tenants could begin digging. For once, one of his cows had an easy birth, and the new, wet creature immediately suckled his mama's teat. He should have felt optimism instead of dread as he and Samuel walked back to Wrenthorpe, the morning sun rising over its roof.

But he knew his mother wouldn't take the news of Henrietta well. It had only been after months of tearful pleas from his mother about how he needed to break from Henrietta and find a wife who would love and appreciate him that he had finally consented to give the Season a try. And now he had to confess that Henrietta would be tagging along. As Mama's companion, no less. He braced for the onslaught of maternal tears and guilt as he entered Wrenthorpe through the stable yards. From the bakehouse, the delicious smell of rising bread mingled with scents of hay and horses. The blind girl he had hired from the village was running

her fingers along the laundry line, hanging the newly washed sheets. Samuel chased the cats from his water bucket and dipped his head in, lapping noisy slurps. Kesseley walked into the scullery, stepped out of his boots and put his head under the pump.

“My lord.” A nervous young female servant curtsied and handed him a towel.

“Thank you, Rebecca.” He wiped his face and neck. “Has your father recovered from his chill? Should I send out the physician again?”

“Mama says he is quite well now. Thank you, my lord.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, handing her the soiled towel. He took the servants’ passage to the morning parlor and quietly slipped through the door.

His mother’s parlor was an airy, tranquil room with pale yellow walls and white wainscoting. The gold brocade curtains had been drawn back, letting in the light from the neat boxwood garden just beyond the panes.

Kesseley leaned against the doorframe and observed his mother sitting at her desk, unaware of his presence. Her head was bowed over a book that lay open before her. The sunlight shone on her fair skin

and blond hair that curled about the edges of her lace cap. She bit her bottom lip, made a soft humming sound and turned a page.

Kesseley remained silent, marveling at the serenity that had come over their lives since his father's death.

In this same room twenty years before, he had rushed in, wanting to show off the picture he had drawn of a machine for planting carrots. He had found his mother sobbing, shoved against her desk, as his father stood between her limbs, clawing at the cotton of her new ivory morning gown.

"You're making me wild," his father groaned.

"Leave me alone," she screamed, flailing under his grip. "Go to one of your mistresses."

Terror seized Kesseley's young mind. He didn't know or care what a mistress was or why his father was ripping his wife's gown, all he knew was his mama was being hurt. He charged, his fists balled like little stones, and pounded his father's back.

"Don't hurt my mama! Don't hurt my mama!" he wailed.

The earl pushed his son in the chest with the heel of his palm. Kesseley fell backward and sprawled on the rug. His father came to stand over him, a diamond and

gold ring glinting from his fisted fingers. In his eyes glowed that dangerous, alcohol-induced shine that always scared young Kesseley.

"You leave my mother alone," Kesseley spat, even as he raised his small arm to shield his face.

The earl laughed. "I'm not hurting her," he said in his low, purring voice, the sweet fire of brandy on his breath. "Son, this is what a woman is made to do. You need to know these things."

He strode back to his wife, now huddled on the desk, her arms crossed over her body, quivering and sobbing. He ran his finger down her cheek and across her chin. "I made your mother a lady," he said, as his finger trailed farther down her neck to the delicate amulet on her necklace. "Do you see this diamond, son? And these pretty clothes? I gave them to her. And all I want is one simple thing. But she can't seem to remember her duty as my wife." He gently lifted Lady Kesseley's chin. "Now what do you say to me?"

She shook her head, refusing to answer.

His knuckles turned white as his grip tightened. "What do you say to me?" he growled.

Kesseley rose up. "Leave her alone!"

The earl turned slowly, his brows low, the edge of his

teeth just visible below his tight lips. Kesseley stepped back, petrified.

"I'm sorry," Lady Kesseley cried, grabbing her husband's arm. "Please, I'm sorry."

"I know you are." The earl ripped himself free of her hold. "Thomas, take your ugly picture and get the hell out of here."

Now the pretty room felt like an old battlefield overgrown with grass and wildflowers covering any reminders of bloodshed. For a moment, that feeling of deep, peaceful relief flowed through him like the day they had set his father's coffin in the family vault and heaved the heavy marble slabs back in place.

"What abominable trash," Lady Kesseley cried. She slammed her book shut with a hard thud, regarded the cover for a moment, then pushed the offensive volume off the desk.

Kesseley chuckled. "I gather the lady does not care for the book?"

His mother's head shot up. Sunlight reflected in her pale, wintry eyes. "Tommie, I didn't see you!" A deep blush blossomed over her skin.

"Good lord, what lurid things are you reading?" he teased, bending over to retrieve the book.

Oh no. He recognized the swirling marbled cover. "Don't tell me you are reading *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* too?"

"Good heavens, no! Fanny sent me that. How she could dare—" Lady Kesseley halted, and then brushed the curls off her forehead. "I mean, how dare she send me such embarrassing drivel."

"I concur. I'm only on page ninety-seven and I keep hoping some right-minded gentleman character will challenge Blackraven to a duel and end my literary misery."

His mother let out a little gurgling laugh. "I never knew you liked sensational claptrap."

"I don't. Henrietta recommended it. Actually *recommend* is putting it lightly. She ordered me to read it."

The amusement vanished from his mother's face. "I thought you were avoiding that girl. You know how I feel about her."

Kesseley sighed and resigned himself to the inevitable battle. He returned the abused volume to the desk. "You judge her too harshly."

"I do not. I can't forgive Henrietta for how she treated you. She's been spoiled since her poor mother died

and her father does nothing to curb her selfish and wild behavior. Every time I saw her in the village, I tried to give her some motherly guidance but she paid me no heed. As if I didn't matter."

He didn't miss the slight quiver in her voice. His father had told her over and over that she was worthless.

"Now, that's not true," he said, laying his hand over her smaller one. "Henrietta thinks the world of you. Everyone does."

He gave her fingers a small squeeze and then let go.

"I have a little problem. Can you help me?" he asked, taking a seat in the ladder-back chair near her desk. He leaned back, lifting the front feet from the floor.

"Yes, of course." A bright smile curled her lips. He knew she loved feeling needed.

"A scholar—a bachelor scholar—is visiting Henrietta's father and pushing his unwanted affections on her."

"I fail to see how this is your problem. She has a father, albeit a rather useless one. Don't you dare help her. She's hurt you enough. If this scholar is so

bothersome, she should have that cousin of hers take care of him. She's been chasing him hard enough these past months."

Kesseley fingered a loose green thread on his cuff. "The thing is, Edward was caught trying to run away with a Lady Sara. Henrietta is devastated."

"No!" his mother gasped. "The Duke of Houghton's daughter?"

"I believe so."

She paused for a moment, running her thumb along the edge of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*. "Well, I truly feel sorry for Henrietta," she began, "but please don't think this is a chance for you to win her affections."

Kesseley's focus shifted from his mother to a figurine of a shepherdess set by the inkwell. "I don't have those feelings for her anymore."

"Yes, you do. You are too much like me when you care for someone."

"And how is that?"

She rose and walked to the window. "Weak," she whispered. Beyond the glass, Samuel had plopped down on the cool stones under the sundial.

"I asked her to be your companion in London."

"What!" His mother spun around.

"I thought I could help her."

Her eyes widened with horror and then narrowed. "Help her? This was that sly minx's idea. This scholar isn't bothering her. She's just trying to get to her cousin in London. Don't you see that she is using you?"

"No. This was all my doing. She had nothing to do with it."

Lady Kesseley jutted her chin. "I don't want a companion. Fanny and the princess Wilhelmina are coming in from Brighton to help us, so I have no use for Henrietta."

"But she is too excited now, going on about what she's going to wear to plays and operas and all those senseless things she cares about."

"I don't care if she sewed an entire wardrobe complete with a court dress of gold thread, she is not going."

"This man is pressing his intentions—"

"She certainly had no difficulty telling you her feelings."

Kesseley shot up and strode to the mantel, but even there he couldn't escape his mother. An oval portrait of her, painted before her marriage, hung over his head.

She wore a simple white gown gathered along the bodice, her blond curls pooling about her shoulders. The passing years had done little damage to her beauty but her eyes had changed. In the portrait they were gentle, untouched by ugliness of his father.

“I want her to go,” he said in a quiet voice. He was the earl, after all.

Lady Kesseley returned to her desk and pressed her palms against her forehead. “Very well,” she said. “Don’t you understand? You’re such a wonderful man. I want you to have everything that I didn’t—someone to love you, respect you, cherish you. Henrietta isn’t that lady. Perhaps I once thought that you and she—” she paused, then shook her head. “She will ruin everything.”

Chapter Four

In the cold darkness of the morning before departure, Henrietta kneeled before her opened trunk in the parlor. She wrapped herself in a blanket, and with a candle on the floor, checked her belongings, making sure the servants had packed the box of gentlemen's fashion clippings and articles on gentlemen's etiquette that she had collected from old copies of *Town and Country*, as well as a list she had made of London hatmakers and bootmakers and such. Mrs. Potts staggered in and slammed a basket down on the round marble table. She put her hand on her hip and poked her head out like a turtle, waiting for Henrietta to say something, a shot in their ongoing domestic war.

"Good morning, Mrs. Potts! I'm going to London. Shall I bring you some nice fabric from the Grafton House, on New Bond Street? That's where all the fashionable stores are."

"I won't be needin' any fancy-dancy fabric from London. It ain't going t' make this face any prettier."

"Oh well, I shall buy you a scrub brush. How

pleasant. Did you make those heavenly creampuffs from Monsieur Ude's cookbook? I think the additional egg yolks will make a nice light, flaky crust around the cream."

"I made the creampuffs I've been makin' for thirty years. If the Lady Kesseley didn't like them, she'd had plenty of time to complain before now. Good morning." Mrs. Potts left the room, cursing under her breath.

Henrietta opened the linen and lifted out a flat, browned creampuff. She snapped it open like a hard biscuit to see clotted-over whipped cream turning to butter.

"You look beautiful this morning, Miss Watson, as you always do," a male voice echoed in the room.

Henrietta shoved the puff into her mouth and turned to see Mr. Van Heerlen fully turned out in tight doeskins, Hessian boots and a light blue jacket with large brass buttons that accented his bright eyes and fair features. He didn't approach her or return a bow, but instead circled the edge of the room, falling in and out of the shadows, his gaze locked on her face.

"You should know your father is a brilliant, brilliant man," he said. "I had no idea the true genius of his mind—his numbers—until I came here. He is a

mastermind of math and physics.”

“Your words mean so much to me, for I’ve always believed in him. And, well, the societies have been so harsh. It breaks my heart to see him so dejected.”

He put a hand on her cheek. A column of tightness rose from Henrietta’s lungs to her throat. She resisted the urge to back away.

“Your fierce love and loyalty to your father is commendable. Would I be presumptuous to desire the same love and loyalty for myself?” He took her hand and pressed it to his heart. “Miss Watson, I love you. I always viewed marriage as a necessity, not a want. For how could one mere woman keep me enchanted, for quickly I would tire of immature opinions and insipid conversation? But I feel that I can never have enough of your company, your presence. You perform the most difficult mathematical calculation while asking me if the paint color suits the study. You are the most bewitching lady I have ever met.”

His blue eyes, once cold and reserved, were filled with a terrifying mixture of fear, hope and vulnerability. She felt a rush of compassion for the astronomer. She wished she could return his affections, that she wouldn’t have to break a heart like hers had been

broken. How perfect the match would be for her father's career.

Yet, she just couldn't.

She reached deep for her courage, hoping that she wasn't destroying her father's dreams, that she shouldn't feel ashamed or guilt-ridden for the words she was about to say. "I—"

He grabbed her shoulders, letting her blanket fall to the floor, then drew her to him and pressed his lips on hers. They were warm, full and not entirely unpleasant. He shivered and tightened his hold on her, squeezing her against his chest. He didn't have Edward's musky scent—he was sweeter—and she didn't tingle at his touch. There was just a feeling of detached observation, a pleasing curiosity.

He opened her mouth with the pressure of his lips, brushing his warm tongue against hers. She pushed him away.

"I'm sorry," he said thickly.

Out in the hall came the sound of the rusty creak of the old great door being opened. Kesseley's heavy steps echoed through the corridor.

Mr. Van Heerlen squeezed her fingers. "Promise you'll come back, dearest Henrietta. That you will

consider all that I have said.”

The door to the parlor opened.

“Say it!”

“I...”

“Please.”

“I—I prom—”

“Have I interrupted something?” Kesseley inquired, his gaze latched on to Henrietta’s hot face.

Oh Lud, what had she done now?

As the rising sunlight cracked over the horizon and Kesseley’s footmen hoisted Henrietta’s trunk into the carriage. She stood quiet, holding her arms about herself.

Usually Kesseley played the funny jester to lighten her mood, but he was tired and in poor humor. He hated traveling any distance longer than two hours and had been up all night seeing to the small details at Wrenthorpe, writing detailed instructions for ridding his barley of parasites should an infestation occur during his absence, as well as diagramming the dimensions of the drainage ditch he required for the clover. He had concluded that the estate would crumble to the ground

in his absence. Additionally, he'd received a stack of correspondences from various politicians who, upon learning he was coming to London, were busy setting up appointments to meet him. He liked the proxy vote—it left little room for compromise—and he detested compromising when it meant bad agricultural reform. On top of it all, his mother carried on like some doomsday prophet. He just wanted to stay home.

He stepped into the carriage. Samuel was sprawled out beside his mother, who sat asleep with her head cradled on the side of the carriage.

Kesseley shook Samuel. "Down, big boy."

He picked the hound up and put him on the floor. Then he swept the dog fur off the seat and offered Henrietta his hand. She reached up and latched on with her small fingers. He lifted her up, bringing her head on level with his, the moist vapor of her breath warming his cheek. Her lips were rosier than usual, slightly puffy. White anger flashed through him.

"Did Van Heerlen kiss you?"

She brushed past him to take her seat.

"It was nothing," she murmured.

He turned on his heel, poking his head out the carriage door, a week of frustration squeezing into a

hard ball of anger. Maybe if he could just land Van Heerlen a facer, he would feel much better.

Henrietta grabbed his taut arm, trying to pull him back inside. "Please, let's just go. He is watching from the window."

Kesseley certainly hoped so as he rammed his fist into his palm.

"Let me guess." He adopted Van Heerlen's accent. "Miss Watson, I have fallen in love with you, only you can ease my suffering, and by the way, if you want me to sponsor your father, you'll consent to be my wife."

Henrietta looked at her hands, bound tightly in her lap. "I didn't give him an answer."

"Would you like me to?" he said. Because nothing would give Kesseley greater pleasure at that very moment than knocking the daylights out of Van Heerlen.

"Let us forget it for the duration of London."

"You're actually considering him?"

"Thomas, do sit down. I'm sure Henrietta could adequately break his heart if she chose to," Lady Kesseley said languidly, waking from a light doze. She stretched her arms before her and yawned. "Good morning, Henrietta. You look none the worse for being

mauled.”

Henrietta launched into a stiff, rehearsed speech. “Lady Kesseley. I am so honored that you have allowed me to be your companion. I shall strive not to disappoint you. Anything you require for your comfort, I shall acquire. I can read, play cards, help you pick out fabric and—and—”

Henrietta faltered under his mother’s cold gaze. Kesseley felt his belly clench. His mother was doing her best to make this difficult. He just wanted to call the whole thing off. He wouldn’t ever get married and his cousin in Winchester would make a fine Earl of Kesseley.

“I—I’ve brought some creampuffs for the journey.” Henrietta offered them up, her eyes nervously downcast like a terrified villager offering a sacrifice to an angry volcano god.

He looked at the unappetizing brown balls and declined. His insides were too knotted to consider eating.

Samuel perked up and sniffed the air, then climbed into Henrietta’s lap, swallowing a puff in a single loud gulp. Then he proceeded to curl up there as if he were a small fluffy dog and not a five-stone hound.

Chapter Five

"We're here!" Henrietta cried.

Well, almost.

After a long day's journey and a crowded inn with a room beside the privy door, she could see London waiting just beyond the tollbooth—a horizon of slanting slate roofs holding thousands of chimney pots, each streaming little black ribbons of coal into the heavy gray sky. Yet they were stuck with a dozen other carriages, unmoving, as a flock of sheep passed the road. Kesseley stepped out of the carriage, and for a one horrified minute, she thought he was going to inspect the sheep, but he shooed them along and spoke to the grooms. He returned to his seat, a mischievous smile on his lips.

"Care for a small tour of London?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" Henrietta slid to the edge of her seat and squeezed his hands. "Please."

The carriage lurched forward into the mass of other vehicles bearing down upon one another, jostling for position in the dark, narrow streets. Buildings towered

on either side, thin stately things, no more than the width of their carriage and painted in soot.

The inhabitants of London concealed themselves in dark coats and capes. Their hard, pale faces seemed closed, like boarded-up windows, and their eyes distant. They moved in great waves through streets, stepping in front of carriages and horses, unconcerned for their own welfare. Henrietta's nose stung with the sour scent of their perspiration mixed with the stench of animal dung.

She looked at Kesseley questioningly. This wasn't the London she had read about. He just sat back, expressionless. "It gets better," he said.

The carriage jerked to a stop. Their groomsman shouted in some menacing, unintelligible language. A heated discussion ensued. Samuel stuck his nose in the air as if he could smell the altercation, and starting emitting deep howls. The carriage turned sharply, and the driver of a wagon of cabbages waved his hands in threatening gestures, letting out a loud stream of foreign profanity.

"Did he speak cant? Real cant?" Henrietta asked. Kesseley chuckled at her.

"What do you think he said?"

“Something about your mother isn’t married to your father.”

“Stop encouraging her, Tommie,” his mother said.

“I didn’t know you could speak cant, Kesseley?” Suddenly this seemed more romantic than French or Italian or any of those Romance languages.

“Well, I did go to Cambridge.”

The lane twisted through intersecting streets, carriage wheels scraping together, horses biting each other, everyone fighting it out to advance.

Henrietta was watching one exchange between a lady in a loose garish gown and a thick bearded man carrying a barrel on his shoulder, when Kesseley touched her knee. A spark of warmth traveled up her body.

“Look,” he said, nodding out the window.

On the opposite side of the street was a boxlike white building, dominated by four rising columns that jutted out onto the sidewalk.

“Haymarket! Kesseley! There’s Haymarket Theatre!”

“Oh, dear God,” Lady Kesseley muttered.

Henrietta refrained from shamelessly pasting her face to the window like Samuel. There was more

shouting, and the carriage made a sudden turn, sliding Henrietta into Lady Kesseley. Henrietta shot back over to her side.

They had left the busy street and entered an open, stately square with a water fountain protected by a black iron gate. Here the houses gleamed a luminous white, seemingly immune to the filth covering the rest of the city. Imposing Greek columns rose up five or six stories to the roofs, so high they were almost lost in the dense clouds. Through the tall windows, Henrietta could see the swag of rich brocade curtains and the gleam of the polished mahogany. Carriages pulled up at the doors and let off ladies who could have stepped from the pages of *La Belle Assemblée*.

They drove around the fountain and then turned into a dark, narrow lane. Kesseley pointed to a flat, unremarkable building. "You should know this place."

Henrietta shook her head.

"It's Almack's." He laughed. "I thought all ladies knew Almack's."

This squat building was heaven? She had expected angels, pearly gates and St. Peter standing at the door with a guest list. It looked rather pedestrian.

The narrow street led to a larger thoroughfare

bordered with tall stone buildings of understated elegance. On the sidewalks, the most fashionable men that Henrietta had ever seen clicked their canes on the pavers, sporting cravats so elaborate they made Henrietta think of fancy rooster tails.

“St. James Palace,” her tour guide said, but Henrietta only vaguely heard. For coming out of a wine merchant’s door was a young man with flowing mahogany locks and a pale blue coat.

Edward!

Henrietta’s hand touched the window glass. She wanted to scream his name. The man looked up as if he heard her silent call. A long, narrow nose ran like a line down his face, ending at a small bump of a chin. It wasn’t Edward at all. Henrietta slumped back in her seat, her heart still racing.

The carriage weaved through two enormous squares of connected white-columned homes, one looking just like the next, and then a large expanse of green opened before them, as if London came to an abrupt end.

“Hyde Park,” Kesseley said.

The Hyde Park! Where the most fashionable people in the world paraded! Henrietta strained in her seat,

looking between the trees to see the riders along the famed Rotten Row. Could one of them be Edward?

The carriage rode along the edge of the park, the boughs of oak trees arching over them. On their left she saw grand white houses that resembled decorated Queen cakes with curving bay windows and terraces.

Oh Lud, was one of these Kesseley's?

But the carriage took a swift turn away from the park and into a grid of row houses, coming to a stop before a plain brown brick dwelling with a wrought-iron gate.

Henrietta sat still as Kesseley and his mother gathered their persons. Surely this couldn't be their London home?

"We're here," he said.

Think of something nice! "It looks so—comfortable."
"

"A sensible house," he said after they had exited the carriage and stood on the pavement, gazing up at the drab building.

"Those were your father's words the day he bought it," Lady Kesseley said quietly. "Of course, he had to fleece a man at some gaming hell in Soho to get the funds."

The door opened and out stepped a robust man in

neat gray livery and a powdered wig curled in tidy tight rows. He had a fleshy sagging face, serious eyes and tight lips.

“Boxly, thank heavens you were free. The agency said you might not be available this year,” Lady Kesseley said.

He bowed. “When the master comes to town, I am never busy.”

Master. Henrietta never thought of Kesseley that way. Of course she heard him called it numerous times by the servants at Wrenthorpe, but that was in the country. The way the word resounded from this man’s deep, respectful voice sounded so reverent as if Kesseley were, well, an earl. Yet in her mind’s eye he remained the straggly boy always running about the village, his shirts stained with whatever berries he had picked along the roads, various bugs trapped in his pockets.

She followed Kesseley, his mother and Samuel inside. Beyond the entrance, the house dramatically improved. The interior exemplified that clean elegance she could never achieve at Rose House. Cool French blue walls trimmed with a white frieze of delicate plastered vines. A staircase striped with slim white

balusters curved down from a stack of small balconies.

"I have a wretched headache," Lady Kesseley said, pressing her fingers into her temples. "Please take care of everything, Tommie." She lifted her skirt and hastened up the stairs to the next floor and then disappeared down the corridor.

Henrietta released a deep, mind-clearing sigh. Lady Kesseley's presence made her so anxious. She felt as if she had been holding her breath since she left the village.

"Boxly, have the carriage taken around and the trunks removed," Kesseley said. "Make sure Miss Watson's belongings are brought to the lavender chamber."

"Very good, my lord."

Several footmen now swarmed the carriage and the butler hurried down the steps to direct them. Kesseley reached over and pushed the door shut, then turned and gazed at Henrietta.

"Do you approve?" he whispered.

"Oh yes." She smiled, taking his hands into hers. Then, without thinking, she rose onto her tiptoes and kissed the edge of his jaw. The rasp of male skin tingled her lips.

She quickly stepped back, careful to keep her eyes from his face. "Thank you," she said, the words almost lost in her breath. She thought perhaps he hadn't heard, until he brushed her cheek with his fingers, then ran his thumb under her chin and lifted her face.

"My pleasure," he replied. "Shall I show you to your chamber?" Something hot and deep pulsed in her most private place, as if he had suggested not only showing her the room, but her bed—and what ~~was~~ that bulge in his pantaloons?

Oh heavens. This was temporary, she told herself, just excitement from the trip. She loved Edward. She wasn't supposed to have these feelings for other gentlemen, especially Kesseley. He was like her brother. It was all wrong and quite disturbing.

He studied her face, that twinkle in his eyes now burning as bright as Sirius. Nor could she allow him to have feelings for her, she reminded herself. For a second, she had lost sight of her mission. Get Edward back and find a perfect, wonderful, loving wife for Kesseley. She stepped away, sliding her chin from his fingers. But when he held out his arm, she had no choice but to take it. She kept herself rigid, making sure no additional parts of their bodies touched, as he

led her up the stairs to the third floor.

He opened a squat white door at the back of the landing, and sweet lavender-scented air wafted into the hallway.

“After you.” He bowed.

She and Samuel walked into a snug room, like a little hideaway. Immediately the hound rolled on his back and squirmed about on the cream-colored carpet. Lavender paper with a subtle leaf pattern covered the walls. A commode draped in white muslin had been set with an oval mirror, washbowl and pitcher. Centered on the back wall was a gray marble fireplace flanked on either side by two square windows curtained in soft white and lavender floral chintz and before the fireplace stood a petite oak writing desk and cushioned chair.

The room continued behind the stairs where the ceiling slanted, forming an alcove over a tiny bed that was hidden behind cotton drapes embroidered with tiny flowers. On a petite round side table, fresh lavender sprigs rose from an etched crystal vase.

“Where did they get lavender so early in the year?”

“It’s a secret. I can’t tell.” He winked.

“Thank you, Kesseley. I always wanted to come to

London, and this..." she gestured about her room, "...is perfect."

He didn't reply, just gazed at her, a softness in his deep gray eyes. Oh no.

"Well, I—I guess I should freshen up or umm ...something," she stammered, suddenly painfully nervous.

He turned and pulled the servants' bell. "Ring if you need anything, and I'm next door, so you can always bang on the wall."

"You're next door!" Henrietta gasped. *That shouldn't be proper.* He laughed, clearly amused by her discomfort.

"Would you like a bath brought up?"

Bath! She couldn't be naked with him just a wall away! What if a servant accidentally left the door open and he walked by and saw her? Yet her blood quickened at the thought of him studying her naked breasts, her belly, her thighs, the same way he now gazed at her face.

"Umm, no thank you. I'll j-just use the washstand."

A young woman in a crisp starched dress appeared at the threshold.

"Please bring up some fresh water for Miss

Watson," he said.

"As you please, my lord." The servant curtsied.

"Come, Samuel." Kesseley clasped the doorknob and waited for his hound to amble out of the room, then shut the door.

"And send up the bath for me," she heard him call after the servant.

Oh worse! The image of naked Kesseley with water running down his wet sinewy arms flashed in her head.

"What is happening?" she squeaked.

She pounded her head with her palms, trying to clear her head. *No luck.*

Think of something else. Anything.

She hurried to the opposite wall and peered out the window down onto the little bricked courtyard. Stone walls ran down a small alley, partitioning courtyard gardens and mews. Below, a man lifted her trunk from the parked carriage, while another servant unhitched the horses and took them aside to be brushed.

She moved to the writing desk and lifted the top, finding a neat stack of stationery and a book. Volume I of *The Secret Suitor* by Mrs. Alexander Fairfax. This was her third novel and not one of her best, but still very

good. Strange it should be here. She never imagined Lady Kesseley would approve of Mrs. Fairfax, much less have her novels available to guests. She set the book aside for later and pulled out a piece of stationery, sat down, crossed her legs very tightly together and began composing a letter to her father.

Next door she heard a muted heavy thud, like an iron tub being dropped on the floor, then the gurgle of water and footfalls. She tried not to envision Kesseley removing his clothes, letting them fall to the floor, revealing his smooth hard chest, the taut lines of his thighs—his sex dangling between his legs like Michelangelo's *David*. But the image got stuck in her head, like a bee trapped in the house, buzzing on the windowsill.

Her knuckles turned white as she tightened her grip on her pen, forcing herself to concentrate on each word she wrote.

We have arrived in London. It was a long—

There was a quiet rap at her door. She jumped, causing ink to splatter all over her letter.

"Yes?"

The servant had returned with a fresh pitcher of water. Behind her, the male servant from the courtyard

had Henrietta's trunk hoisted on his back. He dumped the trunk on the floor, then staggered out, red-faced, taking deep heaving breaths. After the maid had poured water into Henrietta's washbowl, she knelt beside the trunk and began removing Henrietta's belongings.

Across the wall, she heard the *thlunk* of Kesseley stepping into water. He let out a deep "Ahhhh." In her mind flashed an image of his strong chest sinking into the water.

Henrietta thanked the servant and snatched her lap desk from her trunk, stuffed her letter and *The Secret Suitor* inside it, then hurried downstairs. Let the servant put her clothes and belongings where she may. Henrietta could straighten it out later. She just had to get away from the sounds of Kesseley bathing.

Back on the first floor, she cautiously opened the door to a sunshine-yellow parlor with a magnificent vaulted ceiling. An expansive unlit chandelier hung down. The crystals caught the light streaming from long arched windows, breaking up the colors and casting small rainbows about the room.

She took a dainty rosewood chair by the windows and drew her little scuffed desktop onto her lap.

She had to get a wife for Kesseley, if just to get rid of these strange feelings. She loved Edward, after all, the poet who composed love sonnets. Not Kesseley, whose idea of fine art was commissioning portraits of his favorite dogs.

And Edward had a London house, as well, she reminded herself. He might be there this very moment.

With Lady Sara.

Ugh. Henrietta opened her desk and set to work on her project to transform Kesseley.

Kesseley stood, bathed and shaven, in fresh pantaloons and shirt, gazing out the window onto Curzon Street. He could not see a single tree, just stone, iron, cobble and a maid twirling a mop outside her employer's door. The air was acrid, choked with coal, sticking deep in his throat.

He turned and studied his father's old chamber, crammed with opulence. Red carpets, glossy mahogany furniture, art hanging on every available space of wall. All this, Kesseley thought, while he drove his tenants to poverty and scoured his soil. It had taken

Kesseley eight years to put to rights the rundown estate he'd inherited. Just now he could walk through Wrenthorpe at ease, not having some awful memory sneak up on him. Yet here, his father was all about him, thick in the air.

He would have called the carriage to take him back to Norfolk if it weren't for Henrietta. She adored London. He wanted to believe the lies he'd told his mother, that he no longer held any romantic feelings for Henrietta, that he was merely helping her escape an unwanted suitor. But each touch or small smile electrified his body.

She had to feel same attraction, he was sure of it. What else could explain the shiver he had felt run through her body when she kissed him? The nervous flutter when he mentioned his room was next door?

He turned and stared at their adjoining wall. A small hope began stirring in his heart once more.

Kesseley's valet, Baggot, came in holding a forest-green coat in his one arm. Baggot had been Kesseley's most reliable groomsman until an accident hitching a carriage severed his arm. "I noticed all the gentlemen fellers wearing yellor here, so I chose this nice dandylike yellor coat. Then you'll look as fine as

them all," he assured Kesseley.

Kesseley sucked in a breath, bracing himself to make another vain attempt. "That coat is green."

Baggot scrunched his face, his bottom lip hanging loose in confusion. "That coat is as yellor as the day I was born. Ain't I the valet?"

Kesseley sighed. It was useless. There were only so many times he could explain John Dalton's theory of color perception deficiencies to Baggot. Perhaps it was best to let the valet remain in his blissfully ignorant yellow world.

"Yes, you are the valet. Please help me with the *yellow* jacket." Kesseley poked his arms into the sleeves and Baggot tugged with his one arm until most of the wrinkles were removed.

Kesseley came down to the parlor. The tension between the two women hit him like a fist. His mother was busy at her bureau desk, addressing letters. Henrietta sat by the front windows, writing on her lap desk.

She raised her head and smiled at him. However, it was his mother who spoke. "I don't know why I bothered writing instructions to the journals. They all posted our arrival a week early. Look at all these

invitations. Was everyone waiting with their pens like the start line at Newmarket?"

Before her lay two piles of letters, one considerably higher than the other. He reached for the top letter of larger pile. "That's an invitation to an exceptional ball tomorrow night at Lady Huntly's," his mother said. "Her niece is making her debut this year. She has a 10,000 pound dowry and an easy, quiet temperament. It is said she sings and arranges flowers well. The following night, we shall go to Lord and Lady Dougherty's ball. This is their daughter's second Season, but I understand she expected an offer from Mr. Yarrow before his tragic hunting accident, so we can't hold that last Season against her. That leaves Wednesday night open, perhaps for Almack's or the opera."

"Almack's!" Henrietta exclaimed from across the room.

"Lord save us," his mother muttered.

Couldn't she be nicer to Henrietta?

He pulled up a chair next to Henrietta. On the top of her lap desk rested a sketch. Before looking carefully, he said, "How nice," trying to compensate for his mother's simmering hostility.

Henrietta cut her gaze to his mother, and then held out the drawing. Kesseley swallowed. On the page was a flat rendition of the street outside that would make a draftsman shudder. On the sidewalk, she had drawn two finely detailed dandies like scientific dissections, lines pointing to their jackets, pants, boots, hats, with detailed descriptions of color, length and cut. She had even written the name of the cravats. Kesseley stared feeling his heart sink. For a few hours, he'd thought Henrietta had forgotten about her little charade. But he was wrong.

"You can take that to Schweitzer and Davidson," she assured him.

"Thank you," Kesseley responded, setting the drawing on the side table.

She opened her lap desk and drew out a tin box and a book that was covered in white cloth and embroidered with ivy leaves. "This is for you," she said. "It's the diary I made for you and some other things that I thought might help you."

He opened the box and found a stack of clippings. He picked up the top one and held it to the light. It was

an illustration of a fop in a blue coat with ridiculously padded shoulders. His father would have worn such an atrocity.

“I think a blue-gray coat like the one in the picture would match your eyes nicely,” she said.

Kesseley yanked at his cravat. “I have to get out of here!”

His mother’s head shot up.

“I’m sorry, what did I say?” Henrietta asked, alarmed.

“I mean, I would like to go to the park and have a nice stroll,” he said, trying to smooth over his outburst. “Let’s all go to the park.”

Chapter Six

Henrietta observed a bank of dense, gray clouds building to the west. The air was growing sticky. By evening it would rain. But for now, she and the throng of people passing through the iron gate at Hyde Corner were optimistic the sky would hold if just for one fashionable hour.

She had never seen so many smart people in one place, except in the pages of magazines, and they weren't real. Promenade and walking dresses in sheer muslin, flounced with dainty lace and lined with rich sarsenet. Imagine actually owning gowns exclusively for walking in the park, Henrietta thought, as she looked down at the white muslin gown she had worn both to the parson's for dinner and church. How fine the expensive fabric had seemed when she bought it in Ely. She had run her fingers over the thin, almost translucent muslin, imagining the gown she would create, thinking how fashionable she would be. Yet here it seemed so commonplace. Forgettable. She was just an ordinary bluebell in a large, exotic flower

garden.

Even the men were beautiful. Shining Hessians, tight doeskins, cravats in all sorts of elaborate knots, and carefree curls that seemed to tumble into just the right spot on their forehead. They strolled in smooth motions, their eyes half shut as if bored by the scene.

Kesseley seemed so out of place, a walking, unmatched mass of wrinkled fabric and wild hair. Like a tall seedling weed rising above the flowers, begging for the gardener's sickle.

Three rather goggled-eyed and homely young misses burst into giggles upon passing him. Henrietta reeled around, a primitive, protective instinct burning in her breast. One clever girl was discreetly pointing to a grass stain stretching across Kesseley's thigh while her friends laughed behind their hands.

Some inner feline sharpened its claws. She restrained herself from pulling every little silk bow and bead from the ladies' fine pelisses.

But another sight stole the girls' attention, causing them to release a collective gasp. A handsome buck cantered along the fence separating the riders from walkers.

Henrietta's heart squeezed shut. Everything

vanished from her thoughts—the goggle-eyed girls, Kesseley and his mother—everything but the graceful rider.

Edward.

His beautiful face shined out from all the other faces. Even from a few feet away, she could see the sparkling glint in his eyes. He tilted his face to the sun, letting the wind tousle the curls peeping below his curled hat.

Did he not see her? Could he not feel her? She stepped forward to follow Edward's progress and inadvertently brushed against Kesseley.

"Pardon," she murmured.

He looked down and smiled, clearly innocent of Edward's presence.

Up ahead, Edward had caught up to a diminutive chestnut horse holding an elegant lady clad in cornflower blue. Henrietta could not see the rider's face, only the ridiculous daisies poking out of her bonnet. He tipped his hat to the lady, that beautiful, almost crooked grin curling his lips.

Henrietta closed her eyes and bit down on the soft skin of her lower lip, hoping the pain would keep the tears away. That smile belonged to her. He was hers.

When she opened her eyes again, two big white horses' mouths were shoved in her face, lips open, displaying square yellow teeth. Henrietta jumped back.

The matching bays drew a curricule containing two of the most exotic women Henrietta had ever seen. She could only stare.

They had the contradictory appearance of being at one time older and younger than they were. Their rosy cheeks and lips belied a hint of wrinkles about the corners of their eyes.

A dark brunette held the reins in her slender fingers. Large glossy curls framed her fine-boned face. The lady's almond eyes were a brilliant copper.

The other possessed the blondest hair Henrietta had ever seen, like pure white silken threads. She made little kisses with her voluptuous lips. "Eleanora, *ma chère amie est ici* and with *petit* Tommie." She spoke her broken French and English with a thick Germanic accent.

The darker lady waved her long, gloved hand, clanging the jeweled bracelets on her wrists. "Hello, darlings! We have been such good girls, scouring

London looking for brides.” She had a low, breathy voice.

“We make a list for you.” The blonde shoved her hand in her down bodice, patting about her expansive bosom. “Oh no, where did I put it?” She checked the other breast. “Voila!” She pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper and leaned over the carriage’s edge, presenting it to Lady Kesseley.

Kesseley laughed. It struck Henrietta how at ease he seemed with these fashionable ladies whose bombastic beauty made her feel like a homely country lump. He caught her studying him.

“Your Highness and Lady Winslow, may I present my mother’s companion, Henrietta Watson.”

“A princess!” Henrietta gasped.

“Oui, the queen is ma chère cousine.”

Kesseley knew stunning princesses! Why hadn’t he told her? She thought she knew everything about him, yet here, he was a stranger to her. With Kesseley talking to royalty and her love chasing dainty daisy bonnets about the park, her world was rolling out of its tidy little orbit.

“Curtsey,” Kesseley whispered under his breath.

Oh Lud, in her heartbreak and confusion she had

forgotten to curtsy! She made a quick bob, her body burning with embarrassment. Kesseley chuckled at her gauche.

The copper-eyed lady flicked her wrist as if she were already bored with Henrietta. "Tommie, I'm dreadfully sorry but it's a motley crew of young ladies this year, quite frightful. Freckles and crooked teeth. All dreadfully rich and connected, of course. The only one with any beauty is Lady Sara, and she is chasing this splendidly handsome poet."

They knew Edward!

"Monsieur Watson is très handsome." The princess's impressive bosom rose in admiration.

"When I saw him, I thought he was poetry himself and ran out for his book," Lady Winslow said. She coiled a shiny lock around her finger, then let it go. "Horrid stuff, gave me a pounding headache. The physician advised I throw it out because of my particular sensitivities to bad art, else just looking at it might send me into boughs again."

Lady Kesseley glanced at Henrietta, a tiny smirk hiking the side of her lips.

"Ellie," the princess said in a sing-song voice. *"Un homme bel t'attend."* He's come to London just to see

you.”

Lady Kesseley took a sharp intake of breath. Lady Winslow rammed her elbow into her blonde friend’s ribs.

“Ouch!”

“A handsome man waits for Mama?” Kesseley lifted a questioning brow at his mother. “Why have I not heard about this suitor? Is he a secret?” he said in mock severity, as he smiled. Lady Kesseley didn’t see any humor. “There isn’t a man waiting for me. The princess is mistaken.”

Her Highness blinked, confusion creasing her forehead. “Pardon. I thought—”

Lady Winslow cleared her throat and touched her blonde friend’s arm. “Oh well, we shall ask around the park for brides,” she said brightly. “Perhaps there is an heiress hiding about.” She kissed her hand and blew it to Lady Kesseley as the carriage jolted forward. “*Au revoir*, my dear, dear darling.”

Kesseley turned to his mother. “Is a man bothering you?” His voice was thick with that savage male protectiveness.

“No.”

“Tell me his name.”

“For God sakes. I’m not like Henrietta. I can take care of myself.” Lady Kesseley darted across the equestrian traffic, causing several horsemen to quickly rein their horses. Then she disappeared into a small path cutting into the heart of the park.

Henrietta’s gaze shot to Kesseley’s face. An unvoiced curse formed on his lips, and he headed off after his mother, apologizing to the inconvenienced riders. Henrietta hurried to catch up.

They found her standing alone beside the Serpentine, looking at her reflection on the water’s surface. The branches of a willow drooped down around her like a leafy picture frame. She made such a lovely, elegant vision that a painter—set up with his easels and paints on the bank a few feet away—stopped in mid-brush stroke to stare.

Kesseley drew his mother to him. “Who is this man? Do I need to kill him?” he asked gently.

“He is no one.” She laughed, a brittle sound, and pulled herself free. “Let’s keep walking.”

Henrietta paused to let them go ahead. She needed space to think about Edward. She looked deep into the water, past her reflection, to the pale fish darting below. A raindrop splashed the water, then another,

breaking everything up.

That was Lady Sara in that daisy bonnet. It had to be. At this very moment, she would be near him, trying to find shelter from the coming rain, feeling the giddy excitement of having him close, their hands touching. Did he kiss Lady Sara too? Did he look at her like she was the most precious thing in the world and whisper sonnets in her ear? Henrietta wondered if Lady Sara even knew about her—the one left behind.

How invisible she felt. As if in a dream where her house was on fire, but she was unable to move or scream, helpless as the flames grew. Except in this scenario she never woke, forced to watch some little bonnet spotted with daisies steal her life.

“No, no, don’t leave me, Edward. Don’t leave me like this.”

“Pardon?” the painter said a few feet away. It took a moment to realize she had spoken aloud. Oh Lud! She was as mad as Papa. Quickly she tried to cover her mistake.

“I said, umm, no, don’t *paint* me. Don’t *paint* me like this. That’s what I said.”

His bright eyes regarded her warily as one would a lunatic. “I’m not.”

“Good.”

She lifted her skirt and hurried past his easel, then stopped. For all his soulful artistic demeanor, he was the worst painter she had ever encountered. Blotches and swirls of paint, it could have been any body of water painted by a three-year-old.

A mysterious smile played on his face and he scratched his graying bearded chin. “It’s about color. I am trying to capture the exact color of the water as I see it now. This moment.”

“Oh.”

“After all, all we have are moments. One after the other, ticking by, then all is gone but the memory of how blue the river was one afternoon in the park.”

Henrietta paused. “That makes me sad. Time flying away and only blue left.”

“Perhaps not what you have left. Perhaps all you ever had.”

Her heart swelled with pain. This was all she would ever have? This heartache? The man gazed at her with ancient eyes, compassionate and deep. “I have to go,” she said, but remained still.

He looked at her companions, now waiting in the distance. “They will miss you.”

Henrietta nodded, not speaking, then turned and ran off to catch up with Kesseley and his mother. She took his arm, and they hurried toward the road as drops of rain started pelting down. She glanced over her shoulder as the path turned along a row of oaks. The odd painter stood, unaffected by the rain, watching them.

Chapter Seven

At the edge of the park, Kesseley waved down a hackney. The rain came down like a heavy gray wall of water. Everyone crammed inside the carriage that smelled like old stockings. Kesseley wiped the steam off the window. Outside, the people trapped by the rain huddled under coat collars or journals, navigating the muddy streams of filth and trash flowing down the street gutters.

How could people live year round in this wet, squalid city, breathing its rank air? He hated London.

Henrietta's arm brushed his elbow. A drop of rain fell from her black curl onto the edge of her ear, then trailed down her neck. Without thinking, he reached to flicked it away. She tilted her cheek against his fingers. She loved London. And if bringing her here made her happy, it was worth all the filth and chaos.

The butler ran out with an umbrella to meet them. Kesseley took Henrietta's arm and led her up the stairs. He could feel his mother's stare hard on his back, her unspoken words in his ear: *You came here*

to forget about her.

Kesseley took her to her door. He was about to launch into a casual reminder of dinner when she grabbed his hand. Her eyes were large, her lashes still wet from the rain. She suddenly looked so fragile. Kesseley's heart swelled like some overprotective goose, ready to challenge any thick-necked, squawking fowl on the pond for her.

"Kesseley, I saw—" she began, then stopped, the small, soft concave in her throat contracting. "I mean, thank you for..." She rubbed her thumb over his palm. "For being so kind to me."

He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

"Oh, Kesseley," she whispered.

A long quiet moment passed between them.

"I sh-should change for dinner," she said. Then she slowly closed her door, never taking her eyes from his.

Kesseley waited. Under the door, he could see the shadow of her feet. She stood just behind the door, inches from himself.

Was she as paralyzed as he was? Stuck, unwilling to part.

A tiny tremor ran through him.

Hope.

One day soon, he would be on the other side of that door, untying her bonnet, letting her hair fall loose, running his hands down her body to her neat ankles, plucking off her shoes, then lifting her and taking her to that snug little bed, while several stories below, the rain washed London clean.

He was positively shaking as he came down to the kitchen, feeling that sweet, yet scary sensation akin to holding a new calf born too late in the summer. A tiny, fragile miracle about to face the cold winter. Hope and fear.

In the kitchen pots steamed, and a hen spun in the spit. Along the gleaming wooden table servants laid out china and cutlery. In the center the chef rushed about barking unintelligible orders and waving a large spoon like a baton. Kesseley received a dark, hostile eye when he asked the animated Frenchman, "Is dinner good?"

The insulted chef broke into a long stream of fast, violent French, waving his arms, whapping various pots with his spoon. The servants scurried to their corners and cowered in fear.

Kesseley wasn't sure what the chef said, but he heartily agreed it would be the best dinner of which he

would ever partake, and then hastily retreated to his chamber.

Baggot gasped when Kesseley opened his clothespress, flipped past all the “*yeller*” coats and pulled out his only blue one. Why would Kesseley want to wear something that looked like mud?

Yet Kesseley wouldn't relent, not tonight, even if it took an hour or more of persuading Baggot. Patiently suffering through his little digs about how gentlemen of good sense listened to the advice of their valets, and why well-dressed, influential gentlemen wore “*yeller*” coats.

When finally Kesseley was alone, he slapped cologne on his neck, patted down his side-whiskers and brushed his hair back from his eyes, the way she liked. Henrietta came out of her chamber as he stepped into the corridor, still smoothing his cravat and coattails. She had pulled her hair into a braided knot, letting it fall into ringlets around her dark eyes. She wore the same silvery-white gown he had admired at the Ely assembly last fall. Little rosebuds dotted the

sleeves and a beaded lace ruffle ran along the bodice. His sex stirred, as it had when he'd dancing with her those months ago, trying to keep his eyes from straying to that little ruffle flopping under her round breasts.

She gave Kesseley a flustered smile.

"Good evening." He bowed, feeling like his skin could barely contain him. She curtsied. Kesseley's eyes fell to the tiny ruby pendant falling between her breasts. Her mother's, he knew. He had diamonds. Many diamonds. He would give them to her.

"You look very handsome," she said shyly. Was she as nervous as he?

"Do you like my coat?" he said. "It's blue. You said blue matched my eyes."

Her brows drew down. "Blue," she said, like a quiet echo. "It's very nice."

He had this sudden bird-witted fantasy that they were married, that she might reach up and straighten his coat like a fussy wife.

"Do you think I am—that is, do you think I look pretty?" she asked, a fragile tremble in her voice.

Stupid Kesseley! He'd forgotten to compliment her! Damn it! He would have to practice being a better

husband.

“You’re beautiful,” he said in a reverent voice.

He tucked her hand snugly in the crook of his elbow and led her downstairs, hoping she didn’t feel his arm shaking.

In the dining room, two gold multitiered candelabras flanked the long table. A spotless ironed white tablecloth covered the mahogany wood. Shiny silver was set in intricate formations around the china porcelain plates. Running down the center, the chef’s culinary creations steamed on silver platters. The extravagance reflected his father’s taste, and Kesseley felt a twinge of disgust. He quickly brushed away the dark emotion and thought of Henrietta. Tonight was her first night in London. He wanted it to be everything she’d imagined. He looked in her eyes to see if she approved.

“It’s lovely,” she said in a soft whisper, squeezing his elbow. “Thank you.”

Kesseley pulled back her chair. When she sat, his cheek brushed the soft skin of her neck, close enough to smell the rose perfume under her ear. She was like the biblical soft pasture. He could lie down in her until death and not want.

"I believe we have a footman to do that job," said a disapproving female voice. His mother stood in the doorway, dressed in a simple yet elegant pale gown, her fair hair swept away from her face. Her gaze moved disapprovingly from Henrietta to Kesseley, the unspoken question *what have you done?* blazing in her eyes.

He rose and gave her cheek a curt, perfunctory kiss. "Mama, you look beautiful."

"Perhaps not as beautiful as some, it seems," she replied.

"Please," he pleaded under his breath to her. He smiled at Henrietta as he returned to his seat.

The footman came forward and poured the wine.

"To London," Kesseley toasted quickly, so Henrietta wouldn't see his trembling hand.

He started to take a sip when his mother added, "May you find the loving wife you deserve. Who has enough sense to appreciate you."

"Speaking of wives," Mama said, no sooner had the glass left her lips. She pulled a letter from the cuff of her sleeve. "I received a note from Lady Winslow and the princess while I was dressing. They have discovered several more potential brides. All wealthy

merchants' daughters. One of them, an American, is quite beautiful. And a little musical genius, according to her Italian music master."

She flipped the letter over and read the back. "Also, there are several charming, accomplished young ladies who are not being presented, but are worth considering. One has recently returned from India with her nabob father. She speaks six languages and keeps a monkey. We can get a peek of her, they write, if we attend one of her father's popular lectures on cartography at the Royal Academy."

Lady Kesseley's gaze shifted in Henrietta's direction. "How refreshing it is to be away from Norfolk. Here, there are so many well-bred and accomplished ladies to choose from."

Damn his mother! Could she not forgive and give Henrietta a second chance? Why did she want everyone to hurt as she had?

Henrietta murmured a quiet assent as her eyes moistened. She grabbed her glass and held it to her mouth, but didn't swallow. When she set the glass back down, the tears were gone.

When they were alone, he would assure her that she was ten times more beautiful, more accomplished,

more—well, more everything than the ladies in that letter.

With his mother holding court at the opposite end of the table, dinner passed in miserable silence. Kesseley had lost his appetite, but felt obliged to eat the French chef's creation. Henrietta kept her eyes on her plate, making interesting patterns with her food, but never taking a bite.

As the servants carted away dessert, Lady Kesseley rose and beckoned Henrietta with a curled finger. "Please join me in the parlor."

Henrietta obeyed. With her shoulders slumped and eyes downcast, she resembled a chastised child as she followed his mother through the adjacent door.

Kesseley gulped down his port. He had wanted this first evening to be special. He had to salvage the night for Henrietta's sake.

He dashed up to his chamber and opened his desk. Carefully lifting his business papers, he slipped out the three volumes of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* she had lent him. That would get her out of her doldrums! He checked his hair again, slapped on some more cologne.

Before entering the parlor, he ducked into the dining

room, hooked three glasses between his fingers and wedged a decanter of wine into his elbow. He then said a small prayer to whatever saint would listen and entered the parlor.

Henrietta sat on the sofa, alone, her hands clasped between her knees.

Where was Mama?

"Lady Kesseley has excused herself momentarily," Henrietta said, answering his unasked question.

Kesseley felt a smile spread across his face. Determined to make the best of Mama's absence, he poured two glasses of wine, setting Henrietta's on the table beside her. She gave him a small appreciative smile. He took a seat next to her on the sofa and wiped his hands on his pantaloons.

"I have a gift for you." His voice cracked.

"A gift?" A blush returned to her cheeks. "I don't need a gift. Bringing me to London is a gift."

"Just close your eyes." He took her hands from her lap and nestled the volumes into her palm. "Now open," he said, still holding her hands.

"*The Mysterious Lord Blackraven!*" she exclaimed, looking up at him, her eyes shining. He'd done something right! "You read it!"

"Yes."

"Did you love it?"

I love you. "No, but I liked the ending. Insane people should be kept together in remote places like Blackraven castle, away from the general population," he teased.

"Are you not at all romantic?"

"Not if by romantic you mean histrionic, insipid and overly sentimental," Kesseley quipped.

"You didn't read the novel correctly."

"I started on page one and proceeded to volume three, page three hundred and thirteen."

"You see, that is what I mean. You're too rational, too down-to-earth." She was smiling again. "You need to relax into the words, let them flow over you like water, let their passion and emotion sweep you away. You make everything so commonplace, so plebian. I know you can't be so passionless underneath."

Passionless? She thought he was passionless?

Kesseley sat back and rubbed his whiskers, considering her assessment of him. "Perhaps you should read it to me. Show me how to be more passionate, more emotional. What do you say? Like our old toy theatre? Remember?"

“Are you mocking me?”

“I would never mock you,” he teased.

She bit the edge of her lip, causing a dimple on her left cheek. “Fine, if it is a play, then you must be Lord Blackraven, and I shall be Arabellina.”

He nodded, enjoying himself.

She took the second volume and flipped through the pages. “Here, this is one of my favorite scenes. She has escaped from the asylum where he put her and has returned to Blackraven castle.”

“Weren’t all those nuns at the asylum nicer to her than Blackraven?”

“But she knows Lord Blackraven truly loves her now. She must tell him that she never loved his evil half brother, only him.”

“It all seems so logical when you explain it.”

She wagged a finger at him. “You see, you’re mocking me.”

“Was I? I’m sorry. I’ll be good. Please continue.”

Henrietta took a deep breath, the little ruffles on her bodice rising with her breasts. She lowered her face and looked at Kesseley under her lashes. Her voice was dark and dramatic. “Ravenmist castle had changed. A darkness hung over its chambers. The wax

remains of candles, long since burned to their death, hung like condemned men from the grand chandelier. Once, under its brilliance, she had danced in his strong arms, thinking how they would be consumed in its light, its fire. Under her feet, the woven tigers waited, silent in the Persian carpet. How they used to terrify her. He would laugh as she trembled. Now thick dust blinded their eyes. The delicate gilt upon the wall—”

“Why couldn’t he have burned down the castle?” he muttered.

“I heard that,” she said, trying to repress a smile. “The delicate gilt upon the wall was tarnished and black. A small noise, a mere creak, penetrated the silence. Her gaze rose to the balcony, where a shadowy figure stood. Even as her eyes did not recognize this wild beast of a man, her heart knew him, knew his soul bleeding before her. He came into the light. She could see his tormented eyes wild with sorrow. Tears leaped to her eyes, sweet and painful. Running to her, he said—” Henrietta slid the book carefully to Kesseley, trying to preserve the dramatic moment. “Now you read,” she whispered, pointing to the spot.

“What are you doing back, you cracked chit?”

"Kesseley! That is not what it says! You said you would behave!"

"Fine. I missed you."

"No!"

"Yes, see." He pointed to the text. "I—missed—you. His voice was ragged with—"

"I know what it says, but that's not how he said it." Henrietta picked up the book, held the place with her finger and gently whacked him with it. "You're as difficult as Papa, and worse because you know it. Now think. How do you look, how do you speak, to someone you love?"

Kesseley took a sip of wine, sloshed it around his mouth. Dare he? Suddenly the moment seemed the heaviest in his life. Every desire piled on the other. One small slip and it could all crumble.

He couldn't. He was too scared. "Why don't you show me?" he said, his voice harsher than he intended. "How would you say, 'I missed you' to Lord Blackraven, assuming he has put you in an asylum to show how much he cares rather than, say, jilting you for a richer, more socially connected lady?"

Her mouth fell open and her eyes had an unbelieving look as if he had just reached out and slapped her.

What the hell did I do?

Her lips started trembling, little tears moistened her eyes.

Damn it! No!

Kesseley grabbed her arm, panicked. "I didn't mean—"

She closed the book and traced the embossed gold title with her finger. Her tears fell in little lines down her cheek.

"I missed you," she cried, then covered her face. "I miss you." She broke down and buried her head into Kesseley's chest. "Edward was in the park today. He rode by us. He didn't even see me."

Every emotion drained out of Kesseley. He was hollow. Stiff. He could feel her on his shoulder, yet inside him, just emptiness.

She raised her head, her wet eyes looking into his. "You are so much more handsome than any man in that park today. Will you just try to look more fashionable?" She squeezed his hand. "I know you could turn Lady Sara's head if you tried."

The anger came like little explosions, going off everywhere in his heart.

I did all this for you. All this. And you can only think

of Edward, who betrayed your trust and treated you like you were nothing. Kesseley's hand shook, and for a horrifying moment he thought he might slap her—and like it. He shot up from the sofa, afraid of himself.

“Just go to Schweitzer and Davidson, just let them help you,” she pleaded.

“Henrietta. Enough. I'm tired of your little jabs at my person—”

“I never said anything about you!”

“Just clothes, my sensibilities and my manners.”

“I'm trying to help you.”

“By degrading me?” He was shouting now, his voice booming everywhere around him.

“I'm not! You promised to help. You said—”

“I said what I did because—” He paused, trying to rein in his temper. “Because I wanted to make you feel better. Did you ever consider that I might have more honor than to steal another man's betrothed?”

“They're not betrothed yet!”

“And if they are not, there are thousands of other ladies for him to choose from.” His anger was driving him over the edge. He looked down over the mental cliff to the hard place far below and just kept going. “Have you ever considered you didn't have enough

charms to hold him? That perhaps it is you who needs to change? Perhaps it is you who needs to grow up and stop living in this dream world.”

“Dream world!” She stood up, her whole body shaking. “You’re the one living in a dream world! I’m not blind. I see how you’re always touching me, watching me. You’re not here to find a wife! You just wanted to play house with me!”

Henrietta gasped and pressed her hands to her mouth. She didn’t mean those words. Why had she said them? She was just so angry she wanted to hurt someone—and he was there! She grabbed his hands. “Oh God. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it. It’s just been such an awful day seeing Edward and—”

He yanked himself free from her grasp. “I’m sorry I took you to London and ruined your day.” He strode out of the room.

She chased after him. “Kesseley, please, I didn’t mean it. Oh, please forgive me.”

Lady Kesseley was coming down the stairs.

“You ladies have a wonderful evening,” he spat, as

he passed her.

Lady Kesseley watched her son's angry back as he stomped up to the first balcony, then disappeared as he continued up the next flight. She turned back and glared at Henrietta with eyes as hard and pale as arctic ice. She slowly came down the stairs and into the foyer, backing Henrietta into the parlor.

She shut the door behind her. "Sit down, Miss Watson," she said and then waited for Henrietta to obey. "Tell me, do you have any intentions of marrying my son?"

Henrietta felt like a wiggling insect pinned to a board. She couldn't make up pretty lies anymore.

"I feel deep affection for your son, perhaps sisterly love, but none that I believe would translate into a marriage."

There was something so logically cold about her words that for the first time it sank inside her heart that soon she and Kesseley would be irreparably separated. He would find a wife and she...Oh Lud, she couldn't see her future anymore. Just daisy bonnets.

She felt dizzy and slumped down on the sofa. She swallowed hard, trying to keep the tears from following. But they started to trickle down her cheeks.

"You have quite modern thoughts. Love and marriage. Many young ladies—including myself—have to marry for familial obligation. You seem to care nothing for being a countess?"

"I—I just want to die in the arms of the man I love, I-like my mother. Sh-she said I could live as I wanted, choose who I w-wanted." Henrietta's throat burned. She pressed her hand to her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut.

When she opened them again, Lady Kesseley had moved by the mantel. Her head was turned away and Henrietta couldn't see her face.

"If you have no intention of marrying my son, then his clothes or his manners should be no concern of yours," she said quietly.

"I am trying to help because I care so much about him. I just want him to be happy. You must have seen the ladies laugh at him at the park! No lady could find him attractive with the way that he dresses and his provincial manners."

"Provincial manners!" She whipped around. "What do you know of the manners of society?"

"I—"

"Have you ever been to London?"

“No. B-but I have visited many great homes with my father, and I read journals.”

“You read journals.” Lady Kesseley lifted an elegant, curving brow. “Well, I suppose that makes you very wise.” Fury tightened her features. “You know nothing of the cruelty hidden beneath the well-polished boots and folded cravats of fashionable men. Of course they must read love sonnets because they don’t know of love beyond themselves! When they make love, they don’t mention all the other hearts they destroyed before yours. They slice your heart open and lay in a mistress’s bed while you bleed!”

Lady Kesseley trembled, her eyes large, turned inward to some horrible memory Henrietta couldn’t fathom. Was this what Kesseley’s father had been like? Had he done these things? Henrietta flew up to embrace her, but Lady Kesseley stepped back.

“My son is not like them,” she said, shaking her head. Her voice had turned breathy and thin. “He is thoughtful and gentle. So he may need a new cravat or coat. This is nothing. And I am proud of his ‘provincial’ manners.”

“I didn’t mean—”

She held up her hand, not wanting to be interrupted.

"I know you wangled this little invitation out of my son so you could be near that cousin of yours. Maybe you think you can win him back. But let me assure you, you are an ignorant, immature and selfish girl. You are no match for Lady Sara. And not good enough for my son."

Her loud words echoed in the corners, and then the room fell silent but for the clomp and rattle of carriages rolling down the street outside.

Lady Kesseley studied her for a moment, the hardness falling from her eyes. "How like your mother you have grown," she finally said quietly. "Your father so loved her. She filled your home with happiness. I couldn't provide the same for Tommie." She shook her head. "How can you be so blind to all the love that you have been blessed with?"

Chapter Eight

Early in the morning Henrietta gave up on trying to sleep and stared at the ceiling. The shadows of tiny cracks in the plaster looked like spidery veins. London was as sleepless as herself. All night she could hear the clomp of horses' feet echoing down the alley, then the sliding of heavy mew doors.

She was so tired but her mind would not stop replaying her conversation with Kesseley. What had happened was irreversible. In her heart burned the memory of Kesseley's face, the disbelieving hurt in his eyes, which were always so trusting, so gentle. She felt she had destroyed some innocence, like those dreadful village boys who pelted rocks at the robins' nests, killing the fragile babies inside their bright, blue eggs. Kesseley never did that. He fed orphaned birds ground meat and milk through a tube until they could fly.

I am a horrid girl.

When the gray, dull light of the London morning peeked under the heavy curtains, she crawled out of bed, taking a blanket with her. The floor was cold, and

the fire had long since burned to ash. She pulled the servants' bell, then sat at the mirror and examined her reflection. Yes, she was horrid in all aspects. Her lids were heavy, drooping down over her red-rimmed eyes. Her muscles felt loose and shaky from lack of sleep.

The maidservant from the day before bustled in, crisp and alert, making Henrietta feel even duller. She wound Henrietta's long braid into a simple knot, then tightened her stays and sewed her into a plain cotton morning dress with quick and efficient fingers.

Once she was alone again, guilt consumed her thoughts. Why did it feel like someone took a knife and slowly cut away her skin whenever she upset Kesseley?

Outside her chamber, she heard the creak of his door opening. She ran out to the hall. Her words fell out in a jumbled heap. "Kesseley, what I said was unforgivable. I haven't slept at all. I feel horrid. Please, please say you aren't so terribly angry at me. Please tell me how I can make this up to you. I can't bear it."

Henrietta could have run straight into a stone wall for the cold anger radiating from him. If he'd had a sword, he might have run it through her heart.

"Please," she whispered, putting a tentative hand on

his arm. She could feel the contours of his stiff muscles under his green coat. He didn't push her away like last night.

"Let us just forget about it," he said in a tight voice.

"Yes," she whispered, relieved.

They stood staring at each other, awkward, not quite sure how to go about forgetting it. "W-would you like to go to the Royal Academy or the Agricultural Society?" she offered.

"Thank you, but no, I am going to a club."

Don't leave! she thought. Couldn't they go back to the excitement of yesterday, before the park, when everything was new and exciting? Not this silence and coldness.

He looked pointedly at her hand, issuing an unspoken command to remove it from his arm. When she did, he nodded goodbye and brushed past her. She could hear him call for Boxly. She imagined the butler putting him in that old caped greatcoat with the worn elbows.

Then the door closed.

She hurried downstairs to the parlor and watched him leave through the window. She could see the swing of his strong shoulders as he walked away, getting

smaller, then disappearing around a curve. Samuel padded in, hefted his big front paws into her lap and gave her hand a lick.

"You've been left behind, too?" she said.

Samuel gave her a sad, brown eye. She scratched under his ears. "Would you like to go for a stroll?" He jumped down and splayed his legs, letting out a sharp bark.

Henrietta rang for Boxly and told him she was going to the park with Samuel and requested a leash. He returned with a rope that looked as if it were used to lead horses. Good enough, Henrietta decided as she heard Lady Kesseley stirring upstairs. Grabbing her gloves and tossing on her bonnet untied, she quickly fled the house before having to face Lady Kesseley again.

It was apparent not ten feet from the door that Samuel had never been on a leash, and hounds had scented every inch of London. Samuel dug in his nails between the pavers, his thick neck taut and hard, refusing her tugs on the leash, fighting to sniff every mounting block. He pulled her down a street of neat white row houses, running parallel with the park. She hadn't the strength to rein him and clung to his leash,

taking a brisk canine tour of Mayfair. She could just see the sign for Oxford Street when Samuel lifted his nose in the air, picked up a new scent, then veered toward the park to the place Kesseley had flagged the hack the afternoon before.

It certainly wasn't fashionable hour. The park was almost empty but for the people in dark, worn clothes, eyes averted, quietly hurrying to other destinations. She pulled Samuel onto the path, and he actually started to trot beside her, like a good hound.

This was much better, almost enjoyable, as the cool wet, morning breeze blew under her bonnet, tingling her cheeks. For a moment, the sun popped out from between dense clouds and sparkled through the tree leaves. Henrietta's heart lightened.

A rather proper elderly man with a pearl-handled cane passed her. Henrietta smiled. He only scowled.

What? She looked down. Samuel was hunched, defecating on the soft sable sand.

Samuel!

"Wait here!" she ordered. Samuel's ears didn't perk up, like they did when Kesseley issued commands in his deep voice. He just kicked the dirt with his back paws.

Henrietta hurried over to the trees, looking for a fallen stick. She found a nice one with broomlike spindles and turned to brush Samuel's mess off the pathway, but when she turned back, he was gone!

She pivoted on her heel. No Samuel anywhere.

Oh God. Not only did Kesseley hate her, but she'd lost his dog!

She saw the end of the leash, disappearing down a path. Ughh! She dropped the stick and chased after Samuel, her bonnet dangling behind her head.

Despite his girth, Samuel was fast. He had chased a squirrel up a large oak, and the creature now sat on a branch fluffing his squirrel tail, taunting Samuel. She grabbed the leash and yanked it.

"I told you to wait, Samuel!"

He only laughed.

Wait, dogs didn't laugh. She was going mad.

Coming around a bend in the path was a group of giggling young ladies, clustered about a handsome couple, walking serenely arm-in-arm, their heads bowed together as if they were conversing in sweet lovers' whispers.

Good God! Edward and Lady Sara were not twenty feet from her. She couldn't move. She couldn't do

anything. It was like watching the oncoming carriage, the pounding of the horses' hooves, the inevitable impact.

Lady Sara was beautiful, perfectly beautiful, a walking masterpiece of art. Pale, unblemished skin glowed in the morning light. Small blond curls, the delicate kind that didn't frizz like Henrietta's, peeked out from her bonnet. She had high graceful cheekbones and full, pale pink lips. Henrietta's heart sank. How could she compare to such radiance?

And the way Edward gazed at Lady Sara. There was a wondrous light in his eyes—one Henrietta had never seen.

"Samuel, come here!" Henrietta hissed. He ignored her, of course. Using some Herculean strength she never knew she possessed, she dragged Samuel by his hind legs behind the tree. Squatting on her knees, she hugged his big chest and buried his head in his fur.

Please don't see me! Please don't see me!

They were just beyond the tree, a few steps from her hiding place, close enough to hear the poem he was reciting:

*"Amid the roses, you slumber
Dressed in white,*

*An innocent mystery in sight,
The muses of sorrow and delight
Implore to me to pause
In my midnight flight
At this garden gate
And look upon my soul's fate."*

His female audience gave a collective "ahhh" while Henrietta bit down on her lip, hot tears burning her eyes. Then that abominable little squirrel picked that very moment to scurry down the tree and across the path. Samuel gave a powerful lunge, pulling Henrietta with him. *Thud!* Her head hit the path. Everything went black.

A moment later, she opened her eyes. Big fluffy clouds passed overhead, little birds twittered and Edward's green eyes were looking down at her. A deep warmth spread over her heart.

"Oh Edward, you *do* love me," she whispered.

"Good God! Henrietta!" He kneeled beside her. A bead of perspiration ran down his forehead. "Are you hurt? Are you well? What the hell—what are you doing here?"

Why was he so upset? "I'm walking Samuel."

“No, I mean here in London?”

Then everything came back in one big whooshing wave of remembrance.

Oh yes, I'm in London, lying on the ground in Hyde Park. And Edward loves Lady Sara.

“Can you sit up?” he asked.

No, she just wanted to lie there until the grass grew over her and she completely disappeared. However, that wasn't an option, for Edward practically yanked her from the ground by her elbow, causing her to fall into him. The familiar lean lines of his body rubbed against her chest. She stayed there, her body refusing to let go, nestling deeper into him.

“Mr. Watson, do you know this lady?” said a sweet, concerned female voice.

Edward leaped back as if stung. Lady Sara approached, her furrowed brows shading her bright eyes.

“Lady Sara, may I introduce Hen—Miss Watson. She is my...my...” Edward looked at Henrietta, his Adam's apple dropped. Henrietta's insides trembled. *Well, what are you going to say?*

“My cousin,” he whispered, then averted his eyes. Everything inside Henrietta turned numb.

Lady Sara's friends exchanged glances, as if to say *that's her*. Like Henrietta was a novel they had all read. Only Lady Sara remained composed. She took Henrietta's hands.

"My poor, poor dear. I was so distraught when I saw you fall. I thought I might faint myself. Are you well, Cousin Henrietta—may I call you Cousin Henrietta? For any cousin of Mr. Watson, I consider a dear cousin as well."

"Yes, please," she said weakly.

"Dear cousin, you are not well. Let us walk you home," Lady Sara said, entwining her arm around Henrietta's elbow.

"No!" she cried, stumbling backward at Lady Sara's touch. "I can't go home. B-because I-I have to clean up. You see, Samuel, he relieved himself on the path, and everything is so clean here. And so I have to, umm, brush it away."

"Mr. Watson can take care of the hound." Lady Sara gave Edward a lovely smile, the kind that would send a gentleman scurrying to scoop up dog excrement. Then she turned that smile on Henrietta. "And we shall walk you home. We must become acquainted, for I am sure we will be like sisters."

"Really, Cousin Henrietta, let us take you home," Edward said. "I cannot just leave you here."

You've left me before with less concern!

"Please just go," Henrietta said quietly, covering her eyes, hiding her hot tears.

"Henrietta—" Edward began.

She turned and walked away. She could feel their shocked gazes on her back. How those ladies would laugh about her. She didn't care. She just had to make it a few more feet around the corner.

Out of their sight, she stumbled to a large tree and wept on its hard bark. *Oh, Edward, don't leave me. I have nothing else.*

"Is this your dog?" a male voice asked. "I saw him run away."

Henrietta turned, but all she could see was the blurry outline of a man and a brown blob. She wiped her eyes. It was the artist from yesterday, with Samuel sitting beside him like an obedient dog.

"Samuel," Henrietta cried weakly.

The artist put a large, warm hand on her shoulder, his kind-hearted eyes gazing into hers.

"Are you well? May I help you?" he asked.

"You shouldn't touch me. You shouldn't talk to me. It's

wrong," she whispered, still clinging to her tree.

"By the sad standards of English society probably, but not by the universal principles of compassion and love for all living things."

Henrietta's chin trembled, her throat shut tight.

"Did you know that couple?"

"Him," she squeaked.

"Oh," he said, as if he readily comprehended the situation. She could only imagine the extent of his understanding. All kinds of lurid scenarios played out in her head, none she had the energy to correct.

"Should I return you to your family?" he asked.

Henrietta blinked in confusion. Did he know her father?

"The people you were with yesterday. Is that your mother?"

"No. I am her companion."

"Shall I return you, then?"

Henrietta shook her head and tightened her grip on the tree.

He tried a new tactic. "Would you like some chocolate? I have some chocolate from Belgium in a jar by my easel. There is a bench there. You can sit."

He took her elbow, cautiously separating her from

the tree as if she were an injured animal. "Come, come," he assured her.

He led her along the water to a wooden bench, carved with people's names and spotted with bird excrement. A few inches from the water, his easel stood, one brash stroke of blue streaked across the canvas. He rooted through a faded, cracked leather satchel and brought out a thin, delicately painted teacup and a jar of chocolate. He set the teacup on the bench beside her, filled it, then handed it to her. She traced the teacup's delicate gold painting with her thumbnail.

"It's from Venice. I've lost its mates. Perhaps I shouldn't have carried them around in an old satchel." He sat down on the ground at her feet, raising up one knee and holding it with his rough, wrinkled fingers.

She didn't say anything, just studied the deep chocolate swirling in her cup.

"Can you describe this sky? I can't capture it," he said, his light blue, hooded eyes squinting at the sky.

Henrietta gazed at the coal-ridden clouds being carried by the wind over her head. "It's a blue that wants to be blue, but can't be blue because all this gray dust and clouds perpetually block it. It longs just to

be blue, but it can't."

"It is the confusion that confounds me."

"Do you sell many paintings?"

This made him laugh, a free, deep belly chuckle. "I'm no artist. No J.M.W. Turner. I hope you don't think that. My painting is a philosophical exercise."

"How?"

"Learning to look at the world and let it be. The sky in London is restless and nervous. In Germany, a blue sky breaks forth only in the summer. It is bold, adamant to have its day. In Italy, the blue sky glows vibrant and free over the ocean, refusing to be clouded. And the blue sky is endless in the Americas, as if there was nowhere else in the world."

"You've painted all those skies?"

"Poorly, yes."

Henrietta looked closely at his weather-beaten face. He was quite handsome, actually, and younger than she had assumed. Despite the wild mass of white hair on his head and graying beard, his body was robust and wiry.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "Where has Lady Kesseley taken you?"

She stiffened. Had she said Lady Kesseley's

name? “Nowhere. I’m actually her neighbor,” she said cautiously.

“Near Wrenthorpe?”

She didn’t reply.

The philosopher didn’t seem to notice. He looked away from her, down at the water where Samuel prowled about the shore, barking at the two male swans squawking and hissing at each other.

“Is Lady Kesseley, is she—” He paused, considering his words. “Is she very happy?”

Henrietta returned the teacup. “Thank you for the chocolate, but I have to go.”

“Of course,” he replied. “I hear the snap of societal rules like twigs under our feet.”

Samuel seemed more sedate on the way home, his head bowed, somehow sensing that at any moment, Henrietta might break down in the street, weeping to the girl selling oranges.

Everything was lost. She had to go home. No one wanted her in London. But someone most certainly wanted Henrietta at home—to be his wife. Now it loomed like some inevitable fate.

How could she marry Mr. Van Heerlen knowing the heady excitement of losing herself in Edward's lips, drifting in his arms, coming the closest to perfect she had ever been? Did she have to pretend for the rest of her life that Mr. Van Heerlen's kisses fulfilled her? Could she pretend love in the intimacy of their marriage bed? Ladies had for years. Perhaps men were easily deceived, but she couldn't see how. Kesseley would never be so naive.

For several minutes, she stood outside the house on Curzon Street, trying to get the courage to walk back into the disaster. Perhaps Kesseley and his mama were away, and she could make a beeline for her chamber without having to talk with anyone.

Unfortunately, Lady Kesseley stood in the hall, waiting, as if she had seen Henrietta coming.

"Miss Watson, when I said you could go to the park, I did not mean alone! This is not Norfolk. There are dangerous men in the park who could—"

Henrietta held up her hand, stopping her. "I'm going home. Tomorrow. I won't be in the way anymore. I'm sorry for everything. Please have Boxly arrange a post." Typically Henrietta would have been horrified to break down in tears before Lady Kesseley, but by this

point, she had no pride left and just trudged up the stairs, letting the tears trickle down like rain.

Samuel followed her. And when she fell on her little alcove bed, he crawled in beside her, causing the bed to sag. He licked her face, making hurt, whimpering dog sounds. She hugged the old hound, crying into his brown fur until she finally found the sweet refuge of sleep.

Kesseley walked down to New Bond Street, his body a boiling stew of anger, frustration, hurt and other emotions he couldn't separate. How could he have been so stupid, so foolish, so blind?

What magic did she have over him? This was beyond hope. Henrietta was an obsession he was powerless against. Perhaps he was like his father in that respect, even though it pained him to admit he shared anything in common with that monster. Except, unlike his father's dissipation, Kesseley's pursuits and habits only hurt himself.

So Kesseley was headed to Boodles, if just to sit there and keep himself safe from her.

Activity pulsed about him on the streets. Everywhere

people crammed together, yet strangely solitary, rarely acknowledging each other as they hurried on. Barefooted children darted through the crowds, dogs at their heels. Over them all, the bell of the muffin man rang out, and the coarse voices of the pie vendors sang out their offerings Kesseley had always hated London, but today, the city felt as if it folded him into its dark, filthy arms.

To spite Henrietta, he veered off onto Cork Street and glanced in the window of Schweitzer and Davidson. A gaggle of dandies lounged inside. Was this what she wanted? Some thoughtless tulip who cared more for the lay of his coat than the ragged child crouched on the pavement under the window?

He reached into his pocket and gave the poor waif a coin.

To hell with her.

Thoughts in this vein kept him occupied all the way down St. James to the great white bay window of Boodle's.

The door swung open, and two fashionably dressed bucks leaped onto the pavement, each holding ducks, their faces alight with secretive mischievousness. Tucking the ducks under their coats, they ran down the

street on a seemingly urgent mission. Kesseley watched them leave, then stepped inside.

The porter leaped from around his desk and grabbed Kesseley's arm. "Deliveries are made in the back!" He spun Kesseley around to the door.

"Wait!" Kesseley dug in his heels, refusing to be moved. The porter's face flushed with panic. He snapped his fingers three times, and his menacing, overgrown assistant appeared from behind a false door.

"You need some help?" the assistant growled.

Just then a tall, gawky fellow with bright red hair and freckles ran into the entrance hall, a duck tucked in the crook of his elbow. Ronald Buckweathers! Kesseley's old mate from Trinity.

Bucky stopped when he saw his old friend, that toothy good-for-nothing smile Kesseley remembered spreading across his thin face.

"Well, hell's tinker. It's about time you darkened these doors. Here, hold this, good man." Bucky shoved his duck into the assistant's big hands. Then he gave Kesseley a big, back slapping embrace that turned into a brotherly sort of wrestling match causing them to collide with a portly gentleman who had just entered the

club.

“Buckweathers! Contain yourself,” the man barked. “Does your uncle know you are here?”

Bucky bowed, then rose quickly, giving Kesseley a sly punch on the shoulder. “Your Grace, this is my old chum from Cambridge. The Earl of Kesseley. I sponsored him here two years ago.”

Kesseley bowed politely to the unknown duke. He was a pudgy fellow, his broad cloth coat barely able to cover his protruding belly. His face was schooled in a sour expression, but there was a bright twinkle in his eyes.

The flustered porter bowed like one of those prostrate holy men in the east. “Your Grace, my profuse apologies.” Then he turned to Kesseley and Buckweathers and said, “Perhaps I can show you to the undress dining room—”

The corpulent duke huffed indignantly. “Don’t put Lord Kesseley in the dirty room! What are you thinking, man?” He put his chubby arm possessively around Kesseley, as if to draw him into his confidence. “I’m expanding my hops, you see. Been wanting to talk to you. I’ve read your articles in the *Journal of Agriculture*. Impressive. Very impressive. You have a

fine mind.”

“Pardon?” Kesseley said, unsure of the identity of his new friend.

“Houghton, the Duke of Houghton,” he said brusquely as an army of waiters hustled in, all donned in matching black breeches and coats. They made quick work of removing coats, hats and gloves. His Grace kept on talking about swine through the process.

Kesseley asked the duke several basic questions about curing methods and feed composition, trying to get an understanding of the duke’s spread as the porter led them up the grand stone staircase, past the paintings of old race horses. The duke kept a hand behind Kesseley’s neck, holding him captive, while Buckweathers tagged behind.

They passed into the salon, a grand room, over a story high with ornate pilasters lining the buff walls. Above them, paintings of scantily clad Grecian beauties looked down from the molded ceiling. By the dark marble fireplace, a young buck stood on a chair, holding a large leather-bound book and a ridiculous peacock’s plume. Below him, young bloods in handsome coats and shiny boots bounced about like

excited little girls, waving their arms in the air, shouting numbers. "I've got Sir Giles stealing her at one thousand," one voice rung above the others.

"I believe this is about your daughter, Lady Sara, Your Grace," Buckweathers said.

"I wish one of them would steal her," Houghton replied, then lifted a bushy brow in Kesseley's direction. "You wouldn't want to marry my daughter?"

Kesseley opened his mouth to reply, but the Houghton waved his hand, silencing him. "No, it won't take. She don't like men with sense. I'm destined to support a worthless poet."

They entered the oval dining room lined with gilt mirrors and girandoles. Only a few tables were occupied in the late morning. The porter selected a gleaming round mahogany table, and the footmen ran forward with linens and tea.

The porter bowed again before Houghton. "Your Grace, what would be your pleasure—"

"Beefsteak, we all want beefsteak and ale." The duke ordered for everyone.

"Very good," the porter agreed and left to pass along the gentlemen's order.

Someone in the salon raised the stakes to five

thousand for Lady Sara's hand, and a great cheer went up and echoed in the dining room. The duke shook his head.

"Why don't you just tell her she can't marry that poet?" Buckweathers suggested.

"Lady Sara is as clever as her mama," the duke said. "You try to talk to them, they smile all prettily. Yes, *Papa. Whatever you say, Papa.* Then run off with a poet. Right now, my daughter is in the park with her *dearest friends.*" He let out a disbelieving snort, then leaned forward, tapping his temple. "I'll tell you what it is. We've found that Fairfax lady's novels hidden in her room. Never let your ladies read gothic novels. It gives them strange ideas."

"I couldn't agree more," Kesseley said wholeheartedly.

The duke squinted at Kesseley, assessing him. "I like you," he said finally. "You're not one of those fops, like that poet gentleman. Can't stand them."

Tea arrived. Houghton sat back in his chair and tapped his knee. "I've got about a hundred swine, and I'm looking to expand one hundred more. I would value your expertise."

So three hours were consumed on the merits of

different breeds of swine, another two across the street at Brooks's discussing barn and chute designs, then three more hours over dinner at White's on the scientific theories of curing and transporting pig parts. Dusk encroached outside the large window of White's when the duke stood to take his leave of Kesseley and Buckweathers.

"Are you going to Lady Huntly's ball this evening?" he asked Kesseley, pulling his vest down over his belly.

"Yes, I think my mother mentioned it."

"Good. I'll be there. I'll make sure Lady Sara wears her prettiest gown," he said and parted, nodding to his acquaintances as he quitted the room.

Bucky's face turned pink under his freckles, and he bit his lips to keep from bursting until the duke was out of earshot.

"Kesseley, you are the luckiest damn fellow in London."

He shrugged. "I would be interested to see his hops plan in manifest. It's hard to say how it will work without actually seeing his estate."

"Of course, you'll see it! Because he'll be your father-in-law! I can't believe he straight up asked if you would marry his daughter."

“He didn’t mean it.”

“Hell, he did!”

“I can assure you, of all the ladies in London, I am not interested in Lady Sara.”

“How can you say that? She’s rich, respectable and more beautiful than any actress or ballet dancer or courtesan in England. I bet there ain’t an eligible man in here that ain’t in love with her.”

Kesseley swirled the port in his glass. “I’ve never seen Lady Sara.”

A dangerous sparkle entered Buckweathers’s eye, the look of a betting man. “If my uncle wouldn’t find out and stop my allowance, I would lay down a wager in White’s betting book right now that you will be changing your tune after tonight.”

Chapter Nine

Kesseley believed that Lady Huntly had managed to squeeze the entirety of fashionable London into their ballroom. Golden fires roared in four fireplaces and hundreds of candles hung in three expansive chandeliers. Their light caught in the mirrors running along the walls, reflected back, multiplied. The place was brighter than heaven and hotter than hell. Beneath his coat, sticky sweat soaked his shirt.

He watched the delicate, fairylike ladies spinning on the dance floor. All around him conversation buzzed. How elegant Miss So-and-So looked, did she not have seven thousand pounds? Isn't Lady So-and-So a graceful dancer, how beautiful she looks in lavender.

There were so many pretty girls here. He tried to catch their eyes and give them a little would-you-care-to-dance smile, but they always looked away. So he stood, rubbing his nervous, wet palms on his knee britches.

This was no way to get a wife.

He wished Henrietta were here.

You're supposed to forget about that senseless, cruel, crack-brained girl!

This thought propelled him forward, pushing through the crowd to an unoccupied sweet little thing with delicate pink flowers in her curly brown hair and a spray of freckles across her face. Her eyes widened as he approached, smiling. She quickly turned and disappeared down a rabbit hole of arms and elbows. He felt stupid. What the hell was wrong with him?

Kesseley spotted his mama across the room, by a mantel under a portrait of the Duke of Wellington's horse. She was conversing with a trim man with a rugged face and sandy hair streaked with silver. The gentleman gazed at her lips as she spoke, and an appreciative glow burned in his hooded eyes. Then, in plain view of the ballroom, he brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers. The edge of his mouth hiked into a smirking smile. It was going to be terrible to have to scatter the blackguard's brains all over the nice floor, Kesseley thought, feeling his hands ball into fists. Then his mother shook her head, turned and walked out of the room, leaving the fool standing awkwardly alone.

"Kesseley, my boy! I found you!"

He turned on his heel.

Houghton's rotund body pushed through the crowd, parting guests like the seas. He pulled a female by the wrist behind him. Kesseley could just see the daisies entwined about her white-blond curls. "May I introduce my daughter, Lady Sara." The duke's voice was breathless from exertion.

The blonde lifted her doll-like face and gazed at Kesseley with eyes the color of blue swallowtail butterflies. A soft giggle escaped her pale pink lips, revealing even white teeth that glinted in the candlelight.

"Kesseley knows all about pigs, my dear." *Couldn't Houghton have said something else?*

"Do you?" she said, her eyes widening. "How good for us, Papa!" She touched her papa's coat. Not immune to his own daughter's charm, he blushed to the top of his bald head. She took a timid step toward Kesseley. "I think pigs are so adorable with their little curly tails. I just adore animals. Don't you? When I was young, I was forever being pulled from the stables."

Dear God.

He knew this little beauty could save his life. Finally release Henrietta's hold over him. The hopelessness that had been dragging on his heart suddenly

lightened. He could imagine Lady Sara's sweet face in his rose garden, their children at her feet, all curly blond angels like their mama.

The music ended, and the dancers began to leave the floor, making way for new couples. The conductor called down from his platform, "The waltz!"

"Well, well." Houghton jerked his head toward his daughter, a subtle hint to Kesseley.

"L-Lady Sara, would you like to dance w-with me?" Kesseley stammered.

Her face lit with alarm and she pressed her hand to her trembling mouth. For a moment he thought she would swoon or burst into tears. "Oh no! I've already promised this dance." In a small movement, she reached into the crowd and plucked out a freckled brunette by the sleeve of her pink gown. "Perhaps Miss Barten can dance with you, my lord."

Lady Sara kissed her friend's cheek. "Oh the worst thing, dearest. I can't dance with Lord Kesseley, for I am already taken."

"I—" the girl began to protest.

"Lord Kesseley, I assure you that my *dearest* friend, Miss Barten, is an excellent dancing partner."

Kesseley bowed to Miss Barten. "May I have the

pleasure of this dance?"

Lady Sara nudged her freckled friend while continuing to smile at Kesseley, a beautiful, enchanting, hypnotic thing. "Yes, thank you, I would be honored," the friend said flatly, shooting Lady Sara an angry look, thus proving herself to be inferior to Lady Sara in disposition, as well as beauty.

Lady Sara let out a deep sigh, causing her breasts to rub together. *Stop staring at her breasts!*

"Lord Kesseley! You've finally come to this den of vice."

Kesseley knew that voice. It grated at his very soul. Edward! The fop swept in, looking ridiculous as ever, his silly curls dancing about his face. He gave Kesseley a breezy smile that Kesseley had seen him practice in the mirror as he repaired his cravat at the Spring Assembly. "I heard you were here, but wouldn't believe it until I saw it myself. I never thought you could pull yourself from your muddy fields long enough to enjoy the finer pleasures of London." He let out an expansive laugh, the kind meant to encourage others to join in. Only Lady Sara did.

"Mr. Watson, Lord Kesseley has asked me to dance, but I have already promised this dance to you."

“Lord Kesseley, you must be faster, for these London ladies are light-footed.” He laughed at his witticism and whisked Lady Sara away.

Killing Edward would never achieve his purposes. It would only cause Edward a few minutes of distress. Kesseley marveled that Edward could even be a poet. His soul had no substance, knew no hardship. And the world showed no inclination to give him any.

Lord Kesseley led his freckled dancing partner onto the floor. They both stood, hands clasped, waiting on the orchestra. He looked over Edward’s back at Lady Sara. A shy, expectant smile waited on her lips. Edward inclined his head, whispering into her ear. She giggled, flashing a quick peek at Kesseley as the music started.

Kesseley stepped forward, crunching down on Miss Barten’s instep. She shrieked in pain, reaching for her poor foot.

“Are you well?” he cried. He bent to assist her, but instead slammed his head into hers. She wailed again.

Everyone was staring. Other twirling dancers bumped into them, sending them tumbling together. He tried pulling her to safety, but she pushed him away and limped back to the wall, sobbing. He followed,

repeating his apologies and inquiring if he could carry her, take her arm, get a refreshment, find a physician. Several young ladies came forward, taking their wounded sister into their arms and circling her like a protective herd against a predator.

Kesseley felt the sweat pouring under his cravat amid the whispers and discreetly pointing fingers.

Again he inquired if he could help Miss Barten.

“Haven’t you done enough?” called an anonymous female voice from the crowd lining the wall.

Kesseley bowed, then bowed again and again before slinking out of the ballroom. *Stupid, big, stupid Ajax. No wonder Edward gets all your women.*

He poked his head into different parlors, not seeing his mother anywhere. Finally, he found a large, spreading fern near a refreshment table by the servant passage and hid himself behind its long palms.

He remained there, coming out only to look for his mother in the open parlors, packed with perspiring people fleeing the ballroom in search of cool air and audible conversation. He could see their elbows nudging each other, as if to say *look, look, that’s him*. So he retreated back to his palm tree, feeling like a dolt as he watched the clock hands tick around the

numbers.

To hell with this! He was going home.

Tinkling female laughter trickled in from beyond the opened door. Instinctively, Kesseley withdrew to his palm and hid.

Leaning on Lady Sara, Miss Barten limped into the room. Pain crumpled her freckled features. Around her moved the crowd of young ladies, murmuring comfort.

Shame burned his ears as he watched poor Miss Barten struggle. He wanted to run from the hideout behind his plant, get down on his knees and apologize again. But somehow he felt he wasn't wanted as the ladies' eyes surveyed the room, making sure they were alone. When satisfied that no one was within earshot, their shoulders lowered and slumped, their sweet uplifted mouths relaxing to their normal, flat states.

Kesseley was trapped. He crouched lower under the leaves.

Lady Sara spoke first, her sweet voice noticeably sharper, harder than Kesseley remembered. "Do you think your foot shall heal in time for your ball?"

Miss Barten glowered at her friend. "It will swell and turn purple, and I won't be able to dance with Sir Charles. And it's all your fault! You made me dance

with him!"

"It's not my fault. I would never step on your toe, dearest," Lady Sara assured her friend.

"It was that horrid, overgrown country bumpkin!" She looked at the other ladies to make sure they were all in accord with her assessment of Kesseley. They obligingly stated their solidarity. *Horrid. Clumsy Ajax. Clabberfooted. Unhandsome.*

"He will ruin my entire Season! My life!" Miss Barten wailed, burying her head in Lady Sara's shoulder.

"Hardly, dear. Sir Charles must come and comfort your poor swollen foot," Lady Sara said tartly, smiling in appreciation of her own naughtiness as the others giggled into their hands, their faces pink with pleasure, even as they admonished their friend for saying something so fast.

"Tell her what Mr. Watson compared your ankles to," one young lady begged Lady Sara.

Kesseley could hear Lady Sara whisper, and the ladies let out squeals of delight.

"Mr. Watson is so romantic. He is just like Lord Blackraven!" one lady said, jumping on her toes and clasping her hands at her heart.

"If Mr. Watson is Lord Blackraven, Lord Kesseley is

more like—like Lord Blackraven's steward or groom," Miss Barten spat.

"Certainly not his valet," Lady Sara quipped.

"We shouldn't speak that way," said a lone cautious female voice.

"You're right, of course, for my father says he is England's authority on pigs," Lady Sara said.

Wasn't she the clever girl?

"I have Mr. Watson to save me," she continued, "but you all must take care to avoid Lord Kesseley, or you may end up a pig farmer's wife."

"We can't avoid him forever. He is an earl. One of us will have to marry him," the cautious one speculated.

"Let us hope for some witless merchant's daughter to think he is a prize and save us," Lady Sara said.

The conversation ended abruptly as the music resumed, and the young men came looking for their partners. The ladies straightened their posture and met their gentlemen with angelic smiles.

Kesseley remained hidden, quiet. All his life, he'd tried to be kind to others, to listen to their lives, their complaints, their pains. He rebuilt their homes, paved their roads, redesigned their canals, dug wells, fed their families. The plundered estate he inherited

prospered as it never had before. His tenants were better off than most of England. All he wanted was for someone to love him as he could love her. So he wasn't the best dresser, perhaps he hadn't the finest manners and, yes, he did think pigs were a very intelligent, gentle species. Did this hold no value to a lady? He felt like a squashed spider, stepped on merely for the sin of being ugly and humble.

"Tommie, are you in here?" his mother called. He stepped out from behind his palm and let his mama come and wrap him in her arms.

"Let's leave," she whispered. He gently kissed her head. The musky scent of another man filled his nose.

Chapter Ten

On her last night in London, Henrietta lay on the sofa in the parlor, her hand dangling down, scratching Samuel's stomach. Quiet. Just the clomp and rattle of carriages passing on the street and the occasional strings of music drifting from a nearby party. She felt numb, as if her heart had closed up shop.

If only her mind would do the same. It churned and churned. Edward, Lady Sara, Mr. Van Heerlen, Kesseley. Finally, she picked a spiral in the cornice and mentally divided and counted the arcs with the Fibonacci number sequence, anything to occupy her mind.

1, 1...

She wished Kesseley wasn't mad at her. That, for once, she could please him.

2, 3...

Edward must think she was chasing him about like some mad chit.

5, 8...

What would she say to Mr. Van Heerlen? She could

hardly deny him now.

13, 21...

Maybe love could grow over time? Like a slow leaking spring, dripping little by little until the emptiness filled. So slow as to be imperceptible. Then one day she would look across the table as her husband was putting strawberry preserves on his toast and think, how could I have ever loved Edward?

21, 34...

She hated Lady Sara. And hated herself for hating her. How kind Lady Sara had been to her in the park. It would have been easier if Lady Sara had just one flaw, one thing Henrietta could hold against her.

55, 89...

She wished she could talk to Kesseley. He made everything right with his low, calming voice. But she had ruined their friendship.

144, 233...

Like she ruined everything.

377, 600, 977...

The door knocker banged. Both Henrietta and Samuel sat up, ears pricked, listening as Boxly opened the door.

"Boxly, darling," a lady's luxurious, breathless voice

echoed from the hall. Curious, Henrietta and the hound followed the voice, finding Lady Winslow and the princess shucking off their pelisses and furs, tossing them into Boxly's outstretched arms. Their sweet lily perfume filled the room.

The ladies were stunning in their evening attire. Lady Winslow wore a gold silk dress with red trimmings, very oriental and very revealing. Princess Wilhelmina's blond hair fell in bouncy ringlets about a tiara. Her gown of soft pink tulle over satin accented her fair complexion.

The ladies looked about, as if they were expecting someone or something.

"Lord and Lady Kesseley are attending a ball this evening," Boxly informed them.

Lady Winslow's eyes shot up in alarm and then fell as some understanding crossed her features. "Wilhelmina, hand me the invitation!"

The princess dug around in her beaded reticule, producing a badly mangled invitation, smeared with black soot and pink beeswax. Lady Winslow swiped it from her fingers and read it. "This is an invitation to Lady Beasley's! Willie, you've done it again! I told you Ellie would have said something."

The princess took the invitation and held it to the tip of her nose, scrunching her eyes. "It looks like Kesseley."

"Well it ain't! How embarrassing." Lady Winslow swept past Henrietta into the parlor and called over her shoulder, "Boxly, make that drink, the plum thing. I need to concentrate."

As the princess sauntered after her friend, her hips swung in natural sensual circles. "*Nous allons a* Lady Beasley?"

Lady Winslow took Henrietta's place on the sofa. "Good Lord, no! She has the worst art collection in London! It would be an assault to my delicate artistic sensibilities to suffer through an evening at her home."

"Lady Bertram's party, then?"

"At this early hour? No one goes there until at least midnight. We must content ourselves here." Lady Winslow's eyes scanned the room for something to while away the time. Finding nothing, she lit on Henrietta who sat on a rosewood chair with her hands clasped, feet touching, as if in church. Samuel curled under her feet.

"You are a quiet thing," Lady Winslow said. "And not homely. Have you no husband? Why are you Ellie's

companion?"

Henrietta tilted her head, pausing to think of a gracious reply to an ungracious remark. "I live near Lady Kesseley in Norfolk. She thought I could be of some assistance here in London."

A sly smile spread across Lady Winslow's face. "Hoping to catch a London husband on her hem, eh? Well, I suggest the shops. You would make a nice mousy wife to a draper or such."

Henrietta swallowed her anger before it rose out of her throat and formed regretful words. "Thank you," she choked out.

What vile star or planet had drifted into her astrological chart, setting everything asunder?

Boxly returned with a tray holding a decanter of deep amber liquid, three glasses and an open tin of bonbons. He poured each lady a glass, then retreated to the hall. Waiting.

Henrietta took a tentative sip, then another and another. It flowed through her like the heated waters of a Roman bath, slowing those spinning gears in her head. Relief. She tilted the glass back and drained it. Lady Winslow looked at her disapprovingly from under her raised thin eyebrows. What did Henrietta care?

Today couldn't get any worse, and she was leaving tomorrow.

Princess Wilhelmina popped a bonbon in her mouth.

"I certainly hope the modiste's measuring string is long enough to go around your waist," Lady Winslow warned.

Princess Wilhelmina smiled, bonbon still pouched in her cheek. "It makes my bosom *grands*. My waist *petite*." She cupped heavy breasts, then glanced at Lady Winslow's smaller charms. "Perhaps *tu manges du bonbons*."

Henrietta giggled. She couldn't help it.

"Well, I certainly don't think Ellie chose you for your enlightening conversation," Lady Winslow said.

More giggles.

Lady Winslow blew out a sigh of disgust. "Let us play whist to warm up for Lady Bertram's. Boxly! Bring cards. You will be this silly child's partner."

Boxly appeared instantly with cards, as if he had been anticipating the ladies. He removed the bust from the marble table, set it on the floor, then moved chairs about the table for Lady Winslow and the princess. Henrietta slid her own chair over, Samuel followed at

her heels, head down, tentative, as if he were scared.

The princess removed her bracelets and gloves, stacking them beside her. She deftly dealt the cards, turning the last one. A heart.

Henrietta had a nice run of hearts with a jack and an ace, a three of spades, a king and ten of diamonds, and a single of clubs. She yawned, suddenly drowsy, seeing the game play out before it even began. She would lose some tricks to weed out the singles, then win strong in the end, riding on her trumps.

"Your lead, child," Lady Winslow prompted. Henrietta laid down an eight of clubs that was quickly beaten by Lady Winslow's jack. Then Lady Winslow made the mistake of leading clubs again, allowing Henrietta to take control of the game, systematically relieving everyone of their trumps. Lady Winslow and the princess were far easier to beat than her father's mathematician friends, who calculated the statistical probability of every potential play.

When the outcome of the game was assured, Henrietta tossed her last four cards, bored with her card partners. "The rest are mine."

"That's not possible. You see, I have a ten of diamonds. It would have bested your six," Lady

Winslow cried.

"I would have played the six last, long after I had relieved you of your ten."

"How do you know? You can't guess my motives."

Henrietta sighed and recounted the entire game, revealing their hands from the cards they played or didn't play. As she listened to her words, she knew why her mother and father were astronomers. There was a comfort and dependability in numbers. Anything was explainable. It was all in finding the patterns. Nothing beyond all comprehension such as how to mend her heart or if she would ever learn to love another man.

Lady Winslow rose and went to the bureau desk, reached into a cubbyhole and pulled out a small, brown cheroot. She put the foul stick in her mouth and lit it on the wall sconce.

Henrietta's jaw flapped open.

Lady Winslow blew out a haze of smoke, then ran her tongue under her teeth, as if she were contemplating a bargain at market. "Rubber is best of five."

"I feel rather tired and—and I've had a horrid day and—and I'm going home tomorrow. So I need to sleep."

"Boxly, it is your deal," Lady Winslow said, unmoved.

The princess refilled Henrietta's glass, while the butler dealt the cards in the quick motion of a seasoned player.

The combination of annoyance and the plum miracle drove her to play faster and flamboyantly, as if to prove her superiority. She quickly took the rubber in two more games.

As the last card fell, Henrietta looked pointedly at the mantel clock. "Well, I guess you can go to Lady Bertram's now. It's nearly midnight. Enjoy yourselves."

"No, no. Let's have some more to drink. Look, Boxly, we are out, and I haven't felt it yet. You must have forgotten to add the brandy," Lady Winslow said.

Boxly nodded, expressionless, and whisked away the empty decanter.

Lady Winslow and the princess looked at each other. Lady Winslow lifted a questioning brow. The princess slanted her eyes toward Henrietta and then twirled a curl around her finger.

What?

Princess Wilhelmina took Henrietta's hand. "*Vous êtes ici* to find husband? *Non?*"

"I have a husband—I mean, I have received an offer

of marriage back home and I'm, well, considering it," she replied, extracting herself from the princess's grasp.

Lady Winslow threw her head back, letting out an expansive, throaty laugh. "You mean you are leaving some poor fool to cool his heels in the wild jungles of Norfolk while you come to London looking for a better offer. I do say, I like you." She leaned closer to Henrietta. "So now you must come to this little soiree. You can be our little companion. You know we share everything with Ellie."

"I can't. Lady Kesseley will be angry if I—"

"Don't worry about Ellie," Lady Winslow said, flicking her wrist. "She is far too sensitive. It's a bore. The slightest thing upsets her."

"*Oui, elle est très triste*. Her heart is broken." The princess's pillowy lips drooped with sympathy.

"Yes, of course, how sad about the late Lord Kesseley," Henrietta said, adding another pin to her mental pincushion of guilt.

Lady Winslow frowned in confusion. "The late Lord Kesseley?"

"*L'homme terrible!*" the princess added.

"Her heart was broken long before her husband,"

Lady Winslow explained. "It's some horrid family secret she can't tell. Quite gothic. You know how she enjoys being tragic." Lady Winslow waved her hand, dismissing the topic. "But you and the night are young, my darling. Do come out. You can't sit here all night, alone and miserable, when there is music and dancing. Come. We will tell Ellie. She won't be angry."

Boxly reappeared with a full decanter, took Henrietta's glass and filled it just shy of the rim. Lady Winslow and the princess waited as Henrietta took a sip. It roared through her body like fire, burning away her headache, as well as the remainder of her better sense.

Samuel began to whimper and rub his nose on her leg. She nudged him away.

Lady Winslow and the princess were right. She had nothing else to lose. She couldn't make Edward love her again or keep Kesseley happy. Why not just give up? Fling everything to the wind. She was in London after all. London! She needed one night in this wild, loud heaven to remember all those years she would be married to Mr. Van Heerlen.

These emboldened thoughts swept her into Lady Winslow's carriage and through the streets of Mayfair,

then ran away like a frightened hound with its tail between its legs before the lines of fashionable people entering a white mansion towering over Green Park. Gazing upon the elegant ladies with bared shoulders in silk and lace, an anxious thought exploded in Henrietta's head.

What if Edward were there?

She looked down at her plain gown covered with brown Samuel fur. What was she thinking leaving the house in this rag? This was not a gown of triumph, not the breezy *Oh-hello-I-didn't-know-you-were-going-to-Lady-Bertram's-party* kind of gown. This was the comforting gown you huddled in while sobbing into a handkerchief, your fingers leafing through fading letters and poems.

"I can't go. I can't. Please take me back," she cried, digging in her heel at the entrance.

"Mais, nous sommes ici!"

"But my gown—"

"Your gown is perfect," Lady Winslow assured her. "Country innocence is all the rage."

The princess gripped her arm. "You are a sweet little German girl, like me."

A grand staircase with a gilded scrolling balustrade

rose like a big wave to the upper floors. Henrietta felt seasick gazing upon it. The princess and Lady Winslow held her tight and pulled her up the stairs. They passed two stationed footmen entering a garish turquoise drawing room. Henrietta's heart fell. There was no orchestra, no dancing, no young people. Just seven or so round card tables spaced evenly through the room.

It wasn't London at all! They had taken her to a dull old card party!

Lady Winslow scanned the crowd. "There's Lady Bertram, that bold whore!"

Maybe not so dull after all.

Henrietta followed Lady Winslow's gaze to the card table where the hostess smiled tightly to acknowledge their entrance. Henrietta was struck at how much Lady Bertram resembled Lady Kesseley, like a poor imitation of an original. Same hair and eyes, yet Lady Bertram was more pretty than beautiful.

"Look at her!" Lady Winslow said, her voice darkening. "Flaunting her diamonds, thinking she is better than everyone because Lord Damien gave them to her."

Henrietta squinted to see the tiny necklace around

Lady Bertram's neck.

"*Oui*, they are her lucky diamonds, and Lady Bertram never loses at cards," swore the princess. "Never."

"That's a statistical improbability," Henrietta pointed out.

"What the princess means to say, ~~we~~ we have never beat Lady Bertram at cards—or anything else." Lady Winslow's eyes glittered dangerously. "Until tonight. Now, this is how we shall do it, darlings. Wilhelmina and I shall play one rubber and begin the second. After the first game of the second rubber, the one of us who is not lucky, must motion like this—" she twirled her earring, "—and say how very tired I am this evening. That is when you—" she pointed to Henrietta, "— come rushing forward, saying *please may I help you, do you require a drink*—whatever companions do. Then you must finish the hand."

"This isn't right," Henrietta stated.

"I can assure you there is not one lady in this room who would not relish seeing Lady Bertram lose. Not one."

"*Oui!*"

Lady Winslow wagged a finger before Henrietta's face. "Now, when you're playing cards, don't make it look too obvious. Be more—more Norfolk. Understand?"

"What is more Norfolk?" Henrietta asked.

"Backwards, be more backwards!" Lady Winslow elaborated.

"I'm not backwards! People in Norfolk aren't backwards!"

"How would you know, darling? Oh, oh, the table is changing. Come, princess." The two hurried away, leaving Henrietta to ponder her backwardness.

Lady Winslow and the princess greeted the hostess in the French manner, kissing either cheek. Sitting down, Lady Bertram ran her fingers over her jewelry as if to taunt her card partners. Lady Winslow peeked at Henrietta, the corner of her lip lifted.

Henrietta found a vacant space on a bright shiny sofa beside two elderly ladies. It took two cups of black tea, three biscuits and a lengthy conversation about which apothecaries in London best treated constipation for Lady Winslow and the princess to lose the first rubber.

By then Henrietta had recovered enough good

sense to know she should never have agreed to this scheme. However, it was too late, for Princess Wilhelmina was looking about, practically pulling her ear off. Henrietta hurried over.

"You do not feel well, princess," she said. "I can see you are flushed, perhaps you should sit on the sofa."

"Henrietta dear, play out the rubber," Lady Winslow suggested casually. "May I introduce our dear little companion, Miss Henrietta Watson. She is from Norfolk. Isn't she sweet?"

Henrietta curtsied for Lady Bertram. "I like cards. I play all the time with Papa since there is so little to do in Norfolk. That's why we're so backwards."

Lady Bertram considered her, her fingers caressing her diamonds. It was a heavy old necklace, the kind one of Henry the Eighth's wives would have worn—while they still had necks, of course. The pale gems gleaming in the candlelight matched Lady Bertram's eyes.

"You may finish the rubber," Lady Bertram said like an acquiescing queen.

"I like whist. What a jolly game!" Henrietta sat down.

"And such pretty cards. Oops! I dropped one." Henrietta giggled, picked up the fallen jack and restored it to her hand.

Lady Bertram's partner, an animated matron with silvery gray hair and twinkling eyes, led the game. Henrietta flipped any old card that matched suit, while watching Lady Bertram play. She always rubbed her necklace before choosing a card, as if it were some sort of crystal ball guiding her choices.

"What a beautiful necklace," Henrietta said. "I can't help but admire it."

"Thank you. They are from a dear, dear *friend*," Lady Bertram said, her voice smooth and low, like a purring cat.

Lady Winslow played a seven of spades. "But you have so many dear *friends*, do you not, Lady Bertram? How can you remember any one friend in particular?"

"This one was the dearest. Oh, how my *friend* made me feel. How I love and cherished that *friend*." She smiled at Lady Winslow, playing the king of spades over Lady Winslow's seven. "Some spend a lifetime only wishing they had such a *friend*."

"Speaking of Lord Damien, I just read *The*

Mysterious Lord Blackraven,” Lady Bertram’s partner said, tossing a worthless heart on the pile.

“I adore that book!” Henrietta cried.

“The likeness between Lord Blackraven and Lord Damien was so striking that twice I had to remove myself from the fireplace for fear of overheating.” The graying lady fanned herself with her cards, flushed. “After almost thirty years—”

“Twenty-five,” Lady Bertram corrected.

“—and he still gets me right here,” she said, poking her chest.

“You mean Lord Blackraven is based on a real man!” Henrietta exclaimed.

“Lord Damien was more than a man,” Lady Bertram replied, a smug, knowing smile curling her face. “A mortal god. Like—like—”

“Theseus, Hercules, Achilles,” Lady Winslow supplied. “Looking at Lord Damien was like looking at the surface of deep, dark water. Mysterious and enigmatic. Leaving you longing to know what lay underneath.”

“These young ladies and their dandy rakes.” Lady Bertram’s partner held up a bejeweled finger. “Show me just one rake today who could stand up to Lord

Damien's muster. I feel sorry for these poor young ladies out now. To never know a real rake. I wish Lord Damien would come back from wherever he fled if just to show these tulips how it's done. Now there was man who could steal your heart and break it in one afternoon, leaving you begging for him to do it all over again the next day. I will never forget our honeymoon—"

"You were married to Lord Blackraven!" Henrietta cried. "I mean, Lord Damien."

"Of course not. I was married to Lord Travis, so I had to do something," she said as she played the last card, taking the trick. "Well, my young dear from Norfolk, I'm afraid we have set you two. This may be a fast rubber, despite your love of cards."

"Yes, please mind the trumps. Do not waste yours if someone has clearly overtrumped you. You will need them for later," Lady Bertram said like a benevolent mother. "That is a lesson to you. Always remember your cards."

"Yes, my lady, thank you. We get to play one more time, don't we? Maybe I can do better."

"Yes, one more time." Lady Bertram stifled a yawn in her fist while Lady Winslow shuffled and dealt.

Lady Bertram led with a diamond. Henrietta

trumped it.

“Breaking trumps already?” Lady Bertram cried, outraged.

Henrietta gave her a backwards smile.

“They took her to Lady Bertram’s?” Mama shouted at their butler. “She’s just a little innocent! She’s never been to London! How dare they! She mustn’t find out about—” Lady Kesseley looked at her son. “You must find her.”

“Boxly, call my horse!” Kesseley’s blood raced through his body. He bolted out the door, never bothering to replace his hat or coat. A shiny black town carriage ambled around the corner. Inside, female voices were singing so loudly, they echoed down the street.

The crested carriage pulled to a stop and a handsome young footman stepped down and opened the door. Henrietta missed the footman’s outstretched hand and spilled onto the pavement at Kesseley’s feet.

He pulled her up. She was laughing, her muscles loose with drunkenness. She clung to him, her warm, plum-scented breath on his face.

"I learned this darling little song. Listen.
*Therefore, in jolly chorus now
Let's chaunt it altogether,
And let each cull's and doxy's heart
Be lighter than a feather,
And as the kelter runs quite flush—*"

Kesseley tossed her into his arms, removing her before the neighbors heard anymore. Lady Kesseley waited in the hall, her face tight and red.

"I beat Lord Blackraven's dear *friend* at cards." Henrietta said. She giggled, her whole body shaking in his arms. "She never loses when she wears Lord Damien's diamonds." Her glossy eyes widened. "Did you know Lord Blackraven is really Lord Damien?"

"Take her to bed! I do not want to hear that horrid rake's name in my home," Lady Kesseley cried, turning away, disgusted.

"Ellie, don't you dare get angry at our dear little companion!" Lady Winslow warned from the door.

Mama stared at her friend. "Kesseley, leave us."
In the stairwell, Henrietta started singing again,
*"Like natty shining kiddies
To treat the coaxing, giggling brims—"*

“Hush now, that’s enough,” Kesseley whispered.

She lifted her arms and put them around his neck, snuggling close until her nose rested just below his chin.

“Hmm, you smell like apple blossoms and leather,” she whispered. Her lips were so close they brushed his skin.

His throat tightened. His eyes started to burn.

He twisted the knob on her door with one hand, then swung it open with his foot. He pulled her into the darkness, then against all decency and manners, held her small body against his. He buried his face in her curls, closed his eyes and rocked her—slowly, tenderly—her touch a balm to all his hurt.

“Henrietta,” he whispered. “Oh, Henrietta.”

She turned her head and took a fistful of his hair, pulling his head to hers.

No, no, I can't, he thought. *Not this way.*

She raised her mouth, taking his upper lip between hers.

Kesseley couldn't move. He shouldn't let this happen. She didn't know what she was doing.

She released his lip and murmured something he couldn't understand, then took his lips again, her mouth

open, her warm, wet tongue slowly running under his teeth.

He shouldn't let her. It was against every trust, every gentleman's code of honor.

Her hand tightened around his curls, and she thrust her breasts against him, straining, her lips moving faster, deeper, tasting him. Clumsy with inexperience, yet driven by instinct. It would be so easy to kiss her back, lay himself on top of her. Feel her softness under his hard muscles, lose himself in her dark cinnamon scent.

His cock was swelling, rising.

He couldn't.

He wouldn't.

Kesseley heard the quiet footsteps of a female servant coming up the stairs.

He laid Henrietta onto the bed, letting his hand linger on her waist, one last moment holding her. She drew up her legs, cuddling around him. Her face turned up to his, so pale and beautiful in the shadows. He ran his hand up her body, then brushed her cheek with the back of his palm.

"Edward," she whispered.

The single word crashed like thunder in Kesseley's

ears.

He stumbled back, colliding with a small bedside table, knocking off its contents. He heard the shatter of glass. She didn't move, falling into drunken sleep.

He turned and fled.

What the hell had he done?

He sat up on the edge of his father's bed and hung his head in his hands. He tried to calm his breathing.

Why didn't you stop her?

He stood up and paced.

Are you so bloody pathetic you'll pretend to be another man just to get her affection?

He could almost hear his father yelling at him, just like he had on Kesseley's fourteenth birthday when he'd had taken Kesseley to a brothel to celebrate. "Damn it, be a man, you cully boy!" he shouted at the sniffling adolescent.

Kesseley spun and stared angrily at his father's portrait. His eyes met his father's painted ones, evenly, unflinchingly, as they never had in life.

What, Father? Is being a man raping your dearest friend because she loves someone else? Because she could never love you—

His father just stared back.

Something began to turn inside him, years of futility and hurt heaped like leaves, grass and slop upon his manure pile—teeming, decaying, breaking down. Something was emerging, sprouting from the depths. It felt like anger, except colder, duller. Truth.

He had to find someone else, even as he loved her. He was a young man, but his heart was tired, feeble, unable to keep up anymore. He had to let her go.

But how the hell would he explain everything to Henrietta in the morning?

Chapter Eleven

“Miss Watson,” a female voice whispered.

Henrietta opened her eyes. She could just see the fuzzy outline of her crisp maidservant in the morning light. Ughhh, Henrietta’s head felt as if it would burst open and grow new heads. Dizzy, she turned and buried her face in her pillow.

“My lady wants to see you in the parlor,” the servant said.

I’m sure she does.

“She asked that you drink this. Mr. Boxly made it.”

Henrietta carefully opened one eye and peered at the thick, orange substance in a glass sitting on the table, beside the miniature of her mother. The glass was cracked across her mother’s face.

She took the picture into her hand. What had happened?

Having dressed and ingested the vile substance that tasted of anchovies, raw egg and tomato, Henrietta walked timidly into the parlor, not knowing what to expect but imagining the worst.

Lady Kesseley sat at her desk, writing. Calm. The smell of her tea and biscuit unsettled the foul orange drink sloshing about in Henrietta's belly.

"Good morning, Lady Kesseley." Henrietta curtsied.

Lady Kesseley didn't acknowledge her and continued to write, leaving Henrietta at a loss whether to sit, stand, or get on her knees, confess to the crime and plead for a quick, painless execution.

Lady Kesseley returned her pen to the inkwell and set her correspondence aside. "Miss Watson, do you know we are judged by the company we keep?"

"But I thought they were your friends and I thought—I mean—your friends were respectable."

Lady Kesseley's head whipped around. "My friends are extremely respectable! What are you insinuating?"

"Nothing!"

The corner of Lady Kesseley's mouth twitched. "In any case, we are not talking about Lady Winslow and the princess. It is your company that concerns me."

"Oh."

Lady Kesseley stood and began to pace, her footfalls reverberating in Henrietta's ailing brain. "Tell me, how will my son marry a lady of respectable name and prospect when my companion openly gambles

and drinks to the point of inebriation in one of the finest homes in London, then stumbles home singing abhorrent canting songs?”

“I’m sorry.” To her own shock, Henrietta burst into violent, hiccupping sobs. “I didn’t mean to hurt Kesseley. I’m so sorry. Edward doesn’t love me. I’m going to leave. I won’t cause any more trouble. I’m a horrid person.”

Lady Kesseley sat down beside her. “Are you ready for the man waiting for you in Norfolk?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you should know, since I doubt he is a man who will be put off.”

“I feel some affection for Mr. Van Heerlen, but I’m not sure it is enough for marriage.” Henrietta searched Lady Kesseley’s face, hoping for a small scrap of motherly wisdom. Given Lady Kesseley’s feelings toward her, Henrietta doubted she would be so generous, but she had no one else to help her. “Do you think love can grow over time? That you will come to see how perfect someone is for you?”

“No.”

“What should I do?” Henrietta cried. “Please help me.”

Lady Kesseley studied her, some emotion Henrietta couldn't make out moved over her pale eyes. "Stay here."

"But no one wants me. And I'm disgraced!"

"Disgraced?" Lady Kesseley said incredulously. She walked to her desk and lifted a large stack of letters. "We've been invited to every card party in London." She gazed down at the invitations and ran her thumb over a blue wax seal. "Your mother welcomed my son into her home and you should stay in mine."

Kesseley made it out of the house without seeing Henrietta. Guilt dragged him down, ruining the beautiful sky stretching over his head. He knew he had to talk to her, but couldn't bring himself to do it first thing in the morning, when he was still so weak. He needed to get away, strengthen his resolve.

But she had kissed him. And there was something true in that kiss, no matter whose name she had whispered.

Can you let go of your sad, pathetic hope? She

doesn't love you. When will you learn your lesson, you wretched loggerhead?

Kesseley slunk down Curzon Street like a fugitive, his hat low, coat buttoned up. After the comment from Lady Sara and her friends, he was acutely aware of how different he looked from the fops strolling about him in their gleaming white shirts, unblemished, not even the tiniest stain of preserves or butter from breakfast. And their pants! So tight they could scarce walk. Even the skinny ones. Why would they want to advertise their spindly legs?

Their eyes raked over him as he passed, their lips quivered with amusement. Kesseley felt like the human oddity at the fair—comical by simply existing.

He pulled out Henrietta's list of merchants. Tailors, boot makers, glove makers, hatters. She said he could look better than all of those fops if he tried. And damn it, he was going to try.

Until he got to Schweitzer and Davidson and lost his nerve.

He couldn't do this. He wanted to go home—really home—to Wrenthorpe. Back to his cows and pigs and fields. To the things that were real, not this flimsily constructed pretend world of Lady Sara and her

friends that revolved on the cut of a suitor's coat or his fancy words.

To hell with it! He was better than that.

He wadded up the paper in his fist, turned and walked back to the end of the block. Then he stopped, cursing himself.

For God sakes, it's not like you're turning into your father. It's just clothes. Don't you want a lady? Don't you want to forget Henrietta?

He stomped back and swung open the tailor's door. On a ladder, a thin pale man with glasses restored a bolt of cloth. He looked at Kesseley, his face pinched with disapproval, as if a vagrant had wandered into his store.

"Pardon, we do not—"

"I am the Earl of Kesseley. I need some clothes that look better than what I am wearing."

The little man's gaping mouth let out a shrill sound, like escaping steam from one of those mechanical engines.

"You make clothes, don't you?" Kesseley asked.

The tailor rushed forward. "Yes, of course. Please forgive me. You see, I am finishing with a client—it will only be a moment, a small moment. Let me call my

assistant—my *esteemed* assistant.” He ducked his head behind a curtain. A moment later, a tall, blond man stepped out. He froze when he saw Kesseley, his left upper lip raised like a beastly snarl.

“*Ein Mann, ein sehr attraktiver Mann,*” he said, his bright eyes roaming up and down Kesseley’s body with unconcealed admiration. “Magnificent.”

Kesseley felt uncomfortable. “Maybe I should come back some other time.”

“*Nein. Diese ist die perfekte* time. You are my destiny.”

“I need to be leaving now.” Kesseley turned for the door, but the tailor stepped ahead of him, blocking the exit.

“*Nein! Bleiben Sie bitte!* Stay. I will make you desired by *allen Männer und Frauen.*”

“Ladies?”

The man put a strong arm on Kesseley’s shoulder and spun him around. “*Ja, they will drawn to your Pracht. Kommen Sie bitte.* I show you.”

“If you’re sure women will be attracted to my—hmm—*Pracht.*”

Kesseley followed the man up a flight of stairs to a

paneled room lined with pictures of pugilists, dogs and hunts. The tailor took Kesseley's hat and gloves, depositing them on the table. Then he removed Kesseley's coats and cravat, pinching them between his forefinger and thumb—like some infant's fouled cloths—and draped them beside Kesseley's hat.

The tailor's fingers moved with an engineer's precision, wrapping the measuring tape about Kesseley's body, then entering numbers into the small ledger, all while he murmured Germanic praise. *Schön. Großartig. Vorzüglich.*

When he had finished, he snapped the ledger shut, then gripped the measuring tape in his palm and circled it around his fist. "I will be a moment. Shall I send for *eine Dime?*"

"A whore?" Kesseley translated.

"Ja."

Kesseley colored. "*Nein danke.*"

The man raised the edge of his lip. "As you wish."

Kesseley waited, the whole time pondering his tailor's question. His muscles felt tight, especially after last night. Maybe a girl was exactly what he needed. A sweet, fair thing the opposite of Henrietta, who knew

only one word: yes. It would make this whole London affair a little more bearable.

He should add it to his list. *Courtesan*. He wagered Henrietta hadn't researched that one for him.

His tailor returned with two other men hidden under the bolts of fabric they carried. They stacked the fabric onto the table, building a pyramid of tans, blacks and blues.

For two hours the tailor held Kesseley captive, draping fabric down Kesseley's chest— this blue too yellow, this blue too green. *What the hell? It's blue!* But after a while, Kesseley just smiled and nodded his head. He might as well have gone to a tailor in Siam for all the sense this man was making.

Maybe he shouldn't have been so agreeable, he thought, when he got the bill. Somehow he had managed to purchase four coats, three doeskins, three pantaloons, two evening coats and two breeches. He could build a barn for the same cost!

The tailor restored Kesseley to his previous clothes, although it clearly pained him. "I rush your order! *Wir machen* only your clothes! Come back tomorrow for fitting," he said, as his hands tugged on Kesseley's

cravat. "*Sehr guter Knoten*. Remember." He stepped out of the way and let Kesseley look at his work in the long mirror.

"How did you do that?" he marveled. His cravat stood straight up with an elegant knot, like those dandies on the street. But it didn't look so foppish on him. He quite liked it as he looked at it from different angles. Could Baggot and he produce the same between their three hands?

Before taking his leave, he drew out Henrietta's crumpled list and showed it to the tailor. The German scanned the line with his index finger, saying "*nein, nein, nein*." He shook his head, crumpled the list and threw it away.

"I tell you where to go." He tore a sheet out of his ledger, wrote a list of merchants and handed it to Kesseley, pointing with his pen to two names and addresses at the very bottom.

"This is my sister," he said. "She makes very good shirts. She will make a dozen shirts and cravats for you. This is my brother, Frans. He is very good valet. Send for him."

Back on Cork Street, the temporary reprieve from guilt was over. Henrietta was probably at home,

cursing his name. What the hell was he going to say?

Sorry, I am so frustrated and insanely in love with you that I couldn't stop myself, even when you called me Edward.

His father would never be so pathetic. For a small moment, Kesseley imagined he possessed the scruples of his late father, and that last night he had pulled up Henrietta's gown and drove himself into her until all his frustration burst out of him. And then afterward—no remorse.

Everything about last night—about him—was wrong.

He couldn't face her yet. He unfolded the tailor's list, read the addresses, then headed to New Bond Street. By four, he had ordered three pairs of gloves, three boots, four hats and a dozen new stockings to replace all the old ones with holes in the toes. He had managed to physically avoid Henrietta all day, even though the memory of her lips and the feel of her breasts pushing against him plagued the entire afternoon.

He required one last item. After that onerous purchase, he would have to face her.

He stopped outside the long windows of Hatchard's

bookstore. He was afraid to ask Henrietta for her copy of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*. She just might throw the volumes at him. And besides, she wouldn't want him to scribble his notes all over her pages.

He took a deep breath, as if to go underwater. Then he lowered his hat, pulled up his coat collar and opened the door.

He found F authors on the third floor. Unfortunately the shop was cramped, and the customers rubbed elbows along the shelves. He couldn't buy the bloody novel without being seen. He went downstairs and grabbed a copy of Arthur Young's *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk*, then returned to the G shelves and pretended to read about plowing depths while slowly inching over to *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*. He was almost there, one quick grab and—

"Are you buying *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*? It's my favorite book!" said a matronly, plump woman in a leghorn hat with flattened, faded roses. "You know, gentlemen usually don't buy romance novels. My husband doesn't. Calls them the inferior fruits of a woman's mind. I daresay he could learn a thing or two

if he did, read them that is.”

Kesseley panicked. He couldn't get away, not without being impolite.

The woman continued. “There is a wonderful chapter in the book where the heroine is tricked by her betrothed into riding a wild horse. It runs away with her, and we think certainly she will die, but Blackraven gallops after her, pulling her onto his stallion. He saves her life, even though he despises her, because he thinks she loves his half brother. I must say, the half brother is a horrible man. He deserved to accidentally fall off that cliff when he was dueling Blackraven!”

Several other ladies within earshot agreed, rushing forward to join the conversation, trapping him against the bookshelf. It became a regular little literary circle. The lady in the leghorn hat felt it appropriate to introduce Kesseley as the gentleman who enjoys romance novels, causing the man two shelves over to snort in derision.

“I wish my husband liked sentimental novels,” said the tired woman holding a fat, wiggling baby. “Your wife is very lucky indeed.”

“Oh, I'm not married,” replied Kesseley before he could think better of it.

Someone might as well have stood on a chair and announced to all the married ladies in the store that a pathetic gentleman buying *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* on the third floor desperately needed marital advice.

An hour later, he left Hatchard's significantly more enlightened than when he had entered. In the crook of his arm rested the three volumes of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* safely concealed in paper. He planned to study Lord Blackraven with the same scientific intensity that he did his soil composition. Break Blackraven down to his core components and experiment with his ratios.

What was it about Lord Blackraven that ladies craved? He was mean to the point of cruelty, violent and nearly insane. He could hold a grudge longer than anyone Kesseley knew. He lived alone in a ramshackle castle without making a single improvement to the property value. He was like some demonic variation of Kesseley's father, except for the solitary part. The late Lord Kesseley had rarely been alone, and certainly not in his bed.

Kesseley contemplated the paradox on his way home. It was a mystery.

Damn it! Wait. *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*.
Mysterious.

Epiphany!

Ladies didn't require some unknown continent to explore or virgin mountain peak to reach. They just needed a *mysterious* male who refused to be conquered. Never mind that he's Bedlamite, hell, even better. It was the mystery. The unknown that supposedly holds the answers to our heart's yearnings.

But the mystery was a lie! Blackraven could no more love another human being than Kesseley's father could. It was as delusional as believing the right cut of coat or the way one tied a cravat raised one above the misery of humanity.

Maybe chasing the mystery keeps us blind to the ugly truth in ourselves, Kesseley thought, as he watched Henrietta through the window of his townhome. She sat alone in the parlor, reading by the fireplace. The firelight shimmered on the pretty raven locks falling about her face. She seemed so serene, as if untouched by the night before.

What he felt for her wasn't a mystery—it was real—and it didn't make sense to let go of anything real.

Like when Arabellina said she recognized Lord Blackraven by his soul—

Oh dear God, he was comparing his life to a romance novel!

He couldn't do this anymore.

He opened the door. His shoulders were weary, but he was resolved. He would apologize and give her his word never to press his romantic intentions upon her again. Then he'd get a mistress or a wife, whichever came first.

She must have seen him from outside, for she was standing in the hall when he entered, her book cradled in her elbow and a hopeful, yet pensive, look upon her face.

"We've been waiting for you," she said. "I was worried. Are you well?" She gazed at him, concerned, a bit tired, but overall purely ignorant.

She didn't remember!

Suddenly everything he felt—all the sadness, anxiety, frustration and despondency—crystallized into a white hot bolt of anger. *Are you well?* she had asked. *Hell no! Your lips were all over mine last night. It took every bit of restraint I had to be a gentleman. Then you called me Edward. I've had this weighing on me*

all day, aside from being poked and measured like a head of cattle, then humiliated at Hatchard's. Let's not even mention the incident involving Miss Barten's toe and the palm plant. No, I am not well!

"I was at the club," he said.

Her raised, expectant eyebrows hinted that she wanted him to continue. He didn't.

"I just stayed here," she said. "Reading."

He looked closely at the book in her arm. Edward's poetry, complete with dried flowers poking out of the pages. Kesseley brushed past her, angry at her, angrier at himself. What a pathetic fool he was.

She followed him, speaking to his back. "I've been invited to the ball this evening. Your mother says I can go. I'll be playing cards, but I hope that you might save one dance for me."

"I'm sorry, but I can't," he said.

"Why?"

He spun around, his words exploding out of him. "Miss Watson, I am not a boy! I'm a man! Do you understand? I am here to find a wife, not be your dance partner or your shoulder to cry on, or your—your—" He threw up his hands. He could strangle her. "Last night

you—I put you—we—damn it! Do you remember nothing?”

She bit her lip, still slightly swollen, and bowed her head. “I know. I shouldn’t have gone to the card party.”

“That wasn’t the only thing you shouldn’t have done!” He stormed away from her, not looking back.

Safe in his chamber, Kesseley sat at his desk, surrounded by his ledgers. He pulled the first volume of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven* from its paper. The spine was stiff. He cracked it, bending the cover completely backward. He usually wasn’t so rough with his books, but this wasn’t about enjoyment, he thought, as he dipped his pen in the ink and began underlining:

Despite dire warning of Lord Blackraven’s dark ambitions, Arabellina could not believe one man capable of the crimes attributed to him. Upon the first meeting of this beast of a man with his hooded eyes and flying hair, Arabellina felt a shiver of terror run through her. Yet, dear reader, it was in that second look, the one that sees beyond the surface, into the deeper soul of existence, that she could see a small

light burning in the darkness, and she instinctively knew only she could solve the mystery of his blackened soul.

Kesseley wrote *beast, shiver, terror and mystery* in the margins, then kept reading.

An hour later, Baggot tapped on the door. Kesseley marked his place in his book and concealed it under his ledger. He shuffled through the papers Henrietta gave him, finding what he wanted—a print of a dandy with those windblown curls everyone sported.

He locked his desk. “Come in,” he called to Baggot. The valet entered, holding Kesseley’s evening clothes on his arm. He laid them on the bed, muttering the inventory under his breath. “Shirt, collar, coat—”

“I’ve been thinking since coming here that I might like a different hairstyle. What do you think of this picture?” Kesseley handed the picture to his valet.

Baggot scrunched his eyes. “Them curls look like a girl’s.”

“They do not! I’ve seen many gentlemen wearing their hair this way. It’s quite stylish.”

"You're going to need some papers to get those kind of curls."

"My hair already curls. We just have to brush it correctly."

Kesseley walked over to the mirror and looked at himself, then the picture. He had never really compared himself to another man. His face was leaner, his jaw squarer, everything harder than the rosebud-lipped fop in the picture. He took his brush and tried to subdue his curls into poetic windblown locks. It didn't work. His hair only stuck together like a big brown bush.

Baggot spit twice in his hand and reached for Kesseley's hair. Kesseley recoiled. "Don't you dare put your spit in my hair!"

"That's how 'em girls make curls."

Kesseley licked his finger and wound a curl about it. Weren't ladies clever! It made a pretty little ringlet, like a pigtail on his forehead. "Ain't it dandy!" He made a row of little curls across his forehead.

"I picked out these nice clothes for you," Baggot said.

Kesseley looked closely at the shirt. It had a big yellow stain on the front. When he pointed at it, his valet only shrugged. "No one will see it. It will be under your

coat.”

When Baggot held out the cravat, Kesseley spoke without thinking. “At the tailor’s today, he showed me—”

“You went to a tailor without telling me!”

Kesseley had stepped right into it. “It was just a quick visit.”

“But I’m your valet.” Baggot’s big drooping lips began to shake.

“I didn’t plan it. It just happened. Anyway he showed me a new knot for my cravat.”

His scraggly eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “A new knot? I can’t do a new knot. I only have one hand and—”

“Fine. Fine. Forget the new knot.” Kesseley sighed, defeated.

Baggot smiled, his small world restored. “The old one is best for you. Not too dandy. Here.” He held out the end of the neck cloth. Kesseley took it as Baggot wound the other end under. Then Kesseley relinquished his end and took the other. Their old dance. When it was done, the cravat lay limp, like wilted cabbage around his neck.

“Don’t that look nice!” Baggot commented.

"Yes," Kesseley said, more tersely than he intended. "That will be all, thank you." The man hesitated.

"That will be all," he repeated with more force.

Baggot scurried away liked an admonished child. Kesseley hung his head in his hands. Why was it so damn hard to have something exactly like he wanted it? It seemed everyone had a little hook in him, pulling him in every direction.

He felt like a cheating husband when he drew the paper out of his desk and began a letter to the tailor's valet brother Frans, requesting his services. He could feel Baggot's hurt and guilt tugging at him. But damn it, the man couldn't do his job. Just how much longer must Kesseley suffer fools?

He would have two valets.

He folded the note and stuck it inside his coat to give to the footman and left. Coming around the stairwell, Henrietta came out of her chamber in her evening gown, looking, well, beautiful.

"Good God!" she cried when she saw him.

"What?"

She couldn't seem to speak, as if horrified beyond words. She just moved her hands about her hair and cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing! It’s just—just—”

“Just what?”

She touched his curls. “Let me help.”

“No.” He grabbed her wrist, stopping her. “I thought you wanted me to look like a fop.”

Kesseley just sat in the carriage with his silly curls, stiff and silent as a wall. He refused to talk to her, except a tight, begrudging compliment that her gown was “nice.” It was her best, an ivory tulle dotted with small white flowers and a matching sprig of flowers in her hair. She would have preferred *beautiful* or *lovely*, but perhaps a mere “nice” might be the best she could expect after the horrible exchange in the hall.

She should have realized Kesseley was trying to improve and been encouraging. Why didn’t she think? She always said the wrong thing!

Grosvenor Square was crammed with carriages stopped at every door. Soft gold light fell from the stories and stories of windows, making the thick, foggy air almost luminescent. Music from multiple orchestras mingled in the square.

The carriage swerved, finding an opening in the line and stopping before a red brick home with pilasters rising to the roof. The footman opened the door. Henrietta stepped out of the carriage first. The temperature had dropped, chilling her under her fashionable, yet very impractical spencer. She rubbed her arms with her hands.

“Are you cold?” Kesseley asked as he stepped down. The sound of his voice flooded her with relief. He had spoken to her! Almost kindly. She smiled.

His jaw stiffened as he offered his arm.

She took it, clutching on to him as the door opened to the magnificent entrance. All her sad thoughts momentarily vanished in the grandeur. The oval entrance reached up four flights to a white domed ceiling embellished with gilt hexagons and diamonds. The balustered stairs rose to the first floor, then split into two, crisscrossing like loose ribbons to the upper balconies.

The host and hostess came toward them. Quick introductions were made and the hostess, a wisp of a woman with slanting eyes in a pinched face, kissed Lady Kesseley's cheek.

“You get more beautiful every year. I'm terribly

jealous,” she said, then switched her attention to Henrietta. “And this must be your companion everyone is talking about. We’ve been waiting on you.”

Her husband was squat man with a happy round face. “Lord Kesseley, welcome to our home. I read your impressive article in the *Journal of Agriculture* just this morning.” He put his hand on Kesseley’s shoulders and drew everyone up the stairs to the first floor balcony.

They passed two enormous doors which opened into the ballroom. Henrietta glanced inside and saw beautiful couples sweeping across the floors in a graceful minuet. Edward and Lady Sara circled each other, hands clasped. Had not Lady Kesseley and the hostess been holding Henrietta, she would have stumbled.

Inside the card room all eyes turned to Henrietta.

“You shall be my partner,” the hostess said and led her to the center table. Guests crowded around as the cards were dealt.

Henrietta felt like an actress suddenly thrust on stage without knowing her part. The cards shook in her hand. What did these numbers mean? All she could see was Lady Sara in Edward’s arms. She scanned

the room until she saw Kesseley, leaning against the wall by the door. His arms were crossed at his chest and those ridiculous curls drooped into his eyes. Knowing her old friend was there eased her mind. Her racing thoughts slowed to an easy flow. She took a slow breath, everything coming back, the numbers, the moves, the possibilities. She laid the ace of diamonds on the table.

Kesseley knew Henrietta would win. As applause broke out in the room, he quietly slipped out the door to the ballroom.

Let her go, he reminded himself again as he looked upon the minuet dancers. He nervously brushed away one of his saliva-stiffened curls.

Just find a nice girl. No one too fancy. A wallflower that would appreciate some attention. Plain and sweet with an approachable chaperone.

But it was unavoidable, he was drawn to the most beautiful of them all. Lady Sara waited in the center of the room on a sofa. Her friends clustered about her.

As if realizing she was being watched, she turned

her head and her eyes met his. Kesseley held her gaze, daring her to give him that false smile of hers. She whispered something to her friends and they broke into giggles.

He ground his molars together. *To hell with them!*

He grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing footman to steel himself. He longed to go back to the safety of the card room, but forced himself to stay in the deep cold waters of the ballroom until he danced with at least one lady who wasn't Henrietta. Over the edge of his wine glass, he scanned the room for this kind, compassionate angel, only to come face to face with Edward.

Without Lady Sara at his side, he seemed a little more sheepish. He cautiously approached and bowed. "Good evening, Lord Kesseley."

Kesseley nodded.

"Sporting a hairstyle, heh?" He chuckled. Kesseley didn't laugh. He took another sip and looked over Edward's shoulders at the dancers.

Edward still dangled about despite the cold reception, as if he wanted to say something, but couldn't. He spotted Lady Sara and his face flushed. "Isn't she magnificent?"

"In some aspects."

"I wanted to know. Is Henrietta—"

"Miss Watson," Kesseley corrected him.

"Is *Cousin* Henrietta really your mama's companion? Is she staying at your London home?"

"Yes."

Edward bit down on his index finger, some anxious thought creasing his face. "I'm going to visit her. Tomorrow. I just wanted to know, is she very hurt? Does she think I'm a blackguard?" He seemed truly concerned, yet at the same time, somewhat flattered to have broken a heart.

"You are a blackguard."

Edward paused. "Oh. I understand."

"Really, astound me. What do you understand?"

"Everyone knows you've loved Henrietta forever."

It was difficult not to draw the prig's cork right there. "You are mistaken."

"No, I'm not. I know you don't like me, and I can guess why."

Kesseley wished he had the perfect hurtful response, like a knife to Edward's gut. But he wasn't the poet and remained stupidly silent.

Edward, having won, continued. "I would like it if you

were there after I visit. Because you care about her.”

“And you don’t.”

“Bloody hell!”

“Edward, I know you’re a poet and you exist in a higher plane than the rest of us, but let me explain a basic law of science—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. You must expect and accept the consequence of your doings. I will not clean up your mess. Good evening!”

He headed for the ballroom door, not sure where he was going, just as long as it was away from Edward. A gentleman hurrying out of the room bumped into Kesseley’s shoulder, causing Kesseley’s champagne to slosh onto his coat.

Kesseley recognized the reprobate who had ogled his mother the other evening at Lady Huntly’s ball. The man eyed Kesseley for a moment and then bowed. “My apologies, Lord Kesseley,” he said and then continued on without introducing himself.

Kesseley flicked the champagne off his coat, watching the scoundrel as he nodded to the host and then took the stairs two at a time to the upper story. He stopped at the balcony and turned to look down at Kesseley. Their eyes locked for a moment and then the

man disappeared behind the columns.

“Lord Kesseley, you are not dancing!” The smiling host approached, relieved of his duty by the door.

“I say, who was that gentleman you just passed?”

“Sir Gilling,” he said in a low, disapproving voice.

“From my wife’s side of the family.”

“What do you know about him?”

The man stretched his neck to the left and tugged at his cravat, visibly uncomfortable. “Gilling’s wife is from a rich family in Bristol who made their wealth in West African trade. He leaves her in the country while he spends her fortune on horses, gambling and the—” he cleared his throat, “—usual pleasures of such men.”

Kesseley nodded, understanding all too well what those “usual pleasures” entailed.

“Now I must find you a dancing partner,” the host continued. “Can’t have an eligible *parti* standing about at my ball. Ah, there is one of my nieces. She’s a sweet one. May I present her to you?” He gestured to a girl with straight brown hair, a plain face and a thin figure. She stood alone, appearing as miserable as Kesseley felt.

She could be nice, he thought. “Please.”

The lady’s features tensed with panic when she saw

Kesseley approaching with her uncle.

“Ah, Miss Isabelle. May I present Lord Kesseley as an excellent dance partner?”

She let out a shrill humming sound and glanced at Lady Sara, who sat with her friends, making little attempt to rein in their laughter.

“Thank you, but—but—I have a partner for the next dance,” she stammered, a terrible liar.

“Then perhaps the next one,” her uncle urged.

“I’m sorry, but I-I can’t!” she said and then fled.

Kesseley bit the edge of his tongue, his hands shaking from either humiliation or rage, he wasn’t sure.

“It’s her mother, bad blood that side, hasn’t taught her manners.” His host blustered, embarrassed. “Never mind her, I’m sure I’ve another niece or cousin around somewhere.” He twisted about, desperate.

Kesseley laid an arm on his shoulder. “Do not bother, sir, thank you.” He bowed and quit the room, feeling everyone’s eyes on him, or at least thinking everyone’s eyes were on him. Outside the ballroom, he looked up to see his mother’s elegant figure vanish behind the columns on the upper floor balcony. Alone.

Kesseley went downstairs because if he went upstairs, he might kill someone, and if he went in the

card room he might kill himself. Below, beyond a little parlor where several matrons sat comparing debutantes, was an oval library—shelves reaching to the ceiling, leather chairs, dark and so quiet one could hear the hiss of the coals in the fire. There he joined several other gentlemen, all sitting about, not talking, waiting out the night. He outlasted them all. When the little mechanical hands on the clock pointed to one-thirty he was the only one left. The rest had gathered their wives, daughters, and sons and gone home.

At the doorway, the profile of a petite female appeared. Henrietta stepped forward, her face coming into the light. It was brittle, hurt. “Kesseley?” she whispered.

He couldn’t take anymore. “Edward is here. I know. So is Lady Sara. If you’re going to cry, please go elsewhere. I’m quite at my emotional edge tonight,” he barked.

She was silent, her usual topic of conversation removed. She sat in the chair before him, clasping her hands between her knees.

“I didn’t see you in the ballroom,” she said. “Why aren’t you dancing?”

“I can’t dance.”

“Can’t dance? Of course, you can. I have danced with you many times.”

“I broke a young lady’s toe last night.”

“You didn’t!” Henrietta let out a tiny giggle, then another and another, like raindrops before the downpour, until her whole body shook with laughter. “You have to admit, it’s rather funny.”

“I’m glad you find amusement in my humiliation.”

Henrietta stopped laughing. “I can’t do anything right, can I? What will make you happy? Tell me what to do.”

“You could leave me alone.” His words sounded harsh even to himself.

She rubbed her tiny ruby pendant. “When did you become so mean?”

He felt like a louse, but he wasn’t going to apologize. Not anymore.

She left her chair and knelt by him. The firelight flickered on her pale skin. “Come dance with me, Kesseley. Edward’s here and—”

“And?”

“And I want you to dance with me.”

“I can’t.”

“I don’t care if you step on my toe,” she assured him.

Kesseley sighed and put his hands on hers. "Toes aside, I can't dance with you anymore."

"You're just going to sit here in the darkness and be miserable. How will you find a wife this way?"

"I can't get a wife. You were right. About my clothes, my manners. Me. They laugh at me."

Her eyebrows shot down and her eyes turned fierce. "Who laughed at you?"

He pulled away from her, wishing he hadn't been so weak. "Forget it."

"Who?"

"What are you going to do, challenge them to a duel?"

"I might. Ladies in Norfolk are backwards, you know." She laughed, inviting him to join. He didn't.

"I think it best if you just leave," he said.

She reached for him again. "Kesseley—"

"Please leave."

She hesitated, then rose. She paused at the doorframe, looked over her shoulder at him and then disappeared into the corridor. Kesseley felt so damned pathetic. He sank his face into his hands.

Not a minute later, she returned and came to stand before the fire. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

"It's true," she said. "I did ask you to dress better and change your manners, and I said all sorts of horrid things. I regret every one of them. And if you want to sit in the dark and be alone and sad, I won't stop you. But you are the most handsome man here, by far the kindest and the gentlest. And those ladies in that ballroom should be so lucky if you asked them to dance."

"I might have believed you had I not known Edward was here."

"You know, sometimes I wish—"

"Wish what?" he shouted, bolting from his chair. "That I was the gothic hero of those novels of yours, so I could sweep Lady Sara away and Edward would come crawling back begging for—"

"I wish that I loved you instead of Edward!"

Kesseley's heart felt like it dropped several stories and hit the hard ground. He'd never thought Henrietta could be so cruel.

"Leave," he growled.

Chapter Twelve

Henrietta sat at her desk in her morning dress, her pen poised over the letter to her father. So far, she had written one sentence: *London is very exciting.*

She had run out of good things to say, although she could pen volumes describing the heart-crushing pain of watching Edward and Lady Sara dance. Henrietta had won eight straight rubbers that evening. London matrons and gentlemen loved her, yet it couldn't compare to the adoration in Edward's eyes when he gazed upon Lady Sara.

Then Kesseley wouldn't talk to her.

That was the cruelest cut.

The weather has been nice, she wrote.

She could hear Kesseley shuffling about in his chamber. She tiptoed to their mutual wall, placing her ear to the plaster. She could make out scraping feet and murmuring voices. She had seen only the smallest glimpse of his room, through a cracked door—glossy heavy mahogany furniture and dark walls. Men's chambers reminded her of those dark German forests

in fairy tales where secrets were hidden amongst the overgrown thickets. Mysteries ladies learned upon the initiation of becoming a wife.

She heard his door close and she rushed to hers, opening it.

He wore his old greatcoat. Rather hostile eyes glared at her from under his beaver hat.

“Were you waiting on me?” he said, almost accusingly.

“No,” she said, feeling telltale splotches breaking out on her cheeks. “Did you sleep well?” The image of him sleeping in that large mahogany bed only deepened her spots.

“Well enough.”

“I would like to go to the park this morning. Would you care to join me?”

“Sorry, I have some appointments to keep. Please enjoy yourself.” He made a quick bow and then headed for the stairs.

“But wait,” she called after him. “Where are you going?”

“Is it important to you?”

Henrietta blinked. "No." She took a few steps down, until they were eye to eye. "I just wanted to talk about last night."

"I don't," he said, continuing down the stairs. "And if you must know, I am going to Gentleman Jackson's boxing parlor."

Samuel ran up to Henrietta, tongue out, his thick tail whacking the steps. Henrietta sat and gave Samuel's ears a nice rub.

Kesseley paused at the landing and adjusted his hat. "Oh yes, your dearest Edward is coming for a visit today," he said and then continued downstairs. She heard the front door close.

She pulled herself up by the baluster and clung to it for fear she would fall down the stairs. Her insides ached, as if she had a fever, although she was perfectly well. If only she were sick and had to stay in bed. Perhaps she could conveniently die.

"Miss Watson, is that you? Please come. I have something for you," Lady Kesseley called from below.

The parlor was unmercifully bright. Happy little rainbows of colors bounced off the crystal chandelier and onto the walls. Lady Kesseley worked on her morning correspondences at her desk. She held out an

opened letter in her hand and said, "It's for you. I accidentally opened it. He is quite an ardent suitor, your Mr. Van Heerlen."

Henrietta took it and rubbed the letter with her thumb, trying to smooth out the wrinkled and bent edges.

"What's the matter?" Lady Kesseley asked.

"Kesseley informed me Edward was coming to visit." Tears began to trickle from her eyes.

Lady Kesseley's reaction surprised her. "Let us leave," she said. "We shall go to the shops."

Henrietta wiped her eyes. "I want to—I do—but I have to find out what happened. Even if it destroys my heart, I have to know."

She thought Lady Kesseley would be happy to see her so humiliated. Instead, Kesseley's mother put a kind hand on Henrietta's arm. "I shall wait with you."

She sat beside her on the sofa for twenty angst-ridden minutes. Though they didn't speak, Henrietta had to admit that it felt nice to have her there, like a pretend mother.

The anticipation was painful. Henrietta's thoughts rushed about her head, frantically lifting up the letter to her father...the conversation with Kesseley on the

stairs...the dress she'd chosen this morning, looking for those misplaced words she wanted to say to Edward. The perfect ones she had composed late in the night, as she stared up at the curtains above her bed. Succinct, beautiful words, capable of changing Edward's mind. She was still searching when Boxly opened the door and let Edward inside.

Lady Kesseley squeezed Henrietta's fingers and rose to greet him. Henrietta could barely manage to stand, holding on to the edge of the sofa. She murmured, "Good morning."

Edward looked so handsome, wearing a forest-green coat matching his lovely eyes. His cheeks were flush, and his dark curls hung loose and free about his forehead, as if he had just finished an exhilarating gallop.

The smile he wore for Lady Kesseley disappeared when he looked at Henrietta. His jaw tensed and he swallowed, looking very much like a patient under the surgeon's waiting knife.

"Do you want me to stay?" Lady Kesseley asked Henrietta.

Henrietta shook her head.

She left, looking over her shoulder at Henrietta. "I

shall be outside.”

Edward set down his hat and smiled sheepishly, as if he were not sure where to start. “Cousin Henrietta,” he said. “You look lovely.”

“And you look handsome. But then, you always have,” Henrietta conceded.

He nodded in a determined fashion. “I apologize if I seemed surprised meeting you in the park. I hadn’t expected to see you, of course. I—”

She held up her hand before his face in an effort to stop such senseless words. “I just want to know. Did you ever love me? Truly?”

He took a deep, uneven breath. “Everything was so different back in Ely. I thought that I had all I would ever have. Then my poetry got published, and I came to London and—I don’t think you will understand—but I feel like me, the real me.” He held his hands to his chest. “My poetry, my life, everything has changed. It’s like I’m alive. Don’t you feel it?”

Her throat burned. “I’ve never seen you so happy,” she admitted.

“Yes! So you see, I’m who I wanted to be, finally. I thought it wasn’t possible, that we had to live the life doled out to us. And we don’t—I don’t! And I can’t go

back. The thought terrifies me. I can't be that man stuck in Ely, looking out at endless fields of sheep and cows, everything real about me reduced to a few lines on a piece of paper."

"What about me? I thought the same things, wanted the same things. Do you think I am so happy with the life I have inherited? Caring for my father, waiting on the mail, living my life in gothic novels," she cried. "We dreamed together. It was supposed to be us living in that townhome in London. I can be part of London, too. I've been invited to ever so many parties. We can—"

"I love another. Truly love, deeper than I thought imaginable. If you could only feel the same, you would understand that nothing that came before can hold any sway to it. It consumes me, impassions me."

"You can't just forget the past!"

"But you can. You have to."

"I wish I could put my feelings for you in some box and forget about them! Is it really that easy?" she yelled, cringing at the echo of her own voice, stringent and hurt. She spun around, hiding herself from him. "You were my dream, Edward. And you let me dream it. You have to take some responsibility for my hurt."

"Fine. I will admit that I may have encouraged you.

And I am sorry for the feelings or intentions you have harbored. But I didn't ask you to marry me. I cannot be held accountable for something I didn't do."

Henrietta bit down on her trembling lips, her eyes growing hot. Edward put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to him, until she could see his face.

"You were always so beautiful when you were sad." He wiped a tear before it fell. "I do care for you, Henrietta. I always will in my memories. You were the first person I gave my poems to. Do you remember outside church that Sunday? You were the first to believe in me, and I will cherish that, faithful Henrietta."

He hadn't answered her question. "Did you ever love me?"

"No," he whispered.

"Perhaps you should leave now."

But he didn't, he just tightened his hold on her arms. "I know I have no right to ask, but I hope I may count you among my cherished friends."

Henrietta nodded, unable to speak.

He took her hand and kissed it, then retrieved his hat and paused at the door, giving her a soft smile. "Goodbye."

And then he was gone.

Henrietta stumbled, catching the marble mantel and leaning her head against the cold stone. She felt Lady Kesseley's hands on her back, trying to comfort her.

"We are but friends," Henrietta whispered. "Please, I want to be alone."

If only she could walk sixty miles back to the Great Ouse River and watch the water flow by under the heavy oak branches. Perhaps Kesseley would sit beside her, in his old muddy clothes, and talk to her again.

Instead, she would have to settle for the grimy Serpentine and a footman, for Lady Kesseley wouldn't let Henrietta go alone for fear some scary man might take advantage of her.

And there was, of course, Samuel.

So a skinny, red-headed footman, no taller than Henrietta, was summoned and given a leash. He would be no match for the hound, Henrietta thought. But the moment Samuel bolted for an odiferous mounting block, the footman yanked the leash and ordered him to stay in a deep voice. Samuel sat, making it abundantly clear he had no respect for Henrietta.

The park didn't turn out to be the place of quietness and reflection she had hoped. It was a rare cloudless

day in London. The sun beamed down on the city and the *ton* came out like new spring growth to bask in it. Henrietta recognized faces from the previous nights. Suddenly she felt awkward walking to the park with just a servant.

Instead they headed north on Park Lane. A whole street of mounting blocks Samuel hadn't sniffed. They entered the park near Grosvenor Street where the beautiful green trees arced protectively over the path. Around her, children played on the grass, running and laughing, while middling husbands and wives sat on blankets and ate from baskets. Their happiness only made her sadness more pronounced, so she hurried along.

Finding no unoccupied bench by the Serpentine, Henrietta sat in the grass under a quadrangle of trees. The footman took Samuel to the water's edge so that he might bark at the swans and test his paws in the water. Her whole body ached as if she had been beaten with boards. *I do care for you, Henrietta*, Edward had said.

You just don't impassion me, consume me, Henrietta added. *You are as dull as an ewe chomping*

the grass in one of Kesseley's fields. You are everything I despise.

It felt as if Edward had reached inside her heart, yanking out all her soft memories and yearnings and then tossing them aside.

Like you tossed aside Kesseley? that cruel little voice added.

Henrietta winced, feeling she could sink from the layers of emotions weighing her down. This had been a horrible trip! She wished Edward and Lady Sara had made it to Gretna Greene, for there would have been nothing she could have done about it. It would have been done, a clean and fast sever with a sharp blade. Kesseley would have gone to London and found a wife, with no further guilt on her part. And she would be at home, entertaining Mr. Van Heerlen, receiving the affections she once thought so vile.

But that was before she really knew Mr. Van Heerlen. Before the vulnerable look in his eyes the morning he asked for her hand.

She opened her reticule and dug out his letter.

My Dearest Miss Watson,

It has been a week since you have left, and I admit

you fill my thoughts constantly, for I have only the possessions you have left behind to comfort me. In the evenings, when the work is done, I persuade your father to tell me stories of young Henrietta.

I worry for such a pure, untouched young woman in the lecherous streets of London, and wish I could be there to protect you.

Your father's work dazzles me. How such genius could go undiscovered for so long baffles me. I feel like I have discovered some treasure and I agonize whether I should give him to the world or hoard and protect him. It is hard for brilliant men in the world—as I have learned—for so much is wanted from you, so much pressure, always more questions to answer. Especially for your father and myself, on the brink of greatness. My impatience grows, yet I work calculation and calculation until we are certain.

I only hope that my endeavor will win the favor of a most endearing young lady and that she will hold my hand in this step into history.

Pieter Van Heerlen

PS: Your father would like to know where you put his blue knitted nightcap.

She read the letter again, letting her fingers linger on the lines. It felt nice to be wanted, like beckoning her in from her emotional snowstorm to a roaring fire and blanket.

A small squirrel crawled cautiously near and sat back on his hind feet, pointing his twitching nose in the air, searching for a nut or crust of bread.

Henrietta cocked her head at him. "Squirrel, should I just marry Mr. Van Heerlen?"

A nut flew over her head and landed on the ground near her feet. The squirrel nabbed the nut and scampered up a nearby tree with his treasure.

"You shouldn't ask such questions of squirrels," said the gray-bearded artist-philosopher bearing a handful of nuts. "They're terrible. They chase female squirrels all across the park. Take up with any old squirrel that flicks her tail their way. They're not too discriminatory."

"I actually think that was the crux of my question."

"Should you marry a gentleman just because he can write a fancy word?" he said, looking at the page lying in the ground beside her.

"Never mind." Henrietta gathered up her letter. "I don't think we should share personal situations, as we are strangers."

“Too bad, because I can see you are dying for advice. Grapes?”

From within his bag of exotic treasures, he took out a beautiful green vine filled with plump purple grapes and dangled it before her. “Take one.”

Henrietta chose a juicy, fat grape and popped it in her mouth before she could think better of taking fruit from a possible lunatic. The sweet juice tasted cool and vibrant on her tongue. The man took two and chewed them, then neatly spit out the seeds, splashing the lake’s surface. “So you were going to ask me for advice because I gave you a grape,” he said, sitting down, crossing his legs underneath him.

“No.”

“But if you were going to ask for advice, it would be should you just marry some gentleman because the man you love is marrying that blonde chit you met in the park by accident several days ago.”

“No.”

“Is the letter from Lord Kesseley?”

“Good Lord, no. He is just a friend. Or he used to be a friend. Now I’m not sure what he is. He doesn’t talk to me, and I just make him angry. I shouldn’t talk about this.”

"So there is a third gentleman writing the letters. But you don't love him like the gentleman who jilted you for the blonde chit, and Lord Kesseley is just a friend."

"I don't think this discussion should continue."

"Don't be embarrassed—in the history of romantic entanglements, this is mild. The answer is no, despite what society may tell you. If you have the freedom of choice and means, you shouldn't marry someone unless you love him and he loves you."

"So I'm doomed. Because the man I love doesn't love me, and I just can't conceive that I will ever love another man as much."

"Of course you will."

"But I'm old!"

"You're not nearly as old as I am, and I'm still waiting for love."

"How many times have you been in love?"

He squinted and looked at the sun. "You're right, you're doomed. I have only been truly, shamelessly, passionately in love once in my life."

"What happened?"

"She married another man."

"You give terrible advice."

He held up a long, well-shaped finger. "Now wait,

you may not be in love. I thought I was in love many times to find out I wasn't."

"How could you tell?"

He paused and twirled grass between his fingers. His voice darkened. "Look deep into your soul. The truest part of you. The most silent of places, where everything is as peaceful as still water. Is this man there?"

Henrietta looked for that place inside herself, finding nothing so still or serene. It was like a ransacked room, drawers open, clothes spilling out, papers and bottles strewn about. Chaos.

"I don't know," she cried.

"Sometimes it takes time for the waters to clear," he said unhelpfully.

"But I don't have time!"

He shook his head and let out a quick snort of a laugh. "Have another grape. In love or out of love, it is a glorious day. We should enjoy it while it lasts and not squander our emotions on circumstances or people we can't alter. By the way—forgive my changing the subject—I heard you beat Lady Bertram at cards the other evening."

"What do you know of me?" Henrietta said, alarmed.

"I asked around. Aside from what you just told me, your name is Henrietta Watson, from Norfolk."

Where had the footman gone? He was supposed to protect her from such scary men in the park. She reached for her letter and stuffed it in her reticule.

The man put his large hand on her arm. "Now wait, you didn't even ask my name. I'm Danny Elliot from Kent. Pleased to meet you, too."

"I have to go."

"Sit back down. I'm not in love with you, and I won't ask for your hand in marriage. All I want is to enjoy a pleasant day with pleasant company. Everyone else is."

She hesitated, hovering half bent above the ground. It was true—a family was eating together on a blanket, while the grandfather helped the young daughter feed scraps of bread to begging ducks. Two men lay on the bank, hats pulled over their heads, letting the fish play havoc with their poles.

"Come on, sit down. Where else are you going to find more interesting conversation? I can tell tales from all over the wide world. Just ask me."

"Tell me about sands of the Sahara," she challenged.

“Ah, I remember them well...”

Henrietta didn't intend on staying, but his stories were luscious things you could curl up in and be lulled asleep by. How the sands in Africa blow up bigger than waves on the ocean, blocking the sun and burying everything. Jungles where hairy manlike animals lived in trees. Large snakes that could curl about a man and choke him.

She could see the footman approaching in the distance, both he and Samuel dripping wet. Oh, dear.

“I must go,” Henrietta said, standing up. “Thank you, but I really can't say if we should meet again.”

“If we are to meet, we will.” An enigmatic smile lighted his face.

Chapter Thirteen

Henrietta trudged home behind the footman and Samuel, looking particularly pathetic so that Lady Kesseley might say, "Why don't you go back to bed, dear. You look so sad, broken-hearted, miserable, sick and exhausted. Kesseley and I will go out this evening."

No such good fortune. Lady Kesseley waved a note before Henrietta's face, clearly annoyed. "Tommie says not to wait for him this evening. I certainly hope he doesn't think I am going to stand about the walls watching debutantes dance. So I'm going to Covent Gardens with Lady Winslow and the princess. You must come. I cannot think staying in bed and moping will help you."

But that's exactly what Henrietta wanted to do! "Thank you, Lady Kesseley, but I—"

"I think you need a new gown tonight. My lady's maid will alter one of mine. Come, let's find one."

Lady Kesseley's kindness confused Henrietta. Did she feel sorry for Henrietta after witnessing how Edward had deserted her? She sighed and followed

Lady Kesseley upstairs, surrendering to the strong current running against her today.

For some unknown reason, Henrietta had envisioned Lady Kesseley's chamber as the same muted gold she wore so often. But it was a breezy place, as if Henrietta could open the long white curtains draping the front windows and see the sunlit Mediterranean sea, not gray London. The walls were smooth bright white with simple stucco work. A tall mahogany bed faced the window, draped in a fabric of yellow buds entwined on a vine. Several volumes were stacked on a table beside her bed, as well as a vase containing a single yellow flower. A light whiff of residual perfume floated on the air. Henrietta felt like a little girl coming into her mother's chamber, gazing at the perfume bottles, creams and jewelry boxes.

Lady Kesseley disappeared into a small morning room. Henrietta waited, looking at a miniature of young Kesseley that sat on his mother's commode. Were they ever that young? she thought, studying the young boy with long curls.

Lady Kesseley returned. She held a delicate, shimmering pale rose silk gown with small ruffled sleeves and tiny rolled silk swirling on the low bodice.

“Do you like it? I think it will compliment your beautiful complexion,” she said, holding the gown to Henrietta’s body. “See, look.” She pointed to the mirror above her commode.

Henrietta’s brown eyes glowed like whipped chocolate, her hair shiny against the rich fabric. She looked exotic, like a Spanish dancer.

Lady Kesseley opened the top drawer and drew out a necklace of intertwining strands of diamond clusters falling to a single larger diamond in the center. “I’ve always admired your mother’s pendant. The ruby reminds me of her. She was always so vivacious. But for this dress, perhaps you would like to borrow my diamonds.” Lady Kesseley laid the necklace over the tiny pendant and Henrietta gasped. She had never worn anything as exquisite.

Lady Kesseley smiled at Henrietta’s reflection. “Now, this should make you feel better,” she said.

Lady Winslow invited Lady Kesseley and Henrietta to her box on the middle balcony. It was close enough to afford a nice view of the stage and an even better view of the audience. Lady Winslow was clad in a

shimmering, orange silk gown with a matching ribbon twisted with gold beads in her hair. She had brought two gentlemen along. One wore a sloppy black cravat and had curls so wild they made Kesseley's hair look tame. "He's an artist," Lady Winslow explained as if the poor man were afflicted with a disease. The princess had squeezed into a slim lavender gown that dramatically plunged in a deep V at the bodice, showing off her breasts. Her hair was piled high on her head and fell in little spirals around her face. Beside her sat a diminutive man who constantly pinched snuff from his gold box.

The balconies inside the theatre were stacked so high it was dizzying. Even at the tiptop, slammed against the stunning oval ceiling, people sat peering over the rail. Using the constant of gravity, Henrietta tried to calculate how long it would take a person falling from that height to hit the gallery. Approximately 1.5 seconds, she decided.

The burgundy curtain at the back of the box opened. A handsome gentleman stepped inside and bowed. He wore a simple cravat decorated with a diamond pin. A well-tailored black coat and tight breeches covered his athletic physique. His graying blond hair

was cropped neatly about his tanned, muscular face. He scanned the box, his eyes coming to a rest on Lady Kesseley. She audibly swallowed and looked down at the lace fan on her lap, running her finger along its folds.

"I thought you were avoiding us," Lady Winslow greeted him. Her voice held a sharp edge as she twirled her opera glass on her finger.

"I think you are mistaken," he said. "How could I stay away from such beauty?"

Lady Winslow let out a throaty laugh. "How charming you are. But I do not for a minute believe it was my beauty or Princess Wilhelmina's that drew you."

He pulled up a chair behind Lady Kesseley and sat down. A waft of his sweet cardamom-and-musk scent filled Henrietta's nose.

"I did not see your son this evening," he said in a low voice to Lady Kesseley. "May I stay?"

"We shouldn't ...I'm not sure..." she began. She sounded breathy and flustered.

He touched her shoulder. Her chest rose with her breath and a pink flush spread over her bosom. "Come now," he said. "I thought we were friends again?"

She nodded.

A lazy smile lifted the edges of his mouth. He relaxed back in his chair and turned his attention to Henrietta. He raked her figure with his eyes. "You must be my lady's little companion."

Henrietta looked to Lady Kesseley for the introduction. "Miss Watson, may I present Sir Gilling," she said tightly, as if she were embarrassed by her friend.

"A pleasure to finally meet you," he said. His indolent smile widened. "I have heard so much about you."

"Have you ever seen so many birds of paradise?" Lady Winslow scanned the audience with her opera glasses. "You would think it was the Cyprian Ball."

Her remark caused a ripple of laughter among the gentlemen. Henrietta didn't understand. "What's the Cyprian Ball?"

"Lady Winslow, show some decorum," Lady Kesseley warned.

"Really, Ellie, you shouldn't keep the little gel in the dark." Lady Winslow leaned forward in her seat until she could see Henrietta. "My dear, you go to the balls where the respectable ladies dance, but sometimes there are balls—"

"Tomorrow night, for instance," interjected the snuff-

pinching gentleman.

Princess Wilhelmina whacked him with her fan.

"I said," Lady Winslow continued, "sometimes there are balls where the unrespectable women dance."

Gilling chuckled. Henrietta felt a stitch of anger that he found her innocence amusing. Lady Kesseley squeezed Henrietta's hand. "Lady Winslow is only funning you, my dear." Henrietta looked about the audience for unrespectable ladies, instead finding Lady Sara sitting in a box, sandwiched between a fair matron and a whiskered man whose corpulence could barely be contained in the seat. Several gentlemen and ladies clustered about them. Edward dangled about the edge of the box as if he weren't welcome. Nonetheless, Lady Sara's gaze remained locked on his handsome face. An inane smile stretched his lips. So different from the pained, anxious expression he'd worn in her parlor hours earlier, as if each moment with Henrietta was a kind of acute misery.

He never loved me.

I built my dreams on a lie.

Mr. Elliot's voice sounded in her head. "I thought I was in love many times to find out I wasn't. Look deep into your soul. The truest part of you. The most silent of

places. Is this man there?"

She looked hard at Edward and tried to imagine the truest part of her. What was the truest part of her?

Suddenly an image of the Great Ouse River unfurled like a rolled-up oil painting in her head, with detail so vivid she could look into the green water and see the reflections of the oak trees and endless sky stretching over the flat farmland. Something deeper than her heart ached, sick for its home.

Surely *Norfolk* wasn't the truest part of her? Yet—somehow—it was. Silent. Perfect.

Across the theatre, Edward looked up, as if feeling her stare. For a moment, their eyes locked.

Oh goodness! His face wasn't reflected in the waters. He wasn't there!

Had she spent the last few years telling herself she was in love? That couldn't be true. She was too intelligent to spend years in delusion. But it certainly hadn't felt like a delusion. She focused hard on Edward and tried to squeeze that old amorous feeling back into her heart.

It never came, just an elating liberation.

Edward leaned closer to Lady Sara, whispering something in her ear. She giggled in her gloved hand

and peered up at Henrietta. They were talking about her. But Henrietta didn't care, for it struck her that his face was crooked. The left side rose higher than the right, giving him that whimsical, boyish smile everyone admired. She had never noticed it before. After Act I, everyone in the audience rose and started gathering their belongings as if the play had ended.

"A charming little play," the princess declared, dropping her opera glasses into her beaded reticule. "*Nous allons.*"

"Where are we going?" Henrietta asked.

"To Mr. Whitmore's party, of course," Lady Winslow answered. "I can see your fingers are shaking, wild to play cards."

Henrietta was jittery but not with the anticipation of playing cards. Her world had changed. A stone had been rolled away from her heart and she was free.

She rose and reached for Lady Kesseley's wrap, but Gilling beat her to it. He wrapped the silk about Lady Kesseley, letting his fingers caress her shoulders. The intimate way he touched Lady Kesseley made Henrietta think he was much more than a mere friend. She wondered if Kesseley would approve of his mother's suitor.

She followed Lady Winslow, the princess and their gentlemen out the back of the box and waited in the corridor, holding the curtain for her mistress.

“Are you coming?” she heard Lady Kesseley ask Gilling.

“Do you want me to?” he replied.

There was a silent pause. “Yes. But be careful.”

Lady Kesseley sent her carriage home, and the ladies took the princess’s carriage to her lavish home on Berkeley Square. There they repaired their hair, and as Henrietta learned, reapplied their cosmetics. Even Henrietta dabbed a little kohl about her eyes and stained her lips. Her liberation from Edward made her feel oddly exhilarated. When she looked at herself in the princess’s long dressing mirror, she saw another lady, better than old Henrietta, clad in a dashing silken gown, diamonds glittering about her neck, with a loose smile lifting her bright lips.

An hour later, their carriage pulled up outside one of the mansions bordering Hyde Park. It resembled a white iced Christmas cake. Inside, it was lavishly decorated in a bombastic Baroque style, as if all the old French courts had dumped their possessions into this one house before walking up the steps to the

guillotine. Fashionable people stuffed the white-and-gold gilt hall, their perfumes and colognes mingling into one headache of pungent sweetness. Footmen hoisted trays of wine and punch high in the air to maneuver through the human congestion.

From the foyer, Henrietta could look into the parlor with ivory silk-covered walls and lacy plasterwork. A lady in flowing sea-green silk with a peacock feather in her hair played the pianoforte, while another lady plucked an enormous harp carved with a swan's head. Around them, people lounged about on gold upholstered chairs and sofas.

The guests in the foyer parted, making way for a slender man with a fresh, boyish face and toothy smile. His stiff collar reached to the tips of his ears and his coat was padded, making his shoulders appear out-of-balance with the rest of his body. Clinging to his arm was a hunched elderly woman with unnaturally bright reddish-orange curls rising like little flames from her head. She wore a gold gown and diamonds gleamed in her hair, around her stooped neck and on her wrists and curled fingers.

"Lady Kesseley," the foppish man bowed, "we are honored. You know that Grandmama adores cards.

She was hoping you would bring your companion.”

“Is this her?” the old woman asked in a shaky yet powerful voice. The loose skin of her eyelids hung so low, she must have trouble seeing. Even so, her eyes were steady and sharp.

“Mr. and Mrs. Whitmore, may I present Miss Henrietta Watson,” Lady Kesseley said. Henrietta curtsied.

“*Enchanté*,” the lady replied. “You don’t think you would want to humor an old lady with a rubber or two?”

“Miss Watson would desire nothing more,” Lady Kesseley said, giving Henrietta a gentle shove forward.

The host took one of her elbows, and Mrs. Whitmore latched on to the other. Together they led Henrietta down the hall. She glanced over her shoulder at Lady Kesseley. Gilling had materialized at her side. She wrapped her hand around his elbow, a secretive, expectant smile on her lips.

Henrietta was taken to a hexagonal room with indigo-blue walls covered with shiny swords and other ancient weapons of brutality. Six coats of armor stood guard at the angles in the walls.

A portly man with pink bald head, big cheeks and an

expansive belly that strained the buttons of his striped silk vest ambled over. Henrietta recognized him from the mass of people in Covent Gardens earlier that evening.

“Mrs. Whitmore, now you promised me a game of whist,” he said in teasing voice. “Are you holding out for a better offer?”

“Ah! I was waiting on the right partner to set you back good and proper,” she said. “Do you know Miss Watson, Your Grace?”

Grace? Henrietta dropped down into a deep curtsey.

Mrs. Whitmore jerked her orange head toward the duke. “We are fierce whist enemies, the Duke of Houghton and I.”

Lady Sara’s father! Henrietta’s splotches broke out. She eyed the tables, wondering which would be the best to crawl under.

Mrs. Whitmore tugged Henrietta’s arm. “When he has a good hand, he looks down and to the left. He arranges his cards with spades first,” she said in a whisper so loud someone out in the hall could have heard.

The duke wagged a fat finger. “Mrs. Whitmore, we

won't have any cheating like last time, or I might have to draw my pistol."

She winked at Henrietta. "I can outshoot him too."

The duke gestured to a table where four guests were deep in a hand. "May we play here?" he asked, in a way to imply it really wasn't a question, but a command. Immediately the players set down their cards and abandoned the table. The duke pointed at a thin, slack-faced man. "Except you, Alfred. You'll be my partner."

"He's my cousin," Houghton explained. "He doesn't talk much, just plays cards."

Alfred nodded as if this were a fair assessment.

"Watson," the duke said as he dropped into his chair. "You're not related to that cabbage-headed poet Edward Watson, are you?"

"He is my cousin," Henrietta said, waiting for him to ask if she was that sad cousin whom Edward had jilted for his daughter.

"My apologies," he said gruffly. "I'm sorry you're related to a cabbage-head."

A small giggle burst from Henrietta's lips, then another, growing into a full-blown laugh. She should have called Edward that as he rambled on about how

she reminded him of everything he wanted to forget. *Edward, you cabbage-head, I don't love you after all.*

Guests gathered elbow to elbow around the table, watching the game as if the foursome were the performing horses at Astley's Royal Amphitheatre.

The duke dealt. He was a quick, intelligent player, as was Mrs. Whitmore. Henrietta soon forgot about the crowd and got caught up in the heady excitement of a challenge. Her brain tracked every card played, every player's move. Still, Houghton won the game on the last trick, playing a seven of spades over her five.

He leaned back in the chair, lifting its front legs from the floor. "See now, I arranged my cards with diamonds first and looked to the right just to confuse you."

"Oh, I think I've got you figured out, Your Grace," Henrietta said, long since over her initial shyness.

He set his chair legs down and slid the cards for her to cut. "Prove it."

And she did. By the final game, she and Mrs. Whitmore had set the duke and silent Alfred by three. The room broke into calls of "bravo" and "encore," shaking Henrietta from her concentration. She had been so focused on the cards that she had forgotten about Lady Kesseley. She scanned the audience

looking for Lady Kesseley's face, but not seeing it. Nor did she see Sir Gilling's.

Mrs. Whitmore moved to start dealing again. Henrietta held up her hand. "I'm sorry, but I should stop. I need to talk to Lady Kesseley."

"No, you don't," said the duke, banging his hand on the table. Henrietta flinched in her seat. "I don't like losing, especially to a Watson."

The audience ceased chattering. A tense silence filled the room.

"Mrs. Whitmore, deal the cards," he barked.

Henrietta smiled politely and picked up the cards dealt to her. She had a run of spades with an ace and a queen. She could easily win the game playing her long suite, but instead she drew out the seven of clubs and laid it down. The duke took the trick and the next, then Henrietta won with a jack to give the impression she was trying.

When at last the duke was satisfied that he had truly conquered his Watson foe, the short hand on the clock nudged past two. Many of the guests had left and those remaining roamed about with glassy inebriated eyes. Candles had burned down and not been replaced, darkening the house.

She found Lady Winslow in the front parlor in a heated discussion over exactly how many fashionable ladies Lord Damien had conquered in his reign as premiere rake. Lady Winslow insisted Lord Damien had seduced no less than seventy-five.

“Have you seen Lady Kesseley?” Henrietta interrupted.

“Darling, she was watching you play cards.”

Henrietta just nodded, not wishing to publicly contradict her. She set out in search of Lady Kesseley, wandering through a series of ornate parlors, each crammed with art and furniture like a warehouse of decadence. But she couldn't find Lady Kesseley anywhere.

Coming out of the library by the second-floor stairwell, she collided with a young man. His glass of strong-smelling spirits sloshed down the front of her gown.

“Ughh!” she cried, feeling the cold brandy drip between her breasts and down her belly.

“A thousssand apologiess,” he slurred and produced a handkerchief from his coat and began wiping her bosom.

She pushed him away. “You ruined Lady Kesseley’s

gown!"

He opened his mouth and hiccupped. She fled past him and up the staircase. The corridor was dim, lit only by the blue shadows of the moon through the windows. Surely no guests would be up here in the dark, she thought. Then the soft echo of a woman crying drifted below a door. Henrietta froze, her ears pricked.

"What, Eleanora? What did I do now?" a man growled, as if talking with clenched teeth.

Henrietta carefully followed the voice, trying to keep the boards running under the carpet from creaking. She stopped outside the door and leaned her ear close to the wood.

"I just want you to leave," she heard Lady Kesseley say.

"But you were the one who begged me to come up here," the man retorted, clearly exasperated.

"My son might—"

"I'm tired of hearing about your son. For God sakes, Eleanora, he's not five years old. Stop coddling him."

"You don't understand," Lady Kesseley cried. "He's different."

"What? Is he as cracked as you?"

Henrietta heard the pop of skin being slapped.

"Damn you!" the man hissed.

Then the thud of a falling body. Henrietta flung open the door.

Lady Kesseley, whose cool reserve always intimidated Henrietta, was now humbled on the floor, weeping. Sir Gilling stood over her, legs spread, his muscles flexed. His left cheek was red from where he had been slapped. Some mental timber in Henrietta's mind collapsed and all her old perceptions came crashing down.

"What the hell!" he cried, staring at Henrietta, his eyes wild. "I didn't hurt her. She fell. I swear, I didn't lay a finger on her."

"You leave her alone," Henrietta cried, instinctively protective of Kesseley's mother.

"Leave her alone?" he echoed. "Hell, I did. Just like she asked." He began to walk toward Henrietta, backing her up. "But she came back. *Hold me, Gilling. Tell me I'm beautiful. Make love to me.* Then she starts feeling guilty because she thinks that hick son of hers might find out." He glared at Lady Kesseley. She had drawn her knees to her like a small girl and laid her head on her knees, rocking. "How am I supposed to feel?"

"I don't really care," Henrietta responded, as she knelt beside Lady Kesseley and placed a reassuring hand on her back. The scent of perfume and brandy filled Henrietta's nose. She wasn't sure if it came from Lady Kesseley or her own drenched gown.

"Don't let her fool you," he said. "These tears are to make you feel sorry for her. She twists people, makes them think she's the innocent lady that she's not."

Lady Kesseley pursed her quivering lips and shook her head.

"Did you not hear me?" Henrietta said in a controlled voice, trying hard not to scream. "I said get out. Now."

"Don't stand up for her. She doesn't even like you. Calls you a sly minx."

"I didn't!" Lady Kesseley cried. "Just leave, this time forever! I never want to see you again."

"Fine." He held up his palms. "I'll go. I hope you find some bloke desperate enough to put up with your little games. I want you to know that I treated you well. Better than you deserved."

"Just shut up!" Henrietta jumped to her feet. Searing rage burned behind her eyes. "You heard her. She doesn't want to see you anymore!"

His eyes raked Henrietta up and down as if he could

see beyond her clothes. "The little companion," he said, a snarl of a smile twisting his lips. "My lady may not like you, but I do. It's rare to find a loyal woman." He jerked his head toward Lady Kesseley. "When you get tired of her, you find me. I'll take good care of a sweet thing like you."

He opened the door and walked out.

Henrietta wanted to scream at Lady Kesseley, shake her, slap her for dragging her here, for giving her a pretty necklace and gown like a foster mother, then luring her into this sordid desperate place. But the once cool, distant woman now lay huddled and broken on the floor. Henrietta knelt back down, scared, and suddenly recalled the days she'd spent trying to find words to comfort her mother as she lay on her deathbed.

"I'll take care of everything," she whispered, as she laid a nervous hand on the fallen feathers in Lady Kesseley's hair. "Wait here, I have to get Lady Winslow."

Lady Kesseley reached up and clutched Henrietta's hand. "I didn't mean to say those things about you. That was before—"

"Shhhh, it doesn't matter," Henrietta said, as one

would soothe a frightened child. "But you must let me go."

Lady Kesseley relinquished her hold. Henrietta forced herself to walk slowly down the stairs, measuring her breath, trying to look as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Lady Winslow hadn't left the parlor where the Lord Damien debate still raged. The tally of lovers had reached 125. Henrietta tugged Lady Winslow's elbow and asked for assistance with her gown.

In the dressing room, she outlined the situation. Lady Winslow's features sharpened like a soldier's at the first crack of fire. "Go upstairs and wait for me," she said.

Back in the dark room, Lady Kesseley now stood before a rectangular mirror over a washstand, trying to smooth her hair with shaking fingers. The tears rolled down her face and streaked her powder. "I'm sorry you have to see me like this."

"Allow me," Henrietta said. She tried to pin Lady Kesseley's pale curls and feathers back in place but with very little success.

The plunking sound of the pianoforte trickled up, and a lovely bell-like soprano began singing Mozart's *Ah*

se in ciel. Lady Winslow tapped on the door. She had brought a footman. Wordlessly, they held Lady Kesseley between them, hiding her, and sailed down the stairs and out the front door. Henrietta took one small peek into the downstairs parlor as they fled. The princess stood by the piano, entrancing the guests with her lovely voice. Henrietta's throat caught in appreciation. For less than a second their eyes met, and she saw a keen understanding hidden behind the princess's bright eyes.

Silently they continued along the street, catching up to the carriage rounding the corner for them. The footman lifted Lady Kesseley inside. She no longer cried, but leaned limply against the corner.

Henrietta didn't know what to say or how to make it better. She felt utterly powerless. She just watched London pass outside the window, its nighttime inhabitants, drunken men and prostitutes conducting their ugly business under the glow of the gas lamps. She closed her eyes, letting the rhythm of the carriage lull her nerves.

"I met Sir Gilling at Brighton when I was visiting Fanny and the princess," Lady Kesseley began quietly. "I didn't mean for anything to happen, but it just did. I

told him that I couldn't see him in London because of Kesseley. If my son found out that I had an affair with a married man, he would be so ashamed of me. But I'm too weak. I couldn't stop myself. He made me feel ...feel..."

Lady Kesseley's lips trembled as tears streamed from her closed eyes. Startling Henrietta, she leaned over and buried her face in Henrietta's shoulder. "I just want someone to love me again. Isn't that pathetic?"

"No, of course not."

"I wasn't always broken like this. A beautiful boy once loved me. Truer than anything I have known. I ruined it—like I ruin everything."

Kesseley lay in his bed in shirt and pantaloons, one foot balancing on the toes of the other. He sipped red wine while finishing the final chapter of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*. Finally Arabellina had taken into her head to throw herself into the ocean because she knew she had beaten down Lord Blackraven so badly that he couldn't find his own arse without her help. He would come running to save her, thus breaking the poor

man's last straw of free will, and ensuring her dominion over him. She had conquered the unconquerable mysterious male with her innocent love. Now she could live happily ever after.

Outside the clomp and rattle of a carriage stopped before the front door. Kesseley swung himself out of bed and put his banyan over his clothes, using the moonlight to guide him down the stairwell. Their voices drifted up to Kesseley.

"Don't tell Tommie," he heard his mother say, in the manner of a drunken person believing they are whispering.

Henrietta murmured a reply he couldn't hear.

"He mustn't know about Gilling."

Kesseley came down the stairs. He smelled the brandy before he saw them. Henrietta held a candle, her brown eyes wide and glittering, her bodice so low it could scarce contain her breasts. A large stain ran down her gown.

His mother was no better. Wrinkles crisscrossed her gown. Bent, crumpled feathers dangled from her loose hair.

"What must I not know, Mama?" he demanded.

"Tommie, ——" His mother looked to Henrietta for

help. Of course, she was never at a loss for words.

“Nothing!” she said too quickly. “We just went to a play and a party and—”

He held up his flat palm. “Just stop,” he said, and returned his attention to his mother. “I thought we had left all this behind when Father died. I thought we could live decent, respectable lives. Yet here you are, hiding away in darkened rooms with your married, scandalous lover. You’re no better than Father.”

His mother covered her mouth with her hand. He could see her chin tremble. Inside him, a small boy still huddled in the corner of a unlit chamber, listening through the wall to her cries and the angry rants of his father. After all those years, he had defended her, demonizing his father. She was supposed to be the innocent, angelic mother. But now she behaved no better than his father. The only difference was that she attempted to conceal her depravity.

“Why did I even bother?” he whispered, disgusted.

Henrietta reached out for him. “Kesseley—”

He jerked away from her, her hand falling in the dead air. “Enough. I don’t want to hear anymore.” He turned on his heel, heading back to his chamber to lock these people out.

But Henrietta followed him up to the landing.

“Leave me alone,” he growled.

“Listen to me!”

“No.”

“Let me speak!”

“No.”

“We left the p—”

He spun around. “Don’t you ever do a damn thing I ask you?” He bellowed so loud, he heard his own echo through the house.

She halted on the last stair, biting down on the edge of her lips. But, as usual, she didn’t know when to stop. She followed him into the hallway, managing to capture his elbow.

“Listen!” she said.

Her touch felt like the burn of steel scraping across flint. Large black spots blurred his vision. Grabbing the wrist of her outreached arm, he bent it into his chest, backing her into the wall and pinning her there. The candle fell from her other hand and clanked on the floor. He snuffed it with his slipper.

Her uneven breath felt warm on his neck. He could feel her body rise against his. That familiar desire swelled in his sex and he chuckled, low and deep.

Tangling his fingers in her curls, he tilted her head up to meet his face. He pressed himself against her, feeling her soft breasts flatten on his chest, her belly against his groin. Then lowering his head, he tasted that silky skin under her lobe. The scent of cinnamon, brandy and the smallest whiff of lavender perfume made him dizzy and intoxicated and wild.

His lips brushed her skin. "Say, 'I love you, Edward,'" he whispered.

She didn't. She just stood so still, she didn't even breathe.

"Say, 'Kesseley, you could be handsome if you tried.'"

His lips nibbled downward, to the shallow indentation where her collarbone met her neck. He could feel the swell of her breasts. They were so close and so supple. He sunk his lips into the soft mounds.

"No," she whispered, putting her hand over his mouth.

He rose up, laughing. "Now there's the Henrietta I know. Go ahead, scream at me, slap me, tell me how you thought I was your friend."

Her lips opened, and she drew her hand back in a half-hearted attempt to follow his orders.

"I'm waiting," he said.

Her hand met his cheek with the force of an unsure caress. "You disappoint me, Henrietta. You—"

Henrietta rose to her toes and put her lips on his. She could just reach his lower lip, but she held on, leaning into him. Pressing her contours into his body, like a small animal trying to burrow itself into the dark earth. No urgency, no crushing desire, but something tender, tentative and gentle. She tasted him, explored his lips. Her light touch tickled his skin, and he couldn't contain his urge to kiss her deeper, more thoroughly.

His fingers slid down her small neck, brushing her collarbone, over her breasts to her waist. He hugged her tightly, pulling her up, pressing down on her mouth. She surrendered easily, letting him inside.

He gently showed her how to explore him with her tongue. *Like this and this...*

She followed his lead, her arms tightening around his neck.

A warm tear rolled into his mouth—she was crying. Kesseley's heart melted. Every flimsy wall he'd built between them in the last days came crashing down.

"Tell me you love me," he whispered, then kissed her chin, her jaw, her neck. "Tell me you feel something."

Henrietta froze. The truth sang inside her. She shook her head, resisting it.

I love Kesseley? It can't be!

She yanked herself free, stumbling backward against the wall. The world swirled about her. Kesseley, all along it was Kesseley. The country bumpkin who never wanted to leave his small village, his fields, his livestock. Who probably never once opened a book of poetry or dreamed about moonlight reflected on the gentle waves of the Seine. Who thought the paintings of chickens and dogs in his parlor were masterpieces.

This can't be right!

But her body, separated from his, ached with cold and longing, where a moment before she had been warm, full...

Complete.

He reached for her, ran his thumb reassuringly over her knuckles. "Come," he whispered.

"No! No, I c-can't!"

"Hush, come back to me."

"No." She kept her back to the wall. Edward's

handsome face flashed through her mind. He was the man she had wanted, or had until this morning. Or perhaps never had. She didn't know anymore. She didn't know anything. She needed time to think.

Yet her body surged recklessly on. Her most feminine part throbbed with some wanton desire to feel him inside her.

"But you weren't the one I wanted!" she cried.

Oh God, did I say that aloud?

The hallway became heavy and chilly, as if the frigid waters of the North Atlantic flowed between them.

"I'm so sorry," she said, reaching into the darkness, "I didn't mean—"

"Don't say anything else," Kesseley warned, his deep voice harder and colder than she had ever imagined it could be. "I've had enough. I want you to stay the hell away from me."

Even through the blur of emotions and thoughts whirling inside her, she knew she didn't want this.

"No! —"

The slam of his door reverberated like a gunshot.

It seemed like her body stopped working. She wasn't sure how she got back to her chamber. But once inside, her legs gave way and she fell on the floor.

What had she done?

Go back to him, that little voice pleaded. Go back and let him take you to his heart. Go, before everything is lost.

In those seconds, Henrietta knew forever waited in balance. It was all so fast that she couldn't think.

Was this it? Was this love? This terrifying feeling engulfing her? Surely not.

Could she be happy in Wrenthorpe? Discussing crops and parasites, having the parson for dinner, those countless stained green coats of Kesseley's, waiting upon the mail like some rescue boat from the world. Everything so familiar it wore like a rut in her heart. No mystery, no wonder.

Except one.

What waited in Kesseley's arms in that large mahogany bed? She could almost feel his weight upon her, like a blanket smothering out everything but the feel of his lips running under her jaw, his strong rough hands gentle upon her. Could this be enough to keep her at Wrenthorpe, not make her gaze at the stars wondering how she could be content with so little when the world was so large?

But what was the world? London? It only

disappointed her. Was there only more disappointment out there? Where was the world? Seven continents and seven seas or his lips caressing hers?

The philosopher and lover fought mercilessly for hours, until sleep finally came, hushing the thoughts racing through her mind and laying a soothing hand upon her sore, embattled heart.

Chapter Fourteen

Kesseley slammed the door behind him. He sank into his desk chair and hung his head in his hands.

Before him was his ledger of estate business and miscellaneous correspondences, all neat nice rectangles, precisely folded paper, pens lined in the inkwell.

In a smooth motion, he shoved it all into the air. Papers and books fell like flapping bird wings. The notes she had written him, the cutouts of hats and cravats, her scrawl mingling with his neat hand and straight columns. One by one, he gathered them and threw them on the coals, watching them burn. When smoke began to fill the room, he just opened the windows and kept going, crazy to eradicate every evidence of her from his room, from his life. The last item, the cloth-bound diary she had given him to tell her about London and his future wife. For a moment, he considered keeping it, indeed writing all the details of his wife and giving it to Henrietta as a mean and spiteful gift. But he tossed it too. He just couldn't care

anymore.

All that was left was his, scattered about the floor. He moved the papers with his foot until he uncovered Volume III of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*. He picked it up and returned to his desk to read. He had only a few pages until the end and a whole night to fill, desperate to keep his mind from wandering back into the hall, reliving the scene over and over. When he had finished, he began again at the beginning. Reading word for word, focusing so hard his eyes hurt.

At some time during the night, Kesseley must have fallen asleep at his desk, for Baggot awoke him at some merciless morning hour holding his stained, limp clothes on his arm. Kesseley rubbed his face. A slanting indentation ran across his forehead where he had rested on the book's edge. He had fallen asleep on page one hundred and sixty-seven.

Baggot, being rather unsteady in his older age, looked at the papers and ledgers strewn about the floor and walked over them.

"Now look, a nice yellor jacket," he said, holding up a green coat.

Kesseley shot up, unable to bear one more second of this charade. "For God sakes, man, it's green!

Green! Not yellow!”

“That coat’s as yellor—”

“—as the day you were born, yes, I know,” Kesseley finished. “I’ve had enough. My new valet is arriving today with my new clothes. You will make him feel welcome.”

Baggot’s big trembling lip started to droop down, getting ready for a good, guilt-inflicting pout.

But Kesseley had no more patience. “Do as I say or find employment elsewhere.”

Henrietta stayed in her chamber long after she had dressed, sitting on the carpet, wrapped in a shawl in front of the coals, warming her feet. Her heart felt battered. She couldn’t see Kesseley just yet. Everything was too raw and sore. She needed to think, calm herself, return to rational thought.

She heard his door close and the echo of his gait coming down the hall. She stopped breathing. Would he stop? Would he knock at her door? Would he ask her to talk?

Please don’t! Please don’t!

He walked past her chamber without even a pause

or hesitation, continuing down the stairs. Instead of the expected relief, her heart ached more, like it could burst forth and fly to him like a homing bird. She rushed to the door, but then stopped and sank her teeth into the edge of her thumb.

Let him go.

She slid down the door, crouching on the floor and resting her head on her knees. The front door closed. She felt cold.

Eventually, she picked up herself and cautiously made her way downstairs to see about Lady Kesseley.

It was a terrible error. Kesseley sat at his mother's desk in the parlor.

He did not look up or acknowledge her, but Lady Kesseley rushed to Henrietta, taking her hands and clutching them, as if Henrietta were coming to rescue her. She looked so much older in the morning light. Severe lines cut circles under her reddened eyes and along her mouth.

Kesseley wielded a letter opener, slicing the envelopes in one fast motion, his gray eyes scanning the contents.

Lady Kesseley made a plea to Henrietta. "Kesseley says we must go to a ball tonight. But I am unwell." Was

she trying to find an ally? Did she think Henrietta would stand up for her?

Kesseley answered before she could speak. "I'm sorry if respectability sickens you, Mother, but you are going and staying in the ballroom the entire evening. You will chat with the other mamas, then thank the host and hostess for a wonderful ball."

He delivered this speech calmly, while penning a reply. A gold and diamond ring glinted from his long white fingers.

"Kesseley! You're wearing a new ring!" She didn't realize she had spoken the inane words until they were already out of her mouth.

He glanced up, the morning light reflected in his eyes. Heat rushed over her.

"Yes, my father's," he said, then returned to his work.

She wanted him to look at her again and never turn away.

Oh dear God, she was in love—truly in love—with Kesseley!

The sky was one heavy, gray cloud ready to open up and unleash on the city. The footman looked at

Henrietta questioningly as they ventured out to the park. Drizzle stuck to their clothes and hats. Even Samuel seemed hesitant, never straying too far from Henrietta.

The park was empty and the large trees lining the paths swayed and rustled in the wind. Old leaves and trash blew around them.

Oh please be here! Henrietta pleaded silently.
Please be here. I need you.

Coming deeper into the park, she saw a lone man by an easel, his hands flying, lashing a tempest of color on to the canvas. She let the footman walk Samuel to the edge of the Serpentine, then came to stand beside Mr. Elliot and his painting of a swirling incoherent mess of gray, black and blue.

"You captured it," she whispered.

"You shouldn't be out here today. You might catch a chill." He wiped his hands on a rag and walked over to his bench, taking a long sip of steaming chocolate. "Go home." He waved his hand as if shooing chickens away.

"But I love Kesseley!" she cried. "And I'm frightened!"

He looked up at the sky. The tops of the waving

trees disappeared into the clouds. "Real love is terrifying, my dear." Some private thought held him for a moment, but he shook it off and began to root about in his satchel. "Dates?" he said, holding out a branch of big, wrinkled dates.

Henrietta refused. "You are supposed to say something wise about how I don't really love him. That it's a delusion, like—like with Edward."

"Oh, no, you were always in love with Kesseley."

Henrietta flung up her arms and let out a small cry. "Then why didn't you say so!"

"I didn't know before. But it's obvious now."

"No, it can't be possible to be in love with someone your entire life and never know it! My parents are mathematicians, for goodness sake. I am very intelligent. I would know."

Mr. Elliot thought this was quite funny. He patted the bench beside him, inviting her to sit.

"Let's say you're a young tree and you grow beside another tree in a big field. Maybe it's a bigger tree that protects you from the wind or a smaller tree growing too close to you. Either way, years and years go by, just you and the other tree, so close your branches reach into the others and sometimes you can't tell which

leaves are yours. Now if we were those trees, we might say that other tree gets on my nerves, taking my space, stealing my light. But you're just a tree, and that's the way it's always been. Then one night a storm blows the other tree down, taking down your limbs and ripping up your roots. Now you slump over the dead tree, trying to grow back the half of you that died with it."

Henrietta waved her hand, shaking her head. "My brain is too tired for metaphors. What are you trying to say?"

"Usually love bursts into two people's lives, a big wave, wiping away everything that came before. But for some people, they were always together even before they even knew each other. It's hardly perceptible until a hard wind blows, but no matter what happens in their lives, even if they marry different people, leave or even die, half of them is still with the other."

Henrietta dropped her head into her hands, pressing her temples. "And you think this could be the case? And Kesseley will marry someone else, and I will die carrying this in my heart?"

"It is possible, yes. I cannot give you happy endings."

These weren't the words she expected to hear. It was supposed to be like *The Mysterious Lord*

Blackraven: when the light is the dimmest, the hero rescues the heroine and all that happened before—the bitter words, hatred and misunderstandings—washes away. Now, everything was suddenly so big and inconceivable that she couldn't hold it.

Mr. Elliot looked up at the threatening sky, the wind beating his wild hair about under his hat. "Have you told Lady Kesseley about me?"

"Oh Lady Kesseley! Speaking of unhappy endings—" Henrietta stopped herself before she blathered out the whole sordid evening.

Mr. Elliot's eyes pierced hers. "What do you mean?"
"Nothing."

"Have you told her about me?" he asked again, more plaintive than before.

"Good Lord, no!"

The man took another date, smashed it between his fingers and pulled out the pit. "Miss Watson, there is something you need to do," he said without looking at her.

"What?"

He ran his thumb along the hollow insides of his date. "You have to tell Lord Kesseley you love him. I don't know if your love or your life will be as you want it.

But you must tell him you love him. This is the most important thing.”

“He hates me now. I hurt him so much. I’ve done nothing but hurt him. He is so angry.”

“Anger is a hard thing. It could take years or a lifetime to burn out. Still you must tell him, for your sake. Else the regret will destroy you.”

She didn’t like his words. They seemed so resigned. “Regret? Is there nothing I can do to make everything right, nothing at all?”

He gazed at her, that wise look gone from his face. Suddenly, his eyes were as lost and yearning as hers. “Are there enough words for all the years you hurt someone else? For all the pain and suffering you inflicted?”

Her throat tightened, tears swelling under her lids. “Is this all the advice you have? This, this is hopeless.”

“So we are back.”

“Back to what?”

“This day. This river. All we really ever have.”

“It’s not enough! I must make this better. I must make him love me again.”

“Miss Watson, for all your striving, all your schemes, what have you gained?”

She refused to say anything. She refused to admit she had lost more than she gained. That she was powerless. She couldn't.

The sky couldn't wait one more block for Henrietta to get home before letting go of all its rain. Drenched, she hurried to her chamber, tore off her wet bonnet, pelisse and shoes. Then she dove under the blankets and curled into a tiny ball, trying to warm her chilled body. Noise penetrated her little cocoon—the sharp cries of people on the street hurrying in the rain, the rattle of traffic, the closing of mews doors. She wrapped her pillow around her head until she could hear just the sound of her breath moving in and out of her body.

She loved Kesseley. She had always loved Kesseley. Why did the realization strike her with the same fear as a physician telling of her impending death?

You must tell him you love him. That is the most important thing.

Why?

Would she end up like Lady Kesseley, desperate to

recall the feeling of being loved and wanted, concealing her indiscretions in vacant rooms at parties?

Henrietta hugged her knees.

She imagined herself back home on those flat, tilled fields of Norfolk stretching to the horizon. If she left Rose House and walked down the rows of wheat, some of Kesseley's old barns would rise up, with Wrenthorpe even farther in the distance. Inside the barns, heavy iron tools were mounted on the walls. Pigs sniffed in between the wooden slats. Horses stomped the ground, swishing their tails, picking up straw with their lips. The dairy cows stood patient, their large udders drooping as they waited to be milked.

This was Kesseley's world. Could it be hers?

She rolled over and imagined herself out in the lawn behind Wrenthorpe, her belly swelling in the family way, a matronly lace cap on her head. Kesseley would crouch on his boot heels holding his hands out, ready to catch their daughter as she took her first, tentative steps. Their daughter. He always said he wanted girls. Their children would adore their father, for he would set them on his big shoulders and take them around the farm, as wild and unkempt as himself, then let them

climb the hay stacks or ride the goats.

A small smile lifted her face and radiated through her body, like the sun warming her skin in the summer when lines of corn-filled wagons left the village for the ports.

They would marry in the late spring, while Virgo and Hydra still lit the night sky, at the altar of the stone village church where her mother's grave lay just beyond the stained glass. A wreath of red poppies on the grave and crowning her veil. Kesseley would stand before her in his black breeches and coat, all worn and crumpled, somehow endearing him even more to her. His wild locks would fall about his lovely gray eyes, twinkling like sunlight striking quartz. The old vicar would ramble on and on in his usual way and several of the village men would fall asleep.

Hours after the "I do," Kesseley—no, Thomas, as she would call her husband in his chamber—would lay her upon his bed, letting his hand linger on her cheek, promising to be gentle to his new bride, but then kissing her like last night—unbridled, almost obscene and thoroughly intoxicating. Good Lord, they might never leave his chamber for the entirety of their married lives!

Yes, she must tell him she loved him and plead for him to forgive her. She knew now. It was so very clear. Surely he would see it too and forgive her for everything. She would tell him before the ball tonight, wearing a beautiful evening gown, flowers in her hair and her mother's pendant around her neck. Later at the ball, they would laugh and dance, their beautiful secret glowing in their eyes.

She slid out of bed and rang for the servant to come dampen her hair and roll it in paper to make those perfect ringlets. She opened a jar of rose-scented cream and rubbed the lotion into her skin.

Kesseley headed to Boodles in the early morning, drank three cups of black tea and picked up *The London Times*. It took him an hour to read the first page, his mind drifting between the sentences.

You weren't the one I wanted.

He despised her. He never thought it possible. He believed himself bigger than to despise anyone, but as much as he tried to press it down, it boiled up inside him. He wanted to hurt her as she had hurt him,

although he knew he was a better man than that. He must let go of the past.

But he couldn't.

He wanted revenge, the kind only a perfect world could supply. He envisioned his wedding party, where Henrietta cried at what a horrible mistake she'd made, that he was the only man she could love. *I'm sorry*, he'd say, his beautiful wife on his arm, *but I don't love you anymore. Stop embarrassing yourself.*

I don't love you anymore.

Just thinking it—even if it wasn't real—made him feel elated, strangely reckless.

He couldn't stay out all afternoon, although he wanted to, for he had an appointment with his new valet. The man was slighter than his brother, the tailor, and more serious. He spoke little English and wore thick spectacles that enlarged his solemn eyes.

Along with Kesseley's new clothes wrapped in paper, he brought along his own trunk and a document bearing the names of four Germanic princes—his former employers. He didn't speak as he examined

Kesseley's clothes press, systematically touching each item, examining the hems and shoulders and seams with no expression on his face. He lifted up every boot and shoe, turned them over, reviewing all sides, then replaced them. He opened Kesseley's commode and ran his hand across his toilette items.

Eventually the valet came to stand in the center of the room, like a junior officer who had finished his inventory, waiting to report. Baggot glowered at him from the shadows in the corner.

Kesseley said, "I am going to a ball tonight—*einem Tanz*—I want to look better—*Ich möchte stattlich sein*." He wished he hadn't burned Henrietta's picture of the dandy with the curls. He moved his hand about his head, in spiraling circular motions.

The valet shook his head. "No, my lord," he said, then opened Kesseley's commode and brought out his shears. "Cut."

Henrietta came down for dinner, feeling that she looked lovelier than she ever had in her life. She chose a pale lavender gown, not her prettiest, but one she

had worn to Kesseley's Christmas party when they had danced, making it *his*. A natural blush tinged her cheeks and an excitement pulsed through her. She had practiced words, so many words, beautiful ones. Promises to be a good wife and mother. To love so deeply, as to make up for every hurting word, angry utterance or broken promise.

She met Lady Kesseley in the dining room. She had dressed sedately, in an understated gown of pale green. She didn't compliment Henrietta's gown or note how lovely Henrietta looked this momentous evening.

They waited for Kesseley. After several minutes, Lady Kesseley sent the footman to fetch her son. He returned with a message that the lord intended to dine in his chamber.

The ladies bore the news stoically and passed dinner with few words, both lost in their internal thoughts. Henrietta ate very little, her belly too tight and jittery for food.

Once retired to the parlor, Lady Kesseley seized Henrietta's hand, forcing her to sit beside her on the sofa. "Tommie is still angry," she cried. "I promised him that I would never see Sir Gilling again, but it doesn't help. He is ashamed of me."

"I will try to make everything better," Henrietta assured her.

Then she hurriedly changed the subject before Lady Kesseley broke down. For Henrietta only wanted only pleasant, beautiful things this evening, even if she had to force them. So they spoke hollowly of their favorite flowers, samplers they had sewn, whether they liked the minuet or the quadrille better. Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron. All the while the pendulum swung on the clock.

Where was he? If he didn't come down soon, there would not be enough time to tell him, for the ball started at eight, and it was eight-fifteen.

Lady Kesseley and Henrietta discussed table configurations and menus for the winter months.

Eight-thirty. Still time.

Lady Kesseley agreed that Huntley caps were very pleasing, but she didn't favor Mob caps.

Eight forty-five.

Maybe Henrietta could lure Kesseley behind a screen of flowers or a tiny terrace at the ball and whisper her revelation.

Eight-fifty.

Had he forgotten?

Eight fifty-six.

Should she check on him? Perhaps he was ill.

Nine o'clock.

"Boxly, call the carriage." Kesseley's rich voice sounded through the house.

Henrietta's heart surged. Her mouth felt sticky. Her lungs refused to work. He was just beyond the door.

She felt Lady Kesseley's wiry fingers pressing hers. "I'll be good, I will. You must help me."

One shiny black shoe in a silken stocking crossed the threshold, followed by tight breeches molded to the contour of hard thighs. A black coat clad powerful shoulders like a second skin, without a wrinkle or crease. Jutting out from the high points of a white collar was a hard, strong jaw. Two startling clear eyes surveyed the room, glittering dangerously. And his hair—all his lovely curls—gone, barbered back to a little more than an inch, including his side whiskers which barely extended beyond his ears. Henrietta never realized what chiseled cheekbones Kesseley possessed or how his brows soared.

This wasn't Kesseley. This was a cold rock of a man.

"You've become *him*," his mother whispered.

She was more coherent than Henrietta. All Henrietta's words, everything she dreamed, all her planning skittered away.

She didn't know this man.

Chapter Fifteen

The ballroom walls were cover in muted gold silk and held expansive paintings of the host's noble ancestors. One ruddy-faced gentleman was painted with a gun barrel cradled in the crook of his elbow and a hound at his feet. Another more dour relation wore a white wig and posed beside a globe. These were the only distinguishing features separating this ballroom from the last.

Kesseley had not said a single word to her, not even taken her arm at the carriage. Where before she had fantasized about an impassioned kiss and a promise for forever behind a large fern or screen, she now wished for the same such concealment to shake Kesseley and demand to know what he was doing.

After greeting the host and hostess, Lady Kesseley remained true to her word and headed for the mamas sitting in rows like ornamental chickens in a henhouse, watching their daughters and sons on the dance floor.

Henrietta peeked at Kesseley. He showed no expression, surveying the crowd, unaffected by the

blatant stares of other guests. His eyelids just drooped as if bored of the scene. Those weren't his eyes. The man she loved had eyes that were alive and delighted, like a small child's in awe of the caterpillar's cocoon or the perfect angle of geese flying overhead.

"Perhaps I should join your mother?" she offered tentatively, hoping he might say something to the contrary, like *no, Henrietta, perhaps we should dance?* He looked down at her and gave her a quick smile. Henrietta almost burst.

Oh, Kesseley, smile at me again.

"There's Edward. It would be rude not to speak." His voice was low, silky in its derision.

What? No, no, not Edward. You!

But before she could protest, he grabbed her elbow and pulled her into the crowd. Henrietta practically had to run to keep up with his long strides. People made room for him as he passed. The more dashing ladies' eyes glittered with appreciation of his hard, elegant lines. He acknowledged them with a slight hike of his brows and a slow smile, like an intimate invitation. Where had he learned that? He never smiled that way for her. Henrietta's insides burned with jealousy, and she wanted to shout at those welcoming females.

Don't look at him like that. This is not Kesseley. The real Kesseley knows the correct nitrogen ratio for manure and how to birth a cow. That's not very dashing, is it?

Lady Sara and Edward waited at the edge of the room, under the orchestra den, about to step onto the dance floor where dancers were assembling for a waltz.

Lady Sara wore that pale pink only blondes could wear, with a low, ruffled bodice revealing her supple breasts. Her lush lips formed an O when she saw Kesseley and the arm holding Edward's elbow dropped to her side.

Edward, unaware of Kesseley sweeping toward him, was caught off guard.

"Mr. Watson, a pleasure to see you again." Kesseley yanked her forward so abruptly that she almost stumbled. "You remember your cousin Henrietta, don't you?"

Edward didn't acknowledge her, but his eyes fixed on Kesseley. "You've changed."

He snorted derisively. "It's rather poetic, isn't it, my good fellow—change. The flux of being. Suns born, new worlds discovered, old worlds conquered, civilizations dying, birth and death over and over again."

"You forget love, my lord," Lady Sara said quietly. Henrietta could almost see her heart fluttering under her breasts. "Are not some of the greatest poems about love?"

Kesseley paused. A predatory smile spread across his lips. "Perhaps the illusion of love. I, however, no longer believe in love."

His melodramatic words could have come straight out of *The Mysterious Lord Blackraven*.

"Perhaps you have never met a lady to properly show you love," she suggested innocently.

"All ladies are quite the same really," he said. "Cruelty behind their beautiful facades. I have yet to find one worthy of my devotion."

His words slashed Henrietta's heart. She let out a small squeak of pain.

"A-are you enjoying the ball, Lord Kesseley?" Lady Sara asked, a pretty blush coloring her cheeks.

"No, I find these affairs a dead bore."

“What do you enjoy then? Swine?” Lady Sara was both teasing and provoking, trying to keep his attention.

Kesseley regarded her for a moment. Henrietta could see some thought ticking behind his gray eyes. He cocked his head. “I enjoy reading.”

“And what do you read, my lord?” Lady Sara continued.

“Some poetry, some prose.” He brazenly ran his gaze up Lady Sara’s curves, stopping at her face. “The works of a Mrs. Fairfax.”

I told you that! Henrietta fumed. *You blackguard. You’re making a may game of Lady Sara!*

But Lady Sara fell for it. She raised a hand to her breasts. “I read Mrs. Fairfax.”

“Do you?” An infuriating smile lazed on his lips.

Lady Sara nodded, her mouth agape.

“Dark prose for such tender years. Does your papa know?” Kesseley laughed as if pleased with his little performance and started to walk away.

“Perhaps you enjoy dancing, my lord?” Lady Sara called after him.

He halted, turned, his eyes glittering dangerously. “I wound who dances with me.”

Oh dear God!

Lady Sara stepped forward. "I think you will find I won't break so easily."

"You won't?" He gave her a dark, intimate look that could break a lady without laying a finger on her. Lady Sara audibly gulped. Taking her hand, Kesseley kissed it slowly, keeping his eyes on her face as Edward looked on.

Henrietta pressed her fingers on her mouth, remembering how he had expertly kissed her the night before. How his hands had caressed her as if he knew how to touch a woman. She knew Kesseley's favorite dessert was quince tart, that he had a nice baritone voice but rarely sang and that he kept a journal of his sketches and ideas in his library where he would work late in the evenings by a wood fire. But Kesseley the man was an enigma. She knew nothing of the lips he had kissed before hers, or of the ladies he must have known in the most intimate manner. Yet, he seemed to have had a great deal of practice.

"I believe a lady of such delicate bones as yours might snap like a twig under me," he said, Lady Sara's hand still in his.

"You do not know me, my lord," she said.

Kesseley arched an eyebrow. "I don't? Well, I think I do. Dance for me." He swept Lady Sara away from Edward.

"What does he think he is doing?" Edward hissed.

"It seems pretty apparent!" Henrietta cried without thinking.

This was Henrietta's evening! Hers! When she admitted everything in her soul to Kesseley—all her beautiful words, the tender dreams in her heart. And he was dancing with another lady! They were supposed to be engaged by now, discussing how to tell their parents, planning the wedding, thinking up names for their children. But her lovely plans were slipping away from her and she could do nothing to stop it.

Edward yanked her into the swirl of dancers. "We're dancing. And don't look so lost. Gaze at me like you used to."

"Pardon?"

"That *in love* look that always made me nervous. Look like that again."

"What are you talking about?"

"For God sakes, Henrietta! You're in love with me."

"No, I'm not!"

At least Edward had the presence of mind to keep

count with the dance. She stumbled along, unable to dance, have her heart broken and converse at the same time.

"Then why did you follow me to London?" he said. "I know being a companion is a ruse. You and Lady Kesseley never got along. I bet you tricked Kesseley into bringing you here because he was always so sweet on you."

"Are you saying I used Kesseley?" Her voice cracked with hurt. Henrietta tried to drop Edward's hand, but he held tight, not letting her escape the dance.

"You always used Kesseley. We would laugh about it."

"I did not," she whispered, hot tears swelling in the edges of her eyes. All those tiny, inconsequential promises she had made to Kesseley—and then broken—came hounding back to her conscious, like money collectors demanding their due with interest. Edward narrowed his eyes at Lady Sara. "We were supposed to be married."

"You'd better remind her!" Henrietta cried, for it didn't look like Lady Sara remembered.

Kesseley raised Lady Sara's arm, letting her twirl

underneath and he kept his hand on her waist. They looked apart from the rest of the dancers, better, more beautiful, their elegant bodies moving in graceful unison. He leaned down and whispered to her. She flushed, her pale skin turning a lovely pink. As if feeling the heat of Henrietta's stare, Kesseley turned slightly, giving her the full force of his devastating smile.

She stopped. Edward stumbled on to her, causing her to fall backward. He caught her. "Are you well?"

"No!" Henrietta cried and fled, dodging all the dancers, running past the main stairs into the dressing room. A servant looked up and asked if she required anything. *Yes, I require Kesseley, the old Kesseley, who was always sweet on me,* she thought. She emitted a strangled cry, hurried out and blindly reached for a door. The servants' stairs. She closed herself in.

She squeezed her bottom lip between her teeth and closed her eyes. She couldn't cry here, not at the ball, not where everyone could see. But the tears spilled out anyway.

She blew on her face, trying to think of obscure mathematical formulas, anything to block the image of Kesseley whispering in Lady Sara's ear and that lazy, self-satisfied smile playing on his lips. Her whole

evening had fallen into shambles. How had everything gone so badly wrong? Yet in her heart, she knew the answer. Edward was right, she had used Kesseley. She deserved this hurt.

The waltz ended, and a new song began, a minuet. She waited several more minutes before she heard the shuffle of feet below. Her little retreat was about to be invaded. She opened the door and stepped out, wiping the last of her tears away.

Peering into the ballroom, she didn't see him. Just beyond the treacherous battlefield of dancers waited the card room. She would be safe there.

"You really ought to thank me," a deep male voice said.

Henrietta whirled around just as Kesseley disengaged himself from a group of laughing bucks clustered along the wall. The rakish Lord Blackraven demeanor had disappeared, but the coldness remained.

"Lady Sara already promised me a second dance, and her father invited me to their house party after the Season. I think the one you always wanted might be free after all."

"What do you think you are doing?"

“What you told me to do,” he said, as if it were a bird-witted question. Then he drew down his eyebrows, looking very much like a hawk ready to swoop on its prey. “Come to think of it, perhaps I should thank you.” He laughed, paying her a low, mocking bow.

Henrietta wandered into the card room, dazed. Mrs. Whitmore, with her flaming hair and jewels, recognized her and waved her over to their table. Greetings and introductions were exchanged. Then Henrietta picked her cards and hid behind them.

Even numbers failed her this evening. All the suits blurred together in her head. She couldn't remember what cards were played, which suit was trump. And it was so hot in the card room that the chandelier dripped hot wax down onto her arm.

But that didn't burn as much as watching Kesseley in the ballroom twirling different ladies, all of them too eager to have their toes broken. Henrietta tried to keep her eyes on her cards, but she couldn't stop herself from watching him, like an urge to cut herself with her own knife. Her whole inside ached. How could she have been so stupid, blind, ignorant, impetuous, cruel,

so—so everything?

She clutched her mother's pendant tight in her hand.
Mama, I've lost him.

In the third game of the last rubber, Mrs. Whitmore said, "Look, Lord Kesseley is dancing with Lady Sara again. I think her father will be very pleased."

The game paused and the players put their cards to their chests and watched the pair. Lord Kesseley held Lady Sara in his arms, her vivid blue eyes gazing up at his face. Clearly smitten.

The ladies let out a collective "Ahhh."

"It's always nice when there's true affection between marriage partners."

"It will be quite a brilliant match. An earl and a duke's daughter."

They continued to speculate when the wedding would take place, who would be in attendance, the amount of dowry the duke would consider. Mrs. Whitmore reasoned if Kesseley pressed the foiled attempt to Gretna Greene, he could get more than the twenty thousand pounds.

Henrietta felt like her insides were being ripped out. She shrunk in her chair and lowered her head, not wanting to watch Lady Sara waltz away with the man

who dwelled in the quietest place of Henrietta's heart.

At last the wretched waltz ended, and the ladies returned their attention to the game. Mrs. Whitmore led a heart. The lady to Henrietta's right trumped it with a five. Henrietta overtrumped. Then she led the last trick, tossing out the jack of hearts.

"No, Miss Watson, you can't play that," Mrs. Whitmore said. "Hearts led the last trick. You had to play your heart then."

Henrietta gaped before realizing the woman meant Henrietta's cards, not that broken, ailing organ pumping her blood.

"I don't feel well this evening. Please excuse me," she said weakly and rose. Edward waited behind her. How long had he been there?

"I wanted to know—that is, would you dance with me? Again?" He looked as bereft as Henrietta felt. "We never finished our first dance."

His stricken face sunk Henrietta's misery and guilt deeper. She wasn't the only one having their heart destroyed. And what was worse, Kesseley had only done what she had begged him to do. He had turned into some living version of Lord Blackraven and stolen Lady Sara.

Oh God, she hated herself.

"I am so sorry. I am so very sorry." *For everything. It's all my fault. I was so ignorant.* "I think I might faint. I need to find Lady Kesseley." Henrietta ran her hand over her perspiring face.

"I shall take you to her," Edward offered.

She clutched his arm, and they cautiously crept into the ballroom as if it were a dangerous jungle full of tigers and panthers. But the most fearful beast of all waited between the card room and his mother. An entourage of young bucks and admiring ladies, including Lady Sara, surrounded him, hanging on his words.

Henrietta felt Edward's arm tighten. They clung to each other, trying to hurry past unnoticed.

No such luck. Kesseley halted them. "Tell Mama I'll be joining Bucky and his friends this evening." He tugged the sleeve of a red-headed man who laughed inanely.

Henrietta could only nod, her throat tight.

A slow, cruel smile twisted Kesseley's lips. He looked from Edward to Henrietta. "Congratulations on your victory."

"But I-I didn't win. I lost every hand," she whispered.

Kesseley marveled how much easier life in London became when he no longer cared. He rode his anger like a currie at top speed, the wind on his face, not caring if an unseen pothole sent him flying. To hell with them all.

Kesseley followed Bucky and his friends to an entirely different ball at the notorious Argyll rooms. Under the stately bronze goddesses lining the walls and the eighteen chandeliers that ran down the length of the room, the lightskirts danced. Their provocative gowns of sheer white muslin hung low to expose their bosoms and clung to their limbs, giving the inspecting gentlemen a good eyeful of the merchandise.

Kesseley felt that familiar hunger rise up in him. The one that drove him onto the road to Ely some nights to a particular widow's address. He hadn't realized how frustrated he had become, locked in the house with Henrietta.

Now he felt her flow away from him, like a receding tide as these lovely feminine figures twirled about, their obscenely low-cut gowns ready to slide down their nipples, across their navels, below that sweet triangle

of carnal pleasure.

He figured he needed a reward for turning Lady Sara up so sweet in a single night. His father would have been proud. She fell so easily to all that inane conversation about mystery, poisoned souls and dark secrets.

The only secret to tempt Kesseley waited in the curls between a lovely lady's legs.

And it wouldn't take long. In the few moments Bucky and Kesseley stood there, a throng of ladies lit to them like hummingbirds to nectar, teasing those beautiful breasts under their eyes. A variety of ladies to choose from, even removing the raven-haired vixens who reminded him of Henrietta.

In the corner, a doe-eyed auburn stunner regarded Kesseley from under her long lashes. She appeared demure, almost shy. Perfect. He disentangled himself and approached. Her eyes widened with panic as she looked about her for an escape.

Not again!

He halted, ready to turn on his heel. This was lower than he thought possible—to be turned away by a prostitute.

"No, sir, please," she said. She had a fragile voice,

the kind that melted strong men. "I want to dance with you, but there's someone else..."

Kesseley bowed and gave her a smile, appreciating her kindness.

She looked nervously about, then stepped forward. "My name is Ann," she said, as if confiding a secret.

"Kesseley, the Earl of Kesseley," he returned.

"Earl," she echoed. Her face was even more beautiful when confused.

He couldn't help himself—he brushed away a dangling auburn curl from her cheek. "Perhaps there isn't someone else after all," he said, putting her small hand in his and drawing her onto the floor.

It was a sweet relief to dance in silence with no complicated intentions. She let him graze softly at her lips, her neck and the line between her swelling breasts. Each knew what happened next—he would whisk her away to her chambers and—

He felt a tap on his shoulder. "I believe this lady and I have some unfinished business to complete."

Kesseley turned to find Gilling standing there, reeking like a distillery, with two other men flanking him. One fair and freckled with shoulders like mountains, and the other one skinny and dark, looking

as if he thought he had shoulders like a mountain.

Why the two woodpeckers? Was Gilling afraid Kesseley was going to draw his cork in the middle of the Cyprian Ball?

He kissed his dancing partner's hand. "My little darling. Should I set you free?"

"No!" she cried, clutching Kesseley, clearly not wanting to return to Gilling.

A nasty smile snaked across Gilling's lips. "What's a matter, Tommie?" he asked sweetly. "You have to get a whore because your mother's little companion won't open her legs for you?"

Kesseley dropped Ann's hand. "What did you say?"

Gilling's two male companions clamped their hands on his shoulders and tried to pull him away, but Gilling brushed them off. "I said, your mother should tell her champion what that sweet hole between her legs is for. Or hell, maybe I'll just show her."

Kesseley ran his finger under his cravat. "We can settle this two ways. I'm a pretty good shot, but nothing would suit me better than beating the hell out of you. And your two footmen in turn."

"Did you hear that?" Gilling asked his mates. "Lord Kesseley wants to dance."

Kesseley smiled. "That's right, ladies."

Gilling shoved the heel of his palm into Kesseley's shoulder. "Pickering Place. You'll be on your knees before the Watch can come. I'm giving you twenty minutes to change your mind."

As it turned out, Kesseley had thirty minutes to change his mind. Word of the fight rippled through the crowd like a wildfire. Every man at the Cyprian Ball dropped his companion, and with wild glazed looks in their eyes, they all began shouting out bets like madmen.

The Watch couldn't have broken into Pickering Place if they had tried. Human bodies packed the tiny wainscoted passage off St. James like a cork in champagne. The square itself was a tiny, grimy armpit of a courtyard. Men and ladies stood shoulder to shoulder along the wall.

Kesseley couldn't wait for the fight to start. He stood bare-chested, the cold wind whipping around him. Gilling threw punches into his freckled friend's palm. He had a good twenty years on Kesseley, but still had the muscles of a younger man and the brash attitude to match.

Bucky hung about nervously in Kesseley's corner. "Does your heir, the one in Winchester, have a rich sister? Because that freckled chap is a prizefighter from Scotland," he informed Kesseley. "He ain't lost a fight."

Several lovely ladies standing around Kesseley cried with alarm.

He gave them a wink, feeling cocky and liking it. "His luck's about to change," he said, heading for Gilling, his bare fists raised.

Kesseley circled his opponent, anticipating, bouncing on his feet, letting Gilling throw the first punch. Gilling connected a decent jab to Kesseley's ribs. Kesseley smiled. He dodged the fist intended for his face and answered with two stone blows to Gilling's face. First the left, ramming his cheekbone, then a right under the chin, slamming Gilling's jaw together with a sickening crunch. Blood shot up in the air like a waterspout and sprayed down on Kesseley. The lecher tumbled backward into people along the wall, then straightened himself and staggered back into the center.

He spat blood. "You goddamned country bumpkin. You wouldn't know what to do with a woman even if she

were sitting on your bloody cock," he hissed.

The crowd, including Kesseley, laughed.

Then he drew back his right and jammed it deep into Gilling's gut, lifting him from the ground. The man's body collapsed around his fist. Kesseley threw him off, but the fool didn't have the sense to fall, so Kesseley let off two powerful blows, slamming Gilling's face and chest. The crowd let out guttural moans, as if hit themselves.

Gilling righted himself, breathing like an overheated bitch. He drew his fist back and delivered a weak punch that Kesseley caught with his hand. He pulled Gilling forward and smashed his forehead down on Gilling's nose. The crunch of breaking bone and cartilage was audible. Gilling's body went limp and dangled from Kesseley's grip. He let go and the scoundrel puddled on the ground.

The crowd was silent except for Bucky, who danced about telling everyone how Kesseley and he had gone to Trinity together and what close mates they were.

Kesseley flicked Gilling's blood off with his fingers and returned to his corner. His circle of female admirers had swelled. Their fingers massaged his warm, wet muscles. He threw his head back and let out

a groan, feeling weeks and weeks of tension easing from his muscles.

The Scottish prizefighter stepped forward. Unlike Kesseley, whose muscles rippled all the way down his abdomen, the fighter was a hard, shapeless rock of brawn. He stood perfectly still on his large feet while Kesseley danced around, trying to figure him out. Finally Kesseley threw a right, just to have him answer. He did, with a scorcher to the jaw that sent Kesseley sprawling back into his corner and into the arms of his feminine admirers.

He rubbed his jaw. "Damn, you're good."

The Scotsman gave him a smug smile. Kesseley rose and went running at his opponent, taking lightning swipes at his ribs. The bruiser crunched sideways but still managed to nearly punch Kesseley's guts out. Kesseley held steady, resisting the urge to throw up, and sent a fast fist to the Scot's jaw. He didn't see it coming, used as he was to opponents who needed more recovery time from his powerful punches.

Kesseley danced like a light-footed debutante around the alley, ducking and blocking the Scot's slow, but deadly punches. The prizefighter was wearing down. Spit trickled down his chin and his eyes took on

a dumb, blank look. Twice he swiped at the air. The third time, he caught Kesseley's brow, sending him to the ground.

Kesseley touched his bleeding forehead, seeing the blood drip down his finger, and something broke in him.

He couldn't recall the next few seconds, except in the end, he had the prizefighter trapped against the wall, punishing him with a flurry of lefts and rights, until the Scotsman slumped and slipped down. Several hands grabbed Kesseley and pulled him away. He ripped himself free to stand alone, cradling his bruised fists. His chest heaved with each breath. He swallowed the blood and sweat pooling in his mouth. "Where the hell's the other one?"

It seemed Sir Gilling's other friend preferred to keep his face in its proper order—he was nowhere to be found.

Kesseley returned to his corner and picked up his shirt. His knuckles had begun to swell and ache. He tossed his coat over his shoulders and replaced his shoes, then turned to his silent audience and bowed. "Let me apologize for Sir Gilling's unbecoming comments at the ball and this disgraceful debauchery

in the alley. Good evening.”

The crowd broke out in applause, refusing to let him pass.

The sweet auburn temptress ran up and flung her arms about him. “But we haven’t finished our dance.”

“And you didn’t dance with me!” a pretty blonde said.

“Or me!” a brunette charmer cried.

Kesseley didn’t dance, or at least not vertically. His fair Cyprians led him to a mirrored room. They took turns wiping his cut brow, their eyes full of concern, their heavy breasts lying invitingly against his arm. It was decided he was too injured to sit and must lie down, so they led him to the bed where their whispery fingers made short work of his shirt and shoes. He leaned his head against the headboard and cradled his swelling hands while watching the ladies perform a little dance for him.

Wine arrived, deep red, not the sugary misery from the balls of the other evenings. They held the glass to his lips, letting it run over, then kissed his face clean, his neck, his chest, his belly.

He felt soft fingers unclasp his pantaloons...

Silence.

“Oh my,” admired a sweet, feminine voice.

Henrietta waited in the parlor all night, curled up on the sofa, still in her evening gown. She listened for every passing carriage, yet none drew to a stop before the house. As the early morning sun rose into the coal-ridden sky, she heard loud male laughter from outside in the street. She went to the window. A group of bucks, including Kesseley, weaved drunkenly about the sidewalk. He waved them off and ambled up the front steps.

She ran into the hall as the door opened.

“Kesseley,” she said. “I waited for you.”

His eyes, burning under the shadow of his hat, raked over her. He cocked his head. The light from the torch mounted beside the door illuminated his bloody brow and bruised lip.

“Dear God! What happened?” she said, reaching for his face.

He grabbed her wrist. “Don’t.”

The scent of perspiration and sweet perfume hung about him. The loose knot on his cravat wasn’t the neat elegant one from the ball. Henrietta let out a whimper

and tried to wrest her arm from his, the filthy black truth all about her.

Kesseley and another lady.

He held Henrietta tight, forcing her to see the truth. Then he released her and stepped past.

“Wait!” she cried.

He stopped but kept his back to her. “Yes?”

She had stayed up all night to tell him, and even in this wreckage, she ached to release the truth. “I didn’t mean for it to happen this way, but it did and everything has changed.”

“What are you trying to say?” he interrupted, as if she were wasting his time.

She felt like she was moving boulders with her heart. Her voice was a rush of breath.

“I-I wanted to t-tell you. Th-that—” She swallowed and drove the knife in. “I love you.”

He spun to face her, kicking up his coattails. “What?” he said harshly.

“I love you.”

He gently lifted her chin with the knuckle of his index finger and lowered his head, but stopped his mouth just shy of hers. She could almost feel the fresh memory of another lady on his lips.

“You’re a little late, Miss Watson,” he said.

Chapter Sixteen

Henrietta said she loved me.

The words howled in Kesseley's brain.

Go back to her!

Instead he crashed upon his bed, remembering those ladies' hands caressing his body just hours ago.

Yes, Kesseley. Yes, Kesseley.

What had Henrietta ever given him? Nothing. It was always about what she wanted.

He remembered the hurt in her brown eyes. Capital! May she know the pain he'd felt for years.

He slipped off his shoes. They thudded on the floor. The canopy swirled above him. Damn, he had drunk too much.

He closed his eyes and drifted back to the mirrored room and the fair-headed angel. The memory of her lips lulled him to the edge of sleep, then she lifted her head and stared at him with tearful chocolate eyes, all those beautiful blond curls turning to Henrietta's midnight-black locks. "I love you," she said. *Damn it!*

Henrietta didn't call the ladies' maid. She removed the pins from her bodice herself, tearing the sheer fabric beyond repair. She rolled and squashed it in the bottom of her clothes press. She loosened her stays and slid them over her hips. Then she crawled up in her bed, closed the drapes and drew the blankets over her head.

Mr. Elliot must be wrong. Surely a lifetime of regret was kinder than this acute despair.

She turned onto her side, gathered her limbs and wept until she lapsed into dreams.

Mr. Van Heerlen asked her to present her mother's mathematical theories to the Royal Academy, but her mother had died before all the problems had been solved. So she worked frantically on the dining room table of the London townhome, but nothing equated, until Kesseley told her π equaled 5.146573. That is wrong, she assured him. Wrong. Yet everything worked. But when she got to the Royal Academy, Mr. Van Heerlen told her she was too late and that he'd let someone else lecture. She could see Sir Gilling in a room, speaking above the shoulders of the people.

She pleaded with Mr. Van Heerlen, saying this was her mother's work and she had died before anyone could see it. He said if she waited until the afternoon, she could stand on the steps and speak as people left.

A shout from the neighboring mews tore Henrietta from her dream, and she bolted up. The gray morning sun shone through the thin curtains. It was just a dream.

Pi really was 3.14159265.

And Kesseley didn't love her anymore.

She closed her eyes, feeling a dull, sickening feeling wash over her insides. Henrietta heard Kesseley's door open and the steady rhythm of his footsteps as he passed her door and continued down the stairs. Then she heard the thud of the front door closing.

She laid her head on her knees and wrapped her arms about her. She remembered what Mr. Elliot had said about only having this very instant, like the light shimmering across the blue water one afternoon. But she hated this moment and wanted nothing more than to escape it. She couldn't go forward or back. Everything crushed together to this one moment of agonizing hurt and regret.

She heard a scratching sound, and the door opened. Samuel cautiously padded in, his head low and the fur above his eyes crumpled. He climbed into bed with Henrietta and curled up in her lap.

A little before noon, Lady Winslow and the princess arrived. Henrietta, who had spent the morning hiding in her room, took the stairs slowly, sliding her shoulder along the wall, hearing their voices below. As she crossed to the parlor, Lady Kesseley's distraught voice cried, "Are you saying that my son left the Cyprian Ball last night to fight Sir Gilling and four other men, bare-fisted in a dirty alley like rats?"

Henrietta gripped the doorframe to the parlor, unsure of her knees to keep her upright.

The princess sat on the sofa beside Lady Kesseley, cooing soothingly and patting Lady Kesseley's clenched hands. Lady Winslow stood by the mantel, her face hard as a soldier's, reporting the unwanted news.

"My son is not like this—he isn't. It must be me. I must disappoint him so."

Her words stabbed Henrietta. She wanted to

scream, *No, it's me. I did it. I kissed him in the corridor, yet told him that he wasn't the one I wanted. I am the one who disappointed him.* Instead, Henrietta dug her fingers into the stucco of the doorframe to keep herself steady.

"Tommie *est un homme*. He only thinks when his penis is down. When it is up...*well*."

"I certainly hope you are not trying to make me feel better," Lady Kesseley snapped at the princess.

"Hush now, darling," Lady Winslow said, coming to embrace her friend.

Henrietta imagined Kesseley's fingers—the same square ones that gently opened the tender leaves of a corn plant breaking through the soil, or covered her eyes and guided her to a wildflower garden he had planted when he was twelve—laid upon courtesans he didn't even know until last evening. Something sacred inside of her was ripped out and scattered into the dirty street.

"Come with us tonight," Lady Winslow said, letting her friend rest her head on her thin shoulders. "We shall have a small little dinner *chez moi*, then perhaps a play, just like we used to. You will go mad listening to

your own mind, wondering where your son is.”

“I never wanted to feel like this again.”

“Dearest, you couldn’t hold him forever. You did the best you could. He is his father’s son. You could see it in his eyes. The same gray. It was a matter of time.”

Henrietta didn’t remember much of the late Lord Kesseley. Most of her memories were of Kesseley himself, turning up at her house uninvited, his face pale and eyes hurt. He wouldn’t say anything, just sit beside her. It had made her frustrated and angry that he wasn’t her old laughing friend. On those days, her mother would remind her to be especially kind to Kesseley and let him turn the old, brass Armillary sphere.

Henrietta rubbed her mother’s pendant, wishing she could be as wise. None of this would have happened if she had been wiser, more compassionate, more intuitive, more everything.

Instead, her foolishness had unleashed an angry ghost who refused to be forgotten, readily pulling his son back to him.

Kesseley felt London rushing around him—the people, horses, carriages, wagons, pulsing through the city’s

arteries. Even without sleep, he felt lifted. Everything so vivid, its dirt, grime and beauty crowding his senses, pushing Wrenthorpe farther away in his mind. He knew the wheat would be about six inches from the ground now and that the ewes carried new babies in their bellies. Even so, it didn't seem real, like a book he'd once read.

London was like a merchant with endless fancy trinkets for sale, always something the customer desired. A city of beautiful ladies, brandy and gambling hells. Maybe he shouldn't get married this Season. He was just twenty-five. His father hadn't gotten chained until he was thirty-three.

Thinking of the onerous possibility of marriage, he knew he owed Lady Sara a morning call because he'd danced with her twice the evening before. That was the only thing tainting his day, and it was Henrietta's fault, goading him to behave so imprudently. He would take the bitter medicine first—fifteen minutes at the Duke of Houghton's—then go bury himself in his club for the remainder of the day to recover.

He stopped before a shop window and checked his reflection. The swelling had gone down on his lip, but he was going to get a scar from that nasty gash on his

brow. Cutting through Green Park, he thought of melodramatic excuses for his appearance to excite the cracked gel's little romantic fantasies. Even though he had no intentions of marrying, he wanted to keep Lady Sara dangling for a bit longer. He felt a little residual anger from her earlier ill treatment, but most importantly, he wanted Henrietta to know the bitter sting of being rejected for another.

He smiled to himself as he pondered what gothic drivel would fan Lady Sara's passions. He could have been robbed by a footpad demanding a gold locket that he carried close to his heart, containing the miniature of an old love who'd died tragically in his arms. In blinding rage, he'd fought off the attackers with little regard for his own life.

Not very believable, but a good story. Henrietta would like it, he thought, as he was announced at the grand mansion off the park.

Kesseley couldn't tell if he'd been invited into a parlor or flower garden. Flowers sat on every surface, large elaborate arrangements with chrysanthemums, lilies and geraniums. Had all London woken with a

compulsion to send Lady Sara flowers that morning?

Lady Sara sat on the sofa beside her mother, an older version of her daughter—same hair, eyes and stature. When Kesseley entered, Lady Sara stood and shyly lifted her gaze to his face, then let out a soft gasp. “No,” she cried, holding the back of her palm over her mouth. She closed her eyes and collapsed onto the floor. Her gown draped perfectly over the curves of her beautiful figure and her blond locks splayed like a halo around her head.

“Oh, my most delicate precious!” her mother cried, falling to her knees in a similar dramatic fashion. She gazed up at Kesseley and pleaded with tear-filled eyes for him to do something.

He stood momentarily stunned. Had he walked into a *Punch and Judy* act?

There was a rustling of leaves and the duke emerged from the floral undergrowth. He looked down at his prostrate daughter. “Sara, stop that! Get up.”

“My dear!” his wife cried. “She was overcome with Lord Kesseley’s appearance!”

Upon hearing his name, he jolted forward, suddenly remembering his lines. He knelt before Lady Sara. How delicately beautiful she looked unconscious, her

claws retracted. He lifted her. Her neck curved over his arm and displayed a succulent jaw line, the kind for nibbling kisses.

She opened her heavy eyes and murmured, "Lord Kesseley!" then swooned again, burying herself in his chest. He played the proper gothic hero she wanted and gently laid her upon the cushions, even brushed the curls from her eyes. Her limp hand found his. "You frightened me, my lord," she said, a shiver in her whisper.

"A thousand apologies, my lady. I'll leave immediately."

For a faint thing, she had a strong grip, holding him in place. "Don't leave me, my lord!"

"Dear God!" the duke said, taking a seat beside a chrysanthemum. "Why do I spend hundreds of pounds on boxes at the theatres when we could stay home and have more drama."

"Your Grace! You have such little regard for a lady's delicate nerves." The duchess fanned her daughter with her fingers. "Oh my lovely, don't listen to your papa. Shall Lord Kesseley read to you?"

"Oh yes, my lord, please read to me. Poetry about death and birth and flux and change, just not love. For

you do not believe in love.”

“Now, we talked about this! I told you not to make Lord Kesseley read dribble,” the duke reminded his daughter. “Kesseley, why don’t you read that article of yours about turnips and manuring.” He lifted up a flowerpot and pulled out the *Journal of Agriculture*. “Here it is.”

He was given a chair beside Lady Sara and opened the journal right to his article. Little pressed lavender flowers fell out.

It felt awkward reading his own words aloud, especially with Lady Sara staring at him adoringly with those bright eyes of hers, and her sweet voice complimenting his elocution while he read about nitrogen depletion in soil. He skipped entire sections. No one seemed to notice that he never fully explained excretion theory. He had far exceeded the fifteen minutes he had allocated for the visit when he closed the journal.

“It has been a pleasure, my lady, but it would be quite ungentlemanly of me to further press upon your delicate health.”

The duke, who had been sleeping with his head drooped down upon his big chest, suddenly sprung up.

“Let’s play a game of billiards.”

Kesseley clenched his jaws to keep an expletive from escaping. He smiled tightly and followed the duke up the expansive staircase winding around the great hall to a room with enormous arched windows that looked on to a narrow terrace. An inlaid oak billiard table stood in the center of the room.

The duke stacked up the balls, then leaned his large frame over the edge of the table, one eye closed, the other looking down the long pole at the cue ball. “So what do you think of my daughter?” He broke the balls in one clean stroke, sending them all over the table. The one ball dropped in the left pocket.

“She’s very pretty,” Kesseley said.

The duke lined up his next shot. “She’s a little fanciful, but she’ll settle down well enough on a strong man’s arm and with a brood of her own.” He sank the three into the hole.

“Excellent shot.”

The duke smiled, walked around the table and pocketed the seven, then the five. “Now I know you like the ladies as much as myself. And there ain’t a reason marriage should change any of life’s more pleasurable pursuits. Sara will be like her mama and look the other

way to any dabbling in the petticoat line. You keep her in pretty clothes and things, and she won't give you any trouble. She knows her duty."

He banked the cue ball and sank the four. "It's no secret her dowry is 20,000. But for the right match, I might be inclined to sweeten the deal." He merely tapped the cue to roll the two ball in. "I've got a ball in a week. We could make the announcement then. The wedding could take place in the late summer, before hunting season. You think about it."

Kesseley felt his mouth go dry. "I will."

The duke nudged Kesseley's elbow as he passed. "Get your case together and we can talk. I like you. You know what's what." He knocked the left edge of the six ball. It spun and bounced off the edge of the pocket and fell in the hole. "Now watch, I'm going to put the eight ball in the back right pocket." The duke lined up his shot, pulled back his pole, then slid it over his thumb, smooth and quick. The eight ball flew across the table and sank. He smiled at his own prowess.

Kesseley fled the duke's house like wolves were at his heels. He revisited the conversation, looking for any

slip, any phrase that could be misunderstood as an intention to marry Lady Sara. His heart was flip-flapping with fear, just imagining a life shackled to her.

He slipped into a gambling hell on St. James. Passing the money collectors waiting in the front room, he disappeared into the paneled parlors filled with the haze of smoke and the smell of spirits. All the wall sconces and chandeliers were lit, illuminating paintings of pale-skinned goddess baring their breasts. He found a corner table and downed a brandy, feeling the gaze of a raven-haired lady on him. He raked his eyes over her. She was small, trim, with straight hair falling down in wisps. Her pale skin and dark eyes reminded him of Henrietta and anger swelled inside him.

He shook his head. Sorry, no black-haired beauties for him.

Bucky and some of his friends found Kesseley on the fourth brandy, and they removed to the faro table. Bucky quickly lost fifty pounds and had to leave the game, but Kesseley remained, drinking more, spending the afternoon losing and winning back three hundred pounds. He gambled until he grew bored, finding easy diversion in a vibrant redhead and a green-eyed blonde who sauntered in and sat beside

their raven-haired friend. She glowered at Kesseley, still stung by his rejection. What the hell? She was a courtesan. It was just business. She was selling herself, and he wasn't interested in the merchandise.

The three ladies exchanged some words. The raven-haired chit shook her head. The redhead shrugged, and she and her blonde friend approached the table, leaving their dark friend behind.

"Pardon, are you Lord Kesseley?" the pretty redhead asked very sweetly.

His gaze flickered back to their friend. She looked away, angry. "Is that who you want? Lord Kesseley?"

Red looked flustered, as if she had made a mistake. Kesseley took her hand and kissed her smooth, cool skin, but kept his gaze on the black-haired lightskirt. She wasn't going to look at him. "I am Kesseley. But I do not know who you are."

Lydia. The blonde was Aimee with the French spelling.

"Our friend, Josephine, is in a play off Drury Lane this evening," French Aimee said with a heavy Yorkshire accent. She nodded her head to the angry, dark friend, who turned her head at the sound of her name.

"We have a box and desire some company," Aimee continued, her eyes sweeping across the table to include Bucky and his friends. They eagerly accepted.

Kesseley did not. He locked his gaze on Josephine's chocolate eyes. Not as glittery as Henrietta's, but rather skittish.

"Your friends are coming," Lydia urged him.

"I may have other plans," he said, then cocked his head, speaking loud enough for Josephine to hear. "Is your friend a good actress? Will I be amused? Or will she waste my time?"

The men at the table blew low whistles over their cards. Josephine pulled her reticule off the table and walked out.

"I think I will go to the play after all," Kesseley said, watching her retreating back.

In the afternoon, Henrietta exchanged her sacklike morning dress for an equally unappealing evening gown, intending to sit in the darkness of a theatre box and pass the evening pretending to be invisible. She watched the front door, waiting for Kesseley to come home. Although she didn't know what she would say

except *I love you* and *I'm sorry*. The ladies took the carriage to Lady Winslow's for dinner. She lived in a quaint townhome on Cavendish Square, smaller than Lady Kesseley's.

The ground-floor rooms resembled over-stuffed closets of *objets d'art*. Henrietta could scarce see the parlor walls for all the paintings and illustrations. The tables were cluttered with colorful glass vases and interesting sculptures. She could spend the evening sitting in this room, silently taking in each piece.

Unfortunately she was quickly ushered into the dining room, where the portrait of a rather small intense man with intellectual eyes presided over the dinner table. Lady Winslow sat beneath him.

When she asked about the striking gentleman, Lady Winslow's face softened and she replied, "My husband." Then she flicked her wrist to a portrait hanging over the princess's head. It was a man in hunting clothes beside a horse. "And that was the other one," she said flatly.

After dinner, they headed out for an "intimate" little theatre off Drury Lane.

They had to wait behind the carriages headed for Haymarket before they cut through the small, winding

Drury Lane. Soon they came to a stop in front of a shadowy, brown building with cracked painted plaster where people entered a low door lit by a single gas torch.

Inside, the fashionable, intellectual and artistic wearily eyed each other as they squeezed into a dimly lit salon smelling of the tallow and dirty carpet, waiting on the door to the theatre to open.

“Henrietta!” a surprised male voice called. She turned to see Edward edging through the shoulders toward her.

Lady Winslow arched a questioning brow at Henrietta. “The poet?”

“Good evening, cousin.” Edward bowed stiffly, his eyes roving about as if looking for someone. “I do not see Kesseley.”

“He is not here.”

Edward let out a relieved breath. “How are you this evening?”

“Very well, thank you,” she lied. “And yourself?”

“Well, I suppose.” But he wasn’t, and his cheerful façade melted away, pain filling his large green eyes. He swallowed and looked at his hands. “I’ve been roaming about the town, writing poetry—dark stuff. I

don't even know why I do it. Did you not see the reviews of my book? It seems I'm the worst poet ever. I just didn't know what else to do."

Lady Winslow overheard. "Might I comment upon your poetry, Mr. Watson?" she said before Henrietta could introduce her.

"Please don't."

Lady Winslow barreled on. "I do not like your poems."

"You are not unique in your opinion, ma'am," he said tersely, turning to Henrietta, thereby giving Lady Winslow his back.

Lady Winslow continued unfazed. "But I think you possess great talent, Mr. Watson, a talent perhaps picked before it had time to bloom. I daresay the poems that you have written this day in your despair may show your true depths. Many artists only discover themselves in their darkest time."

Edward swung around, searching Lady Winslow with his earnest green eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

Lady Winslow performed a graceful curtsey, slowly lifting her copper eyes to meet Edward's, and a silent communication passed between them.

"Lady Winslow, may I introduce Mr. Edward Watson."

He is my—”

“I would be honored if you would join us this evening, Mr. Watson, in my box if you are not otherwise engaged,” Lady Winslow said.

“I’m not.” He shook his head, looking almost dazed. “I-I just came here, because— because I didn’t know where to go.”

“Well, we have found you.” Lady Winslow smiled enigmatically.

The ladies recognized several other lost gentlemen in the salon, taking them along to the box that Lady Winslow engaged beside the stage. She insisted that Edward sit next to her. Lady Kesseley and two other gentlemen sat behind her in the coveted back seats, concealed in the shadows, leaving Henrietta the front seat which was so close to the stage she should have been in the playbill.

The curtain opened to a painted vista of Florence. This was a quite serious production about the Medici family. The actresses wore period costumes, long frumpy Renaissance gowns, causing great distress to the gentlemen in the front row, who couldn’t see even the tiniest glimpse of ankles. Halfway through the opening scene, a few frustrated male audience

members threw pieces of their dismantled benches onto the stage, causing one actor to lose his performance face and throw some of the Italian set back. A fight ensued, and several men had to be carried away.

As much as Henrietta tried to pay attention to the play, thoughts of Kesseley crept into her mind. Each instance she'd disappointed him or pushed him away returned to haunt her. She didn't remember a time Kesseley wasn't there, lingering in the periphery of each moment of her life. So patient, so loyal. Her best friend. She was so horrid and stupid. She didn't deserve him, she never had.

Across the stage, several loud drunken bucks and their garish lady friends stumbled into a vacant box. Behind the rowdy young men, a taller gentleman waited in the shadows with ladies on either side of him.

Henrietta heard her own sharp intake of breath as Kesseley moved to the front seat.

He wore a crisp white shirt, the tips brushing his hard jaw, his coat and breeches molded to his physique. For a moment all the audience, including the actors on the stage, stopped and admired the Adonis

amongst them. He appeared bored, disdainful of the attention. He sat back in his seat, spreading his knees wide, resting his chin on his knuckles. His two beautiful companions, a redhead and a blonde, draped themselves beside him, leaning their generous bosoms on his arms. His lips curled into a slow, appreciative smile.

She felt a hard fist of jealousy clenching in her heart. She couldn't help but wonder if he smiled the same way when those ladies were naked in his arms. His mouth on their skin. Wasting his love—that she so desperately desired—on some—

“Whores!”

Dear God! Did I say that? For one horrible moment she thought she had.

“Whores!” Lady Kesseley cried again, her pale eyes locked on Kesseley. The gentlemen sitting beside her quickly pulled her into the shadows, and the princess and Lady Winslow fell back to shield her. Henrietta rose and saw the audience's eyes on her, as if she played the part of “whore” in the play. She looked at Kesseley, who stared back at her, his eyes narrowed under his brows.

Henrietta turned and fled into the corridor where

Lady Kesseley leaned against the wall, supported by her friends. "I've lost my son," Lady Kesseley whispered.

Henrietta held Lady Kesseley's arm outside the theatre. A cold breeze whipped through the narrow street, blowing back Henrietta's pelisse and biting her cheeks and ears. It took ages for the carriage to come. They could have walked home. Lady Winslow, Princess Wilhelmina and Edward were silent. No one knew what to say. All the time, Henrietta kept close to the door, hoping it would swing open and Kesseley would come outside, explain that it was all a terrible joke.

But he never came.

When the carriage rolled to a stop on Curzon Street, Lady Kesseley adamantly refused any company, insisting she wanted to be alone. As Lady Kesseley descended the carriage, Lady Winslow grabbed Henrietta's arm.

"We shall come by in the morning," she said. "Send a footman at any time during the night if you require help."

Henrietta escorted Lady Kesseley to her chamber door, her arm weak on Henrietta's elbow. She gave Henrietta a small kiss on her cheek. Her lips were cold and dry. "I used to resent you because you never loved my son. But now, you are like my own true daughter. Did you know I had two daughters? They died, didn't live more than a week," she said, her voice coming in strange waves as if spoken from a far distance.

Henrietta hadn't slept in two days and even as her mind pressed on, her body shut down. She fell into bed as soon as the maid removed her stays. She didn't even braid her hair. She would brush out the tangles in the morning, like she would all the other tangles in her life.

In her dreams, she sat on a rock with her mother before the Ouse. Heavy deep gray clouds blew over their heads, and she could see the lightning strike the flat horizon. So when the screams first pierced her dreams, she thought it was thunder. A few seconds

later, however, she shot up in bed in the darkness with one thought.

Fire.

Not even bothering to reach for her banyan, she ran out into the corridor, instinctively heading for Kesseley's chamber. It was empty. The screams continued. Henrietta rushed down the stairwell, coming to the landing where Lady Kesseley stood, still in her evening clothes, a glass figurine poised in her raised hand.

Kesseley stood below in the shadows, holding the rail, the fire from the wall sconce flickering in his dark glossy eyes. Henrietta couldn't tell if he was drunk, but he reeked of alcohol, smoke and perfume.

"Do you think you are going to stay out all night with whores, then sleep in my house? Get out!" Lady Kesseley cried and threw the figurine. It cracked on his collarbone but he didn't flinch.

"Oh God! Kesseley!" Henrietta ran down the stairs, cutting her foot on a shard of glass.

"Don't hurt him! He is your son!" she cried, shielding his body with hers. He brushed her aside and continued up the stairs.

"It's my house, Mother. You get out." He spoke low,

slowly, as if he were moving mountains with his voice. "Why don't you batten yourself on a lover. Maybe one of them has a nice *pied a terre*. The perfect place for a mistress."

"No, Kesseley!" Henrietta pleaded, still pulling his arm.

"Stay out of this, Henrietta!" he shouted.

His mother started sobbing. Her cries echoed on the stairwell, and she sank onto the floor, clinging to the rail.

"All those years I told myself everything I gave up was worth it because I had you. And this is how you treat me?"

"No, you don't mean it," Henrietta pleaded. "You're just angry. Please..."

Kesseley ignored her. His mother slowly rose, her shoulders sloped.

"You've become him," she said. "I wish I had never married your father." She walked away, into the shadows.

Kesseley couldn't even see, everything was black. Inside him, the locks and chains holding back old

demons broke under the strain. He felt the ugly truth flood his veins—he couldn't fight anymore, wasn't strong enough to hold back this swift, strong current.

"So be it," he spat.

He felt Henrietta's hands on his chest. "No," she cried. "Take it back!"

He couldn't. He was his father. He turned on his heel and flew back down the stairs, his head pounding, his heart surging on. He was his father. He didn't know where he was going, but he had to get out, he knew that much.

Henrietta chased after him, catching his arm, her bare feet sliding on the floor. He swung around. She was scared, her eyes large and luminous. Her hair hung loose, curling around her breast, her nipples poking through her thin shift. The candlelight behind her showed the curve of her thighs and the small feminine valley between her limbs.

"You're not your father! She didn't mean those words. You're not a horrid rake," Henrietta cried.

"You are a stupid, naive girl." He took her to him, pressing her against him until he could feel her—her breasts, her stomach, her thighs.

"I am trying to help. That's all I'm trying to do. Maybe

if you could be more understanding—”

He put his finger over her mouth and tilted her head back until her large eyes were under his. He continued to move as he spoke, forcing her to walk backward into the parlor. “I want you to tell me when in the last twenty-five years I haven’t been understanding. When I didn’t bend over backwards for you, when I didn’t do your bidding. All that time you thought you controlled me, but I protected you, Henrietta. I protected you from all this—from me.”

“This isn’t you, Kesseley. This is everything you are afraid of. You don’t—”

“I thought as a boy you could save me, that quaint house of yours, your strange parents, your dreams you spun like a silken cocoon. Tell me, how does it feel inside? Is it comfortable? Does it shield you from the ugliness surrounding this moment?”

“I’m sorry I was so blind to everything. I’m sorry I hurt you all those years. I love you.”

He sank his mouth onto hers, plunging his tongue deep inside her, taking her right into the heart of his ugliness. His fingers tangled in the chains of her mother’s pendant. He felt the necklace loosen, then bounce off his thigh.

Henrietta didn't notice. Her lips desperately tried to slow his frantic pace. He wouldn't let her. Instead he lightly ran his thumb over her breast to shock her.

She lowered her head onto his shoulder. "Do you want me to tell you how horrid you are? I can't. I love you. The real you."

She entwined her fingers over his hand, still on her breast, then she raised her mouth and gently kissed the edge of his ear.

"I love you," she whispered again.

She drew his head down and opened his mouth with her lips. Her tongue caressed his as he had taught her that night in the corridor. A thousand years ago. She nestled her body against his. The tip of her nipple teased his palm.

"Don't." His voice trembled.

Despite his will, his penis rose at her touch. Her mouth released his, and she let out an uneven breath.

"If you want me to be your mistress, I will," she whispered. "Show me everything I don't know if that will help you, if it will ease your anger."

He didn't move—too angry and terrified. He wanted to hurt her as he had been hurt. He wanted to deny her so she might know the bitter pain of rejection. He

wanted to wage some battle with his father, his mother on her body. He wanted...

He wanted her and that made him hate himself.

She stepped away from him, but kept her gaze on his face. Her throat contracted with her breath and she slowly drew down the sleeve of her shift, revealing her right breast. A supple, perfect creation capped with a dainty pink tip. Kesseley heard his own inhale. *Dear God.*

"Touch me," she whispered.

Kesseley stumbled backward. "No."

"I want you to."

She reached out and took his hand and placed it over her breast, her fingers guiding his over its delicate surface.

"Dearest Kesseley," she murmured, oblivious to her own danger. "Show me how to love you, so you don't have to go out tonight."

She tugged his arm, pulling him to the sofa. She lay back on the cushions and gave her body over to him.

He didn't know if it was rage or desire that made him want to drive himself into her and find that thoughtless oblivion of moving inside her body.

He lowered his head and kissed her breast, running

his tongue over its lush tip. Her body rose under his mouth, and she released a high, sweet gasp. In an easy motion, he slid off the sofa and knelt onto the floor. He pulled her legs around him. The feminine contours of her body pressed against his hardness. He could feel the warm wetness of her femininity through his breeches. Her earthy scent covered him. Years and years of unfulfilled dreams and frustration pushed him on.

He rubbed his thighs over her sex. His penis strained to be inside her.

“Do you feel me?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He moved in the rhythmic motions of love as he watched her face, a tenderness in her eyes that cut to his heart. He wanted her to yell at him, tell him to stop. He wanted to hate her.

“Is this what you always wanted?” she asked.

His skin prickled. Above him, the crystals from the chandelier waited like cold, gray daggers. Henrietta dangled off the sofa, her legs apart, her shift falling from her shoulders. No, this was not what he always wanted. He had wanted it to be beautiful for her, not this desperate act for an angry, vengeful man. He

couldn't let her do it.

He pulled away, restored her shift to her shoulder and brushed her cheek with his hand. "I'm sorry."

Tears swelled in her eyes. "But I want you to," she pleaded.

"Henrietta, don't you understand? Too much has happened."

"No." Her voice was a scarce breath.

He shook his head and rose to leave. "It's too late."

"Don't leave, Kesseley. Stay here. Please don't go out there tonight. You're too upset. Stay with me. You don't have to...You don't have to do anything." Her words were choked with tears.

When he didn't stop, she ran around him and hid the doorknob behind her back. "No, Kesseley. I'm afraid for you."

"Goodbye," he said, then gently pulled her from her station, stepped outside and shut the door.

Pain ripped through his chest and burned down his arm. He grabbed his heart and doubled over. For several seconds, he couldn't move. Finally, he pushed himself from the steps and headed out into the night.

Henrietta curled in her bed and wept. Kesseley's smell and feel was still on her skin. She prayed he was somewhere safe tonight. She blamed herself for his hurt. She had asked him to be a rake, thinking only of a fictional Lord Blackraven. She'd had no idea what being a rake truly meant and how by asking Kesseley to play the part of one, she had unwittingly opened old wounds inflicted upon him by his father. There weren't enough *I'm sorrys* to make up for the damage she had caused by her ignorance. Of course, he wouldn't let her be his mistress. She repulsed him. Yet in her feminine core, his touch had caused an acute need that throbbed, unabated, for him.

Kesseley didn't come home. When a ribbon of sunlight cut through the tiny alley running between the houses, Henrietta left her chamber and went to see about Lady Kesseley.

She lay back in her pillow, her golden hair loose. Red veins spread like spider legs around her light blue irises. She stared out at the sunlight streaming through the window, showing no expression. Her lady's maid

attended her, pouring liquid from a small brown bottle into a spoon, then holding her hand under Lady Kesseley's chin as she sipped.

Henrietta sat on the edge of the bed. Lying open across Lady Kesseley's lap was *The Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant. She'd never imagined Lady Kesseley would be interested in philosophy. She was about to ask Lady Kesseley about the book when she began to speak in a quiet whisper.

"I lived in Kent when I was girl. It was a hot summer, hotter than anyone remembered—I felt as if I were swimming through the air. I would run off in the woods by the lake and sit on the cool rocks in the afternoon. He came down the trail, his hair loose, all tangled about his face. He and a servant carried a boat over their heads. He had just moved into his uncle's house. I don't know where he had been before, but he didn't look like any of us. He plopped the boat in the water and waded in. *Come here*, he said, lifting me up from my waist and putting me in the boat. I remember his touch, how this jolt of something passed through me. He swam about the boat, twirling it in the water. Then he said, *Do you think the world is only our*

perception? I laughed. Then—and I think he did this on purpose, even though he denied it—the boat fell over and I plunged in. I had that moment of panic, not being able to feel the bottom, then his arm came around me. *Don't worry, I can stand,* he said.”

Henrietta waited for more of the story, but that was it. “Who was he?” she asked.

“He was the only man I have ever loved.” Lady Kesseley waved her hand, dismissing the question waiting on Henrietta’s tongue. “I told him I couldn’t marry him. My father wanted me to marry Lord Kesseley.”

She turned her head on her pillow to look at Henrietta. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I should never have let Kesseley bring you here.”

Henrietta couldn’t respond, wanting to say all she couldn’t. It was just too big and awful, and Lady Kesseley was so weak now.

“I don’t think Kesseley meant what he said last night.”

“There is so much you don’t know. So much hurt. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had run away with him—would it have been different?—and I hate myself for thinking it...because of Tommie.”

She closed her eyes. Henrietta waited silently beside her until the medicine took effect and Lady Kesseley drifted off, her book falling to her side. Henrietta picked it up, remembering her mother and father discussing Immanuel Kant at the table. She opened the first page and found an inscription.

"If the world is my perception, then I am in love with the world, for wherever I look, I see only Eleanora. Danny Elliot."

Danny Elliot! Good God!

Henrietta ran back to her chamber, grabbed her pelisse and bonnet, and flew down the stairs. She called out for Samuel and a footman, her body exhausted, but her will driving her on.

Henrietta meandered around the Serpentine like some vagrant female, following every bearded graying man who passed. How was it that Mr. Elliot popped up whenever you least expected him, but when you desperately needed him, he was nowhere to be found. She reached for her mother's pendant. It wasn't there. She frowned—she must have forgotten to put it on that

morning. She sat on the pigeon-fouled bench waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Twice the footman came back and asked if she wanted to leave. Twice she refused.

The sun was approaching its zenith when Henrietta gave up. She wanted so much to tell Mr. Elliot that Lady Kesseley still loved him, that maybe they could make a happy ending in all this wreckage. A small redemption. She shut her eyes and prayed that he would find her and take all these things that her heart couldn't carry anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

The philosopher wasn't at the park the next day, or the day after, or the day after that. Henrietta feared he might have sailed away to the far-off places of his stories just as she needed him. She couldn't solve the equations before her: Lady Kesseley and Mr. Elliot, Kesseley and herself.

Kesseley wandered home in the mornings and early evenings, sometimes somber. He washed, changed and doused himself with cologne, then set out again. She didn't know where he went or what he did. He wouldn't talk to her except to exchange a terse greeting, ignoring her attempts to engage him in any conversation. She wished he would scream at her, kiss her, hold her, berate her, anything but act as if she didn't exist, that she didn't mean anything to him.

Lady Winslow and the princess visited Lady Kesseley's bedside like dutiful friends. They spoke only of frivolous gossip, a forced gaiety in their distressed faces. They knew things, many things they weren't telling Lady Kesseley. Each day they became

more uncomfortable in their chairs, straining harder for topics. If Lady Kesseley asked about her son, they said they hadn't heard anything, their eyes darting to the window or the miniatures on the commode, anywhere but Lady Kesseley's face.

One Monday, Kesseley didn't even come home in the morning. Henrietta waited by the window, hoping every shadowy profile on the street's horizon was his. Where was he? Was he safe? Her fingers rubbed the spot where she'd once worn her mother's pendant, saying a tiny prayer. At one o'clock, when Lady Winslow and the princess didn't come by, Henrietta called the footman and Samuel. They set off for Lady Winslow's, walking into the wind to Cavendish Square. Dense, gray clouds covered the sky to the west, shadowing Hyde Park and blowing into the city.

Lady Winslow's trim, Mediterranean-looking butler ushered Henrietta to a bright, white room where curtainless windows stretched the height of the walls, looking on to a small flowering garden. It was a feminine library with white bookcases overfilled with books and objects.

Lady Winslow sat at a round table. She wore round glasses low on her nose and was reading a page she

held in her hands. Edward peered over her shoulder, his eyes following her progress. He jumped away when he saw Henrietta, as if reading was some illicit act.

Lady Winslow's eyes narrowed under her spectacles. Henrietta noticed she wore no lace cap, letting her hair fall loose in glossy curls. Her dress was rather dashing for the afternoon.

"Shall I come back?" Henrietta asked.

"No! Stay. I was just leaving," Edward assured her. "Lady Winslow was reading some of my new poems." He quickly gathered his work, stacking it into a pile, then concealing it under his arm.

"You don't have to leave." Lady Winslow tried to sound casual, but her voice carried a small plea.

"I shall let you visit alone." He bowed to Lady Winslow, then again to Henrietta as he fled the room.

Lady Winslow sat back in her chair and flung her glasses on the table. "What brings you out this afternoon? How is Ellie?"

"She only wants to sleep."

"As usual. Have a seat." Lady Winslow gathered the remaining papers and books. She took them to a glass bookshelf and set them inside with stacks of other paper and various writing implements.

"Do you write, as well?" Henrietta said spontaneously as she sat on a red sofa with a nice view of the garden.

"I used to write. Now I just pass my endless hours," Lady Winslow said, closing her cabinet and locking it. "So you've come to find out what we couldn't tell Ellie."

"Yes."

Lady Winslow crossed to the mantel and pulled out a cheroot from a silver box. She lit it, then took a chair across from Henrietta. "He lost seven thousand the other evening at faro. Then he won eight thousand at dice the next evening. He bets wildly and wins as wildly." She took a long breath and then blew it out. "He is seen with different ladies, though none are under his protection. He fights in the morning at Gentleman Joe's. Whenever the old boxer looks the other way, bets are being made."

It seemed almost inconceivable Lady Winslow was talking about Kesseley and not some notorious rake, unnamed except for his initials in the gossip columns.

Lady Winslow continued. "The betting book at White's is filled with dates of when Lady Sara—or her father—will bring him up to scratch. Most believe an announcement will be made at their ball." Lady

Winslow looked down at her lap. "Poor Edward—he loved her so," she muttered. She inhaled her cheroot again, raising her eyes to stare frankly at Henrietta through the smoke. "Now, I have been truthful with you, and so you must be with me. Are you truly over Edward?"

Henrietta blinked, not expecting that question or Lady Winslow's earnest face, the trembling at the corner her eyes, as if bracing for a blow. Suddenly Henrietta understood.

She walked to a bookshelf, where she picked up a tiny wooden figure of an owl. "I love him as I should a dear cousin. I took all my dreams and placed them on him. Only now I realize those aren't the dreams I want."

"And what do you want now?"

Henrietta pulled her rueful smile under her lips. "For my father to find a planet behind Uranus." She turned away before Lady Winslow could read any more in her face. She scanned the titles on the bookshelf. Lying flat as bookends were several volumes of *The Lost Manor* and *The Fatal Rendezvous* by Mrs. Alexander Fairfax.

"You read Mrs. Fairfax?" she asked.

"Do you?"

Henrietta shrugged. "I used to."

"But you don't now."

"I find her work...almost too fanciful. It's fun to read. That is all."

Lady Winslow rose. "They are rubbish, then?"

"Yes."

"Frivolous dribble read by the masses. Something base, to tantalize their lower natures."

"To some degree."

"You are very diplomatic." Lady Winslow reached around Henrietta and took out a slim volume. "Perhaps our Mrs. Fairfax wasn't always that way. Perhaps once she had other aspirations." She handed Henrietta a book—*Quiet Reminiscences* by Miss Frances Fairfax.

Henrietta gasped, the full understanding coming to her. "Oh no! I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did. I am a horrid writer now. Selling Lord Damien and sensation instead of the truths I feel inside. I tell Edward to write what is true, but I can't myself, afraid I will receive the same harsh welcome as that volume in your hands." She collapsed back in her chair, rubbing her forehead with her thumb. "No, I'm old and scared now. What could someone like Edward ever see in me?"

Kesseley could barely think for the dull aching in his head. He couldn't separate the details of the evening before, the places and people compressing into one loud scene. It was three in the afternoon, and he was just coming home. His evening clothes hung uncomfortably on his skin, stained and smelling of the last evening's debacles.

Looking at his stark, gray row house on Curzon Street filled him with that tangled mix of sweet nostalgia, bitterness and dread. Boxly let him in. The house was as quiet and somber as a chapel. Was Henrietta gone? He felt an unexplainable disappointment in his chest. He stomped up the stairs, his steps reverberating around him, letting everyone know—including his mother, hiding in her chamber—that he had come home at three in the afternoon.

Henrietta never came out.

The previous evening, Kesseley had promised to meet Bucky at Hyde Park for fashionable hour. He bathed and changed into doeskins and a blue coat, lingering in his chamber even as he was ready to go. He always found something that needed to be done, a

letter to reread, a number to commit to his ledgers.

Admit it, you're waiting for her.

He grabbed his hat and headed downstairs, as Boxly let Henrietta and Samuel in. His dog came running to Kesseley, wet and smelly, his tail wagging the back half of his body. Kesseley knelt and Samuel started turning circles between his knees, rubbing his face on his master's hand. He patted Samuel's ribs. "There, there, big boy."

"We are happy to see you," Henrietta said, a small tentative smile on her lips. She removed her bonnet and pelisse and handed them to Boxly. She was pale, no luster in her eyes. For a weak moment, he wanted to draw her into his arms and comfort her. Then his anger came back. He was finally free of her control. He would be damned if he was going to be dragged under again.

"May we speak for a moment?" she asked.

Kesseley nodded.

"I-I am concerned about your mother," she began after a pause. "She is very sad. She doesn't leave her chamber. I've been managing the house these last few days. I will be leav—"

"You don't have to protect my mother. This is a game

to her.”

“And to you? Is this all a game to you as well?”

Kesseley smiled, the same phony one he gave the ladies who flaunted themselves before him. “You tell me. You’re the one who is so good with games.”

“There is no game. I love you. But I’m scared. The things I hear about you...”

“Why are you so afraid for me?” He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m having a wonderful time. Hell, I won eight thousand last evening.”

“To make up for the seven thousand you lost the previous evening?”

“Keeping account of me?”

She came to him and raised her hand, letting it hover over his arm, then pulled it back as if she’d thought better of touching him. “I am afraid because when I look in your eyes, I don’t see the Kesseley I knew.”

“The Kesseley you controlled, who did your bidding?”

“No,” she said. “The Kesseley who lets his poorest tenants live in their homes without rent—it’s no secret in the village, you know. I don’t see the Kesseley who gave a milking goat and food to Mrs. Rogers when her

children were sick, who makes sure all the village children have good shoes and coats for the winter. You're acting out some nightmare. It has nothing to do with me."

"Then stay the hell out."

Kesseley found Bucky waiting at the gate. He had donned pedestrian clothes for his secretive mission, which involved finding some merchant's daughter—a mousy brunette with an unusual quantity of beauty marks and wealth—who frequented the park at fashionable hour. Bucky's uncle had been turning her family up sweet last week and had talked Bucky's cousin into sending the homely gel and her family an invitation to her ball this evening. So Bucky figured he had best secretly see her so he could prepare himself.

"Afterwards we can head over to Two Sevens and curse my fate over some drinks. You are coming with me to my cousin's ball. She's been bragging to my other cousins all week that you're coming."

"Give me enough brandy and point the way," Kesseley said. Henrietta still colored his thoughts. Twice on the way to the park he wanted to run back to

Curzon Street, but he held himself back.

Don't give in to her. All she's ever done is hurt you.

Inside the park, Kesseley could feel everyone's gaze on him, taking in the tiniest aspects of his person, as if he were their personal property. He and Bucky could hardly move in the crush. People he could scarce recognize greeted him as an old friend—insisting on drawing him into conversation, introducing him to their sisters, daughters, nieces or other female friends. Merely bowing to the ladies caused them to blush and stammer. He gave them the most mundane of compliments—faint praise for bonnet or gown—and they clung to his words, as if they were the dearest tribute anyone had ever bestowed upon them. After half an hour, Kesseley could tolerate no more and veered into the interior of the park.

The wind had picked up and massive oak branches waved over the path. The breeze felt cool on his cheek, and he let out a long breath. Ahead of him, the Serpentine expanded. There were no people wanting something from him, staring at him, trying to draw his attention, only bickering ducks and swans gliding along the brown water.

"Did you see how those ladies looked at you?"

Bucky said. "I just want to make one thing clear. You are my closest friend. Those years I didn't send you a single letter, be sure I was thinking about you every day."

"I like you, Bucky, but you're not my closest friend."

"Can I call you my friend if it helps me with the ladies? Do you even have a close friend?"

Kesseley looked at the water, the wind raising little ripples on the surface. He remembered how long ago, he and Henrietta, too young to be conscious of their bodies, had waded in the Ouse in the hot summer afternoons. Just their heads stuck out of the water, their hands held underneath, keeping each other from flowing away.

Bucky jabbed Kesseley with his elbow. "It's your wife," he said in a chastising shrill falsetto.

Lady Sara was not thirty feet away. He couldn't escape. Lady Sara had already seen him.

Oh hell!

He braced for the collision. She was coming along the narrow path by the water, flanked by two friends. All in white, they looked like moving Greek columns. The wind blew Lady Sara's gown around her becoming curves and lifted her pale blond curls. She looked as

serenely beautiful as the lush surroundings.

“Good afternoon, Lord Kesseley,” she said, performing a demure curtsy. The small, beguiling smile that quivered on her lips looked too perfect to be spontaneous. She wore it like a lure. “You are much improved since I last saw you, not nearly so frightening. So I must deprive you of the opportunity of holding me in your arms.”

Her friends giggled in their hands, all but a rather cool, tall girl with creamy freckled skin and almond-shaped hazel eyes. She appeared confused by the whole interaction.

“Lady Sara swooned when I last visited her family, allowing me the opportunity to be gallant,” he explained. Really, Lady Sara was as relentless as her father. “Would you be so kind as to introduce me to your lovely friends?” he said rather severely, taking her to task for her lack of decorum.

The girls leaped forward for the introduction, except for the tall one. Kesseley learned she was the American cousin of Lady Sara’s friend.

Kesseley must have smiled too warmly, or displayed some small hint of favoritism to the sensible American, for Lady Sara said, “She is marrying a very handsome

gentleman in Charleston this summer,” with that practiced innocent look of hers, as if she were unaware of any subtext in her words.

“Please accept my best wishes for your happiness,” Kesseley said. Then the conversation fell into a lull, everyone’s eyes on Kesseley, waiting.

“Well, shall we all take a turn together?” he begrudgingly suggested.

The ladies looked at Kesseley, then Bucky, then back to Kesseley. He wound up with Lady Sara on his right arm and some giggly thing on his left. Bucky got the American.

“You have not said anything about my new gown. You must know as a gentleman that it is your duty to compliment a lady.” Lady Sara’s smile held a challenge, as if she were expecting him to say something roguish.

Behind him, the American was explaining that her husband-to-be and father grew rice and tobacco on their plantations.

“Yes, very nice,” he said of the damned gown, then turned his head back to the American. “Surely you couldn’t grow rice and tobacco in the same soil?”

“No, our land is quite spread out. We abandoned

our home on the low marshes, where the rice fields are, and built another home forty miles away, where the soil is sandy and the air is drier. Perfect for tobacco.”

“Are you going to Lord Southington’s ball this evening?” Lady Sara said, tugging on Kesseley’s arm.

“No, I believe I am attending another ball,” he said, then addressed the American again. “How long do you dry tobacco before you ship it?”

“We harvest at the end of June, then put it in sheets and carry it to Charleston three weeks later. My brother and I used to climb up the eaves in the tall hot tobacco barns and smell the drying leaves. I suppose that is why I am so homesick. Everything here is so different—the smells, the weather, the homes,” she said, gesturing to the sky. “It never clouds like this. The sun is always large and warm, hence my freckles.” She laughed, a pleasant, easy sound. “Please don’t compliment me on them. It is a gentleman’s duty *not* to compliment some aspects of a lady’s appearance.”

“Surely you could grow some lemons with everything else. If you applied lemon juice daily, you could fade your freckles by your wedding,” Lady Sara said, then arched a pretty brow at Kesseley. “Oh look at me, spilling my feminine secrets to Lord Kesseley.”

"The winters in the Carolinas are too cold for lemon trees," he stated. Lady Sara frowned. He refused to play her game. *Wasn't it Henrietta who'd complained of him being obtuse?*

"I say, Lady Sara, your bonnet is loose," Bucky observed. "You might want to retie it."

"I don't know what you mean."

"It's falling to the right side," Kesseley said.

"That is the fashion. I hope I am not unfashionable."

"No, of course not," Kesseley resigned himself.

But it only took a slight breeze and—

"My bonnet!" Lady Sara cried and hurried in chase to the river's edge. She reached futilely over the water like a bad actress. Kesseley's gut tightened. He had seen this all before—Arabellina sinking in the water, Lord Blackraven having to drag her melodramatic arse out. Surely Lady Sara wouldn't try something so outrageously obvious, would she?

Oh God, she's going to do it!

She turned, seemingly slipping on a rock and plunging into the water with ballerina-like grace, splashing a nearby swan on her nest. "Help me!" she cried.

Kesseley saw everything happen before he could

stop it. "Get out! Get out!" he shouted as he ran for the water.

The swan's jealous mate came skimming across the lake, beak straight out like a sword, ready to defend his unhatched family. Lady Sara's eyes widened. She shrieked as the raging swan flew at her, making its terrible hissing noises. She tried to shield her face, but it clamped down on her arm. She lost her balance and slipped under the water. The swan went down with her, pecking her hair.

Kesseley leaped into the cold water, knocking the swan away, sending white feathers flying. The bird let out a high, shrill hiss and rose up in the water, flapping his wings, making swipes at Kesseley's back.

Kesseley pulled Lady Sara to his chest, protecting her with his body. He lifted her from the water. Her body shook with ragged coughs and water spilled from her mouth.

When she couldn't cough anymore, she started screaming. Kesseley called the footman to deliver the carriage and then laid her under a tree. Blood oozed from her arm where the swan had bitten her. The torn fabric of her gown exposed her ripped stockings.

She latched on to Kesseley's hand, wrapping her

fingers between his, all pretense gone from her face. She was cold and scared. Her lips and ears had turned a pale blue.

Kesseley had pulled her shaking body to his by the time the footman returned. The carriage was waiting on Park Lane.

“Lady Sara, I’ve got to carry you to your carriage.”

She clutched him tightly as he lifted her from the ground.

Word had reached Rotten Row. He could see the fashionable people hurrying down the path, coming to view the spectacle.

An open landau waited for them with the steps folded down.

“Damn it!” Kesseley spat.

The footman and Bucky climbed aboard and helped lift Lady Sara up. She refused to let go of Kesseley’s hand. “No, don’t let me go!” she cried.

He shook his head in frustration, but when he spoke, his voice was gentle and resigned. “Don’t worry, Lady Sara. I will take you home.”

The footman and Bucky jumped down. Kesseley pulled himself up. Lady Sara clung to him, trying to get warm. Her fingers were wrinkled and red. Wet droplets

fell from her curls.

Her mother was in the parlor entertaining a dozen callers amid the flowers when Kesseley carried Lady Sara inside—shaking, bleeding, her limbs exposed. Kesseley couldn't explain for the screams. The household staff descended upon them. The duke came huffing into the room, his face reddened from the exertion. Words and demands were shouted. Kesseley had to yell to speak above the roar. Lady Sara needed warm clothes and a fire.

"This way!" the duke said, and Kesseley followed him up the curving stairs to Lady Sara's chamber on the second floor. He laid her upon the bed as the household staff buzzed around. She clung to him, refusing to let him leave.

"Dearest, you have to let Lord Kesseley go," said an older female, probably Lady Sara's abigail.

"No!" she cried.

"We have to remove your clothes," the lady pleaded with her charge.

"I don't care!" Lady Sara replied. "He's already seen me."

Her mother screamed and buried her face into her husband's chest.

Kesseley swallowed, trying to speak calmly. "Lady Sara, you are distraught. You must get dry. I won't leave until I know you are well. I promise."

"Don't leave," she said. "Please don't leave."

"I have to, for now," he said. Pulling his hand free, he slowly backed out of the room and closed the door to protect Lady Sara from the duchess's friends clogging the corridor. The feigned concern in their eyes barely concealed their sordid curiosity at his wet dripping pantaloons and bloody shirt.

What happened was going to blaze through London like a windblown fire. It didn't matter what truly happened. Kesseley had carried a sobbing, disarrayed Lady Sara in his arms through London. The truth would be whatever London wanted it to be. He would be put on the sacrificial altar for that specious truth.

Kesseley felt a fat, warm hand behind his wet collar.

"My future son-in-law is a fine man," the duke said to the guests. "My daughter is safe, thanks to him."

Kesseley started to speak, then shut his mouth. What he needed to say couldn't be aired in front of

London.

"We need to talk, son," the duke said, still smiling at the guests while pulling Kesseley into the chamber across the hall. It was devoid of art, just a draped bed and wall sconces. By the wooden carved mantel, two fabric-covered chairs were pulled up by the fire. The duke gestured to one, uncaring that Kesseley was soaked and muddy. He took the other, his plump legs hanging off the edges. He reached for the silver snuffbox beside the chair and took a pinch, then offered it to Kesseley.

"What happened?" he asked.

Kesseley declined the snuff, then retold the story. It seemed so absurd in retrospect. The duke ingested it with no expression.

"You're a fine man. You protected my family. I'll be honored to call you my son. We can make the announcement at my ball. You will marry at our estate, of course. I have some land I want to show you. It came from my mother's line and it ain't entailed. Not far from Norfolk. 10,000 acres. Good tenants, the old kind that ain't afraid to work. I'm giving it to you. You can farm as you see fit, then pass to any younger sons."

"Your Grace, I'm not sure—"

The duke held up a flat palm and rose to stand by the fire. "You're young and I know your father died too soon. I'm not the only gentleman in England that admired how you put Wrenthorpe to rights. But let me give you some advice—"

"I'm not sure I want to marry your daughter. I mean, I'm not sure I want to get married this year."

The duke stared at him, his face coloring with rage. "Today you carried my daughter from the park—muddy, bleeding, her dress torn, parading her through the streets in an open landau for all London to see! Then you tell me this wild story that she was attacked by a swan!"

Kesseley stood. "It's the truth. And if you must know, she threw herself in the water for me to save her. I am being entrapped."

"Damn it, man, you're an earl. Show some honor to your name and duty."

Kesseley flinched. The duke's words stung him. Duty and honor. Words his father hadn't understood. Words he lived his life by.

Or had.

The old man continued, "The Duke of Houghton was made by William the Conqueror. My estate expands

20,000 acres in four counties. I got a dozen members in the House of Commons that do as I say. When Prince George has a question, he comes to me. When Lord Liverpool needs to get something done, he comes to me. I'll be damned if you will make a fool of me and my family. Perhaps you've never had the importance of family duty and honor instilled in you."

Kesseley couldn't breathe. His lungs felt weighed down.

Isn't that what you wanted, damn it? Accept it. You've finally severed yourself from Henrietta.

"Oh God," he cried.

The duke put a hand on his shoulder. "Son, we all come to this moment. It's in the choice between what you want and what your name and duty demand that makes the man. Now you just make some handsome sons and vote the right way. Everyone will turn a blind eye when you dabble. Just like they do for me. Just like they did for your papa."

Chapter Eighteen

Three hours later, Kesseley sat in evening clothes in a dim, smoke-filled gambling hell on Soho Square, playing *Vingt-et-un*. He kept his playing hand on the table with the other one around a golden-haired courtesan whose name he didn't know. She sat on his knee and held his drink. He had already gulped down three gin-laced drinks, but they weren't strong enough to burn out the anger, fear and dread writhing around like a worm in his gut.

He hated himself. He stared at the turned card under his thumb and felt the softness of the courtesan's thigh on his leg. This was all it was going to be. His fate. In his mind flashed Henrietta's chocolate eyes reflecting the sunlight dancing off the Ouse River. Now lost forever. He had finally shed his past. He should be happy. He nudged the courtesan, and she gave him another sip of the gin.

Bucky had lost seventy-five pounds early on and had to quit. He'd since been standing against the tapestry-covered wall behind Kesseley, smoking, repeatedly

asking when they were leaving for his cousin's ball. So eager to meet that ugly heiress of his dreams.

Kesseley's rowdy card partners included a lucky naval captain who entertained the table with stories of wild exploits on his frigate and several men with various handles to their name, including a handsome baronet who unexplainably annoyed Kesseley. He seemed amicable enough, smiling more than Bucky, yet something about the buck's close-set eyes made Kesseley feel he could never really see him eye to eye. The baronet had recently inherited 10,000 acres with a 7,000 pound a year income and a fine home in the Westmorland from a deceased uncle. Everyone knew this, because he proudly repeated it between naval stories, as if he had not said it just fifteen minutes prior. The others took pleasure in ribbing him. "Was that 3,000 acres you say? Lake or land? How are you going to manage on just 2,000 a year income?"

Kesseley had a seven turned and ten showing on the table. The bet was three hundred pounds and a lot of face cards had been dealt. The baronet took a pinch of snuff, asked for a card then raised the bet another hundred pounds. He had something good. Kesseley fingered his cards—he was safe—but a rebellious

recklessness urged him on.

The captain took a drag of his cheroot and blew it over Kesseley's shoulder. "Look who's back in London?"

Kesseley followed the smoke, finding Sir Gilling edging through the crowd. He smirked when he saw Kesseley, arrogant even as the faint translucent blue bruises still marred his face. He drew back a chair at the faro table not four feet away from Kesseley to further show his indifference.

"He would do better to stick to games of luck than skill," the captain said loud enough for his voice to drift to the other table.

The indentation under Sir Gilling's jaw pulsed. Otherwise he appeared not to hear.

"Lord Kesseley, the bet is four hundred. It's your decision," the dealer reminded him. He had a jack turned.

Kesseley should stand, but something inside him didn't want to, even against the odds. "Sweetheart, give me another sip," he asked the courtesan. She lifted the glass to his lips. He swallowed it down, and then leaned back and stretched his arms. "Another card, gentlemen."

Devil take it, the last queen.

Kesseley laughed and turned over his seven.

Bucky gasped, "What the hell were you thinking!"

"That I couldn't feel my balls anymore," he said.

The men hooted and the naval captain waved his hand dismissively. "Deal him out. Deal him out."

Kesseley concurred, standing up, letting the courtesan slide down his leg. He turned to his friend. "Bucky, let's go find this ugly heiress of yours."

"Maybe Lord Kesseley should have taken lessons from his mother's companion," the baronet said to the table. "I had the delightful opportunity of getting beaten by that delicious morsel. I couldn't help but feel amorous every time she over trumped me."

Kesseley's belly tightened. The veins over his temples hurt.

"Don't talk that way about Henrietta," he whispered, keeping his back to the little prig else he would tear off his head.

Sir Gilling's head jerked around.

"Henrietta, is it?" The baronet laughed. "It seems Miss Watson might be more than just his mother's companion. Maybe his little companion too. I tell you, if that little pocket Venus lived in my house, well, I

daresay, I would never leave. She could play her little trumps in my bed.”

Kesseley’s heel ground into the floor as he turned to the baronet. Fury heated his face.

The table went silent. When the bugger realized he might have swum out too far, he started stammering. “I didn’t mean—Hell, I was only funning.”

“I changed my mind,” Kesseley said slowly. “Deal me in.”

The game moved fast. He didn’t speak, keeping his mind on every card falling from the dealer’s hand. Soon the baronet no longer possessed the cool face of a seasoned card player, but became a desperate man, perspiring, the cards shaking in his hand. He had to stay in the game just to try to win back the fortune he was losing.

Kesseley should have stopped, but he couldn’t—some dark urge pushed him on. He continued to play, racing his own demons to some brink where everything became irreversible, all hope gone...the old Kesseley gone.

The final game rested on one thousand pounds. All that was left of the baronet’s seven thousand pound income for this year.

Kesseley felt everyone's eyes on him. The baronet swallowed and turned his final card. A nine. He had nineteen. He looked to Kesseley, desperation in his eyes.

What the hell did he think Kesseley could do now? It was too late. He turned his card. A jack to match his ten. Twenty. The baronet sunk his face into his hands.

No cheers went up for Kesseley's victory. Just uneasy silence. Why had he done that? What was he trying to prove?

Kesseley stomped outside, furious, leaving the baronet to the moneylenders. The night had grown colder and the wind whirled trash and other debris around the square.

"You are a bastard," Bucky said.

"I know. Why don't you go to your cousin's without me?"

"I told my cousin you were going. She got all my other cousins, her friends. Everyone expects me to bring you."

"Why, so they can stare at me? Bucky, do you really like me, or do you just like being in my wake?"

"Now see here—"

Kesseley waved him silent. "Don't listen to me, I'm

drunk and I damn well want to stay that way. Let's stop and get a dram or two. Then I'll go and dance with all your female cousins and their friends and every damn eligible female there."

They took a hack to a white stucco row house on Green Street. Kesseley stumbled over the entry, banging into Bucky as the butler ushered them in.

"Hell's tinker. Straighten up," Bucky hissed under his teeth.

"You wanted me to come," Kesseley reminded him. "Even if I am a bastard."

"Go to hell."

"I have," he replied.

It was a modern home: all ornate stucco ceilings, iron balusters, Grecian cornices and pastel walls. The harshest critic couldn't find any want in the décor nor any distinguishing features that might make it different from the adjoining houses on the block. Some Greek gentleman, maybe Plato, perched on a bust over the door, looked down with his stone, blind gaze as Kesseley entered the parlor.

Pocket doors were open, forming a large room of a

red parlor and fern-green dining room. The carpets had been removed and the walnut furnishings pushed to all the walls. The guests hovered awkwardly about with vacant expressions, having perhaps run out of conversation two hours ago. A scrawny orchestra, consisting of a violin, cello and flute screeched in the corner, while several young ladies and gentlemen danced a sad minuet in the center of the room.

Every eye flew to him, a pulse of excitement jolting the bored guests. *He's here!* their faces seemed to say.

A beautiful redhead glided gracefully across the room, relief on her features. Bucky's cousin. They shared the same pale skin, light green eyes and riotous curls.

"I thought you would never come, dear cousin," she greeted Bucky, but her bright eyes were on Kesseley. Her cousin made the introductions, and Kesseley bowed so low he had to right himself on a nearby table.

"A pleasure," he said, having already forgotten her name. It began with a C.

She gestured to an expressionless bald man sitting inert by the fire, his chin drooped on his chest, his pudgy legs sprawled out before him. "My husband."

Her tone contained an apology to Kesseley as well as her own thinly veiled contempt for her husband.

“He’s rich,” Bucky said quietly to Kesseley as they followed behind his cousin to a cluster of other young female cousins, all with frizzy curls and dipped in freckles.

“Damn, Bucky, which one’s the heiress?” Kesseley whispered. “They’re all ugly.”

“That’s it—you’re leaving!” Bucky hissed, and he took Kesseley’s shoulder to spin him around. He didn’t budge.

“But I’m ready to dance!” Kesseley protested.

The hostess smiled. “Are you? Lord Kesseley, may I present you to an eligible dancing partner?”

Kesseley wiped off Bucky’s arm.

“Yes, I would like to dance with a young lady as beautiful as yourself.” Bucky’s cousin blushed as bright as her hair. “In fact, why don’t you dance with me?”

His hostess started. “I-I can’t. My husband wouldn’t like it.”

He flashed that intimate smile the ladies liked. “My understanding is that marriage shouldn’t stop you from enjoying yourself.” The hostess let out a small gasp, then closed her mouth. She peered at her inert

husband, her eyes tensing with pent-up longing and fear. She was miserable, Kesseley thought, then quickly closed the box he had opened. "Yes, yes, introduce me to a sweet eligible young thing. I desire a country dance."

He danced with every one of Bucky's redheaded cousins, spinning them all about the floor, complimenting gowns, hair, jewelry, dancing ability. They didn't seem to notice when he stumbled and only laughed when he upset the fire screen.

Bucky glared at him.

His heiress wasn't so ugly. Yes, she was short and had a few moles, nothing unattractive, but then Kesseley did have a weakness for petite things. She was trying to smile and converse with Bucky, but her eyes slid in Kesseley's direction.

He didn't get near her.

Bucky's cousin was another matter. Her gaze never left Kesseley's form, hastening to him at the end of every dance, being sure he had a drink when he wanted one, introducing him to dance partners. He repeated his futile desire to dance with her because it made her smile a flustered, natural smile that should have always been on her face, but waned as her eyes

slid to her husband.

As the clock hand pushed two o'clock, most of the candles on the chandeliers had burned out, and many guests had left. The orchestra took a break. Kesseley searched for a footman. "May I have a brandy?" he asked.

The footman bowed and disappeared, but it was Bucky's cousin who returned with a brimming, amber glass she held on level with her generous breasts. Their fingers touched as she handed it to him. She watched him drink.

"Thank you for coming," she said, biting the lower edge of her lip.

"Don't look at me like that. Where's your beautiful smile?"

She tried to smile just as her husband fell from his chair onto the floor and awakened with a glazed, stupid look. "Where's the music? I paid for music, damn it."

"I hate him," she whispered, keeping her beautiful face as still as stone.

"I'll take care of this," he said, heading off like a drunken knight.

"Come, man, let's have some manly conversation in your chamber," Kesseley said, taking the man by his

arm and pulling him up. "I think we've both had a little too much."

It took three of them—Kesseley, the butler and a footman pushing from behind—to get the rotund man up the stairs. Kesseley could hear the hostess below, reassuring guests who suddenly hastened to leave that they could stay. Her voice was shrill, barely containing her panic.

They dumped the man into his bed. His chamber smelled like smoke and chamber pot. He fell back asleep, snoring through his fat lips. Kesseley let the servants take care of the man and stumbled back into the stairs, wanting to get the hell away.

The hostess was coming up the stairs, stopping his progress.

"I'm sorry, Lord Kesseley." Her voice was a sad whisper.

"It's nothing," he said.

She took his hand, turned it over, and her fingers traced along the lines of his hand. The servants were extinguishing the candles. The residual smoke drifted up and the hallway grew dimmer.

Where was Bucky?

She started talking, the words coming out so fast, as

if they had been fermenting in her brain for a long time. He was too drunk to understand her dialogue, but he knew what she was saying anyway. When she finished, she stood silent, awkward, waiting.

He exhaled and put his arms about her, drawing her away from the stairwell and the eyes of the servants below. She had tiny bones, frail to his touch, and smelled faintly like citrus in the winter. His penis grew hard with a drunk erection.

“Damn it!” He backed away, his palms up. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” she cried, taking his hand again and caressing it with her thumb.

“I’m too drunk. I can’t,” he protested, but he didn’t drop her hand, nor did he try to stop her when she led him to her chamber.

He could just see the faintest outlines from the dim light of the night and the city. Floral wallpaper, floral bed, delicate furniture, paintings, everything crowded, leaving no empty spaces.

She sat on the edge of the bed, drew his palm to her face, circling it around her cheek.

“Tell me I’m pretty again.”

“You’re lovely.”

She drew his head down, pressing her trembling, unsure lips to his jaw.

"Please," she said, her fingers gathering the skirt of her gown. He felt the silk of her stockings against his thighs. "I've only known him."

"I-I can't."

"Try, please," she whispered, reaching for the button of his breeches.

He thrust at her thighs with his weak drunken erection, failing to find that spot of dark oblivion between her legs.

The hostess let out a strangled sob.

Pale fabric swished in the periphery of Kesseley's vision. Then the hard edge of metal slammed down on the base of Kesseley's skull.

"Don't hurt my mama!" a young boy cried.

Kesseley stumbled back. He didn't know if the blow was real or remembered.

"You leave her alone!" the boy wailed. Kesseley could just see the figure of a child, maybe seven. He struck at Kesseley with his small fists. It felt like being beaten with cattails.

"Don't hurt my mama!"

"Damn me to hell," Kesseley cried.

He fled, running out into the night without his greatcoat and his shirt hanging out. He made it to the park and concealed himself in the blackness under the tree branches. The wind whipped around him, whispering. *My son. My son.*

He swung at the ghost in the air. The phantom slipped away, hiding behind him. *Now you know me*, it whispered.

“No!” Kesseley screamed.

He felt a hard blow in his belly, knocking the wind from him. He fell on his knees.

“Father?” he cried.

“Look in ’is coat,” a low rough voice growled.

A strong hand held Kesseley’s face down, suffocating him in the black, murky dirt. Rough hands reached from behind, ripping his coat. Kesseley thrust his elbow back. Something cracked. The weight fell off Kesseley’s shoulders. He bolted forward as a fist rammed his kidney.

He groaned, fighting to keep standing. Sweet brandy ran out of his mouth. He felt heat and the stirring of air before him. Swinging blindly, he connected with hard bone, perhaps a cheek. Pain reverberated down his arm.

"Bloody 'ell," the hoarse voice coughed out.

A cold edge dug into his skin. A knife, slicing like a slithering snake down his arm.

"You son of a bitch," Kesseley shouted, throwing his arm back. He caught his assailant's face with the back of his fist. The knife spiked into Kesseley's forearm and then fell with a muted thud on the grass.

Then nothing. Wind and the trilling chirp of a nightingale. And pain.

He grabbed his arm, holding it tight, feeling it throb under his hand. Warm blood seeped through his fingers.

He was shaking, everything blurring. He stumbled, following the faint light glowing through the leaves. The pain screaming in his mind. The lights came from torches outside the ghostly white mansion on Park Lane. He held on to the iron gates with his mangled arm, blood drenching his shirt. Everything was narrowing to a small spot. His mind was collapsing.

He had to get to her.

He inched along, forcing himself to stay conscious.

His home was silent. The light coming over the door shadowed the stairs on the wall. Kesseley clenched his teeth, stifling his desire to scream as he held the railing

and forced himself up step by step, until he leaned his head against her door.

“Henrietta,” he whispered.

She didn’t come.

“Henrietta...”

He fell, his cheekbone slamming the floor planks. He thought he heard her footsteps. Blackness.

Her warmth was all around him—the ridge of her collarbone, her tiny wrists, her breasts under the soft fabric of her shift. Her loose curls tickled his neck.

“Oh God, Kesseley, what’s happened?”

He clung to her, shaking, his teeth chattering, so cold a snowstorm could have blown down the hall.

“You’re hurt!”

He put a feeble finger on her mouth. “Shhh. Get Baggot.”

Big hands were on him—men’s hands—lifting him. She trailed behind them.

“Don’t tell,” he murmured.

They put him in his bed. He looked up at the slats of wood running across his canopy. Henrietta's fingers felt like tight strings around his hand, her eyes shiny like obsidian. Baggot cut off his coat and shirt. Blood. Blood. Blood. She put her hand over her mouth, tears squirting out of the edge of her eyes.

Don't cry, he thought.

The cut ran like a winding river from his shoulder to his elbow. Baggot poured herbal water on it. Kesseley crushed his teeth together, trying to keep the pain inside him. She squeezed his hand, her fingers stroking his forehead. The candle cast her shadow on the wall behind her, cutting across his father's portrait. He was afraid his father would hurt her, but he couldn't move his arms to protect her and cried out in frustration.

Then suddenly he felt nothing, the pain leaving, his body falling away from him.

He awoke to the sound of rain tapping the window. A line of pale light shone through his curtain. He felt pain, but also her warm skin on his, her cinnamon scent in his nose. She sat in a chair by his bed, her head bent

down beside him on the mattress with her arm across his chest. Asleep.

His father peered down from his portrait with cold metal-gray eyes.

Kesseley didn't move, could scarcely breathe. He just wanted to keep her here longer, the quiet rhythm of her breath and the ping of rain on the glass. He tried to memorize every detail of this moment to keep in his memory. Soon she would wake up and everything would end.

A servant tapped on his door.

She lifted her head, her curls tickling his bare skin.

"No, not now," he called out.

Her eyes, gentle with sleep and concern, gazed at him. She smiled. "Kesseley," she whispered, letting her fingers gingerly touch his bindings, stained with old, brown blood. "Does it hurt?"

"No." Yes. He wanted so much to feel her lips on his, without anger or hurt, just her softness smothering his fear.

"I s-stayed. Baggot said the cuts weren't deep. But I was afraid," she said. "I love you, Kesseley."

She leaned over and kissed his lips.

This was the hardest moment of his life. He couldn't

let her know him like this. The ugliness. The words he had to say burned in his throat. He gently pushed her away.

“Last night, a young man lost his inheritance to me at cards. The remains of one man’s life lost in an evening. I wasn’t even remorseful. I was drunk. I went to a ball and the hostess drew me into her chamber.” His words rattled through his body like an old man. “Her son walked in—he couldn’t have been more than seven—and saw his mother’s legs around me.”

Henrietta’s lips quivered as if she wanted to say words, but couldn’t find any. Nothing would make it better. His sins were as true as the blood staining his sheets.

“You can never say ‘I love you’ again. Do you understand? We can never have a life together. In any capacity.”

She bowed her head, her long, black hair concealing her face.

“I won’t stop saying I love you, because I do.” She lifted her gaze. Her eyes were fierce. “I will love you all my life.”

“Henrietta, I’m not a good man.”

“Don’t say that! You are the kindest, best man I

know. We can go back to Wrenthorpe. It could be like it used to be.”

He tensed and pain shot up his arm. “It can’t be like it was before. What it was before was a lie.”

“No!”

He closed his eyes, so she couldn’t see the lie he was about to tell her. “I don’t love you, Henrietta. Understand. I will never love you again. You must find someone else.”

It was impossible to keep Kesseley’s injuries a secret in the small house. Blood is hard to conceal. His mother left her chamber for the first time in almost two weeks and rushed to her son’s bedside. An hour later, they came downstairs arm in arm to the parlor, a strained truce between them. Kesseley wore gray pantaloons and an unbuttoned shirt with no cravat, his arm bound tightly under his sleeve. His lips were tight. The skin around his eyes was a pale blue.

He didn’t look at her, just at the tip of his glossy boot. “Kesseley is engaged, dearest,” Lady Kesseley said in a bright, empty voice.

“Who?” Henrietta whispered.

He raised his eyes to hers. His voice was hard, emotionless. "I am betrothed to Lady Sara."

Chapter Nineteen

Henrietta needed the things she remembered around her, holding her. She wanted to go back to Rose House, to its crooked, crumbling walls, the smell of hundreds of years of fires, and the dried lavender, rosemary and mint hanging in the pantry. She wanted to curl up in her woolen blanket, her feet tucked under her body. She would gaze out the large windows to the expanse of field extending beyond the village to the horizon, bending and blurred through the old, thick-paned glass. All her life she had tried to make her quaint, irregular relic of a home into the grand estate it could never be. She wanted her old home back with its smoking fireplaces, squat medieval walls and aging timbers. Where the rooms were thick with memories of her mother's laughter and young Kesseley playing by her side. From now on, she would stop trying to cover her home—her life—in pretty paint, but would cherish it as it was. But she couldn't go home, though, not when her father would be arriving in London in two days. Two days.

When her mother died, her body was laid out in the parlor for two days, the ravages of cancer concealed under the long sleeves and lace collar Mrs. Potts and Henrietta had sewn on her mother's blue evening gown. Kesseley had come that first morning as the servants set the bed in the parlor. Her father brought her mother down, her body so emaciated she could have been a kitten in his arms. He placed her on the bed. Then he wept, kissed his wife's cheek and unclasped her necklace.

She remembered Kesseley putting the pendant around her neck, lifting her hair and clasping the chain. The silver setting felt heavy on her young neck. He stayed beside her as she watched her mother's still body, waiting for her chest to expand with breath, as if this were all a mistake.

"Come with me," he whispered, taking her hand. They slipped through the villagers starting to fill the house and escaped to the quiet streaming of the Great Ouse.

Now Henrietta felt that acute sorrow again.

Kesseley rested in his bed just beyond her wall. She wanted to lie beside him again and let him fill her senses. The warm smoothness of his skin under her

arm, his comforting smell of leather and apples and earth. The rustling sound of his breath when he slept, like wind through summer leaves. Now it would only be a memory. She had been severed, and her imagined life expanded before her without Kesseley. A separation like a death.

The two days passed as slow as a mournful march of a defeated army. She searched for her pendant, not finding it. She pushed back the thought that it had fallen off in the park or at a ball, and that she had lost her mother's necklace forever. Kesseley was either in his chamber or gone. He dined only once with Henrietta and his mother, asking Henrietta only to oblige him with the pudding.

She carried so much inside her, her heart sloshed like an overfilled, heavy bucket. She was desperate to see Mr. Elliot, but he never returned to the park.

Kesseley left the house early on the day of his engagement ball. She heard his door close. He paused by her door. She could see the shadow of his feet from where she sat at her dressing table. Her heart tightened. Then he walked on. The thud of the

entrance door reverberated up the stairwell.

Later in the afternoon, Henrietta tapped Lady Kesseley's chamber door. Her lady's maid, with pins pressed between her lips, let Henrietta inside. Silk and sheer gowns were strewn about the bed and chairs.

Lady Kesseley stood before her commode, dressed only in shift, stays and a diamond necklace. Tiny anxious lines radiated from her thinned lips. She pressed her palm on her forehead. "I'm not sure what to wear on the day I lose my son. Oh, Henrietta, everything has to be perfect. I have to be perfect."

"You will be the most beautiful lady there."

Lady Kesseley shook her head, as if Henrietta hadn't answered her question properly.

Henrietta carefully folded back the edge of a pale voile gown on the edge of the bed and sat. "I do not think I can be your companion for the remainder of the Season," she said. "You see, my father and his colleague have an appointment at Greenwich Observatory tomorrow night. I'm not sure how long my father shall stay in London, but when he leaves, I want to go with him."

"Becky, please let us continue in a few minutes," Lady Kesseley said to her lady's maid and waited for her leave.

"I do wish you would stay. And, well..." She paused. A sad smile teetered on her lips, then faded. "It's all so peculiar. I wasn't invited to dine this evening. I've not heard from the duke or duchess. Yet Winslow and the princess tell me it is true that all of the *ton* is talking of the engagement. Does my son seem happy to you?"

"I-I don't know."

"I'm so afraid. He doesn't care for Lady Sara. I hear only coldness in his voice. There is nothing I can do. He still despises me because of my affair with Gilling. Nothing I say will work on him. Everything that happened before is happening again, and it is because I was too weak to stop it."

Lady Kesseley looked at Henrietta expectantly as if Henrietta was supposed to say something to make everything better.

"I-I've lost Mother's pendant," she said, her voice cracking. "I've looked everywhere. I fear it may be in the park or the street. But if you find it, please return it to me."

Lady Kesseley nodded, pursing her lips together.

Henrietta rose to leave.

"Why didn't you love him?" Lady Kesseley asked.

"I do love him." The words burst out of Henrietta. "It was all my fault. I wanted him to steal Lady Sara away, because I thought I loved Edward. I urged him to dress better and change his manners. I was foolish and ignorant. Then he kissed me, and I realized I loved him all along. But when I told him, he said I was t-too late."

Lady Kesseley stared at her, her face stricken with pain. "Oh no." She reached out, but Henrietta couldn't bear to be touched. She hated herself too much at this moment.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whispered and fled.

"Wait! Henrietta!" She heard Lady Kesseley call behind her but Henrietta couldn't go back. She rounded the stairs and then stopped short.

Kesseley waited at the banister. Their eyes met. His mouth twitched and for a moment she thought he would say something. Instead, he turned and went into his chamber, closing the door behind him.

Henrietta took her bonnet and pelisse from her chamber and walked out of the house, without a footman or Samuel. They would reprimand her, but she couldn't take anyone or anything crowding her

thoughts, demanding her attention.

The sun was bright and high in the sky. Large cauliflower-shaped clouds billowed above the treetops and roofs. She passed through the outer ring of Hyde Park into the familiar spot by the Serpentine.

She hoped he would be there, then admonished herself. Of course, he wouldn't. Why did she always hope, only to be let down again?

She could see the old bench where the philosopher shared his chocolate with her. A mother and her son sat there. She suddenly wanted to cry.

Can't I at least just sit on the bench? Can't I have something I want?

Just as Henrietta resigned herself to sitting on the grass and ruining her gown, the mother and son suddenly left, and the bench was vacant. Henrietta scurried forward, claiming it as her own.

She squinted until the water reflected like jewels on the surface. For a small second, everything seemed to lift from her. But then it all came back, refusing to be hushed or solaced.

"I brought you a small present," she heard a man call behind her.

She whipped around. There was her friend, with his

wild white hair shooting out from the edges of his hat. The edges of his easel pointed out from his back and his cracked leather satchel hung from his shoulder.

“Thank God you’re here!” she cried. “I thought you had gone away to Africa or India!”

“No. Just wandering through the countryside and old memories.” He set his satchel on the bench, dug around in it and brought out a gray shale rock streaked with thin white veins of calcium.

“A rock?” Henrietta said, perplexed, taking it into her hand.

“This is from Lyme, where one afternoon I picnicked among the tall brown grass and listened to the waves rolling onto the beach.” He pulled out a rolled-up canvas and opened it, revealing a splotchy painting vaguely resembling a beach with sun setting on the ocean’s horizon. The sky glowed luminous shades of oranges and pinks.

“I got your rock here.” He pointed to the gray, round stones lining the beach.

Henrietta turned her little stone over in her hand, feeling its weight and solidness. Her throat hurt as she tried to speak.

“Lady Kesseley still loves you,” she finally said. “You

must go to her. I can take you.”

He sat on the bench, leaned his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. “I can’t.”

“What?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Isn’t that why you are here? You can’t just come this far and stop. She loves you.”

“What did she say when you told her I was here?”

“I didn’t tell her. She doesn’t know you’re here.”

He rose, suddenly agitated, rubbing his large palms on his pantaloons. “What did she tell you about me?”

“She loved you and rejected you and when you put her in a boat on a pond. I figured it out. You had inscribed a book of Kant to her. *If the world is my perception, then I am in love with the world for wherever I look, I see only Eleanora*. Then your name—Danny Elliot.”

He gave a snort. “Did she tell you anything else? About anything that happened after?”

“No.”

“My dear, there isn’t enough forgiveness in the world for the pain I caused her. You just have the sweet memory of how it all started, but not the end. Yes, Lady Kesseley rejected me, but my circumstances changed

and I used them to hurt her. Irreparably.”

“But I think she will forgive you. She needs you. I know it.”

“Why does this matter so much to you?”

“Because you must forgive each other, you must, because something has to be right. Something has to be redeemed.” Henrietta started to weep and covered her face.

“Come here.” He wrapped his arms around her, embracing her in front of all the ducks, swans and people passing. “What happened?”

“I told him I loved him, and he told me I was too late.” The remainder of the story fell out, blabbered on his shoulder, more horrifying in the retelling. She finished with the announcement to be made at a ball that evening.

“Oh, my sweet child. I wish I could say something to make it better, but I can’t.”

She pushed him away.

“Yes, you can. You can tell Lady Kesseley you love her!”

“You don’t understand.”

“What do I not understand? You told me to tell Kesseley that I loved him, even if it was hopeless, but I

did. And now I tell you to do the same thing and you can't!"

"Henrietta—"

"You wanted me to tell her I found you in the park, didn't you? You wanted me to tell her because you couldn't."

"Perhaps."

"Were you ever my friend? Did you even mean the words you said? Or were they just pretty things you thought I wanted to hear?"

"No, I—"

"All this time, you made me believe you were wise with your stories and exotic fruit. All we have is this moment, the blue of sky. You're a coward. You didn't go on all those adventures, you ran away!"

"Forgiveness is not that easy!"

"Clearly, since I'm the only one willing to do it!" Henrietta stomped away, then turned back. "I'm sorry. I can't tell her, because she's been hurt enough. I have to know you will be there for her. Will you?"

He sunk his head in his hands. "I don't know."

"Then I suppose her memories are better." Henrietta turned the rock over in her hand, wondering if years from now, when she took it out of some memory box, it

would still be fresh and sweet in her memory when all the other pain had long been worn down.

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

Boxly opened the door. Henrietta searched his face for disapproval, but found none in his placid expression. “This letter arrived for you, miss,” he said, and placed it in her hand.

Samuel—by some intuitive canine knowledge—knew she had gone to the park without him and came bounding down the stairs. He sniffed Henrietta’s skirt to confirm his suspicion, then sat back on his hind legs and emitted low cries. She knelt down to console him.

“Samuel, I will take you later. I promise. I just had to be alone.” He licked her face. “I know you can’t understand” He tried to scrunch his thick body into her lap. “Yes, you’re still my favorite hound.”

“Down, Samuel.” She heard Kesseley’s voice booming from above. He came down the stairs, his buckled shoes clicking on the steps, his evening clothes under his greatcoat. He gripped his hat in his hand.

She clutched Samuel, her muscles going loose. Kesseley was so beautiful.

“Good evening,” he said, making a slight bow.

Henrietta rose and brushed the dog fur from her gloves onto her pelisse. “Are you leaving? You’re not dining with us?”

“No.” They stood together, silent as prayer, while she waited for the impossible—for him to say he loved her again.

“You look very handsome,” she whispered. “I hope Lady Sara knows how lucky she is, for she is marrying the finest gentleman in England.”

“You know I am not.”

“Yes, you are.” She held his gaze to hers. His eyes were an impenetrable cold gray, no light inside. “I sincerely hope you will be very happy.”

“Thank you.” He brushed past her, putting on his hat. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the door to close.

“You will marry a good man and have beautiful children,” she heard him say. “He will give you everything I couldn’t. You will forget all about London—and about me.”

She turned. “Do you truly think so?” She could more

easily perform miracles than love another man.

“Yes,” he said, his lips thin as a knife’s blade. He paused for a moment, gazing at her, and then he opened the door and left.

Not possessing the strength to make it up two flights, Henrietta collapsed onto the rosewood parlor chair. She untied her bonnet and let it fall on the floor. Samuel put his paws in her lap, bending the letter lying there.

She recognized her father’s barely legible scratch on the address.

Inside were two letters, the first a curt message from her father. He and Mr. Van Heerlen had arrived at Greenwich Park in the morning. They were staying at The Green Man in chambers seven and eight—very nice accommodations that Mr. Van Heerlen had suggested. He had forgotten his hairbrush. A carriage would be sent for her tomorrow in the late afternoon.

The other letter was penned in a more elegant hand.

My Dearest Miss Watson,

I do not recall if the trip was hard. It might have been. The hotel in Royster may have been drafty, and the wine watered down to a pale pink. I did not

think of these things. I thought only of tomorrow evening and yourself. Lesser men win ladies with their athletic prowess or by executing chasse or glissade, but I shall endeavor to turn the telescope to the sky and find the elusive heavens for you.

Knowing you are not seven miles from me makes my heart long to fly from here and find you. I wish I could steal away. I am impatient for tomorrow evening. Unable to concentrate upon these old numbers and pages, my mind turns to our beautiful future.

*Your faithful servant,
Pieter Van Heerlen*

Kesseley's shiny crested carriage lurched off the curb. He sat back in the shadows. How much time did he have? Ten minutes? He tried to practice.

Lady Sara, please do me the honor of...

The carriage stopped in front of the Duke of Houghton's white boxy mansion. Hedged boxwoods ran in two parallel lines to the entrance.

Kesseley's heart contracted—he felt dizzy. He couldn't do it. Not yet. He needed a place to hide where no one knew him for a few minutes, just until he

could get his thoughts straightened.

He knocked on the carriage roof. "Take me to the Strand."

On the Strand the merchants were lighting their torches and locking the doors to their shops. A few drops of rain fell from the dense clouds overhead.

Kesseley sent the carriage back to Curzon Street and then walked down to the corner. He turned down a small alley by a print shop. A large rendering of a British warship firing its cannon into a white smoky cloud hung in the window, smaller illustrations around it. He didn't stop to view the prints, but headed to the Thames.

He thought of his future bride. Lady Sara would just be a beautiful face to the world, diverting its attention while he did as he pleased. Few of his station had the luxury of something more than an agreeable marriage. It was a business arrangement, like selling a breeding mare. Yet he knew every time that he would touch his bride, he would wish she were Henrietta. As Lady Sara lay under him, he would pretend he was making love to Henrietta.

He had the sensation that he was no longer looking down at the water, but had sunken below and looked

up to the water's surface from the bottom. As if he had drowned in the brown stinking waters of London.

The rain began to come down in hard drops, splattering the Thames. Kesseley wandered up to the Strand and into the tavern with those old crosshatched panes like in Henrietta's house. He ordered a brandy and set his pocket watch on the table. The coal quietly hissed in the chimney. He leaned his head back over the edge of his chair and closed his eyes. Henrietta filled his mind. She had looked so fragile when he left. He wished he could have kissed her and assured her the best part of him would always love her.

He wished...

Everything was hopeless now. He had put his life into this knot. He could only tighten the strings until it couldn't come undone. Until he could finally silence that damned hope niggling inside him.

Five minutes before eight, he gulped down the remainder of his brandy and restored his watch to his chain. Leaving the tavern, he lowered the brim of his hat and strode against the slanting rain back to the protective ledge of the print shop by the hackney stop. When a hack didn't arrive after a minute, he turned to read the prints under the gaslight that was mounted

beside the door. The same illustration was repeated in the windows like wallpaper. Kesseley's jaw tensed as he studied the caricature. Atop a bed, a diminutive lady with long black curls and clad in a loose chemise played cards with several foppish gentlemen. At her side, covering her bared breast with his hand, was Kesseley. He could scarce read the caption for the black spots blinding his eyes. *The Little Companion.*

How dare they! Henrietta was an innocent. She had nothing to do with anything. The lecherous illustrator had had the good sense not to leave any initial, else Kesseley would have hunted him down and put a bullet through him, then gladly hung for it.

He had to get back to Curzon Street and stop her. Then the terrible realization sunk into his mind. He was too late! The ball had already started.

He had to get to her before the others did.

With no hack in sight, he took to his heels and rushed into the darkened park.

Henrietta came to a halt in the grand entrance of the Duke of Houghton's London mansion. She had never seen such opulence firsthand and had to turn about on

her heel and marvel at the architecture. The house was like a regular cathedral on Piccadilly. Every little detail was a masterpiece. Above her were stacked balcony upon balcony, all lined with tall Greek columns. She had to squint to see the ceiling. Framed in gilded stucco ovals were murals of angels hovering about the masts of British battleships. A marble stair that ran the entire length of the back wall led to a platform flanked by statues of Greek goddesses in flowing gowns. From there, the stairs split into two smaller staircases that wound in graceful curves to the floor above.

“Come,” Lady Kesseley said, tugging Henrietta’s arm. She seemed unmoved by the splendor about her, as if it were commonplace. Henrietta realized she was just the mere daughter of an eccentric astronomer. She didn’t belong in this world. Yet Kesseley and his mother were welcomed with open arms. It was so easy for her to forget amongst the radishes and sheep that Kesseley was an earl. That he had even loved her or been her dearest friend was a miracle.

Now the only way she could love Kesseley was by letting him go into this beautiful world and praying for his happiness.

As Henrietta lifted the ruffled edge of her gown to

mount the stairs, Lady Kesseley squeezed her elbow. "Let us stay together. I need you."

Guests mingling on the balcony turned their heads as she and Lady Kesseley approached. Their conversation stopped, fans shot up like walls. When they passed through the tall double doors and into the ballroom, a hush rippled through the room in a concentric circle around her.

"What has happened?" Lady Kesseley cried.

Lady Winslow and the princess broke through the crowd and rushed forward. Lady Sara glided across the glossy wood floor, a rustling flutter of white silk. But His and Her Grace reached Henrietta and Lady Kesseley first, having pushed past the line of yet-to-be-welcomed guests.

The duke made a slight, hurried bow, his eyes like sharp nails in his doughy face. "My dear Lady Kesseley, so wonderful to see you. There is an extraordinary rumor circulating this evening. Of course, it can't be true. However, perhaps your companion would care to stay in the library—it would be more comfortable for her."

"W-what?" Henrietta said, confused.

"I have heard no rumor," Lady Kesseley said, a shrill

edge to her voice.

The duke and duchess looked at each other, each wanting the other to speak.

Lady Winslow reached them, all the usual languidness gone from her voice. "I didn't know until I got here just a few minutes before. I sent a footman to try to stop you. It seems a scurrilous caricature of Henrietta has been circulating in London this afternoon."

Henrietta didn't understand. What had she done? The only thing she could think of was that someone had seen her alone in the park with Mr. Elliot. "The embrace was innocent, I assure you."

The duchess let out a shriek. Houghton gave his wife a squelching glance, and she covered her thin mouth with her hand.

"I believe you will find the library most accommodating," the duke said and grabbed Henrietta's arm so tightly it hurt and pulled her back onto the balcony. He motioned to a footman with his free hand. "See to Miss Watson's comfort."

"No!" Lady Kesseley cried, catching up to Henrietta. "Miss Watson is a well-mannered young lady. I beg you, you must let her stay and show everyone these

rumors, whatever they may be, are unfounded.”

The duke’s fat cheeks turned crimson, not expecting opposition. He spoke in a fast, harsh whisper so that the guests crowding the ballroom door couldn’t hear. “Lady Kesseley, it has been alleged in the lowliest way that Miss Watson is your son’s mistress.”

“Make her leave, Papa!” Lady Sara wailed.

The guests crowded at the ballroom entrance, like buzzards waiting in trees.

Henrietta felt dizzy, hot perspiration moistened her skin. “No, it’s not true,” she said faintly.

“Of course it’s not.” The duke kept his grip on her arm. He dragged her toward the shadows of the mansion’s left wing, hidden behind four tall Grecian columns. “But given the forthcoming union—”

“Henrietta!” Kesseley’s rich timbre echoed through the hall. Those on the stairs gave way to him as he took the grand staircase two steps at a time, water dripping from his hat and coat. He raced across the balcony. The duke pulled Henrietta to his chest, like a shield.

Kesseley stopped short and glared at Houghton. He held out his hand to Henrietta. “Miss Watson, come away.”

"But we are supposed to be engaged!" Lady Sara cried.

"Quiet, Sara." The duke's voice was smooth and controlled. "Kesseley, I think we need to discuss this calmly. I'm sure it was all just a malicious rumor. I'm just trying to protect the gel."

Kesseley's eyes flickered over the scene—Henrietta could see the thoughts speeding through his mind as fast as lightning flashes. "Come away, Miss Watson," he whispered again.

She could scarce see, but she felt the stares of everyone heating her skin. The duke shoved his protruding belly into her back.

"No, don't do this," she said. "You're marrying Lady Sara."

"I never—"

"Let's not lose our tempers and put anyone's reputation in danger," Houghton warned.

Henrietta twisted her neck to look up at the duke and pleaded in a whisper. "Please let me go home. Please." She couldn't let her presence wreck Kesseley's engagement evening.

"For God sakes, man!" Kesseley cried.

The duke didn't bend. He dragged Henrietta along

the balcony, farther from the curious guests. "We're just going to the library to talk, then we'll all go back to the ballroom with Miss Watson beside us," he said in a low authoritative voice. "Tomorrow no one will care about this caricature or whatever it is. They'll just wonder if they're invited to the wedding. We can all have what we want if we just play the cards right."

"I will not allow you to *play* Miss Watson's reputation," Kesseley spat.

"No, Lord Kesseley, you played her reputation. I'm merely offering to salvage it," Houghton replied.

"No, please," Henrietta begged. "You can make the engagement announcement. I don't care if I'm ruined. I want to go home."

The duke tightened his grasp on her arm. "Don't be foolish, Miss Watson."

From across the room, a low menacing male voice cut through the tense air. "I think the lady asked you to let her go," it said.

On the far side of the balcony, among the columns, a man waited in the shadows.

"Who's there? Show yourself!" the duke demanded.

The man stepped forward. The light from a candle sconce fell at a slant across his face. Mr. Elliot's wild

white hair was slicked back in an old-fashioned queue. His beard was gone, revealing a hard cleft chin and two soaring cheekbones. A pale white scar sliced down his left cheek. His eyes glowed like those of a coiled cobra from the stories he had told her of India. Houghton's cool controlled demeanor vanished. His voice boomed like thunder. "Lord Damien! What the hell are you doing here?"

"What I wasn't strong enough to do two decades ago. I'm saving a lady."

Henrietta's eyes shot to Lady Kesseley. The color drained from the lady's face, and she started to sway, her eyes rolling up in their sockets.

"Kesseley, your mother!" Henrietta screamed.

Too late. Lady Kesseley's body crumpled. Her head made a sickening thud as it struck the marble floor.

"Mama!" Kesseley cried and fell to his knees. He frantically rubbed her temples with his thumbs. Her eyes fluttered. She reached up and weakly took his arm. "Tommie," she whispered. Kesseley pulled her onto his lap.

"I've got you, Mama."

Tears ran from her eyes. "Why did he come back?"

Mr. Elliot—Lord Damien, whoever he was—backed

away, all his chivalry gone, his face contorted with a mixture of panic, fear and helplessness. His eyes sought Henrietta, pleading for something. What? Was she supposed to save him now?

She jerked against the duke. His fingers easily gave way. She looked at Lady Kesseley buried in her son's arms weeping, then at Mr. Elliot. "You're Lord Damien? The horrid rake? The inspiration for Lord Blackraven?"

The man in question bowed his head. A rumble of excited whispers resounded in the great hall.

Henrietta felt the little faith she had fleeing away. Nothing made sense. She reached for her mother's pendant, feeling only skin and bone. "I'm so tired."

Kesseley's head jerked up. Their eyes met. She saw her name form on his lips, those lips that could be both gentle and rough, capable of entrancing her or slicing her heart.

She had come here tonight to let him go. It was the only way she could think to love him now.

Release him. Let it all flow away.

"I'm so sorry, Kesseley. I ruined everything for you again. Take care of your mother. I can no longer be her companion. I'm sorry," she whispered, turned and ran.

"No!" he shouted to her back.

The guests streamed from the ballroom, their bodies crashing against hers as she pushed her way to the opposite stairs.

Kesseley shouted her name, begging her to wait. She covered her ears and rushed down the curving staircase, and out into the street. The rain splattered her face and soaked through to her shift.

A hackney was pulling to a stop. She ran up to the driver. "Can you take me to The Green Man Inn near Greenwich Park?"

"It'll be a whole crown for me to get there and back."

"I've only got a half crown. But my father can pay you at The Green Man. He can pay you extra. Please?"

The driver leaned down from his seat and yanked Henrietta's hair, pulling out a pearl and several strands of her hair.

"I'll be keeping this pretty pearl, just to be making sure he pays alright," he said, grinning wide enough to display his black, crooked teeth.

Henrietta pulled herself inside the carriage, hearing the seam of her gown rip. The man clicked at his horse, and the hackney took off. She wrapped her arms around herself to try to stop the cold shivers convulsing her body. The hackney turned by the Duke

of Houghton's estate. Out of the rain-streaked window, she could see Kesseley running down the twin rows of boxwoods at the entrance of the mansion. She slid back into the shadows and covered her eyes.

Chapter Twenty

A footman in green livery ran out from The Green Man Inn and opened the hackney door. Henrietta latched on to his hand and stepped down, feeling her heart slow. She had made it to safety. The rain was coming down harder, and she shouted above its roar, asking the hackney driver to wait.

The inn had red walls with etchings of castle ruins scattered about. A glossy black wooden balcony ran around three of the walls. Men sat about in chairs, glasses of ale on the tables beside them. Their conversations were no louder than whispers. Henrietta's presence caused several curious stares. She crossed to a small window where a bored attendant sat, reading a journal. He motioned to a footman, who led Henrietta up the stairs and down the hall to a small paneled room.

Her father and Mr. Van Heerlen sat at a table with discarded china and silver, a bottle of wine and several stacks of paper. They shot up, surprised, when they saw her.

She ran to her father and wrapped her arms around his thin frame. His scent filled her, reminding her of home and everything safe.

"My daughter, whatever is the matter? You're all wet. We were coming to get you tomorrow."

"Oh, Papa," Henrietta repeated over and over as she buried her face in his cravat.

"Hush now," he said. "You're back with me. Old papa. You haven't seen our new work." He gestured to the papers.

Henrietta ran her finger along the numbers and symbols on the pages, grounding herself in the universe so much bigger than her problems. Planets, stars and comets millions of miles away from her, moving in the silence of space. "It looks wonderful. I'm so proud."

She told him about the hackney driver outside, and her father went to his chamber to retrieve the money. She and Mr. Van Heerlen were alone.

The hem of her gown dripped water on the floor. She crossed her arms over her chest. Cold bumps were all over her skin. "Mr. Van Heerlen, I apologize that you should see me thus."

"Not at all." He pulled his chair closer to the hearth.

"Come sit by the fire. You are too cold."

"Thank you," Henrietta said feebly. He pulled the blanket off the back of the chair and nestled it around her shoulders. The soft fabric of his shirt brushed her skin.

Henrietta grabbed his hand, surprising him. "I have received your letters, sir, with your sentiments. You should know that something terrible has happened. I'm not quite sure of the exact details, but my reputation has been compromised beyond repair. I am disgraced, it seems."

He put his index finger to his lips, as if to quiet a child. "Did I not warn you of London? Now you understand my concern. How I wish you had stayed at Rose House. I knew it would all end thus. But I was not in a position then to stop you."

"But you understand the meaning of my words."

"I do." He knelt down beside her and tilted his head. "Still I am unaltered in my feelings. Now rest. Tomorrow will wash all this away."

She doubted whatever sins she carried would be washed away in the London rain. Nothing made this ugly town clean. The coal would be in the air again tomorrow, the gutters swelling with brown, stinking

water and waste. And her name would be whispered in parlors all over Mayfair. But she wouldn't be there to hear it.

Henrietta started. "I need to send a note! They don't know where I am!"

"No, you must rest. I will take care of it." A protective glow manifested in his eyes. "I will take care of you, dearest Miss Watson."

Kesseley flung open the door of the house at Curzon Street, slamming the knob into the wall. The house was dark. No sound but the splatter of rain against the windows.

"Henrietta!" he called, hearing only his echo. "Henrietta!"

Boxly appeared from the shadows.

"Is she asleep?" Kesseley asked.

The butler bowed, then reached for Kesseley's coat. "Miss Watson has not come home."

Kesseley yanked himself free. "But...she never came home?"

"No, my lord."

Kesseley tore off his hat and threw it against the

wall. He ran his hands through his wet hair, then down his cheeks.

Where could she have gone? He had run up and down the streets of Piccadilly looking for her for at least thirty minutes. If she had taken a hackney, she would have been home. Surely she wouldn't have done something so foolish as to walk home on the London streets at night.

He sank onto the sofa, hung his head in his hands and waited. Nothing seemed louder than the quiet tick of the mantel clock. It continued, mercilessly.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Thirty minutes passed. Terrifying thoughts began to gather in the corners of his mind. He pushed them back.

Tick. Tick. Tick. For a torturous hour. Then Kesseley called for his horse.

The rain fell in sheets, whipped by the wind. It flooded the brim of his hat and soaked beneath his wool coat. He clenched the reins. His wet gloves did little to protect his hands. He navigated the grids of Mayfair to Cavendish Square at a gallop, looking into every hackney that passed. "No, Lady Winslow did not return this evening, my lord," her butler told him. "No, a young lady did not come by."

Nor was the princess at her home in Berkeley Square. The butler said she had stopped by momentarily, then left in the company of Lady Kesseley and a gentleman. What did he look like? Gray hair in a queue, a scar down his left cheek. No, he had not seen a young lady with black hair. No, he didn't know where they had gone.

Kesseley returned home, hoping she had come back.

Just silence. Another hour passed.

He could no longer hold back his fears, as irrational as they were. Hurt. Raped. Alone. Dead. The image of brutal masculine hands restraining her smaller ones. Smeared blood on her pale skin. Crying out for help.

Goddamn it, get a hold of yourself!

There was only one more person she may have gone to.

The rain was almost impenetrable, coming down on Kesseley like bullets. He could scarce see in front of him.

Kesseley tied the beast to the iron gate outside Edward's townhome in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He said a silent prayer and slammed the knocker down so hard the adjoining houses could hear.

Edward opened the door. He wore a collarless shirt and black pantaloons. Ink stained his fingers. His face changed from anger to puzzlement, then back to anger. "What are you doing here?"

"I can't find Henrietta," Kesseley shouted above the rain.

Edward grabbed his arm and hauled him inside. A light flickered from the front parlor, casting the shadow of a female form onto the entrance hall walls.

"Is she here?" Kesseley cried.

"No."

Kesseley's words fell out in a jumble. "I can't find her. She left the duke's ball and didn't come home. She is upset. I hurt her."

A thin female stepped in from the parlor. Lady Winslow! Her curls hung loose, all haughtiness gone from her face. She looked almost fragile. Edward took her hand. "Henrietta's missing."

Her eyes widened with alarm. She fixed them on Kesseley. "You never found her! But we thought—"

"Where's Mama? Do you think she went back to her?" He was almost screaming.

"I don't know. We left the ball and went to the princess's. Then Eleanora and the princess went to

Lord Damien's home. And I came here. No one said anything about Henrietta. We had assumed she was with you."

"Where the hell does Lord Damien live?"

"I don't know."

"How did Henrietta know him? Where did they meet?"

"I didn't know she knew him," she replied.

Kesseley banged his hand on the wall. "What the hell do you know?"

Edward took a step forward, putting his face less than an inch from Kesseley's. "Watch yourself."

"I'm sorry." Kesseley backed away and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Forgive me. I have to go."

"I'll go with you," Edward said.

"There are several parties this evening," Lady Winslow said. Kesseley could hear the fear quivering in her voice. "I could—"

"No, it's too dangerous out tonight," Edward interrupted. "I would feel better if you stayed here."

"But she could be in trouble," she cried.

He kissed her cheek. "We're going to find her. Don't worry."

He turned to Kesseley. "Where should I go?"

"I don't know." Kesseley blurted out his worst fear. "London Hospital." Where the bodies were taken.

Lady Winslow stifled a cry in her hand.

"Get a hold of yourself, man." Edward slapped Kesseley's shoulder, hard. "I'll wager she rejoined your mama at that Lord Damien's. Go back to your home and see what you can find, an address or something. I'll ride over to the duke's and talk to the footman."

Kesseley galloped home. He rushed to the parlor and tore open his mother's bureau. One by one, he pulled out each paper until every drawer and shelf was empty. Not a damn thing about a Lord Damien. Who the hell was this man?

He stumbled to the sofa, quaking. It was two in the morning. In his mind, her eyes were filled with terror in some dark place where he couldn't find her.

The candles flickered and spitted, about to burn out. Something red glinted under the bureau. He got down on his knees and ran his fingers along the floor, feeling cold metal. He slowly pulled out Henrietta's necklace.

He clutched the ruby pendant and held it to his lips.

The front door opened. Kesseley's sharp laugh sounded like something echoing down the halls of Bedlam. He ran out into the entrance hall.

That Lord Damien fellow stood with his mama, her head on his chest as he stroked her hair. When the blackguard saw him, he tightened his arm about her, as if to protect her from her own son.

“Where the hell is Henrietta?” Kesseley demanded.

His mother stepped from her lover’s embrace. She appeared confused, as if she had just woken up. “You didn’t take her home?”

“No!” Kesseley yelled. “I can’t find her anywhere.”

Damien tried to put his hand on Kesseley’s shoulder. Kesseley slung it off. “Get your goddamned hands off me!”

Lady Kesseley pulled her son to her. Her warm, sugary scent made him feel like a small boy. Tears sprung in his eyes.

“I think she said her father was in town. She might have gone to him.” She tried to smooth over the worried edge in her voice.

“Where is he staying?”

“I don’t know. She just said her father was coming to London to look for comets or whatever he does—”

“He has proven another planet exists behind Uranus,” Kesseley shouted.

“She said she would be leaving with him.”

Kesseley bolted upstairs, yanked a candle from the sconce on the corridor wall and went into her chamber. A brush rested on the commode, books were stacked by her bedside table beside a cracked portrait of her mother—all waiting for her to come back. He pushed aside the feeling that he was somehow violating her and opened the lid to the delicate writing desk. Her correspondences were neatly stacked in a pile, beside two pens and blank stationery. He lifted the first letter and scanned Van Heerlen's eloquent hand. Self-loathing washed over Kesseley. This man could have written "I love you" on every line.

He pulled out the next letter. It was from her father. His eyes scanned the lines until he found what he needed. They were staying at an inn called The Green Man.

He flew down the stairs, calling to anyone to supply a dry coat.

The knocker banged.

Let it be her!

Damien opened the door. A courier waited on the step, rain dripping from his hat. He bowed quickly, handed Damien a letter.

Kesseley snatched it from the man's fingers. He

popped the seal while Damien paid the courier.

Lord Kesseley,

Miss Watson has returned to the responsible care of her father and myself. Please send her belongings to The Green Man on Blackheath Hill. I ask that you spare a female servant for two days to assist her. Her arrival is most unexpected, and we were unable to provide proper preparations for her greatest comfort at the inn.

If it is of any concern to you, please be assured that Miss Watson is safe and well.

We shall meet at a later date to discuss the neglect and mistreatment she has suffered under your guardianship.

Sincerely,

Mr. Pieter Van Heerlen

He felt his mother's arm brush his.

"Is she safe?"

He handed her the letter. "Please send a footman to Mr. Edward Watson's home," he said. "Tell him that his cousin was safely recovered." Then Kesseley walked upstairs to his chamber.

He laid the necklace on his desk, sat down and

studied the ruby sparkling in the candlelight. Samuel, who had been shivering in his bed by the fire, padded over and put his nose in his master's lap.

"She's gone, Samuel."

The hound whimpered.

Over his head, the portrait of his father hung. Kesseley gazed beyond his father's gray eyes, seeing the remainder of his own life. It wasn't the lush fields of Norfolk, the feel of the tilled earth under his boot, the expansive skies heavy with the clouds that rolled in from the sea. No, it was a blur of smoke, brandy, cards flipping in his hands, hungry eyes of moneylenders.

There was a rhythmic tap on the door. "Lord Kesseley," a low rumbling voice said. "I thought we might talk."

"Not now."

The door cracked, and Damien peered cautiously from the shadows. "She loves you."

Kesseley was too tired to be polite. "Pardon me, but who the bloody hell are you?" he demanded, rising from his chair.

The man must have viewed Kesseley's rude remarks as an invitation to enter, for he sauntered in, impervious to the hostility in the air. He looked about

the room. His eyes stopped on the portrait of the late earl, darkened, then drifted to Kesseley. He considered him for a moment.

Kesseley leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and glared at the man. "You are an angry one," Damien said.

"I think you are going to tell me who you are."

The man shook his head and sighed. He sat on the edge of the bed, his shoulders sloped, hands clasped together. Then he took a deep breath as if to begin a long story.

"Let's see, years ago, before you came along, I was just an orphan coming to live with my uncle, Lord Damien. I was quite a serious, introspective young man, burning with so many questions. You really don't care about that part, do you?"

"No."

He opened his hands. "Your mother and I were young and...well, we fell in love. So when your grandfather arranged the marriage with Lord Kesseley, I said we would steal away. I was naïve then, and bullheaded. I thought I was stronger than this world. Your mother wouldn't go. She cried when she turned me away. And I accused her of—oh I don't want to

remember the words. You would think what happened decades ago wouldn't hurt anymore." He looked sideways at Kesseley. "No, I see you don't. You are not as foolish as myself."

Kesseley's fists balled with an urge to land this man a facer.

The man laughed, as if he read Kesseley's thoughts. "So she went to London and well, I went on being a charity case. But anger consumed me. I became obsessed with my own misery, blaming Eleanora for the torment I inflicted upon myself. Then several unexpected tragedies befell my uncle's family, and suddenly, I was Lord Damien." He shrugged. "I didn't give a damn about an estate and tenants. I was as noble as that Lord Kesseley, and raging inside. I wanted to make Eleanora hurt as much as I had hurt."

"Get out."

Damien raised a bushy brow. "Are you so innocent, my young nobleman? Have you not damaged someone?" He paused to let his meaning wash over Kesseley. "I was handsome then and the London ladies—the married ones—were very receptive. Your mama was so beautiful, more beautiful than when we had parted, and I prided myself when I seduced her.

Why should she be any different from the other ladies? You couldn't have been a year old."

"Did you come here so I would kill you?"

"That is a possibility," he said, then continued unfazed by the prospect of his pending death. "Eleanora confided that she'd always loved me. She cried, telling me how much she despised her husband. She wanted to take you, and we would all run away to the continent. I agreed. Then on the night we were supposed to meet..." He paused, straining under his words. "I never left a brothel."

Kesseley yanked him up by his cravat. "Very little is keeping me from putting a bullet through you. I suggest you leave with your life."

The man didn't fight. He met Kesseley eye for eye.

"Where were you the night Henrietta told you she loved you? Ah, look at that face. You are a fierce one. I would never fight you in an alley." Kesseley pushed him away, his ragged breath hissing through his clenched teeth. Damn this man.

"Tell you what, why don't you let me finish? Then you can kill me."

Damien paced for a moment, his hands clasped behind his back. "One night I attended a notorious

party at a hunting box in Leicestershire. Your father was there with this beautiful young courtesan. I had drunk too much, eaten opium. I don't think I need to explain more. So some words were exchanged between your father and me about that pretty little prostitute, and I told him..." He rubbed his mouth and let out a long breath. "I told him I had slept with his wife. I don't know, maybe I wanted him to kill me."

"I assure you, if Father had shot you, it would have been the one noble thing he ever did."

Damien continued, as if he hadn't heard. "Your father laughed, then said, 'My wife is a beautiful little whore, isn't she?' in front of all those men. In that moment, I changed, as fast as a flash. I had philosophized and romanticized my pain like a selfish, immature bastard. But Eleanora knew hell, lived it, slept with it. And she had come to me for help, but when I could have saved her, I turned her away."

Damien squeezed his eyes shut. His voice was on the verge of cracking. "I challenged your father to a duel over your mother's honor. I could hardly use a pistol. I pulled the trigger, but I wasn't fast enough. This fire burned through me, and I fell. I knew I was dying, that I deserved to die." He swallowed and studied his

crinkled hands. "Two months later, I ran out of laudanum on a Spanish beach, not sure how I got there. All those years I wandered, running from myself, telling myself all kinds of lies. Until I couldn't run anymore. I came back to England, thinking that being near your mother was enough."

"What are you trying to do? Do you want me to absolve you? Forgive you?" Kesseley exploded.

He shook his head. "You don't understand. I'm trying to save you."

Kesseley slammed his hand on the wall. "Get the hell out. Now."

"Don't give in to this anger and hurt. Fight it. Don't live your life in regret."

Kesseley put himself an inch from the man's face and growled, "Did you not hear me?"

Damien didn't move. Wrinkles cut deep grooves into the skin of his face. His eyes were tired, but unwavering. "I'm not afraid of you," he said. He walked past Kesseley and came to stand under the late earl's portrait. "I know how it feels to have anger consume you. You try to inflict it on other people, trying to get it out of your heart. When that doesn't work you run away. Be it in China or a glass of brandy at a gaming hell."

He grew quiet for a moment, then said, "Forgive Henrietta. Don't lose her."

"I have forgiven her," Kesseley cried. He flung himself into his desk chair and ran his hands down his face. So much had happened he couldn't be rational anymore. It felt like his mind had flown loose. "I pushed Henrietta away to spare her. From me. It's me I can't forgive. Don't you see? I can't control myself anymore. I'm afflicted with my father."

"No." He shook his head. "You may be your father's son by birth, but how you live your life is your own choosing."

"You don't think I know that," Kesseley screamed. He gritted his teeth, trying to regain his control. "I'm not..." He swallowed and ran his finger down the chain of Henrietta's necklace. "I'm not strong enough."

"I know it's hard, son." Damien squatted by Kesseley's chair. "I've stumbled in this life more than I've stood. I am a weak man. You are not. Letting yourself love Henrietta and letting her return that love gives you that strength."

"It's too late. I've hurt her too much."

He snorted. "She called me a coward and now I am calling you one." His face grew serious again. "Yes, you

are your father's son, but you're also Eleanora's, which, in my opinion, makes you the luckiest man alive. And I wish you had been mine."

Damien stood and laid his hand on Kesseley's shoulder. "You have the strength inside yourself to overcome all the damage your father has wrecked upon your soul. Don't give up on yourself. Don't give up on Henrietta. Not yet."

Henrietta came down to the parlor in the late morning. It was a beautiful day. The light streamed in through the window where residual raindrops from last evening still lingered on the pane. If this weather held, her father could point a telescope into space, straight past the solar system, the galaxy, perhaps into heaven.

She looked beyond the window to the rolling green grass of Greenwich Park, visible just beyond the outbuildings. A peace came over her, one she had not felt in weeks, at least not since coming to London. She felt as if a calm hand lay on her heart, telling her to be still.

She said a small prayer that the man she loved might find the same peace this morning.

The door opened, and Mr. Van Heerlen strode in, crisply dressed in tan doeskins, a pale blue coat and a simple gold pendant on his cravat. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. How easy it was. She didn't have to struggle so hard. She could just let the day and the world come and float on it. Not digging below the surface.

He sat beside her, leaning over his chair, dangling his hand casually over her arm. At first, she felt the urge to move, but didn't. His touch was like the first jolt of coldness when she stepped in the Ouse, gradually getting used to the feel, eventually moving easily in the water.

"You look lovely this morning," he said. "Your eyes aren't so tired, and you're smiling."

He circled his finger, making tiny circles on her arm. "I have some unfortunate news, and I debated if I should tell you. I didn't want to worry you. It is never my intention to cause you a moment of distress. But I located the caricature that upset you last evening." He pulled a folded paper from his coat. "Would you like to see it?"

Somehow, despite his kindness, she had the feeling she couldn't refuse. And she didn't want to. She

nodded. He gave it to her.

She wasn't shocked, not even angry, when she examined the spiteful image. Just resentful to have it all come back, like a pile of rubbish onto her beautiful morning.

"London is so hateful." She refolded the paper and set it on her lap. "This isn't true."

"Of course not." He transferred the caricature to the fire. The edges alighted quickly, and the orange flames consumed it. "This isn't your fault, Miss Watson. You weren't properly guided. I assure you, in the future you will be better managed, your honor protected."

"Surely you cannot still desire my—affections—after I have been so disgraced?"

"London is not my world. I find the opinions of other men and society an annoyance I must bear. They are so little, so inconsequential. I am better than they are. The boundaries of my world are beyond their understanding." He knelt before her, and for a moment, she thought he was going to propose.

"Let us not discuss this any longer," he said. "We should not let this small matter blight this historic day." His lips brushed the top of her hand, then he slowly opened her fingers and pressed his lips into her palm.

“One day very soon, I will kneel before you again.”

Kesseley arrived at the Royal Greenwich Observatory as the last light of the sinking sun lit the road. The silhouette of the old observatory rose above the treetops. From the high perch, Kesseley could see the Thames snaking to London, where the lights of the city blurred in the haze of coal. But up here the air was clean and crisp, fragrant with the sweet scent of flowering trees.

Kesseley touched his breast, making sure the rectangular box was still there. He took several long breaths to try and calm his anxious nerves. He had spent the morning running about the town on errands and then the afternoon being yelled at by the Duke of Houghton. All Kesseley could do was shake his head and agree that he was indeed a disgrace to his name, unworthy of his title, and a callous scoundrel. In the end, he had been ushered to the door and asked never to return.

He wandered into the courtyard, getting in line behind a group of serious men, all in ill-fitting coats and sagging cravats, who seemed to know where they

were going. He followed them to a small domed room rising above the trees.

He looked for Henrietta, but neither she nor her father was yet in attendance. He examined the telescope tilted from the floor to an open shutter in the round ceiling. It was a spectacular instrument, at least five feet long, all shiny brass wheels and cylinders. One brave gentleman sat in a reclined chair under the telescope, while another gentleman stood with a foot propped on the small ladder, occasionally pulling a bar or rotating a wheel on the request of his colleague trapped under the equipment. Leaning against the wall, a heavy-set gentleman with wiry curls and a prominent wart—assumedly Mr. Pond, the Royal Astronomer—checked his watch with two owl-like eyes, then looked up at the sky through the ceiling. It was a clear night. Perfect.

Kesseley felt excitement jolt through him like electricity. He couldn't help but feel a part of this great scientific discovery, even though he had done nothing. He had watched this dream progress over his lifetime and understood that now was the moment of realization. He wanted this planet so much for Henrietta.

At the sound of footsteps coming up the narrow stairs outside the domed room, the guests' eyes turned to the door. Mr. Watson entered, holding a folded parchment in his shaking hand. He carried himself reverently, as if in sacred space. Behind him followed Van Heerlen with Henrietta on his arm.

Kesseley stifled a gasp. She had never appeared so beautiful as she did that evening. She wore a plain white gown and a simple knot in her hair like she did back in Norfolk. Kesseley hadn't realized how London had changed Henrietta. A beautiful rosy color that had been absent for several weeks now blushed her ivory skin. A gentle sparkle replaced the overwrought, fearful look that had haunted her eyes.

She seemed tranquil. Happy. She studied the telescope and then smiled at Van Heerlen. He squeezed her fingers, an unspoken communication passing between the two. Kesseley's belly tightened. The little hope he had mustered suddenly faltered.

Van Heerlen and Pond exchanged stiff bows, their history of animosity salient behind their calm composure. Mr. Watson handed the Royal Astronomer a parchment, which Pond transferred to his assistant. Then Pond led Henrietta to the only chair in the room,

his stern expression softening under her beautiful, proud smile. She leaned forward in her chair like an excited child, her eyes scanning the room, coming to rest on Kesseley. Her smile wavered, all the hurt he had inflicted returning to her dark eyes.

He shouldn't have come. He had driven all his hurt into her. Poisoning her. Poisoning this moment—perhaps one of the most important of her life—by being here.

Van Heerlen sensed her distress and quickly found the source. Kesseley bowed. Van Heerlen didn't make any attempt to conceal the hatred on his face. His eyes cut to Henrietta, then back to Kesseley, drawing a protective invisible line around her that Kesseley could not cross.

Van Heerlen was the better man. He had cherished her, protected her—everything Kesseley hadn't. What made him think he should have come here tonight? What made him think he could get her back?

He felt stupid for the words contained in that little box resting on his heart. Why had Lord Damien told him to hope? Why had Kesseley believed him?

Mr. Watson spoke with Pond's assistant and pointed to a line on his document. Pond looked at his

watch again. The assistant pulled down slowly on the chain altering the focus.

Find the planet, damn it. I want nothing more in this life than that planet to be there.

The man under the telescope leaned back and shook his head. Nothing there.

Kesseley's gaze shot to Henrietta. For a moment they locked eyes, and he could see fear tensing her features.

Van Heerlen took the page from Mr. Watson's hand and spoke to the assistant himself. The poor assistant appealed to Pond. The astronomer nodded his head. An adjustment was made to the telescope and the previous exercise was performed again.

Nothing.

Damn it.

Kesseley was furious. Why did Henrietta have to get hurt again?

She had left her chair and came to stand beside her father. His eyes seemed to lose focus, like he was receding into himself. She was whispering to him, holding his hand so tight her knuckles were white.

Van Heerlen brushed aside the assistant, who flung up his hands and gave Pond a disparaging eye. Van

Heerlen used his persuasive powers on the man under the telescope. He flattened his palm at an angle to demonstrate what he needed.

The man removed himself from under the telescope and conferred with Pond. The Royal Astronomer considered.

Do it, man! Kesseley was beginning to share Van Heerlen's view of England's premier astronomer.

Pond flicked his wrist dismissively. The assistant, sensing his superior's disapproval, nervously shifted the angle of the telescope to Van Heerlen's specifications.

Still nothing. For thirty minutes, the beautiful instrument searched the skies.

Mr. Watson peered up beyond the telescope to the night sky, his eyes wide and desperate. Henrietta clung to him, murmuring soothing words. Her gaze drifted across the audience, finding Kesseley. He could see the tears rimming her eyes. She was trying so hard to be strong.

Van Heerlen reached to adjust the telescope himself, but Pond interceded. "That will not be necessary. Might I remind you, the Royal Observatory is for the advancement of His Majesty's science, not

the frivolities of amateurs.”

Van Heerlen’s face whitened with rage. His voice was a constrained whisper. “The planet is there. Our math supports it. Perhaps you English astronomers—”

“Is that what it is? The inferior English astronomers? Perhaps you can use your influence to better effect with the German astronomers. Good night, sir.”

Henrietta stepped forward, putting her hand on Mr. Pond’s arm. “Please try again. I’m sure the planet is there. I have checked the numbers myself.”

Pond smiled condescendingly. “I am sure you have,” he said, as if he were talking to a child.

The audience snickered. They didn’t know how close they were to being beaten to a bloody pulp.

“But they’ve worked so hard, perhaps a few more degrees,” she begged.

“As much as I like to please a lovely lady, I feel Mr. Van Heerlen has wasted my time, as usual. I beg you would excuse me—we must repair the telescope and close the ceiling.” He removed Henrietta’s hand and strode from the room, leaving his assistants to do all the said chores.

Mr. Van Heerlen followed him out. Their heated exchange echoed up in the domed ceiling.

Her father's brows furrowed as if he were puzzled. "Where is she?" he asked his daughter.

"Who?"

There was a small pause, then it seemed like her father mentally exploded. Words flew out of his mouth, incoherent numbers, terms, places. He flourished his hand about in the air as if he were writing.

Oh God! She looked for Kesseley, but she couldn't find him. Where was he? Was she alone?

Frantically, she searched inside herself to find some thread of strength, something she could hold to as she had to be the strongest she had ever been in her life.

The audience members began gathering their notebooks and other belongings, silent and embarrassed. Careful not to watch her father go mad.

A firm, warm hand clasped her shoulder. Kesseley's familiar scent of apple and leather filled her nose.

"Come," he whispered.

He took her father's arm, wrapped it around his shoulder and led him to the door. Papa shuffled like a feeble old man, his eyes vacant, as if he had retreated completely into his mind. He continued to mutter,

having some fierce debate with an imaginary foe. He looked so old and broken. Would she lose him too?

Kesseley assisted her father through the courtyard to the entrance gate where his footman waited. He whistled to the man and ordered him to bring Henrietta's carriage. A single torchlight burned by the gate and the tree boughs shadowed the drive. He led Henrietta's father to a bench by the stone wall that ran the perimeter of the observatory. She sat next to her father and he slumped against her shoulder. She could feel his heartbeat pounding in his sagging body. His fingers quivered, still trying to write.

"She isn't in her place in heaven," he said.

"Hush, Papa. You'll find that planet," Henrietta quietly assured him, brushing the loose hair from his eyes.

"I charted the entire sky to find Imogen again. She is lost in the heavens."

Her throat tightened. She couldn't talk or cry, stuck in that suspended breathless state before one breaks down.

She felt Kesseley's hand on her shoulder. "Henrietta," he whispered.

"Don't touch her." Mr. Van Heerlen had caught up. She could feel his anger as he glared at Kesseley.

Kesseley stepped away, fading into the shadows under the arching branches.

“No—” she began, then fell silent.

Mr. Van Heerlen knelt before Henrietta’s father and herself. Finding her hand, he squeezed it. His palm was warm, his voice reassuring. “We will take our case to Germany to real astronomers who will listen to reason, who recognize genius. Don’t worry, our work will be heard by the world.”

Henrietta embraced Mr. Van Heerlen and cried, so grateful that he believed in her father. She was glad Mr. Van Heerlen had yelled at that contemptible Mr. Pond for calling her father an amateur, for caring so little about his life’s work. Mr. Van Heerlen was right—English astronomers such as Mr. Pond were inferior.

“There now, Miss Watson,” he said soothingly, running his hand up and down her back. When she had collected herself, he rose.

“Come, Lord Kesseley,” he said darkly.

Henrietta interrupted. “Mr. Van Heerlen, I’m indebted that Lord Kesseley came. Don’t be angry.”

“Hush, dearest, don’t upset yourself anymore.”

The two men walked a little way down the steep road running along the stone fence. She could just hear

their terse voices, but couldn't make out the words for the rattle of their carriage rolling up the hill.

"Come, Papa," she said, helping him into the carriage, then sitting beside him. He leaned his head against hers and curled his fingers in her hair. "You're all I have," he said, over and over.

Mr. Van Heerlen stepped up and swung into the seat. He handed Henrietta a flat rectangular box as the carriage lurched forward. "This is your mother's necklace. Lord Kesseley won't be bothering you again."

Henrietta peered out the window, but she couldn't see Kesseley in the darkness of the park.

Mr. Van Heerlen helped her father to his bed at The Green Man Inn and then procured some laudanum from the innkeeper. Her father drank it without protest, seeking relief from his relentless mind. Mr. Van Heerlen kissed Henrietta's cheek when he left, promising he would make everything better once they arrived in Germany.

Henrietta wet a cloth in the water pitcher and wiped her father's forehead. "What did I do wrong?" he asked

her.

“Nothing, Papa, nothing.”

He shook his head, his features contorted in pain. He didn't speak again until a little after nine, when he closed his eyes and whispered, “Imogen.” Then he drifted mercifully into sleep.

Alone in the silence, warm tears slid down her cheeks. How cruel the world was! Henrietta wasn't innocent—she had been foolish and careless with the hearts of others. She'd received only what she deserved. But her father? What had he done? He'd cared for his dying wife and chased phantom planets in the heavens, but he hadn't hurt anyone. She watched his face relax with sleep, hoping her mother found him in his dreams.

Sitting on her father's bedside table was the unopened box containing her mother's pendant. Dear Kesseley. She had never loved him so much as when he'd taken her arm that evening. She wished London hadn't happened. That they could meet again at the Great Ouse River in that lovely hour before dusk, when the golden light sparkled on the water. The boughs on the towering oak trees would sway from the breeze blowing in from the sea and across his fields. She

wished she could hold him again, all the fear and anger gone, just the strength of his arms around her, keeping her safe.

She picked up the box and lifted the lid. Her mother's tiny ruby sparkled in the candlelight.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Henrietta whispered.

She lifted the necklace and saw that its clasp was broken. As she returned it to the box, she noticed that a letter had rested underneath. She lifted the missive, opened it and held the page to the light.

23rd of April, 1819

Which day appeared personally the Earl of Kesseley and made an Oath that he is of the County of Norfolk aged upwards of Twenty-Five Years and a Bachelor and alleged that he intended to intermarry with Henrietta Watson of same county.

She clamped her palm to her mouth, trying to calm the emotions whirling inside her. He wanted to marry her. Marry her! She had to get back to Curzon Street.

Then the realization sunk in. Of course, he was asking for her hand—out of honor. Why else would he have relented so easily when Mr. Van Heerlen asked him to leave? He escaped, leaving her with evidence

of his honorable intentions. Now he could return to Lady Sara with a clean conscience.

His hurtful words came back: *I don't love you, Henrietta. Understand. I will never love you again.*

Henrietta gathered the letter, necklace, box and candle, then tiptoed across the hall to her dark, cramped chamber. She laid the marriage license on the bed and ran her fingers across the words wanting so much to be with Kesseley, to marry him, love him. But she couldn't consent to such an unequal marriage born from honor and duty. He didn't love her, and she couldn't bear any more of his coldness, knowing he would find his comfort with beautiful ladies in places she didn't know about.

She replaced the license to its box, where she would keep it forever. Maybe knowing she could have married him was enough. Yet another letter waited in the very bottom of the box, sealed with a green K.

Were these his marriage terms? She looked warily at the letter, afraid of what she might find inside. She couldn't bear any more heartbreak, any more hurtful words. Taking the letter to the fireplace, she knelt down by the coals and broke the seal.

Dear Henrietta,

I have attempted this letter many times this afternoon, but my words can't broach the truth. I can write that I have always loved you, but it will not capture the depth of my passions or my fears. I lied every time I said I didn't love you. I pushed you away to keep you safe from what I've become. I told you my old life was a lie. And it is—my gardens, my fields, all the things I made around me, tried to nurture, bring to life—all so that I might bring myself to life from the shambles of my father.

You have been the truest part of me. I cannot relinquish you from my heart, even as I stumble in my weakness and failings. You have always been my hope. You taught me to dream when I was afraid of the world. You've been beside me in the darkest moments of my life and given me comfort. You believed I was capable of goodness when all I knew was darkness and hurt. When I am with you, I am the man I want to be, in my heart, because of your faith in me. Yet, I have failed you.

Let me unburden you of any guilt or obligation you may feel towards me. You are innocent. I threw my

sins and the sins of my father at your feet. They are not yours to bear. Please forgive me.

I want to marry you and spend my life with you, but I fear you will not have me. I fear I have passed any hope of your redemption and forgiveness, but I love you, dearest Henrietta. I will always love you.

Your faithful servant,

Thomas

Kesseley slipped inside the house on Curzon Street. All evening he had walked up and down the Strand, listening to the quiet water, wishing he could sink into the current and let it carry him away.

He stood at the doorframe of the parlor where his mama and Lord Damien sat on the sofa, their fingers entwined. They looked up with expectant, smiling faces, waiting for good news.

"I've lost her," he said.

"Oh no," his mother whispered.

Kesseley bit down on his lip, feeling tears well up again. He let out a hiss, blowing his eyes dry.

His mother rose and embraced him. "I'm so sorry." Her body trembled on his shoulder.

She led him to one of the rosewood chairs. He just

wanted the solitude of his chamber, but hadn't the energy to resist.

"Danny was telling me about his journey to the Americas." Mama shot Lord Damien a pleading look.

The man made a weak stab at conversation, mumbling of flint, arrows and poison.

Kesseley didn't listen. His insides ached. He couldn't even think about the next moment, let alone the Americas. All he knew was pain. Damien had told him to fight for Henrietta, for himself, but he had lost.

He held up his hand, halting Damien's words. "Pardon," he said, his voice a tired whisper. "I must go."

He rose, wearily, just as a carriage rattled to a stop before the front door.

"That must be Lady Winslow and that Mr. Watson. She said they are coming by after a dinner party. I will tell them to leave," his mother assured him.

"No, don't, but please excuse my company." Kesseley quitted the room and started up the stairs before he could be seen.

"Kesseley," Henrietta called softly.

He shot around, stumbling on the steps. He grabbed the railing to right himself.

She wore the same plain white gown under her blue pelisse. Around her neck, the ruby pendant glinted. A thread hung down from where she had tied the broken clasp together. She seemed pensive, wringing the letter he'd written in her fingers.

Lady Kesseley stepped in from the parlor, but seeing Henrietta, she turned and hurriedly closed the door without even saying hello.

"Is she angry with me?" Henrietta asked.

For a moment, Kesseley couldn't speak, the words choked in his burning throat. He tried again. "No one is angry with you." He came down the stairs and stood before her. "I'm sorry your father didn't find the planet. —"

She held her finger to his lips, hushing him. Tears gathered in her eyes and started to run down her cheeks.

"Oh, Henrietta." He wanted to draw her to him and comfort her, but she stepped back.

"I wanted to tell you that you are wrong," she said, her voice brittle and shrill. "You are a gentle and good man. You have such joy in being in the world. You marvel at the smallest thing, the things most people miss. You watch and wait for the world with a patience I

will never possess.”

He clasped her hands and held them to his chest.

“You ask me to forgive you,” she continued. “I will and a thousand times again, but you must forgive me. I didn’t mean to waste all those years. When I told you that you weren’t the one I was supposed to love, it was because I was lost in my fantasies. I didn’t understand that I might turn my telescope to the sky and nothing would be there, that my dreams were empty and immature. Your love taught me what is real and what isn’t.”

He wanted to feel her against him. This separation, a mere foot, was agony. But she continued, staving him off longer.

“There is a part of you in everything that is mine. Every memory, every moment. You know me beyond how I know myself. And you—you still love me and I don’t know why, nor do I feel I deserve it.”

“No—”

“My father has come undone. He calls for my mother. Mr. Van Heerlen said if I came to see you tonight that I wasn’t the honorable lady he believed me to be. But I had to see you. You always say I only come to you when something is wrong, but it is because...” she

swallowed, the tears coming down harder, "...because I love you so much."

He closed his eyes, feeling as if he were tumbling freely as his head descended. Her soft lips caught his, moving like silk across his skin, tasting him, exploring him. She pulled herself closer, as if she could nestle into his heart.

He slid to his knees, trailing kisses down her neck and tops of her breasts. "My dearest, beautiful lady. You tempt me too much. I will take you as my wife in our little village church, then I'll show you a hundred different ways your husband can love you. And I do love you, Henrietta. There has not been a day that I did not love you."

Chapter Twenty-One

Two weeks later

Several hours after the wedding and feast and music and wishes for their happiness, Henrietta waited alone in her chamber in Wrenthorpe. With every small noise, her nerves tingled and her eyes darted to the door leading to Kesseley's chamber. She had changed out of her wedding gown and into a delicate silk chemise edged with lace and embroidered with tiny white flowers.

She picked up a silver-handled brush and smoothed her long, loose curls as she crossed to the tall windows along the back wall. A fat white moon shone through the trees, making long shadows of boxwoods growing in the garden below. This was her home now. It didn't seem real. Perhaps she wasn't really Lady Kesseley, this wasn't her chamber and at any moment a footman would come to tell her that her carriage had arrived to take her back to Rose House.

Her poor dear papa. How sad she felt leaving him

alone tonight. He didn't talk about the planet anymore. The library door had remained closed since they returned. At dusk, Henrietta and he took long strolls hand in hand through the fields just as the stars came out.

"Do you think she sees us?" he always asked.

"I know she does," she told him.

That morning she had taken his arm as they walked to her mother's grave. She laid upon the gray stone a wreath of red poppies matching the ones crowning her thin veil. She had rubbed her pendant and said a small prayer to her mother to bless her forthcoming union. Then Lady Kesseley and Lord Damien met them outside the church door. Lady Kesseley, tears in her eyes, fussed over Henrietta's gown. It was a delicate silk miracle that Henrietta, Mrs. Potts and the village girls had tirelessly sewed.

When the church door opened, Kesseley turned from where he stood at the altar. Her heart soared. He was so handsome in a smooth black coat and breeches, the tips of his white collar brushing his hard jaw line. He wore a simple but elegant cravat, just like in London. But those twinkling gray eyes, they belonged to her dear old Kesseley. When he saw her,

his lips parted, letting out a silent, wondrous sigh, reminiscent of the shy boy he had been once.

Together they knelt at the altar, their trembling bodies barely touching.

I vow to forsake all others and keep only unto him so long as we both shall live.

She heard a soft tap and she jumped.

“Henrietta, might I have a word with you?” It was Lady Kesseley’s light voice.

Henrietta set down her brush and let her in. Her mother-in-law appeared exhausted— having to oversee a banquet and houseguests was an exhausting task—but happy.

She embraced Henrietta. “You were so lovely today.”

“Thank you. But I can never outshine Lady Kesseley in love.” Henrietta held up the dowager’s hand, letting the sapphire ring on her finger sparkle in the candlelight. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

Lady Kesseley smiled, flustered, like a young girl. “But you are Lady Kesseley now.”

“And you shall be Lady Damien.”

A soft light brightened in the future Lady Damien’s pale eyes. She looked shyly away, taking in the chamber, letting out a sigh. “I remember my first night

here years ago. I thought my life was over. I was frightened and alone. But life is longer than they say and filled with so many unexpected turns and rebirths. Tonight I only feel joy." She squeezed Henrietta's hand. "I thought we might talk—as mother and daughter."

Henrietta squirmed. She felt she was nine again, running to her mother, worried. "Kesseley said a stallion puts his big thing in another horse to make a baby horse, just like a man does to a lady when they want a baby," she had cried. That had led to a very uncomfortable discussion.

Lady Kesseley—Dowager Kesseley—must have sensed Henrietta's hesitancy and laughed. "My dear, your time together as husband and wife should be joyous." She leaned closer. "Love my son and let him love you."

There was a quiet knock on the door leading to Kesseley's chamber. Henrietta felt those hot splotches on her cheeks.

Dowager Kesseley kissed Henrietta's cheek. "Enjoy each other," she said, then hastened out of the chamber with a mysterious smile on her lips.

Henrietta glanced one last time at the mirror. Her eyes were wide and luminous and filled with

nervousness. She took a big breath and opened the door. Kesseley stood collarless in a green coat and his old loose doeskins.

Perhaps she'd misunderstood the marital dance. "Kesseley, you're wearing boots."

"I brought some for you." He held out the scuffed shoes she used to tromp about the countryside. "And these." Her blue pelisse, gloves and a bonnet.

She looked askance at his offerings. "You're up to mischief."

"Yes, I have been working very diligently, and I will not have you spoil it by tempting me with that beautiful chemise and your bare feet. Now sit in that chair."

She did as her husband asked. Kesseley knelt before her, took her bare foot into his palm. His lips brushed her ankle while his thumb rubbed soothingly into her arch. She released a humming moan at his touch. Tonight there would be no other voices crowding her mind, reminding her of propriety and other such nonsense. Tonight she didn't have to say no to that urge swelling inside her.

He slipped the ugly old boot on as if it were a golden slipper, then rubbed her other foot, not neglecting it of its fair share of soft caresses with his lips. Coming to

her hands, he kissed the diamond ring he had put on her finger, not taking his dark, secretive eyes from her face. Each finger got a slow kiss, but her thumb he took into his wet soft mouth and tenderly sucked it. Henrietta's lips parted with a quiet gasp. That warm, heavy need Kesseley always solicited blossomed inside her.

Suddenly she didn't want to be a part of Kesseley's scheme. She wanted him to take her to the bed waiting not a few feet away. To pull off this chemise and feel his skin, his weight, his muscles against her.

She heard a chuckle rise up from his chest as if he could read her mind.

Yet he wouldn't satisfy her so easily. Instead, he removed her thumb and placed a cold glove over her fingers.

She refused to let him torment her other hand and ripped the dangling glove from him and shoved it on her hand.

He frowned. Displeased.

Then he grabbed her, crushed her against him and pressed his tongue through her lips, deep into her. Henrietta tilted her head back to accommodate his violent plundering of her mouth. Her nipples surged to

feel his touch again. She thrust herself against him, but he pulled away.

“Mustn’t forget your bonnet,” he said airily as he put it over her head and primly tied its ribbons.

Something came out of her mouth that wasn’t a complete word, just a frustrated vowel.

And the way his lips slowly nibbled at her neck and earlobes as he slid the pelisse over her arms was plain cruelty. When Henrietta told him as much, he responded that she was his most cherished wife whom he loved beyond all rationality and principle.

Like two naughty children, they crept through the dark corridors on their tiptoes, using the escape route Kesseley had devised in his youth. Except they didn’t climb out the library window with a rope and freefall down a story, but sensibly used the servants’ back entrance.

Outside, the moon was enormous and shining over the lawn, an accomplice to Kesseley’s clandestine mission. He took her hand in his and they snuck behind the labyrinth of boxwoods, then made a quick dart from the garden to the woods, only slowing once they had made it past the outbuildings bordering the lawn. Henrietta clung tightly to Kesseley as he guided her

along a path he knew by memory, holding the low branches to let her safely pass. She wanted him to stop and kiss her in the darkness, but he tromped on until they stepped out of the trees and the Great Ouse expanded before them.

The current gleamed like tiny silver threads on the water. A gentle breeze blew off the water, cool on Henrietta's cheek. Beyond the other bank, the full moon shone above the horizon of fields. So large, Henrietta could see its craters and mountains.

"I love you, Thomas," she whispered, in reverent awe.

"You told me the stillest, most silent place in your heart was by the river."

"With you," she reminded him. "You omitted the most important part." He lifted her chin and gave her that yearning kiss that had destroyed her immature fantasies and upset her old existence. She drew him closer, wanting to smell his dark and sweet scent, marveling at how perfect she felt tucked in his embrace.

For several moments they clung to each other, swaying with the wind, their breaths harmonized. Then he stooped down, ran his arm under her knees and

whisked her up. She rested her head on his shoulder as he carried her farther down the bank to their favorite oak tree. Beneath its strong boughs, an impressive tent stood, made of heavy woolen blankets and suspended by a complex web of rope. Henrietta laughed at her husband's ingenuity.

He set her down slowly, their bodies rubbing together as she slid down his leg. "Why don't you go inside and remove these unappealing boots and wait while I light a fire?" Henrietta hid her desire to grumble. She didn't want to wait, and she didn't want to be away from him. She drew back the blanket flap to find a sweet little room. Kesseley had layered blankets upon the ground and then strewn them with fragrant flower petals. Her knees sank into the soft wool as she crawled in. Fat golden and burgundy pillows bordered the edges of the tent walls. Lavender-scented sheets had been stacked in the corner. He had made all this for her. She smiled at her dear husband, although he couldn't see.

She closed the flap, took off her boots, pelisse, bonnet and gloves, placing them neatly in the corner. With only

her chemise on, she drew up a pillow and hugged it. She hated being separated from her husband. Her nerves were giddy. Her feminine core felt heavy and hot with anticipation. She could hear the crackle of the fire and his feet shuffling on the ground. What was taking so long?

Then the blanket swung open, and the light from the fire illuminated the tent. Kesseley entered, not a stitch of clothes on his beautiful, sculpted body.

The firelight flickered on his hard face and the lines on his neck. The shadows and light pronounced the bulge of his muscles on his arms and chest. Her gaze lowered to his taut belly and then to the dark curls and impressive member beneath. Henrietta gulped.

Suddenly, he appeared shy, his Adam's apple bobbing.

He spoke sheepishly. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you. I just thought you might be more comfortable if I—" She didn't know what he was trying to say. Her brain had stopped working. She leapt at him, desperate for his lips, his skin, his touch. Her body writhed against his, knowing something her mind didn't.

He kissed her back thoroughly, his tongue thrusting

so deep she could feel the edge of his teeth. He broke free, whispering into her ear, his voice thick and hoarse. "Do you like me?"

"Yes," she cried. "C-can I touch you?"

He laughed as his lips caressed her neck. He clasped her hand and guided her to him. His penis felt rigid and hot. It jolted at her touch. She heard her own uneven inhale.

"May I show you how to please me?" he asked.

She nodded against his cheek. With his hand over her smaller one, he tutored her. She gazed at his face in the firelight. His eyes were closed. A snarl curled his lips.

"Am I doing it right?"

"Oh God, love." He leaned his head on her shoulder, his hand moving hers faster up and down his sex. Then he released her and entangled his fingers in her hair. He murmured her name, almost like a groan. She explored his contours, learning she could make him shudder if she stroked him all the way down his length, or elicit a gasp if she moved her fingers over the tip. Her heart swelled knowing she was pleasing him.

Then suddenly his whole body stiffened, and he yanked her hand away.

She was mortified. "Did I do something wrong?"

He drew her against his chest. "No," he said harshly in her ear. Then he kissed her again as he eased her down to the pillows.

"Wait!" she cried.

He released her, almost too fast. His eyes searched hers. "Are you frightened?"

"I-I want you to see me."

She edged over to the open flap, where the firelight danced. Ignoring the cool air seeping in, she gathered the edge of her silk chemise in her hand and raised it over her thighs, revealing her dark curls. She lifted her eyes to his shadowed face. His intense gaze made her feel self-conscious, yet dangerously sensuous. She swallowed and continued, slipping the cool silk over her nipples, then up over her head. She shook her curls free and let them fall about her shoulders. He was silent as he studied her curves, her breasts, her thighs, taking in the smallest details.

"Me," she whispered, then repeated the question he had posed to her. "Do you like me?"

He didn't move. She shivered, waiting, feeling very vulnerable.

"Henrietta, I've imagined you like this since...well,

since I knew desire.” His voice cut through the silence. “But, my God, you’re more beautiful than I even conceived.”

She went to him, away from the cold, and took his hand, placing it upon her breast. He stroked the sensitive tip on his fingertips, sending a tingle to her feminine parts.

He pushed her gently onto the pillow, his mouth taking in her other breast, sucking, licking, its taut nipple. She dug her fingers into his hair, shamelessly pushing herself against him, unable to get enough of the sweet, acute sensation his tongue elicited.

He lifted his head and gazed at her from below her wet, reddened breast. “Can I please you?”

“Aren’t you?” she cried, barely keeping her voice from flying away.

The way he chuckled made goose bumps break over her skin.

His fingertips glided like feathers down her body, over her belly, lower and lower. She stopped breathing when his hand lingered in her curls. He kissed the inside of her thigh as his finger slid down her wet, feminine folds. Her legs tensed and instinctively she tried to close them.

"I love you," he whispered, his breath like a caress over her skin. "We don't have to do any more tonight. I'm content to just hold you."

But as he spoke, he touched the small mound nestled between her feminine petals, and she shuddered. Again he brushed across her. She bit down on her lip, releasing a soft hum.

His finger began to circle faster, his gaze fixed on her face.

"What—" she cried, but couldn't finish. Her body arched, and her legs shamelessly widened for him.

He circled and flicked his finger over her mound. Teasing her, making her quiver. She couldn't form words, all she knew was to throw herself against her husband's hand, demanding more pleasure. His tongue found her breasts again. She let out a high whimper and curved her body to his touch.

In one long lick, his lips moved down her, coming to rest in her curls. "Don't fight, my love, let it come."

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. He ran his tongue down the wet, swollen slit between her limbs. She instinctively flinched, but he held her tight, the back of his hand reassuringly caressing her thigh. "Let me," he begged.

She bit the edge of her lip, unsure, but trusting her husband. He reached for her hand and laced their fingers together as his tongue lapped at her mound. The shudders returned, this time more powerful. She held her breath, her whole being attuned to the smallest motion of his tongue. The merest touch reverberated down her spine and exploded across her nerves.

He released her fingers, sliding his hand over her breasts, down her thighs, then slowly, slowly she felt his finger ease inside her, exploring her feminine secret. She groaned and instinctively thrust against him.

He moved his tongue, slightly. An intense pleasure shot through her. Her head fell back, her legs so taut they shook. She was on an edge of something. What? Everything was a brilliant white in her mind's eye.

His fingers gently squeezed her nipple and she cried out. Her body seemed to burst under her, rocking, bucking against her husband. And he wouldn't stop. With his fingers, his lips, he took her further into ecstasy.

His wife's cry of pleasure resonated to his core. She

was amazing beyond any dream he'd ever had. Now she lay against the pillow. Her breath rose and fell like the gentle lap of a calm beach.

He pulled himself onto her. Her limp legs easily gave way, letting him slide between her knees. Her perspiring face glowed in the firelight, those chocolate eyes shiny and slightly dazed. She was beautiful in her wantonness.

"I never knew..." she whispered.

Kesseley chuckled, his heart swollen with masculine pride.

"I didn't mean to scream," she said, worry creasing her brow. "Do you think the villagers heard?"

He couldn't help himself. "Of course they did. And you know what they are saying, don't you?" He leaned down until he was by her ear. "Kesseley made that beautiful wife of his climax." Then he tossed his head back and howled like a wolf.

She gave his arm a small swat. "Well, it's your fault. You told me to let it come."

"And you surely came, my love," he heartily agreed, knowing she was ignorant of his meaning.

"What's so amusing?"

"Nothing's amusing, my beautiful, dearest wife

whom I desire more than life.”

He gave her a reassuring kiss. Her lips were gentle and languid, and he had a problem. He was between her legs and achingly aroused. Squeezing his eyes closed, he willed himself to be a patient husband. She was still a virgin, and they might not be able to consummate this marriage tonight, he reminded himself.

Then he felt her tentative fingers running along his cock as he had shown her.

“Yes, love,” he whispered, encouraging her confidence.

He could feel her eyes burning through the shadows. “I love you, Thomas.”

He clenched his teeth, fighting for the self-control to be gentle and not ram himself inside her. But she rested wantonly below him, open, the tips of her swollen breasts rubbing his chest, her heated cinnamon scent intoxicating him.

The light, fast movement of her hand crumpled his will. He thrust at her, desperate to discover the mystery waiting within her.

“Please let me inside of you.” His voice was as hard as his cock.

She reached up and held his cheek. "Yes," she said quietly.

He turned his face and kissed her hand. Then he brought himself outside her swollen wet folds. Her eyes grew large. He could feel her nervousness.

Kesseley was breaking up inside with aching, consuming desire and the fear he would hurt his petite wife, that he couldn't stop himself and would damage her burgeoning sensuality.

"I love you," he said, almost as an apology, then covered her mouth with his.

He pushed slowly, steadily, feeling her body resist, then give. She whimpered in his mouth, her legs tense around him.

He stopped, biting down on his lip. "I'm sorry. I tried to make it better for you. We don't have to continue tonight."

"No," she said, pain tightening her voice. Then she rose under him and in a swift motion impaled herself on him.

"Oh God," he cried, unprepared.

He felt her body trembling. Willing restraint with every ounce of energy he had, he lowered himself carefully onto her, chest to chest, belly to belly.

"I love my fearless wife," he said, and with a tender hand, brushed her long curls from her face and kissed her temples, her cheek, her chin. Her body relaxed, and they lay together, silent, feeling their hearts beat together.

She entwined her fingers in his. "Thomas, we are one."

A silent awe came over him, years of yearning finally realized. Henrietta was his wife. Her love was his completely. There would be no more separation between them. He knew this moment would linger in his heart until his death.

His lips brushed hers and he began slowly rocking his body. "Does that hurt you?"

"No," she whispered. He licked the edge of her ear and whispered his love while he eased farther into her. She writhed under him, chafing against his leisurely rhythm. Her ragged breath and moans heightened his excitement.

Kesseley clung to the fragments of his vow to be gentle, but she lifted her knees to let him sink farther inside her, her hips urging him to go faster. When she sighed his name, he could no longer hold back.

Again and again, he thrust. Her face was tense with

pleasure, her beautiful, heavy breasts shook, and her lovely, sweet whimpers rung in his ears. Her nails dug into his arms as she moved frantically under him. Kesseley peered down at his ravishing bride, her lips opened, body arched. For a moment she didn't make a sound—then a guttural cry escaped her throat. She sank him deep into her dark softness, breaking his last bit of restraint. He could no longer hold himself back. The sensation overpowered him. He tossed his head back and cried out through clenched teeth as he released his seed into his wife.

For a moment, they didn't say anything, their perspiring bodies united, their breath ragged in the stillness. Kesseley felt tears welling in his eyes, a fragile wonder trembling inside him. He fell beside her, and gathered her to him. "I meant to be gentle, but—oh, I love you. Please say I didn't hurt you."

"No, Thomas," she said, letting her fingers run down his biceps. The fire had burned down to ash, and only the glow of the moon and stars lit the tent. He felt her smile and knew without even seeing them that her eyes were large and serene.

"Do you know what I loved most?" She kissed his shoulder. "Watching you. I could see the light in your

eyes even in the dark, and I knew I was safe. In London, you lost that light. I was so afraid for you. Now sometimes when you're holding me, I feel this sorrow, a grief for something that almost happened. I nearly lost you. It makes me scared and vulnerable knowing how tenuous the most important things and people in your life are, yet at the same time, the knowledge makes this moment so beautiful. That it almost didn't happen...and yet it did. And here I am stronger and weaker for everything that happened and desperately grateful that this moment wasn't taken away."

"Come here, my lover who can see the light in the darkness," Kesseley whispered, laying his wife's head on his heart. "Let me feel you."

Henrietta snuggled close to her husband, feeling so full of love she couldn't imagine her heart could hold any more. Outside the tent she could hear a nightingale singing in a nearby tree, the low hushing sound of the flowing river and the rustling of leaves in the night wind. Things she had known her whole life, but tonight, she felt as if she were hearing them for the first time.

About the Author

Susanna Ives chases after two wild children, eats a lot of chocolate, dreams up stories, writes, codes web pages, folds laundry and meets up with friends at assorted restaurants and tea houses around Atlanta. As a child, she fell in love with the movie *The Sound of Music* and started performing in musicals at her local theater in rural Georgia. She can sing (badly) almost every Rodgers and Hammerstein tune. After receiving a master's degree in digital media, she worked in corporate land for a number of years before deciding to stay at home with her children. Aside from being a mother, writer and web developer, she and the kids sometimes follow her Viking husband on long trips to Europe. You can read about her travel misadventures on her blog: <http://susannaives.com/wordpress/>.



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