

Governess Penelope and a Duke

A SECOND CHANCE SWEET REGENCY ROMANCE

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Contents

1. Chapter One
2. Chapter Two
3. Chapter Three
4. Chapter Four
5. Chapter Five
6. Chapter Six
7. Chapter Seven
8. Chapter Eight
9. Chapter Nine
10. Chapter Ten
11. Chapter Eleven
12. Chapter Twelve
13. Chapter Thirteen
14. Chapter Fourteen

15. Chapter Fifteen

16. Chapter Sixteen

17. Chapter Seventeen

18. Chapter Eighteen

19. Chapter Nineteen

20. Chapter Twenty

21. Chapter Twenty-One

Epilogue

THE END.

Chapter One

The candlelight sent flicking shadows against the paisley walls. While some might have needed more persuasion to do what she was about to do, Penelope Bexley did not. Glancing at the letter on her writing desk for the umpteenth time, she retrieved a crisp new sheet of paper from her drawer, smoothing her hand over its surface as she laid it atop the desk before reaching for her pen.

Dearest Agatha,

Though it pains me to hear of your husband's death and your troubles since, I am most thankful and eager to accept your offer of a place within your household. Only recently, I asked myself what shall become of me. Your letter came as an answer to that question.

My father, as you know, has declared that he has no use for me, nor does he care for my future, since I refused his friend's proposal. Believe me, dear Agatha, I wished I was a less fastidious woman to whom the simplicity of a roof over my head and a comfortable home were enough. Sadly, I am not. My heart desires love above such things, but alas, it is something that has eluded me these twenty-six years. Since I cannot persuade myself nor bend my will to accept his

friend's offer, my father no longer wishes to know me. He has cast me adrift. Truly, your letter was a rope to a drowning person, but enough of such things. Let us turn our minds to happier thoughts, such as our reunion.

How I have missed you these fourteen years. Letters have served as our only communication, but mere missives could never convey all I wished to say. I very much look forward to seeing you again, my friend, and finally meeting your lovely daughter, Christine. How old is she now? Sixteen? What a wonderful age. I remember it well. Has she been presented at court? Your husband's death changed many things, and you could have postponed Christine's debut into society, but if she is willing, I would be most eager to help her prepare. I will make all the arrangements as soon as possible.

I know what you will ask in your next letter, but do not trouble yourself. I will answer you now. No, I will not miss this house. The only person I will miss is Marina. Indeed, my sister will be the only one who will miss me. My mother remains lost in the haze of her laudanum to forget my father's misanthropic activities, and apart from his anger toward me, he is busy trying to secure another loan. His gambling has completely taken him over of late. I fear it may be the ruination of the whole family. I pray not, but my hope is not in it. I fear it is only a matter of time, but I will elaborate more on that when I can see you.

Your dearest friend,

Penny

Penelope folded the letter without reading it again. There was no need. What she'd written wouldn't change, and neither would her mind. She was ready to leave her father's house and venture into the world. She was no longer a child needing the protection of Crossley and its small society. She was ready for more. Folding the letter carefully and sealing it with wax from the candle at the corner of her desk, she rose with it in hand and secreted out of her bedroom, the gentle time of her sister's breathing dotting her steps.

The house was silent as she stepped into the hall with a lamp in one hand and letter in the other; the family was already abed, and the house staff were finishing their nightly duties before retiring for the evening. It was good that no one was about. She need not have to answer questions about the lateness of her correspondence or risk her father intercepting it. He had a terrible habit of reading anything he deemed worthy of his attention, regardless of the addressee.

Letter secured on the table for Mr. Morton, the valet, Penny retreated to her room once more, her feet light on the stairs, but her heart heavy. She crept into the room and scurried to the bed, resting the lamp on the stand before climbing beneath the warm sheets.

“Who were you writing to?” Marina spoke, surprising Penny.

“Agatha,” she answered, pulling her nightcap from under her pillow and placing it on her head. Strips of cloth secured Penny’s chestnut curls, but the bonnet helped to ensure none came loose. “I thought you were still asleep.”

“No, not for a while now. You were deep in your letter, and I didn’t want to disturb you.” Marina rolled over to face her, the lamplight deepening the shadows on her furrowed brow. “Is everything well? You’ve been mulling over her letter for days since it arrived. Now you’re sending an answer so late at night. Something must be amiss.”

Penny shook her head solemnly. She’d hoped to have more time before there was a need for this discussion. Alas, there was not. Her throat thickened. “Nothing is amiss. It’s just...”

Words eluded her as she looked at her younger sister’s face. Usually, she would have discussed such a momentous decision with her, but not this time. This time, the decision had to be her own.

Marina looked at her quizzically. “Just? Just what?”

“Agatha asked me to come to London to live with her and be Christine’s governess.” The words tumbled out of her mouth like fallen snow from a bow

and landed with a deafening plop.

“What? You’re leaving Somersley?”

Penny nodded. “Yes. I’ve decided that it’s time I sought more of what the world has to offer. London is diverse and diverting. I can take in the great libraries and galleries there and help Agatha during this time. She’s mourning her husband and with the season about to start, and Christine old enough to be presented at court, she needs all the help she can get in preparing her.”

Marina’s chin lowered. “And what Father said about you not marrying Mr. Humphries? Did that have anything to do with your decision?”

Hearing your father call you a disgrace and a disappointment was not a conversation easily forgotten. “I cannot continue to burden Father. We both know our family’s situation. He wants someone to rescue us and thought I would be a willing sacrificial lamb, but I am not.”

“Nor I,” Marina replied with tears in her eyes. She rushed forward and hugged Penny as she wept. “I shall miss you.”

Penny squeezed her tightly, pressing her cheek against the side of Marina’s head. “As I will miss you, but we will not be strangers. I promise. Once I am settled, I will write for you to visit.”

Marina sniffled. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

Chapter Two

The clotted cream was more clot than cream to his palette, most reflective of everything about Steadmoore Manor, his family estate. Since his return, Anthony Carmichael felt no warmth in the large, empty halls and the nearly four hundred acres of lush parkland and gardens. Indeed, his return was a most bitter one, marred by the death of a beloved brother and sister-in-law, and the acquisition of a beautiful but grieving niece.

“Is everything to your liking?” His words sounded more contrived than he planned, but this was a new world for him, being the guardian of a sixteen-year-old. If she’d been a boy, he may have known better what to do and say, but here, with a young woman he’d only seen a handful of times in her life, he was at a loss. It was a situation he did not relish but accepted wholeheartedly. He would overcome this challenge, as all challenges before him. There was only ever once where he rose to the occasion and found defeat, but that was many years in his past, along with the young woman who won over him.

“I will get used to it,” Cosette replied, looking up at him with dark eyes that reminded him so much of Vernon. His younger brother was a great man, a

wonderful husband, and father. Indeed, he was everything Anthony had hoped to be one day. Everything he failed to become because of one woman.

“I know it isn’t what you were accustomed to in France, but we are in England now. A good English breakfast is to be expected.”

She turned away from him, looking at her plate. “Yes, Uncle.”

He was making remarkable strides in cheering her up, wasn’t he? “What do you say to this? I will ask the cook to prepare meals you would have had in France until you get accustomed to our delicacies. I too must reacquaint myself with them as I have spent so much time abroad that it all tastes quite plain now,” he mused, hoping to cheer her.

Cosette smiled, not as large a smile he’d seen when she was a girl, but it was progress compared to the sullen, despondent disposition she so often had. He could give himself credit for that, at least.

“Merci.”

“You’re most welcome, Cosette. Now, let us put this meal behind us and proceed with the matters of the day. We have a long journey; we best get a move on.” He raised a hand and a tall, austere gentleman of some age, his valet, approached.

“Yes, My Lord?”

“Pope, is the carriage ready? I wish to be in London by evening meal.” Anthony rose to his feet and offered his arm to Cosette. The young woman took it without question. Her mother, God bless her, was a very elegant woman and her daughter had inherited all her finer qualities and more. It would make the task of finding her a husband that much easier. His chest tightened at the thought. He was responsible for seeing a young woman wed when he could not do the same himself. Vernon would have laughed at the irony of it all. The thought of his brother made his chest constrict more. Vernon. Why had one so young and good lost his life so early?

“All is prepared, My Lord. I have seen to it that you should arrive by six o’clock at the inn, where a light meal will await you. I have secured two rooms until the morrow; at which time, the carriage will take you on to Highgate House to meet Lady Averganst.”

“Excellent! Thank you, Pope.”

The man nodded. “If I may, My Lord. I just wanted to say how good it is to have you home. I served your father, the fifth Duke of Somersley most of my life, and I am proud to serve you now.”

Anthony stiffened. Despite the three years since he had become Duke, it was not something he heard spoken often. While in the Pacific, he preferred Mr. Carmichael, shrugging off his title and position to be a man and something more than his responsibility. Now, he had to walk in the shoes his father left empty. He’d prepared for it his entire life as the older son, but it did not mean he was eager for it.

“My father trusted you, Pope. I did the same while I was abroad. I am glad to have such a capable valet in my service.” He clapped an assuring hand on the other man’s shoulder and then departed.

The carriage ride was a silent one. Cosette looked out one window while Anthony, the other, neither able to muster the courage to speak before they made the brief stop atop the small hill that stood several miles from the house overlooking the countryside.

Anthony alighted and took Cosette’s hand to help her down before proceeding to the markers that stood like sentinels beneath a shady oak.

“I have brought Cosette to see you, Vernon,” he said. It was a silly thing to do, and even more ridiculous when he heard himself say it, but he didn’t know what else to do. The gravestones were memorials, and no bodies lay beneath them. Burned while in India to stop the spread of plague, these were all he and Cosette had to remember her parents.

He remained in place as his niece kneeled before the cold stones and rested her hands upon them, crying a lament. Anthony resisted the urge to listen. This was a private moment, and he was only there to watch over her. He was sorry to have to take the steps he was forced to, but finding a husband for her was the best thing. It would help distract her from her loss and help her better adjust to life in England. Besides, he was eager to set sail again. Steadmoore was a house, but no longer his home. The life and love that was once there were gone and with it his desire to be trapped by its hallowed halls.

He allowed Cosette only a brief stay before ushering her to the carriage and the journey ahead of them. Again, there was silence between them.

“Have you decided about Miss Kipling?” she asked after nearly half an hour had passed.

Anthony looked at the young woman and shook his head. “No, I have not.”

“Will we see her in London?”

“I suppose we might.”

Cosette sighed. “I do not wish to.”

“Neither do I.”

Anthony rested his chin against his knuckle as he propped to look out the window. London, it held many memories for him. He wished he could say all were good, but they were not; at least not in the end. At first, the sight of her brought his heart delight. The day she debuted he was amongst those present, and though she made no great stir, she moved something within him, and when chance brought them together in Somersley, he knew that it was fate.

He inhaled deeply at the memory. It was long ago, yet so near. Penelope Bexley was a wound that knew no healing, and though he'd learned to live with it, the pain of it often reminded him that somewhere inside, his heart was festering with feelings he couldn't let go of.

What had become of her, he wondered, but only for a moment. Such thoughts were torture in themselves, and he was not a masochist. No, it was better not to think of her.

I am sure she is doing all together far better than she deserves.

Chapter Three

London was indeed diverting. In the two weeks since her arrival, Penny found herself befuddled by the many streets that looked so much alike, the number of dress and ribbon shops, not to mention seamstresses. There seemed to be one on every corner and each vying to claim most of the ton's young women as their clients. It was marriage season, and a young woman of note couldn't dare venture out in the same dress twice. However, today was a quiet day, or so she hoped.

"I cannot tell you enough how good it is to have you here, Penny. You set my mind at ease knowing that you are here to guide my Christine through the trials of her debut." Agatha sipped her tea and set it aside. A woman of thirty, she looked closer to fifty, so terrible the trials she faced. The weight of losing one husband while still young, and now of another, plus the ugly business with his brother, was taking a toll on her.

"It is my pleasure, Agatha. I could think of nowhere I'd rather be than here with you and Christine. You'd described her so clearly in your letters that when we finally met, I felt as if I'd known her all the time. She is exactly as you

described, and I am very sure that some young man will take notice of her. If they do not, then they are fools, and she is better off without them.”

Penny smiled. Not one to exaggerate, she spoke the truth in her compliments. Christine was a lovely young woman who bore the loss of two fathers with such grace that it belied her sixteen years.

“Thank you, Miss Bexley,” Christine replied, her bright, youthful smile lighting up her handsome features. She would surely find a good match. One so beautiful hardly ever lacked attention.

“Please, call me Penny. I know I am several years your senior, but we are still friends. You may call me by my first name.”

“Very well. Penny.”

Agatha chuckled at the exchange. “Yes, very light indeed. Seeing the two of you together is a dream come true. My days could use more of these pleasures.”

Penny watched as the lines on Agatha’s forehead deepened. She didn’t know how she would handle the ordeal her friend now suffered, but she was glad that she refused to succumb. If the new Duke of Averganst, her brother-in-law, was so vile a creature as to rob a widow and her child of their inheritance, then Penny wished him just recompense.

She patted her friend’s knee. “And so you shall, as long as I am here.”

A sudden commotion interrupted the moment, as the housekeeper rushed in with two men close behind her. “I’m sorry, My Lady. They refused to wait to be announced.”

Agatha raised a hand to silence the flustered woman. “It’s all right, Mrs. Tull. I will handle it from here.”

The other woman retreated as Penny and Christine stood and watched from behind Agatha. Whomever these men were, they were beyond rude to invade a private home in such a manner.

“Luthor,” Agatha said coldly. “Why are you intruding in my home?”

The man chuckled. "I prefer, Your Grace. And it is not your home, at least not for much longer. As the sole beneficiary of my late brother's estate, this house and all its contents belong to me. I am here to take an account of it."

This was Agatha's brother-in-law? Penny scrutinized the man. He was average height, with dark blonde hair and eyes and an average nose. Indeed, he was entirely average, nothing extraordinary about him at all—if one excluded his loathsome manners.

"I beg your pardon sir, but as you noted, this house is not yet yours therefore you have no right to enter it in such a manner, nor to take stock of its contents," Penny interrupted, stepping forward beside her friend and disregarding the customary polite greetings. "I think you should leave now, Your Grace."

He looked down his average nose at her. "And whom might you be?"

"This is the governess," Agatha replied.

"Does she not have a name?"

"None that you need to know."

Penny suppressed a smile at her friend's boldness. That was the spirit. There would be no bullying in that household today. She lifted her chin and returned the scathing look so liberally given to her. It took more than looks to frighten her. She lived with her father; she could face any man without trembling.

"Hmph! Spending my money on useless governesses? What for? You will never find a match for that daughter of yours once everyone knows she is as penniless as her mother."

"Leave. Now," Agatha stated evenly.

"I will not. Not until I have done what I have come for."

The duke stepped toward Agatha, and Penny stepped between the two. "Should I call the footmen to remove this person?"

He stopped. "You would not dare."

Agatha ignored him. "I would be very grateful if you would."

“You would attempt to throw me, the Duke of Averganst, out of my home?”

“Correct yourself, sir. You may be the Duke, but this is my home, and you are no longer welcome in it. See yourself out, or I will have you removed by force. I am sure the newspapers would love the headline-Duke tossed into the street for trespassing. I would buy it.”

“You will not get away with this,” he seethed, pointing a finger at Penny.

“Good day, Your Grace,” Penny said curtly, giving him his cue.

The three women stood silently as the duke and his clerk left. Once they were out of the room, Agatha gripped Penny’s hand and trembled.

“Agatha, are you all right? Sit,” Penny instructed, ushering her to the closest seat.

“He took me by surprise,” her friend replied, her words disjointed between breaths.

Penny gave her a cup of tea to calm herself. “There now. He’s gone. There is no trouble here.”

“Do you see what I live with? The man is insufferable. He has never known what it is to lack or suffer. He is covetous and always has been. He desired my husband’s title even before he became ill, and once he was gone, he descended upon us like a ravenous jackal.”

Tears stung the back of Penny’s eyes. She closed her hands around Agatha’s. “He will not take what is rightfully yours. Justice will prevail.”

“I pray for it, Penny, for Christine’s sake, more than my own.” Agatha turned to her daughter. “It is a terrible trial to be penniless in this society. Having a title allows you some measure of grace, but there are those for whom it simply is not enough. They would snub us, and Christine would lose all hope of a good match.”

Penny comfortingly tightened the hold on her friend’s hand. “It shall not happen. We will find a way. You are not in this alone. I am with you and will

help you in any way I can.”

Agatha smiled shakily. “Thank you, Penny.”

She meant every word but lacked clear direction on how she could help. The new duke was his brother’s solicitor and the one who prepared the will. His clerk and Agatha were witnesses. Now, the will that entitled her friend to the family’s house, which was not part and parcel of the title and the law of primogeniture, and a large annuity to sustain her and her child for their remaining days, was missing.

The atmosphere was heavy after the duke’s departure. The women returned to their tea, but no one spoke for several long minutes until the arrival of a guest lifted the cloud that hung over them.

“My Lady, The Duke Somersley and Miss Carmichael are here,” Mrs. Tully announced.

Penny’s heart quickened. Had she heard correctly? The Duke Somersley? She had not a moment to think before the woman ushered him in and Penny’s breath faltered as her chest and his name tumbled from her trembling lips.

“Anthony.”

Agatha turned to her in surprise. “Penny, do you know the Duke?”

A subtle heat warmed her cheeks and Penny looked away from her friend’s questioning gaze. “It was a long time ago.”

Chapter Four

This was a joke. It had to be. She couldn't be standing there. It was impossible. Yet there she was, chestnut hair and those dazzling hazel-brown eyes, skin like porcelain, and features as delicate as a rose petal. She was as captivating now as she'd been nine years ago.

“Miss Bexley? Or is it Mrs. now?”

Penelope shook her head. “It is still Miss.”

Anthony's chest swelled slightly. She was unmarried, how befitting. “I thought you would be married by now. Never the matter. I hear it is becoming more common for women to be spinsters.”

“Anthony!”

The sharp tone in Agatha's voice made him remember himself. He bowed his head contritely. “I apologize, Agatha. That was terribly rude of me.”

“It is not me you should apologize to.”

Anthony looked at the woman who once held his heart, and who now filled it with resentment. Nine years was not long enough to forget her, it seemed. He clenched his jaw. “My apologies, Miss Bexley. I assure you it will not happen again.”

“See that it does not. I will not have you treat my friend in such a manner, especially when she has so readily agreed to guide your niece in society this season.”

Anthony balked, his gaze shifting from Cosette to Agatha and then to Penelope. “I beg your pardon?”

“Penelope, Miss Bexley, is the governess I wrote you about. The one who will help our girls prepare for their debuts.”

He could feel his nostrils flaring. She was the governess? Her? Someone was having a laugh at his expense; he was sure of it. There was no way that the woman who broke his heart and rejected his proposal was now the one about to help his niece find a husband. She was unmarried. It was even more ridiculous than him doing it himself.

Agatha must have sensed his discomfort, as she quickly excused them from the conversation under the pretext of showing them to their rooms. Once the parlor door was closed behind them, Agatha launched into her questioning. “Why does Penelope unnerve you? I have known you several years, Anthony, and not once have I seen you so discomposd and rude on top of it.”

He took a deep breath. “I am not discomposd. She merely took me by surprise. You have my assurance that I have remembered myself and will not make such a display again.”

Agatha looked at him critically. “Good. I do not want you to upset her. Penelope is all the comfort I have had these many years. The constancy of her friendship has sustained me through the loss of both of my husbands and my beloved sister.” She glanced over her shoulder at her niece. Cosette appeared oblivious. “I think we both want what is best for everyone in this situation. It would help if we did not antagonize one another.”

“Of course. Though, if I may ask. Why, of all people, did you choose her to become your daughter’s governess? Were there not more suitable women

available?”

“There were, but none who knows me so well as Penelope. She knows my every wish for Christine, and indeed, they are her desires as well.”

“She is unmarried. How can an unmarried woman know what is required to find a husband? Agatha, it is, if I may be frank, quite ridiculous.”

“Her singleness is not because of a lack of suitors, but a discerning heart that would not falter in its desire,” Agatha replied.

Anthony bristled. So there had been other proposals, and she had rejected them as she had him? Now, look at her. Alone and forced to watch other young women do what she did not. It was something to pity, but he could not find it within himself to do so. He’d loved her once, wanted to marry her, and yet she had coldly turned him down for another. Had that man left her as suddenly, and as inconsolable, as she had him?

“I hope she will marry one day. I can think of no better wife for any man of worth,” Agatha continued. “Perhaps when you become reacquainted, your view might change.”

Anthony stopped immediately. “Agatha, I promise you that no matter how long we are in each other’s company, my opinion of Miss Bexley will not change, so please do not try.” He glanced at his Cosette, who was looking at him with as bewildered a look as Agatha.

Agatha continued her questioning. “Why are you so firmly set against her? What happened between the two of you?”

Anthony swallowed the lump in his throat. “Nothing.”

“It certainly seems more than nothing to me.”

“Let me say that Miss Bexley, for all the good you see in her, has proven that she is better off as she is than as some gentleman’s wife.”

Agatha smiled. “Now you have me curious, Anthony. I have never heard you speak in such a manner, and knowing Penny to be the best of people, this is quite

intriguing. If you were trying to dissuade my interest, you have only provoked my curiosity further.”

“That was not my intention.”

“Yet you have done so, and I will not rest until I have the complete story.”

Anthony sighed. “Then, my dear Agatha, this will be a tedious visit indeed.”

Chapter Five

Duke of Somersley. She should have known that he would've assumed his father's title after his passing. Still, when the housekeeper announced his arrival the day before, it had taken her by surprise. Agatha told her of an expected guest, but she never imagined it would be Anthony. If she had, she might not have come, at least she told herself that, but truthfully, she knew there was no alternative. There was Agatha or nothing. It only made her current circumstances more difficult.

The fire did not cause the heat on the back of her neck, or the tremble in her hands. His presence did. Anthony's piercing gaze watched her every move from where he sat across the room. Pretending to read his newspaper, she hadn't missed the looks he stole in her direction or the displeasure on his face. Their eyes never met, but she still remembered the color of them, a clear chocolate brown. She used to wonder how so average a color could be so bewitching when set in a pair of eyes and accompanied by a pleasing smile. Once, she used to lose herself in those eyes, and long to have him look upon her. Now, his looks made her stomach knot, as if some great mechanism was turning, threatening to burst.

Penny forced a smile and tried to focus on Christine and Cosette. “Now ladies, I would like you to continue working on your deportment for when you stand before the Queen. It is no small matter. Her Majesty will scrutinize everything about you, not only her, but all in attendance. You must leave nothing to chance. Poor manners are as unforgivable as swearing in this society.” She glanced in Anthony’s direction.

“Penny? Were you presented at court?” Christine asked.

“I was, but that was many years ago now.”

Cosette looked at her keenly. The young woman’s expression was full of curiosity and wonder. “What was it like?”

Penny smiled. They were both so young, so naïve about the ways of the world. They were oblivious to what they were about to walk into. Every step was a trap, and many a friend was secretly a foe. The ton was an unforgiving bunch, grasping and venomous, trying to wheedle their desires above all else.

She folded her hands in her lap and lowered herself into the chair across from where they sat. Where she was unprepared, they would not be. She would help them. “I was nervous. My mother was a great beauty when she was younger, but I take after my father in looks. There was great expectation that I would find a husband in my first season. I had hoped to, but it was not to be.”

“What did you do wrong?”

Penny blinked rapidly at Cosette’s question. “I... I cannot tell you.”

Anthony snorted.

Penny stiffened, but ignored him and continued. “I tried my best. I did everything that was expected of me, but no young man seemed interested. Perhaps it was because my father did not have a title. Perhaps it was because I was not as pretty as the two of you. Regardless, what befell me will not happen to you. You have everything in the world going for you. All you need to do is present it to your greatest advantage. That is why I am here.”

Another snort.

This would not do. Penny forced a smile and got to her feet. “Excuse me a moment. Carry on with your lessons.”

She walked over to where Anthony sat, her heart thudding so loudly that she could hardly hear herself think. Would he receive her or snub her? Once, that was never a question she needed to ask.

“A word, sir?”

Anthony looked up at her with annoyance. “Why a word?”

She exhaled slowly. She should have known that he would not make this easy. “Because it would benefit your niece and my charge if you would indulge me a moment, My Lord.”

Anthony glanced in the girls’ direction. “Very well, for their sakes.”

He folded his newspaper and set it on the table beside him, as Penny turned and walked away from earshot of Cosette and Christine, to where a large window overlooked the small garden. Her hands still shook, but she tried to clasp them together to hide the face. Finally, Anthony was beside her. She steeled herself.

“My Lord, we do not have the best of histories together, but I would ask that we try to be civil in each other’s presence.”

“I am civil.”

“Are you? Is this what civility has come to? Snorting and scoffing in corners while another is trying to educate your niece about the trials she will face? You claim to want the best for Cosette, then why not try to make it easier for me to help her rather than more difficult?”

The muscles in his jaw flexed, but Anthony remained silent.

“I am not asking you for friendship, only that we try not to antagonize one another. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” he said. His tone was so cold it made her want to weep. She remembered the last they spoke, and how tender he was, how loving, and how hurt, when she rejected him. She had hoped time would lessen the blow, but it had not.

He took a deep breath and Penelope could see as the tension in his face dissipated. “For my niece’s sake, I will endure this. I want the best for Cosette. I want her to find a good match and a husband who will love and cherish her. A man who will give his whole heart to love her and protect her, as any good man would do. I know she will not reject such sincere affections.”

His words stung like a thousand bees.

“Had I known you were the woman Agatha spoke of, I would never have brought my niece here to learn at your feet. They are too eager to run away.”

Another sting.

“Regardless of the direction my feet took me in, I would hope that you would know that I would never wish unhappiness upon your niece or Christine. I assure you of that.”

“Forgive me, madam, but your assurances mean very little to me.”

Penny forced herself to meet his gaze and the hurt and anger she saw there. “I hope that by the end of the season, you will have changed your mind.”

“You have greater hopes than I do.”

Anthony turned and walked away, and Penny’s stomach felt as if the ground was no longer beneath her. She used to wonder what it would be like to see him again. She always hoped they would one day, but now she wondered if they were better off apart. She looked at him, once again seated and perusing the newspaper as if they hadn’t spoke at all. Penny allowed herself a moment, and then quickly returned to the task at hand. Her charges were waiting for her, and there was much to be done and no time to do it in. The ball was only days away, and they had to be ready to take on the town.

Chapter Six

The house was quiet without the girls' voices chirping. In the days since his arrival, Christine brought out the best in Cosette, lifting her spirits until the young woman was smiling again, a sight that pleased Anthony very much. He did not pretend to be a stellar uncle; the girl needed a father, and despite his best efforts, he was not that. He doubted he could ever be the father Vernon was, but he would be the best surrogate he could be, no matter what it took. Even if it meant sipping tea with Penelope Bexley, as he was now.

One name permeated conversations at Highgate House-Luthor Armitage—the new Duke of Averganst, a fiend whose malicious greed was threatening the lives of Agatha and her daughter. He knew only a little, that the late duke had established a sort of trust for his wife and stepdaughter, and purchased Highgate House as a gift to her, as well as a small annuity for her comfort. It was not part of his estate as entailed, ergo it should have been able to pass to her while his brother kept what remained. The new duke, it appeared, believed all should belong to him.

He weighed in on the matter. “Subterfuge is what’s needed. The man clearly has his wits about him. You can be sure that customary means will not find the

evidence you seek. If it still exists, of course, which it may not.”

Agatha looked at him with consternation. “Whatever do you mean?”

He took a long sip of his tea before setting it down. Leaning forward, he lowered his voice to avoid being overheard by anyone passing in the hall. Walls had ears, and under such circumstances, it was best to be cautious. You could never be sure who was working for the enemy, even in one’s own house.

“Someone would need to gain his trust, his confidence, and then use it to search out where he might hide the evidence.”

“Are you suggesting a spy?” Penelope interrupted.

Was his explanation so difficult to understand? He breathed deeply, reminding himself of his promise to keep the peace, for Cosette’s sake, no matter his annoyance.

“Yes, Miss Bexley. I am suggesting a spy.”

Penelope was silent for a moment, the slight tuck of her lower lip the only indicator that she was considering his suggestion, a tell that only one who knew her might detect, so imperceptible the action.

Some things do not change.

“Who could do it?” she asked, meeting his gaze.

That was not the response he expected.

“Are you seriously considering his suggestion?” Agatha questioned.

“It makes sense. He might confide in someone who gained his trust, but that might take some time. He does not seem the sort that many would befriend.”

“I do not have time,” Agatha sighed, her teacup clattering against the saucer as she once again set it down.

“Then, perhaps someone too lowly for him to consider? Someone who could get into the house and search it for you without detection?”

“Someone like a maid,” Anthony interjected.

Penelope's eyes lit up. "Yes! Precisely. A maid would not gain his notice but could go almost everywhere in his household."

"Perhaps we could persuade someone with a monetary enticement," he suggested.

Agatha's response was immediate. "Certainly not. Bribery? I would be no better than Luthor to reduce myself to such methods."

"But Agatha, what other choice is there?" Their gaze met again, and for the briefest of moments, he saw the girl he once knew.

"Something. Anything. I would rather keep my dignity and lose my home than become as unscrupulous as that man."

"Agatha," they said simultaneously, surprising the other.

She pushed away from the table and stood. "I said no, both of you. If I lose this house, then I lose it, but I will not make a mockery of myself by such means. If you would excuse me, I need to lie down. I have quite the headache."

Anthony was silent as he watched her go. He had not meant to upset Agatha, only to suggest a plan to ensure the future of her family. How could he fix this?

"You did nothing wrong; you know. You were just trying to help."

Penelope's words interrupted his thoughts. It was as if she could read his mind, a frightening idea indeed, for she filled it entirely.

"I did not say that I had."

Penelope smiled. "Your expression did."

"And what expression was that?"

She smiled again. Was something about him amusing? Was he a joke to her? His jaw clenched. It was one thing to break his heart, but another to mock him. She must have perceived his change in demeanor, because a moment later, the smile disappeared, replaced by a contrite expression.

"I meant no offense."

"Yet you offended."

“Anth... My Lord. It was not my intention. I simply meant that I recognized the look on your face. It was the same look you had when we were younger, and you hurt Prudence Frost’s feelings. If I recall, it was unintentionally done.”

He remembered the incident well. Prudence thought he had invited her to tea when it was Penelope he wished to see. The young woman was sorely disappointed when she realized her mistake. He regretted his lack of propriety that caused her pain and embarrassment. Still, his actions could not compare to Penelope’s now.

“That was an error. You mock me, Miss Bexley. There is nothing erroneous to it.”

“But I do not,” she retorted. “Nor would I.”

He remained taciturn.

“I am doing my very best to make your stay a pleasant one. I have tried to be cordial, and not intrude on your affairs. I was trying to make conversation, remembering things from the past that have not changed.”

That was enough. Anthony pushed up from his seat sharply. “Much has changed, Miss Bexley, and you would do well to remember it. What feelings there once were between us are no more. I am no longer a boy with a silly inclination toward love. I am the Duke of Somersley, a man of wealth, property, and title, and I will not allow you to mock me or ingratiate yourself upon me with your ideas of my character or demeanor. You do not know me, madam. I doubt you ever did.”

The look in her eyes at his outburst, the glisten of restrained tears, caused him to falter before she turned away from him and got to her feet.

“I see that I have only upset you, My Lord. Again, it was not my intention. Please, excuse me.”

He wanted to speak, to say something, to further assert his position, but words failed him, and he remained silent, watching her walk away, leaving him alone

with his tea and his thoughts.

Why had he behaved so? A low growl of frustration left him as he pinched the bridge of his nose and paced. He said he was going to do his best to be civil, and that was far from civil. It was the complete opposite, but he couldn't help himself. She had a way of affecting him that few in his life ever had the power to do. Where once it made him drop all pretense and desire nothing more than to give her the deepest parts of his soul, now it only made him want to keep her as far away as possible.

It was good that things had worked out the way they did. If he had married her, they would only anger one another now. He told himself that there was no reason to feel sorry. She abandoned him. Had he not some right to be angry? What he found worrisome was that he felt something at all.

Chapter Seven

There was still something missing.

Penelope considered the white dress with its draped sash and pearl beading. It was a fine piece of workmanship, yet seemed out of place on Christine's frame. If the young woman was to dazzle before the Queen and court, this simply wouldn't do.

"Do you have anything else?"

"Is something the matter, Penny?" Agatha questioned. "I thought she looked lovely."

"She did, but I don't know. There was something missing. It was fine, but I don't believe it presented Christine to her best advantage."

"I have others," the shopkeeper interjected quickly. "I will show them to you. Please, wait here."

"Go take that off," Agatha instructed her daughter as she drew closer to Penelope.

"I'm sorry, I know you must think me overly particular, and perhaps I am, but I don't believe you should buy just any dress for such an important evening. It should be the right dress, the one that presents the image of who Christine is."

“You speak as if a dress can do all of that,” Anthony scoffed. He had insisted on joining them to ensure that Cosette’s attire was suitable and to his specifications. Did he fear she would dress the girl in sackcloth and painted shoes?

She ignored him. Clearly, he did not desire to live in peace and put the past behind them. He was angry at her, and for that, she could not blame him, but nor could she live in the past with him. What hope she had of them one day meeting again in friendship was over. It was not what he wanted, and she would not torture herself to consider it. Instead, she would do her best to avoid his company wherever possible and live her life as apart from him as she had done these many years.

“The right dress, and the right dressmaker, are just as important as remembering all the points of decorum. The right dress can make you feel alive, beautiful, and bold. It can bolster esteem when it is floundering, hide imperfections, and enhance the attributes to make you feel at your very best. That is what we want for the girls, for them to feel their very best on this very special occasion.”

“It is only a dress, Miss Bexley. Not magic.”

She expected Anthony not to understand. He was a man, and after all, frocks and hems were not their forte. He could not fathom how a woman could feel completely lost in her own skin, exposed even when fully clothed because of the way the wrong material hugged all the bits of her she wished to hide.

“No, indeed it is not, Your Lordship. Magic doesn’t exist, a six-foot train does,” Penelope retorted.

“Oh, you two,” Agatha chided.

Penelope continued. “The right draping can hide a sagging shoulder or an uneven gait. There is much that the right person with the right skills can do to make a young woman feel as if she could take on the world. The ton is their

world, Christine and Cosette's, and they will have to face it, and no matter how we prepare them before, if they do not feel worthy or strong, or confident or beautiful on that day, it will show, and everyone will see it. They will never live it down."

Her reaction caught her off guard. She had not planned to respond, yet she had. What was more troubling was that her words left her feeling uneasy, shaken, and reminded her of feelings she thought long behind her. Feelings she felt the day of her debut.

She met Anthony's gaze and softened her tone. "The right dress can make you feel protected, like a shield. The right seamstress knows her client intimately and how to make her feel that comfort and security. It is a relationship of trust."

Anthony's nostrils flared slightly. "Then I presume you have had many seamstresses in your pursuit of the right one."

"No," Penny replied. "Only one."

"And what happened? Did you quit her when you left Somersley?"

"We parted ways."

"Forgive me, but I think it is more than that."

She could not answer, though she wished to. Penny felt Agatha's hand on her arm. She looked at her friend and realized that Christine and Cosette were standing not far off, staring at them and the scene they were making. Embarrassment instantly warmed Penny's cheeks. She looked at Anthony, who seemed to share her feelings.

"Please, continue looking. I need to get some air." It was a lie to allow her to escape. Penny rushed from the shop to save face and her feelings. Anthony could not know what dredging up the past did to her, nor would she tell him. The choice she made she had to live with, even if he hated her for it now. She made the decision that was best, and he had become the man he wanted to be. She could be content with that.

The chilly air nipped at her cheeks as she stood outside the shop door. The yuletide season brought the masses to town with the sitting of parliament, and it seemed it was going to be a white winter that year.

She only needed a few minutes to compose herself, but it was not to be. Anthony joined her a moment later, upending the peace she was trying to reclaim.

“You act as if the truth disturbs you, Miss Bexley. But it is your truth, set in motion by you. Why act the victim when it was your choice that made things the way they are now? Why do you act as if I have done something wrong?”

“It was not my intent.”

“It never seems to be your intent, yet it is so. Tell me, do you do anything with consideration for your actions or the results of them, or is it all chance? A game you play with people’s lives and feelings?”

“I assure you; I have done many things with the feelings of others as my motivation. I wish I could tell you, but...”

The tears were falling, and she could not stop them. She tried to wipe them away, but no sooner had she wiped her cheek than it was damp once more. She could not let this happen. Not there. Not now, when he could see. She promised herself she would never let him see her cry, not after that day, not after she broke his heart.

“Excuse me. I seem to be a little... I must go.”

Chapter Eight

Penelope hadn't joined them for dinner in days. In fact, she was absent at any meal at which he was present, a fact that haunted Anthony daily. Agatha blamed him for upsetting her friend, and truthfully, he blamed himself as well. He had gone too far that day at the dress shop. He'd let his emotions get the better of him when he should have had more restraint. It was the looks on the ladies' faces as Penelope left the shop that provoked him. It was as if they blamed him, as if he was the villain who'd hurt her. He couldn't stand being denigrated for her wrong. In the end, he'd caused them both embarrassment and her tears. Guilt was now his reward.

The fire was lit, but he didn't feel its warmth. His mind tried to focus on the book he'd found to read, a tome forgotten on the chaise that he'd picked up as a distraction—a poor one, for his mind could only see one thing: Penelope's tear-stained face.

It was late, but he couldn't sleep. He'd made a fool of himself and now he had to undo it or face Agatha's ire and Cosette and Christine's disappointed looks. They expected better of him, and intended, he expected better of himself. He had to overcome his feelings, for emotion never won him anything he truly wanted,

not love or happiness. Come what may, he had to keep them in check. It was a solid resolution, one he fully intended to keep.

Then she walked into the room.

Wearing a red dressing gown and her hair in a long braid down her back, Penelope took his breath away. She hadn't noticed him, and he was glad; it afforded him a long look at the woman she'd become. He'd spent so much time since his arrival in anger that he had not noticed the changes in her. She was taller than she was, but not by much. Still, it made her stand out amongst other women, something he always liked about her. Her face was slender, with prominent cheeks and thin pink lips that pursed with her concentration. She was searching for something. He wondered what.

When she finally turned and noticed him, her eyes widened, and her lips parted. Anthony stood immediately. "Miss Bexley."

"Your Lordship."

"I beg your pardon; I should have announced myself."

"No, I interrupted you. I'll leave."

She turned.

"Wait. You do not need to go. I promise I will be on my best behavior. Please. You were looking for something. Perhaps I can help you find it?"

Penny looked at him skeptically. He would have done the same if the roles were reversed, but he was trying to make up for his rudeness earlier. Perhaps, if he helped her find what she was looking for, it could somewhat ease the sting of the spectacle he'd made of them.

"Please, let me help you."

She remained silent and pointed at him. Anthony looked at himself, trying to decipher the cryptic action. What was she pointing at? Was there something on his trousers? He looked and saw nothing.

"The book. I was looking for that book."

“Oh,” Anthony replied, holding it up. “I was reading it. Or trying to. Here.”

Penny raised her hands in protest. “No, it is all right. You have started it. I can find another.”

He stepped forward with the book outstretched toward her. “No, I insist.”

She stepped back. “Please. Take it. I have barely read a few pages. Truthfully, I wasn’t interested in it for anything more than a distraction.”

“So was I, therefore, as you have already started it before me, you should be able to finish it first.”

She sighed. “Please, do not make this difficult.”

“I was not trying to.” He was trying to do the very opposite. He was trying to apologize. Why was she making it difficult for him?

Penny sighed. “Why are you doing this? Why do you antagonize me every time I am trying to be civil? Keep the book. I can read it another time.”

Anthony could feel frustration mounting. Why was she being so stubborn? Couldn’t she just accept the book and let it be over? Why make it an issue between them? Was peace not possible? He swallowed his annoyance and tried to keep his tone calm. “I am trying to apologize.”

She looked at him in disbelief.

“Yes, Miss Bexley. I am trying to apologize. What you see before you is an act of contrition or my poor attempt at it. Know that I am guilt-ridden because of the way you left us the other day, and even more so when you refused to join us for meals since. I was contemplating how to make amends when you arrived. I thought this could be my penance, but even in that, I am failing.”

Penny’s expression softened. “I think we both deserve apologies.”

His brow furrowed. What did she mean?

Penelope stepped toward him, pushing the book back until it rested against his chest. “Finish it. Do not argue. Consider it my penance for wrongs many years in the past.”

She looked into his eyes and Anthony felt something in his stomach clench as the firelight danced across her fair cheek, causing it to glow orange and set fire to her hair. She was stunning, breathtaking even.

“I cannot change what was, your Lordship, but if you would allow me, I would like us to be friends now.”

“For the sake of Cosette?” he asked.

“For the sake of us both. Do you not feel it is time to let go of the past and start afresh? I know I cannot fully eradicate the pain I caused you then, but I would like to be on good terms with you now. You may not feel I deserve it, yet I ask it of you.”

His pulse echoed in his ears as he watched her lips with every word she spoke, a bewitching sight. Finally, he had to answer, but could not find the words. She was right, and he knew it. He could not continue in anger, no matter the pain he still felt. It was years ago, and neither of them was where they thought they would be. Was it worth it to rub the pain in her face and remind her of things neither of them could change? It was not only affecting them, but Agatha, Christine, and Cosette. He didn't want that. He didn't want to cause more discomfort and unhappiness.

He offered her his hand. “Friends?”

Slowly, Penny grasped his hand and shook it as a hum of emotion shifted between them. “Friends.”

Chapter Nine

She was as jittery as a goose at Christmas. The house was busy with preparations, and the girls were already in their dresses, feathers in their hair, and pearls around their necks as they sat at their respective dressing tables. The carriage would leave in less than half an hour, but Penelope felt as if they needed more time to prepare.

“Is Mama returned yet?” Christine asked, regarding the reflection in the looking glass.

“Not yet. She said she would be late and would meet us at court.” Penelope stepped behind Christine and pinned the last of the young woman’s blonde curls into place. “Don’t worry. Your mother will be there to walk with you.”

Christine turned to her with a hand on her stomach. “Oh Penny, I am so nervous. I feel I might be sick.”

“That’s normal,” Penny replied, smiling. “Anxiety is the cause, but once you’re there and you do as we’ve practiced, all will fade away and you will be perfect. You both will be.”

Cosette looked at her nervously. “Do you think so?”

“I know so. All you need to do is to be yourself and smile. Now, on your feet, let me have a last look at you.”

Penny stepped back as Christine and Cosette stood and faced her. Both young women wore white silk. Cosette’s gown complemented her tiny waist and gave her the appearance of more cleavage than she possessed. Christine’s gown minimized her bosom while adding length to her short torso to make it more even with her long legs.

“You both look spectacular!”

The smiles that spread across the girls’ faces caused Penny’s smile to broaden. They were happy, as they should be, and all would go in their favor. At least she prayed so. She feared what Anthony would say if Cosette failed to find a match after all their efforts. And what would Agatha do if Christine did not find a suitor who might rescue them from ruin? She forced the thoughts back. It was not the time to think of such melancholy things. They had a ball to get to.

“Shall we go?”

“Penny? Before we go, may I ask, why have you never married?”

Penny looked at Christine in surprise. “Wherever is this coming from?”

“I don’t know. I just... I was wondering, and this seems as good a time as any. I know you said that finding a husband is the right thing for us, but you did not, and it was your choice, so Mama says. I wanted to know why. If you could choose not to marry, then couldn’t we?”

Penny blinked rapidly. “Do you not want to marry, Christine?”

“It isn’t that. I just wanted to know why you didn’t. We always hear the reason for marriage, but never the reasons not to. Shouldn’t we have some idea of what both options look like before we decide? Not all women marry, though most do. Should we not be told of that as well, to weigh the odds, so to speak?”

Cosette agreed with her friend. “Yes, Miss Penny. Would you tell us?”

Penny wanted to tell them no, that her choice not to marry was a private affair, but she couldn't. She'd shared so much with the girls about this day that it seemed an injustice to hide from them now, especially when they'd mustered up the courage to ask her such a personal question.

She took a deep breath. "Take a seat. I will make this quick. We have a ball to get to and your mother and uncle would be very cross with me if we were late."

The girls smiled and quickly took their seats, their eyes fixed on her as she explained her story to them. Who would have thought that the story of her choice not to marry, one that caused so much pain, would now be of benefit to others?

"I wanted to marry. I very much wanted to be a wife and mother. However, I did not want just any match. I wanted a match for love. As you well know, in our society, marriage is often a business understanding or the means to ensure the legacy of one's family. Sometimes love is involved, but often it isn't. That doesn't mean that such marriages do not work, they do, but I didn't want one that might work or that love might grow. I wanted one that was based on it. Based on love."

Cosette leaned against the dressing table and propped up on her hand. "Did you find it?"

She should've expected the question, yet it didn't lessen the disappointment it elicited to answer it. Despite believing she did the right thing, her heart still wished for the further that might have been should she have chosen otherwise.

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"What happened?" Christine asked, her expression confused. "If you wanted it and found it, then why didn't you marry?"

Penny's chin lowered and her voice softened as she remembered why. "Because I let him go. He loved me very much, and I loved him. He was to become a great man, maybe even sit in parliament or some other office of

importance, and his father wanted it for him. I wanted it for him. However, I knew, as his father did, that his love for me was greater than what he might have become, and he would have given it all up to marry. Indeed, he wanted to.”

“If he loved you that much, then why didn’t you say yes to him?” Christine asked again. “You said love was the most important thing in the equation.”

Penny’s throat thickened. “Because I loved him so much that I could not let him sacrifice his future for me. His father would have withdrawn his support for him if I had married him. He told me so. He would’ve been forced to struggle for his future. It would’ve been selfish of me to hold him back. I thought that if destiny brought us together again someday, everything would come together. He would become the man I knew he would be, and we would have all we hoped for.”

“Did you meet him again?”

Penny stared at Cosette as she pushed back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. “I did.”

The young woman’s expression fell. “Didn’t it work out?”

Penny shook her head. “No. He became all I thought he would, but the time for us had passed. The love was gone, only bitterness and resentment remained.”

“Do you think you will ever marry?”

Penny’s stomach felt hollow as she answered, “No, I do not think so. I am too old, and the likelihood of me finding the love I wish for is almost impossible. I am almost assured that I will never marry.”

The room was heavy with the truth she shared, and Penny fought to keep her tears inside and her emotions controlled as her tale ended. Her unhappiness would not be theirs. They would find their perfect matches tonight; she was sure of it.

“Well, enough of sad stories. It’s time that both of you made wonderful stories of your own to share someday. Tonight, I want you to dance, laugh, and learn,

but most of all, remember that you are two wonderful young women who deserve to be happy. Seek it out and it will find you. I promise.”

Cosette and Christine rushed to her, wrapping their arms around her waist, as they thanked her. Penny wept happy tears as she hugged them back. In the short time that she’d spent with them, they were like her own daughters, and if she’d had her own children, she would have wished them to be like the young women before her. She’d done all she could for them. Now, it was up to them to chart the courses of their futures.

Chapter Ten

What was taking them so long? The ball was liable to start without them. Anthony looked at his pocket watch, then tucked it back into his waistcoat. Women were ever late. Why it took them so long was beyond his comprehension. A man was always ready on time. Look at him.

Dressed in his best black coat and trousers, with his cravat double knotted around his neck beneath the high collar of his shirt, Anthony looked very smart, if he said so himself, and it had taken him less than half an hour to be ready.

Pacing at the bottom of the stairs, he continued to wait. He was not a patient man about punctuality. He preferred to be early than late, and on time never. He needed to be calm. They would make it. After all, this was the most important night of the girls' lives, and they would not dare to be late for it. He paced several more times before they finally appeared.

Cosette came down first and greeted him with a warm smile and a tight hug. The dress they had decided on looked perfect on her. He supposed Penelope was right after all.

“Uncle, how do I look?”

“Magnificent, Cosette. Your mother and father would be very proud. As I am.”

She grinned. "Thank you, Uncle."

Christine followed, looking as radiant as the sun in her gown as she moved to stand beside Cosette, the pair whispering to one another. It was just Penelope they waited for. Anthony was a little disturbed that she, as a more mature woman, would be the one to keep them for so long. Finally, she appeared on the balcony above them, gliding toward the stairs like a phantom. Anthony watched, transfixed, as she descended the stairs like an angel from above. Dressed in a light pink gown that gathered beneath her bosom and barely showed the magenta of her slippers, she was a sight to behold. He could not say it, but to his mind, she put the younger woman to shame with her beauty.

"Isn't she stunning, Uncle?"

"Yes, Cosette. Quite stunning."

"It is a pity she will never marry."

He looked at his niece in surprise. "Wherever did you get that idea from?"

"Penny said so. She said she lost her love and now she will never marry."

Anthony's gaze returned to Penelope. "She said that, did she?"

"Yes. We asked her why she had never married, and she told us. She said she loved a young man, but he had a great destiny, and his father would not have supported him if he'd married her, so she ended it with him. She said when they met again, too much time had gone and the love was no more."

Anthony's heart stuttered in his chest. "Did she say why?"

"No," Cosette replied. "She cried a little, though. She seemed very sad about it. We all were. To think she's been so good and kind to us, preparing us to find husbands when she does not have one of her own. It must have been painful for her to do this, yet she did, never complaining and always encouraging us."

How her words shamed him. All this time, Anthony could think of nothing but his feelings. It never occurred to him how Penelope might feel, or that perhaps the broken heart she'd given him was not entirely what it seemed. He wanted to

know more. Why had she ended it? What did she mean his father would not have supported their marriage? He never found out who the other man was. Now he wondered if there was even one. Did she lie to him then, or was she lying to them now?

“Sorry to keep you. I had to freshen up,” Penelope said with a smile as she joined them at the bottom of the stairs.

“No trouble. We better be going; we don’t want to be late.” He extended one arm to Cosette and the other to Christine, allowing Penelope to follow them to put on their coats and then out to the carriage. Once the young women were inside, he turned and offered Penelope his hand.

Covered in a white lace glove, Anthony desired the feeling of the warmth of her skin as her hand held his. He could remember holding her hand in secret, enjoying the smoothness of her skin, and how her hand perfectly matched his. He noted that it still matched his perfectly, as he helped her into the carriage and then followed her inside.

They sat across from each other, and Anthony couldn’t help but look at her, even though he pretended not to, turning his head enough to appear to be looking out of the window while spying on her in his periphery.

Though Penny smiled, there was a forlorn look about her, as if the night’s adventure reminded her of something that brought pain. Could it be that she thought of him and the love they shared and lost? Was he being conceited to think that it could still matter to her all these years later? Did it matter to him? There seemed to be more questions than answers, and the more he thought about them, the more his desire to know the truth. Had he resented her all these years for nothing?

Chapter Eleven

Penny told herself it was the rocking of the carriage over the cobbled streets that made her feel ill, but she knew otherwise. Anxiety gripped her like a vise. She'd worked tirelessly with Christine and Cosette and now they would all see if her efforts were in vain. What if they were? What if she'd failed them as she had herself all those years ago? If history repeated itself, it was not her alone who would suffer, but the two young women with her.

“We're here.”

Anthony's voice startled her from her melancholy thoughts. How had they arrived so soon? Had her mind wandered so far that she'd lost track of time? Her heart raced. She turned to Cosette and Christine.

“Remember, you are a gem amongst rocks. A prize and a treasure. Whoever makes you his conquest, and wins you, has found in you a good thing. A great thing. Anyone who cannot see your worth is blind, and only God can help them. Take a deep breath, and be mindful of where you step for the horses have been here.”

Her remark made the young women laugh, and Penny laughed with them. Good. It was what she wanted. She could bear the anxiety for them all. They

were better off in a happy, comfortable place, their thoughts on enjoying themselves and not on the enormous mark their positive debut would make on their lives.

The group alighted from the carriage, Anthony taking them each by the hand to help them down. Penny gripped his fingers to steady herself as she teetered. He held her firmly, their eyes meeting over the union of their hands. There was something softer in Anthony's eyes that evening. Penny wasn't sure if it was the light of the street lamps or the excitement of the occasion, but there was something there. Something almost curious.

They found Agatha waiting for them at the entrance. She was smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes. Clearly, things had not gone well with the solicitor. Penny would have to learn more when they could speak privately. She smiled at her friend as she joined them, and they entered together. It was more lavish than Penny remembered. Two clerks greeted them at the door and took their cloaks before ushering them inside. The entrance was full of eager debutants and their families, all vying for the best place in the ton. Queen Charlotte's ball was an opportunity for connections to the best of English society. Princes and Dukes were in attendance and the possibilities for any fortunate girl were endless. If they were exceptional, an engagement would crown their season. It was a prize they all coveted.

Anthony remained in the main ballroom while they waited in a nearby room for Christine and Cosette's names to be announced. As Christine's mother and Cosette's aunt, the responsibility rested with Agatha to make the presentation and escort the young woman before the court. Penny did what she could while they waited, but when they were called into a line in alphabetical order, there was nothing more for her to do.

"I think it best that I return to the Duke. This is not my place and I believe I am being given the eye," Penny said, as she caught the unhappy glance of a nearby

gentleman in the attire of the royal household.

Agatha looked in his direction. "I see. Very well. You have done all you could, and I am very grateful."

"Yes, Penny. We are both very grateful," Christine said in agreement.

Penny smiled and nodded. "I will see you in the ballroom."

Her stomach still felt hollow as she walked back to where the remaining guests gathered. Dressed in their best, the colors as varied as their faces, the guests were impressive to behold. Not a single person seemed out of place, but she felt that way. Court was never where she wanted to be. It was her mother and father's wish that she debut before the queen. Penny was happy to be in society at home, where the company was amiable and the friends were true. Here, she felt like a small fish in an ocean filled with sharks, and as she walked, she met one of them.

"Miss Bexley."

It sounded as if a serpent spoke her name, so great the disdain in the utterance. Penny turned sharply to the speaker, her eyes widening, and her mouth opening in surprise to find the Duke of Averganst standing before her.

What did he want with her? Why was he there? She looked around hesitantly before bowing her head and curtsying. "Your Grace."

"I see you have bothered to make an appearance. I daresay Agatha must be somewhere about with her little daughter." He craned his neck to look behind her before fixing his gaze on her again.

"If I am not mistaken, that is of no concern of yours, sir. You do not care about their well-being. Therefore, there is no reason for you to consider where they may or may not be."

He sneered at her. "Still a sharp tongue, I see. I would be careful if I were you. Your father would not like to hear of your behavior. Then again, from what I hear, he cares even less than I do about your well-being."

Penny felt as if her heart stopped at the mention of her father. She blinked rapidly. "I did not know that you and my father were acquaintances."

"Acquaintances? No. But I am aware of him. Very aware."

Penny was speechless as he stepped toward her.

"A little bird told me of certain debts that he has, and his attempts to marry off a very unwilling daughter to a very wealthy friend of his. From what I hear, he turned her out without a penny, disowning her entirely when she refused. She disappeared to parts unknown. At least none would tell me, but we both know where she is. Do we not?"

He met her eyes as he pulled back, and what she saw there made her stomach sick. Hatred and guile stared back at her, even with the smile on his face.

"I warned you," he said. "I always keep my word."

The hair stood up on the back of her neck as he walked away. He knew who her father was, and her circumstances. How had he come to such knowledge, and what would he do with it? Her hand touched her stomach as it clenched inside her, the other feeling for the nearby wall for support. If he won over Agatha, then it was only a matter of time before they were all ruined.

Time passed as she stood in shock. Penny could feel curious glances in her direction, but she didn't care. The room was spinning and she could not trust herself to stand unaided. Finally, Anthony roused her from her stupor.

"Miss Bexley? Penny, are you all right? You look pale."

She forced herself to look at him, giving an assuring smile as she stood upright. "I was feeling a touch unwell. The heat of the party must have gotten to me for a moment, but I am better now. Have the girls been called?"

"Not yet, but soon. Would you stand with me?" he asked, taking her hand and folding it over his arm. Penny was grateful for the support and didn't protest. She couldn't trust her feet on her own as the encounter with the duke left her shaken. Still, she had to appear calm. She could not allow Anthony to know of her plight.

She would not subject herself to more derision, especially not from him, or worse, pity.

They stood beside each other and waited, Penny with bated breath, as they listened for the girls' names to be called. "I am more nervous than they are," she murmured.

Anthony smiled at her. "I highly doubt that."

"Do you? I do not. I have more butterflies in my stomach than I did the night of my debut."

His gaze shifted from her to the main door of the ballroom, where Cosette and Christine were processing down the aisle with Agatha at their side.

Penny and Anthony watched as their charges stepped into the room, heads held high, features still and elegant, and walking as gracefully as a swan swimming upon a lake. Their dresses dazzled, each flattering its own and setting them apart from each other as it did in unifying their appearance. They may not have been the most handsome young women in the room, but they were the most striking at that moment. Penny's heart swelled with pride.

"Well done, Miss Governess. Well done indeed," Anthony commented as the girls curtsied before Her Majesty.

"I do not deserve praise. The young ladies do. They worked hard and managed themselves well. I could teach all, but if they did not have it within them to learn and put in to practice, then all my work would be for nothing. No, Your Lordship, it is not me who deserves the praise."

"Yet I give it to you all the same."

Penny turned at his instance and found Anthony smiling at her.

"I believe that a reward is in order," he said, holding out his hand. "May I have the first dance this evening, Miss Bexley?"

Chapter Twelve

Anthony felt like a schoolboy as he asked for Penny's hand for the first dance. She might reject him, but he hoped, with their newfound friendship, that she would accept. After all, what was a dance between friends?

She did not answer immediately, their discourse interrupted by Agatha and the girls' return. Anthony's hand lingered in the air between them for a moment, his fingers folding in slowly, before returning to his side. He would get his answer later. After all, the night was not about him. He turned his attention to his niece. "You were splendid, my dear. Truly splendid."

Cosette glowed with pride. "Thank you, Uncle."

He bowed his head slightly and turned to Christine. "You too, Christine. You would've made the late duke proud."

The young woman bowed her head. "Thank you, Your Lordship. That is high praise indeed. My stepfather was a very meticulous man. I only wished to make him proud."

Agatha gripped her arm. "And you did. He may not have said it, but I know he felt it. If he were here, he would be the proudest of fathers."

The women looked at each other sorrowfully, and Anthony felt the sting of familiarity and his own loss. Though the efforts to prepare Cosette occupied his mind, and the shock of Penelope's presence, the memories of Vernon were ever at the back of his mind.

"We sometimes do not say what we should in life. Time goes by and we think we will have the chance, but it escapes us. Then one day, there is no more time. Your stepfather loved you, or else he would never have provided for you as he did. I will ensure that you receive all he wished to give you. I consider you my family as much as Cosette."

The look of gratitude on Agatha's and Christine's faces made his heart warm. They had no one to protect them, no man to stand up for them, but he could be that man. He could take care of them as a relative should. It didn't matter that they were not blood-related to him; they were family, and he would do his duty.

"Thank you, Anthony. Your sentiments mean more than you know," Agatha replied.

"I sincerely meant them."

She smiled. "I know."

The conversation paused momentarily. Anthony knew his declaration meant a great deal to Agatha and her daughter. It meant he would have to keep his word and protect them. Though he did not yet know the Duke of Averganst, he would make it his business to do so. If he could help, then he would. In the meantime, they were at a ball and there was dancing. He prepared to repeat his request when he noticed the approach of two young gentlemen from his right and another from ahead of him. He smiled. "I believe these gentlemen are here to ask Cosette and Christine to dance."

Anthony watched with satisfaction as the young women's faces lit up with excitement. The three gentlemen came to ask for their hands, but only one could dance with either partner at a time. After a few minutes of debate over who

would get the first dance, they decided that whoever arrived first had the first choice. Anthony watched silently as the young women handled themselves with perfect decorum in choosing and accepting their partners, before allowing themselves to be led to the dance floor.

He turned to Penelope. "I believe it is our turn, Miss Bexley."

"Your turn?" Agatha raised a curious brow. Her eyes darted between him and Penelope.

"Yes. Before you arrived, I asked Miss Bexley for the first dance, but she has not given me a reply. Do you think I might persuade her?"

"I certainly hope so." Agatha took her friend's arm and nudged Penelope in his direction. "Go on. Have a dance. I will be perfectly fine here."

Penelope looked confounded. Was he wrong in thinking that they could so easily overcome the past and be friends? Surely a dance was not too arduous a thing to undertake.

"I will not have an unwilling partner," he stated. "If you do not wish to, you do not have to."

Anthony watched as a rosy bloom filled Penelope's cheek as her eyes tried to avoid his gaze. "I never said I was not willing. Indeed, I hardly had the chance to say anything at all."

He could not conceal the pleasure her response gave him. Still, he wanted her answer to be clear. "Does that mean you will dance with me?"

Penelope smiled demurely. "Yes, I will dance with you, Your Lordship."

He smiled back at her, taking her hand. "You may call me Anthony. We are friends now, are we not?"

Penelope nodded silently as he took her hand and gently wrapped it around his and led her to the dance floor. The room was resplendent. Gold chandeliers adorned the roof, while golden candelabras marked the tables that dotted the

periphery of the room. A chalk drawing beautifully decorated the floor, a scene from some painting he believed, the name of which eluded him.

Anthony led Penelope as the music swelled, and his heart swelled with it. He thought never to hold her in his arms again, yet now they stood at arm's length. They waited for the perfect moment to join the other couples in the dance.

His grip was firm but gentle as he strode with her around the room, weaving between other dancers, holding hands, and looking into each other's eyes as they followed the steps of the cotillion.

"You are still an excellent dancer," he said.

"I can say the same for you."

It was silly, but her compliment made his chest swell. They'd spent so much time in debate that simple niceties were a relief. It was good to have that over with. Now, if only the formality between them would go. He knew how. "Penelope."

Her expression changed at the mention of her name. He could be mistaken that it affected her. The look was fleeting, but he did not believe he was.

"Anthony."

A small smile tugged at his lips to hear her say his name again in such a dulcet tone.

"Do not think me impertinent, though perhaps I am, but Cosette told me of the story you shared with them this evening. A story about a love lost?"

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted with a silent breath.

"So it is true," he continued.

"Yes. It is."

Did he want to know? Was it the right time? He'd believed something for so long. Did it matter now if it was true or not? Yes.

"Is what you said true?"

He pulled her closer as the dance demanded, grateful for the timing.

She whispered her answer. "Yes."

He looked down at her, their faces close enough to feel the warmth of the other's breath against their cheek. "Why?" he asked as the music pulled them apart and brought them together again. She answered.

"Does it matter now?"

He twirled her around and brought her back into his arms. "To me it does."

Penelope looked around them before answering. "Not here. If you wish to know, then we must speak privately."

"Very well," he agreed. "After the dance."

The music continued and so did they, but silently. Anthony took the time to observe Penelope's every action, the way she looked, and how her dress held her, and her curls bounced every time she skipped. They said beauty faded with age, but not for her. If anything, she was more beautiful. Finally, both to his disappointment and pleasure, the song ended, and with it, the dance.

He was eager to hear her answer, and though politeness would have them return to Agatha, Anthony instead led them away from the main ballroom to a small parlor a few doors away. A handful of people taking a respite from the evening's activities, sitting in conversation over their wine or admiring the tapestry that hung on the wall. He led Penelope to the fireplace and there stood in silence as he waited for her to speak, or for him to muster the courage to ask again.

Finally, he could bear it no longer. "Will you tell me now?"

"I warn you that you will not be pleased to hear it."

He looked at her with earnest. He would listen to anything she had to say. For years, he went without hearing her voice. Now, his ears thirsted for the sound. "Tell me."

"Are you sure? It will change nothing between us," she said, meeting his gaze. He smiled. "Speak, then we will know if it does or not."

Chapter Thirteen

Her heart was racing a thousand beats a moment and threatening to overtake her. Truth was not always simple. On the most basic level, it only required one to open one's mouth and speak. However, there was more at stake than mere words. There were hearts and memories of a beloved father to consider. No, it wasn't so easy, though she wished it were.

She looked up at Anthony's handsome face and smiled. Happiness filled his eyes, making them shine. She wanted to forget her promise and tell him everything. Again, her fastidiousness thwarted her. Penny always kept her word, no matter what. Though the one she'd made the promise to no longer lived, she would keep it. Those memories were all Anthony had to hold on to. She could not ruin them.

His proximity was too close. An errant finger brushed against the back of her knuckles, sending her stomach into flutters. Anthony's gaze searched her eyes, pulling her in, coercing her lips to speak without saying a word more. She had to remember, what she did was for his best. How could she deny he was a better man for her actions? And she was less deserving of him now than she was then. She looked away.

“We have only memories of the past. I would not tarnish them.” Her voice was a whisper.

His hand took hold of hers, and Penny spun to look at him. What was he doing? People would see. She searched the room to see who observed them, but no one did.

Anthony must have noticed her distress and shifted his stance to conceal their joined hands, yet he did not release her. His tone was gentle as he spoke again. “Do we not have them? Do they not haunt you as they do me?”

Her cheeks, once warm, now burned with the intensity of his gaze. Her heart ached at the sight. “Know that what I did, I did for your good. Anything else is inconsequential.”

“How can you say that? The consequences have been lasting. I have spent years in resentment and anger. Years that I might have invested better. Do you know what could have been?”

Penny trembled as she withdrew her hand from his and took a step back to an appropriate distance. “I know, but I cannot allow myself to dwell on it.”

She knew he would protest, but thankfully, a rather large and decorative woman stepped into their midst. At first, the intrusion surprised Penny. Then she took in the woman's appearance and surprise turned to wonder. She never saw so many ribbons on someone so mature.

“Your Lordship, I thought that was you. I was just telling Olive that I was sure it was you.”

Anthony's nostrils flared for a moment, but he forced a polite smile as he bowed his head. “Mrs. Kipling, how wonderful to see you! I did not expect you to be here this evening.”

“Indeed, we had no plans to, but I told Olive, I said, we surely need to see who will make their debut. You never know whom you might meet. And how fortunate for us, here you are!”

The woman's generous frame stepped further between Penny and Anthony, forcing Penny to step back or be crushed against the fireplace.

"I beg your pardon, Miss," Mrs. Kipling said, momentarily looking in Penny's direction long enough to settle a scathing look upon her.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Kipling. Please, let me introduce Miss Bexley. Miss Bexley, Mrs. Honora Kipling, and her daughter Miss Olive Kipling."

Penny bowed her head. "Mrs. Kipling. Miss Kipling."

Mrs. Kipling's tiny, pointed nose wrinkled. "Miss Bexley."

Her daughter nodded but said little. The woman was only a few years younger than Penny, if her looks were to be believed. She was pretty enough, yet a spinster like Penny, something she was sure her mother had more to do with than she would admit. Such manners would chase many a promising prospect. Again, Penny noted the look of displeasure on the older woman's face. What could she have done to deserve such looks? Every time their eyes met, Penny felt as if she were an insect that Mrs. Kipling intended to crush.

"Your niece looked extraordinary this evening. That was her, Miss Cosette, was it not?"

"Indeed it was," Anthony said, smiling proudly.

"I thought so. We had hoped to meet the young lady. We had expected you to call on us, but alas, you seem to be otherwise engaged since your arrival." She glanced in Penny's direction once more. "I had so hoped that Olive would have had the chance to play some role in this evening's events. After all, with the agreement between us, it is best that your niece and Olive become better acquainted, sooner rather than later."

Penny's eyes widened and immediately looked at Anthony. He forced a smile. "Miss Bexley, would you excuse us for a moment? I need to speak with Mrs. Kipling privately."

Privately? A moment before he could not wait to hear her answer, now he was asking her to go? Who was this woman and what understanding was there between Anthony and her daughter that required private discourse?

“Of course,” Penelope said, though she wanted to say otherwise.

She nodded her head to the two women and promptly turned to leave. It took all her strength not to turn around. What did Mrs. Kipling mean? A thousand possibilities flooded her mind. Finally, one made her stomach lurch, and her hand moved to comfort it as a reason settled in her mind. Surely Anthony would have said something if that were the case. He would have mentioned it. Wouldn't he?

In their time together, their conversations never turned to themselves. They were always about Cosette or the past, but never the present. Could there be an attachment between Anthony and Miss Kipling? Surely Agatha would know. She sought her friend immediately and found her standing alone, watching her daughter dance. Their eyes met as she approached.

“Penny, are you unwell?” Agatha asked, noting her expression.

She wanted to ask if Agatha knew of Anthony being engaged, but her mouth couldn't utter the words. Instead, she felt it best to leave the proceedings, lest her emotions overwhelm her.

“I fear I have become overheated. If you would not mind, I would like to return home.”

Agatha looked at her with concern. “Of course. Let me fetch Anthony to escort you.”

“No,” Penny said quickly. “I would rather not disturb him. It is no trouble for me to walk. The fresh air would do me good, and it is not so long a journey.” They had arrived there in no time at all. Surely it could not be much longer to walk.

Agatha gave her a skeptical look. “Are you sure?”

“Quite,” Penny said. “Tell the others, would you?”

An unsettled look remained on Agatha's face, but suddenly changed as she spied someone in the crowd. “Wait, I see someone I know at the door. Perhaps they will be good enough to see you home. I do not feel comfortable with you walking. This is not Somersley. London can be more perilous, especially for a lady alone.”

Penny didn't argue. She followed Agatha immediately, who introduced her to the Wiltons. The elderly couple agreed to take her home in their carriage, as they lived only two streets away from Highgate House. Penny was obliged to them. They were not only saving her a walk but also Anthony's company. She was too unnerved to be trusted to keep still on the matters he wished to discuss, and she could not risk becoming weak and telling him. Worse, she could not yet handle the confirmation of what she suspected, not when she was only just realizing her own feelings.

Time had not quenched the feelings that had once burned in her heart for him. Indeed, it felt as nothing had changed at all, as if time stood still and they had by some miracle stepped back into the place they left. The thought of him marrying another made her feelings clear. She loved him. Heaven help her, but she did.

Chapter Fourteen

The night had not gone as planned, and worse, Mrs. Kipling's arrival saw an end to his conversation with Penelope, something he regretted. After all these years, he was so close to discovering her reasons for jilting him so unceremoniously. She said it was for another man, but in his heart he never believed it. Still, it was what she said, and he had nothing to prove otherwise. And there was more, he was sure of it. Perhaps with time, and a little persuasion, she might finally tell him all.

He had expected to have the chance to engage Penelope again after she'd left him and Mrs. Kipling, but he found she'd left. He then hoped the conversation would resume once they returned to Highgate, where things would be considerably more private. Unfortunately, Penelope was already in bed when they returned home.

Anthony stalked the floors of his room, unable to sleep and too alert to relax. He needed something to help distract him. He didn't care to wake any of the servants to attend to him. The house was quiet, and he wished to keep his activities private. Instead, he took it upon himself to find distraction elsewhere. He dressed in a simple coat and gathered his hat before leaving the house for

The Quarterman, a gentleman's club that served the best whiskey and opened late.

The walk to the club was invigorating, the cold air chilling his cheeks as his breath floated above his head in a cloud. The streets were empty at that hour. Most were still at the ball or retired for the evening. That was good. Anthony had no wish to make unnecessary conversation. He could not feign interest when his mind overflowed with questions that needed answers.

Once settled at a quiet table in the back of the club, Anthony asked for a glass of whiskey and a cigar. He didn't smoke, but he liked the feeling of rolling them between his fingers while he pondered the night's events. Indeed, all the pressing events of his life in the past months.

First, it was Vernon's death, then taking in Cosette, and now Penelope's return to his life. It may have been presumptuous to think so, but he considered her presence as a return of sorts, though not specifically to him, at least not yet. Was he hoping for it? He could say without doubt, yes, he was.

The more he contemplated his life, the more questions he had. Then there were the Kiplings. Much had changed in the past weeks regarding Mrs. Kipling and her daughter. Anthony had not fully decided on the matter, but now he would have to bring it to a conclusion posthaste. Discretion was not something Mrs. Kipling possessed by her manner at the ball, resulting in a regrettable occurrence. How would he explain himself to Penelope? She would think the worst.

When he first wrote to Mrs. Kipling, it was while he was still overseas, and life in London was far away. Indeed, he was still reeling from his brother's passing and the news that he would be Cosette's guardian. It was a lot to take in, and Anthony felt overwhelmed. It was then that he'd heard of Mrs. Kipling's daughter and what a fine young woman she was. He was sure that they could come to some arrangement between them to give Cosette the stability she

needed. How could he have known that Penelope would be in London waiting for him?

He took a sip of his whiskey.

The raucous laughter of a group of men disturbing his thoughts. He recognized the men, though he did not know them personally. However, one seemed more familiar than the rest. It was only when he heard his name that Anthony knew for sure.

“Is all settled then, Luthor? Will you have Highgate House before the Season is over?”

“Long before. I have spoken to Agatha’s solicitor, and he agrees that there is nothing she can do to fight this matter. It is in her best interest to give up and settle. He tried to persuade me to leave them something in the way of an annuity, but why should I? What belonged to my brother is rightfully mine. I will not share it, as I have my entire life. I despised having to do so when he was alive, and will not do so now that he is dead.”

The callousness of the man's words ignited Anthony’s blood. He had property of his own, and wealth, yet he would rob Agatha of what was her right as his brother’s widow. Anthony could not abide hearing it. He crossed the room in five long strides and stood at the edge of the table where the group congregated.

The Duke of Averganst looked up at him with glassy eyes. “Do I know you, sir?”

“No, but I know you. At least, I have heard of you.”

“Pray, state your name, or be off. My friends and I are otherwise engaged.” The man snorted a laugh and Anthony could not help but think it suited him; after all, snorting was a common practice of swine.

“My name is unnecessary. I just wanted to see the face of a man who would swindle a woman, twice widowed, of her rightful inheritance.” He looked him over. “You are as I suspected.”

The duke pushed up from his seat and planted his hands on the table. His breath reeked of sour alcohol as he spoke. “And what does that mean?”

“It means that only a loathsome creature would treat a woman who is in such need of support, with such derision and censure. I pity you, for you will one day reap. Mark my words, Your Grace, you will regret what you have done to Lady Averganst and her daughter, and I will be there to see it.”

Anthony nodded curtly and turned from the table, the angry voice of the duke following him. He paid no mind. He suddenly felt exceedingly tired. In the morning, he would seek Agatha’s solicitor.

Chapter Fifteen

Penelope sat beside Agatha and held her hand. Earlier that morning, Anthony informed them of what he'd heard the night before. It surprised Penny to hear he had visited such a place, but she dared not question him. The less they talked, the better. Agatha and Christine needed them. Now, more than ever, their personal issues could wait.

“Are you certain there is nothing you can do?” Penny asked. She patted the back of Agatha's hand as she sat quietly beside her. Her solicitor, Mr. Peck, sat across the table from them, his head bowed solemnly as they waited for him to speak.

“I am afraid not. I have said it before, and now I must affirm it. There is no evidence of the will. Though I believe it existed, there is no proof of it. Therefore, the law states that the one left on record stands.”

“My husband wrote that long ago, before he met me,” Agatha said. Her voice sounded hollow, and her gaze was distant. Penny worried for her.

“It is all the law has to stand on.” Mr. Peck looked at her with pity. “I am sorry, Agatha, but there is nothing more to be done. He will not relent, and my efforts to secure at least some support for you and Christine have proved futile.”

Her friend nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Peck. I know you did your best."

He stood, his round belly touching the top of his desk. "I only wish I could have done more."

Agatha tried to stand, but fell the moment she was on her feet.

"Anthony, help me," Penny called. She tried to hold Agatha up as the two men gathered around them. Anthony took hold of one arm while Mr. Peck took the other, lifting Agatha into her seat.

"She's fainted. I will have my clerk get some smelling salts," Mr. Peck said, before leaving the room in a rush. His round frame rocked to and fro as he scurried to the door.

"Poor Agatha, it was all too much," Anthony said, as he cradled her head in his hands. He sighed. "That abysmal man is to blame. I wish I could do more. He has the legal right without evidence."

Penny looked at Anthony. "We shall get the evidence."

He met her gaze. They both knew Agatha's feelings on the matter, but it mattered little at this point. She'd lost her inheritance and all means of support. If they found nothing, she would be none the wiser, but if they succeeded, she would regain her wealth and property. It would be worth her temporary anger if all worked well.

Anthony's eyes lit with mischief as he whispered his reply. "I think we better not utter a word of this to her, or here." He glanced at Agatha's unconscious face and then the door before returning this gaze to Penny. "We can discuss the matter later."

Penny nodded.

Mr. Peck returned with his clerk shortly afterward, and the pungent aroma of the salts revived Agatha, who rose with a start. "What? What happened?"

"You fainted, Agatha," Penny said. She held her friend's clammy hand. She would do whatever she could to assist her, regardless of her feelings on the

matter. Whatever the duke threatened, she would help Agatha, even if it meant she had nowhere to go. She would not allow the man to win, not if she could help it.

Anthony called the carriage while Penny waited with Agatha. Her friend tried to restrain her tears, but it was useless. They poured out like water from a glass, spilling all over the front of Agatha's pretty green dress, turning it from peppermint to deep sage.

“Whatever shall we do, Penny? What will become of us? Christine is only a girl, just out in society. When news finds its way to the gossip mills, it will ruin her.” Agatha’s words were hard to decipher through her weeping, but Penny tried her best.

She offered Agatha a handkerchief. Her face, once daintily made, was now blotchy and red from crying. “Calm yourself. You and your daughter will survive this. Did you not survive when your first husband died? You will rally again. Your friends are with you and will stand by your side.”

Agatha shook her head as she wiped her damp nose. Though Penny meant to assure her, words were not enough to quell the cascade of emotions her friend was feeling. “Christine must marry. It is imperative. You must help her, Penny. You must see to it. Anthony must also help if she is to be successful. Before the Season is over, she must find a husband, or else we will be destitute.”

Agatha’s panic caused a wave of emotion to swell in Penny’s breast. She loved her friend dearly and wanted the best for her. It wasn’t fair that she should suffer, not once but twice in love, and then robbed of what little she had left.

Though her heart ached for Agatha, a small part lamented her own circumstances. At least her friend had loved and reaped the rewards of it. What had she done? She gave it away when asked. She hadn’t even fought for it. Now marriage seemed impossible for her at her age.

“The carriage is waiting.” Anthony’s sudden intrusion made Penny’s heart skitter. It was as if the thought of what they had summoned him.

“Come, Agatha. Let us get you home.” Penny stood and took Agatha’s right hand to help her to her feet. Anthony took the left, their other hands meeting on the small of Agatha’s back, his fingers atop hers, and their eyes met at the connection.

Penny could hardly hold his gaze. It caused her stomach to twist and turn and she imagined it was what carrying a child felt like. She remembered how Christine rolled in Agatha’s belly when she carried her. Penny found the sensation fascinating, but she had only an outsider’s experience of it. She would never know what it felt like for herself. Her eyes lowered as pangs of sorrow knocked on her chest. “We best be going.”

Agatha sat beside her in the carriage and was soon asleep. The events of the morning had done her in, and Penny allowed her to rest on her shoulder as they traveled home. Anthony sat across from her, his eyes fixed upon her face.

“We did not get to finish our talk the other night.”

Penny sucked in a long breath and released it slowly. “I believe we did.”

“I think not. There was more you had to say.” His gaze burned with determination. “I would like to finish it.”

“I would not.” Penny’s words were resolute. At least she hoped they sounded that way. Her insides were shaking like freshly made jelly. If he pressed her, she might collapse under the weight.

“You cannot avoid me, Penelope.”

“It was not my intent.” The lie sounded almost believable, at least to her ears. She had every intention of avoiding him. She did not want to discuss their past or his future with Miss Kipling. Penny could not pretend that she did not fear the latter more. It was one thing to rehash the past and have those feelings rush

unbidden to the surface. It was another to know how futile they were if he was engaged to another.

Determination etched severe lines in Anthony's features, though they made him no less handsome in her eyes. "We will speak about this."

Penny glanced at Agatha's sleeping face. "I think we both have more to think about at this point. We must help Agatha. I could not rest easy knowing that she will be homeless before the Season is over, maybe even before that."

Anthony exhaled audibly, his shoulders relaxing and the lines on his face fading away with his breath. "We will see to Agatha's matter, then we must deal with our own. Agreed?"

Penny wanted to say that they had no matter, but could not will herself to lie yet again. There was much between them, but she held little hope for any of it. She turned her gaze to the window and remained silent.

Chapter Sixteen

Days passed and with it, Penelope seemed more withdrawn. Was it Agatha's situation that troubled her, or something else? Was it him? Had he pressed her too much? Why did he feel such urgency to deal with the matter long behind them?

There was only one answer. It wasn't behind them. It was always in his heart. She was the only woman he could see and to have her so close without knowing her heart was frustrating. The love he thought was gone was still there, beating a war cry in his chest, begging him not to allow it to escape again. This time, he had to fight. And he would win.

The murmur of people on the street muffled the sound of his heels as he walked. Penny's melancholy hurt him to see, and to ease it, he sought the florist for her favorite bouquet. Anthony nodded to those who greeted him in the street, but did not stop to speak to those of his acquaintance. He had much to do and little time.

Penny liked peonies, and he ordered a bouquet of them to be delivered to the house. He did not wish to be seen giving the arrangement, as it would lead to too many questions, and he wanted to avoid any interference in their affairs. He was

certain this would make her smile. If they could see it delivered that day, he would pay a bonus. The shopkeeper looked at the extra coin with glee and promised Penny would receive it before the evening.

After, he made his way to parliament, where boring meetings with various ministers filled his day. There were many plans in the works, and most of it required the crown to pay sizable sums. Anthony could not agree with much of the spending, and it was his responsibility to advise accordingly. More fashionable streetlamps were unnecessary. The reformation of the drainage system was imperative, though he was sure there would not be too much discussion over the matter. The lords in their high places wished the better parts of town to remain that way, rather than trying to raise standards for all. By the end of the day, Anthony was exhausted.

It was past suppertime when he returned to Highgate House; the housekeeper welcomed him, while a maid took his hat and coat as he slipped off his gloves. “Good evening, Mrs. Hull. Where are Miss Bexley and Lady Averganst?”

“Her Ladyship is resting, and Miss Bexley is in the drawing room.” Mrs. Tull was a severe woman who hardly ever smiled, but was excessively efficient in her post. “I have had the cook prepare a light supper for you, Your Lordship. If you are ready, I will have it brought into the dining room.”

“Not yet, Mrs. Hull. I would refresh myself first.”

The woman nodded and excused herself, leaving the maid, Susie, behind. The girl was in her late teens and a frail-looking sort, but friendly. Once Mrs. Hull was gone, she leaned closer to him, a smirk on her face. “Miss Bexley received flowers today, sir. A pretty bouquet arrived from the florist.”

Anthony tried to conceal a smile as he leaned in conspiratorially. Susie had few people to call on, and it entertained her to think of them as friends. Anthony indulged her. “Is that so?”

“Indeed. You should have seen her, sir. She was so sullen the past few days, but the moment she saw those pink flowers, her entire face lit up like a Christmas tree. She took it right up to her room.”

This time, Anthony did not conceal the smile. “Thank you, Susie. I am glad to hear she has cheered.”

The young woman nodded and left, and Anthony made his way to his room to wash and change. The roads were quite mucky, and his clothing reflected it, especially after a passing carriage splashed him. Agatha would tell him it was his fault for not taking a carriage home and opting to walk, but Anthony liked the walk. It gave him time to think.

Anthony washed and ate quickly, hoping that he could speak to Penelope that evening before she went to bed. He would have gone to her straight away, but the grumbling in his stomach pressed his need for food. He only hoped she was still in the drawing room by the time he finished. The cook left a tray of meat, cheese, and bread, and Anthony gobbled it up without stopping to lift his head. Satisfied, he wiped his mouth and left the room in haste.

Anthony tried to appear nonchalant as he walked toward the drawing room, his ears pricked for any sound from within as he took hold of the handle to open the door. There was silence, only the crackle of the flames on the hearth. He stepped further into the room, his eyes surveying the space for any sign of Penelope. There were several small sitting areas within the room itself, each one directed to a focal point: the harp, the pianoforte, and the fireplace. The first two were empty, and Anthony rounded the large settee that separated the third space from the rest of the room to see if Penny sat there. She did, feet curled up into the seat beside her, and cheek rested upon her hand as she read from a sizeable book.

“Good evening, Penelope.”

She looked up from her book, a bright yet hesitant smile greeting him. “Good evening, Anthony. Are you just returned?”

“A half hour. I hoped to find you here.”

She sat up, moving the book to her lap. It claimed the space entirely and looked far too heavy for her slender frame, yet she bore it well enough. Her chestnut curls caressed the contours of her neck as she looked at him. “Whatever for?”

Anthony smiled, lowering himself into the chair beside him. He would hold back from asking what he primarily wanted to know. He promised they would settle their matter once they restored Agatha and Christine were secure. Instead, he settled on a safer topic. “Did you like the flowers?”

Penelope's face glowed, but she avoided his gaze. “Very much. Thank you. I thought it may have been you. Few know my favorite flower. Though I must admit, I am surprised that you remembered.”

“I remember everything,” he said. His gaze lingered over her endearing expression as he took in the slight glow of her cheek and the mess of hair from where she reclined.

Penny was doe-eyed. “Perhaps you should not.”

“Why? When there is so much good to be remembered.” He was not succeeding at keeping his promise, but he couldn't help himself. She was light, and he was a man in darkness.

“But it is useless now. Besides, there are more pressing matters. I cannot fathom thinking of what is behind us when what is before us is so bleak.”

He frowned. “Is it so bleak?”

Penelope's eyes met his once more. “There is no cause for cheer unless we can find the evidence to help Agatha.”

“Is that all you consider?”

Penelope's jaw squared as she gave him an unwavering look. “Yes. It is all I care about.”

Her words knocked at his pride as disappointment filled his heart. "I thought perhaps you could find some source of joy."

Penelope shook her head. "No. Though I wish you every happiness, I cannot see any chance of it for myself."

He fought the urge to press her, to tell her all he felt. Force would not win her over. He had to be smart if he wanted to learn the truth. Perhaps if he understood why she felt she had to resist, he could find the truth without words? "Do you mean that?"

She held his gaze earnestly. "Once, I thought my happiness was with you, Anthony. I wanted it to be. I wished it to be. But it was not. Now, I know that happiness cannot rely on circumstances alone, but on the bonds one shares. You must find it for yourself wherever you can, and by whatever measure, so long as it is good and upright. Agatha and Christine are my sources of joy now. Their unhappiness is my unhappiness. I care for nothing else."

She meant she did not care for him. Anthony could read between the words, though it pained him to decipher them. He stood and bowed his head. "Good night, Miss Bexley. I am sorry to have troubled you."

His heart was heavy as he left the room. It seemed she had answered him without being direct. She did not care about his affection or feelings. It left him with only one choice for the life he hoped for Cosette.

Miss Kipling.

Chapter Seventeen

Days passed, and the distance between her and Anthony felt insurmountable. Penny tried not to focus on it, given the urgency to see Christine wed, but it was difficult. She saw him every day and dreamed of him every night. Ensnared in every direction, she had no choice but to remain still. Fear stopped her mouth from asking what she wanted to know, and honor kept her from speaking about what she should. Though, what honor was there in a lie? It was a question that plagued her. However, today, she had to focus her attention on Christine.

The sun was out, the sky clear, but a chill lingered in the air as Agatha and Penny walked toward Gaskell Bazaar, a new shopping establishment that had the best plumassier in the city. Christine and Cosette received invitations to another soiree, and the girls needed to be outfitted with the best plumage for their hair. She was told the masters at Gaskell were the best.

Penny was better oriented now than she was when she arrived. The two major streets of shops no longer made her head spin with their side alleys and uniform colors. She found Gaskell's in no time, and the walk was good for her. It helped clear her mind, if only a little.

“You and Anthony have spoken little these past few days.” Agatha’s observation was keen. Though Penny tried to present an amiable air when around him, she found it difficult to hide her emotions and, therefore, tried her best to avoid them being seen. Her wayward heart still entertained past feelings, despite her words to the contrary. She knew if she spent enough time in his presence, he would recognize it and challenge her to resolve to leave such feelings in the past.

“We have not had reason to speak”

Agatha balked. “No reason? I did not know you needed a reason. You seem to find one easily enough before.” She stopped Penny mid-step; her brown eyes looking up at her from her ringlet-framed face. “Has something happened?”

Penny tried to hide her feelings, but they overwhelmed her. “Oh, Agatha. I feel I hardly know myself.”

Her friend’s brow furrowed. “Let us find a quiet place to talk. There are too many ears eager for gossip on these streets and I would not entertain them.”

Penny nodded, following Agatha into Gaskell’s and the plumassier. The shop was on the second floor, small, but effectively positioned to ensure ease of movement between the displays and the main desk. Agatha pulled her toward the corner, where an assortment of peacock feathers adorned the wall. She gave Penny a concerned look. “Tell me.”

Penny felt the warmth in her stomach as she hesitated to utter the words. Finally, she could hold them in no longer. “I think I know... I still love him.”

A grin lifted Agatha’s cheeks and, for the first time since their visit to the solicitor’s office, there was hope in her eyes. “I knew it! I could tell by the way you looked at each other, and your arguments were so lively that only love could be the foundation.”

Penny’s brow wrinkled. “Love the foundation for argument?”

“Yes, indeed. Only those we care about most can unearth our passions, whether positively or negatively. The deepest love causes the deepest pain. We desire the most from the one we love, leaving ourselves vulnerable to the slightest misstep, leaving us feeling wounded or enraged. Yes, love is a firm foundation of passions, and you, my dear, have proven it.”

Penny’s heart sank. “I hurt him so long ago, Agatha. What I did was unthinkable.”

“You speak of this as if it was a murder you committed. You simply rejected him.” Agatha smiled. She tried to ease her distress, but it was no use. Agatha didn’t know the truth, but Penny could tell her. Where a vow held her tongue from uttering the true events of that day to Anthony, she could share them with her friend, now that she was aware of her feelings.

“It was not merely a rejection. Agatha, I lied to him. I told him I loved another man and desired to be with him instead. I broke his heart.”

Penny could read the confusion on her friend’s face. “Why? Why would you lie?”

“Because his father asked me to.”

There, she’d said it. In the past nine years, she had only uttered the truth to Marina. Her sister supported her during those initial months, but since then they had not spoken of that time, mostly because Penny did not wish to. Uttering the words aloud felt as if someone had lifted a boulder off her chest. She never realized how burdensome it was. Agatha frowned, and Penny knew further explanation was necessary.

“The late Duke of Somersley was a good man. He was kind and generous, but also determined to see his older son excel in life, especially as he would inherit the title, and all associated with it. Like me, he believed the best of Anthony. However, he did not see that coming to be if he married me.”

“What?” Agatha’s shocked response caused Penny to look around, despite the fact that they’d secured a spot for privacy. “He said what?”

“He thought Anthony was too young, and his focus should be on improving himself before he married. I also believe there was another reason, though I have never uttered it before now. There was an incident between my father and the Duke of Stethford. Though few knew of it, Anthony’s father did.”

Her father, ever grasping for wealth, had betrayed the duke in a business deal that saw their once-close families estranged. They had not spoken since. The Duke of Stethford and the Duke of Somersley were longstanding friends. It only made sense that he would share his misfortune that painted her family in a negative light.

“Regardless if that was part of his reason, he had a good argument, and I believed him. I wanted Anthony to become the man I saw in him. The man you see now. He would not have left me if I merely told him my reasons for it. Nothing but another man could dissuade him from me, so I agreed to say that there was someone else. I watched as I shattered his heart for a man who never existed.” She held Agatha’s hands to steady herself as the truth set her free. “There has never been another who possessed my heart. Not before him nor after.”

Agatha squeezed her hands and smiled. “Then you must not let another day wait. You must tell him the truth. His father is dead, but you are not. The grave broke whatever promise you made.”

Penny stiffened. “It did not. A vow is just that, a vow, no matter the circumstances.”

“Your oaths are a wonder. You hold them so dear that you sacrifice your own happiness to keep them. Fine, you do not have to tell him the reason, but confess the truth, that all was pretense and that you love him and wish to be with him.”

Tears stung Penny’s eyes as she sucked in a ragged breath. “I cannot.”

Agatha gave a deep breath. "Why ever not?"

"Because I believe he has already found another. It is too late for me now."

Penny peeked up from beneath her lashes, her vision blurred by unshed tears. Agatha's eyes were wide.

"Who?"

"Miss Bexley."

It was as if, yet again, a thought had summoned someone to her. The tone was familiar, though newly so. Penny already guessed whom it belonged to. She hesitated to turn around, but slowly turned to the speaker and smiled. Her daily attire also reflected her fondness for ribbons. "Mrs. Kipling. How are you today?"

The woman scoffed. "A fine greeting after what you have done. Women like you should have to compensate those they have injured."

Penny was speechless. What did she mean? She stiffened. "I assure you, I do not know what you speak of."

Mrs. Kipling pushed her daughter forward. Penny had not noticed Miss Kipling standing there, half-concealed behind a display of ostrich feathers. Her mother continued her tirade.

"You ruined my Olive's hopes."

Penny's stomach lurched as Mrs. Kipling's raise tone garnered the attention of others. Had something happened between Miss Kipling and Anthony? She could determine it had, but why would Mrs. Kipling believe she had anything to do with it? She tried to diffuse the situation. "My dear lady, believe me, I do not know of what you speak."

Agatha tugged at her elbow as she levelled a scornful eye in Mrs. Kipling's direction. "Who is this person?"

"This is Mrs. Kipling and her daughter. They are friends of His Lordship, the Duke."

Agatha nodded, but continued to eye the two women suspiciously. She leaned closer to whisper in Penny's ear. "Is this the person you spoke of?"

Penny nodded, but had no chance to speak as Mrs. Kipling lost all sense of herself and raised her voice so loudly that no one in the shop could miss it. "Do not nod me off! Do you think yourself better than me? The arrangements were almost complete before you entered the picture. All they had to do was meet. I knew it the moment I saw you with His Lordship at the ball that you had designs on him, and I was right. You were trying to take my Olive's place and you've succeeded. You've ruined her hopes. How can you stand yourself? But I tell you, I will not let this stand as long as I draw breath. We have an agreement and he must honor it or make recompense."

Penny's lips quivered with shock and embarrassment. She did not know of their arrangement. How could she blame her? How could Anthony put her in such a position? It was clear they were engaged, and he had concealed it. He'd spoken earnestly about their past, and persisted against her resolve to put it behind them, all the while knowing he had another who expected to become Mrs. Carmichael. It was cruel, and the thought hurt her more than any other—he was going to marry another, or he was supposed to.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Kipling, but I assure you that my friend has no designs upon anyone. And if she had, the choice remained with His Lordship to decide, not her. If you have some quarrel, let it be with the Duke and leave my friend out of this. You make a scene, and I will not have her reputation besmirched. You would do well to hold your tongue and calm your emotions, lest you make your daughter a spectacle as well."

Agatha's words seemed to affect Mrs. Kipling, who turned to look at their observers. She pursed her lips and raised her chin, taking her daughter by the arm. "Come along, Olive."

Penny remained motionless as the women departed. She was teetering on the verge of tears, but doing all she could to make a further show of herself. Mrs. Kipling had done a splendid job already. Agatha took her arm, her voice soothing. "I think we should go home. You look pale."

Penny didn't protest. She allowed herself to be led as disappointment and guilt rang through her. Anthony was engaged and had broken it off? Mrs. Kipling seemed sure that it wasn't over and that he would have to keep his promise to her daughter. That meant he would wed Olive Kipling, eventually. The thought was too much to bear. Her head ached instantly, and she leaned against Agatha as she held her head high and left the shop.

Chapter Eighteen

Something was amiss. The lack of conversation at dinner spoke to it. Christine and Cosette engaged themselves in witty repartee about the latest fabrics and the dances they hoped to secure at the next ball. However, Penelope was quiet, and even Agatha seemed more reserved than usual.

Anthony leaned closer to Agatha, who sat beside him at the head of the table. “Is everything all right? You do not seem yourself this evening.”

“Quite fine.” Her curt response did little in the way of making him believe her words.

He tried Penelope. Perhaps he could glean more from her than he had her counterpart. “And you, Penelope. Did you have a good afternoon at the shops?”

Her eyes met Anthony’s with an expression more perplexing than the silence that accompanied it. It was as if he’d struck her. But for the life of him, he could not think of what he said to elicit such a reaction.

“We had an eventful afternoon. Nothing that would interest you,” Agatha said. Another point of note. Whenever he tried to make conversation with Penelope, Agatha answered.

Strange.

It would not deter him. If she thought that having Agatha speak for her would discourage him, she underestimated him. There was already too much unsaid between them. He would not allow more to impede the way of their happiness. He was sure they both desired it, even if Penelope refused to admit it. “Did you find anything to your liking, Penelope?”

“No, nothing at all,” Agatha answered.

Anthony smiled. “Thank you for your commentary, Agatha. I appreciate it. However, I would like it if you allowed Penelope to speak for herself.”

The women were wide-eyed. Cosette and Christine’s conversation dipped to almost silence as they watched the exchange closely. It had no effect on him. Something had happened, and he was going to find out what.

Anthony leaned forward and smiled earnestly. “Please, I would like to hear of your day, Penelope. Was it enjoyable?”

He could hear the strain of her breath from across the table, her eyes avoiding his. “As much as one might expect.” She set her napkin aside and pushed back from the table as she stood. “If you would all excuse me, I feel tired from this afternoon’s exertions. I would rest now.”

His brow knitted together as confusion gripped him. What had he said now? He had not spoken of anything upsetting. Why was she trying to get away? He clenched his teeth, his jaw twitching. He would not allow this. Taking her lead, he set his napkin aside and excused himself from the table to follow her. He was just outside the door when Agatha stopped him.

“Wait.”

Anthony turned to look at her. Her arm gripped his to restrain him. He stood taller, removing her hand gently from his bicep. “Agatha, what is the meaning of this?”

She exhaled deeply, her face set in a scowl. “It would benefit you both to allow Penelope some time to herself.”

He frowned. "Pray, tell me why?"

"I think you must know, but I will explain it if you must hear it. She met with Mrs. Kipling and her daughter at the shops."

Agatha was clearly angry at him, and Anthony was at a loss. Why should meeting with the Kiplings upset Penelope? They had already settled their matter. He sought clarity. "I do not follow."

"The woman accosted Penelope in front of the entire shop. She accused her of having designs on you and of taking her daughter's place in your life. She left me flabbergasted at her boldness, but more so, disappointed in you for having failed to tell us of your engagement."

Anthony balked. "My what?"

"Your engagement. Mrs. Kipling divulged that the arrangement between you and Miss Kipling was settled until your arrived in town. She accused Penelope of having snatched you away from her daughter." Agatha shook her head. "It was quite the scene. Penelope was unaware that an understanding even existed between you and Miss Kipling, and though blameless, it left her feeling guilty for having done something she knew nothing about and embarrassed before all who witnessed the scene. If you wished to marry, you need only have told us, we would have encouraged you. Or at least warn us that there might be some ruffled feathers once it was called off. You left poor Penny defenseless."

The joy that leaped into his heart overshadowed Anthony's anger with Mrs. Kipling, and he did his best to contain a smile. Did this mean that Penelope was upset over the fact that he was engaged? The possibility gave him encouragement. If she was upset about him being engaged, then it meant she felt more for him than she admitted. He was right. There was still something between them and he would bring it out.

"Agatha, please forgive me, as I only wish to confirm a few things. Are you saying to me that Mrs. Kipling told you that Miss Kipling and I are engaged?"

Agatha looked baffled. “She did not use the words, but she certainly said that there was an arrangement between you.”

“I see. And Penelope became upset because of this news?”

“Yes, of course. Should she not be? Mrs. Kipling harshly accused her of husband-snatching when she knew nothing of a pending marriage.”

Anthony nodded. “Another question. Was it the scolding or the pending wedding that upset her more?”

“Anthony, I do not understand your questioning. Both were upsetting to her.”

He smiled. He had his proof from Agatha’s lips. Both had upset Penelope. Neither would have had cause to if she felt nothing. Now he needed to get her to admit it. That was easier said than done.

Anthony considered the means to provoke a confession, but the coming of a letter for Agatha interrupted him. The butler delivered the missive on a silver laver and departed once received. Anthony stood watching as Agatha opened it.

She was calm at first, then Agatha’s jaw slackened and her lips parted as the color drained from her cheeks and her hands went limp, dropping the letter.

“Agatha?” Anthony stepped forward in time to catch her in mid-swoon. Thankfully, she had not completely fainted this time. He could still remember the weight of her from that day at her solicitor’s office. She was heavier than she appeared.

She braced herself against the wall. She exhaled. “It is final, then.”

“What is final?” The worst scenario entered his mind as he retrieved the letter from where it had fallen. He went to read it but thought better without permission. “May I?”

Agatha nodded, her hand clutching at the fabric over her chest as she took several quick breaths. “We have no secrets. We knew this day would come.”

Anthony skimmed the letter and immediately crumpled it in his hands, biting back words that were unbecoming of his present company. He suppressed a

growl. “The duke is unbelievable. He would turn you out so soon?”

“I suppose he thinks a week too little,” Agatha said. Her hand remained at her chest, but the other had collected the fan from the pocket of her dress and was waving it briskly near her face.

Anthony stepped forward to hold her as tears rolled down her cheeks. She wept bitterly. He stroked her back. “All will be well. I promise. I will look after you.”

“We have lost everything. First Winston and now our home. What will become of us?”

Her tears tore at his heart and strengthened his resolve. He would find the truth, for her sake and Christine’s. He would find some way to make the duke pay for his crime. In the meantime, he would do what he could to help them and Penelope would help. There was no time for there to be any misunderstanding between them. It was time they resolved their matter if they were to help Agatha. It was time for Penny to see his heart.

Chapter Nineteen

The house was in fresh mourning. The staff was upset over the duke's cruelty. Penelope and Christine were worried about their futures, and Cosette seemed wholly lost amidst it all. Only Anthony remained unmoved. The life preserver they clung to as the ocean of events threatened to drown them. He tried twice to speak to her, but Penelope outmaneuvered him each time. She could not keep it up for long, just long enough for her to regain control of her feelings. That was all she needed. Time to stamp out the fire that their renewed friendship ignited, and quell the disappointment his engagement brought.

Penelope sat in her room, contemplating the future. Agatha no longer had a home or an income. In a few days, she would no longer have a roof over her head, and Penelope would be penniless beside her and everyone would know the truth. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. If only the duke would be reasonable. Alas, he was not a man with whom reason acquainted itself. What was she to do?

Her lady's maid knotted her chestnut hair atop her head with a looping braid on either side of her head. The pins only scratched her scalp, a better experience than with the last lady's maid in Somersley. The woman was insufferable and

smitten with her father. Whenever he was angry with Penny, the woman seemed to share his displeasure. Penny was sure she was one of his lovers, but she had no proof of it. Penny was happy to never have to see the woman again.

A knock on the door caused her attention to divert. She hoped it was not Anthony; she was still unprepared to speak with him. Fortunately, it was not, but Mrs. Hull. "There is a Mr. Gregory here to see Miss Cosette, and the Duke is not home. Should I ask him to return later?"

"No. Please invite him into the drawing room. I will be there shortly. You may inform Cosette of her visitor." Penny was pleased to hear that Cosette had a suitor. She would not deny her the visit just because Anthony could not supervise.

Mrs. Hull bowed her head and turned on her pointed heels towards Cosette's room. Penny turned aside to gather a book. If the gentleman meant to court Cosette, the visit may be lengthy. She would need a distraction. Conversations between would-be lovers did not interest her. She only wished to ensure Cosette's reputation remained intact, though she dare not think of her own if the duke kept his word about her. The incident with Mrs. Kipling didn't help matters. Susie informed her that there was talk amongst the servants, though most didn't believe Anthony would conceal an engagement. They weren't there, but she was. He'd hidden his actions well.

Penelope held the book of poetry like a shield over her middle. Once, she was the girl in need of a chaperone. Now she was the latter. She could not help but smile at how quickly her life changed in what now seemed so short a time. Cosette would do better, she assured herself. She would marry well and have all the happiness she deserved.

Penny waited outside the drawing room for Cosette's arrival. The young woman looked positively skittish as she rushed towards her, a bright smile on her face. "Do you remember Mr. Gregory? I fear I do not."

Penny's smile broadened. "A little. He was the tall man with the blonde hair at the Heaths' tea party two days prior."

Cosette nodded vigorously. "I remember him now. He was handsome and polite, if I recall correctly."

"All the better. Shall we go in now?"

"Let's."

Penny allowed Cosette to enter first. She watched as she gave a curtsy and greeted Mr. Gregory in a cordial tone, ensuring to keep her smile demure. Cosette needed to show interest, but not excessively. There was still much to learn about the man. She could not give him hope too quickly. Penny would ensure that they took their time in getting to know one another. There was no rush for marriage, unlike Christine. The young woman had not received a visitor in days since the news broke about their coming eviction from Highgate House. Penny was sure that the duke had something to do with the news reaching the gossip columns, but had no proof. Yet there was nothing about her. She did not dare think of what he was planning for her. She pushed the thought from her mind and focused on the task before her.

Cosette and Mr. Gregory took a seat on the chaise near the fireplace. Penny sat across the room in an armchair facing their direction. She poised the tome upon her crossed knees and looked down to read it, their frames visible in her periphery, just in case the young man sought to become too friendly. She settled into her poetry as Cosette entertained Mr. Gregory with animated conversation.

The afternoon was turning into an enjoyable one. Mr. Gregory seemed amiable and had quite a wit, from the laughter she heard from across the room. They served tea at four and the couple was still enjoying biscuits when the door of the drawing room opened. It was Anthony. Penny's heart faltered. She had hoped he would not return for hours.

Mr. Gregory immediately stood and bowed. Anthony did the same, and Penny and Cosette followed their actions before returning to their seats. Mr. Gregory approached.

“Good afternoon. I was told we had a visitor. Mr. Gregory. I did not expect to see you here.” Anthony glanced in Penny’s direction, his eyes lingering on her for a moment longer than was necessary, before focusing on the young man who now stood before him.

“I wished to speak with Miss Carmichael. I had hoped to speak to you before, but you were not at home. Miss Bexley permitted me to enter. I do hope that was all right.”

“Certainly. I trust Miss Bexley’s judgment. Please, do not mind me. Act as if I am not here.” He ingratiated himself in the armchair several feet to her right and immediately scowled in the couple’s direction. Did he not approve of Mr. Gregory? Or was something else the matter?

His unhappy disposition continued until it affected Mr. Gregory. Penelope could see his nervous glances in Anthony’s direction and the way he wiped his brow repeatedly. What was Anthony doing? Was he trying to ruin the visit? Cosette looked at her haplessly. Penny took a deep breath and forced herself from her seat and over to Anthony, blocking him from the couple’s view. She stood over him like a mother about to scold her child. “Are you trying to frighten Mr. Gregory?”

Anthony barely looked at her. His expression was stern and contemplative, and his tone was almost dismissive. “I do not know what you mean.”

“You are staring at the young man as if you wish him to evaporate. If you dislike him, do not be so obvious about it. You are making him anxious and Cosette uncomfortable.”

Anthony sprang to his feet. “Must I care about his feelings? I barely know the gentleman, yet you seem to think my thoughts should be on him. I assure you

have more pressing matters on my mind than his comforts. He is a silly man and Cosette could do much better.”

Penny’s lips parted in shock and dismay as Anthony’s expression echoed her feelings, both realizing that his tone was loud enough to be heard by the man they spoke about. She caught sight of his movements from the corner of her eye. He was standing, bowing to Cosette as if to leave. She looked at Anthony. “Do something?”

“What precisely would you have me do?” Annoyance filled his words, but embarrassment painted his features. Mr. Gregory approached a moment later and said his goodbyes. Cosette wept in the corner as he departed.

“Cosette, I did not mean to say that.” Anthony apologized, but Cosette only wept harder as he approached her. “Forgive me?”

The young woman did not respond. Instead, she ran from the room, leaving Penny and Anthony alone. Anthony groaned. His expression was contrite. She knew he had not meant to speak so loudly, but why had he behaved that way? It was unlike him.

“Do not say it.” His warning came in a gentler tone than his previous words to her.

Penny stepped towards him, searching his face for some explanation. “What has you so out of sorts? I do not think I have ever heard you so brash.”

“I have a lot on my mind.”

“Then I will leave you with your thoughts.” She turned to leave but found her course hindered by his hand upon her wrist. Her heart staccatoed as she turned to look at him.

Anguish colored his features. “Stay. Please.”

Chapter Twenty

The plan worked perfectly. Mr. Gregory and Cosette played their parts to the letter. When he'd approached them in his conspiracy, he thought they might refuse, but he was happy to see how eager Cosette was to aid him. She loved Penelope and wanted nothing more than to see her happy, especially if it was with Anthony. They'd gone to some lengths, even as far as Mr. Gregory pretending to be a stranger at the Heaths' tea party.

Truth was that Archibald and Cosette were long acquainted. They knew each other in France, but it was only her departure that spurred him into action. He approached Anthony for her hand the very day he arrived in London. Anthony had already contrived his plan when they met outside of parliament, and when Cosette agreed to the match, they settled the matter.

It was a lot to go through, but Anthony could think of no better way to distract Penelope from Mrs. Kipling and focus her attention on him. He knew that if the situation seemed dire enough, she would not run away from him. If she did, then everything was in vain. He held onto her wrist, her skin warm beneath his fingertips.

“Only for a moment.” Her answer was enough to set his heart soaring. A moment would do. He would take whatever she would give him if it meant she would stay in his presence. It would have to be enough.

He smiled. “Thank you.”

Penelope nodded in silence. She was a rare beauty. Anthony could not help but think so as she meandered away from him, her hands clasped over her stomach, a curl of chestnut hair skimming the skin on the side of her neck. Would it be presumptuous to remove it? Of course. It tempted him.

She walked, and he followed. Every time she glanced in his direction, he saw the trepidation in her eyes. “You asked me to stay. What do you wish to say?”

She loved him once. He was sure of it. He loved her. If she could love him again, accept him into her heart, then he would take it. He was sure he could get the truth from her.

Penelope pivoted. “If you have nothing to say, I will leave.”

Anthony stepped to his right, putting his body between her and the path to the door. He would not allow her to leave. He needed her. “Do not run away.”

“I think I should. You are behaving oddly, and it is not appropriate for us to be alone together.”

He smiled again. “We were alone some weeks ago, and you were far less attired in your nightdress, as I recall. Yet you did not protest then.”

Penelope’s cheeks erupted in crimson. “It was late. There was no one about.”

“Even more cause,” Anthony teased.

Penelope huffed, folding her arms over her chest. “If you care about my reputation, you will let me pass or say your peace and we can both leave.”

He moved closer, his steps slow and even as if approaching a wounded animal that was liable to pounce at any moment. He continued his ruse. “Do you think Cosette will forgive me?”

Penelope watched him. Her eyes were cautious. "Give her time. I am sure she will."

"I did not mean to make a scene or embarrass her suitor. My thoughts consumed me and I did not consider her feelings. It was selfish of me."

"I have never known you to be selfish." Penelope's gentle tone encouraged him. He remembered the way she spoke to him in years past, when they sat beneath a tree at Steadmoore, fingers laced together and eyes gazing up at the sky for rainbows. They were young and hopeful then. He wished to be hopeful again. He had to seize the moment.

"I can be selfish. Very selfish, in fact." He stepped closer, his eyes fixed on her, wishing her not to run.

She did not answer.

He continued. "I was selfish with you. I tried to keep you without considering whether you wanted to be kept."

Penny looked at him in bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"When we were young. I wanted to tie you to me and have you by my side forever, never asking you if you wished it too. Presumption made me think you felt as I did, but I was always too frightened to ask. I thought proposing would secure you. What lady did not want to be wed? It never occurred to me that perhaps our time together was just experimentation for you. That you wanted to know what it was like to fall in love but not be in love."

Her jaw tightened and her eyes widened, a flicker of anger in them, as she stepped forward. "I loved you. I wanted to marry you."

Anthony concealed a smile. His plan was working. She was close enough to touch, and he wasted no time in taking her hand. His thumb stroked the back of her knuckles, tiny circles to soothe her nerves.

She tried to slip her hand away.

He kept holding it.

“Do you know how this will look? I am your niece’s governess.” Her warning had merit, but it only made Anthony smile. There would be no question of their involvement when he was done, and no besmirching of her reputation. He gave Cosette instructions to let no one enter, and to keep the household otherwise engaged. None would see them. No one would know what transpired between them now if they did not wish it. He believed she had elicited Agatha in the plan, but he was not sure of it. Cosette had assured him she would handle it all. He need only focus on Penelope.

“Do you fear that someone might see us in this compromising position? I would have to marry you to save your reputation, wouldn’t I?” He stepped closer. “What would you say if I told you that is exactly what I wished?”

Penelope’s eyes were as wide as saucers at the statement. “What do you mean?”

He fully expected her to move away, but she did not. She seemed fixed in one place, and Anthony was glad for it. It was time for the truth.

“I can think of only you, Penelope. I wondered if you had told me the truth then if things would be as they are now. Would I still be a bachelor and you unmarried? Would you have accepted me and left that other man? Was there even another man?” Her hand flinched in his, but Anthony refused to release it. Instead, he took both hands to it, caressing the inside of her wrist. “Would you have married me, Penelope? If I had persisted, would you have accepted me? Would you be my wife?”

“Why are you asking me?”

He met her gaze. “Because I need to know. If I did, then would you have said yes?” He stepped closer, their joined hands the only thing that separated them. His voice was low, inviting. “If I did now, would the answer be the same?”

Surprise lifted her brow and made her eyes wide. “Are you asking me?” This time, her efforts to escape him were more urgent and forced him to release her.

Penelope stepped away from him and stared, her eyes like a frightened deer caught in the sight of a hunter's rifle. "You cannot ask me that."

"Why not?" Hope made him bolder. He wanted to hear her answer

"Because."

"Because, what?"

"Because of Miss Kipling, that is what." Her voice was slightly shrill as she spoke, and a hint of panic hung in the air. "Her mother has scolded me awfully for interfering in your affairs when I knew nothing of it."

"Forget Miss Kipling."

"I cannot." The firmness in her tone made him pause. "You ask what you should not. Consider her feelings."

"I have, and they are of no consequence to me." He stepped forward, emboldened. He was sure of it. Now, by her own action, he had confirmation. She loved him and he would not let it go. "Your feelings mean more to me. If I asked, would you accept?"

Penelope shook her head so violently that he was sure she might hurt herself. "I could never. No matter my desire, I could never cause another such pain without cause. If you are engaged to Miss Kipling, then it is better that you do your duty and fulfill your promise to her. It is a cruel thing, lost love. I know it and would not wish it on another."

She was breathless after her speech, and Anthony fought to contain himself. He wanted to erase the space between them, to take her in his arms and silence her mouth with his, but she was too emotional. He didn't want to frighten her. Her response was more extreme than he imagined. Penelope needed to calm herself before she heard his confession. He would give her time, but only a little. There was still one more thing he had to do. Now that he knew her feelings, he could take the ultimate step. He backed away.

“Forgive me. I did not mean to upset you. I understand you perfectly, and will leave you alone.”

He turned for the door and marched from the residence, his destination Rundell and Bridge.

Chapter Twenty-One

Penny could hardly breathe after her exchange with Anthony. It took all of her strength to make her way to her bedroom and seal herself inside. What had happened? She could not make sense of it. He'd taken her fragile emotions and forced such a reaction from her. She could hardly understand it herself. As she tried to catch her breath, she pressed her back to the door frame, her hands trembling.

Agatha spoke about love and passion. They intertwined, both negatively and positively. The notion was accurate. Her display was evidence of it. Penny had not intended to let her feelings show or to speak so much about Miss Kipling, but she panicked. She could not allow Anthony to put her in such a position. The husband-snatcher. She did not want to steal what was someone else's, when she wanted to be stolen, taken away by love and passion. She wanted his love. His heart. She had no right to it if he gave it to another. She could now be sure of it. If he loved Miss Kipling enough to propose, and she was sure that only love could induce him, then his sentiments to her might only be the effects of memories.

The thought made her heart ache and her stomach sink. Love was a terrible and wonderful thing. She knew its blessings and its curses. Being in love was the world set to music, a never-ending garden where the sun always shone. Without it, there was midnight and winter. Cold and pain. For nine years, she felt the absence of love, and in the past months, she had a glimpse of what it felt like again. She felt hollow, as if someone had reached in and taken her heart away. Anthony loved someone else when she could never have induced herself to even look at another man. She curled her body upon her bed and wept.

Penny was not sure how much time had passed. It was dark outside, so it must have been after supper. She found the lamp by her bedside and lit it, casting the room in a pale-yellow glow. There was a knock.

Penny walked to the door. "Who is it?"

"Anthony."

Her heart raced at the sound of his voice. She could not see him. "Go away."

"I cannot. I must speak with you." The handle of her door accompanied his words, turning to open it so quickly she could not reach the lock in time to secure it. A moment later, he was inside, and she was aghast.

"Have you lost your mind? What would I say if someone caught you here? It would irrevocably harm my reputation. You must leave."

Anthony breathed heavily, sweat dotting his brow. "Not my mind. My heart." He looked at her with such urgency that she staggered away from him. His looks were too intense, and her heart could not bear it. Looking at him was looking at her soul, wishing to be taken up, fearing being left behind.

She shook her head. "Please, Anthony, you must go. I cannot bear it. I have lost enough. My family, my home, and now my employment. I cannot lose my dignity."

He stood erect, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "What did I say earlier about being forced to marry you?"

Penny balked. "You were not serious."

"I was." His voice was even. Penny's mind reeled.

"You cannot say these things, Anthony. It is cruel of you. Please go." She was begging him. Her heart could not take it. Her reputation, even less. He wouldn't listen. Instead, he stepped towards her, and it forced her to raise the lamp between them for protection. "Anthony, please!"

"You object because of Miss Kipling?"

"Her and propriety," she answered.

"Then you need not. I have already dissolved the understanding between myself and the young lady. She will find alternative employment. I am no longer in need of a governess."

Penny was ready to protest, but his words caused her own to lodge in her throat. "What? Governess?"

Anthony smiled and stepped closer, taking the lamp from her hand and setting it on the table. "Yes, a governess. I wanted her to tutor Cosette. I felt my niece needed a woman's presence in her life to teach her the things I could not."

Penny's lips parted as she tried to find her breath. Anthony wasn't marrying Miss Kipling? She searched his eyes and found only mirth in them. She was confused.

"Do you mean to say that you are not engaged to Miss Kipling?"

Anthony's smile widened, and he took her hand in his. "I never proposed to any woman, save you."

Penny felt as if she would faint. It was too much to process, and even more to believe. She shook her head. "But Mrs. Kipling. She said—"

"She said that we had an arrangement. That is true. A contract of service that had yet to commence. We were supposed to meet when Cosette and I arrived in town, but after Agatha arranged for you to supervise Christine, and since we were already here, it made no sense to engage her services yet. I wanted to wait.

Then, I no longer wished Cosette to have a governess. I wanted her to have an aunt instead.”

Penny was more confused. “I do not understand. Then you are engaged?”

“Not yet, but I hope to be. If she will have me.”

Penny closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her forehead. She felt as if the world were spinning backwards and she could not orientate herself. When she opened her eyes, Anthony was in front of her, so close she could see the orange flecks of the lamplight in his eyes. It caught her breath.

Penny shivered, yet it was not cold. She trembled, but there was no chill. He was so close. Too close. And he was getting closer. Penny closed her eyes as Anthony pressed his forehead to hers.

“I begged you to tell me the truth. I wanted to know, but then I no longer cared. The past was not important, the present was. I needed to know if you loved me still or not, and when Agatha told me of your encounter with Mrs. Kipling and your reaction to what you thought was my engagement, I knew there was hope. Still, I wasn’t sure until this afternoon and the way you reacted when I pressed you in the drawing room. Then I knew for certain that you loved me.”

Penny leaned back to look at him. He was smiling. Was this a plan?

She was trying to process the possibility when Anthony lowered himself to one knee before her, his hand fumbling in his pocket. Her heart almost stopped as he pulled out an ornate engagement ring.

“I did not do this properly the first time. I had no ring and was hasty in my nervousness. This time, I wanted it to be proper.” He looked up at her, his eyes brimming with love. “Penelope Bexley, I have loved none but you my entire life. From the day we met until this moment, you have always been with me. Time did not make me forget you. It never could. I masked my feelings with anger and resentment, but it was a lie. I was lying to myself, afraid to admit my feelings. Afraid of being rejected again. I can no longer deny it. What I feel for you is

more ardent than affection. More fervent than ardor. It is the deepest passion a soul can feel for another. I would be the luckiest and happiest man alive if you would accept me as your husband. I am flawed, and far from perfect, but I will love none but you for the rest of my life.”

Tears streamed down Penny’s cheeks at his confession. Her shoulders shook with her weeping and almost made her unable to speak. She could only nod her answer as Anthony slipped the ring on her finger. He stood immediately, pulling her into his arms and wrapping her in the warmth of his body as he pressed his lips to hers passionately. At first, she did not know how to respond, but soon her body took on a life of its own, her arms encircling his frame as she gripped the back of his waistcoat. Their lips moved over one another, this way and that, in a dizzying dance that made Penny’s head light. She was panting when they parted.

Anthony’s cheeks were red, and she was sure hers were as well. He placed another, gentler kiss on her lips.

Penny kept hold of him, afraid to find herself in a dream or to faint at such a perfect moment. She was glad they were together now, but she lamented the years they spent apart. “I should have told you sooner.”

Anthony placed a finger on her lips. “Hush. It is of no consequence. Let us put the past behind us and live for now, and the future. You are my heart, Penelope, and always have been. Now, I will make you my wife, as you always should have been. And I will make it my honor to ensure your happiness for the rest of my days.”

Penny rested her head against this chest, the sound of his heart thudding in her ear. She was perfectly content at that moment, all else forgotten. No matter what tomorrow brought, she would face it boldly, because he was with her. Because love could stand the test of time.

Epilogue

Steadmoore was a gorgeous property. Penny had almost forgotten its splendor in the years since she last visited it. Soon it was to be her home, and her its mistress.

Weeks after Anthony's proposal, once the Season was ending, and he was no longer needed at parliament, they returned to Somersley with Agatha and Christine. Their friends had no other refuge and Anthony would not allow them to stay in London and beg. He would never allow the Duke the satisfaction of seeing their humiliation. Instead, he offered them a house on his property where they and Penny could live until the wedding.

It was a simple cottage that once belonged to his father's former steward before the man had gone off to Scotland to marry. Anthony saw to its upkeep but refused to let anyone else live there. Penny was glad that he had. The house allowed Agatha the freedom to have her own household without feeling a burden upon Anthony, though he assured her that would never be the case. Still, her friend had her pride, and they respected that. Cosette was no longer with them. She'd returned to France after an intimate wedding at Steadmoore a few weeks before. Penny was happy for her. They all were.

They sat on the lanai that afternoon. Tea was on the table, with an assortment of cakes, pastries, and sandwiches, for their delight. Penelope and Anthony were alone, Agatha and Christine were in town for the afternoon, shopping for a ball. Since they arrived in Somersley, the country had warmed to them. They received countless invitations and never once did anyone mention why they left London. Though she was sure the townsfolk knew the reason, the people of Somersley were more gracious than those in London. One's privacy was their own.

Penny was enjoying a crumpet when Mrs. Shultz came with a visitor. She was the new housekeeper they'd hired when they arrived. Penny needed someone to see to her affairs, while Mr. Morton saw to Anthony's concerns. She was a fine choice, though Mr. Morton was still getting used to her. The two often battled for responsibility in the house, but Penny was sure they would work it out amongst themselves, though she instructed Mrs. Shultz to give deference to Mr. Morton wherever possible.

The moment Penny saw the mop of light brown curls coming in her direction, she knew whom they belonged to. "Marina!"

"Penny!"

The sisters ran toward each other and embraced. A wave of peace filled Penny's heart as she held her sister in her arms. She was unaware that she was coming to call, or she would have had a room prepared and insisted she stay. "Why did you not tell me you were coming?"

"It would have spoiled the surprise." Anthony's words reflected his amusement. It was another one of his plans. Once they were engaged, he admitted his scheme to make her confess her feelings. She pretended to be displeased, but in her heart she was glad he had gone to such lengths. She might not have been brave enough to do so herself.

She turned to him, lifting her chin at him playfully. "Are you responsible for this?"

“I am.” He moved beside her, wrapping an arm around her waist as he pulled her body against his. “Marina wrote to say that she was traveling to London with friends, and I persuaded her to visit for a few days before that.”

Penny’s heart filled with delight. She was staying, after all. She hugged Marina again. “It is so good to see you. I wanted to visit you, but I dare not venture near the house. Father would not have welcomed me.”

Marina nodded, a smile lingering on her face. “I understand, and it was for the better. Father has been in a foul mood for months now. The mention of your name sends him into fits of rage. It is best you stay away.”

Penny frowned. “And what of you? Are you quite safe there?”

Marina sighed as she stepped closer to the table. “I try to spend as much time with friends as I can. I think the worst has finally happened, and he has yet to get the courage to tell us.”

Sorrow filled her heart at Marina’s words. “I always feared this day would come.”

Anthony’s grip tightened gently around her waist as he spoke to her sister. “You need not fear, Marina. You are welcome here. It would be my pleasure to offer you a home with us at Steadmoore.”

“Will you give residence to all of my family and friends?” Penny looked at her fiancé adoringly. She loved teasing him, but she would be glad if Marina took the offered protection.

Anthony kissed the top of her head. “If it will make you happy.”

Marina’s eyes glistened with rapture. “It pleases me to see you both so happy. I cannot wait for the wedding.”

Penny led her to the table, and Anthony pulled out a chair. “You will be my maid of honor, of course.” Penny said as she took her seat.

“I hoped you would ask me. I have so longed to be a maid of honor.” Marina smiled and took a sandwich from the tray and took a bite. “Delicious.”

“The cook is excellent here,” Penny said. “The best in the county, if I may be so bold.”

Marina nodded. “If I had to hazard a guess, I would say you are right. Which reminds me. Penny, in your letter to me, you mentioned something about a duke. I have misplaced it, so I wondered if you would remind me of the name.”

Penny’s brow wrinkled. Why would Marina want to know about the Duke? “Averganst. His name is Luther Armitage, the Duke of Averganst.”

Marina’s eyes widened. “So, it is him.”

Penny’s heart quickened. She had not thought of the man since she left London. She waited for him to act against her as he promised, but when nothing happened, she summed up his words as bravado. Still, hearing his name made her heart cold. “Do you know him?”

“Not yet, but I will soon. I am to stay with his family during my visit to London. Hortense is his cousin.” Marina sat back in her seat and clasped her hands on the table as her brow furrowed. “To think, I will be under the roof of the man who treated dear Agatha so terribly. Perhaps I should not go.”

Penny would have preferred her not to, but then a thought wandered into her mind. She glanced at Anthony and then at Marina. She leaned closer. “Marina, would you like to help Agatha?”

Her sister sat up. “Of course. What can I do?”

“You are not thinking what I think you are?” Anthony set his teacup aside and leaned closer. “Agatha would be livid if she knew.”

Penny smirked. “We will not tell her.”

Marina looked at them quizzically. “Know what?”

A grin etched into her features. “That we have found a spy.”

“A spy?”

“Yes,” Penny said. “We needed someone who could access the duke’s home and search for information about the will. We could think of no one, but you

have presented a perfect opportunity. The Duke has never met you. You could pretend to be Hortense's lady's maid instead of her friend. Would she be willing to conceal your identity if you asked?"

There was an unmistakable glint in Marina's eyes as she bit her bottom lip. "I think she would. She hates her cousin. She is only going to visit him because her mother has promised that he will introduce her to eligible bachelors now that he has gained his brother's title."

"Perfect! We have the basis for a plan." Penny clapped her hands together.

"But not much time to execute it," Anthony interjected.

Penny's tone became grave. "We will make do. Whatever happens, you must be careful, Marina. You cannot go by your name. We must give you another. If the Duke thinks there is any connection between you and me, he will never allow you inside his home."

Marina nodded. "I understand. I will risk it for Agatha's sake. She has always been good to me, and better to you. If I were in her place, I would want someone to stand up for me."

Anthony placed a hand on the back of Marina's chair. "Then we have a plan. In a fortnight, you will leave this house and join Hortense as her lady's maid."

"You must write to us in secret and take every precaution to conceal your identity and your plan," Penny warned again. "Are you sure you can do this?"

Marina lifted her chin and smiled. She always loved intrigue. "Watch me."

THE END.

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