

A Gentleman Never Tells

by

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Smashwords Edition

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A Gentleman Never Tells
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*For Eric, my real-life hero and my inspiration. Thank
you for believing in me, especially when I didn't believe
in myself. It is your love and confidence that keep me
going . . . and keep me sane. I love you.*

Jerrica Knight-Catania

Chapter 1

Benjamin Wetherby, Earl of Glastonbury and heir to the Marquessate of Eastleigh, stared unblinkingly at the letter before him. It had been just under eleven months since he arrived in America, and now he was being summoned back to England.

Father is dying, his sister wrote. Dying. Was that even possible? His father had been the picture of health the day he left Ravenscroft Castle, but now less than a year later, he apparently had precious few days left.

As much as Benjamin was loath to return home, to leave the life he'd established in New York, he was duty bound. He could never ignore the position to which he'd been born. Besides, along with the title came great responsibility. Many relied on the marquess for their welfare, including his own family: his mother, his sister, his brothers.

"Lillian, get up," he called from across the room.

His mistress stirred in the bed. Her blond curls stuck out from under the counterpane. She had been a comfort of sorts to Benjamin over the last few months, and he to her. Brought together by misery, they enjoyed one another's company. But there was no room for a mistress in Ben's life anymore. He had a duty to marry now, to find a woman who could serve as his marchioness. A woman reared in society, born and bred to the position as much as he had been.

"Come back to bed, Benny," Lillian murmured sleepily. "It's too early."

"No," Benjamin said quietly, more to himself than to her. "It might just be too late."

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London, England

Phoebe Blake stared out her second-story window as bolts of lightning lit up the rain-soaked streets of Berkeley Square. The water cascaded down the panes like a gushing waterfall, obscuring her view of the chaos in the streets.

The storm had come on rather suddenly, and those caught without umbrellas ran for cover. Mud caked under horses' hooves and carriage wheels, and to the hems of women's dresses. She shivered, hopeful the storm would pass before the ball that evening.

"The stew is ready."

Phoebe turned to see her maid, Becky, in the doorway of her room. With a sigh, she followed her into the hallway.

She poked her head around the edge of her mother's bedchamber door. "Mama? Are you awake?" Her mother gave a tiny grunt, indicating she was not actually sleeping, so Phoebe proceeded into the room.

Becky followed along behind with the luncheon tray while Phoebe pulled the heavy curtains back to let light in the room, the only room that was still fully furnished. Her mother shielded her eyes, even though there was no sun to shield them from, and rolled over to bury herself in her pillow.

Phoebe sighed. Would she never see the end of her mother's mourning? A year had gone by since Phoebe's father had died. And every day her mother grew a little thinner. Much like their pockets.

Just that morning, another notice had come from yet another debt collector. Her mother wouldn't have

known, but half their furniture had been carted away already, including the Broadwood piano that once sat in the parlor.

That had been the worst of it for Phoebe, and the last straw towards her decision to re-enter society and find a rich husband. If she didn't, they'd all be in the poorhouse within a few months. And that would be the final nail in her mother's coffin, Phoebe was certain.

She pushed the dilemma from her mind and focused on the task at hand: getting her mother to eat. It was not easily accomplished, and three times a day, Phoebe found herself nearly force-feeding a woman who would rather die than take a bite of mutton stew. Of course, Phoebe wouldn't allow her mother to simply waste away, so she bore the task like a good daughter.

She settled on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to a ball this evening, Mother," she said as she spooned the first bite into her mother's mouth.

Lady Grimsby's eyes widened; it was the first show of emotion Phoebe had seen from her in months. "A ball?" she repeated. "But we're still in mourning, Phoebe. It's only been..."

There was a pause as her mother tried to figure out how long it had been since the baron had died, but it wouldn't matter if she sat there all day with her mind on the task. She had no idea how many days—*months*—had passed.

"It's been a year, Mama. A year, yesterday."

Pain, clear as day and so horrible to see, passed across her mother's face. She pushed the food away and turned her gaze to the window, but Phoebe knew she didn't see anything in the street below. Her grief blinded her to all else. Resigned, Phoebe stood from the bed and left the room. Her mother would eat tomorrow.

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“The carriage is waiting, Miss Phoebe.”

Phoebe’s head jerked in the direction of her maid’s voice, as if she had some kind of nervous tic. She looked back to the mirror and studied herself intently. The image staring back was almost unrecognizable compared to the gangly, green girl she’d been not so long ago. A poised and reserved woman sat in her place now, though the nerves were comparable to those she’d suffered in her first season.

However, she was not at all the same person. Since her father’s death, she’d grown up quite a bit, taking on the family finances—or lack thereof, in their case. And she’d somehow reversed roles with her mother, who couldn’t quite get past her grief.

Never mind her father hadn’t been the most loyal of husbands or the most responsible with money. But, well, he had been educated at least. And somewhat respected amongst the *ton*, titled and landed, and . . . kind. If nothing else, he’d been a nice man.

“Your gloves.”

Phoebe stared at the white gloves Becky held out to her. They weren’t as white as they should have been, but she couldn’t afford new ones. They would have to do.

“Do you think I’ve made the right decision?” Phoebe asked as the carriage trundled through the city streets.

Becky turned her brilliant green eyes on her and smiled. “You can’t stay cooped up in black crêpe forever. And you’ll never catch a husband if you don’t attend social functions.”

“I know. I just wish . . .”

“That your mother was here?”

Phoebe shook her head, but offered no explanation. She'd long since given up any hope of her mother attending social functions with her. The woman could barely sit up in bed, let alone stand at the edge of a ballroom all evening.

What Phoebe really wished was that she didn't have to choose a husband based on his wealth and status, but rather for love. However, her situation didn't afford her the time necessary to search for a soul mate. She just needed a husband who could keep them out of the poorhouse . . . or debtors' prison. Not even her cousin Geoffrey, who had inherited the title of Baron Grimsby, could afford to save them.

Heavens, what was wrong with her? Who cared about love and soul mates? If she didn't act quickly, she'd end up with a Fleet Marriage in the middle of the Marshalsea prison yard.

"Here we are," Becky announced, bringing Phoebe from her thoughts.

Her stomach flip-flopped as the carriage pulled to the front of Stapleton House. Goodness, it had been so long since she'd attended a social function. One year, to be exact. But she was prepared, thanks to countless nights pouring over Debrett's *The New Peerage* during the last few weeks. Becky had insisted she refresh her memory and learn who was still available this season.

Their conveyance stood in a short queue of coaches waiting to drop off the other guests. Phoebe leaned forward and pulled back the black velvet curtain to reveal the manor. It was one of the more grandiose London mansions, with great stone pillars and a marble staircase that led to the main entrance. One found it hard to believe such immense estates existed within the city's limits. Especially when one lived in a minuscule

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townhouse.

The carriage door opened moments later to reveal a refined footman dressed in gold livery. With his assistance, Phoebe stepped out and onto the drive, Becky close on her heels. She gathered her skirts between her fingers and fidgeted all the way up the stairs to the receiving line, until they stood face-to-face with their host and hostess, Lord and Lady Stapleton.

In a desperate attempt to keep her dinner where it rightfully belonged, she greeted them and then waited to be announced to the room at large. Lady Stapleton had an obvious propensity for the color pink, though in reality she ought not to have, for the color clashed painfully with the gilded ballroom. However, the lady's horrific taste in decoration did not make the scene any less intimidating.

Phoebe tried to gather her wits about her as the footman announced her name and then proceeded to the chairs at the edge of the dance floor. A few wallflowers had taken up their posts there, including her longtime friend Victoria Cunningham.

"Miss Blake!" her friend gushed as she and Becky approached. "What a delightful surprise!"

Victoria's dark brown curls bounced about her face, open and bright and genuine. Phoebe couldn't stop the smile that came to her own lips.

"May I join you?" she asked, and Victoria led her to a spot where they could sit side by side. "I must admit I'm relieved to find you here, though I'm rather surprised you haven't been snatched up by a doting gentleman yet."

"You could never be more surprised than my mother, but it's no surprise to me. One must make an effort to catch a husband. I would rather put my efforts into . . . other things."

“Other things?”

Victoria ignored the question and changed the topic. “So will you look for a husband for yourself this season, or are you still resolved never to marry?”

Phoebe laughed at the reference to a declaration she had once made, long ago, after she’d been insulted by a blackguard deemed an eligible bachelor. *If that is the type of man I am required to marry, then I shall never marry at all!* Or something to that effect. “No, actually, I am now quite resolved to marry.”

“Well, then,” Victoria gave her a little push, “you mustn’t lurk in the corner with us recluses. You are more likely to meet your future husband if he actually has opportunity to take notice of you.”

Phoebe looked around, taking stock of her competition, and swallowed her nerves. This was no time to doubt herself.

Victoria was right. She’d never meet or marry a man to save them from destitution if she clung to the shadows all evening. So she bid her friend farewell and made her way to the refreshment table. Surely eligible gentlemen got thirsty at some point or another.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite cousin. I knew I’d find you here.” Benjamin approached his cousin Victoria and watched as her brown eyes lit with affection.

“Ben, you’re back!” she exclaimed as she threw her arms around his neck. “When did you arrive?”

“To London? Yesterday, but I came by way of Kent.”

“So you’ve seen your father?”

Ben nodded. He had seen his father, though he didn’t look anything like the man he’d said goodbye to

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a year ago.

"I'm surprised you didn't stay there," Victoria went on.

"Yes, well, I've been given a task here in London. Hopefully, I'll be able to accomplish it in good time and be back before . . ."

"I'm thrilled you're here," Victoria trilled, and Ben was grateful not to have to finish his thought. "I've missed having you around at these dreadful affairs. You do tend to liven things up."

"I'm not sure I'm as entertaining as I used to be, but my sister assured me if I didn't attend tonight's festivities, I would be shunned from society for the rest of the Season."

"Oh, posh! She simply wanted to get an early start on the matchmaking."

"Perceptive as always." Ben looked about until his sight landed on the girl who had been chatting with his cousin moments earlier. She looked familiar, but he couldn't quite place her. How to ask without sounding smitten . . . "Who was that girl with you before?"

Victoria turned speculating eyes on him. "Why?" she asked.

Clearly, she was going to make him beg for an introduction. "You seemed rather familiar with her. Is she a friend of yours?"

"Wasn't that much obvious? And since when are you interested in my friends?"

Since they look like auburn-haired goddesses. "I never said anything about being interested." He met his cousin's raised eyebrows and annoying smirk straight on. "Fine. Will you please introduce me to your friend?"

Victoria's face lit up in a bright smile. "I would be happy to."

“Thank you for the dance, Miss Blake. I daresay, you’re one of the best partners I’ve had the privilege to dance with this season.”

“It’s early yet, Mr. Potter. You ought to reserve judgment until you’ve had opportunity to dance with a fair selection.”

Phoebe laughed as Mr. Potter, a handsome young man who hailed from Derbyshire, deposited her back into the hands of her maid. She had to admit she was having quite the time of her life this evening. She didn’t remember ever dancing with such fervor before or laughing quite so much. She’d obviously been holding it inside for far too long.

“Perhaps I could claim another dance later on this evening, if your card isn’t full? I will be sure to note the qualities in my partners until then, though I am sure my opinion will remain the same.”

Phoebe smiled and offered her dance card to him. “I shall look forward to it.”

He bowed over her hand and gave a smoldering look with his hazel eyes, which she was sure was only meant for her. Perhaps it wouldn’t be nearly as hard as she thought to find a husband this season.

As Mr. Potter walked away, Phoebe noticed Victoria approaching. However, she was not alone. She glided to them on the arm of the most astonishingly handsome man Phoebe had ever seen up close. He was, for lack of a better word, beautiful. Slightly tanned, the jaw chiseled to perfection, his nose indicative of generations of good breeding in its aristocratic slope. And the rest of him . . .

Oh, good heavens!

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He stood at least six feet tall, with a slender and muscular build. His raven hair had been trimmed to a fashionable length, and a thick lock fell into his eyes as he bowed to her. The man was Adonis incarnate.

Phoebe didn't realize she was gawking until she felt a sharp jab to her ribs. Becky threw her a sideways glance and cleared her throat as if to say, *Get a hold of yourself!*

She tried, she really did. But when the gentleman muttered a low, rumbling, "Good evening," Phoebe was sure she must be drooling.

Her friend didn't seem to notice, though, and she set right to the introductions. "Miss Blake, I would like to introduce you to my cousin, if I may."

"Y-yes, of course," Phoebe stammered.

"Miss Blake, my cousin, Benjamin Wetherby, Earl of Glastonbury. Benjamin, my dear friend, Miss Phoebe Blake."

He inclined his perfect head again, and Phoebe managed to execute what she hoped was a dignified curtsy.

"Might I see your dance card, Miss Blake?" he asked, his low drawl thrumming through her veins.

Wordlessly, she held up her wrist and offered the tiny pencil. When he was done writing, she withdrew her hand from his searing touch. He bowed again, and she responded with an awkward curtsy.

"I will see you in a little while, Miss Blake."

Chapter 2

Benjamin spotted Miss Blake sneaking onto the

balcony only minutes before they were to waltz together. Perhaps she simply wanted a breath of fresh air. She'd been dancing all night, and he'd been watching her. She was quite breathtaking, though not at all a conventional beauty. She had a delicately shaped nose, though it held a generous sprinkling of freckles. Her eyes were large and round, but far too eager. Her lips full and pouted, not thin enough to be fashionable. And her hair . . .

Quite the most brilliant shade of auburn he'd ever seen. He was sure it was thick and soft, perfect for grabbing hold of or burying one's face in.

Ben quickly tried to shake the thoughts from his head, appalled that he didn't have the mastery he thought he did over his own body. He grabbed two champagne glasses from a passing footman and strolled onto the balcony after her. Perhaps she was thirsty.

As he emerged into the cool night air, the stench of body odor gave way to cut grass and lilacs. He looked left and right in search of Miss Blake. She wasn't there. This was cause for a bit of alarm. She never should have wandered out alone in the first place, but if she wandered farther into the garden, unchaperoned—

Benjamin paused as a pair of voices wafted up to him on the breeze. A man and a woman. Was it possible the innocent-looking Miss Blake was having an illicit tryst on the lower terrace?

Out of sheer curiosity, Benjamin strode to the stone wall and set down the champagne flutes before making his way down the stairs to the terrace below. He stuck to the shadows so he couldn't be seen and then ducked behind a large statue.

Much better. He could hear every word now, though he still couldn't see a thing.

"How is your mother, Miss Blake? Is she well?"

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"I'm afraid she's not all that well, Colonel Wallace," she replied, and Benjamin grew hard at the mere lilt of her voice.

But what was she doing out here with Colonel Wallace? The man was old enough to be her father, and he had a rather unsavory reputation. Benjamin didn't like this scenario one whit.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Your mother was always such a gracious hostess. I daresay her lovely daughter will follow in her footsteps."

Miss Blake gave a little laugh at the colonel's compliment just as the strains of the waltz reached Benjamin's ears. Clearly, she heard it, too, for she sucked in a rather loud breath.

"Oh, Colonel Wallace, thank you for the conversation, but I'm afraid this dance is reserved by a rather important gentleman."

Benjamin's chest puffed out a bit at her words. Of course he was important in a *lord of the realm* sense, but it wasn't often he got to hear a woman say it, and with a particular breathiness to her tone. He was more than flattered.

However, he didn't have much time to ponder her compliment. She practically ran up the terrace stairs. She would be looking for him when she arrived back at the ballroom.

He waited a moment to make sure Colonel Wallace was looking the other way and then darted up the stairs after her. He saw Miss Blake just as she was sneaking back in through a door at the far end, and so he did the same through another door. He lost himself in the crowd for a moment and then approached her as if from a direction other than the terrace.

"Miss Blake." He bowed before her, bringing her up short in her search for him.

“Lord Glastonbury!” Her ample breasts heaved from her run up the stairs. “I was just looking for you.”

“Shall we?” He imparted his most dazzling smile on her and then swept her into his arms.

Damn, but she felt good there. Perfect, like a glove, designed and measured just for him. They twirled about the dance floor as though they’d done it a hundred times before.

“You are quite the dancer, Miss Blake.”

“I suppose I had an excellent instructor,” she returned with a smile. “I’ve been complimented more times than I can count tonight in regard to my dancing. I shall have to send a thank-you letter to Mr. Ponsonby first thing tomorrow.”

Benjamin laughed, but as they rounded the corner at the far end of the ballroom, near the terrace doors, all humor fell away. Colonel Wallace stood there watching them, and Benjamin had the distinct feeling the man was up to no good. When he made eye contact, the man turned and left the ballroom.

“Miss Blake, I hope I’m not being too forward, but might I offer a small piece of advice?”

She blinked up at him with her doe-eyed expression. “I suppose so.”

“I thought to warn you that . . . not everyone is as they seem.”

Miss Blake looked at him, waiting for more, but he wasn’t quite sure what else to say. Should he warn her specifically of Colonel Wallace?

No, better to make it general, so as not to incriminate himself.

“Is that all?”

“No,” he finally said, meeting her wide brown eyes with his own. “I would like to call on you tomorrow, if I may.”

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A smile stretched across her face and lit up his heart. He could get very used to seeing that smile every day.

“That would be . . . wonderful.”

Benjamin was up before dawn the next morning, wishing he could sleep another four hours, but knowing he'd never be able to fall back to sleep. The same dream that had haunted him for a year had plagued him last night.

Would he never get over his guilt? He knew it wasn't entirely his fault, what had happened that day on the field of honor, but still . . . the old baron didn't deserve to perish in that way. He'd had a wife and a daughter, supposedly, a life Benjamin had no right to take from him, regardless of whether or not the man had tried to cheat his brother at the table.

Benjamin pushed the tormenting thoughts from his mind and catapulted himself from the bed. There was only one way he would find relief from his nightmare.

He dressed and prepared himself for the day, and then made his way to Ashbury Manor, his sister's Grosvenor Square estate. Katherine had married Benjamin's old friend, William Hart, Duke of Weston, two years earlier, and while they were still childless, they were still sickeningly happy.

But his sister was the *ton's* most notorious busy-body, and so she would be able to point him in the right direction.

Ashbury Manor's butler showed him promptly to the breakfast room upon his arrival, for which Ben was eternally grateful. He was famished, and he rejoiced at having come to his sister's home rather than the club

for breakfast. The smells of eggs and breakfast meats had his stomach rumbling like thunder in the cavernous room. He had no idea whether Katherine and William had eaten yet, but much to his delight, the buffet was still fresh and piping hot. Benjamin piled his plate high and sat, eager to enjoy his meal.

He was about to shovel a forkful of egg into his mouth when a ruckus of shrill giggles rent the air, alerting him to his sister's presence. They were like schoolchildren, she and the duke, running about playing a game of chase through the halls of Ashbury Manor. A moment later, Katherine crossed the threshold and stumbled to a halt at the sight of her brother at the breakfast table.

"You can't escape me for long, Duckie!" came William's voice from the hall.

"I wouldn't dream of it . . . *Duckie*," Benjamin responded flatly, eliciting a bemused smile from his sister.

William appeared in the doorway and blushed from ear to ear when he saw his brother-in-law at the table.

"Oh, don't be ashamed, *Duckie*, it's quite adorable, really," Benjamin teased further, unable to help himself.

"All right, gentlemen, that's quite enough," Katherine reproached. "I didn't realize you were here, Benjamin."

Benjamin smiled. "I thought it might be nice to have breakfast with my sister and her husband this morning."

William sat, his plate aloft with a generous helping of kedgere. "Would you care to join me on a ride this morning, Ben? I want to give my new gelding a good run down Rotten Row."

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“Much as I would love to, I actually have some things to attend to this morning, which is why I’m here. I, ah . . . I want to visit Baroness Grimsby.”

Both Katherine and William paused mid bite to stare at him.

“Well, are you going to tell me where she lives or not, Kat?” he persisted.

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry, Ben, I didn’t realize you would . . . that is to say . . . oh, Ben, you know it wasn’t your fault,” she finished, her voice pleading and pitying at once.

He gave her a somber smile. “No, I don’t know that, Kat. I need to pay a visit.”

“Berkeley Square. Blakeny House.”

Well, that was convenient. He had another important visit to make in Berkeley Square that day. Benjamin stood to go, abandoning the rest of his breakfast, but Katherine stopped him.

“Ben, it’s not even nine in the morning. You can’t call on Lady Grimsby this early.”

“She’s right, GB,” William said, using the old nickname his friends at Eton had come up with in lieu of *Glastonbury*. “Why don’t you come on that ride with me?”

Despite his desire to get his visit with Lady Grimsby over with as soon as possible, he had to admit they were right. It wouldn’t do to show up on her doorstep this early in the morning. Though he wasn’t sure he could wait until appropriate visiting hours. That time was reserved for his visit to Miss Blake.

He smiled as he pictured her freckled little nose.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Kat said, bringing him back to reality.

“Not even a hundred pounds,” he shot back, then turned to William. “Hopefully, you have a spirited

stallion for me to ride.”

“Nothing less for you, Brother.”

Benjamin followed his brother-in-law to their private mews and gratefully accepted the reins to a glorious black stallion. William had always had an eye for horseflesh, and Widow-Maker was about as fine as they came. The new gelding wasn’t so bad, either, with his chocolate brown coat and jet black mane. They would spark the envy of every gentleman on Rotten Row that morning.

They waded through the busy streets at a walk and took their time getting to the long riding path at the other end of the park. It was a fine morning, though the dark clouds in the distance heralded a rainy afternoon.

“How is it, being back in England?” William ventured from beside him.

“Odd,” Ben remarked honestly. “It’s still hard to believe I’m home again. I wasn’t sure I would ever come back.”

“And what of your home in New York?”

Benjamin was quiet for a moment. “I gave it to my mistress,” he finally admitted.

William only nodded his reply, and they fell into silence for a few moments. But Benjamin felt the question in the air, so he answered it before Will had a chance to ask.

“She won’t live there forever. Just until she . . . finds someone else.”

“And what if *you* find someone else first?”

He nodded. Of course he would probably find a wife before Lillian found another benefactor. She hadn’t been too keen on his leaving her behind. The house had been a consolation; she’d been rather outraged when he told her he was leaving and more than likely never coming back. She would probably

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stay forever just to spite him.

“I would say that I would cross that bridge once I came to it, but I fear that bridge needs to be crossed post haste.”

“Oh?”

“I know it sounds absurd—I can hardly believe this myself—but father says his last wish is to see the future marquess settled with his marchioness.”

A snort of laughter came from William, and Ben rolled his eyes at him.

“Laugh all you want. It’s a dying man’s wish. He says he owes everything to Mother. Without her he never could have been the great leader he turned out to be. He wants me to have that same . . . support, I suppose.”

“Well,” William said, “I can’t really argue with him there. I was lost until your sister.”

Benjamin had to laugh at that. William had always been exceedingly organized and diligent in his duties; he doubted his flighty, nosy sister could have offered much in the way of support to that end. Still, William wouldn’t have said that if he didn’t mean it. Perhaps Benjamin wouldn’t understand until he experienced marriage for himself.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Mr. Potter,” William acknowledged as the younger man approached from the opposite direction. “Out for a morning ride?”

“Among other things.” Mr. Potter tipped his hat to Benjamin, who nodded back. “I recognize you from the Stapleton Ball last night, though I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of an introduction.”

“Potter, this is my brother-in-law, Benjamin Wetherby, Earl of Glastonbury. He’s just returned from a yearlong sabbatical in New York.”

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“In America?” The young man’s face lit with excitement.

“Indeed,” Benjamin confirmed.

“Those are lovely flowers, Potter. Are they for someone special?”

“Special, indeed. I met her last night at the Stapleton Ball. I’m on my way to Berkeley Square to call on her now.”

Benjamin’s ears perked up at the mention of Berkeley Square. Wasn’t that where Miss Blake said she lived? Number Twelve, if he remembered correctly. Despite the fact that she probably wasn’t the only debutante to live in Berkeley Square, Benjamin had a sinking suspicion the young pup was going to see the enchanting Miss Blake.

Well, then, he would just have to pick up an even bigger bouquet of hothouse flowers.

Chapter 3

Phoebe looked up from her position beside her mother to see Becky standing in the doorway. She motioned for Phoebe to come to her. Clearly, whatever she had to say, she didn’t want to say it in front of Lady Grimsby. Which could only mean one thing: There was another bill collector downstairs.

“What is it, Becky?” she whispered as they slipped into the hall.

“There’s a gentleman downstairs, miss. Says he needs to see you.”

Phoebe sighed, and a sudden weariness came over her. “Can’t you tell him I’m not at home? I don’t

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know what I'll say if I do receive him. I haven't a shilling left."

"It's not that kind of gentleman, Miss Phoebe," Becky said. A wry smile appeared on her lips. "It's a *gentleman* gentleman."

"A what?" Phoebe stared back at her maid, dumbfounded. "You mean . . . ?"

Becky nodded enthusiastically. "And he's brought you flowers, too!"

A shiver of excitement started at Phoebe's toes and quickly crawled its way to her lips where she was helpless to prevent a smile. "Wonderful! Where did you put him?"

"Put him?" Becky's eyes widened until every inch of green was visible.

"Yes, what room is he in?"

"He's . . . on the front stoop, miss."

"The front—Oh, dear. Becky, see that my mother eats the rest of her meal. I shouldn't be too long."

With that, Phoebe tore down the hall and down the stairs, pausing only for a brief moment to catch her breath, before flinging open the front door. She faltered a bit when she saw it was Mr. Potter on the stoop. He hadn't mentioned anything last night about calling on her and so she hadn't expected it to be him behind the door.

He did, however, look incredibly handsome in the light of day, with the sunlight glinting off his blond waves. And the flowers he carried had clearly been selected with care. She certainly wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, and so she stepped aside and ushered him in, accepting the flowers with a wide and, hopefully, flirtatious smile.

"I'm sorry that our maid left you standing on the stoop," she said, leading him down the hall to the

parlor. “Our . . . um . . . butler had a . . . family emergency!”

It hadn’t occurred to her until she’d seen Mr. Potter on her stoop, looking handsome and so refined, that her situation might seem an embarrassment. Only one servant for the household. The furniture sparse and faded. What was left of it, anyway.

But there was naught she could do about it now, and so she pasted on her brightest smile as if everything was as it should be and led him into the parlor. It wasn’t until she turned around to face Mr. Potter that all her fears were confirmed.

He looked about the room with an uncomfortable expression on his otherwise handsome face. He stopped in the middle of the worn rug and rocked forward and back on his heels, put his hands in his pockets, took them out again, and then finally spoke.

“I hope you like the flowers,” he said.

“Oh, yes. They are quite lovely. I’ll have Becky put them in water just as soon as she—” *finishes force-feeding my mother*. Oh, Lord, this was not going well at all. “—Comes downstairs,” Phoebe finally finished.

“Right, well, I’m sure you’re expecting a great many callers today, Miss Blake. It wouldn’t be well done of me to monopolize all your time.”

Phoebe almost commented that they’d yet to even sit down, and that it was far too early to expect a great many callers, but she held her tongue. If he didn’t want to be here, where he was obviously so uncomfortable, she wasn’t going to force him.

“Well, thank you for calling, Mr. Potter. I’m certain our paths will cross again soon.” She batted her eyelashes in one last attempt to win his affection, despite her obvious state of financial ruin, but he wasn’t

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even looking at her.

He was already at the door, stalking down the hall ahead of her, muttering something about letting himself out. Phoebe sighed and sank down to the sofa, coughing a little as a poof of dust exploded into the air.

Perhaps she'd spoken too soon on the ease of finding a husband.

By the time Benjamin returned to Ashbury Manor to retrieve his own horse, it was almost noon and he was feeling a bit restless. He still needed to call on Lady Grimsby—Lord only knew how long that might take—and buy flowers before calling on Miss Blake.

He rode as fast as the busy London streets would allow until he found himself in Berkeley Square. He wasn't sure where exactly he would find Blakeny House, so he meandered slowly about the square, reading the placards on the town houses as he went. It wasn't until he'd almost made a full revolution around the square that he found the one.

With mounting apprehension, he climbed from his horse. He barely even noticed his feet were moving as the front door grew nearer, and before he knew it, his hand reached up to lift the brass knocker. Then he waited. And waited. It seemed like an eternity stretched before him, and he was just about to give up and turn tail, when the latch clicked and the door creaked open.

Benjamin's jaw dropped as the little maid he had seen with Miss Blake at the ball last night came into view. Apparently, she wasn't as surprised as he, for her face turned up into a silly smile as she bobbed a curtsy.

"Afternoon, Lord Glastonbury," she said,

stepping aside to allow him into the foyer. "Shall I fetch Miss Blake for you?"

It took him a moment to find his voice, but it didn't matter. Nothing coherent came out when he did. "I . . . no—I mean, yes, but . . . I was actually—"

The green-eyed maid was trying not to laugh at his stammering, but she wasn't all that successful.

"Come with me, my lord," she said, turning and starting down the hall. "Miss Blake will be along shortly."

She deposited him in a small parlor, bowed out of the room and shut the door. Benjamin looked around, assessing the modest drawing room. The few pieces of furniture were old and in great disrepair. A faded blue sofa sat opposite one spindly chair that looked as if it would crumble under the weight of a small child. There was a fireplace, though no fire burned there to warm the somewhat chilly room. The only other furniture was a small end table, adorned with a few miniatures and the bouquet of fresh flowers he recognized as Mr. Potter's.

Benjamin made his way across the room and picked up one of the tiny frames. As he stared at the familiar face, his heart seized with guilt and shame. The Baron Grimsby was Miss Blake's father.

How in the world had he missed the fact that Blakeny House was Number Twelve Berkeley Square?

"Lord Glastonbury."

Benjamin started at the sound of Miss Blake's voice behind him, but he didn't turn right away. He took a moment to gather his wits about him and gingerly replaced the miniature to its spot on the table. When he finally turned to face her, he couldn't stop the smile that came to his lips. She stood in the doorway, a curious expression on her face. He noted how tired she looked, but he decided he liked her this way: subdued and

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relaxed, a serene smile on her lips and in her eyes.

“Miss Blake.” He crossed from the end table and swept her an elegant bow. “I would apologize for calling so early, but I see I am not the first to do so.”

Miss Blake tucked her chin to her chest in a sheepish gesture, her eyes darting to the bouquet across the room. “Yes, though I far prefer your company, Lord Glastonbury.”

This made him smile. Wide. “Though you must admit, Mr. Potter has excellent taste in flowers.”

At this, Miss Blake’s head snapped up and her wide brown eyes locked with his. He gulped.

“How did you know it was Mr. Potter who called on me this morning?”

Benjamin had to laugh at his slipup and decided the best route would be honesty. “I confess my brother-in-law and I ran into Potter this morning. He was carrying that exact bouquet. Those lilies are so rare, I figured it could not have been a coincidence.”

She did not respond, but smiled again and gestured to the sofa. He sat, ignoring the dust that settled on his pristine breeches as he did. He held his breath as Miss Blake took her seat in the spindly wooden chair, praying it wouldn’t break beneath her weight. Thankfully, she sat without incident.

However, guilt began to niggle at Benjamin’s conscience. Was it his fault they were living in such dire conditions? Was it because of his actions that almost all their worldly possessions had been removed from their home? Without a husband, a woman had very few options in regard to earning money. And if that husband died penniless and with a great many debts . . . it was a wonder they weren’t already wasting away in debtors’ prison, if the rumors about the old baron had been true.

But was it possible she didn't know who her father's killer had been? He wondered why she didn't recognize his name. It was true very few people knew who had been involved, only his second, who was his own brother Andrew. And the baron's second, an old friend of Benjamin's and the heir to the barony, Geoffrey Abbott. He must be a distant cousin to Miss Blake.

As they sat there making small talk, Benjamin warred with his conscience. Should he tell her? Should he ask to see her mother so that he might clear the guilt from his mind? Or should he find another way to make amends for his actions?

Admitting what he had done would only bring up old wounds, and he feared Miss Blake might never want to speak to him again if she knew. He had known her less than twenty-four hours, yet the idea of never speaking to her again was a most unwelcome prospect.

Once they had exhausted the predictable topics of last night's ball and the weather, there was an opening in the conversation and Benjamin decided to venture into what could be risky territory. "The miniatures," he said, gesturing to the tiny frames on the end table, "they are of you and your parents?"

Her large brown eyes shifted to the frames and then back again. "Yes."

There was a slight pause before Benjamin said, "I don't think I saw either of them with you at the ball last night. Do they venture into society much?"

Benjamin hated the uncomfortable look that crossed over Miss Blake's face, but he had to gauge if she knew about him or not.

"No. My father is dead, and my mother is still in mourning. We've only just passed the one-year anniversary."

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“My condolences,” he offered, and then, hating himself even as the words came out of his mouth, he asked, “How did he die?”

Miss Blake seemed slightly taken aback by the question. It wasn’t something one should ask on a polite afternoon call, but he just couldn’t help himself.

“A fever,” she said, and Benjamin nearly fell from the sofa in shock.

Just a fever? “A fever,” he repeated aloud.

“Yes. You know . . . dangerously high body temperature, that sort of thing. We were in the country when it happened and made it back only in time for the funeral.”

Benjamin’s mind reeled at this shocking revelation. She didn’t know. She had absolutely no clue how her father died, that his fever had been caused by a nasty gunshot wound.

He wasn’t sure what else to say, and he worried that remaining on the topic might lead him to incriminate himself. And so, he offered his condolences one last time before changing the subject.

A half hour later, Benjamin rose to leave and Miss Blake led him to the door.

“Thank you, Miss Blake,” he said, nearly drowning in her dark eyes, and alternately in his own guilt. “This has been a most pleasant afternoon.”

She smiled and nodded. “For me as well, my lord.”

“May I call again tomorrow?”

Miss Blake’s eyes widened in surprise, with what he hoped was delight. “I-I . . . I would like that very much.”

He tipped his hat and stepped outside, onto the stoop. “Until tomorrow then.”

Chapter 4

Phoebe walked through the doorway of Lord and Lady Sheffield's home that night, already exhausted. How in the world would she survive an entire season of late nights? She'd only been to one ball so far, but after having spent a year in mourning, she wasn't used to staying up until all hours of the night. Not to mention her responsibilities at home were many and they were exhausting—both physically and emotionally.

Despite the fact she'd already spent one evening in the bosom of the *ton*, her nerves still threatened to get the better of her. Her stomach was a veritable bird sanctuary as she made her way to the ballroom, surrounded by lords, ladies and other important people. Her plain muslin dress, artfully upgraded with pearls and ribbons, still seemed inadequate next to the green silk creation on the woman to her left. Or the jonquil, topaz-studded gown of the one in front of her.

Phoebe sensed Becky on her heels and silently thanked God she was with her; it was comforting to have her maid-cum-companion by her side through these nerve-racking events.

She politely nodded her head to the few people she knew from the night before, and some that she even knew from her first season, two years ago. But she didn't trust herself to speak yet. If she opened her mouth, one of the birds in her stomach would surely make its way to her throat. She didn't relish making a fool of herself right away.

Thankfully, only a few moments passed once they had found their seats before the four-piece

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ensemble mounted the dais and began to tune their instruments. The players consisted of the three Sheffield daughters: Elaina, Emma and Ermentrude. Phoebe felt especially sorry for poor Ermentrude. Not only had she been given the most atrocious name of the three sisters, but she'd inherited the smallest amount of good looks as well. The poor thing had small green eyes that were far too close together and hair the color of fire.

The fourth player was apparently a cousin, and she sat poised before the gorgeous Broadwood piano. Phoebe's heart ached a little at the thought of her own piano and the day she'd watched the collectors remove it from her home.

Aside from the day she'd heard of her father's death, it had been the most difficult day of her life.

The music began, and Phoebe pushed the sad thoughts from her mind to focus on the players. They were quite good, she thought, with a definite sensitivity to the style. Just as she was beginning to enjoy herself, she felt the telltale tingle of needing to relieve herself.

Blast that extra cup of tea! Phoebe looked about the room, trying to assess if she could slip out without being noticed. They were toward the back, and Becky sat next to her, at the end of the row. The door was a little farther than she might have hoped for but . . .

Oh, dear, she really could not wait. The program indicated three pieces, all with several movements to them, before they would reach the intermission.

She leaned in to whisper to Becky. "I must remove myself to the retiring room."

"Shall I come with you?" Becky whispered back.

Phoebe shook her head. "I'll only be a moment." And then she slipped past her companion,

and walked quickly and hunched over until she reached the door, refraining from making eye contact with anyone on her way.

She heaved a heavy sigh of relief as she reached the hallway and gingerly shut the door behind her. She looked about, hoping to find a servant who could point her in the right direction, but the hall was empty. They were probably preparing for the reception that would be held at the end of the concert.

Phoebe looked right, then left, and finally decided to go left in search of the necessary. It felt odd, snooping about the Sheffields' home, but what choice did she have? When one had to go, one had to go.

And then, blessedly, she came upon the room that had most certainly been deemed the ladies' retiring room. Chinese silk screens stood in the far corner of the room, no doubt hiding the much-needed chamberpots, and a little maid sat quietly by the vanities.

Once she had completed her urgent task, she made her way to the vanity to check that all was still in place. Her auburn curls remained neatly tucked into the coiffure Becky had created for her. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes bright. She bit down on her lips to bring a little more color to them and then all was perfect.

Phoebe slipped into the hall and started back toward the ballroom where the musicale was still underway. Her pace was a bit slower now, since she no longer had the need to hurry, and as she padded through the corridor, she noticed a door that stood ajar. Curiosity made her peak her head inside—just for a moment. However, before she could stop herself, her feet carried her farther into the room toward the beautiful Shudi harpsichord. It stood in the center of the candlelit parlor, leading her to believe she'd stumbled upon the manor's actual music room.

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Indeed, the fresco on the ceiling revealed tiny cherubs playing tiny harps and flutes, and aside from the harpsichord, a cello stood propped on a stand in the corner.

She alternately sighed with longing and bubbled with excitement, contemplating if it would be ill-bred of her to sit down and play while she was supposed to be listening to the concert in the other room. Perhaps a few minutes wouldn't hurt. She would still be back long before the intermission. And it seemed like a lifetime since she'd had the opportunity to play. Who knew when the next would present itself?

Making her decision, Phoebe sat on the bench and began to play.

Benjamin strode into the gilded ballroom of the Sheffield mansion thirty minutes late for the start of the musicale. His sister would probably be furious with him for not being on time, for he would have missed opportunities to mingle with eligible young ladies. There was still afterwards, though, wasn't there?

But truth be known, he didn't really care to mingle with anyone but Miss Blake. He doubted she was here tonight, however. It was a smaller crowd that was invited to these sorts of things, and Miss Blake didn't seem all that well connected. At least not yet.

Benjamin stood at the back of the hall and scanned the program. He had already missed the Handel, and they were in the middle of the Haydn now. Though they played better than most of the debutantes who put on musicales, Benjamin was feeling a bit restless. After five minutes of Haydn, he could barely stand still, let alone even think about sitting. So, as

discreetly as he had crept in, he crept back out.

He wouldn't be able to go far; Katherine would expect to see him at intermission. But perhaps he could find the library and a glass of brandy, sit quietly and contemplate what he'd learned at Miss Blake's house that afternoon.

It was still hard to believe she had no idea about the duel, about her father's gun wound. He would have expected Geoffrey to tell the man's wife and daughter what had really happened, but perhaps he'd seen no reason to. Perhaps he thought it would be easier for them if they thought he simply died of natural causes.

Benjamin wandered farther through the house, noting that while he enjoyed the Baroque style of music, he didn't much care for the Baroque architecture. Sure, it was a sensorial feast for the eyes, but good Lord, it was gaudy! Even the cherubs in the wall paintings seemed uncomfortable in their surroundings.

He was about to open the doors to what he assumed would be either the library or a study when he heard the sounds of a harpsichord wafting down the hall. Playing Mozart.

It was sheer curiosity that set his feet in the direction of the music; it took a brave person to sneak away to perform their own musicale while another was going on just down the hall. He wanted to see who this brave soul could possibly be.

The door stood slightly ajar, and it creaked as Benjamin pushed it open. The music stopped abruptly, and then he found himself face-to-face with Miss Blake. He almost wanted to laugh at the coincidence, but he was too taken aback to do much of anything at the moment.

She, too, seemed at a loss for words, and he

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couldn't blame her. She'd been caught red-handed.

"Lord Glastonbury," she finally managed. "I-I was just . . . um . . ."

He smiled and moved into the room, closing the door behind him. "It's all right, Miss Blake. You don't have to offer any excuses to me. As you can see, I, too, am wandering about the halls of the manor whilst the musicale is in progress."

The tension seemed to drain from her face and eventually gave way to a smile. "So you are," she acknowledged. "You weren't enjoying the music?"

"No, no, it wasn't that. I was just . . . feeling a bit restless is all. You?"

Even in the dim light of the parlor, Benjamin could see the color that infused her cheeks and he again wanted to laugh. However, *again*, he didn't wish to embarrass her, as she'd probably slipped out to use the necessary. Instead, he did the gentlemanly thing and changed the subject.

"I didn't know you played, Miss Blake."

She smiled up at him with those big round eyes. In the candlelight, they shone gold, like rare topaz glimmering in a dark cave. It would be easy to forget he was going against every dictate of society by being alone with a young lady in an abandoned music room. *Very, very easy.*

"Ever since I was a child. It was the only feminine pastime I took to."

"That's not entirely true," Benjamin corrected. "You've already proven you're an excellent dancer."

"Yes, but women cannot dance alone. Therefore, it is not an entirely feminine pastime."

"Well, you must embroider then."

Miss Blake laughed, a haunting, lilting sound that struck a chord as sharp as if it had actually been

played on the harpsichord. "Remind me to show you my embroidery one day."

Benjamin stared at her, and before he could stop the words, he said, "You would get along splendidly with my sister."

"Oh! Yes . . . the Duchess of Weston is your sister, is she not?"

"She is," Benjamin replied, wondering what it meant that he wanted Miss Blake and his sister to be acquainted.

"I'm afraid I don't typically have opportunity to consort with duchesses, so I've yet to meet her. Are we of an age?"

"Katherine is a bit older, perhaps, though I can't say without knowing *your* age. However, I do know better than to ask—"

"Twenty," she interrupted. "Just turned. My birthday falls at the beginning of April."

Benjamin smiled at the surprising young woman. "Then, yes, the two of you are of an age. Katherine will turn one-and-twenty in December."

There was a lull in their conversation, but not an uncomfortable one. He liked that Miss Blake didn't feel the need to fill every moment with inanity like many of the girls he'd met at last night's ball.

"Well, we should probably be getting back before someone notices we're gone."

Benjamin knew she was right. It would be intermission soon; it wouldn't go unnoticed if they walked in together once everyone had stood to stretch their legs. They needed to go, and soon. But not yet.

"Do you know any duets, Miss Blake?"

Her dark eyes widened at his question. "You mean you play, my lord?"

"Benjamin. Please."

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“Oh . . . well, then I must insist you call me Phoebe.” She graced him with a wry smile. “It’s only fair.”

“Indeed, Phoebe. And, yes, I do play.”

“Well, I’m afraid I don’t know any duets, and wouldn’t we need two instruments for that, anyhow?”

Benjamin decided he was going to find a way to share the same bench with Phoebe if it killed him. He wanted to be close enough so he could find out what she smelled like. Perhaps find out what she tasted like too, if the opportunity presented itself.

“I’ve an idea!” he said, making his way to the bench. She had stood when he first came in, but now she dropped her little bottom back to the seat. He took his place beside her, making sure to press himself as close as possible. Ah. She smelled like the most fragrant of rose gardens, soft and fresh and—

“Benjamin?”

“Sorry!” he exclaimed, bringing his mind back to the present. “Do you know this one?”

He began to play a Mozart sonata. One he loved and played often. And when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Phoebe poised her left hand above the keys, he dropped his own left hand and she began to play. The hands in this particular piece were played close together, though, and Phoebe had to turn her body into him in order to execute the notes.

Benjamin momentarily lost his concentration when her breasts pushed into his upper arm, and his fingers missed several notes in a row. Dear God, this was absolute torture. She was so close, smelled so delicious, and now her breasts—her full, delectable-looking breasts—were mashed against him.

He knew she was aware of it, too. He heard the sharp intake of breath, felt the slight *ritardando* in her

playing. But neither of them stopped for fear of what might happen if they did.

However, the piece was only so long, and after a mere couple of minutes, they reached the end. They played the last chord in perfect precision, and as the echo faded, it became evident that their breathing had found precision as well.

When he felt her gaze on him, he turned to look at her. She licked her lips, and Benjamin wasn't sure how long he could continue to play the gentleman. The tightening in his trousers was already more than he could bear.

Dear God, he had never been so aroused in his life.

But she was an innocent. And she was the marrying kind. The kind he wanted to marry. It wouldn't do to ruin the poor girl here, where they could be caught. He actually liked this Phoebe Blake, and he wanted to do things right. To court her properly, and ask her mother for her hand, not announce they would be married because he had defiled her in the Sheffield's' music room.

But then she licked her lips again, and Benjamin decided he was no longer accountable for his actions. He leaned into her and planted his lips on hers. Phoebe responded immediately, wrapping her arms around his neck, pressing her breasts to him like a wanton woman while he wrapped his arms about her slender waist.

Benjamin had kissed many women in his life—women with a great deal of experience in the art. But none had ever aroused him, enchanted him, like this one. The smell of her, the feel of her womanly curves beneath his roaming hands—all of it combined and unraveled him until he wasn't even sure of his own name anymore.

But with a jolt of remorse, he remembered *her* name. Or, more importantly, her father's name. In the back of his mind, he wondered if he had ever heard the old baron referred to by his actual name, rather than his title. If he had, he had not associated the two. Even his nephew Geoffrey had always called him Grimsby, never Blake.

Shaking his mind free of his thoughts, he pulled back from the kiss and met with Phoebe's lazy, lusty eyes. Yes, it had been a rather thorough kiss—one she wasn't likely to forget anytime soon.

"Now we really ought to be getting back," he said, his voice barely reaching above a gravelly whisper.

Phoebe only nodded before she slipped off the bench and retreated from the room. Benjamin remained for propriety's sake and then made his way back to the concert in progress.

Chapter 5

Phoebe returned to the drawing room where the audience was beginning to rise from their seats for intermission. She sought out Becky, who immediately widened her bright green eyes at her.

"What is it?" Phoebe asked. Was it that obvious she had just been kissed?

Her cheeks turned warm at the thought. Goodness, she was unnerved by that man! The memory of his hands around her waist, his lips caressing hers so tenderly . . .

"Miss, are you all right?" Becky asked, bringing

Phoebe from her scandalous thoughts.

“I’m fine,” she replied, feeling somewhat panicky inside. “Why? Do I not look fine?”

“You look flushed, is all. Should we step outside for a moment?”

Phoebe did want to step outside—fresh air would have done her a world of good. But then Lord Glastonbury, *Benjamin*, came through the door and sauntered into the drawing room. He spared only a fleeting glance for her before making his way across the room to his sister. She watched him, his every move, studied the way he walked and spoke and laughed with the Duchess of Weston.

While Benjamin was a paragon of aristocratic breeding, his sister was the epitome of grace and beauty—everything one would expect from a hostess of the *ton*. With her raven hair pulled into an intricate plait and her perfectly fitted scarlet gown, Phoebe wondered if she could ever match up. How must Benjamin see her? What must he think of her re-made gowns and paste jewels? Surely, she paled in comparison to the women he was accustomed to.

“Would you like some lemonade?”

Phoebe turned to her maid, aware she had not answered her in regard to stepping outside. “Oh, yes, I suppose a bit of refreshment would be nice.” The only problem was that Benjamin stood right next to the table where said refreshment could be retrieved.

This posed a great many questions. How should she act? Should she greet him or pretend they didn’t know one another? Perhaps she should just send Becky alone to avoid him all together. But Becky had already stepped out and was on her way to the table. If she called her name or pulled her back now, she would draw attention to herself, and she certainly didn’t want

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to do that.

So she stepped out in Becky's wake and followed her to the refreshment table.

Benjamin couldn't quite explain the sudden acceleration of his heartbeat. Or the beads of perspiration that broke out on his brow despite the cool breeze flowing through the drawing room. But he was surprised to learn, when he turned around, that they were a result of the close proximity of Miss Blake. Phoebe.

Was it possible he had sensed her before he even knew she was there? He sniffed the air and realized he could smell her faint perfume. It could have been the smell of the garden that lay just beyond the drawing room windows, but either way, it smelled like *her*.

He didn't dare catch her eye, though, and he moved himself in front of his sister so she wouldn't see Phoebe there behind him. They could meet another time. A time when he hadn't just been kissing and fondling the girl in private.

Good Lord, he was uncomfortable!

"Oh, Benjamin, look! It's Lady Sharpe and her lovely daughter Abigail!"

Benjamin followed his sister's gaze to the two women who approached from the opposite direction. He groaned, wishing he could avoid his sister's matchmaking attempts, but there was no way out now.

"Lady Sharpe, I'm sure you remember my brother," Kat said with a covert smile for the woman.

"Oh, indeed, Your Grace!" Lady Sharpe dipped into a curtsy that should have been difficult for a

woman of her advanced years. "You are not easily forgotten, Lord Glastonbury. Though, I do not think you have met my youngest." She pushed her daughter forward and practically forced the poor girl into a curtsy. "My lord, this is Abigail."

Sensing Abigail was as embarrassed by her mother's gregariousness as he was, he smiled warmly at her, took her hand and kissed the air above her knuckles.

"Oh, look! There is Mrs. Harcourt," Kat announced. "I've been meaning to speak with her about our committee. If you will excuse me?"

Damn his sister. How could she leave him alone with this woman? Fairly easily, it would seem, for he had not even finished the thought before she was gone from their circle.

"Our Abigail has just embarked on her first season, my lord," said Lady Sharpe. Then she leaned in to whisper, "And she has suitors practically banging down the door. Of course, it's not any wonder, is it?"

Benjamin shifted his eyes to look at Abigail. The poor girl seemed mortified, and he didn't blame her. Her mother was just as shameless as his sister was, and Ben knew all too well the embarrassment that came with having such a family member.

"It is a very fortunate thing to be so well-sought-after," he offered with a cordial nod.

"Yes, but it is a pity none are truly suitable matches for our little girl."

"Suitable?"

She leaned in closer, her beady eyes narrowed. "What I mean, my lord, is that none can offer our Abigail the . . . *finer* things in life, to which she is accustomed."

Oh, good Lord! It was probably true Abigail had a

fair amount of suitors at her door. She had a quiet demeanor and a large dowry, if his sister were to be believed. Though it was clear her mother hoped for her daughter to marry not just any peer, but one who still maintained a substantial amount of fortune and power.

While he wished all the best for Abigail, Benjamin pitied the man who ended up with Lady Sharpe for a mother-in-law.

“Ah, I see,” he said, and, then, desperate to make a quick escape, added with an optimistic smile, “Well, never fear, Lady Sharpe. I’m sure the right one will come along soon.”

With that, he bowed to the women and turned to go, noting as he did, that Phoebe had already gone.

Chapter 6

The following morning, Benjamin called on his sister bright and early, not only because he wanted to partake of the elaborate Ashbury Manor buffet, but also because he couldn’t let another day go by without knowing what, if anything, his sister knew about Miss Blake.

“Goodness, Ben, you might as well set up a room for yourself here and get rid of your town house if you’re going to raid our buffet every morning,” Katherine said as she crossed the threshold into the breakfast room.

“I’m not sure what people would think of me were I to move in with my sister, but thank you just the same. It would make things much more convenient. Where’s Duckie this morning?”

Kat rolled her eyes. "He's gone to meet with our solicitor." She put two pieces of plain toast on her plate and asked the footman for a cup of tea.

"Are you unwell?" Benjamin asked, concerned that his sister's normally vivacious appetite seemed to have disappeared.

She was silent for a moment as if she contemplated telling the truth or not. "Not *unwell*, per se. Just . . . tired."

"I've never known you to eat so little—no matter how tired you were."

"Yes, well, my stomach may be a little upset. Too much lemonade last night."

"Liar."

Kat's head snapped up and her black eyes settled on him in alarm. "What are you talking about?"

"The truth, Kat. I don't have all day. Are you unwell?" He punctuated the last words with an edge of impatience to his tone.

His sister's face began to contort, and he wasn't sure if she was going to laugh or cry. After a moment, she said, "Leave us," and the footmen bowed out of the room, closing the door firmly behind them.

Oh, Lord. Something must truly be wrong for her to send the servants away. He waited while she gathered herself, and at long last she looked up at him. Her eyes were moist, but she wore a serene smile that put Ben somewhat at ease.

"I'm *enceinte*."

The words hung in the air for a moment before Ben jumped from his seat and went to his sister. He pulled her from her chair and enveloped her in his embrace. Kat and William had wanted this for so long, and he knew they'd worried if it would ever happen at all. But it had, and he couldn't have been more thrilled

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for his sister and his old friend.

“What did William say when you told him?” he asked as he made his way back to his seat.

And then his sister dissolved into tears.

“Kat? What is it?”

“He . . . he doesn’t know yet.”

Dammit. He had squeezed it out of her before she’d even had a chance to tell her husband. “Well, you must do it soon . . . tonight! This isn’t a secret I can keep, Kat.”

She laughed at that. The entire family was notoriously bad at keeping secrets, so they had very few amongst them.

“I will,” she said, her voice choked from the combination of laughter and tears. “I promise. Now—” she straightened up in her chair and used a napkin to wipe the tears from her cheeks, “why are you here?”

Right. He had come for a reason. “Did you know who Grimsby’s wife and daughter were? I mean, are you aware of their surname?”

“Yes, of course, Benjamin. They don’t call me Canary Kat for nothing.”

“Bloody hell, you have a nickname now?”

“Watch your language, and, yes, I do. I suspect you learned this when you paid your visit the other day?” He nodded his confirmation. “And what of it?”

“I met Miss Blake the night before . . . at the Stapleton ball. I meant to call on her after my visit to the baroness. You can imagine my surprise when I realized they were all one and the same.”

“You meant to . . . oh, dear, Ben. You’re courting Grimsby’s daughter?”

“It’s more than that, though,” Ben admitted. “I think I might actually like the girl.” He remembered their kiss the night before, laughing while they played

Mozart together . . .

“She *is* lovely.”

“You’ve met her?” Ben snapped back to the present. Phoebe had indicated they’d never been introduced.

“No, but I have seen her. She was there last night, was she not?”

Benjamin nodded. The truth was he could have introduced the two women last night at the musicale, but after their kiss, he and Phoebe avoided one another like the plague.

“And I would very much *like* to meet her.” Kat’s voice tilted up hopefully at the end of her last sentence.

Blast it, should he really be doing this? Courting Miss Blake, involving his sister? What if they became friends? Then what would he do?

And what if he married Miss Blake? It seemed a bit early to think of such a thing, but with his father’s health and his dying wish . . .

Damn, how would he ever keep the horrid secret of her father’s death from her?

“I don’t know if I’m ready to bring her here, Kat. Give me a few days alone with her. I think it’s best if I come out in the open before I begin introducing her to the family. And *please* refrain from throwing anymore Lady Sharpes my way.”

“Oh, Ben, she’s a lovely woman and so is Abigail. But since you’re apparently smitten with Miss Blake, I will do my best to deter the mamas.”

“Thank you.”

Kat moved to take a bite of her toast when her face twisted into a grimace. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she looked at him as if to say *Please excuse me* before she flew from the room. He might have felt sorry for her if he didn’t know she’d been praying for

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this for two years.

He stayed a few more minutes to finish his breakfast and then left Ashbury Manor. There were flowers to buy and a particular young lady he wished to visit. He just wished he could leave his guilt behind with the remains of his breakfast.

Benjamin called on Phoebe every day for the next few days. And every day, Phoebe had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. It wasn't just the fact that a man had taken interest and decided to court her; it was that *Benjamin Wetherby* had.

He was everything a girl could hope for: kind and funny and smart. It didn't hurt that he was a peer of the realm, either, or that he was about to inherit a marquessate. Or that he was quite the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes upon. But Phoebe was sure she would have loved him even if that were not the case. After all, he seemed to care for her despite the fact she had less than nothing.

They never discussed the kiss that happened in the Sheffield's music room, but that didn't stop them from sharing more. Benjamin always delivered a chaste kiss upon his arrival and a not-so-chaste kiss before he left every day. Surely, Phoebe had discovered heaven on earth in those kisses.

On the fourth day, Benjamin arrived, flowers in hand—goodness, the parlor was overrun with them now!—but he did not come inside. He insisted she hand over the flowers to Becky and don her pelisse; they were going to Ashbury Manor.

Phoebe's heart raced as the open carriage trundled through Mayfair. Was he truly taking her to

meet his sister? What would she be like? She'd never met a duchess, only seen them from a distance at parties and balls. She wanted so much for Her Grace of Weston to like her, to see her the way she thought Benjamin saw her.

Becky gave her a slight nudge, bringing her back to attention, only to realize she'd been gathering her skirts in her sweaty hands. The fabric wrinkled unattractively when she let it go.

Oh, bother! At least she had chosen her most fashionable garment that morning when she dressed herself. The light pink muslin day dress flattered her frame exceptionally, clinging where necessary and falling eloquently over her softer parts. She did wish, however, that her bonnet were of a more fashionable style. It was a little old and didn't quite frame her face in the right way. At least she could deposit it into the hands of a servant before the duchess would have a chance to make a judgment on the state of her wardrobe.

She looked up to see Benjamin smiling at her. Blast it, he'd been watching as she mangled her dress, and clearly found it amusing.

"You needn't be nervous, Miss Blake," he said, using her proper name in Becky's presence, though the way he looked at her was far from proper. "I told you, the two of you will get along splendidly."

Phoebe nodded, appreciative of his reassurance, though it did little to calm her nerves. They were only a few blocks from Grosvenor Square now, so she decided to focus on her surroundings rather than think of all the things that could go wrong over tea with a duchess. Things like spilling tea on herself, or worse, on Her Grace; knocking over the entire tea-cart and breaking all the Wedgewood china; or God forbid she slip and

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announce that she'd fallen in love with the woman's brother in the last four days of their acquaintance. Yes, that would be far worse than breaking a few replaceable pieces of china.

"Here we are!" Benjamin announced as the barouche rolled to a stop in front of Ashbury Manor. The Palladian-style mansion loomed tall above them, and Phoebe had to swallow her stomach back into place. There were three stories that Phoebe could count, a two-sided staircase that was hidden by a massive brick wall, and columns that reminded her of the sketches she'd seen of the Parthenon in Greece.

In a word: intimidating.

Benjamin helped her down to the street and she could hear Becky hop to the street on her own behind them. They proceeded up the left staircase and the door opened before they even had a chance to knock.

"Lord Glastonbury," the very erect butler intoned.

Self-consciously, Phoebe pulled her own shoulders back and straightened her spine. If the duchess expected such uprightness from her staff, Phoebe wondered what she might expect of her brother's future wife.

Future wife? Oh, dear, where did that come from? Of course, she wanted more than anything to be Benjamin's wife, but after four days, even *she* realized the notion was a bit premature. She must put it from her mind, lest she slip and announce their betrothal accidentally. Their non-existent betrothal, that was.

"May I take your things, miss?"

She handed over her pelisse and bonnet, then bid Becky goodbye in a silent exchange of knowing glances, and walked with Benjamin down the hall to the grandest of grand drawing rooms.

The entire space was decorated in cream with regal gold accents. The floor-to-ceiling windows at the end of the gallery seemed a million miles away, the room was so long. Canaries chirped in their gilded cage, which stood in the center of the room. There were two designated sitting areas, both with identical furniture and both set up in the exact same way. The room was a masterpiece of symmetry and opulence.

Phoebe faltered a little as they crossed the threshold and moved to the closest sitting area. The duchess had yet to arrive, so it was just the two of them for the time being.

“Lovely birds, aren’t they?” Phoebe commented, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt.

“Only the loveliest for my sister,” he replied, rising from the seat he had just sunk into and sauntering to the cage.

Phoebe was distracted for a moment by the slight curve of his bottom under his tight-fitting coat, and the way his muscular legs moved beneath a pair of snug tan breeches.

“Would you like to hold one?”

“Hold one?” she choked out. “What if it pecks at me?”

Benjamin laughed and waved her over. “They’re tame, Phoebe. Come.”

She did as she was bid with a hint of reluctance. She wasn’t known for her adeptness with animals, but she supposed if Benjamin were there to assist, she might be all right.

As she approached, Benjamin reached a gentle hand into the cage and closed it around one of the bright yellow birds. It struggled for only a moment before it realized it was in good hands. Then he unclenched his fist, leaving it cupped slightly, cradling

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the small bird.

“Why does he not fly away?” Phoebe wondered, reaching a tentative finger out to pet him.

“*She*,” Benjamin corrected, “has had her wings clipped, for her own safety, of course.”

“Ah . . . like the ravens at the Tower. Is it painful for them?”

“Far less painful than getting loose and flying head-first into those windows. Besides, it’s only temporary. When she molts, they’ll have to clip them all over again.”

“May I hold her?”

Phoebe met Benjamin’s soft gaze and felt the color rise to her cheeks. The looks he gave her were so intimate they tended to reduce her insides to mush. She hated to get her hopes up for fear she might be let down, but her instincts told her a proposal might not be too far in the offing.

Benjamin carefully transferred the bird to her cupped hands, taking care to brush lightly against the exposed skin of her wrist before he pulled back.

“If you don’t stop that,” she whispered, “I’ll never be able to look your sister in the eye.”

“Stop what?” Benjamin asked, a playful smile lighting his dark eyes.

“Being so . . . *familiar* with me.”

“Why? Don’t you like it?” His voice lowered to a gravelly whisper and he leaned in closer, close enough that she could smell the distinct scent of his cologne. It was sharp and manly, and it made her feel . . . *tingly* inside.

“I like it very much,” she replied, matching his whisper. “That is the problem.” Desperate to change the subject before the duchess came upon them, she asked, her voice noticeably shaky, “Why does this one not

sing?”

“Because she is a female. Typically, only the males sing.”

“Typically?”

“Yes.” He paused and captured her chin gently in his hand. “There are exceptions, though. Many of the females can sing . . . with the right coercion, of course.”

Phoebe wasn’t exactly sure what Benjamin was talking about, but she had a sinking feeling they were no longer on the subject of birds. Instinct very clearly told her that much. And his lips confirmed it as he swept low, like a bird of prey, and captured her lips.

If it weren’t for the slight flutter of the bird’s clipped wings in her hands, she might have forgotten all about the little animal. Benjamin’s kiss was so deep, so distracting, it was a wonder she had any wits about her at all.

She opened her mouth, allowed him to deepen the kiss. Their tongues mingled and teased and—

“Benjamin!”

“Ah!” Phoebe jumped what felt like thirty feet off the floor at the reproachful sound in Benjamin’s sister’s tone. But she didn’t have much time to dwell on it, for the little bird had taken a fright as well.

Or perhaps Phoebe had simply lost her grip on the poor thing when she jumped. Either way, her fingers had turned to butter, and the bird struggled in her hands. It seemed as though the entire world slowed as she watched the canary slip between her hands. Phoebe shrieked that the bird couldn’t fly, and she reached out to try to grab it.

But another voice, a soothing, calm voice was saying, “It’s all right, darling,” as the bird fluttered lamely above the ground.

Phoebe gasped for breath. Good Lord, she’d

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almost killed the duchess's bird!

She stood there, unable to move, and saw a blur of black and crimson bend down before her, then appear right in front of her. As her heart slowed, her eyes focused on the woman staring back at her.

Phoebe had seen the duchess before, of course, at the Stapleton Ball and the Sheffield Musicale, though they'd never spoken. They didn't quite run in the same circles . . . until now, she supposed.

The duchess was beautiful. Strikingly so, with her jet black hair and black eyes, olive skin so smooth Phoebe had an urge to reach out and touch it to see if it was real, and a dress that Phoebe was sure many women would kill to wear for just one night, let alone an afternoon at home, in their own parlor.

Phoebe opened her mouth to make her apologies for nearly killing the little bird that now sat contentedly on her mistress's forefinger. But she stopped herself. All of this had happened because Benjamin decided to kiss her in a most inappropriate location. Was it her fault she'd been startled?

She supposed she could have stopped the kiss, but—no, she could not have. The king's marching band could not have caused her to pull her lips from Benjamin's in that moment.

Goodness, he'd turned her into a wanton woman!

"Miss Blake, Maddy is just fine. You needn't look so panicked."

"Maddy?" she parroted inanely.

The duchess smiled and returned the bird to her cage, perching her on a little swing next to another identical canary. How in the world did she tell them all apart? There was only one with any visible markings to distinguish it from the others.

“She’s named for the island she comes from. Madeira. Though we tend to know it more for the wine than the birds.”

“Miss Blake, may I introduce my sister, Katherine, Duchess of Weston.”

Finally, in a sudden moment of clarity, Phoebe was able to gain full control of her faculties and dipped into a curtsy before the duchess.

“Oh, good heavens, Miss Blake,” the duchess said. “While I admire your manners, I do not ever want you to dip before me again.” This was delivered as a command, but there was a hint of humor in the woman’s black eyes. “Besides,” she continued, turning what one could only refer to as a *meddling eye* onto her brother, “we are going to be great friends, Miss Blake, and dare I hope—”

“No, you may not,” Benjamin cut in with a warning glance at his sister and a wink for Phoebe.

Clearly, he meant to prevent Phoebe from further embarrassment by curtailing his sister’s thoughts.

The duchess laughed and then moved behind her brother to give him a little shove. “Fine. Now go,” she said. “Miss Blake and I have much to learn about one another if we’re going to go about the task of becoming . . . *friends*.”

Benjamin pulled his sister along with him to the door, leaving Phoebe to stand alone by the birdcage. He whispered something to the duchess that Phoebe couldn’t quite make out, but she assumed it was a warning of some sort. He left a moment later after one last smoldering look for Phoebe over the top of his sister’s head.

And then she was alone with the duchess, who, truth be known, looked positively ravenous for gossip.

Chapter 7

“Well, well, well,” the Duchess of Weston said as she glided across the room to Phoebe. How did she do that? The woman must have wheels on her feet, for it seemed impossible that one could walk without an ounce of bounce in their step.

Phoebe stammered and stuttered as she said, “Please accept my apologies, my lady, for . . . *everything*.”

“Apologies?” The woman grabbed her hands and led her to the sitting area. When they sat, their posture was close and familiar, as if they’d been friends for years. Phoebe wasn’t sure whether it made her uncomfortable or set her at ease to have the woman’s knees bumping hers, her hands still clasped tightly in her grip. “My dear Miss Blake—may I call you Phoebe?”

Phoebe nodded. “Of course, Your Grace.”

“Then you shall call me Kat! Now, my dear Phoebe, there are no apologies necessary. As you see, Maddy is just fine.”

They both turned to the cage to see Maddy still nuzzling the identical bird on the little perch.

“I thought she couldn’t fly. Your brother had just told me all about the wing clipping—”

“It only *hinders* their ability to fly, Phoebe. It doesn’t incapacitate them.”

Phoebe smiled a little. “That would have been nice to know before I went into hysterics over the little thing.”

Kat erupted into laughter and then jumped from the sofa, releasing Phoebe's hands as she did. "I'm going to ring for tea. Are you hungry? Cook makes the most exceptional lemon cake . . ."

She chattered on until the maid came to take her instruction and then returned to the sofa beside Phoebe.

"Phoebe," she said, leaning in and dropping her voice to a whisper. "I don't mean to pry, but I must know . . . was that the first kiss my brother has given you?"

Lord above, this woman was forward. Not at all what Phoebe would have expected from the Duchess of Weston. At balls and such, she seemed so poised and elegant. The lady before her was lively and vibrant and nosy. And waiting for an answer.

Phoebe gulped, unsure of whether to confide in Kat about her intimate relations with her brother, but she wasn't much of a liar. Finally, after a long pause, Phoebe shook her head.

The duchess squealed and startled Phoebe to jump. "I knew it. Oh, Phoebe, my brother is smitten with you, I can tell. He even asked me about you the other day. He has never done that. Never!"

A maid appeared in the doorway, pushing a shiny, silver tea-cart, loaded with fine china and a large cake. Phoebe's stomach grumbled rather loudly, but thankfully Kat was too busy, instructing the maid on where to leave the cart, to hear. Their meager funds didn't allow for very filling foods. And it was her mother who needed the hearty meats and breads. There was an upside to living on a diet of mostly broth for a year, though; Phoebe had lost at least a stone, leaving her body slimmer and more fashionable. It was unfortunate she didn't have very fashionable dresses to accompany it.

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“Now,” said Kat, returning to the sofa and handing over a large slice of lemon cake, “I hope you won’t think me too forward, but it is my hope to gain an understanding of your affections towards my brother.”

Phoebe had taken a small bite of the cake, but it somehow lodged itself in her throat. She coughed, the duchess offered her a cup of tea, and finally she was able to swallow the cake down. However, she still couldn’t quite believe the duchess wished for her to confide in her so soon. She’d only known the man a few days. True, she fancied herself in love with him already, but who wouldn’t? He was quite the most perfect man alive. As a matter of fact, there were probably a dozen other girls pining away for him at this moment. And perhaps he even called on them, too! It wasn’t as if they’d made any promises to one another.

She looked up to find Kat staring at her with an intensity that made her want to either laugh or flee—she wasn’t quite sure which. Either way, Phoebe could not remain silent. “I-I find that I enjoy your brother’s company quite a bit. He is most kind and . . . solicitous. He seems to be a man of great intelligence and ambition, and . . .”

Katherine’s brows rose in a skeptical arch. “Solicitous?”

Phoebe felt her lips twitch. What a ridiculous word to use in regard to the man she thought she might be falling in love with . . . or perhaps had *already* fallen in love with. She started to laugh and so did the duchess, and Phoebe thought that was, perhaps, the happiest she had been in a very long time.

“All right, Phoebe, the truth. If we are to be friends, there must be complete honesty between us, which is why I’m going to tell you a secret of my own.”

Phoebe felt the excitement of sharing secrets

bubble up inside of her. Becky had been her only friend for the last year, but there were no secrets there to share. It was their commiseration that brought them together.

But this was entirely different, and, oh, so exciting!

A wide smile broke out on Kat's red lips, and she took a breath that made Phoebe feel as if she were in a play, waiting for the main character to make her announcement that would add an intriguing twist to the plot.

At last she opened her mouth and said, "I'm going to have a baby!"

For a brief moment it occurred to Phoebe how odd it was for her to feel so very excited for this woman she barely knew to be having a baby. But she couldn't stop herself from throwing her arms around her and squealing with delight at the news.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Kat!" Phoebe said as they pulled away from one another.

"Yes, I know," the duchess replied, and then, as if they hadn't just been squealing and bouncing up and down on the sofa, she straightened her spine and sobered her expression before leveling Phoebe with a serious stare. "Now, it's your turn."

Phoebe swallowed and tried to acclimate to the sudden change of pace. The duchess could be a confusing woman.

And then, out of her confusion, she said the one thing she had promised herself she wouldn't say during this visit: "I am in love with your brother."

"Care to join me on a shopping trip?"

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William looked up from his desk, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Do I *look* like a woman? Of course I don’t want to go shopping with you.”

Benjamin laughed and sauntered over the threshold. The study at Ashbury Manor was about as masculine a study as Ben had ever seen. Dark walls, dark wood furniture, dark, solid wood paneling on the ceiling. And it smelled like wood, too. Benjamin wondered if he’d come back with sticky sap on his fingers if he touched anything.

“Not even for an engagement ring, *Duckie*?” he asked, approaching his brother-in-law’s desk.

The pencil Will had been holding dropped to the desk and made a clacking sound as it bounced to its final resting place. “Dear God,” he muttered, staring back at Ben with wide eyes. “You’re going to propose? To whom?”

“Not quite yet,” Ben told him. “But soon . . . to Miss Blake. I have some things to take care of first, but . . .”

William was already up and making his way to the sidebar. He poured two generous helpings of brandy into snifters and brought one to Ben before taking a seat in the large armchair beside him.

“I thought Mr. Potter had a bid in for the girl as well.”

“I have a feeling when Mr. Potter called on Miss Blake the other day, he realized she was not the one.”

“The one to what?” Will wondered.

“The one to save him from financial ruin. I’ve done some research in the last few days to find out what, if anything, I was up against, and discovered that Mr. Potter is almost as poor as Miss Blake. Though one wouldn’t know it. Clearly, he still has available credit, but not for long, the way I’ve seen him squandering his

money at the tables the last few nights.”

“And what were *you* doing at the tables?”

Benjamin chuckled. “Nothing, other than keeping an eye on the two troublemakers I’m forced to call my brothers.”

“That bad?”

“They’ll grow out of it, like the rest of us did. I just have to make sure they don’t drain the family coffers in the meantime.”

Ben took a long sip of the brandy, savoring the perfect balance of fruit and wood. When Will shifted in his chair and cleared his throat, he knew the dreaded question was coming.

“You haven’t told her yet, have you?” Will asked.

Ben shook his head. “There hasn’t been an opportunity yet. But, I will. I must, before I propose.”

“And what if she doesn’t take it well?”

He had considered that possibility a hundred times over the last few days. It was possible she would hate him forever if she knew. For God’s sake, he had killed her father! He hoped the remorse he felt, the penance he’d paid for his sins in the form of gut-wrenching guilt, would be enough to convince her he’d never actually meant to kill the baron. He’d simply wanted to teach him a lesson about honor.

God, that sounded pompous even to his own self. But that was what he’d thought at the time, and he couldn’t change what had already happened. He could only try to fix his mistakes.

And wouldn’t his marrying her count for something? He could pay off all their debts, set her mother up for life in a lovely manor home near their own estate in Kent, even provide security for her little maid, who, he noticed, seemed to be more than just a

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maid to Phoebe. He could give her the security she'd had with her father times ten.

"I suppose I'll have to cross that bridge when I get to it, my friend." He stood and placed the snifter on the desk. "So will you come with me or not?"

William rolled his eyes, but proceeded to stand and place his own snifter beside Ben's.

"Fine," he sighed. "Lord knows you should have someone with a relic of taste to help you pick out the ring."

A couple hours later Benjamin returned to Ashbury Manor to collect Phoebe and take her home. He wasn't sure what he expected when it came to her relationship with his sister, but he certainly did not expect to find them sprawled in the middle of the drawing room floor, giggling their heads off.

It was obvious, as much from their behavior as the empty bottle of apple brandy next to them, that they had been drinking.

"Having fun, ladies?"

"Oh! Benjamin, I'm so glad you brought Miss Blake—Phoebe—to play with me today. She isn't nearly as stuffy or pretentious as those other women I'm forced to spend time with."

"I see you've introduced her to your favorite beverage," he commented, coming down to his haunches before them. "Kat, are you sure you should be overindulging in spirits in your . . . *condition*." He whispered the last part, though he had a feeling his sister had already told Phoebe of her pregnancy.

"Oh, it's all right, she knows," Kat confirmed. "And don't worry, I haven't had nearly as much as Miss Blake. You should probably take her home, though I'm reluctant to let her go. Phoebe! Phoebe!" she called to a bleary-eyed Miss Blake. "Will you come

to see me again?”

Phoebe nodded, though the action seemed like it may have been too much for her, if her suddenly green pallor was any indication. He might have found it humorous if Miss Blake were simply tipsy, but his blasted sister had gotten the woman so foxed, he wasn't sure he could take her home right away.

But now what was he to do with her? A carriage ride was out of the question, unless he wanted repurposed lemon cake all over the fine leather seats of his barouche. He wasn't sure she could stay upright long enough to take a walk, though. The only real option was to have her sleep it off in one of the guest bedrooms upstairs.

“Katherine, I'm taking her upstairs.”

“Upstairs?” his sister exclaimed, seeming scandalized.

“Not for *that!*” he replied as he scooped Phoebe into his arms. She immediately nuzzled against his neck and groaned. “She needs to sober up before I can take her home, thank you very much. Which room is likely to have a clean chamberpot in it?”

Katherine scrambled to her feet and followed after Ben. She seemed far less drunk than she had a minute earlier. “The fern room on the second floor.”

“The fern room?”

“Yes. I've renamed all the rooms after plants. What do you think?”

“I think you're mad, and I think you're even madder for doing this to my future fiancée.”

A little gasp of excitement came from his sister.

“Oh, Ben, really? You're going to marry her?”

“Shhh! If she'll have me, yes. Now, I'm going to go put her down, and then I'll be back. You and I need to have a talk.”

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“About the wedding? Oh, yes, I’ve already so many ideas!”

“No. About what you’ve done to her!”

Katherine didn’t flinch at the anger in his whisper. She merely smiled sweetly at him and said, “I did it for you. I thought if I got her a little tipsy, she might be willing to tell me more about what she knows of her father’s death.”

Ben stared back at his sister, who continued to smile at him, clearly waiting for him to clap her on the back and say “Well done, sis!” *That* was not going to happen.

“Kat, what the devil does it matter what she knows? Please, stop meddling in my affairs—”

“You’re the one who brought her here!” she shot back.

“Yes, for a nice afternoon visit, not a drunken party where you try to squeeze useless information from her.”

“How was I to know she would take so to the brandy?”

“Now you’re calling her a glutton—”

“No!”

“Katherine Wetherby Hart, I don’t care that you’re a duchess, you’re still my little sister, and I wouldn’t have a single apprehension about taking you over my knee. You will apologize to Miss Blake as soon as she’s coherent enough to understand you.”

Ben stalked off then, leaving his sister in the middle of the hallway, her mouth hanging open in dismay. What had she been thinking, anyway? And what good would it have done to know what Phoebe knew? He already knew that, didn’t he?

He found the “fern room” a few minutes later. True to its name, the chamber was done entirely in

green of varying shades. Good Lord. If she didn't throw up from the brandy, she would surely throw up from the color. But it would have to do, since Ben's arms were growing tired.

He laid her on the bed and flipped the counterpane from the other side to cover her up. She looked so innocent lying there with her pale eyelashes resting on her cheeks, and all her little freckles sprinkling her nose. She was adorable and beautiful, and Ben wanted nothing more than to curl up with her in that bed.

However, he knew better, and so he kissed her on the forehead, intending to leave the room. But before he could get very far—he had barely lifted his head from her forehead—she reached a limp hand out to grab onto the fabric of his coat, the coat that hid a stunning emerald ring inside.

"Shhh," he cajoled. "Get some rest, love. I'll be back for you in a bit. You just need to sleep off some of the brandy you drank."

"What time . . . is it?"

Ben pulled out his watch fob to check the time, though he wasn't sure she'd be coherent enough to understand him.

"Just past five o'clock."

"My mother. She'll be worried."

He hadn't even considered that Lady Grimsby might wonder where her daughter had gone off to. "I'll send Becky back in my carriage. Now go to sleep."

Phoebe closed her eyes obediently, and Benjamin slipped from the room. He started to make his way to the kitchen, where he was sure Becky would be keeping company with the other servants, but then an idea struck him.

Perhaps *he* should go to Blakeny House himself.

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This could be his opportunity to come clean with Lady Grimsby and, depending on how well that went, perhaps ask for Phoebe's hand. Surely, if her mother was able to get past what had happened, Phoebe would be able to do so, as well.

He changed the course of his direction and made his way to the mews to collect his carriage, and then set out in the direction of Blakeny House.

When he arrived, though, it didn't seem as if anyone was home. Curious, he approached the door and knocked. Would Lady Grimsby answer her own door in the absence of Becky? They really needed another servant or two. Or ten.

After a few minutes, there was no answer, but Benjamin wasn't quite willing to give up. If Lady Grimsby was home, he wanted to speak with her.

He turned the handle on the door, which someone had left carelessly unlocked, and moved into the foyer.

"Lady Grimsby?" he called to no answer. Perhaps she truly was not at home.

He was about to walk back through the front doorway when he heard a thump from the floor above him. It could have simply been one of those old-house noises, but Ben didn't think so. Someone was home, and if it was Lady Grimsby, he needed to assure the woman of her daughter's safety.

He climbed the stairs and followed the thumping to a closed door on the left side of the small hallway. He raised his fist to knock, but the door came flying open before he had the chance. There was an awkward pause during which Benjamin tried to come to terms with what he saw.

"Afternoon, Lord Glastonbury," said Colonel Wallace. "Didn't expect to see you here, too."

Chapter 8

“Colonel Wallace?” Ben stared at the man, dumbfounded to find him, not just in Phoebe’s home but in Lady Grimsby’s bedchamber.

He looked past him to see a frightened and dejected-looking woman sitting on the bed. Her dark hair was mussed and matted, and tears streaked her cheeks. Thankfully, and much to his surprise, she was fully covered in a modest robe.

What the hell was going on here?

“You might want to give her a few minutes,” Wallace said. “We had a raucous time, didn’t we, Lucy?”

Benjamin thought he might be sick to his stomach. Whatever was going on here, the lady didn’t like it, and neither did he.

“Get out,” Ben growled, knowing that if Wallace said one more word, he might not be able to keep his fist from connecting with the man’s jaw.

Mercifully, the man did as he was told, mumbling nonsense as he left. Ben waited until he heard the front door close before he moved to Lady Grimsby. She wasn’t looking at him; he wasn’t even sure she realized he was there, so she jumped a little when he put his hand on her shoulder.

“Lady Grimsby,” he said carefully.

She looked up at him, a haunted expression on her face. Good Lord, did Phoebe know what was happening under her own roof? Surely, she wouldn’t allow her mother to carry on in such a way. He could only thank

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God he hadn't brought her home with him.

"My name is Benjamin Wetherby," he told her. "I'm a . . . friend of your daughter Phoebe's."

At Phoebe's name, Lady Grimsby turned panicky. "She's not here, is she?" she asked, her eyes wide and frightened.

Ben shook his head. "No, she's with my sister. I came to tell you she is safe, and also to ask you something very important. But I can come back another time if—"

"No!" She grabbed on to his coat sleeve.

"Please . . ."

She stood then and gestured to the small settee on the far wall. He accompanied her there and sat down beside her, knowing he could never reveal the reason he was really there. At least not today, not now. Not after whatever Colonel Wallace had done to her.

But should he pry? Did he *want* to pry? For Phoebe's sake, he should. If he could do something to help her mother and keep Wallace away from them, well, he needed to do it.

"I know you don't know me, ma'am, but I am courting your daughter."

"Oh." The woman's hand flew to her chest. "I had no idea."

"Your daughter's been hiding us from one another." He understood why now. All of her excuses about her mother being out whenever he came to call . . . he should have seen through it, but he never could have guessed the woman was up here wasting away, among other things. He had to get to the bottom of this, and there wasn't time to beat about the bush. "Is Colonel Wallace a friend of yours?"

Lady Grimsby dropped her eyes, which were identical to Phoebe's, to her lap, where she fidgeted

with the fabric of her dressing gown. There was such a long pause; Benjamin thought she wasn't going to answer. But then she opened her mouth to speak, and her voice shook as she tried to control her emotion.

"When my husband died a year ago, it was all we could do to keep the debt collectors from banging down our door. I had no idea my husband had been so . . . loose with our funds. We had always had nice things, a house full of servants. I have no idea how he maintained our lifestyle with so much debt hanging above his head."

"I would wager he was robbing Peter to pay Paul, and round and round he went. It's not uncommon."

The baroness nodded. "I suppose you're right, but he left us in quite a dire situation. That's where Colonel Wallace comes into play."

Benjamin took a deep breath. He had a feeling this was not going to be an easy story to hear, and even worse for her to tell.

"My husband lost a significant amount of money to Wallace in a bet. The first time he came to visit, I was . . . well, better off than I am now. This wretched state of melancholy began once I'd made my deal with him."

"Deal?" Benjamin prodded, eager to get to the heart of the matter.

She nodded her head once, and a single tear slid down her cheek. She brushed it away before continuing. "Phoebe has no idea how close we were to being carted away to debtors' prison. It could have been a matter of weeks, maybe even days. Either way, 'A desperate disease requires a dangerous remedy,' does it not, Mr. Wetherby?"

Ben didn't bother to correct her on his name. There would be plenty of time for her to learn he was more than a mere *mister*. He gave her an infinitesimal nod so

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she would keep going, though he wasn't sure, in this case, that he agreed with Fawkes's quote.

Her gaze turned away from him, toward the window, as she began the next part of her confession. "Wallace offered to help us with our debts, but of course everything comes at a price."

"Right. So he insisted you—"

"No, not me. Not at first. The colonel wanted Phoebe."

Benjamin's stomach turned. That no-good, lascivious bastard had thought to use Phoebe in exchange for debt payment. Dear God, what happened to giving out of the kindness of one's heart?

"I told him he couldn't have her, but that he could have me instead. The offer wasn't as appealing and his generous offering became a little less generous as a result, but if it meant staying in our home, staying out of debtors' prison, that was all that mattered."

"Does Phoebe know any of this?"

The woman's lips began to quiver. "Nothing. She thinks the paltry coins she's thrown at a few debtors here and there is what has saved us all this time. She knows nothing, and we must keep it that way. *Please*, Mr. Wetherby," she begged. "I don't know what I would do if she ever found out."

"I'm still not sure I understand how you've kept it from her all this time."

"It's a matter of timing and discretion. Whenever Phoebe goes out, she takes Becky, and I'm all alone. It's a lot of work on Colonel Wallace's part. Several times a week, he stops by. If Phoebe is home, he treats it as a social call. If not, he sees himself here, to my room."

Which explained the man's odd behavior at the Stapleton Ball the other night. He had left as soon as he

made sure Phoebe was fully ensconced in the festivities and wouldn't be home for a while.

Benjamin had a great deal of trouble reconciling the fact that all this was his fault, even if indirectly. If he hadn't ever called out that blasted baron at the table, the man would still be here today. He hadn't been an honorable man and he'd been lousy with money, but he'd found ways to keep them afloat: to keep his wife and daughter in the life they were accustomed to, the life they deserved.

They certainly didn't deserve this. Destitution. *Prostitution*. The guilt pressed in on Benjamin, threatening to suffocate him as he thought of all the horrors these women had been forced to go through over the last year.

He thought of his life in America, and the guilt grew even stronger. All the while they'd been suffering, thanks to his idiotic actions, he'd been frolicking with his mistress about New York, attending party after party, assimilating himself into the American way of life.

It was time to grow up now and take responsibility for what he'd done. He couldn't admit to his mistake, not now. He wanted to marry Phoebe, but he wanted to marry her because he cared for her. If she knew his secret, she would think he was marrying her out of guilt.

However, he could right all the wrongs that had been forced upon these unfortunate women, starting with Colonel Wallace. As soon as all that was taken care of, he would marry Phoebe.

"Lady Grimsby," he said at last, turning to face her. "I would like to help, if I may. But, unlike Wallace, I want nothing in return . . . except, perhaps, your daughter's hand in marriage. If she'll have me, of

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course.”

Lady Grimsby’s eyes widened and then flooded with tears, which he accepted as her blessing. Having been big brother to Katherine, dealing with emotional women was fairly familiar territory to him. So he didn’t shy away when she started to sob, but rather pulled her into his embrace.

Once she had calmed down, Benjamin stood to leave, feeling better about himself and the situation. He hadn’t revealed the truth to her, but he was going to make it right. Hopefully, that counted for more than a mere apology in the long run.

“Mr. Wetherby,” the baroness said, stopping him before he walked out her bedchamber door, “is it possible to keep this visit between us?”

“You read my mind, my lady,” he replied. There were too many details of this meeting that would have to be omitted, and that might make it difficult to keep their stories straight. “I will see to your financial state post haste, and when all that is out of the way, I will talk to Phoebe.”

The baroness smiled, and Benjamin had the distinct feeling that was the first time she’d done so in a very long time. Then Benjamin tipped his hat and left Blakeny House to go and wake his future bride from her drunken stupor.

Phoebe woke up in a strange room with a terrible headache that was only worsened by the horrific shades of green that accosted her vision. Dear God, it was hideous!

What in the world had happened to her? It was dark out already, but the chamber was lit with candles and a

roaring fire. She jogged her memory, trying to retrace her steps.

“Oh, no!” She sat up abruptly in the plush bed. “I can’t be . . . can I?” Flinging her legs over the edge, she hopped down to the floor and began pacing the room as the events of that afternoon came back to her.

Unfortunately, she didn’t get very far before she was forced back to the bed by the pounding in her head and the roiling in her stomach.

A chamberpot sat on its stand nearby, and she peeked inside to make sure it was empty. There was a possibility she would need it soon.

With a groan, she leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. *Oh, that won’t do!* She felt as if she was spinning on the fastest of carousels and the only way to keep off of it was to open her eyes. Which made her head hurt.

Lord, what had she done to herself?

No, what had *Kat* done to her?

Here, Phoebe, you must try some of this! It is my favorite . . . Oh, have some more, Phoebe, isn’t it wonderful? . . . How about another glass, Phoebe . . .

If she didn’t know better, she would have thought the duchess tried to get her foxed on purpose. But she would never do that, would she?

She would have shook the thoughts from her head, but she knew the physical act would have her face-down in the chamberpot, so she held still and tried to focus on other things. Things like, where in the world was she? And was anyone going to come and retrieve her? Did her mother know where she was? Had Becky been taken home? And what *time* was it, for heaven’s sake? Though her mother claimed to never be hungry, she still needed to be fed. Heaven knew she wouldn’t do it on her own.

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Phoebe would have left the room in search of someone if she thought she could make it more than two feet past the door. Frustrated, she drummed her fingers on the bedside table. She had drummed them three times when, finally, the door to the chamber opened and Benjamin poked his head in.

“You’re awake!” he said, a genuine smile coming to his lips.

And that was it. That was all it took to remind Phoebe of the horrific mistake she’d made that afternoon. No, no, no, no, no! How could she have told the duchess she was falling in love with Benjamin? *How?* What on earth had possessed her in the first place?

Suddenly, she couldn’t find her tongue, and the queasy feeling in her stomach got worse. Much, much worse.

Don’t, Phoebe! Do not throw up now!

He was coming towards her, but she couldn’t stop it, so she held up a hand to stop *him* instead, at the same moment reaching for the chamberpot and burying her head as deeply in it as she could without getting vomit on her face. Tears sprung to her eyes, though in her current state she couldn’t tell the real reason for them. Any number of things could have brought her to cry: the fact that she was tossing up her accounts in front of the man who was courting her; the stinging, scratchy feeling at the back of her throat; or the incessant pounding in her head.

“I will never . . . *ever* . . . have another sip of apple brandy for as long as I live.” Her face was still buried in the chamberpot, which she thought more favorable than meeting Benjamin’s eyes. But when she heard him chuckle, and heard his footsteps near, she lifted her head, horrified.

“Don’t,” she said, not wishing for him to come closer lest he get a look inside the pot.

But he didn’t stop his advancement. He came right to her, took the chamberpot from her hands and placed it back on its stand. Then he brought her a wet cloth from the washbasin to clean her face.

“You forget I have three younger siblings. I’ve had to take care of them in this sort of state many times before. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“It most certainly is,” she rebutted, still wondering if Kat had told him what she’d said earlier that day. “I can’t believe I allowed myself to drink so much.”

“But it’s not your fault,” came another voice from the doorway. Phoebe glanced up to see the duchess gliding over the threshold, dressed for the evening in a blue-green gown that clashed horribly with the room. She turned to Benjamin and said, “You know better than to be alone in here with Miss Blake.”

“Says the woman who got you drunk today,” he said to Phoebe, bringing a smile to her lips. “Fine, I shall leave, but only if you assure me you don’t have a bottle of apple brandy stuffed in your garter.”

“Oh, get out, Ben!” Kat said, swatting him with her gloved hand.

“You will see she gets home, Kat?” he asked, his expression turning serious all of a sudden.

“Of course. Now, go.”

Ben winked at Phoebe, told her to get some rest and assured her she would see him on the morrow.

Part of her wanted him to stay—the part of her that wanted to be with him always, every moment of every day, the part that just couldn’t get enough of him. But, of course, the part that had just thrown up and could barely hold her head erect wanted him to go . . . far away.

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As soon as the door was shut, Kat nestled on the edge of the bed next to Phoebe. “Do you hate me?” she asked, her lovely face twisted into a grimace.

“Of course I don’t hate you. Why would I?”

“I never should have made you drink all of that. You’ve probably never even had spirits before, have you?”

Phoebe shook her head. “But while I must admit this is probably the most painful physical experience of my life . . . I did have fun this afternoon.”

A wide smile broke out on Kat’s lips. “Good. Then you forgive me?”

“For getting me drunk, yes. However, I must know, Kat . . . did you tell him what I said to you this afternoon?”

“Oh, Phoebe, I would never do such a thing to you. Believe me, your secret is safe with me.”

There was a slight pause, and Phoebe knew there was something more. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what it was, but at the same time, she was certain she would find out anyhow.

“Though I dare say,” the duchess continued predictably, “you will soon have the chance to profess your love to him yourself!” She giggled briefly and then sobered, all vestiges of humor disappearing with alarming immediacy. “However, that is all I will say on the matter, so do not try and pry it out of me.”

Chapter 9

When Phoebe arrived home that evening it was to a fully lit house and quiet chatter coming from the parlor.

Though her head still hurt and all she really wanted to do was feed her mother and fall into bed, curiosity won out. After all, she was essentially the head of the household; if there was someone in her home, they were probably there to see her.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sight she saw upon walking into the parlor, though. Her mother. Her mother and Becky. And a fire and food . . .

Phoebe was speechless, and she stood lamely in the doorway, wondering if she'd stumbled upon another world. A dream world where everything seemed to be going her way, the apple brandy incident notwithstanding.

"Oh, miss, we didn't hear you come in!" Becky leapt from the chair and hurried across the room. "Let me take your things."

Phoebe handed over her pelisse and parasol, gloves and bonnet to Becky, but she still couldn't find the words to ask what was going on or why her mother, after a year, had suddenly decided to emerge from her room. "You're eating," was all she managed to get out.

Her mother smiled—*actually smiled!*—and shrugged her shoulders. Then she patted the dusty sofa for Phoebe to come sit by her. She did, her headache and sour stomach all but forgotten by the time she reached her mother. Though there were heavy bags under her mother's eyes and her skin fell limply from her cheekbones and jaw, there was a sparkle to her eyes and a hint of color to her usually stark white pallor.

"Becky's prepared a delicious stew, with real beef."

"Real beef?" Phoebe spun to see Becky, who stood in the doorway, a proud look on her face. Had everyone gone mad? They couldn't afford beef!

"No more mutton at Blakeny House," Becky said. "Only the finest cuts of meat, he said."

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“He? He who?”

“Were you ever going to tell me about your gentleman suitor?”

Phoebe spun back around to face her mother. “I suppose Becky told you about him,” she said.

“She told me his name, and that he sent her home with enough quid to feed us for quite some time.”

Phoebe’s heart stopped, or at least that was what it felt like. He meant to rescue them, to deliver them from ruin. It was amazing, really, how in one moment, with one tiny sentence, a person’s world could be turned upside down . . . or right side up, in this particular case. After a year of living a nightmare, of wondering just how far they could stretch what few pennies they had left, she would be able to rest easily.

“But why didn’t he tell me any of this?” Phoebe wondered. “I saw him not a half hour ago and he said nothing.”

“He wanted it to be a surprise,” Becky confirmed. “Can I bring you a bowl, miss? It’s quite delicious.”

Now she thought about it, she’d had very little to eat today and far too much to drink. A little beef stew sounded like just the thing. Once Becky was gone, on her way to the kitchen, Phoebe turned to her mother, who spoke before she had the chance.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were being courted so earnestly, Phoebe?”

“I would have, it was just that . . . well, I didn’t want to get your hopes up, Mama. I thought to wait until a proposal was in the nearer future—”

“And is it?”

Phoebe sighed. “I certainly hope so, but, Mother, it’s only been a few days. And while Lord Glastonbury is being exceedingly generous—”

“I can handle disappointment, Phoebe,” her mother

said, and Phoebe almost choked. She could handle disappointment? The woman who had lain despondent in her room for a year could handle disappointment?

Of course, Phoebe didn't react to this statement, but merely clamped her lips shut and nodded, just once. "I will remember that in the future then," she finally said.

And then, unable to stop herself after an entire year of not confiding in her mother, Phoebe began to talk: about Benjamin, about Katherine, about the balls and parties, and about Benjamin some more. It wasn't for another hour or so that her mother began to visibly wilt before her. She supposed it wasn't surprising since the woman hadn't sat up properly for more than ten minutes at a time in the last year.

"You're exhausted," Phoebe remarked.

"I am," her mother replied as she grabbed Phoebe's hand, her eyes misty. "But that will change, Phoebe. I promise."

Phoebe gently hugged her mother and then helped her up the stairs to bed. Once she'd tucked her in, she went immediately to her *escritoire*. Paper and ink were expensive, so there wasn't much of it. But if there was one person who deserved to have a page spent on them, it was Benjamin.

Benjamin stared at the mound of correspondence in front of him. It stacked high on his desk and looked rather daunting, if truth be known. He hated to think that a pile of paper could intimidate him so, but he simply dreaded the hours he would have to sit there in his study sorting through it all. Hours that could be spent in the company of the lovely Phoebe Blake.

He looked at the clock. It was far too early to visit,

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anyway, so it was best he keep himself occupied until proper calling hours.

A smile spread his lips wide, from ear to ear, as he thought of the woman he would soon call his bride. He wondered what her reaction had been to his “gift” last night. Next time he gave her a gift, he would be there to see her reaction and reap the reward. But it was good enough for now to know they’d all had a good dinner and were hopefully enjoying a hearty breakfast at that very moment.

Determined to get through his post as quickly as possible, Ben plucked the first letter from the top of the pile. His housekeeper had arranged them with the most recent date at the top. He assumed the ones at the bottom must date back to just after he’d left for America. If they had waited this long for a response, they could wait a few more hours.

Ironically, the first letter he picked up bore the signature of his beloved Phoebe. He laughed that she had thought to send him a letter when she knew he would be calling on her that afternoon. But he opened the missive, anyhow, curious to see what she had to say.

*Dear Benjamin,
Your generosity exceeds all bounds of human
kindness. Thank you.
Affectionately yours,
Phoebe*

Ben smiled at the simplicity of her note, and the intense emotion he felt in receiving her gratitude. He’d never wanted to make someone happy as much as he wanted to make Phoebe happy. And he would do anything and everything in his power just to see her

Jerrica Knight-Catania

smile.

Tucking her note neatly in the top drawer of his desk for safekeeping, he moved on to the second letter in the pile. His brows knit together as he recognized his own family crest emblazoned in the wax seal. It was from his mother.

*Dearest Benjamin,
I must ask that you collect your brothers and
sister, and dare I hope, your betrothed, and
bring them to Ravenscroft Castle as soon as
possible. Your father is not well. The doctor
says it could be a matter of days.
Love,
Your Mother*

Benjamin tried not to panic. He thought he had weeks left, not mere days. Dammit, he should have stayed in Kent with his father! More guilt, thick and suffocating, closed in on him. A whole year he'd spent hiding out, trying to run from his horrid mistake. A whole year he'd missed out on spending time with his father. A whole year he'd spent carousing about New York instead of learning about his inheritance.

Dear God, his inheritance. Money, land, tenants and employees . . . how would he ever survive it? His breaths were coming in short spurts now, but through the haze of his panic, he saw Phoebe's face, and he knew she was the only way he would be able to survive what was ahead. He needed a wife, like his father had said. He needed Phoebe.

Since Becky was busy helping Lady Grimsby

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dress for the day for the first time in a year, Phoebe answered the frantic knock at their front door. On the stoop stood a rather frazzled looking Benjamin. He must have run his hands through his normally perfect coif at least a hundred times.

“Benjamin,” she said, moving aside to allow him entry. “Is everything all right?”

“No.” He turned to her once she had shut the door and took her by the elbows, pulling her close.

She wanted to take a moment to bask in the fresh scent of his cologne and the warmth of his masculine form, but he was bearing down on her with an intensity that made her shiver.

“It’s my father. I must return to Kent at once, with my family.”

“Oh, dear. Benjamin, I’m so very sorry.” Selfishly, she wondered how long he might be gone, but stopped herself before the words made it to her lips.

He stared at her for a moment before pulling her fully into his embrace. “I need to ask you something very important, Phoebe,” he said into her hair.

“Would you like to ask me here or in the parlor over tea?” she asked, her voice muffled in the soft fabric of his overcoat.

She felt his chest rumble with a chuckle and then he pulled away, running a gentle hand over her hair as he did.

“Yes, the parlor, please. I would like to do this the right way.”

Phoebe’s eyes widened, and she looked up to see the tenderness and caring that alighted Benjamin’s face. Good heavens! Was he planning to . . . ?

No, she would not get her hopes up. He could have meant any number of things by his statement of doing things *the right way*.

She walked dazedly to the parlor, Benjamin close on her heels, and then they sat side by side on the sofa.

“Phoebe,” he began, seeming nervous all of a sudden. “I . . . my father . . .”

“Benjamin,” she cut in, trying to set her own nerves aside, “you can tell me anything.”

A smile formed on his lips and in his eyes. “I know I can, which is precisely why I’m here. Phoebe, my father’s most fervent desire is for me to inherit the marquessate . . . having already chosen my marchioness.”

Phoebe’s heart sped until she worried it might leap from her chest. Oh, Lord, this was it. He was going to ask her to marry him.

But what if he wasn’t? Perhaps he was here to tell her he’d chosen someone else. That her station and position in the *ton* just weren’t good enough for someone like him. Which would not have been untrue, Phoebe realized with a sudden sinking in her stomach. She was poor and unconnected, and her father had been a gambler and her mother . . .

Oh, heavens, how would she tell her mother that Benjamin had changed his mind? This was exactly why she’d wanted to keep it a secret until something more definite presented itself.

“I realize,” he was saying, so Phoebe pushed her errant thoughts aside and tried to pay attention, “that we’ve known each other for barely a week—”

“Six days!”

Benjamin gave a little laugh at her interruption. “Six days then. But,” his expression turned serious, “I have never been so certain of anything in my entire life.”

Phoebe heard herself gulp. The sound echoed so

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loudly in her ears that she worried she wouldn't be able to hear him when he asked what she dared to hope he was going to ask. But she did. She heard it loud and clear when he dropped to his knee before her, reached into his coat pocket, and asked, "Phoebe, will you do me the distinct honor of becoming my wife?"

She stared at him dumbfounded, afraid to move or speak for fear she would wake from the most pleasant dream she had ever known. For surely, this could not be real. Moments before, she had been hoping, wishing with all of her might that he would ask her, but now he'd done it, she couldn't quite believe it.

She must have stayed silent for too long, staring at the massive emerald, for he started to ramble on about it being too soon, and he was sorry, but he couldn't imagine his father passing without having met her.

Finally, Phoebe's heartbeat resumed a normal pace, her breathing, too, and she tugged on Benjamin's hands so he would take his seat on the sofa beside her again. She put a hand to his cheek and, in a moment of bravado, leaned in to kiss him. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she figured that must be better than a simple yes.

He returned the kiss, of course, at the same time gathering her in his arms and pulling her to sit on his lap. She breathed in the tangy scent of his shaving cream, feasted on his coffee-tainted lips, and moved her hands over the rigid muscles of his shoulders until she reached his hair. It had been mussed beyond repair when he arrived, so she didn't take any care in running her fingers through it. She felt something harden beneath her bottom and wondered briefly at it before she heard a gasp that was not her own.

Alarmed, they both pulled away from the kiss and Benjamin stood abruptly, forcing Phoebe to her feet as

well. She faltered slightly, but he steadied her and then stepped away.

Phoebe stared at her mother, who didn't seem nearly as scandalized as she might have expected. However, Phoebe felt scandalized enough for both of them—perhaps all three of them—in that moment.

Finally, her mother, using her father's old walking stick, hobbled into the room and walked right to Benjamin. "You must be Lord Glastonbury," she said with a smile.

He nodded. "I am."

"And are you going to marry my daughter?" she asked.

"It is my greatest hope to do so. However," they both turned their gazes to her, "she hasn't given me a *proper* answer yet."

Chapter 10

Benjamin watched Phoebe's scandalized expression as she opened her mouth to answer. Her cheeks blushed an attractive pink, and she avoided eye contact with her mother, but at last she said, "Of course I will marry you, Lord Glastonbury."

Benjamin was about to place the emerald ring he still held in his hand on Phoebe's finger when Becky's voice came from the doorway.

"Pardon me, my lady. There's a visitor here to see you."

"A visitor?" Lady Grimsby cast Benjamin a brief glance that told him everything he needed to know. Colonel Wallace was here. "Please send him in,

Becky.”

Benjamin crossed the room to help Lady Grimsby to the sofa, where she sank down with a grateful sigh. There weren’t a lot of options for seating, so he placed Phoebe on the sofa beside her mother and then took his stance by the fireplace, which he was happy to see had a fire in it today. Colonel Wallace, in all his rotund glory, arrived moments later and stopped short when he took in the picture before him.

Surely, he’d had the impression yesterday that Benjamin had arrived to claim his own payment for debt. The mere thought made him sick, but he’d been too dumbstruck to correct the man when they had met in Lady Grimsby’s bedchamber.

He wanted to kick himself for not trying harder to find the man last night. He’d stopped in at both his clubs and even visited the colonel’s favorite hell, to no avail. He thought of paying a visit to the man’s home, but he did not wish to spark any concern in Mrs. Wallace. The poor woman seemed to have it bad enough as it was, being married to the bastard.

“Lady Grimsby,” Wallace said as he bowed to her, a small drop of spittle escaping when he pronounced the ‘s.’ “It’s been a . . . long time.”

Benjamin narrowed his eyes on the man, who seemed to have grown rather nervous in the last minute. He acknowledged Phoebe first and then Benjamin, who gave no response.

“Indeed, Colonel,” said Lady Grimsby. “Won’t you have a seat?”

Wallace eyed the spindly little chair and Benjamin was sure he was questioning its ability to hold his weight. Ben knew it wasn’t kind to wish ill on others, but he fervently hoped it did not. Regardless of his apprehensions, Wallace made his way to the chair

and sat as gingerly as a man of his particular girth could be expected to.

The next ten minutes were perhaps the most excruciating of Benjamin's life. Uncomfortable glances were tossed back and forth from Lady Grimsby to Wallace, then Wallace to Benjamin, and Benjamin to Lady Grimsby. It was a miracle Phoebe didn't suspect anything, but she went on as if everything was perfect.

And, indeed, it was, wasn't it? They'd not had much time to celebrate their engagement, but Ben's heart was near to bursting with the joy he felt in that moment. As soon as the fat bastard in the spindly chair made his exit, the rest of them would certainly make merry.

However, as the man stood to leave, Benjamin noticed a look pass between him and Lady Grimsby. A look that Ben took to mean "I will be back."

Not if he had anything to do with it.

"Well, ladies, my lord, I must take my leave of you," Wallace said. "Congratulations again on your betrothal."

"I'll walk you out, Colonel." Ben pushed off from the mantel and started across the room.

"Oh, that's not necessary, my lord."

"It's all right. I'm on my way out, anyway."

"You're leaving?" This question came from a distraught-looking Phoebe. He hated to leave her. He had so wanted to celebrate, but there would be time enough for that soon, he hoped. There was a great deal to do before they left for Kent the next morning.

Dammit, he hadn't even told them they were leaving.

"I'll be back later on," he finally decided. "I have some . . . things to take care of this afternoon."

He bowed out of the room and followed

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Wallace down the hall, where Becky waited with their coats, hats and walking sticks. Neither said a word until they were on the street, a safe distance from Blakeny House.

“How much does she owe you?” Ben asked, keeping pace with the colonel and staring straight ahead.

There was a pause, but finally the colonel said, “Two thousand pounds. It was three to start with.”

“I will have the funds transferred immediately . . . with interest.”

The colonel stopped walking and tugged on Benjamin’s arm, forcing him to turn back. “Now, see here, Glastonbury, the lady and I have an agreement—”

“Yes, I know all about your little agreement, Colonel,” Ben said, not bothering to hide the acid in his tone. “And I’m putting a stop to it. They are under my protection now. You will stay away from Blakeny House, and if you so much as breathe a word in Lady Grimsby’s direction, I will see to it that you are returned to the dirt from which you so obviously came.”

“Are you threatening me, my lord?” Wallace asked, putting on an air as if he were affronted.

Hah! As if the man had any right after what he had done.

“You’d better believe I am,” Ben replied, coming within mere inches of the man’s craterous face. “You know, I shouldn’t pay you at all. I think you’ve taken far more than a mere two thousand pounds from Lady Grimsby—”

“I’ve kept them out of debtors’ prison!”

“At what price?” Benjamin’s pulse began to beat violently in his neck. He could feel the blood twitching angrily through his veins. Had this man no morals? No ethics whatsoever? How did he not

understand the distress he had caused over the last year, all because of a measly amount of money?

“It was her idea,” Wallace shot back. “She begged for me to make that bargain with her.” The way his eyes shifted away, and the twitchy way he scratched behind his ear, clearly indicated the man did not tell the truth.

Benjamin’s fists balled at his sides with the strongest desire to punch the man. But they were in the middle of Mayfair on a sunny day. There were far too many people about for Benjamin to want to cause a scene.

Instead, he lowered his voice to what he hoped was a dangerous growl, and said, “You will refrain from *ever* making disparaging remarks about my future mother-in-law again. Is that understood, Colonel?”

The man fidgeted and stuttered, clearly not used to taking orders from others. Especially others who were twenty years his younger. But Ben didn’t feel sorry for him in the least. He just wanted to make sure the man never came within three hundred feet of the Blake women again.

With a scowl, the colonel finally mumbled his acquiescence and then stalked off in the other direction. Ben watched him go, making sure his feet took him in the opposite direction of Blakeny House before finally getting on his way.

Benjamin arrived at Blakeny House just before dinner that night. The sun was setting over the city, casting an orange-yellow glow on Berkeley Square.

He had spent half the afternoon tracking down his brothers, who immediately abandoned their pints of

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ale to go home and begin readying themselves for the journey to Kent. He spent the other half of the afternoon on errands of varying sorts. He called on his sister to inform her of Father's health, then on to his solicitor to see to the transfer of funds to Colonel Wallace, as well as the procurement of a special license. He would have to marry Phoebe soon; they didn't have time to wait for the banns to be read. And finally, he made it to his own lodgings to instruct his valet to pack his trunks. At last, when all that was done, and he had procured a bottle of fine champagne, he returned to Blakeny House.

Hopefully, they wouldn't be too put out to learn they would be leaving in the morning, or that he and Phoebe would marry at the small chapel on the property of Ravenscroft Castle. They didn't have many belongings, so it shouldn't take long to gather them. And neither lady had been out in society for a year, so he doubted Phoebe was expecting a large wedding. Really, there was nothing for him to worry about.

Becky answered the door with a smile and a curtsy as always. Phoebe was close on her heels, beaming ear to ear at him. Lord, she was beautiful, and so very innocent. Ben shuddered to think of Colonel Wallace and all that had gone on in this house. It was important to him—imperative, really—that she maintain her naiveté, for who knew what such knowledge would do to her?

However, this was not the time to dwell on such disturbing facts. They had become engaged that afternoon; it was time for celebration.

"I've brought some champagne," he said, holding up the bottle.

"Champagne! Oh, Benjamin, I'm so glad you came back. We were just sitting down to dinner. Would

you care to join us?”

He needed to be getting back soon, but it couldn't hurt to sit down for a few minutes. “I would love to.”

“I hope you won't mind. Becky being the only servant and all, she usually takes her meals with us.”

Becky, red in the face, leaped to say, “No, no, it's all right, miss, I can eat alone tonight—”

Benjamin laughed. “Of course you'll eat with us, Becky. Now, what are we having?”

It turned out they were dining on roasted chicken, hearty potatoes and glazed carrots. A simple meal, but delicious, and he was sure it was one of the more nutritious suppers they had enjoyed in a very long time.

When they finished with dinner, Benjamin popped the cork on the champagne, and finally found an opportunity to inform them of tomorrow's trip.

“I realize it's rather short notice,” he began, “and perhaps all this is happening more quickly than I might have planned, but we are unfortunately under a great time constraint.”

No one responded; all three of them just stared back at him, blinking, waiting for him to continue. He cleared his throat.

“Right, well, the thing is that my father has so little time, and I must go to him, you understand—”

“Oh, well, of course you must!” Phoebe put in.

He nodded. “Yes, thank you for your understanding, but as it stands, I would like to request that you—and your mother and maid, should they choose—accompany me. To Kent.”

Phoebe's eyes widened, but she didn't actually balk at the suggestion. Not until he gave her the next piece of information.

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“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!” This came from all three women in unison.

“Please,” he continued, holding up his hand against the wrath of the women. “I know I should have said something this morning, but . . .” He tossed a glance at Lady Grimsby, who appeared to understand the silent communication. He’d left sooner than planned that morning to deal with the colonel, and it was something that had to be done, along with the tens of other things he’d had to attend to.

“When will you be married?” asked Lady Grimsby, her demeanor much calmer than her daughter’s.

He looked at Phoebe and smiled, hoping she would be as excited about their hasty wedding as he was. “The day after tomorrow . . . if that suits my bride. I should have the special license before we leave in the morning.”

There was a long moment of silence, during which Benjamin’s palms began to sweat profusely. But finally Phoebe’s panicked expression turned into a bright smile. Ben blew out the breath he’d been holding and reached for her hand. He kissed her knuckles and then stood go.

“I will send a carriage for you in the late morning. I will be off first thing, but I suppose you can take a bit more time getting there than I can.”

Phoebe saw him to the door, and he planted a swift peck to her lips. He wanted more, but he knew if he deepened the kiss, he might not be able to stop. Besides, they would have plenty of time once they were married to share more than just a deep kiss.

“Good night, my love,” he said to her as he stepped onto the stoop, and then, remembering the ring,

turned back to her. “I almost forgot about this. I’m sorry I didn’t have the chance to put it on your finger this morning.” He pulled the ring from his pocket and delighted at the awestruck gasp from his betrothed.

“It’s . . . perfect,” she breathed as her eyes sparkled with tears of happiness.

Benjamin smiled at her and kissed her knuckles before turning to go. He had just gained the sidewalk when he heard a loud and elated squeal come from inside Blakeny House. If he were a woman and not a man of six-and-twenty, he might have squealed as well.

Chapter 11

The next morning was just about as painful a morning as Phoebe had ever experienced in her life. After Benjamin left the night before, they had all sprung into action. There was so much to do beyond simply packing their trunks. Phoebe hadn’t worn her traveling dresses or her riding habit in more than a year, and both hung on her like potato sacks.

However, that was nothing compared to her mother’s clothes. She had barely eaten in the last twelve months, so while Phoebe had lost near a stone, her mother had lost no less than two. Every dress, every gown, *everything*, needed to be altered before she could go out in public.

And so, after measuring her mother and sending her off to bed, Phoebe and Becky stayed up nearly till dawn altering their clothing. There were still many that needed work—there were only so many hours in a day, after all—but they had enough to get them through the

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first few days at Ravenscroft Castle at least. Phoebe hoped there would be time enough to alter the rest once they were there.

It wasn't until just past five in the morning that she and Becky decided to put down their needle and thread and get some sleep. They would have to be up early to pack the trunks and prepare for the journey, but a few hours of slumber might see them through what was sure to be a long day.

It was eight o'clock by the time her mother hobbled into her room, but Phoebe was already awake. She still lay in bed, exhausted, but rather alert and excited in anticipation of the day. It wasn't until she'd lain down in the wee hours of the morning that she'd allowed herself to think on her life, how it had changed so drastically in only a week, and how it would continue to change in the coming days and months.

To see her mother now, up and about, actually waking *her* up for the day, made Phoebe's heart soar. If someone had even suggested the notion the day before, she would have laughed in their face. And if it weren't for the massive emerald weighing her ring finger down now, she might still believe she was in a dream.

"Becky's made breakfast already. Are you hungry?"

"Famished," she replied, thinking of yesterday's breakfast and excited for more today. They'd had eggs and bacon, toast with gobs of butter, and tea with sugar. Actual sugar! It had been ages since they'd had sugar in the house.

After an informal and delectable breakfast, identical to yesterday's, they set to packing and dressing for the journey. Just before ten o'clock, a large, finely sprung carriage pulled up in front of Blakeny House. It was shiny black and bore a large

crest with two golden griffins that flanked a shield of royal blue. Below the shield was their motto, *Vincit veritas*, though Phoebe's Latin was subpar, so she wasn't certain of the meaning. This was the Eastleigh crest. And very soon it would be *her* crest.

Excitement, raw and thrilling, bubbled inside her, like the fine champagne they'd drunk last night, as the driver and footmen carried the trunks to the carriage. Phoebe helped her mother out the door and down the sidewalk. She squinted and hid her eyes from the bright sun. It must be painful for someone who hadn't been out of doors for a year to go outside for the first time. However, once they were settled against the squabs, Phoebe saw that her mother bore a wide smile. Yes, it was difficult not to smile under the circumstances.

The journey took a half a day and was rather uneventful. Her mother and Becky slept as they passed through miniscule parishes that did not fail to hold Phoebe's interest. She was tired, but she didn't want to miss a minute of the vista. It had been some time since she had been to the country; she'd forgotten how peaceful and beautiful it was. She couldn't wait to open the door to the scents of flowers and greenery; it would be a welcome change from the unsavory smells of the city.

The Wetherbys' family seat, Ravenscroft Castle, was apparently near the small town of Sevenoaks in Kent, and according to Benjamin, it was not a castle at all, but more of a midsize manor home.

His assessment proved to be a vast understatement. As the carriage approached the main drive to the "midsize manor home," Phoebe's stomach lurched. Great stone pillars rose above the oak trees that lined the drive, but nothing could have prepared her for

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the breathtaking view once the trees gave way. An immaculately manicured lawn stretched out for at least two acres, and stopped abruptly at the edge of a circular drive.

The house itself was built of reddish bricks that seemed to change color in the bright afternoon sun, and the structure spread out on either side of the towers so far that if you were standing at one end, you might not be able to see the other. Impressive stained-glass windows decorated the twin towers, lending a touch of whimsy to the ancient structure. Between the massive columns stood a grand archway, which led to a stone courtyard.

They pulled into the courtyard where they were greeted by a multitude of servants. Footmen helped them from the carriage, lackeys unloaded and carted off the trunks, and a portly older woman—presumably the housekeeper—bustled up to them with a cheery smile.

She introduced herself as Mrs. Simms, then led them into the house. Phoebe nearly swooned at the grandeur and sheer size of the place. It was old, but everything shone as if it had been dusted mere moments before. They walked through long corridors, up ornate staircases, past so many rooms that Phoebe lost count after a while. Despite her exhaustion, she resisted the urge to blink lest she miss something . . . or wake up. Goodness, she hoped she never woke from this dream.

After what seemed like an eternity of walking, they reached the guest chambers. It occurred to Phoebe as Mrs. Simms led them down the hallway that she would spend only one night in this particular part of the house. At least that's what she assumed since she and Benjamin would be married tomorrow.

Oh, good heavens! They would spend the night together tomorrow night!

Phoebe's heart raced and her head felt light, so it was quite a blessing when the housekeeper opened one of the doors and said, "Miss Blake, you'll be in this one."

She nodded to the housekeeper and told her mother she was going to lie down, then dragged Becky into the room with her. She barely registered the décor in the chamber. It was creamy and bright—and massive—though the roaring fire at the far side of the room made it feel warm and inviting. But she couldn't stop to enjoy it; she needed first to sit and catch her breath.

The thought of her wedding night hadn't really occurred to her until now, which was quite astonishing. How could she have forgotten about the wedding night? They'd kissed plenty of times; he had even held her and caressed her hair. Shouldn't the topic of the wedding night have entered her mind during those intimate moments?

But then, how could it have? It wasn't as if she knew what to expect in any capacity. She hadn't come close to even a single kiss during her first season, so apparently her mother hadn't seen the need to cover the topic with her.

She had thrown herself into this season, and now into a marriage, with no one to guide her in the intimacies of the marital bed.

"Can I help you out of your things?" Becky stood over her, waiting to help her undress. "You ought to take a rest before you meet the family tonight. I'll lay out the peach gown we worked on this morning."

Phoebe nodded, shrugged out of her traveling coat, and stood to allow Becky access to the buttons down the back of her dress.

Yes, a little rest would be helpful. Perhaps she was just blowing things out of proportion because she

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was so very tired. Though it wasn't tremendously far from London to Ravenscroft Castle, it had taken them several hours just to get out of the city. All in all, she had been in the carriage much longer than she'd slept the night before.

Phoebe absently went about undressing and then finally climbed into the massive four-poster bed. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep—it could have been seconds or hours, really—when she felt a warm and tender hand stroking at her temples, in her hair, across her cheek. She nuzzled the hand, reveling in the caresses, content to fall back to sleep, when she heard her name.

“Phoebe,” the voice whispered. “Phoebe, my love, are you awake?”

Her eyes snapped open to see Benjamin looming over her at the edge of the bed. She immediately grabbed for the counterpane and brought it to her neck, since all she wore was her thin and tattered chemise.

“What are you doing here? Where's Becky?” she asked, noting, despite her embarrassment, how very handsome he looked today.

His hair wasn't as mussed as the day before, but neither was it slicked into his usual style. It simply waved against his scalp naturally. He looked a bit tired, but his eyes glinted with happiness. Hopefully, happiness to see her.

He laughed at her modesty and then leaned in to kiss her forehead. “Becky is taking a walk through the gardens with your mother. I'm just saying hello.” He smiled at her, and it sent a jolt of awareness to her middle.

“Could you not have waited until I came downstairs for that? Until I was dressed properly?”

“I know it's improper of me, but no, I couldn't

wait. And besides, my entire family is here. I thought perhaps I should prepare you before you were thrown into the lion's den."

Phoebe couldn't argue with that. If the rest of them were as gregarious as the duchess . . . oh, Lord, it was best not to think of it like that. How overwhelming it would be to have more than one Kat in a room at the same time!

She smiled then and scooted up to a sitting position, taking care to keep the counterpane in place. Benjamin sat on the edge of the bed, facing her, and took her hand in his. A little thrill shot through Phoebe at the tenderness in his touch, and butterflies began to beat about in her stomach. Goodness, if she got this way over his holding her hand, what would their wedding night be like?

No, she would not think about that now. Already, she felt the color creeping to her cheeks, and she prayed he wouldn't notice.

Of course, he did. "Why are you blushing?" he asked, looking every bit the rogue. As if he knew what she was thinking . . . and liked it.

"I'm not," she countered, eager to change the topic. "I'm just . . . warm. Now, what do I need to know about your family?"

"Well, you should first and foremost be warned about the twins. Michael and Andrew have recently reached the tender age of two-and-twenty. They've also just finished their last term at Oxford, both having focused on *the classics*, which will be completely useless to them in the real world, which leads me to believe I will be supporting them for the rest of their debauched lives."

Phoebe giggled at Benjamin's vivid depiction of the twins. She noticed that although he didn't speak overly

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kindly of the pair, there was a glint of amusement, and certainly love, in his eyes when he spoke of them.

“We are absolutely nothing alike, the twins and I. It’s quite a miracle we were raised in the same household, with the same parents, and given the same education, for where I consider myself to be responsible and studious, *they* are debauched and reckless. However, I’ve no doubt you will find them to be just as entertaining as the rest of us.

“My mother, on the other hand, is . . . delightful.” He spoke about his mother with a light in his eye Phoebe had yet to see. “She has been the rock of this family. The pillar upon which we all lean. I’ve no doubt the two of you will get along splendidly.

“And you’ve already met Kat and the duke, so that about covers it,” he finished.

“Well, what about your father?” Phoebe wondered. “When will I meet him?”

Ben took a moment before answering. “Unfortunately, my father is unrecognizable compared to the man he once was. He used to be strong and virile; he taught me everything I know.” His expression grew pained, and Phoebe knew it must be difficult for him. While she had not been exceedingly close to her own father, losing him had been one of the hardest things she’d ever faced. “His moments of consciousness are few and far between, and very short, but perhaps later this evening we can pay a visit?”

Phoebe nodded. “I would like that. Now, get out or I’ll never be ready in time for dinner.”

The smile she loved so much returned to his face as he leaned in to plant a tender kiss to her lips.

“I . . . am very glad you’re here,” he said, coming to his feet.

“I am, too,” Phoebe said, and meant it, with all her

heart.

“It’s hard to believe you’re going to leg-shackle yourself so soon, Ben. You’ve only been back a week.”

Benjamin laughed at his brother Andrew, who lounged complacently across a settee in the drawing room. A week ago, Ben might have said the same thing if it were a friend who was getting married, but not now. It was amazing how smitten he had become in such a short amount of time—quite unbelievable really. And even more unbelievable that he’d almost told her he loved her just a little while ago in her chamber.

He did, of course, love her. But he had never said that to anyone before, except his family, which obviously did not count in this situation. So he’d stopped himself and told her another truth that was just as sincere: that he was happy she was here.

“Yes, really, Ben! Next thing we know, you’ll be saying it was love at first sight, for Christ’s sake!” This came from Michael, the other depraved twin.

“Perhaps not love, but certainly like,” he finally admitted, laughing again at their sickened expressions.

“She must look like bloody Aphrodite, then,” said Andrew, “for I won’t believe that my brother has turned into a lovey-dovey sap all of a sudden.”

“Well, you better believe it, gentlemen, because I am enamored of Miss Blake.”

“As you should be,” came an older, feminine voice from the doorway. “She is to be your wife, after all.”

All three of them rose to greet their mother, who sauntered into the room with a grace and agility befitting a woman of her elevated station in life. Though her dark hair had begun to gray, and fine

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wrinkles outlined her black eyes and red lips, she was still as beautiful as Benjamin remembered her from his childhood.

“Your father has always been fond of me,” she continued as she took a seat near them. “And I always felt sorry for the women whose husbands did not care for their wives. I won’t have a son of mine marrying a woman he does not love.”

“Love!” Both Michael and Andrew stared back at their mother in horror.

Benjamin remained silent. He wasn’t going to admit his feelings about Phoebe to his family before he’d admitted them to her. To avoid further discussion, and possible inquiries on the matter, he changed the subject.

“How *is* Father today?” he asked. He’d seen the marquess upon his arrival that morning, but he’d been sleeping at the time.

His mother turned a sad smile on him, and Benjamin wished he had not brought up the worrisome topic.

“Not very well, darling. He’s sleeping now, but I told him you brought Miss Blake home with you, and he said to wake him whenever you’re ready.”

Ben nodded but didn’t have time to respond. Voices in the hall heralded the arrival of his sister and the duke, who were followed by Lady Grimsby, Phoebe and Becky. The maid was turned out in a simple day dress, apparently assuming the role of companion to Lady Grimsby for the week since she did not have to cook or clean.

Lady Grimsby’s health seemed to be improving by the minute, and he was suddenly thankful he had come upon her and Colonel Wallace the other day. Without that bastard harassing her, she might begin to

heal after a most horrific year.

His gaze fell on Phoebe next, having saved the best for last. She held onto her mother's arm, seeming a bit nervous, and he couldn't blame her. The poor thing was about to have dinner with his family, and while they were an exceedingly friendly bunch, they could be exceedingly overwhelming.

She looked at him with those wide brown eyes he'd come to adore so much. Her gaze pleaded with him to come to her, to take her by the arm and guide her through the evening ahead, which he was thrilled to do.

He hurried to her side, taking her arm and leading her across the room to introduce her to his mother and brothers. Becky took Phoebe's place on Lady Grimsby's arm, and they followed as well.

"Mother," he said when they'd stopped at her chair. "May I present my bride-to-be, Miss Phoebe Blake. Miss Blake, my mother, the Marchioness of Eastleigh."

She curtsied appropriately, and his mother smiled at him while Phoebe's head was still angled to the floor. He wasn't surprised to see she approved of his choice.

The introductions continued with Lady Grimsby and Becky, whom he introduced as her companion, and then they started all over again with the twins.

Benjamin tried not to groan as they attempted to win over his betrothed.

"It seems you've snatched up the prettiest girl in all of London, Ben. What are the rest of us to do now?"

Phoebe giggled, clearly delighted, but not at all fooled by the rogues. "I'm certain you will find no shortage of acceptable girls in London, Lord Michael."

"Unfortunately, we can hardly throw a stick without hitting one of our cousins, but heaven knows

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we try.”

“All right, you two, that’s enough,” his mother cut in. “Let Miss Blake maintain her innocence for a few more hours before you start recounting your exploits.”

Phoebe blushed at the mention of her innocence, and Benjamin smiled. She wouldn’t be so innocent after tomorrow. The thought made him instantly aroused, and alternately grateful for the dark color of his pants that would hide that fact from the rest of the party.

It didn’t help that she stood next to him, several inches shorter, giving a clear view to her décolletage. Her skin was the color of fresh cream. God, how he longed to taste it, to touch it, to feel it beneath his hands.

However, this was neither the time nor the place, and after tomorrow, he would be able to abate his lust for her whenever he needed. Lord, he hoped they were getting married first thing in the morning.

“What time will we see the minister tomorrow?” he asked aloud before he had a chance to stop himself.

His mother raised an eyebrow at him. Damn, but she could read him too well. Or perhaps he’d just been that obvious.

The stodgy Ravenscroft butler stepped into the room and rang a tiny bell just then, to announce that dinner was ready. They filed out two-by-two and walked in a caravan to the dining room down the hall. His mother walked directly in front of them on Andrew’s arm, and just before they gained the doorway to the dining room, she turned to them with a smile.

“Ten o’clock,” was all she said at first. But then turned again to add, “And don’t be late.”

Chapter 12

After what could only be described as the most bizarre family dinner Phoebe had ever been party to, she made her way with Benjamin and Lady Eastleigh to the master suites on the second floor. Phoebe would have been lying to herself to say she wasn't nervous about meeting the marquess. Not only was she meeting her future father-in-law, which she assumed would be unsettling in its own right, but she was meeting him on his death bed. It was imperative she make a good impression, lest it be the only one she got to make.

"Did you enjoy dinner?" Benjamin asked as they cut through a massive portrait gallery.

"It was . . . lively," Phoebe said with a smile.

"Yes, my children see to that, Miss Blake. Though I don't know if lively is exactly the right word. They're all rather excitable when it comes to just about any topic of no real import whatsoever."

"Now, now, Mother, I don't think it's fair to say that the controversy of roundarm bowling is of no import. Katherine is mad to say it should be allowed in the cricket clubs. And she's out of her mind if she thinks I will allow it in our own matches."

Phoebe giggled as Benjamin turned to give her a wink. Perhaps entertaining was the best way to describe the dinner conversation.

They grew silent as they neared the massive oak doors to the master chambers, and Phoebe's heart raced with apprehension. Lady Eastleigh went ahead of them and closed the door behind her while she made sure the marquess was in a state to receive them. A moment later, she cracked the door open and bid them enter.

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The chamber was dimly lit by only a couple of candles and a fire in the hearth. It smelled of sickness, and a pall of sadness hung in the air. Phoebe's eyes landed on the slight form in the bed. Hair that she was sure was once as dark as Benjamin's was now streaked with silver and framed a gaunt and wrinkled face. Thick blankets covered the rest of him, but it was obvious he was thin and frail.

Phoebe trembled for many reasons: she was nervous, yes; even worse, however, she was reminded of her own father's death. It saddened her and yet somehow made her grateful she had not been there in his last days. Benjamin put his hand over hers in a gesture of comfort. It helped, but not completely. She still had to pass the test.

Sure, Benjamin had made his decision, but she knew approval from his father was of great import.

They walked to the edge of the bed. Lady Eastleigh sat on the other side and applied a cold compress to her husband's forehead.

"Darling," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Benjamin is here with Miss Blake."

He blinked a few times until Phoebe could see just a sliver of his black eyes. "Ah, Miss Blake," he said. "You will have to forgive me that I cannot greet you properly, but I'm afraid my legs do not work as they used to."

Phoebe smiled, feeling a little more at ease already. Clearly, he shared the same wit his wife and children did, and he had not lost it despite his debilitating disease. "I shall endeavor to find it in my heart to forgive you, my lord," she replied, hoping her sarcasm would not be lost on him.

It wasn't. A hint of a smile appeared at the corners of his mouth, and he turned his attention to

Benjamin. "At least we know she will be able to hold her own with the lot of you," he said weakly.

Benjamin laughed as the marquess refocused his attention on Phoebe. "Tell me about yourself, Miss Blake. While you seem to be quite charming, I am sure there are many more reasons that caused my son to fall in love with you so quickly."

Phoebe flinched at the mention of love, and her heart sped to an alarming pace. He loved her? She wanted to turn to him, to see if his expression confirmed or denied his father's words, but her neck felt suddenly immobilized. She couldn't turn if her life depended upon it. It was certainly fear that had rendered her thus, for she wasn't sure what would happen if his eyes denied the marquess's assessment.

Instead, she remained focused on Lord Eastleigh and launched into an abbreviated account of her life and her upbringing, her interests and her dislikes, until it became apparent the man was growing weary.

"I have tired you out with my incessant rambling, my lord," she said with a smile.

He smiled back with fondness in his eyes and reached for her hand. "I could *never* tire of you, my dear," he rasped. "But I tire quickly of this blasted illness." He coughed a bit, and Lady Eastleigh was back at his side in an instant with a glass of water.

"We will leave you to rest, Father," Benjamin said from behind her.

He gently took her by the elbow to help her from the chair.

"Wait!" said Phoebe, an idea coming to her all of a sudden. She looked at Benjamin, then Lord Eastleigh, and finally stopped at the marchioness. "Do you think it would be too much to ask that we have the ceremony here tomorrow? So that his lordship might be

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able to witness it?”

There was a pause before Benjamin leaned in to whisper, “Are you sure, darling? I thought you would want to at least have a chapel wedding.”

Perhaps that had been her dream once upon a time. A grand wedding in a grand church with pews filled with friends and family. But none of that seemed to matter now. It had been Lord Eastleigh’s dream to see his son marry before he died, and that was far more important than a silly chapel wedding.

“I would rather have it here . . . if that’s all right, of course.” She looked up at her fiancé and saw the joy in his eyes, the approval in his smile.

“It is up to you, Father,” he said, but the marquess was already sound asleep.

“I am absolutely certain it would be all right,” Lady Eastleigh put in. “Now, why don’t you two go downstairs with the rest of them, and we will see you in the morning.”

They bid goodnight to Lady Eastleigh, left the master suite and started in the direction of the large drawing room where they had congregated earlier, before dinner. But halfway there, Benjamin tugged lightly on her arm and pulled her into his embrace. They stood in the darkened hallway like that for a few minutes before he finally released his grip on her. She tilted her chin up so she could look at him and noticed the intense longing in his eyes.

“Phoebe, I . . . I don’t know how to thank you for—” His voice broke, and so did Phoebe’s heart.

“There is no need to thank me,” she told him. “It is what I want.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to say that. I know it can’t be in keeping with your dreams. I have seen how women get over their wedding day. I’ve taken

all that away from you by insisting on a hasty wedding. And now—”

“And now it will be absolutely perfect.” She smiled and reached up to smooth the worried frown from his forehead. “It is the people who make a wedding special, not the location or the flowers or any of that. Please believe me when I say *this is what I want. You* are what I want.”

She held her breath, wondering if she’d said too much. Surely, he knew from her behavior just how much she cared for him, but they’d yet to express their feelings with words. She thought about what his father had said about his being in love with her and wondered if it was true. If he truly did love her, even after such a short period of time. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility—she loved him, after all—but perhaps it was too much to hope for so soon.

And what did it matter, anyway? She would marry him whether he loved her or not, for it would be difficult, after the past week, to imagine her life without him. Furthermore, it was obvious he cared for her, and even desired her, which was far more than most women could say of their husbands.

His lips came down on hers, firm and needy, coaxing her to open to him. She didn’t hesitate to grant him entry, and she allowed her tongue to mingle and tease with his, while her hands roamed his hard, muscular shoulders. There was more to this kiss than she had felt in ones prior. He had always been gentle and careful with her. But not tonight.

He kissed her harder, held her tighter, breathed a little heavier than ever before. And Phoebe could not get enough. She felt weak, as if her legs might give way any moment, and urgent, as if she might never be able to get close enough to this man.

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She snaked her foot around his calf, pressing herself against his leg, trying to satiate an urge she didn't quite understand. He pressed back with his muscular thigh and Phoebe felt the blood rush to her ears. She wanted more, *more*, of this sensational feeling, but she wasn't sure how to go about getting it. However, she was positive Benjamin would know how to give it to her.

When his mouth left hers and began to travel down her neck, stopping to tease the sensitive dip where her pulse throbbed, she whispered, "Take me to your room."

There was a groan—a low, reluctant groan—as Benjamin lifted his head, straightened his leg and set Phoebe away from him by several feet. She stared at him, breathless and wanting, wondering what had happened.

"Was it something I said?" she asked, hoping to break the tension that crackled between them.

It worked. He chuckled. "While no one in this household would think much of it were I to take you to my room a mere twelve or so hours before I marry you, *I* would."

She said nothing, only blinked at him, surprised by his virtuous declaration. *She* was supposed to be the virtuous one, wasn't she? The virgin, saving herself for her wedding day? Yet here she stood, desperate to make the throbbing between her legs go away, the ache in her breasts, with not a thought for her own virtue.

He moved towards her, and she dared to hope that perhaps in the infinitesimal seconds that had passed, he might have changed his mind. A strong hand caressed her cheek and moved into her hair. She thought for a moment that he might pull her to him again for another kiss, but he didn't. Not the kind of

kiss she was craving, anyhow. He merely placed a tender peck to her forehead, and said, "I want to do this the proper way, Phoebe, my love. And I will force myself to wait until tomorrow."

"Well, that's not exactly fair, is it?" Phoebe asked, a sense of bravado washing over her.

"I'm sorry?" Benjamin stared at her, his brows raised in surprise.

"By forcing yourself to wait, you are also forcing *me* to wait, and I'm not sure I like that scenario . . . not right this moment at least."

Benjamin chuckled again and shook his head. "You're going to be the death of me, you know. In the Shakespearian way, of course."

What did Shakespeare have to do with this? "Would you care to explain?" she asked, not enjoying being left in the dark.

"No." He took her firmly by the elbow and started off in a brisk walk down the corridor. "Not tonight, anyway."

She wasn't sure what he meant by that, but it didn't much matter. The air between them had cooled in the course of their conversation, and she was ready to acquiesce. He was right, anyhow. Their wedding was a mere twelve hours away, and then she supposed she had the rest of her life to figure out how to satiate the incessant throb between her legs. Or to learn how exactly she would be the death of him. It didn't sound very romantic, but one never knew. She would save judgment for tomorrow.

By the time they gained the stairs, Phoebe had decided she did not want to mingle with the family tonight. She was getting married in the morning, so it was best she have a good night's sleep to appear fresh and awake for her nuptials.

Benjamin agreed it was for the best. "I think I shall turn in myself," he said, leaning in to give her another chaste kiss on her cheek. "Sleep well, my darling."

They parted ways, and Phoebe sauntered slowly back to her room, one floor above. She was sleepy and ready to climb into bed, but when she did, the second her head hit the pillow, she knew she wouldn't enjoy a wink of sleep that night.

Chapter 13

The morning of his wedding, Benjamin woke early and went to the master suite to see if he could gain a few moments alone with his father. Of course, the marquess was still sleeping, so Benjamin settled into the armchair beside the bed and waited. He must have nodded off, for he was awakened by his father's voice.

"She's lovely, son. I say you've done well for yourself."

Benjamin looked up to see his father trying to prop himself higher on his pillows. He immediately jumped to help.

Lord Eastleigh balked, clearly frustrated at needing help to sit up, but said, "Thank you," nonetheless.

"Do the doctors permit you to drink?" Ben asked, knowing how much his father cherished his smuggled brandy.

"I hardly think it matters at this point."

Benjamin's jaw tensed and twitched. Certainly

his father was deteriorating, but he still didn't like to hear him talk like that. "If refraining from it will keep you with us longer, it most certainly does."

"Look at me, Benjamin." He did. "I'm not getting any better. It's time you come to grips with that and got me a blasted drink."

He grimaced but did as his father bid him. Once they were settled, his father said once again, "She is a lovely girl, Ben."

"I know." Benjamin nodded. "I'm glad you like her."

"How could I not? She is sweet and kind, with just enough fire to make her interesting. She reminds me of your mother when she was younger."

Benjamin had never thought about it before, but it was true. Perhaps that was what attracted him to her in the first place. He'd always admired his mother—her strength of will and good heart. Phoebe, though young still, certainly had those same qualities.

"So you are happy with my choice?"

His father turned and focused his watery eyes on Benjamin. "You have always made me proud, Son. This is no exception."

Benjamin stared back at his father, wondering what he would think of him if he knew the truth. That he had shot a man and fled his life out of fear and self-loathing. That the coward in him hadn't even told Phoebe. He could never tell his father this, of course. It would only upset him, and Benjamin wanted his father's last thoughts of him to be good ones. There was no point ruining the man's impression, no matter how misguided it was.

"You are very quiet," Lord Eastleigh observed after a few moments of silence.

Indeed, he was. And riddled with guilt. Not just

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over Phoebe, but over the fact he'd run off for a year and wasted precious time in America that could have been spent with his father.

"I'm sorry, Father," he said, unable to look at him as he did.

His apology was met with a soft snore. It was just as well. The man needed his rest.

Before Benjamin knew it, he was standing in his father's bedchamber with the rest of his family and the minister, awaiting his bride. Katherine, who had been somewhat put out by the fact they weren't having the wedding at the church, had collected flowers from their hothouse and ordered that all the curtains be pulled back and the windows cracked for the occasion.

Though Benjamin would have been content to marry Phoebe in a dungeon, he was glad for his sister's fussing. This way it would at least feel more like a proper wedding; he wanted that for Phoebe.

He turned to his father and noticed the color in his cheeks was higher than yesterday. And though it was weak, his smile was wide. Ben thrilled at the fact he had been able to fulfill his father's wishes. It was quite a boon that Benjamin happened to be falling madly in love with his bride.

Becky poked her head into the room, and everyone turned to look at her. "She's ready," she announced, and the family moved into position.

Benjamin and the minister stood at the foot of the bed, where the marquess would have a good view of the nuptials. Everyone else lined up in two rows, forming an aisle for Phoebe to walk down with her mother. Kat, William and his mother stood on one side,

the twins on the other.

Once they were all settled, Becky swung the door open to reveal Phoebe and Lady Grimsby waiting on the other side. Benjamin's breath caught and his heart swelled. She was perhaps the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, and within a matter of minutes, she would be his. All his. Forever.

As they began the slow walk to the makeshift altar, Benjamin took the opportunity to admire the woman who would be his wife. She wore a yellow gown, so pale it was almost cream, made of thin muslin that fluttered about her ankles as she walked. It hugged her voluptuous curves and Ben found himself struggling to control his ardor. Good God, it wasn't easy. The high waist of the gown fit snugly below her bust, pushing her milky white breasts up until they very nearly poured from the neckline. But they didn't, and that was what Ben found so very arousing.

He forced his eyes from her neckline to her face, suddenly very aware that he stood next to a man of the cloth. She bore the most brilliant smile he'd ever seen her wear. Her cheeks were rosy, her lips plumped, her eyes round and shining. Young spring daisies were strung through Phoebe's thick auburn hair, which had been partially gathered on top of her head; the rest of the luxurious length cascaded down her back in a wavy mass.

Ben itched with the desire to run his fingers through her thick locks, but obviously, he refrained for the time being. It would be his priority, though, once they said

I do.

And then she was upon him, kissing her mother on the cheek and then turning to face him with that brilliant smile. He smiled back. He couldn't help it; she

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was so radiant, and she was his . . . almost.

The minister began the ceremony with the famous words “Dearly beloved,” and that was all Benjamin heard. He was far too focused on the woman before him to pay attention to what the old vicar was saying. It wasn’t until he was prompted that he shook himself from his bride-induced trance.

“Do you, Benjamin Kendrick Wetherby, take Phoebe Isadora Blake to be your wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do you part?”

It was in this moment that Benjamin thought of Phoebe’s father. He wondered if perhaps he should have been forthright and told her about the duel; about the horrible thing he’d done a year ago. Perhaps he should have, for now he never could. Did that sort of dishonesty bode well for a happy marriage? Certainly hesitating before one said “I do” did *not*, so before too much time passed, Benjamin pushed the thoughts of the old baron from his mind and answered, “I do.”

The minister repeated the question to Phoebe, who promptly responded with an eager “I do” as well, and then Benjamin was encouraged to kiss his bride.

It felt a little awkward with his entire family bearing down on them and the reverend mere inches away, but Lord knew he wanted more than anything to seal their vows with a kiss. So, he stepped forward and gathered her in his arms, pulled her close and planted his lips on hers. It wasn’t enough; he might never get enough, but for now it would have to do. He released her to a chorus of congratulations and hugs, and then, before they all left to enjoy the wedding breakfast downstairs, Benjamin and Phoebe approached Lord

Eastleigh.

He was exhausted—that much was obvious—but he seemed filled with joy at the same time.

He held out his hand for Benjamin to shake. “Congratulations, my son,” he said. Then he turned to Phoebe, who leaned in to place a kiss on his cheek. “Welcome to our family, Lady Glastonbury.”

Phoebe didn’t prolong their time at the wedding breakfast on purpose. At least, not on a completely conscious level. She was simply having a wonderful time with her new family, trying to assimilate herself into their sparring and teasing. It was great fun, she had to admit, and she thrilled at the thought that she was a part of them now.

In the back of her mind, she knew as soon as they left the breakfast and retired to Benjamin’s bedchamber, she probably wouldn’t see the light of day for quite some time. What she had been desperate for last night, she felt apprehensive about this morning. It wasn’t every day a girl lost her virginity, after all.

The night before, her head had spun with speculation. Would he want to see her in the nude? Would he expect her to *do things* to him?

Oh, Lord, she hoped not. She could handle being stark naked with him as long as he didn’t expect her to know what to do in regard to his person. She wouldn’t even know where to begin. Perhaps with that hard appendage that seemed to come into play every time he pressed her close for a kiss.

A blush crept to her cheeks, but she wasn’t exactly sure why. She wasn’t even entirely positive what that *thing* was! Why should she already be embarrassed about it?

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“I do hope that blush is for me,” Benjamin whispered close to her ear as she raised her champagne flute to her lips.

The bubbles tickled and teased her tongue as they made their way down her throat, but the intoxicating drink did nothing to calm her sudden nerves. She tried to smile at her husband, but she was sure it ended up looking more like a grimace. Benjamin, however, had no trouble bringing a smile to his lips. He looked positively elated. Phoebe only hoped she wouldn't dampen his elation once they were in bed.

“Are you all right, darling?” he asked as he took her hand in his.

“Fine,” she choked. “Just a little overwhelmed, that's all.”

“You're not nervous, are you?”

Phoebe felt the color rush into her cheeks, and her ears roared with embarrassment. Trying to maintain her composure, she cleared her throat and asked, “What would I have to be nervous about?”

Instead of answering her question, he said, “You have nothing to fear. I promise I'll be gentle.”

“Benjamin!” she scolded, keeping her voice to as much of a whisper as she could. Though they stood a fair distance apart from the rest of the family, it wasn't all that large of a room. “This is hardly the place to bring up such a topic.”

“But you're my wife now. And nothing makes me happier than seeing you blush when I say inappropriate things.”

“They will all know what we're talking about if you don't stop.”

“I don't think any of them would be surprised, my darling girl. Now, please don't make me beg. Let me take you away from here.”

“But the party—”

“—can go on without us,” he finished, and then before she had another chance to protest, Benjamin was on his feet, announcing their imminent departure from the festivities.

Phoebe’s blush did not relent while she said her goodbyes, and she found herself unable to look any one of her new family members directly in the eye. How humiliating that all of them knew what was about to take place!

Even worse, *she* didn’t really know at all what was about to take place. It wasn’t fair at all!

“Come, my darling,” he said close to her ear once they had bid everyone goodbye.

He set such a brisk pace through the corridors of the castle that Phoebe was almost forced to run to keep up. She had never seen him like this: eager, almost hungry, as if he couldn’t possibly wait another moment to ravage her.

Benjamin turned the handle on a door at the end of the second-floor corridor. Phoebe tried to look inside, but Benjamin stopped her.

“Don’t you want to go in?” she asked, somewhat surprised he had the ability to stop himself.

“More than anything,” he replied gruffly. “But we must do this right.”

Phoebe gave a little squeal as he scooped her into his arms without warning. He kissed her, firmly and thoroughly, before carrying her over the threshold.

“You’re positively carnal!” she exclaimed as he tossed her onto the canopied bed.

“You have no idea,” came his growled response as he tore off his jacket and cravat. Then he bent to kiss her with a lust-hungry mouth. “You have no idea how long I have wanted to do this.” He nibbled at her ear

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and delighted in her involuntary gasp.

“I’m guessing about a week?” she said, though her breathing had grown somewhat shallow, thanks to his erotic ministrations.

He pulled away with a wide smile. “Let’s see if we can put that tongue to better use, shall we?”

With a bit of a slower pace, Benjamin rolled off her and then pulled her into his arms. She melted into his embrace as he lowered his lips to hers and kissed her.

“You are so beautiful,” he said against her mouth. “Exquisite . . . and you’re mine.”

She *was* his. All his. And nothing could have possibly made her happier in that moment. As her nerves abated, her senses heightened. She became more sensitive to his labored breathing, more aware of his citrus cologne. She reached tentative fingers up to touch his chest, still covered with layers of linen. But the soft fabric did nothing to mask the firmness and the heat that lie beneath.

Benjamin paused as she caressed him and met her hungry gaze with his own. “You have no idea what you do to me, my love,” he said, and Phoebe’s heart soared at the endearment. Whether he truly loved her or not, she did not know, but hearing the words from his mouth was enough for now.

He took her mouth again, but this time, his hands set to work unbuttoning the back of her gown. Phoebe was at once excited and terrified. But she didn’t have much time to contemplate whether or not he would find her breasts too small or her belly too large, or any other number of things that all of a sudden seemed inadequate, for he was already pulling the small sleeves from her shoulders. He made quick work of removing the dress entirely; Phoebe was in such a daze, she

wasn't exactly sure how he'd done it. And then she lay there next to him, wearing only her chemise and stockings, and feeling more nervous now than she had at any other time in her life.

He slowed his pace as he reached to untie the drawstring of the chemise. The proximity of his hands to her breasts sent a shiver of awareness straight to her toes. The buttons followed, though his pace had reached a level of painstaking slowness. But soon the chemise fell away, exposing her bare breasts to the air.

Benjamin sucked in a sharp breath, and instinct made Phoebe reach for the counterpane to cover herself up. But he stopped her before her hands were able to grip the fabric.

"No, darling." His voice was a husky whisper. "Let me look at you."

She did as she was told and waited impatiently while her husband looked his fill. Then his hand reached up to caress her bare bosom, sending an unfamiliar quiver to the depths of her belly as he gently tugged on her ruched nipple.

"Benjamin," she began, not really knowing what she wanted to say.

"Shhh," he quieted her. "It's all right. It won't always be this awkward for you."

"It's not that. I . . . I just want to make you happy," she said, not quite sure how else to express herself. What did one say under such circumstances?

"Let me go first," he replied, a roguish smile appearing on his lips.

"What do you . . . *oh!*" Benjamin lowered his head to her puckered nipple and suckled gently at the rosy bud.

Phoebe was lost from that point on, unable to think of anything but the astonishing intimacy she was

sharing with this man.

Her man.

Benjamin blazed a trail of kisses down her stomach, stopping briefly to tease the tiny opening of her navel. Phoebe started when she realized he was not returning to her top half, but rather moving farther down her body with his taunting kisses. She tried to recoil from his hold, but he kept her firmly planted and then parted her legs. When his mouth found the auburn thatch of hair at the base of her stomach, she tried to protest.

“Benjamin,” came her breathless plea. “You can’t—what are you . . . is this even legal?”

Benjamin stopped abruptly, and an incredulous chuckle escaped. “I assure you it is sanctioned and approved by the clergy, my dear, and you’ll be quite glad of that in a few moments.”

Surrendering to the scandalous play of his tongue in her most intimate parts, Phoebe opened herself to him and gasped as he parted the folds of her sex. She was oblivious to anything but the feel of his tongue as it coaxed and caressed her. He murmured against her as if he feasted on the finest of meals, and when she thought it couldn’t possibly get any better, he slipped one slender finger deep inside of her. She rose up slightly off the bed, marveling at the strange intrusion. No one had ever informed her how splendid it could be to have her most private parts manipulated in such a scandalous way.

As Benjamin stroked and licked her with his probing tongue, he slipped yet another of his lengthy fingers inside her. Then stretched her. And licked her again and again.

Phoebe’s breath came in a series of spasmodic whimpers, and when he sucked ever so gently at her tiny bud, she splintered.

She writhed and bucked against him, reveling in the foreign sensations of the lust that consumed her; the blinding frenzy of pleasure that caused her skin to flush and her body to tense involuntarily.

When the delirium seemed to have eased, Benjamin pulled away from her, his own passion barely within his grasp. He was hard with need and when he removed the remainder of his clothing, revealing a long, hard shaft, Phoebe's eyes flashed for the briefest of seconds with what he thought was terror. But then she smiled lazily and came up to her elbows to look at it.

Good God, he was going to climax under her intent scrutiny. That would not be good. He needed to make it perfect for her, to show her what could be between them.

He moved over her and lowered himself on top of her listless body. "I'm going to be as gentle as I can, darling," he told her, "but you have to trust me. It will only hurt this once, I promise." He planted tender kisses on her cheeks and eyelids, hoping the pain would not be too great.

He rose off her and parted her legs again, then lowered himself, nudging the tip of his sex into her moist opening. She winced slightly at the initial contact, and the moment he was forced to pause was pure torture. But then she gave him a brave and encouraging nod.

Thank God!

He continued to push forth, delighting in her warmth, in the perfect tightness of her, until he reached her maidenhead, and then he whispered softly in her ear. "Look at me, darling," he urged. "Look into my eyes."

She raised her gaze to his and then gasped as his shaft drove deep into her, filling every inch of her tight

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space. Benjamin paused to give her a moment to adjust, but when a bashful smile graced her lips, he could hold back no longer.

He plundered her over and over until at last he found his release. Sweet release inside of the beautiful woman who lay beneath him.

His beautiful wife.

Sometime later, Phoebe woke from what she assumed was a short doze. Though it must have been longer than she thought, for the sun waned on the horizon. She tilted her head back to look at her husband.

He met her eyes and smiled, then broke through the lazy silence. "Thank you," he muttered.

"For what?" She propped herself up so they were practically nose-to-nose, reveling in the way his hands felt as they shifted over the bare skin of her lower back.

"Well, for agreeing to marry me on such short notice. For packing up your life. For letting us have the wedding in my father's bedchamber. I don't know how I can thank you enough."

It was odd for him to be thanking her, when it was he who had saved her from quite a desperate situation. She wanted to tell him she'd done it because she loved him, but in the end, she said, "Benjamin, I did it because I care about you."

A roguish smile came to his lips as he stared into her alluring brown eyes. "Show me how much you care, my sweet."

And she did. Although she was still new to the intimacies of the marital bed, Phoebe allowed her

instincts to guide her. She dared to take hold of his manhood, surprised to find that despite its hardened state, the skin proved to be soft and silky, like that of a newborn kitten. Permitting his hand to guide her, she coerced the shaft with methodical strokes until Benjamin declared emphatically that he needed to be inside her at once.

This time, the absence of pain and panic provided for a much more pleasurable experience. It would still take some time to get used to the odd invasion, but when Benjamin planted himself deep within her, she could think of nothing but the all-consuming pleasure that raced through her body.

Taking further liberties, she allowed her hands to wander aimlessly over her husband's tanned skin and straining muscles as he sought to pleasure her. Having never seen him before without a shirt, she marveled at his hard, masculine form, now hers for the taking whenever she wanted.

As Phoebe climbed higher and higher into ecstasy, Benjamin fought to control his own ardor. When at last she reached the point of release, he, too, let go his reins and tumbled with her into blinding fulfillment.

The intimacy of the shared moment had them both trembling in one another's embrace. Neither could speak for quite some time, choosing to silently find their way back to reality. Back to solid ground.

Sated and exhausted, Phoebe curled into Benjamin's arms again and welcomed his touch as he caressed her lovingly back to sleep. Eventually, his hands fell limp and his breathing evened. Only then, just before she found her own reprieve from the arduous day, did Phoebe dare say what was in her heart:

"I love you, Benjamin."

Chapter 14

Lord Eastleigh passed away quietly in his sleep a few days after the wedding, his wife by his side. While there had been an ominous cloud over the household before, it seemed to literally rain with despair now.

This morning, as with every other morning since arriving, Phoebe strolled through the Ravenscroft Castle gardens with Kat, matching her reserved pace. It was a lovely spring day. The sun was bright, the sky a pale blue with the occasional white fluffy cloud. Though Phoebe didn't feel right about enjoying the day or the weather. The somber mood that came with the death of Lord Eastleigh would have been better matched with dark skies and torrential rains.

What a different household she seemed to be living in now. Katherine hardly spoke at all, which was actually quite unnerving. Phoebe had grown so accustomed to hearing her constant chatter, but silence had become the only accompaniment to their daily walks.

Not even the twins, so gregarious and full of life, could muster the fortitude needed to tease or entertain with risqué jokes. It was sad and frustrating and reminded Phoebe of her year in mourning for her father. But as much as she wished for life to return to normal, she knew how important it was that they all mourn the marquess in their own manner and time.

"Do you know what the hardest part of all this is?"

Phoebe cast a sidelong glance at Kat, surprised she was initiating a conversation. “What’s that?” she prompted.

“That this one,” her hands moved to her belly, “will never know his grandfather. He was such a remarkable man, Phoebe.”

“I know he was, Kat. But you’re wrong to think your child won’t know his grandfather.”

Kat turned a questioning glance on her, and Phoebe smiled.

“He is in you, and in your brothers—in your wit and humor and good nature. I think your children will have a very good idea of how remarkable their grandfather was.”

For the first time in weeks, a smile came to Kat’s lips and actually made its way to her eyes. She readjusted her shawl and then looped her arm through Phoebe’s.

“Do you think you and Benjamin will honeymoon once all this has passed?”

Phoebe cocked her head sideways, contemplating. “I hadn’t even thought about a honeymoon, to be perfectly honest. It would be nice, though I don’t see it being anytime soon. Perhaps once Benjamin unburies himself from the mounds of paperwork.”

Kat squeezed her arm a little tighter. “Good,” she said. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“What will happen once you return to your own home, Kat?”

“Oh, heavens, I don’t know. But for now, I’ve convinced William that I want to stay here. The ducal seat is in the Lake District, you know. I refuse to go through my confinement without my mother . . . and you, of course. So don’t even *think* about leaving me!”

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“You forget this is my home now. Where on earth would I go?”

There was a moment of silence between them as they navigated around an elaborate topiary. Phoebe took special note of the daffodils that lined the path, knowing their days were numbered. As they approached the house, Kat gave her arm one last squeeze.

“I’m glad you’re one of us now,” she said, and then disappeared inside the house.

Phoebe stared after her with a smile on her face. “So am I.”

Benjamin stared at the mound of papers and letters and ledgers in front of him, and tried his best to keep his heartbeat to a normal level. He tried even harder to push the memory of the night his father died from his mind, but it kept whittling its way back in. His brother-in-law had delivered the message in the middle of the night, waking them from a deep sleep. In the moment it had seemed that all the air was being sucked from his lungs; as if his limbs had seized and his heart had stopped beating all together. For at the same moment he mourned his father’s death, he felt the unbearable weight of his inheritance suddenly upon his shoulders.

There was so much to know, to learn, and he’d thought he had so much time. Though his father had taught him a great deal growing up, Benjamin knew he had not so much as scraped the surface of what his responsibilities were.

Then Ben had made that one terrible mistake of calling out Grimsby and then fleeing the country upon word of his death. He remembered the day well. It was

nearly two weeks after the duel, after he had shot the man clean through the shoulder. He thought it would heal, it was such a small wound and the bullet had shot out the other side, but apparently the baron had not been made of very sturdy stuff.

Did you hear? Gambling Grimsby's kicked the bucket. Something about a fever, I hear.

He had overheard the conversation at his club, and he didn't even bother to confirm it. He feared too many questions might raise suspicions. Very few knew about the duel, and he preferred to keep it that way. So he packed his things and left the next morning for Dover, stopping briefly to tell his mother and father he was leaving for America, but that he would be back soon.

At the time, he had anticipated being away only a few months, but as the guilt began to niggle and gnaw at him, he found it more and more difficult to buy passage on a ship back to England. Besides, he'd found a woman to be with, he'd made friends and formed business liaisons. And he liked New York. Everything was new there, and it made it easy to believe in a new beginning for himself.

"I thought you might like a cup of tea," came Phoebe's voice from the doorway of his study, formerly his father's.

She never failed to bring a smile to his lips, even when the darkest of thoughts clouded his mind. It had been three weeks since the wedding, two and a half since his father's passing. Phoebe, being no stranger to grief, had been his rock since then, and he finally understood what his father had been talking about.

"That would be lovely," he said, beckoning for her to come to him.

"You look tired, darling. Will you come to bed

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soon?”

He looked at the clock. It was indeed late and the mound of papers before him would take hours to get through. “I suppose these can wait until tomorrow.”

“I wish you would let me help you sort through all this,” she said, putting her hands to his shoulders and massaging them with a strength that belied their dainty appearance.

He groaned his appreciation before mumbling his answer. “It would only strain those lovely brown eyes, and I can’t have my wife squinting at me now, can I?” He pulled her into his lap, eliciting a surprised squeal, and planted a kiss to her lips. She was so beautiful, and he still found it difficult to believe he had found her and married her all within a week.

“Take me to bed,” she whispered. Her breath feathered against his ear, sending a shiver down his spine.

“You needn’t ask me twice, my love.” He stood from the chair, keeping her firmly cradled in his arms. Together they blew out the few candles that were lit on the desk and in sconces on the walls, and then made their way to the bedroom.

Phoebe woke the next morning to find her husband already gone from the bed. It wasn’t a surprise—he had only remained in bed with her for the first couple of mornings after their nuptials. Once his father passed, everything changed. Benjamin wasn’t sleeping well at all, and she knew it was more from stress than grief, though she was sure he missed his father tremendously. She saw the look in his eyes sometimes, as if he might go mad thinking of what needed to be

accomplished.

He met daily with the steward, the many tenants, the solicitor—for the last will and testament needed to be fulfilled, and his father's wishes had been many. Lady Eastleigh helped where she could, but she was so overcome with grief she tended to keep company with Phoebe's mother more than anyone. If anyone could help the dowager marchioness through this, it was Lady Grimsby.

Phoebe hated this horrible feeling of helplessness. She wanted to do something—*needed* to do something productive. She tried to keep occupied, walking with Kat through the gardens or playing the piano or embroidering, which she continued to be absolutely dreadful at. But the thought of her husband pouring over piles of documents while she lazed about the estate didn't sit well with her. It didn't seem fair, and she couldn't understand why he wouldn't let her help. She could at least answer his correspondence for him. Sharing the load might mean spending more leisure time together, rather than Phoebe spending it alone.

Deciding that she would talk him into letting her help if it was the last thing she did, Phoebe swung her legs over the edge of the bed, rang for Becky, and began to ready herself for the day. It didn't take long, and within the hour she was at the breakfast table, devouring her poached eggs and buttered toast. No one else was there, so she didn't have to make small talk or even mind her manners. When she was done, she darted off to Benjamin's study, excited to get to work.

But the study was empty, with no sign of her husband anywhere.

She started back down the hall, hoping to run into someone who might know where he'd gone off to,

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but it seemed the entire house had emptied out. Finally, she found Sikes, the butler, overseeing a pair of chambermaids as they dusted down the library furniture.

“Lady Eastleigh,” he said in time with a deferent bow.

“Oh, good morning, Sikes,” she greeted the man. “Have you seen his lordship this morning?”

“His lordship left hours ago with his steward. Something about a leaky roof on one of the tenant’s cottages.”

Well, that was disappointing. Phoebe’s spirits deflated at once, knowing Benjamin might be gone all day if he was visiting tenants. So much for helping him sort through the mess of papers on his desk.

Phoebe paused once she was in the hall, an idea coming to her. Why couldn’t she help him still? He didn’t have to be present for her to organize the mess or reply to a few social invitations, did he? Anything that seemed of elevated import, she would simply put to the side for him, but everything else . . .

Excited again at the prospect of making herself useful, Phoebe marched right back to his study and plopped herself down in the large armchair behind the desk. She felt rather dwarfed by all the large furniture and the mound in front of her. But she would not be deterred.

She decided she would divide everything into categories on the desk, so she moved all the papers to the outer edges in order to make room. The first letter she picked up was an invitation, so she purposely placed it on the desk to her left. That was a pile she would read through later herself.

The process went rather quickly, and before she knew it, she had six neat little stacks in front of her, a

result of the first large stack of papers. She hummed to herself as she moved on to the next pile, standing so she could reach it on the far side of the desk. But as she reached for the letter on top, she lost her balance and sent the entire stack scattering to the floor.

“Oh, bother,” she mumbled as she rounded the desk and bent to re-form the pile.

As she gathered the envelopes, one in particular caught her eye. Where all the others she’d gone through had been obvious as letters of business or invitations, this one was not, and it bore no return address.

Phoebe stared at the letter, noting it had certainly been written in a woman’s hand. Either that, or a man with quite a feminine flourish. And it was addressed not to the Marquess of Eastleigh, or even the Earl of Glastonbury, but simply to Benjamin Wetherby. She wondered if it was from someone whose intent was disrespect, or perhaps somewhere where titles were not common.

She sighed as she looked about the room, then blew her breath between her lips as she looked back at the envelope. What if it was important? And time sensitive? It could take Benjamin weeks to get through all these letters, but this one possibly needed immediate attention. Would it be so awful if she just took a peek to make sure there was nothing urgent enclosed?

Her heart raced and her palms began to sweat at the thought of actually opening something that looked so very personal. Did she really want to know what was inside this letter? And would Benjamin ever forgive her if she read something that wasn’t meant for her eyes?

Of course he would! They were married and he loved her, didn’t he? He hadn’t said it in so many words, but certainly he had shown it over the last few weeks.

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Besides, how could he be mad at her for merely trying to help? He would be a complete boar if he did, and one thing Benjamin was not was a boar.

Though she had reasoned her way to the opening of the letter, her hands still trembled as she broke the seal and unfolded the foolscap.

And then she immediately wished she had let well enough alone and not opened the blasted letter.

Benjamin arrived home with little time to bathe and change for dinner. He had spent most of the day helping a tenant repair a leaky roof. He supposed he could have waited to send one of his many workers there to fix it, but with the dark clouds that loomed overhead, he wasn't certain there was time to wait. Especially when the crofter had a wife and three small children who needed a dry home.

After that, his solicitor had taken him on a tour of the cattle pastures, not far from the cottage he had repaired, and by the time they were finished, the sun hung low in the sky.

He didn't see his lovely wife upon his arrival back home, for which he was rather grateful. He was sure he didn't smell very appealing, and it would have been difficult to keep his filthy hands off her pure, creamy skin.

It wasn't until he went to the drawing room, clean and dressed appropriately for dinner, that he saw her. His heart still skipped a beat whenever his eyes landed on her. Tonight, she wore a charcoal gown made of muted satin. The style was simple, the dress almost plain. A single strand of pearls dangled from her neck, and her hair was piled loosely on her head, some of it

falling to frame her face.

Good Lord, even in mourning colors, she was a vision.

She sat next to his sister on the far side of the room, a glass of claret in her hand. She hadn't seen him come in, and it was Katherine who noticed him first.

His sister gave him a serene smile, but when Phoebe's eyes met with his, there was nothing serene about them. And her lips certainly did not form a smile.

Benjamin's stomach twisted with worry. Had he done something wrong? Was she angry that he hadn't woken her that morning? What could possibly be the matter?

She held his gaze for only a moment before looking away, almost as if she hated to treat him thus, but had no choice. It didn't make much sense to Benjamin, but he had long ago stopped trying to analyze the female brain. He would simply have to endure her strange behavior until later, when they had a chance to talk privately.

As it turned out, it was much, *much* later by the time they made it to their chamber. Phoebe had insisted on several rounds of whist after dinner, so it was nearly midnight when they finally were alone.

Benjamin had spent the evening pretending as if everything were fine. He gave no indication that he noticed her strange behavior. He was sure Phoebe didn't think he was so addle-brained not to notice, but she hadn't said anything to him yet, so he continued to act in their normal manner.

He shut the door to their chamber and followed her across the room to the vanity, where he always helped her with the buttons down the back of her dress while she removed her jewels and unpinned her hair.

"You don't have to do that tonight," she finally

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said as he reached for the first button.

“Have you grown extendable arms to do it for yourself?” he asked, hoping to perhaps incite a smile. He had no such luck.

“No, I have not.” She removed her pearls and her bracelet, then turned to face him, not a hint of humor anywhere in her countenance. Good God, what the devil had he done? “We have to talk, and then I’m going to my own room. Becky will help me undress tonight.”

“Like hell she will,” he countered. His blood began to boil. It was one thing for her to ignore him all night, but quite another for her to decide they would sleep in separate rooms. She hadn’t even told him what was wrong. He had been given no chance to defend himself yet. How was she so sure they wouldn’t work out whatever differences she had found between them this evening?

“Yes, she will . . .” Phoebe pulled a folded-up piece of paper from the bodice of her gown and held it out to him. “Unless you can explain why your mistress is still being supported and cared for in America while you have a wife *here*.”

Chapter 15

Benjamin stood there, staring at his wife, unable to find words. Anything would have been better than the stammering and stuttering he demonstrated, but no singular thought had an opportunity to form completely, and therefore none made it to his mouth. Lamely, he reached for the letter she still held out to him. It felt

heavier in his hand than a simple piece of paper should have.

It bore his given name, no title, written in Lillian's hand. She'd never seen reason to refer to him by his title; they were far too intimate for such formalities, she always said. Damn her! Her *informality* had clearly raised suspicions with his wife.

At that thought, his mind shifted. What was Phoebe doing reading his correspondence? He had told her he didn't need help with the mound of papers that were his responsibility—not hers—and it appeared she had gone behind his back to “help,” anyway.

If Ben had found the letter on his own, he would have opened it to make sure none of his friends in New York had died, and then used it for kindling. He didn't care what Lillian had to say. He didn't care if she missed him or wanted him to come back. She meant nothing to him; Phoebe meant everything.

However, his helpful little wife had clearly read the letter and now he had to answer to her.

A sudden headache began to throb between his eyes. What was he to say? Would she believe him if he told her the truth? He was about to open his mouth to venture an explanation, but Phoebe spoke first.

“You might want to read it before you try to comment upon it.”

He blew out a long breath and stared her right in the eyes. “I don't *want* to read it.”

“Really?” Her tone was ice, but her eyes burned with fury. “I think I would want to know if a woman had carried my child and miscarried. Perhaps you want to know that she misses you and *loves* you. That she wants you to come back and marry her and let her bear your children.”

“Stop!” he shouted, unable to hear anymore. His

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head was swimming now, as if he were drowning, in the deepest and most turbulent of seas, with no foreseeable way out.

“Oh, but there’s so much more,” Phoebe said, the light sarcasm in her tone belied by the rigidity in her stance.

“I don’t care!” This time he roared at her. He hated this side of her. This hard, cold exterior and cool, sarcastic voice made him want to shake her until she turned back into the beautiful, vulnerable woman he loved.

He *loved* her, dammit! Didn’t she know that? What was it going to take for her to understand the depths of his devotion to her? He had no idea. All he knew was that he couldn’t let her go on believing he held any feelings for Lillian whatsoever.

“Phoebe,” he said, softening his tone and moving towards her. “You must listen to me. I have had no contact, other than this letter that *she* sent to *me*, since I left America. I told her she could stay in my townhouse until she found another protector, but that is as far as my relationship or financial support with her goes.”

Phoebe didn’t move away from him, but neither did she soften when he put his hands on her shoulders. She stood still as a statue, staring at him with furious black eyes.

“She carried your child,” she said, her voice low.

“You don’t know Lillian. She will do anything—*say* anything—to get her way.”

“But she loves you!”

And I love you! He should have said it to her, but it wasn’t the way he pictured telling her. They should be making love, not screaming at one another

about his former mistress when he told her he loved her for the first time.

“But I. Don’t. Love. Her.” He accented every word and pleaded with his eyes for Phoebe to hear the meaning in his voice.

She did not. At least, he didn’t think so when she dissolved into tears and pushed past him. Dammit!

He spun to see her stomping across the room, one hand to her face to hide her tears. “Phoebe, please —”

“No! Don’t say anything. You have no idea what it was like for me, finding that letter today, reading such intimate things from another woman . . . a woman who knows you far better than I.”

“What the hell does that matter?” This was really getting out of hand, and he had to put a stop to it now. She was letting her female sensibilities run away with her, and he was getting the brunt of it.

“It matters tremendously! How can I compete with her?”

“You don’t *have* to compete with her. I-I don’t care about Lillian—”

“But she cares about you!”

Good God, they were talking in circles now, and the bottom line was that she never should have been going through his post in the first place. He couldn’t say that to her, though. He would have to find another way to put a stop to this conversation.

“Phoebe,” he said, a slight warning in his tone. “Do I not demonstrate my desire for you on a nightly basis? Did I not demonstrate it by *marrying* you, for Christ’s sake?”

“You married me because you *had* to!”

Her accusation cut right to his heart and stopped him cold. “What the *hell* are you talking about?” His

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voice was a dangerous growl now, and he saw her cower slightly before straightening up and re-assuming her hellcat persona.

“You needed a wife. Or, rather, your father thought you needed a wife,” she amended. “You married me in an effort to gain his approval before he died, did you not?”

Now she was treading on dangerous territory. “You know *nothing* of my relationship with my father.”

“I know that you must feel guilty for being gone for the last year of his life—”

“Silence,” he growled.

“Why? Because it’s true?”

He said nothing, only stared at her, seething, wondering how the hell a bloody letter from Lillian had resulted in *this*.

“Well?” she asked, lifting her eyebrows as she crossed her arms over her chest like an insolent child.

“You will never do this again.”

She looked at him askance, as if she were suddenly unclear as to what they were talking about. She maintained a challenging look, though, as she asked, “Do what?”

“You will *never* go through my letters again unless I give you explicit permission to do so. Is that understood?”

Phoebe’s nostrils flared. “Why? Are you expecting more letters from your mistress?” The acerbic tone she used on “mistress” made him scoff.

“I’ve done far worse things than keep a mistress, Phoebe.”

“Is that meant to make me feel better? That this Lillian person is the least of your transgressions? Because it doesn’t.”

“I don’t give a Goddamn, Phoebe. Give your

word that you will stay away from my papers!”

“Don’t curse at me, Benjamin Wetherby.”

“I will curse at you until I am blue in the face or until you bloody well understand that if you had never gone snooping about my things, we wouldn’t be having this ridiculous argument right now.”

“I wasn’t *snooping*, I was *helping*, God forbid! And I never realized my husband had so many secrets he wished to keep from me.”

“Lillian was not a secret I meant to keep. I didn’t think she was important enough to bring up. Plenty of gentlemen keep mistresses before they’re married, and many of them after!”

“Like you,” she accused.

“Not. Like. Me.”

“You are paying for her to live in your home, Benjamin. If that’s not *keeping*, then what would you call it?”

Dammit, he was letting her talk him in circles again. “Enough of this, Phoebe. I’m going to tell you one last time. I care nothing for Lillian. I’ve had no contact with her since I left America, and I have no intentions of contacting her in the future. I had no control over her writing to me, and I really do not appreciate this attack you have launched on my character.”

“Don’t you dare try to turn this around on me.” Her voice caught slightly and she shook with the effort of trying to keep the tears that shone in her eyes from spilling over to her flushed cheeks. “You have no idea what it is like to read those things from another woman about your husband. It’s not as if I thought you were a virgin, but to have your intimacies so blatantly spelled out before me . . .”

“Phoebe, what more can I do?” he pleaded, hating

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to see her like this, but knowing not what else to say beyond what he had already said.

“Sell it.”

He blinked at her. “Sell what?”

“The house!” she screamed at him. “Evict her from it and sell it!”

“Phoebe,” he said, trying to keep his tone calm in light of her irrational behavior. “It is an investment property, and as soon as Lillian finds another protector, I will rent it to someone else.”

“What do you need with investment properties, Benjamin? You’re richer than Midas, for heaven’s sake.”

“I will not continue to have this conversation.”

He was truly angry now. Why the hell would she not see reason? “That is *my* property and those were *my* letters, and you cannot march into this house, demanding what I do with them!”

“Why can I not have input where it concerns me?” she yelled back.

“Because these things *do not* concern you—”

“Of course they concern me! I am your wife!”

“Listen, *wife*, when I want something to concern you, I will tell you. Otherwise, you are to stay out of my business.”

“You sound just like my father!”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I shot him!”

Silence, heavy and charged with shock, hung in the air between them. Their eyes locked, but neither of them said a word. Benjamin’s heart raced so quickly he was sure he would have a coronary. Had the words actually escaped his mouth?

Dear God. What had he done?

Chapter 16

“What did you say?” Phoebe stared at Benjamin, certain she must have heard him wrong.

She loved him. She had married him. She had trusted him with her life, with her heart, with . . . everything. Surely, he hadn’t actually meant what he said, for if it were true, it would mean that in a few short hours, everything she knew and believed in turned out to be a lie.

He didn’t answer right away, and Phoebe felt an anger so wild and raw race up her body at his silence, until she finally screamed, “Answer me!”

“I killed him!” he yelled back, his words coming over the top of hers. He looked almost as distraught as Phoebe felt. What in the world was he talking about?

She shook her head back and forth. “That’s not possible. My father died of a fever, Benjamin—”

“A fever that I caused.” His voice was resigned and low; his body language reflected sheer and utter dejection.

Phoebe said nothing but waited for him to continue on his own. She watched as he collapsed into a chair and leaned forward to prop his elbows on his knees. He buried his face behind his hands as he began to speak.

“I didn’t know, Phoebe.” His voice cracked with emotion when he said her name. “When I met you at the Stapleton Ball, I had no idea who you were. I knew your father as Gambling Grimsby—even your own cousin called him that.”

Phoebe was well aware of the moniker that had followed her father around the *ton*. She would have

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wagered that few associated her and her mother with him. At the rare social occasions he had accompanied them to, he'd found his way quickly to the gaming rooms and usually left early, without them, to make his way to his favorite hells. But that explained very little.

The silence seemed to stretch into eternity before he finally spoke again.

"I had every intention of calling on you that next afternoon, with flowers that would surely have dwarfed Mr. Potter's. But I planned to call on the widow Grimsby first. I didn't realize I was knocking on Number Twelve, Berkeley Square at first, and I continued to grasp for answers until I was in your parlor. Until I saw the miniature of him. That of Gambling Grimsby."

"That is why you asked so many questions about him that day, isn't it? I found it strange at the time, but, Benjamin, this isn't making any sense. Why do you think you killed my father?"

He blew out a long breath, as if he was hoping they would never have to get to that part of the story. But she wouldn't let him distract her with other stories about how they had met a few weeks earlier. She'd been present for those.

"Your father cheated my brother Andrew in a game one night. I wasn't playing, but I was watching. And I was close enough to see the secret hand he tried to switch his own with . . . I called him out."

Phoebe wasn't sure what to say to that. Of course, it was wrong of her father to have done that, and Benjamin probably did what any other gentleman would have done. It was a shame Benjamin had been the one to see it.

"What happened?" she asked, maintaining her distance in the middle of the room.

“We agreed upon first blood. Your father’s was first. I shot him in the shoulder, but apparently he developed a fever as a result of the wound. I swear to you, Phoebe, I never meant to kill him.”

She believed him, of course. Benjamin wasn’t a violent man, of that much she was certain. However, she was certain of very little else in her life just then.

“You lied to me,” she said quietly, unable to keep the pain from her voice. The gut-twisting pain of betrayal.

“Because I wanted you . . . I needed you to be my wife, Phoebe.”

Why? This was the question that bounced about in her head, over and over, with no answer in sight. Did he want her so that his father could die at peace, knowing his son had settled with a nice girl, worthy of being the next Marchioness of Eastleigh? Did he need her so that his guilt might be assuaged in the matter of her father? Perhaps he felt that marrying her, rescuing her from destitution, would relieve him of the remorse he carried over the matter.

He still had not said he loved her, and he’d been given plenty of opportunities in the last three weeks . . . even this evening. But he’d taken none of them. So it must have been for one of the other, less appealing reasons that he had taken her as his bride.

It hurt. It cut as deeply as if a knife were truly being driven into her heart. But she wasn’t sure how to reconcile the man she had married—the man she’d fallen in love with—with this man before her, who kept a mistress and who had apparently killed her father. Not a day of their relationship had been without lies. Or, at the very least, omissions of the truth, which, to Phoebe, was every bit as abhorrent.

She suddenly grew very weary. Her body shook

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with the effort of simply staying upright. And she didn't want to be there anymore. She didn't want to talk, let alone argue. So, quietly, and without explanation, she turned to go.

"Phoebe, please," she heard him whisper behind her, and her heart nearly broke in two.

In that moment, she wondered if he even understood why she was leaving, why she was turning her back on him and walking away. More than likely, he thought it was because he'd killed her father, for that alone would cause a great rift for most people. However, Phoebe knew all too well that her father had been a dishonest person at times. Though she'd loved him, she had not had any misconceptions regarding his character. No, if Benjamin had not called him out that night, someone else would have eventually. That particular transgression was actually easy to forgive.

If only he had known that when they first met—or, at least, when he first realized who she was—things might have been different. As it was, too many lies stood between them now, and Phoebe wasn't sure what to do with all she had learned that evening.

She needed to be alone, to think. And so she kept going, ignoring his whispered plea, and shut the door to his bedchamber behind her.

Benjamin watched her leave, heard the click of the latch on the door, but he couldn't quite believe she had just walked out of their room. He had expected fury just as raw as it had been over Lillian and the townhouse, but there was nothing.

Nothing except disappointment, and that, to Benjamin, was worse than anger. He liked it far better

when she was screaming at him and accusing him. This—the silence—was unbearable.

He sat there, staring at the fire for hours. He replayed the night in his mind, over and over, until the sting of her words, and the weight of his own shame that he had carried for more than a year now, drove him to tears.

It wasn't until the very first light of the morning began to creep onto the horizon that his tears dried up and he made a decision. There was no way he would be able to face his family, let alone his wife, like this, so it was best he remove himself from the premises all together.

There was work he could do in London, and his steward could continue to look after the tenants at the estate. The man had been doing it for the last six or so months on his own, anyway; what was another few weeks?

Benjamin woke his valet and informed him of their imminent departure. Collins wasn't all that thrilled about being rushed to pack his master's things, but Benjamin wasn't taking any chances. They needed to be gone before the others were up and about.

It was nearly seven when they finally made it to the stone courtyard of the castle, where a crested black carriage awaited them. He stared unblinkingly at the Eastleigh crest as the footmen loaded his trunks. *Vincit veritas*: Truth conquers. Hah! Apparently, whichever great grandfather had coined that particular motto had never killed his wife's father.

With the trunks loaded, Ben, with his blackened mood, moved to mount the carriage himself when a voice stopped him.

"It's awfully early to be setting out, isn't it?"

Mother.

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“I didn’t know anyone else was up,” he said, turning to face her.

She had aged no less than ten years in the last three weeks. Her black hair had grown many more silver strands. Her eyes were red-rimmed with great black circles beneath them. And she wasn’t eating well, if at all. Good Lord, he’d been so absorbed in his new marriage and his new responsibilities that he hadn’t even noticed his mother was wasting away in her grief.

“I don’t sleep anymore,” she finally admitted. “I doze here and there, but I’ve not slept two consecutive hours since . . .” She gave him a sad smile and then changed the subject. “Where are you going?”

“London,” he told her, squinting against the rising sun that filtered into the archway of the courtyard.

“Phoebe is not accompanying you?” She raised a questioning, but not accusatory, eyebrow.

He shook his head. After all the lies, he wished he could simply tell the truth about why he was leaving, but he couldn’t, of course. “I have some things to attend to, but I shouldn’t be more than a few days. Phoebe will be better off here.”

It was true, was it not? She would be better off here, without him, without his lies, without having to face the man she now knew had killed her father.

His mother merely nodded, and quietly stepped forward to kiss him goodbye. Impulsively, he drew her into a hug and tried to keep his tears at bay. When he pulled back, he didn’t look at her. He knew that if he did, he would break down again. So he turned quickly and started to walk to the carriage.

“Benjamin,” she said, halting him midstride. There was a long pause, and he wondered if she had anything to say at all, or if she had just stopped him,

knowing something was wrong. Finally, she said, “We’ll take care of her for you.”

His heart twisted so painfully that it was his instinct to double over, to crumple to the ground with the agony of not knowing when he would see her next and the probability that things would never be the same again.

Instead, he simply nodded once and then mounted the carriage.

Phoebe woke with a pit in her stomach and a pounding in her head far worse than when she’d drunk half a bottle of apple brandy. She had stayed up most of the night and finally cried herself to sleep near dawn. It was after eleven when she made her way down to the breakfast room.

She wasn’t sure how it would be when she saw Benjamin, but one thing was certain: she wanted to see him. No matter what he had done, the things he’d kept from her from the inception of their relationship, they were married now. For better or for worse, they were husband and wife. And now that everything had been brought out into the open, they could begin to sort through it, find common ground, and hopefully, very soon, return to the blissful state they had shared only a day before.

In spite of the late hour, her mother, as well as every member of her new family, sat at the dining table in the breakfast room. Everyone except Benjamin, that is. Of course, she wasn’t surprised. It was late, and any other morning he had been up, and sometimes gone, just after sunrise.

“Good morning, all,” she greeted the room,

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trying to sound cheery despite the way she felt inside.

They returned her greeting, and then she took her seat and asked the footman for toast and tea. It wasn't until she turned back to the table at large that she realized they all stared at her, silently. Waiting. Though for what, she did not know.

Trying to pretend everything was fine, Phoebe unfolded her napkin and placed it in her lap. She looked up and smiled at Kat, who forced a smile back. And that was just about as much as Phoebe could stand.

"Where is Benjamin?" she asked, knowing their odd behavior must have to do with the two of them.

As embarrassing as it might have been, she wondered if perhaps one of them had overheard their argument last night. Or perhaps he had told them all what happened this morning, while she still slept.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence before the dowager finally answered her. "He left this morning," she said quietly. "He's gone to London."

Phoebe did her best to maintain her composure, despite the fact she wanted to crawl into a hole and cry until the pain went away.

He'd left her. And her heart shattered into a million little pieces. He hadn't even bothered to stay and see if they could work out their problems this morning. He had given up on them already.

But the last thing Phoebe wanted was to confirm their suspicions that something was wrong. Clearly, that was why they had all gathered together, and *clearly* Kat wasn't the only meddler in this family.

The laugh she gave next sounded hollow and forced to her own ears, but she hoped she was a good enough actress to pull it off. "Oh, goodness," she said, waving her hand about in front of her, "of course he did!"

She saw the dowager's eyes widen in surprise, but quickly turned her focus to her toast. She spread jam carefully and generously over the bread in order to keep busy and avoid eye contact. That was the only thing that would keep her from crying, she was sure.

"I was sleeping so soundly when he woke me and kissed me goodbye," she continued before anyone could get a word in edgeways, "I suppose I thought it was a dream! But, yes, of course he is in London, to take care of that . . . *thing* he's been talking about for days now."

She rolled her eyes as if he had been plaguing her with talk of this *thing* and then stuffed her mouth with toast to keep from rambling on anymore. She knew she sounded mad, but she figured that was better than dissolving into hysterics in front of everyone at the breakfast table.

Blessedly, there were a great many smiles and shrugs passed back and forth between the members of her family, and slowly they began to retreat from the breakfast room. When it looked as if Phoebe was going to be left alone with the dowager and her mother, she jumped from her chair, made her excuses and left the room. If anyone had seen through her charade, it had been the two matrons, and one word from either of them would have been Phoebe's undoing.

Once in the silence of the hallway, she collapsed against the cool marble wall and dropped her head into her hands. Only then did she allow the tears to fall.

As soon as Benjamin arrived at his townhouse in London, he made straight for the brandy bottle. He was beyond exhausted, having stayed up all night and

then traveled half a day's ride from Kent.

He hadn't eaten, and he was starving. But every time he tried to eat something, the food seemed to turn to sawdust in his mouth.

All he could see was his wife's face, wrought with disappointment . . . in him. All he could hear were her whispered words *You lied to me*. Everything else faded away. The London streets could have been mobbed and riotous and he wouldn't have known. Gunshots might have been sounding in his ear. It would not have mattered. Nothing mattered now.

And so he lost himself in the bottle of brandy. Drank until he couldn't see straight and then fell into bed, praying for sleep. Eventually, it came, but it was far from restful.

Chapter 17

Over the next few weeks, Phoebe found herself obsessing over the argument with her husband. She thought about that dratted letter from Lillian—which she had since burned in the grate—over and over until it didn't quite hold the same power over her as it once had. She became desensitized to the words she had read, and it somehow gave her more perspective. It was true that *Lillian* had written the letter, and as far as she knew, Benjamin had made no effort to contact her.

Of course, she couldn't speak for the last three weeks that he'd been in London working on that *thing*. But she could admit now that perhaps she had overreacted a bit. If only he were here so she could tell him that!

Blast him, why wouldn't he come home? She wasn't angry anymore . . . just lonely. And empty. And she was going mad.

Every day when the post arrived, she attacked poor Sikes, hoping for a letter, something—*anything*—from her husband. Or whenever she heard the clip-clop of horses on the drive, she ran like a banshee through the house to the courtyard, praying that it was Benjamin.

But there was nothing. No letter. No Benjamin.

She was trying to be better about assimilating herself into family activities. For the first week Benjamin was gone, she faked illness and stayed abed. But she didn't care to follow the same route her mother had taken, and besides, it wasn't as if Benjamin was dead. He was alive, and hopefully well, in London.

London. There was nothing that said she couldn't go to London and find *him*, was there?

She looked across the room at Kat, who lounged like Botticelli's Venus, draped over one end of a chaise, a gothic novel lying open in her lap. Her black hair was only partially pulled up, so most of it fell over her shoulder. She played with a loose lock as she mumbled the words she read to herself.

Phoebe's gaze moved across the room to Becky, also engrossed in a book, but certainly not a gothic novel by the looks of it. In her newfound free time, Becky had taken to bettering herself, and it seemed that today's lesson was in frog anatomy.

As grateful as she was for the company of her friends, Phoebe missed her husband more than words could ever express. She needed to find him, and forgive him—and beg his forgiveness as well—and that meant going to London.

She stood from her chair, and both women looked up at her.

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“Going somewhere?” Kat asked curiously.

“Yes, actually,” she replied. “I’m going to London.”

“London!” Kat sat up and swung her legs to the floor. “But you can’t go alone. Becky and I will come with you. When do we leave?”

Blast it! She should have known Kat would want to come.

“Kat, it isn’t necessary that you accompany me. Becky and I can manage fine on our own until we find—*join* Benjamin.”

“No, no, no! The two of you are *not* leaving me here to while away the hours alone. I’m coming.” Kat’s dark eyes burned with determination.

Phoebe blew out a long breath, knowing she would never win this argument with her sister-in-law. Kat would find a way to go to London with them if it was the last thing she did. At least it would be an entertaining trip.

“Fine,” she said. “We will leave after breakfast tomorrow, so we are sure to make London by nightfall.”

“Excellent!” Kat sprung from the chaise and started for the door. “I’ll send a letter ahead to Benjamin to let him know we’re coming.”

“No!”

Kat halted and turned to stare at her, Becky watched from the other side of the room; both were clearly wondering why they couldn’t send word ahead. Heavens, this was not how she wanted it to be. She wanted to go to Benjamin, find him on her own and . . .

She suppressed a groan. Now it was to be a spectacle, with family. And Lord only knew, despite their state of mourning, what would be on her social calendar by the time they arrived.

No, she couldn't have it that way. Kat was going to kill her for what she was about to do, but it was the only option. "*I will send notice, Kat,*" she said with a serene smile. "You go on and tell Sally to start preparing your things."

Kat shrugged and thankfully didn't question her further. "All right," she replied, and then bounced out of the room.

As soon as Kat was a fair enough distance away, Phoebe shut the door to the parlor and practically ran to Becky's side. She slammed the large tome about amphibious creatures shut and leveled Becky with what she was sure was a wild stare.

Becky blinked back at her. "What are you doing?"

"*We* are leaving. Now."

"Now?" Becky practically yelled.

"Shhh!" Phoebe felt like a player in a farce all of a sudden as she flailed her arms about dramatically. But they had to get out of there before Katherine had a chance to realize they were gone. "Becky, please. I need to find Ben—"

"You don't know where he is?" Becky stared at her; concern turned her shocked expression to a frown.

Phoebe shook her head slowly and tried to keep the tears that pricked at the back of her eyes at bay. "He left me, Becky," she admitted, feeling her burden lift slightly, but not completely, at finally telling another soul what had happened.

"No," Becky returned. "How can that be? You said you knew he was leaving for London. You've been getting letters from him and . . . Oh, dear. You made it all up, didn't you?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone, Becky. Please. Just help me find him so I can sort out this whole, ridiculous mess."

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“All right. But how are we going to get out of here unnoticed?”

As it happened, dinnertime proved to be the best time to sneak out of a house unnoticed. It took a great deal of planning to orchestrate such a feat in such a short amount of time, but they somehow managed. It was easy enough to convince everyone she wasn't feeling well and wanted to eat in her room. And even easier to bribe a stable groom into preparing a lesser-used coach and driving them to London.

Each armed with a small satchel and the clothes on their back, Phoebe and Becky snuck from the house and met the coach at the end of the drive, where no one would hear the clip-clop of the hooves on the gravel.

Phoebe was positive, however, that as soon as Kat realized they were gone, her rage would be heard all the way to the Capitol.

It was the middle of the night by the time Phoebe and Becky made it to Blakeny House. Phoebe had decided to go there since she had no idea where to find her husband and because it was far too late to start her investigation.

It was odd being back in that house. It seemed years rather than mere weeks since she'd slept in her own bed, sat in her own shabby parlor. She didn't miss it, that was for certain. The smell of mold and dust alone was enough to make her exceedingly grateful for her new station in life. But she was glad it was there, for without it, she would not have been able to come to London to chase after her husband.

After a good night's sleep, Phoebe was up early, excited for the day. Excited to find Benjamin.

Jerrica Knight-Catania

She sent Becky to the market first thing to purchase a few items for their breakfast and then tried her best to dress herself. As she put the finishing touches on her simple coiffure, she heard the latch turn on the front door.

“Becky, is that you? I could use your help with a few of the buttons I couldn’t reach.”

There was no answer, and the hair on the back of Phoebe’s neck stood involuntarily on end. On tentative feet, she left her small chamber and made her way down the hall to the top of the staircase. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw it was not an intruder, but a friend. Standing in the foyer was not an unwelcome guest per se, but Phoebe wasn’t really in the mood to receive guests, so she hoped Colonel Wallace would be quick about his business there.

Benjamin took to the streets again that morning for a long walk. It had become his ritual since returning to London, and he found the exercise helped clear his head and lift his spirits. At least as much as they could be lifted under the circumstances.

He had come to London with the intent to merely get away for a few days. To give himself and Phoebe both some time to think, room to forgive. Every night before he went to bed, he made up his mind to go back to Ravenscroft Castle the next day. And every morning, he awoke with the terror and suspicion that she would never forgive him. That he would only go back to find her with that same disappointed frown on her face. That was something he could not bear.

So now, three weeks to the day after he had left for London, he was still here, trying to figure out what to

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do about his marriage. What to do about his life.

Other things were more easily taken care of. Like the transfer of the deed to his New York townhouse to an old friend who wished to own property in America. And the final notice of eviction he sent to Lillian.

He wasn't a mean or cold person, and he didn't think it would be fair to simply evict her without a bit of explanation. So, he told her briefly of his marriage and of the sale of the townhouse, and that under no circumstances was she ever to try to contact him again. That was a headache he could live without.

It was a lovely day, and despite the early hour, the streets were already beginning to crowd. Benjamin didn't mind, though. At least in a crowd of people it was easier to pretend he wasn't so very alone.

His stomach rumbled as he passed through the fresh market and the smell of fresh-baked bread made it to his nose. He was just about to stop and purchase a small loaf to abate his hunger when he saw a familiar head of blond hair bobbing out into the street.

Becky. What was she doing here? Surely she hadn't come back to London alone. Was it possible that Phoebe had come to find him?

It seemed a bit too much to hope for, and he supposed there were a hundred maids with that same color hair, but . . .

He would never know unless he ran after her.

His hunger and bread forgotten, Benjamin took off in the direction of the maid. Carts and carriages and mongers of all sorts presented obstacles, but it was easy to keep sight of her golden hair. Thank heaven he was tall enough to see over most people's heads. It wasn't until they were almost at Berkeley Square that he finally caught up to her. Good God, the girl kept quite a pace.

“Becky!” he called out when he was close enough to be heard.

He waited for her to turn and heaved a sigh of relief when she did. It was indeed she. Thank God!

“Lord Eastleigh!” she cried, a bright smile coming to her face. “How fortuitous to have met you like this.”

He drew closer, still trying to catch his breath. “I’m not sure it was necessarily *fortuitous* since I had to chase you down from several blocks away, but, indeed, I am very glad I did.” He stared at the smiling girl, afraid to ask the question that hung between them, but he finally dredged up the courage. “Did she come with you?”

Becky’s eyes sparkled in the sunlight, bright emerald green, as she nodded her head. “She came to find you, my lord, but I must say, this is far better than a wild goose chase throughout the city.”

“I do believe I’m the gander, Becky, but I won’t quibble with you over the technicalities. Take me to my wife.”

Chapter 18

“Forgive me, Colonel Wallace, I wasn’t expecting you,” Phoebe said as she descended the stairs.

The colonel turned to look at her. His eyes squinted against the sun that flowed in from the fanlight. He wasn’t a horrible looking man, but clearly hygiene was not high on his list of priorities. He smelled strongly of tobacco and spirits, and it wasn’t even nine in the morning. But there was a kindness in

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his eyes, a softness about his features.

“No, no, it is I you must forgive, Miss Blake, barging in like this. I was passing by when I saw your lovely maid leaving and ascertained that you must be back in Town.”

“Oh, Colonel, you must not have heard. I was married only a few weeks ago, and I am afraid I am no longer a Blake, or a miss, for that matter.”

The man’s jowls shook as he tipped his head to her. “My sincerest felicitations for a happy marriage then, Lady . . . well, it must be Eastleigh now, is it not?”

Phoebe nodded, a sad smile on her lips. “It is.”

“Right, well, my condolences as well then.”

There was an awkward pause, and Phoebe had the distinct feeling the man wished to be invited in for a more proper visit. She hated to be rude, and it wasn’t as if she could go anywhere until Becky returned anyhow. There was the matter of her half undone buttons, but other than that, she didn’t see any harm in giving the man a few minutes of her time.

“I don’t have any refreshments to offer, Colonel, but if you would like to come to the parlor, we can certainly have a chat. You can tell me all about your wife’s prize rose garden you’re so fond of.”

His beady eyes lit up and he smiled down at her. “Well, that’s very kind of you, Lady Eastleigh. I’ve been on my feet since early this morning, so a brief rest would be welcome. The delight of your company is a boon I was not quite expecting.”

Phoebe smiled back and then led the way to the parlor. She let the colonel sit on the sofa, which was even dustier now after weeks of neglect, while she sat on the small spindly chair. There was a moment of awkward silence. Without the distraction of tea service,

there was nothing to do with her hands, other than fidget with the fabric of her pale blue day dress. She smiled at the colonel; he smiled back. Finally, she opened her mouth to speak, just as he opened his.

"What brought you back to London?" he asked as she was saying, "I trust your wife is well."

They both laughed, and Phoebe gestured for him to go first.

"I wondered what brought you back to London and, more specifically, to this house. I would think your new husband would have better accommodations for you here."

"Um, yes, of course," she laughed, brushing off his comment as if there was a completely viable explanation. However, there wasn't. At least, not one she could share with him. *Think, Phoebe, think!* "I...I came to prepare the house."

"Prepare?"

"Yes! You see, the house is not entailed and, therefore, since it is no longer needed, we will sell it." Phoebe kept the sigh of relief as internal as she could at her quick thinking. She had no idea, though, if they would be selling the house or not. Perhaps her mother wished to return to it, but the thought of her here, all alone, didn't sit well with Phoebe.

"I see," he said, then added, "And, yes, my wife is—*ahem* . . . well, thank you."

All of a sudden, the man dissolved into a fit of coughing. He doubled over, trying to clear his lungs of a distinct rattle. Phoebe watched for only a moment before leaping from her chair and rushing to his side. She sat down beside him, and the girth of his weight caused her to sink towards him, until she was pressed up against his side. She reached an awkward arm around to pat his back, but before she made it that far,

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the colonel ceased his coughing and grabbed her wrist.

Phoebe blinked up at him, surprised at the firm grip and the menacing look that lit his eyes now. Her heart raced at the realization that his coughing fit had been a ploy. A ploy to get her closer to him, though she couldn't begin to understand why. He had never shown any hostility toward her in the past—as a matter of fact, he had always seemed kind and caring—yet now he looked positively murderous.

“C-colonel, what are you doing?” she asked, trying to sound indignant, but knowing her voice shook with fear.

“I’m collecting payment due, my lady.” His tone was low, and he spoke so close to her face, she could smell the rotting of his teeth. She was tempted to swoon from the smell, but Lord knew what he would do to her once she was unconscious.

So she collected herself and tried to pull away from him. He only held tighter, though, as he came up to his knees on the sofa beside her and grabbed her other wrist. Now he towered above her, fat and salivating—a hideous creature Phoebe did not even know. How could it be that the man who so lovingly spoke of his wife’s roses was now staring at her with all the evil of Satan himself?

But through the haze of her fear, it triggered what he’d just said. “Payment?” She looked up at him, hoping the terror she felt in her heart didn’t show on her face.

“Oh, so he didn’t tell you after all, I see. They’ve kept you in the dark, to preserve your sweet innocence, I presume.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your mother wasn’t finished repaying me,” he said, showering her with spittle on almost every

consonant.

“Colonel Wallace, I am sure that whatever is owed to you we can now pay. Money is no object. Please, let me go.”

A maniacal smile came to his lips. “I do like it when you beg, Lady Eastleigh.”

Phoebe’s stomach turned. And her mind spun with the effort of trying to put it all together. Payment. Payment for what? And *who* had kept her in the dark about it? Surely not her mother, who had been lying comatose in her bed for a year? What could she possibly have known about this?

If Becky knew anything, she never would have let the man into the house, so Phoebe mentally marked her from the list.

That left only one person. And added yet one more lie to his catalog.

The twisting in her heart at this horrendous thought hurt far more than the firm hold Wallace had on her wrists. It made her want to give up, to let him do what he wanted. Take his payment, whatever that may be. For what did any of it matter now?

Not only had Benjamin lied to her about Lillian, her father and now even this bizarre situation with the colonel, but he had left her. He had left without a word, without an apology of any sort. And he’d left her to fend for herself with his family, and with Wallace.

It was almost more than she could bear. No, she was stronger than that. She *could* bear it, but she didn’t want to.

And so she surrendered. Her body went limp as the tears began to flow. She closed her eyes tight as Wallace pinned her arms together over her head, and waited for him to do his worst.

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Benjamin walked through the front door of Blakeny House, excited to find his wife and begin the healing process in their relationship. But instead of finding Phoebe at the door, he was greeted with whimpering and sounds of struggle.

It was a cold feeling that passed over him, leaving his hands numb and his heart pumping with fury and fear. He and Becky exchanged panicked looks, and then they both darted down the hall toward the parlor.

The door was wide open, and Benjamin's gut turned as he was faced with his most horrific fear. Wallace had his wife—*his wife!*—pinned to the couch, his face a mere inch from Phoebe's. Her eyes were shut tight, and he could see the tears glistening on her cheeks. Benjamin didn't hesitate before launching himself at the fat bastard attacking his wife. The man hadn't heard them come in, so Benjamin took him by surprise when he delivered an upper cut to his jaw and sent him sprawling to the floor beside the sofa.

As much as he wanted to go to her, he left Phoebe in the capable hands of Becky. "Get her out of here," he said, his eyes cold and focused on the colonel, who now struggled to his feet. He knew if he looked even once at that beautiful and pained face, he wouldn't be able to resist taking her into his arms.

But first he had a job to do.

He grabbed Wallace by the collar at his throat and twisted the fabric until he was sure it was near to choking him. "What part of 'Stay the *hell* away from them' was so difficult for you to understand?"

Of course, Wallace couldn't answer—not with Ben's knuckles digging into his throat. He just stared

back, red-faced and wide-eyed. Clearly, he hadn't expected to see him there that morning.

And then Ben unleashed his fury on the loathsome wretch. He delivered a few poignant blows to the man's face. The sound of cracking bones and teeth gave him a great deal of satisfaction. And once the man succumbed to unconsciousness, Benjamin left the room. He was certain the man would not get up for quite some time.

He made his way up the stairs and found Phoebe and Becky sitting on the edge of the bed in what Benjamin assumed was Phoebe's old bedchamber. Tears streaked her face as she lay with her head in Becky's lap. He knelt down in front of her and stroked her cheek until she opened her eyes to look at him. Her bottom lip quivered, but she made no move to go to him. Rather, she turned her face into Becky's skirts and began to cry all over again.

He would not be deterred, though. He wanted to hold her, to be the one to comfort her. And he could do with a bit of comforting himself. So he sat on the bed beside her and dragged her, albeit reluctantly, into his arms, until it was his chest she cried upon.

"Becky," he said quietly as he stroked Phoebe's hair. "I need you to find me a runner, quickly. I don't know how long we can keep the colonel incapacitated."

She needed no further explanation; she was up and out the door within seconds. Ben took a few moments of silence to slow his breathing and to thank God he had arrived when he did. He had already paid the man far more than he should have, sure that the sum would keep him out of their lives for good. Obviously, Wallace had been out for much more than monetary compensation.

With so many willing women wandering the

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streets of London, Ben wondered why he'd been so intent on harassing the Blake women. But it didn't matter now. Wallace was going to get just what he deserved. Benjamin would have no trouble pressing charges against the man in a court of law.

However, that was not his most pressing concern.

"Phoebe, my love," he whispered as he pulled back so he could see in her eyes. When she refused to open them, he said, "Please, my darling, let me see you."

It seemed to be a struggle, but she finally lifted her lids to reveal those wide sable eyes he had missed so very much. They were filled with tears and fear and sadness, and all he wanted was to make it all go away. He wanted to see her smile again, to hear her laugh . . . to hear her say *I forgive you* and, perhaps, even *I love you*.

"What are you doing here?" she finally asked, her voice thick as she tried to swallow more tears.

"I saw Becky at the market this morning and followed her here. She says you came to find me."

She nodded. "I m-missed you," she said, and then scrunched her face up with uncertainty. "Is that . . . all right?"

For the first time in weeks, a genuine smile spread his lips. "Of course it's all right, darling. And quite a relief. I was sure you hated me. That's why I've stayed away so long."

"I never hated you, Benjamin," she assured him. "I—" She looked down to where she gathered the fabric of her skirts in her fingers, and then back up. "You lied to me."

"I know." He looked at her, deep into her eyes, and hoped she read the honesty and sincerity that lay in

his own. "And I promise I will never make that mistake again."

"But you have."

"What are you talking about?" The hope he had felt a moment before vanished in an instant. Clearly, they weren't done sorting out their issues.

"What do you know of Colonel Wallace and my mother?"

Dammit! Benjamin breathed out, long and slow, and threw his head back to stare at the ceiling. The bastard had said something to her, but what was he to tell her?

"Phoebe, it is not, nor was it ever, my place to tell you about Wallace and your mother. And as a matter of fact, your mother begged me to protect you from the truth."

At this, she was up and off the bed, pacing before him. "Why? Why does everyone think I need to be protected? Have I not been the rock my mother has depended upon for the last year? Have I not kept a household afloat on my own? A girl, who should have been at balls and parties, not force feeding her mother, or searching the ground for a fallen penny. It was I! I did all that." With a resigned sigh, she added, "The faith you all have in me is astounding."

"Phoebe, please, you're upset. You've just had an awful fright, and I don't blame you one bit for being angry . . . with me, with your mother and Wallace. Lord knows, you are entitled."

"Entitled doesn't begin to describe it, Benjamin. What did everyone think I would do if I knew?"

"Perhaps we worried you would do what we have done, go into hiding, run away. There were any number of ways you could have reacted, but most importantly we didn't want you to suffer any more than

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you already had.”

“But I . . . I wouldn’t have, Benjamin.” She looked up at him and there were tears in her eyes again. Only this time, he saw the resignation in her body, the understanding and, dare he hope, the forgiveness.

He went to her, unable to bear another moment without having her in his arms again. “I know that now, my love, and I’m so sorry . . . for everything. You didn’t deserve to be lied to, and you certainly didn’t deserve the horrific things I said to you that night.”

“I said some pretty awful things too,” she admitted. “And I was very wrong. I-I feel terrible for what I said about your father—”

He put a finger to her lips. “Please, Phoebe, let us not relive it.”

“But I never should have said that, no matter how angry I was. They were horrible accusations, and —”

“And partially true.”

She shook her head, the guilt in her eyes more than he could bear. They had said things in anger, both of them, that they should not have said. He wanted to forgive and forget and move on.

“I never should have asked you to sell your house.”

“Perhaps not . . . but I did, anyway.”

She pulled back a bit and stared up at him, an astonished look in her fathomless brown eyes. “You what?”

“I sold it. I care too much about you, about this marriage, to have any point of contention between us.” He took a deep breath and prepared to tell her more of the truth. “I sent a letter to Lillian.”

Her sleek muscles tensed beneath his hold, so he continued in hopes of reassuring her.

“I couldn’t just ignore her. I had assumed

responsibility for her, and, yes, it was wrong of me to keep that from you, but I felt I at least owed her an explanation. So I told her about you, and I informed her that she needed to leave . . . that I was no longer her protector.”

Phoebe didn’t say anything to this. He wondered if she was hurt by the fact he’d sent Lillian a personal note, or if she even trusted that he was telling the truth about the letter’s contents. He didn’t have to wonder for long, though.

“Thank you,” she said as she threw her arms around his middle and squeezed tightly. He knew she was thanking him, not for ridding his life of Lillian or for selling the house, but for telling her the truth. And that gave him an incredible sense of satisfaction.

“Benjamin?” she asked a moment later, her voice muffled against his chest.

“What is it?”

“Am I ‘your love’?”

He wanted to laugh at the uncertainty in her voice, for it was surely unwarranted. Instead he tipped her head back and kissed her, tasting the salty tears, reveling in the unique soft smell of her, his wife. “I will never, ever lie to you again. You have my word. However, on the topic of your mother and Wallace, that is something you will have to take up with her. I love you, my darling.”

She threw her arms around his neck. He lifted her off the ground in a firm embrace. “I love you, too!” she said, and his heart swelled until it was so full he thought it might burst.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much time to enjoy the moment, for they heard a distinct scraping across the wooden floor below them in the parlor. They pulled away and stared at one another.

"I completely forgot about our guest," Phoebe said. "But we don't want him running off now, do we?"

"Certainly not." He kissed her quickly on the forehead and then started for the door. "You stay here until I ensure his immobility."

Chapter 19

Thankfully, Benjamin didn't have to issue another blow to the old colonel in order to detain him. Becky arrived with the Bow Street Runner just as Benjamin was barreling down the stairs. He explained the charges against the man, and the runner quickly tied him up and carted him off. Much to Benjamin's relief, Wallace was in too much pain to say anything, and he left without a word.

"Well, my dear," Ben said to Phoebe as they stood in the parlor. "Would you like to stay here—" He patted the sofa, and a thick cloud of dust puffed into the air. "Or shall I show you Wetherby Manor?"

She smiled up at him with the openness and innocence she'd had when they first met, before she knew of all his indiscretions. The fact that she looked at him that way now, after all she'd learned about him, meant so much more. If she could love him in spite of all his mistakes, they would be able to get through anything.

"Wetherby Manor, *please*," she said with a little laugh. "I don't ever want to set eyes on this place again."

"Agreed."

They made their way to the manor on foot. He

could have hired a hack, but it was a lovely day, and Phoebe claimed she wouldn't mind a bit of fresh air. Benjamin carried the two small satchels she and Becky had brought with them, knowing they could not have brought more than one other dress each. He made up his mind to detour them to Bond Street. Neither of them knew where Wetherby Manor was, so it wasn't until he stopped in front of a dress shop that Phoebe raised an eyebrow.

"Please do not tell me you live in a dress shop, Benjamin, for that would simply be too much."

He laughed, elated that her sense of humor had returned, and pushed the door open. "You're a marchioness now. It is time you started dressing like one."

Phoebe didn't argue with him, and why would she when her husband was holding open the door to a fancy dress shop? She was a woman, after all.

They spent the afternoon in the shop, trying on various ready-made dresses and modeling them for Benjamin, who sat patiently in the waiting room. He browsed the fashion plates, making suggestions for future gowns to be made, but since she would still be in mourning for a few more weeks, the ones they took home that day would have to be black or gray. He was grateful her mourning period would be shorter than the rest of theirs, as merely an in-law, for he far preferred her in vibrant colors. And Lord knew he could use a ray of sunshine through this dark time.

Becky chose several dresses of a more simplistic nature, which would serve her station better than elaborate gowns. Despite her uneasiness at Benjamin's generosity, it was obvious she enjoyed the spree every bit as much as her mistress.

Several hours and quite a few shillings later, the

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trio made their way to Wetherby House. Ben enjoyed the look of wonder on his wife's face as they crossed the threshold into the foyer. It was quite an impressive place, with the shiny gray-and-white marble floors and the wide-winding staircase. But he noticed that it was the naked statue that sat in the curve of the staircase that held her attention.

A blush rose to her cheeks, and he knew she had missed him just as much as he had missed her . . . in the Biblical sense, of course. But she had been through quite an ordeal, and though he was sure the shopping had helped to take her mind off of it, he wasn't sure she was ready to be thrown into bed.

"Would you like a tour of our house?" he asked as she handed her things over to Becky and Deane, the stalwart butler of Wetherby House.

"I would love one . . . and perhaps a bath?" she suggested with a grimace. Of course she would want to bathe after having that lascivious bastard slaving all over her. Ben thought he might like one himself just thinking about it.

"Mrs. Norris!" he shouted, and the portly housekeeper came forth from a small door just beyond the staircase. He gave a quick introduction of his new wife and her maid, and insisted that Becky be shown to one of the guest rooms upstairs, then ordered a tub of hot water be set up in the master chamber.

He took Phoebe's hand and looped it around his elbow, leaving the boxes from the dress shop to Becky and Mrs. Norris, then led her from the foyer into the front parlor. The house was large, and all the rooms interconnected. The ground floor had a series of reception rooms in addition to a small study that his mother enjoyed for writing her correspondence. Phoebe *oohed* and *aahed* at each room, and Ben enjoyed seeing

the house through fresh eyes. His family had always resided here when they were in London, so he supposed he took it for granted.

Phoebe marveled even more at the rooms on the first floor: the grand, crimson-colored ballroom, lined with gilt-edged mirrors; the private parlor with its yellow-and-white-striped décor; the family portrait gallery that spanned the length of the house; and especially the music room with the custom-made Broadwood piano.

“Would you like to play?” he asked her, but when she turned to him, he saw the weariness in her eyes.

“Later, perhaps? I’m really quite desperate for that bath.”

Ben touched his fingers to her temple and gently stroked her cheek. “Of course.”

They made their way up one more floor to the master suite of chambers. The copper tub sat before the fire, and Phoebe sighed in apparent relief at the sight of it. Ben had to admit it looked inviting. He could see the steam coming off the water, could smell the lavender-scented oil that had been added.

It was absolute torture watching his wife undress and slip into the tub. Every muscle in his body ached as he held them in check, resisting the urge to reach out and touch her. Though she gave off the appearance of a woman of great fortitude, he was sure she must still be shaken from her encounter with Wallace that morning. For tonight, Benjamin would stifle his own desires for her sake.

The next morning, as Phoebe stared at her

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husband over a quiet breakfast, she noted that the horrific events of yesterday morning seemed as if they had happened years ago, rather than a mere twenty-four hours earlier. Benjamin had played quite the gentleman, taking her shopping, touring the house with her. She couldn't quite believe he had watched her bathe without so much as trying to kiss her. Though, it had been obvious he'd wanted to. She had seen the ardor in his eyes . . . and in his trousers.

Phoebe had been torn herself over whether or not she was ready to receive him in the marital sense, so she let him hold her and caress her, and she fell asleep in his arms.

This morning, however, she was feeling the effects of three whole weeks without her husband. It didn't help that he looked so blasted handsome in his dark gray jacket, his hair slightly askew. She had watched him tie his neckcloth with great care, but all she really wanted to do was tear it off of him now.

He looked up and caught her staring. Her skin flushed at the promise in his eyes, and she gave him the sultriest smile she could muster. Clearly, he understood her meaning, for he dropped his fork midbite, letting it clatter to the fine china plate, and moved to her side.

Phoebe thrilled at being dragged through her new home as if she were a cave woman by her primal beast of a husband. It had been too long since they'd shared the intimacy she so loved and desired. She craved it, craved him, so much that she gave little notice to the servants they passed on the way to their chamber.

When at last they reached the large mahogany doors that led into the bedchamber, her heart began to race with uncertainty. It had been three weeks since she had shared a bed with her husband. What if she'd forgotten all she learned?

She didn't have time to think on that much, for Benjamin had her in the room, on the bed and half-undressed within mere seconds. His carnal manner reminded her of their wedding night, and joy bubbled up inside of her.

Deciding it was best not to think, she let her instincts take over and reached down to the bulge between his legs. He was hard, so hard, and it made her blood run warm in her veins. The warmth spread right down to her core, to the place that ached to feel him.

He gave a low moan as she rubbed him, but clearly it wasn't good enough with the thick layer of fabric that separated her hand from his skin. He stood from the bed, keeping his eyes fixed on her as he tugged and yanked and pulled until the trousers finally found their way to the floor.

Phoebe sat up, deciding she wanted to try something new this time, something she'd read about in a very naughty book Katherine had given to her. She took Ben's hands and drew him closer until he stood right in front of her, his member, large and throbbing, a mere inch from her face.

Oh, Lord! It was so big! How would she ever do what the picture depicted without choking herself?

"Phoebe," he rasped, "what are you doing?"

With a new determination, she cast her glance upward and gave him a sly smile as she wrapped her hand around the base of his member. "Just trying something new."

And then she wrapped her lips about the tip.

"Good God!" Ben shouted and jumped, so Phoebe pulled back.

"Did I do something wrong?"

He seemed to want to laugh at this, but he didn't. "Where the devil did you learn about this?"

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Phoebe wanted to test the waters again, and so she put a tentative tongue to the tip and gave it a quick lick, almost as if she were eating a chocolate ice. Though it didn't taste as good as a chocolate ice, it was far more arousing somehow. The musky smell and the illicit act caused moisture to pool between her legs. She wanted more of him.

"I learned it," she answered, kissing him between words, "from . . . your . . . sister."

"No! No, no, no, no, no!" He grabbed her chin so she had to look up at him. "You are *never* to mention my sister while we're doing *this* again!"

She pulled away and gave him a haughty retort. "You asked."

"Don't answer next time."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Dear God, I don't ever want you to stop, my sweet, darling, Phoebe."

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips with the knowledge that she could bring him such pleasure. And her mouth was on him again, devouring him, tasting him, reveling in the moans and groans above her. It was all she could do to keep her wits about her when he reached down and tugged on her nipple.

Blessedly, he pulled away from her then and pushed her back onto the bed. Though she had enjoyed the exploration and the surprising amount of pleasure she herself had gained from the experience, the ache between her legs was becoming unbearable. It had been weeks, and she needed him. Now.

But he took his time. First he kissed her, thoroughly, making the storm inside of her brew until she couldn't take anymore.

"Please," she begged. "I need you, Benjamin."

With an ecstatic groan, he flipped onto his back,

bringing her with him. Her legs straddled his hard thighs, and she landed on his rigid length. He wasn't inside of her yet, but it was bliss merely to feel him against her, hot and hard. With painstaking slowness, Benjamin pulled her forward, sliding her along his cock until they reached the right angle for him to slip into her.

Phoebe winced with pure pleasure at having him inside of her. He pressed up and she pressed down—he was so deep, and she felt so wicked sitting atop him, riding him like a prized stallion.

She loved the control she wielded in this position, and even was so daring as to lean over and dangle her breasts in his face. He grabbed on to them and devoured one nipple with his ravenous appetite, while he used his fingers to titillate the other.

They had made love before but never like this. Never with this wild, urgent need that came of being apart for longer than either of them really wanted.

It didn't take long before the inexorable rhythm sent both of them spinning out of control into unbridled ecstasy. Phoebe cried out as Benjamin released a low and guttural roar. He came halfway up, and Phoebe clasped her arms behind his neck, pressing herself to him as they prolonged the moment, the blissful moment.

They stayed like that, holding one another close, their bodies slick with sweat, trying to find purchase in the real world once more. After a few minutes, when their breathing had slowed and the sweat began to cool on Phoebe's back, he guided her to lie beside him.

“Benjamin,” she said a while later as she stared

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up at the dark green canopy above them. When she felt his eyes on her, she turned to look at him. "I think I would like to go home."

"I assume that by *home* you mean Ravenscroft Castle and not Blakeny House?"

Phoebe laughed. "Of course, I mean Ravenscroft." Then she sobered a bit. "I think it's time I had a long talk with my mother."

Ben nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

For the first time since she'd been in London, she thought about her great escape from Ravenscroft Castle. "Though I *could* wait one more day to deal with Kat's wrath."

Benjamin raised one, dark eyebrow in curiosity. "What does Kat have to do with anything?"

"Ah . . . well, she may have had it in mind that she was coming with Becky and me to London."

"And? What happened?"

Oh, dear. What would Ben think of the way they'd escaped from the bosom of his family? "I didn't want her to come." She waited to see what he would say, but he didn't say anything. He stared at her until she was forced to continue the story. "I left a note," she said, by way of an excuse. "But I knew if your family knew we were trying to leave, they would somehow get involved. Kat had already begun to make a big to-do over coming here, and I . . . I needed to be alone with you."

"You are a peculiar and fascinating woman, Lady Eastleigh." He lifted her hand gently and kissed her fingers. "And that is why I love you."

A smile lit her up from the inside out. "I love you, too."

Chapter 20

Phoebe was all at once anxious and apprehensive about returning to Ravenscroft Castle. She was actually quite desperate to speak with her mother, to know what happened with Wallace and why he had attacked her. What was so awful that she'd had to keep it a secret from her? And furthermore, why did Benjamin know about it?

These questions plagued her during the entire journey, but she knew better than to ask Benjamin for clarification. He wouldn't tell her, and she would only end up more frustrated. It was best she wait and hear it directly from her mother.

However, there was the issue of Katherine, with whom she would have to deal with as well. Her palms grew sweaty at the idea of facing her sister-in-law after running off to London without her.

She looked at Becky, her partner-in-crime, who sat nestled in the corner of the seat opposite her and Benjamin. Clearly, she was not as worried as Phoebe was about facing Kat—if the monstrous snores coming from her were any indication.

Ben squeezed her hand, and she turned to look at him. He was trying to stifle his mirth, but it wasn't working. Furthermore, it was infectious, and they both giggled like schoolgirls at Becky's loud snoring.

It wasn't until they pulled to the front of Ravenscroft Castle and lurched to a stop that Becky woke with a start from her nap.

"We're here, Becky," Phoebe said gently, once Benjamin had alighted the carriage.

"Oh, goodness, I didn't mean to fall asleep."

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“It’s all right, Becky. But you’d better prepare yourself. I’m certain we’re about to get an earful from Katherine.”

They filed out of the carriage and then up the stairs. The door opened before they reached it, and Sikes stood there waiting. Phoebe barely had time to remove her bonnet and gloves before her sister-in-law’s voice echoed through the foyer.

“I do hope you have an excellent explanation for leaving me here.”

Phoebe turned to find Kat standing behind her, arms crossed over her chest, fury and speculation in her dark eyes. Her slippered foot tapped steadily against the marble floor as she waited.

“We do!” Phoebe assured her. She turned with the intent to pull Becky into the conversation, only to discover she had fled already. Blast her! They had left together, hadn’t they? Sure, it had been Phoebe’s idea, but, still, a little support as she faced the fuming duchess would have been nice.

Kat grabbed her hand, led her into the nearest parlor and shut the door. Before her sister-in-law could speak, Phoebe launched into her reasoning.

“I had to go alone, Kat,” she started. “I couldn’t risk getting distracted.”

At this, Kat looked up abruptly, a confused expression on her features. “From what? I thought you were merely going to see Benjamin.”

Phoebe shook her head, resigned to admitting the truth, now that all had been solved between her and Benjamin. “I was going to *find* him, Kat. We had an argument, and he left. It wasn’t entirely his fault, and I was too embarrassed to admit to the rest of you that I had driven him away. I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you. But I do hope you can forgive me.” She gave a

sheepish smile. "It has only been two days, after all."

Not easily swayed, Kat continued to tap her foot. "You should have told me. I would have brought him to heel. I know how stubborn Ben can be."

"That is just it. I know you would have meant well, but I needed to find Benjamin and sort this out, for the sake of my marriage. And I had to do it on my own," she concluded in a soft voice, praying Kat would understand.

Kat rolled her eyes, but a reassuring tug appeared at the corners of her lips. "I suppose I forgive you. It can't be easy being married to my brother. But you mustn't ever abandon me again!"

Phoebe didn't exactly agree with Kat's assessment of her marriage, but she chose to keep that to herself. "I won't. I promise." She took a deep breath and asked, "Do you have any idea where I might find my mother?"

"I think she is with my mother on the veranda."

Phoebe enveloped Kat in a tight hug, grateful she had been quick to forgive. Heaven only knew that the sensitive topic she had to discuss with her mother might not go quite as well.

Her mother was indeed where Kat said she would be, keeping company with the dowager. It seemed they spent most of their days there recently, and she couldn't blame them. The weather had been quite delightful of late.

"Oh, darling, you're home!" her mother cried as Phoebe stepped from the house and into the sunshine.

Lady Grimsby rose and enveloped her in her arms; the dowager was quick to follow, then insisted she join them at the round lattice table.

"We were so worried when you ran off like that, Phoebe. Whatever possessed you to leave without

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telling anyone?”

“It’s a very complicated story, Mother,” she replied, hoping to avoid telling it all over again. It was more important that she get to the topic of Colonel Wallace and what had actually transpired in London. Not that she could broach the subject in front of Benjamin’s mother, but she would need to discuss this with her sooner than later. She wondered how she could politely ask his mother to leave or if she should ask her mother to join her on a stroll.

“But I’m glad we’re home now,” she said to her mother. “I have something very important to speak with you about.”

“Oh, darling, you must save whatever it is for another time.” Her mother was almost giddy with excitement as she procured a missive from her sash. “It is a good thing you came home when you did, for we must turn around and leave again.”

“For London?”

“No, no! For Billingshurst.”

Phoebe’s brows rose in surprise. She hadn’t been to the family seat in Billingshurst since her father died. “What for?”

“For Geoffrey, darling. He’s getting married!”

As much as Phoebe was elated for her cousin, her spirits deflated. How could she ask her mother about Wallace now? She was so happy to be going to Billingshurst. Phoebe wasn’t about to take that away from her.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she said, mustering a smile. “When is the wedding?”

“This Sunday. We will leave on Friday.”

Phoebe sighed inwardly. It was only Tuesday, which meant she would be forced to wait almost an entire week before approaching her mother about

Wallace. She supposed it wasn't the end of the world. She'd been in the dark this long; what was six more days?

"That's wonderful," she said again, and pushed back the wrought iron chair. "I'll go tell Benjamin."

Her mother reached out and took hold of her wrist to stop her from leaving. "Didn't you have something to speak with me about?"

Phoebe shook her head. "It's not that important after all, Mother." Then she retreated into the house.

Phoebe thrilled a little at being seen with her husband in public for the first time. She knew it was only a small gathering that would be at Blake Hall—they would not have been able to attend a large fete anyhow, being in mourning—but it would be their first foray into any kind of society together since reciting their vows.

At just past seven o'clock on Friday evening, the Eastleigh carriage pulled up to the drive of Blake Hall. Phoebe strained to look out the window of the carriage. It had been quite some time since they had been there, and the circumstances under which they had left had not been the most desirable. However, Blake Hall was lovely, and it had been her home often throughout her childhood.

Phoebe allowed Benjamin to help her from the carriage, and then she took his arm to walk to the front door. They were led into a small parlor where Geoffrey and several others mingled, drinks in hand.

"Oh, good heavens, is that my little cousin Phoebe?" he announced as she and Benjamin crossed the threshold into the room.

Heat rose to her cheeks, but she smiled in spite

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of her embarrassment. "I'm not quite so little anymore, Geoffrey," she returned as he placed a kiss on both cheeks.

"Certainly not." There was admiration and tenderness in his eyes, and she wondered if he somehow knew the horrible struggle she'd had to go through to end up where she was today. "Aunt Lucinda." He gathered Phoebe's mother in a hug. "It has been too long. Are you well?"

Lady Grimsby nodded and smiled wide. "Congratulations, Geoffrey."

And then Geoffrey turned to Benjamin and offered his hand. "It has been a long time, my friend."

"Indeed."

"Might I introduce you all to my betrothed?"

Geoffrey turned and gestured to a young woman who rushed immediately to his side. She was a lovely girl, with honey-colored hair and skin so pale it could only be referred to as alabaster, her eyes so blue Phoebe imagined the sky might have been jealous. She was, in Phoebe's estimation, the perfect example of a true English rose.

Geoffrey took the girl's hand and placed it in the crook of his elbow, then smiled at the three of them. "May I present my fiancée, Lady Anne Rutherford."

The introductions ensued all around, and then the butler, who was not the same one she had known when she lived here at Blake House, announced dinner.

Phoebe was seated next to Anne, who turned out to be quite an engaging woman. It was easy to see why Geoffrey had chosen her as his baroness.

Once the meal was over, Phoebe retired with Anne and the other ladies to the parlor for tea, while Benjamin stayed with Geoffrey and the other men in the dining room to do whatever it was men did in there

once the ladies were gone. Though the issue of her mother and Colonel Wallace continued to occupy the back of her mind, Phoebe found herself immensely entertained and very happy.

The following afternoon, Benjamin insisted Phoebe take him on a tour of her childhood home. It wasn't as big as Ravenscroft Castle, perhaps it was not even as large as Eastleigh House in London, but it seemed to hold a great many happy memories for Phoebe.

"This," she said, brandishing her arm in a wide arc, "is the library."

Ben quirked his eyebrow. "You don't say," he teased as he scanned the floor-to-ceiling shelves stuffed with books.

"I do." She walked lazily to a shelf and pulled a red, leather-bound book from it. "And this was my favorite book."

He took the volume from her and opened to the first page. He wasn't at all surprised to see it was a gothic novel, written by Mrs. Radcliffe, of course. "Katherine loves this one, too, but I'm sure you already knew that."

Phoebe took the book from him and placed it back on the shelf. "Come on." She tugged his arm and pulled him from the room. "I've saved the best for last."

Benjamin adored how predictable his wife could be at times, and completely surprising at others. In this case, it wasn't hard to guess where she was leading him.

As they neared the back of the house, Phoebe pulled aside a large sliding door to reveal the Blake

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Manor music room. She dropped his hand, made her way to the pianoforte, and plopped down on the chair. Her face lit up as she began to play, and so did Benjamin's. He had been so busy after their own wedding, he hadn't the opportunity to listen to her play. She was quite talented, however . . .

"You're breaking your wrists, you know?"

The music stopped, and Phoebe looked up at him with her wide doe eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Your wrists." He moved into position behind her and used his own hands to nudge her wrists into the proper place. As he did so, Phoebe leaned back, allowing her forehead to graze his afternoon stubble, providing him a better view of her exaggerated cleavage. A smile came to his lips. "There, that's better."

"Benjamin!"

He met her stunned expression with a wry smile.

"What? I was only trying to help."

"You were trying to seduce me," she corrected.

"And is that so awful?"

Phoebe's eyes drifted to his lips, which were only mere inches from her own. Her gaze grew shuddered, and he felt her skin turn to goose flesh as he traced a path up her arm with his finger.

"I suppose not," she finally answered, and then offered her lips to him.

Hungrily, he took them and plundered her mouth with hot, wet flicks of his tongue. She matched his hunger, and while he yanked down the front of her dress, she set to undoing his trousers. His heart raced with anticipation, with the excitement of an illicit rendezvous in a public room. He knew if he gave his wife a chance to think about it, she would put a stop to it. So he didn't give her that option.

Jerrica Knight-Catania

His lips never left hers as he gathered her in his arms and laid her on the plush rug beside the pianoforte. He pleased her until she was writhing with frenzy beneath him, but he couldn't let her scream out.

"Shhh," he whispered as she found her release.

He lifted her with one arm, and she pressed her mouth into his shoulder, biting in lieu of crying out. And as she clenched around him, he spent himself inside of her.

Somehow, during the frenetic love making, they'd made their way under the harpsichord and now stared up at its underbelly. Benjamin's breaths were heavy, Phoebe's quick, as they came down from their ecstatic states.

"Do you think anyone heard us?" Phoebe wondered aloud.

"I have no idea," Benjamin answered. "And, frankly, I don't bloody care."

Chapter 21

"I am sorry to have missed your nuptials to my cousin, Ben, though I don't remember seeing an invitation to the wedding."

Benjamin and Geoffrey were alone in the baron's study, nursing their brandy and puffing on fine cigars. They had enjoyed a celebratory dinner earlier in the evening, but it was late now. Most of the others had gone off to bed, but Ben had decided to stay up and spend some time with Geoffrey on his last night of bachelorhood.

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“Yes, well, it was a small ceremony—only family, and it was in my father’s bedchamber. I’m sure you understand.”

“My deepest condolences, by the way, in regard to your father. You must miss him tremendously.”

“Indeed.”

There was a pause while both men took a drag on their cigars. Ben’s was near done, so he put it out in the crystal ashtray that sat on the table, then sat back in his chair with a sigh. It had been a very nice evening thus far, though the mention of his father was a reminder he could have done without.

“I find it somewhat ironic that you ended up married to Grimsby’s daughter.”

Benjamin suppressed a groan. If the topic of his own father had been unwelcome, the topic of Phoebe’s father was even more so. Especially with someone who knew his secret. “Sometimes you can’t control who you . . . take a liking to. I didn’t even know who she was when we first met. It came as quite a shock when I went to call on Lady Grimsby, and Phoebe was the one to greet me.”

Geoffrey’s passive expression turned into a grimace. “What business did you have with Lady Grimsby?” he asked.

Ben scoffed. “Very funny,” he said with not an ounce of humor to his tone.

“No, really.” Geoffrey sat forward in his chair. “Did you mean to tell her of the duel?”

“Of course, man.” He stood and began to pace the room, somewhat annoyed that Geoffrey was making him spell it out for him. He knew what happened; why did he need to ask all of these ridiculous questions? “The guilt was gnawing at me. I-I couldn’t stand it anymore. I wanted to tell her what I had done, but then

when Phoebe was there . . . I couldn't.

"She's forgiven me, though," he went on, hoping to bring the conversation to a close, "in spite of the fact that I kept it from her until after the wedding. So all is well now, and we are doing our best to move past my

. . . my mistake."

"I'm sorry, Benjamin, I'm a bit confused. To what mistake do you refer? You called the man out for cheating. It's not all that uncommon, you know."

"Yes, well, being the killer of your wife's father *is* uncommon."

Geoffrey's eyes widened in obvious shock, and he shook his head back and forth, as if the motion might make the things he was hearing a bit clearer. "His *killer*?" he repeated.

Benjamin had had enough. Geoff had been there, had seen him shoot the man, and had certainly been privy to his death a mere two weeks later. What the devil was his problem? "All right, perhaps not directly, but certainly that fever was my doing. It would be too coincidental for it not to have been my fault . . . I know what I did, Geoff."

Geoffrey's voice was low, almost soothing, when he said, "Perhaps. But you don't know what *he* did."

Ben looked up abruptly at Geoffrey. "What are you talking about?"

"Good God, Ben, you've been carrying this on your shoulders for a year? Do you not ever read your correspondence?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked again, his heart racing.

"Benjamin, I sent you a letter, shortly after my uncle died. I thought, of all people, you should know

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the truth. Aunt Lucinda had it printed in the papers that it was a fever. She was worried about what the truth might do to Phoebe—

“Goddammit, get to the point, man!”

“He killed himself!”

The world seemed to come to an abrupt standstill. What was Geoffrey talking about? “H-how is that possible? Why?”

“He was a sorry excuse for a man, and he knew it. The creditors were closing in on him, his wife knew about his affairs. And Phoebe . . . well, I think he felt worst of all about her. He knew it wouldn’t be possible to keep her outfitted for another season . . . that’s why he was cheating at the table.”

Ben tried to keep up as Geoffrey continued, but it wasn’t easy. All he could think was: *I didn’t do it.*

“Of course, doctor bills from the gunshot wound drained him of what little he had left. He didn’t see a way out. I guess he assumed I would be a better steward of the estate—what was left of it anyhow—and perhaps keep his wife and daughter in the life they were accustomed to. Unfortunately, he left me with such a mound of debt that I couldn’t afford to send much to Aunt Lucinda and Phoebe.”

“Did you know the creditors were hunting *them* down as well?” Ben asked, wondering where Geoffrey had been in the midst of all the hardships the Blake women had undergone.

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t.”

They were silent for a few moments. Ben’s mind was still reeling with all this new information, with the realization that he’d lived with a year of horrific guilt over something he hadn’t actually done. It didn’t seem fair at all that he had missed out on the last year of his father’s life to start over in America, when

he hadn't needed to start over at all. He had truly done nothing wrong.

But now what? "Do you think your aunt would hate me forever if I were to tell Phoebe the truth?"

Geoffrey finally put out his cigar and stood from his chair. "I think it's not your place to tell her. Aunt Lucinda must come to that conclusion on her own."

"And if she doesn't?"

Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders and gave him a half smile. "You said she already forgave you, did you not? At least now you can truly accept the forgiveness." He started across the room to the door. "Come. It's late, and I'm getting married in the morning."

With the newfound revelation in the forefront of his mind, Benjamin found it exceedingly difficult to act normally around his wife. He knew Geoff had been right; it wasn't his place to say anything to Phoebe. He would have to confront his mother-in-law and convince her to tell Phoebe on her own. It was the only way.

However, because it was impossible to put it from his mind, Benjamin feared a slip on his part every time they had a conversation. It didn't help that they could not return immediately to Ravenscroft Castle. They had to wait until after the wedding, of course.

When they finally pulled up to the drive of his family seat, Benjamin felt the weight lift. It had been torture, getting through the wedding festivities and the long ride home, but they were here, and he would at last be able to speak with Lady Grimsby. But he had to do it in private, without Phoebe knowing. He didn't want to raise any suspicions before he had a chance to state his case to her mother. And it was another couple of hours

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before he was granted the opportunity.

Phoebe had decided to lie down for a nap, and he found Lady Grimsby sitting with his mother in the salon at the back of the house. It overlooked the gardens, and he supposed it was the next best thing to the veranda on a rainy day.

"I hate to interrupt, but I wondered if I might borrow Lady Grimsby from you for a few minutes," he said, bowing to the pair of them.

Both matrons raised their brows, but his mother stood and gestured for him to sit. "I have to speak with Mrs. Simms about dinner. Here, take my seat."

She bustled away, and Ben took her place, half excited, half dreading the imminent conversation.

"Has Phoebe gone to lie down?" Lady Grimsby asked before he could embark on the topic of Colonel Wallace.

"Yes, she seemed awfully tired from the journey." He stared across the expanse of the sitting area at his mother-in-law and decided the best thing to do was to just come out with it. "She knows about you and the colonel."

A look of quiet horror passed over the woman's face, and she sucked in a breath.

"I didn't tell her, I assure you," he continued when she said nothing. "Wallace told her, and not in the most . . . pleasant of ways."

Her hand flew to her heart, and she moved to the edge of her seat as if to stand. "Oh, Lord, please do not tell me—"

He held up a hand to stop her before she got ahead of herself. "It was fortunate Becky found me when she did. Phoebe is fine. She was a bit shaken up by the incident. However, the colonel alluded to you and payment due before I was able to stop him."

She was quiet for a moment but then asked, “Did you explain any of it to her?”

Benjamin shook his head. “I told her it wasn’t my place . . . but she will ask you, and soon. She tried last week but was afraid it would ruin your time at the wedding. I wanted you to be prepared.”

Lady Grimsby nodded her head. “Thank you for telling me, Benjamin.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not all.”

“No?” Her brown eyes went wide with curiosity.

“Lady Grimsby—”

“Please, call me Lucinda.”

“*Ahem* . . . Lucinda, I have no doubt this will be an unpleasant topic to visit, but I fear I have no choice but to bring it up. But first, I should explain something to you.” He paused and took a deep breath before continuing on. “I-I spent a year of my life thinking I killed your husband.”

He could see the comprehension pass over her features, followed quickly by fear, and perhaps loathing. But he would not be deterred.

“At this moment, your daughter thinks I killed her father . . . because that’s what I told her, when I still believed this to be true. You see, I challenged your husband to a duel after I saw him hand-mucking in a game of cards against my brother. I shot him in the shoulder and was convinced the wound led to the fever that caused his death. However, I learned otherwise a few days ago, from Geoffrey. Apparently, he tried to tell me shortly after the incident, but I had already gone off to America. I never got the message.”

Silence fell between them, heavy and sad, and Benjamin wondered what the older woman was thinking. Surely she would tell Phoebe now, to relieve

him of this horrible burden of a secret.

“Benjamin,” she began, her voice soft and leaden with emotion. “I cannot imagine the kind of pain you have suffered as a result of my . . . dishonesty. My daughter and I were in the country during all this. We knew nothing of the duel. Geoffrey informed me of the *decision* my husband had made and I made the choice to hide it. I did not think it was something the public needed to know. And I especially did not want Phoebe to know.”

“But you do understand the necessity in telling her now, do you not?”

Her throat moved over a large gulp, and she stared at him proudly, determined. “I understand nothing of the sort, my lord. I will take this secret to my grave. As will you, I am sure. You are far too honorable, I believe, to tell Phoebe news that is not yours to tell. News that would be devastating to her.”

Benjamin wasn’t sure he was hearing correctly. Surely, she did not mean to let her daughter believe such a horrible untruth about her husband. “Do you mean to say that you are *not* going to tell her? After all we have been through—after all we have suffered over the last year, you mean to keep this from her?”

“She is my daughter. I have a duty to protect her.”

“You have a duty to tell her the truth—”

“Not if it is something that will hurt her!”

Benjamin didn’t want to yell at his mother-in-law, so he bit down on his tongue until he could taste the blood. Good God, the woman must be delusional to think it was better to keep Phoebe in the dark over this matter.

“Lady Grimsby, I know firsthand that your daughter values honesty above all else. She and I

fought, for no other reason than she was angry at me for having lied to her. For having married her without telling her of my transgression.” He chose to omit the part about Lillian. The declaration was enough without mention of her.

“Then certainly I will not tell her now.”

“But you must! I deserve to have my name acquitted in this.”

“Why? She has already forgiven you—she even went to London to find you and tell you so, did she not?”

“It is not enough.”

Tears filled the woman’s eyes. “It will have to do, my lord.” And before Benjamin could say another word, she was up, running from the room.

Benjamin stared after her, dumbfounded. How could things have gone so wrong? How could she be so blind to think that keeping the secret would be better than telling the truth to her own daughter?

He sat there, numb and frustrated, wondering what the devil he was going to do, when his wife came into the room. He opened his mouth to greet her, but she intercepted him.

“Benjamin? What happened? I just passed my mother in the hallway on my way to find you. She is in hysterics.”

“Good God,” he whispered, and shook his head in disbelief. Could this situation possibly get any worse? Why wouldn’t the woman just tell the blasted truth? “Phoebe, I can’t tell you. It is not my place.”

“Tell me what?”

“If I could tell you, you would already know, Phoebe, but this is something that I cannot. And, unfortunately, your mother refuses to tell you, so I am left—” Dammit! If he didn’t stop his blathering, he

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would tell her. Just like he'd blurted out that he had shot her father, he might find himself in the same situation. "Go to your mother, for God's sake, and make her tell you."

"And upset her further? I meant to speak with her about Colonel Wallace today. Benjamin, I have been waiting a week to approach her on this subject."

Oh, that was rich! "I've been waiting a bloody year, Phoebe."

She reared back slightly. "What are you talking about?"

Ben shook his head and closed his eyes. He couldn't let his temper get the better of him. "It's nothing. I'm sorry."

"It's not nothing. You sent her away in tears. I don't think it is I to whom you owe an apology."

"And you take your mother's side over mine, I see. When all I am trying to do is get her to tell you the bloody truth." He hated the sardonic tone to his voice, but there was nothing for it.

"She is not a well woman, Benjamin. Something like this could send her to her bed for another year. What did you say to upset her so?"

He couldn't do this. "I would *love* to tell you, Phoebe." He tried to keep his voice calm so she would hear the desperation behind the anger. "But I cannot."

Phoebe stormed through the house, away from her husband, straight to her mother's bedchamber. What could this possibly be about? And why would he not tell her? Why would her mother not tell her? All these secrets were starting to weigh on Phoebe, and she'd had enough of it.

She would get to the bottom of it. She had to. Though *when* she would get to the bottom of it depended greatly on her mother.

When she reached her mother's room, she knocked but received no answer. A sad feeling washed over Phoebe, recalling the days—more than three hundred and sixty-five of them—that she'd knocked on her mother's door to no answer. She only did so out of respect. Or perhaps with the hope that one day her mother would answer back.

She pushed the door open to see her mother lying on the bed, her back to the door. Phoebe walked quietly across the room and put a hand to her mother's shoulder. She didn't move, didn't even acknowledge anyone was there. Clearly, Phoebe would get no information out of her mother today. And Benjamin wasn't going to be forthcoming . . .

Frustrated and angry, Phoebe left her mother's room and went straight to her own. Not the one she shared with Benjamin, but the one she'd had that first night she slept at Ravenscroft Castle. The one she'd stayed in the night of their last argument.

She didn't want to stay there. She wanted to be with her husband. But more than that, she wanted the truth. She thought she'd had it, but apparently she had been misled once again, if the earlier argument was any indication.

As she stepped into the room, all cream and pale shades of green, she shut the door and then sank against it. She bent her knees and slid all the way down the wall to sit on her bottom. And then she cried.

Chapter 22

Five days. Five bloody long days, and he had barely spent ten minutes in his wife's company. Benjamin was practically pulling his hair out, wondering what the devil he was supposed to do about his predicament.

Part of him wanted to toss his honor to the birds and march into Phoebe's room and declare the truth: that he hadn't killed her father after all. That the man had taken the easy way out and taken his own damned life, and her mother had lied to protect her from that truth.

But damn the sense of honor that had been drilled into him from the cradle, he couldn't do it.

However, how long could this go on? It was ridiculous! Didn't his mother-in-law understand what her lying and secrets were doing to her daughter and her new husband? They loved each other, for Christ's sake. They should not be spending the seventh week of their marriage in separate bedrooms!

She had said she wasn't angry with him—that she didn't hold him accountable for her mother's current state. But how could he believe that when she refused to come to him, to spend time with him or sleep in the same room with him?

Benjamin pounded on the keys of the piano in the music room, playing Bach as fast as his fingers would allow. He loved the way the keys responded according to his touch. The way they did exactly what he wanted them to do. If he meant the sound to be soft, the keys obliged. Or if he banged with all the force in his fingers, they did his bidding then, too. How easy it was, how convenient! So much more accommodating

than a bloody woman.

“Benjamin!”

He lifted his fingers from the keys at the abrupt tone of his sister’s voice. The look about her was somewhat urgent, and for a moment Benjamin worried that perhaps something was wrong. But then she launched into an unexpected scolding.

“You’re going to break that piano, you nodcock. I’ve never heard such a ruckus.” She floated into the room in a flurry of black satin and onyx jewelry that clicked together as she walked. “Perhaps you should take your frustration outside. Hunt animals or whatever it is you men do, rather than taking it out on a fine musical instrument.”

“I’m fine,” he said curtly. “I will play quieter so as to not disturb Her Grace.”

He groaned as she sat down next to him on the bench, causing him to have to scoot over to make room for her. Dammit, why wouldn’t she leave him alone? He just wanted to be *alone*. Or with Phoebe. But certainly not with his bloody sister.

“You are not fine, and neither is your wife. I can’t get her or Lady Grimsby to answer the door, Benjamin. I only know they are alive because they return barely touched trays to the hallway after every meal. And because I occasionally see Phoebe dashing between her own room and her mother’s.” There was a pause, and Benjamin could feel her gaze on him. Her *pitying* gaze, which he really did not appreciate. “Ben, what happened?”

“Hah! I knew it!” He was off the bench, stalking across the room with a sardonic laugh.

“Knew what?” Katherine was at his heels.

Could she not just go away?

“That you were here out of your own curiosity and

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not out of any concern for me.”

“That’s not true, Benjamin. I want you to tell me what happened so I can help.”

“Help? I think the word you’re looking for is meddle.”

“It’s no wonder she won’t speak to you, you boar!”

Benjamin opened his mouth and then clamped it shut on an acidic retort. “You are very fortunate you’re with child, Kat, because otherwise I would wring your scrawny little interloping neck.”

“Don’t you dare threaten me, Benjamin Wetherby! I am your sister, and I am only looking out for you. *And* your wife.” She stood there a moment, her nostrils flaring slightly as she seethed. Then she stuck her nose in the air and turned to go. “Never mind. I will share my newfound information with someone who cares.”

Benjamin’s head snapped to look at her. He hated to take the bait, but he couldn’t help himself. “To what ‘newfound information’ do you refer?” he asked, keeping a sneer in his voice to make it sound as though he wasn’t *completely* interested.

Kat whipped around. She raised one brow as she attempted to hide a triumphant smile. “No, no . . . I wouldn’t want to appear to be *meddling*. I’ll just be on my way.”

He didn’t let her take two steps before he clamped his hand around her dainty little elbow and spun her around. “Stop playing games, Kat. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Stop cursing at me, and I will tell you.”

“Dammit, woman, you are infuriating! Tell me what you’re talking about!”

Her black eyes flashed at him ferociously, and

he feared “The Canary” was about to peck his eyes out. But at last she yanked her arm from his grasp and retrieved something from the sash of her gown.

He took the folded parchment and held it up in the air while giving her a condescending look. “Have *you* taken to going through my post now as well? Perhaps I should litter the roads with my personal correspondence, and then gentry from near and far can come to tell me about Great Aunt Gertrude’s trip to Bath.”

“I will not apologize for this, Benjamin,” she said, her demeanor suddenly serious. “I know that you told her about the duel, and I know that’s why you fled to London in the first place. I imagine it has something to do with why the two of you aren’t speaking now, though obviously, I’m a bit fuzzy on all the details of the last week or so—”

He didn’t bother to ask how she knew what she knew—The Canary had sources apparently. He just wanted her to get to the point. “Kat, what in God’s name are you going on about?”

“Just read the letter, Benjamin.”

With great reluctance, Ben did as his sister bid and gave a chuckle born of irony. Of course. It was a letter from Geoffrey, sent more than a year ago, telling him the circumstances of Grimsby’s death.

“Where did you find this?” he asked when he was done scanning its contents.

“I . . . happened upon it.”

Ben had never even seen it, yet somehow his sister simply ‘happened upon it.’ Not bloody likely. But somehow he couldn’t find it within himself to be angry at her for snooping through his things. He was simply going to have to accept that that was what women did apparently. He could rant and rave about it all he

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wanted, but it wouldn't make an ounce of difference.

"Right," he said as he tore the letter in half and handed it back to his sister. "Well, it won't do me any good. I already knew what was in that letter, and so does Lady Grimsby. Only she refuses to tell her daughter, which led us into an altercation, which sent her into a depression, which upset Phoebe, and now, my dear, gossip-mongering sister, you know why my wife and mother-in-law will not come out of their rooms, let alone give me the time of day. If you will excuse me, I'm going to go shoot something."

And then he brushed past his sister and made his way to the stables.

As much as her brother and the rest of the *ton* thought to the contrary, Katherine Wetherby Hart really did hate to meddle. She didn't do it because she was so desperately curious about other people's affairs; she did it because she wanted her friends and family to be happy. And if she could do something to help solve their problems, well, then, why should a little thing like privacy stop her?

It shouldn't. And that was why, when the plan began to form in her mind, she didn't stop its formation. Kat was smart enough to know she couldn't very well march up to Phoebe's room and hand her the letter that would solve all of her and Benjamin's problems. She wouldn't live to see them reunite if Benjamin ever found out. But she could surely find a more *discreet* way of passing the letter on.

She certainly didn't have any time to waste. She had seen those dinner trays of Phoebe's, and they were coming back with hardly a dent. If Kat didn't do

something soon, poor Phoebe would waste away to nothing. And what a shame it would be for her fetching sister-in-law to lose those lovely curves! If she were too thin, it would ruin the silhouette of all her new gowns.

Not that Phoebe had been forthcoming in showing Kat the new gowns since they had arrived from London a few days ago.

Kat harrumphed in sudden annoyance and crossed her arms over her chest. This whole mess was not only ruining Phoebe's, Benjamin's and Lady Grimsby's lives, it was ruining *hers*. Phoebe wasn't merely her sister-in-law, she was her friend. And Kat wanted her friend back.

She wanted to see the new gowns that she *knew* were up there in Phoebe's room collecting dust. She wanted to walk through the gardens with her, and laugh at their hideous attempts at embroidery together.

Blast Benjamin and his blasted sense of honor! If he wasn't going to tell Phoebe about Lord Grimsby, Kat would have to take matters into her own hands!

Phoebe looked up from her book as she heard the scratch at her door. It was a distinct scratch—a code of sorts that she and Becky had developed so she wouldn't have to call out “Who is it?” every time someone was at her door. If it wasn't the telltale three-scratch code, she simply didn't answer.

“Enter,” she said weakly from her spot by the window.

The door creaked and Becky entered. “I've come to deliver your laundry,” she said.

“Thank you, Becky.”

Phoebe turned her attention to the rain-soaked

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vista outside her window. It hadn't stopped raining for days, it seemed. Or maybe she was always looking at the gardens through her tears. She didn't know. And it didn't really matter one way or the other.

She had expected Benjamin to come to her and offer an apology, or to tell her he had apologized for upsetting her mother, but he had not even tried to visit her. Everyone else had. Kat made almost hourly trips to her room, begging her to come out. Her mother-in-law had been by a few times, and Phoebe had received her—she wasn't going to turn away the dowager Marchioness of Eastleigh, after all. Thankfully, the woman had not asked any questions or pressed her for any answers; she had simply come to check and make sure she was well and did not require the services of a doctor.

Even the twins had tried to lure her out of her room with their scandalous talk. She had not come out, but at least they'd made her laugh.

But the one person she actually wanted to see apparently did not want to see her.

Phoebe blew out a long breath in an attempt to stop the blasted tears that wouldn't stop flowing. Just when she thought she was going to be all right, that her heart was on the mend, she would think of something that made it break all over again. Happy thoughts of Benjamin, angry thoughts of him . . . it didn't matter; any thought of him made her ache with sadness.

"Hm..." Becky's tiny, curious sound drew Phoebe's attention to her once more. She stood by the armoire with a stack of white undergarments in one hand and a small piece of parchment in the other. She turned it over, then back again.

"What is that?" Phoebe asked, noting how very weak and dejected her voice sounded to her own ears.

Becky shrugged. “I don’t know. It was mixed in with your drawers and things.” She crossed the room and handed it to Phoebe before going back to the business of putting the clothes away.

Phoebe stared at the folded-up piece of parchment. There was nothing on the outside that she could see. She would have to open it up in order to know to whom it belonged.

A bird outside the window attracted her attention for a moment while she thought about what to do. She had learned her lesson well in regards to opening and reading other people’s post—most specifically her husband’s. She didn’t particularly care to go down that path again, but what choice did she have? Certainly, she could toss it in the grate and be done with it, but what if it was important?

Oh, this was ridiculous! It wasn’t as if things could get any worse.

As soon as Becky left the room and closed the door, Phoebe unfolded the letter. Only it wasn’t in one piece. Someone had torn the thing in two, which explained why there wasn’t anything on the outside. The piece with the address had been on the inside; the piece that was addressed to her husband, from her own cousin Geoffrey.

Phoebe closed her eyes and leaned back, ignoring the pain when her head thudded against the wall behind her. How was it she always found herself in these blasted situations?

A thought occurred to her, bringing with it a resigned chuckle. She *hadn’t* found herself in this situation . . . *Kat* had put her right smack in the middle of the situation. Oh, yes, this little ruse had the Duchess of Weston written all over it. Who else would sneak about and drop letters into someone’s pile of drawers?

Clearly, there was something in that letter Kat wanted her to see, but was she really meant to see it?

Chapter 23

After a long, hard ride about his property, Benjamin made his way to the Ravenscroft Castle library and poured himself a snifter of fine brandy. And then another. He was about halfway to a drunken stupor when a glorious vision appeared in the doorway of the library. He must have been more foxed than he thought, for surely, this could not be real. After six days of silence, she wouldn't simply appear before him, would she?

"Phoebe?" He said her name in a whisper, unable to believe she was really there. But then she spoke back.

"I-I found this," she said, crossing the room on tentative feet until she stood an arm's length away from him.

He wanted to reach out and grab her, pull her into his arms and never let go. But he wasn't quite sure where he stood at the moment, so he decided instead to follow her lead. His eyes shifted from her face—which was markedly thinner than last he had seen her—to the familiar piece of foolscap she held out to him. It was amazing how one little piece of paper could sober a person in an instant.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, raising his heavy eyelids to meet her gaze.

"*Ahem . . .* it was . . ." She closed her eyes and shook her head with a little laugh. "It was in my

laundry.”

He waited, wondering, but terrified to ask if she had read it.

“I didn’t—” she said, possibly in response to his unasked question. His brain was slightly muddled and he couldn’t be sure. So he was pleased when she added, “—read it, that is. I didn’t read it. It took all my strength not to, but I figured if there was something I was meant to know, you would tell me. I betrayed your trust when I read the letter from Lillian. I didn’t want to do it again by reading this.”

He said nothing, only stared at her, unblinking.

“I know it’s from my cousin Geoffrey,” she continued. “But that is all.”

“You found it in your *laundry*, you say?”

Phoebe nodded.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Kat the Canary was behind this. Though it was hard to believe she’d had the audacity to go behind his back and give the letter to Phoebe, no matter how indirect her method. Damn her! As much as he wanted a reunion with his wife, he was far too incensed to focus on that just then.

Benjamin snatched the torn-up letter from his wife and stalked across the room. “Katherine!” he bellowed as he leaned into the hallway, and then he yelled it again.

“Benjamin, don’t!” Phoebe was at his side in a moment.

“Don’t? Phoebe, there is only one person who can tell you what is in that letter. Only one person who has the right to say anything to you. That person is not I, and it certainly is not Katherine. If your mother doesn’t want you to know—”

“What on earth are you shouting about, Benjamin?”

Katherine approached them, and it took every

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ounce of willpower he possessed not to wrap his hands about her neck. "I thought I told you to stay out of my affairs!" he yelled, brandishing the letter.

She paused, finally appearing to be slightly afraid of him, but it was only a fleeting moment. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said haughtily.

Phoebe pushed past him into the corridor. "It's all right, Kat. We know you planted the letter. Don't infuriate him further by lying."

Kat's eyes grew wide at having been properly scolded, and Ben wanted to give his wife a pat on the back. God, how he missed her! How he wished all this mess would just go away so he could be *with* her!

"Did you read it?" his sister asked of Phoebe.

Phoebe shook her head. "I appreciate what you were trying to do, Kat, but I . . ."

"Katherine?"

All three of them looked up to find Lady Grimsby standing in the hallway behind them. She was thin—frighteningly so. She looked almost as awful as she had that first day he had found her in her room with Colonel Wallace. But what had brought her from her chamber at last?

"Mother? You're out," Phoebe said, appearing to be just as perplexed as he was.

"Of course I am. When Katherine told me there was an emergency, I assumed something was wrong with you. I went straight away to your room, but . . . darling, you look fine to me. Is everything all right?"

Benjamin and Phoebe both turned their gazes to Katherine, who was slowly backing her way down the long corridor. He shook his head. There was no hope of a cure for his meddling sister.

"Everything is fine, Mother," Phoebe said,

turning her attention back to Lady Grimsby. “But I think you and I need to have a chat.”

Benjamin shifted his gaze from his sister’s retreating form to his wife, wanting more than anything to draw her into his embrace and carry her off to their bedchamber. But he knew he couldn’t . . . not yet.

“I won’t be long,” she told him, planting a kiss to his cheek. “Try not to kill Katherine in the meantime. You know she means well.”

Phoebe took her mother by the hand and led her into the library, leaving Benjamin all alone in the corridor. He wondered if the truth would come out, or if he would simply have to accept that Phoebe had forgiven him, but that she would go on believing the worst of him.

Either way, he was certain it would be a while before she and her mother emerged.

Every last one of Phoebe’s nerves tingled with frustration. This had all gone on long enough. She wanted to know the truth, but she wanted to know it from her mother. She probably could have read that letter and perhaps known everything, but it wouldn’t make things any better. She had to hear it from her mother—every last word of the truth, no matter what.

“It is my impression, Mama, that you’ve been keeping quite a bit from me over this past year,” she began, making sure to keep her voice calm and even. She wanted to lull her mother into a discussion, not an argument.

But her mother remained silent, so Phoebe amended her last thought: she wanted to lull her mother to talk. Full stop.

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“Would you like to begin with Colonel Wallace? Perhaps explain why he attacked me in London?”

Her mother turned suddenly to look at her with haunted eyes. “He what?”

“He attacked me . . . tried to violate me, really. He said you still owed him *payment*.” She paused to allow her mother a chance to explain, but still she said nothing. At least for a moment. And then the floodgates opened with tears and explanations and stories that Phoebe almost wished she didn’t have to hear.

Her mother recounted her horrific encounters with Wallace, and Phoebe hoped and prayed with all her might that the man would be brought to justice. It was awful to listen to; she couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for her mother to live through. No wonder she had kept it a secret. Anyone in their right mind would have.

At least an hour passed as her mother relived the past, but at the end of the sordid tale, Phoebe still didn’t know the last piece of the puzzle. What was this horrific thing they were all trying to keep from her? She’d known about Wallace—she just hadn’t known all the details. But there was still something more, of that much she was certain.

“Mama, I know this has been taxing, to say the least. But I know there is more that you are not telling me.” She squeezed her mother’s hands between her own. “Please, Mother.”

For the first time in the last hour, her mother lifted her head and met Phoebe’s gaze. There was a great deal of shame in her eyes, and Phoebe hated to press her further, but she needed to know. Whatever this secret was, it was causing a great deal of unrest in her family.

“Darling,” her mother began, her voice thick and raspy, “Benjamin was not the cause of your father’s death.”

It took Phoebe a moment to even comprehend how her mother knew Benjamin had caused the fever that had led to her father’s passing. Perhaps this was how they’d ended up arguing the other day, but . . .

“Are you saying the fever was coincidental then? That Benjamin is innocent in all this? Why the secrecy if it was merely a coincidence?” She was having trouble wrapping her mind around this particular idea.

“You have it partly correct. Your husband is *completely* innocent.” Her eyes filled with fresh tears and she tried to turn away, but Phoebe would have none of it.

“Mother, look at me,” she said, adding a force behind her voice that she had never used with her mother. “What part, exactly, do I have wrong then?”

“I didn’t want to tell you. I thought it best to protect you from such a harsh and horrible reality. Lord Grimsby was an awful husband to me, but he loved you. More than anything else, he loved you. And he was a good father when he came around. That’s what I wanted you to remember of him.”

“So there are no misconceptions, Mama, I had no illusions about my father’s character. No glorified impressions of the man whatsoever. And my memories of him have been clouded by a year of being hunted by his creditors. I’m not sure anything you say would surprise—”

“Your father killed himself.”

Phoebe blinked at her mother’s sudden admission. “He . . . *what?*”

“He kill—”

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“No!” Phoebe held up a hand. “Don’t say it again. I heard you the first time. I . . . I can’t believe it. Why?”

For the first time in a very long time, her mother burst into laughter. Phoebe stared at the woman, not quite sure what to think after admitting her husband had taken his own life.

“Mother?” she asked, reaching out to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. Clearly, the woman was going mad.

“Oh, Phoebe, I know this is no laughing matter.” She dabbed at her moist eyes. “But it feels . . . *good* to finally have all of this out in the open. Darling, I’m so sorry I never told you.”

Phoebe dragged her mother into her arms and hugged her long and hard. In the end, it didn’t really matter how her father had met his demise; she had already mourned him, his debts had been paid—in more ways than one. What really mattered was keeping her family together now, finding a happy ending to more than a year of misery.

She pulled back from her mother with a sudden jerk, her mind shifting to Benjamin. Oh, poor Benjamin!

“Go to him,” her mother urged with a teary half smile, and Phoebe needed no further prodding.

She ran from the room, through the halls, checking any and all of the locations she thought she might find him. Not surprisingly, she found him in his bedchamber—*their* bedchamber—practically pulling his hair out. It was obvious he’d been worried about the outcome of her chat with her mother, but she would be quick to set him at ease.

The large wooden door swung back and banged against the inside wall of the chamber. Benjamin turned

at the sound. His eyes were wary, his dark locks stood on end, and a general look of dread clouded his features.

Phoebe barely stopped to look at him, for she was drawn to him like a magnet. She needed to be in his arms, to tell him how much she loved him and how very sorry she was for all he had been through, and all she had put him through as well.

His arms wrapped about her middle; he held her so close and so tight that her feet came off the ground. She hugged him back and ran reassuring fingers through his tousled hair as she did. She breathed him in, the masculine, alluring smell of him she had missed so much.

And then he was kissing her and carrying her to the bed. It turned out that words weren't actually necessary in the making-up process. She knew the truth now, and he *knew* she knew the truth. They didn't need to talk about it. So, they made love instead. For Phoebe, it was the most freeing experience of her life, lying with her husband, knowing that nothing else stood in their way. No more lies, no more questions . . . only the love they had for one another.

Sometime later, as the rain beat against the window of their bedchamber, Phoebe curled into the crook of Benjamin's arm and sighed contentedly. His hand stroked her hair and she was tempted to let the tender motion lull her into the deep sleep she so craved. But she had one more secret she needed to get off her chest.

"Benjamin," she said quietly into the darkening room.

"Hm . . . what is it, my love?"

"Well," she turned slightly so she could rest her chin on his chest and see into his eyes that sparkled in

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the dim firelight, “as long as we are sharing secrets, I do have one more thing I think you should know.”

He sucked in a breath, and his eyes widened slightly; her serious tone clearly made him uneasy. But it was impossible for her to keep up the somber ruse, and a smile broke out on her lips before she could stop it.

“You needn’t look so very terrified, Benjamin . . . or should I say, *Papa?*”

It took only a moment for him to comprehend her words, and then he leapt from the bed with a great holler of joy. Phoebe laughed at the sight of her husband, naked and virile, jumping about like an India rubber ball. He gave a few more ecstatic shouts of “I’m going to be a father!” before he returned to the bed.

He nearly smothered Phoebe with his kisses, but she didn’t mind one bit. There was love, so much love, behind every kiss, and it was the sweetest moment Phoebe had ever known. Though her life had been filled with uncertainty for so long, she knew she would never, ever doubt again that she was thoroughly and completely loved.

Epilogue

Ravenscroft Castle
Five Months Later

“Becky will murder us in our sleep if she ever finds out about this, Kat.”

Phoebe stared aghast at her sister-in-law, whose belly looked as if it might pop at any moment. Kat held

in her hand a letter. A letter that was not addressed to either of them, but to Becky. Becky had no family that Phoebe knew of. In all her time with them, she had never received a single letter. From anyone. Ever.

So it was indeed suspicious that she would receive one now, which was why Phoebe had brought it to Kat, merely for the sake of discussion and speculation. Not with the intent to open it, for heaven's sake!

"You are overreacting, Phoebe," Kat assured her. "It is for Becky's own good that we *screen* the letter before we pass it on to her."

Phoebe eyed Kat askance. "How in the world could the two of us opening Becky's post be for her own good?"

Clearly having been bested, Kat leveled her with an annoyed expression. "Do you want to know what is in the letter or not?"

Phoebe bit down on her lip while she thought about it. Of course she wanted to know what was in the letter. How could she not be just a little bit curious?

"Perhaps you're right," Phoebe said at last. "What if it is bad news? We might be able to soften the blow in that case. No one wants to read bad news in a letter. It's much better coming from a friend, is it not?"

Kat smiled and patted her on the hand in a congratulatory sort of way. "My thoughts exactly." Then she broke the seal on the letter and unfolded it, holding it out so they could both read.

Phoebe scooted a little closer—though Kat's belly was so large, she couldn't get all that close—and focused her eyes on the flowery script.

Dear Miss Thorn,

My husband and I were very pleased to

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receive your letter. Our two children, Max and Lydia, are in desperate need of a governess, though we have had some difficulty finding one who suits our every need. I am certain, with your education and background, that you will be a perfect match. Perhaps we could persuade you to join us for a trial period here in Essex? I look forward to your expeditious reply.

*Sincerely,
Viscountess Hastings*

Phoebe could hardly believe her eyes. Becky wanted to *leave* them? Even now, tears threatened to choke her. “Why?”

“Oh, Phoebe, darling, don’t get all upset now,” Kat said, patting her on the back. “It’s only a letter. This doesn’t mean she’s going to go.”

“You don’t think so? Why would she have written to this—” she peered at the letter again “—Viscountess Hastings if she didn’t mean to seek employment with her?”

Kat seemed stumped at this. “Well, it’s no matter, Phoebe, we can simply burn the letter.”

“Burn it!” Phoebe cried, turning astonished eyes on her sister-in-law. “Have you gone mad, Kat?”

“Shhh! She’ll hear us . . . and, no, I have not. If you don’t want her to go, don’t tell her about the letter.”

Phoebe sighed, wishing it were that easy. But she would never be able to lie to Becky like that, and the guilt would be so unbearable she would eventually confess all anyhow. “Thank you for the suggestion, Kat, but I can’t do that.”

“All right,” Kat said, looking more like The Canary now that the wheels were turning in her head.

“Then why don’t we make it impossible for her to go?”

“Impossible?” Phoebe raised her brows, curiously. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we should—oh!” Kat’s hand flew to her oversized stomach.

“Kat? What is it?”

Her sister-in-law looked at her with a panicked expression. “I think it’s time.”

“Time? *Time!*” *Oh, Lord!* She crossed the parlor and flung open the door. “It’s time!” she shouted into the corridor, hoping someone, anyone, would hear her and come to their aide.

Blessedly, word spread throughout the household in a matter of minutes, and before she knew what was happening, Kat was being assisted to her chamber. William picked her up in his arms, struggling a bit thanks to Kat’s massive belly, and carried her off, with the dowager and Lady Grimsby following behind.

Phoebe put a hand to her own stomach, now more than six months along with her own babe, and thanked God she was with child. It was the only thing keeping her from having to be in the delivery room with Kat. A place she really did not care to be.

“May we go in?”

The doctor held the door open and gestured for Phoebe and Benjamin to enter Katherine’s bedchamber. It was early the next morning, and sunlight streamed through the windows at the far end of the room. But the brightest spot to be found was in the middle of the large bed where Katherine sat with her new baby boy *and* her new baby girl. Phoebe and Benjamin walked together to her bedside and peered over the swaddling blankets to

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see the babes tucked inside. Two small pink heads, covered in matted black hair, poked up from their confines, and Phoebe's heart melted at the sight.

"They're so small," she whispered, already in love with her tiny niece and nephew.

Benjamin reached out and put a loving hand on her round belly, eliciting a well of activity from their own little one.

"Do you want to hold one?" Katherine asked her.

Phoebe started at the question. "Erm . . . later, perhaps." She felt the warmth creep into her cheeks as Benjamin turned to look at her, a bemused expression in his eyes.

"You've never held a baby, have you?"

Phoebe shook her head slowly as her hands grew numb from fright. Oh, goodness. What if she made it cry? Or dropped it? Heaven forbid! She really did not want to hold a baby right now. She had no idea what she would do once her own was born, but she preferred not to think about that.

"It's all right, darling." Benjamin took her hand and led her around the side of the bed. "I'll hold little Will first to show you how it's done."

"Don't patronize me, Benjamin," she chided. "I've seen other people hold them plenty of times. I've just never done it myself."

Benjamin smiled at her as he reached to retrieve William from Katherine's arms. He cradled the baby with an expertise that indicated he had held many before this one.

"Where did you learn to hold a babe like that?" Phoebe asked, trying to hide the jealousy in her tone.

Benjamin glanced at his sister, an affectionate smile on his lips, and then turned back to Phoebe. "I was almost four when the twins were born and six when Kat

was born. Once I learned how to hold them, I didn't want to put them down."

Phoebe glanced at her sister-in-law. She looked radiant and exhausted at the same time. But her eyes glittered with tears. Phoebe felt them prick at her own as well.

"I beg your pardon. What was that?" Benjamin spoke to the infant as if he'd just spoken to him. "You want me to teach you how to make girls weep over you, too?"

"Oh, do be quiet, Benjamin," Katherine warned her brother, and then to Phoebe added, "Leave it to my brother to create a tender moment and then ruin it all in the same breath."

"All right, love, it's your turn. Sit here." Benjamin stood from his perch on the bed and motioned for Phoebe to take his place.

Very gently, he lowered baby William into her outstretched arms, and Phoebe knew she had fallen in love with yet another boy. She held him gingerly at first, afraid she might break him if she held on too tight, but as she became more comfortable, she couldn't resist the urge to nuzzle him closer. He was so soft, and he smelled sweet and warm. Now she understood why her husband might have been reluctant to put his brothers and sister down when they were wee things.

William came into the room then, after having stepped out to speak with the doctor. Benjamin greeted him with congratulations, and then both men left to go enjoy a celebratory cigar in the study.

"We should have guessed you were having twins," Phoebe said once the door was shut. "You were big as a house after only five months."

"How kind of you to point that out," Katherine rejoined, her lips curving into a smile. "Now, what have

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you done with that letter?”

Phoebe smiled. Of course, not even twenty hours of labor with twins could deter Kat from gossip. “It has been resealed and delivered to Miss Thorn.”

“And?”

“And . . . ” Phoebe shifted the baby slightly in her arms and then looked up at her sister-in-law. “I think we should put whatever devious plan you have to keep her here into motion . . . immediately.”

The End

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More Than a Governess

Prologue

Lady Isabelle Thornton stood at the back door of Blakeny House, her hand poised to knock, but her wrist refusing to go through with the movement. She didn't care that the rain continued to soak through her dress even though she had a feeling it would take days for the thick, ugly material to dry completely. And Isabelle certainly paid no mind to the fierce grumbling in her stomach—the butterflies were far more bothersome than the hunger.

Or perhaps it was the heavy pit of grief that truly overrode any physical discomfort at the moment.

She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth and bit down. Hard. What was she doing here? She knew nothing of hard work, of being a lady's maid or, God forbid, a scullery maid. What would it be like to be on the other side? To serve rather than be served? Would she ever be able to return to the station to which she'd been born?

Probably not. Not after what had happened. Not after...

Isabelle shook her head in a desperate attempt to toss the memories from her mind. If she dwelled on them, they would take her over, drown her in such despair she wouldn't be able keep upright. But she needed to keep upright—she needed to survive. And Blakeny House was her only option right now.

She raised her fist again, and this time, she did not hesitate to knock. Within moments, the door opened to reveal a thin, older woman, dressed much like her own housekeeper. Her hazel eyes crinkled at the corners as she took in Isabelle's appearance.

"You must be here about the maid position," she said with a smile. "Well, come on in, dearie. You'll catch your death if you stand there much longer."

Isabelle followed the woman through the small door and into a large, toasty kitchen. Her muscles, which she hadn't even realized had been bunched with cold and tension, began to relax, as the warmth of the stove penetrated the thick, wet wool of her dress.

"Have a seat right there, miss, and I'll be with ya in just a moment. Lady Grimsby will be wantin' her tea now. Not usually my duty to deliver the tea, but since Sally up and left us to marry that Jimmy boy from Spitalfields, I've been doin' near everything. It will be

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nice to have an extra pair of hands...”

The woman bustled from the kitchen, her arms leaden with a heavy tea tray, and the swinging door came to a rest moments later. Isabelle stared unseeing at the door, her heart racing with fear, her mind jumbling with thoughts and images that would disturb a grown man. For a fifteen-year-old girl, they were almost unbearable.

She fought to concentrate on one emotion rather than the hundred that bombarded her at the moment. She chose the only one that would get her through this day, through the new life she'd chosen out of necessity: hope. Hope that she was the first, if not the only one, to respond to the advertisement. Hope that her ruse would work, that she wouldn't be recognized, that she would somehow be able to convince the kindly housekeeper that she was capable of doing a job she'd never even considered.

Hope that in time she would be able to erase the memory of her mother's broken and lifeless body at the bottom of the stairs; the memory of her father at the top of the stairs, staring down at her with the same loathing and contempt he'd shown for her mother. Hope that her father would think her dead and not seek her out.

“All right then!”

Isabelle jumped at the abrupt reentry of the housekeeper and sought to control her racing pulse once again.

“A bit jumpy, aren't ya?” The older woman smiled at her and then set a plate of warm biscuits before her. “Perhaps you're a bit hungry as well?”

Isabelle looked from the biscuits to the woman and back again, very aware that she was salivating at the mouth. She'd had little to eat since she'd fled her father's Mayfair home in the dead of night, three days

ago. But she wondered if this was a test. Her father had never taken kindly to the servants taking what was not theirs, and that included food that had not been rationed to them. Certainly, their servants had never enjoyed such delectable-looking biscuits. Gruel and bread crusts were more like it.

“Well, go on before they turn cold,” the housekeeper urged, pushing the plate closer to Isabelle.

She couldn’t take it anymore. If she lost the position, it might very well be worth it. She reached for a biscuit, but stopped when the housekeeper let out a loud “Oh!”

Isabelle looked up at the woman. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, taking her hand away and tucking it into the damp fabric of her skirt. “I didn’t mean to—”

“You’ll of course want something to wash those down with!” The housekeeper wasn’t even paying attention to her now that her head was buried deep in an ice chest. “They’re a bit rich—the kind that stick to the roof of your mouth.” She poured milk into a glass and slid it across the table to Isabelle. “Well, what are ya waiting for, dearie? You must be starving. Never seen eyes so round with hunger in my life.”

And with that, Isabelle dove into the warm biscuits, heedless of crumbs, uncaring if she looked like a rabid animal as she stuffed them into her mouth. All she cared about was the slightly sweet, buttery taste on her tongue and the empty feeling in her stomach that was quickly disappearing.

“There now,” the housekeeper crooned. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

Isabelle nodded, her mouth too full to speak. She took a gulp of the milk and swallowed down the last of the morsels. “Thank you. I-I...suppose I was hungry after all.”

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“Well, now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself.”

Isabelle gulped over the sudden formation of a lump in her throat. What the devil was she supposed to tell this woman? She couldn’t very well say that she was the daughter of a highly regarded member of the *ton*. Or that she’d watched her father—that highly regarded man—only three days ago, shove her mother down a flight of stairs to her death.

Her heart ached at the thought of her mother, and it was all she could do to focus on the task at hand. Somehow, some-way, she must convince this housekeeper that she was an orphan, completely alone in the world, with not a penny to her name. And even more importantly, she needed to convince her that she could serve a tea tray and roll out biscuit dough, and whatever else might be expected of her now. Now that she was a servant.

Drawing herself upright on the stool, Isabelle held out her hand, and said, “My name is Becky Thorn, and I am a maid.”

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About the Author

Jerrica Knight-Catania left her “glamorous” life as an actress in favor of becoming a romance author, where she could write about truly glamorous lives. She currently resides in New York City with her real-life hero of a husband, their shy Russian Blue, Dr. Snuggle, and their beautiful daughter who is most definitely a princess-in-training.

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