

*Must Love
Rogues*

*Rogue
Be a Lady*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON

**Rogue
Be
a
Lady**

**A Must Love Rogues
Book 6**

Eva Devon

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Rogue Be a Lady

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For my darling boys. You are the light in the world.

Special thanks to:
Tracy, Scott, Patricia, and Judy.

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Chapter 1

Miss Emmaline Trent was that thing which all well-born, unmarried ladies strove to avoid at all possible costs. Now, to her credit, she had done all the required things of a good young lady. She had drunk watered ratafia, was never alone with a gentleman with the door closed and, certainly, she had never done anything which would get herself cast out of the good graces of the *ton*. Yes, Emmaline had followed every rule and expectation set out for her. With a fortune larger than any daughter of a duke, her future had surely been set.

But through actions completely beyond Emmaline's knowledge or power, she had become. . . *Notorious*. And Emmaline, unlike most ladies cast into the fiery pits of disgrace, absolutely loved it. There was little question that the immense wealth she had inherited, wealth which might run certain small countries, certainly did not hinder her regard for her ill-gotten status. So many ruined young ladies were forced into pokey cottages or became imprisoned by upper class pimps. Not, Emmaline. For she was a woman of independent thought and means. Two facts which made it quite possible to laugh up her sleeve at the cream of society that had so eagerly thrown her out like a bit of rubbish when scandal's brush had touched her.

Quite wrongly, as it happened. But even though she had been most horribly slandered, there had been no going back. It mattered not that the Duke of Huntsdown, her formerly intended's eldest brother, published a full retraction of the nefarious accusations. She'd remained diminished by the event.

So, with a little timely encouragement from far more experienced friends, she had decided since she was in for a penny she might as well go entirely in for a pound. And had she ever.

Emmaline's name had become legend in the salons of Paris where they had reveled in the tarnished English Rose who refused to wilt as most flowers would.

She'd quickly learned she had a flair for masking and theatrics, something which she never would have known had she remained a good young miss on England's rainy shore.

Private performances of Shakespeare and Molière had thrilled her and her audiences to bits.

So, it was after achieving a strange sort of goddess-like status, she had decided to return to the shores of her birth and show how little the disdain of the *ton* meant to her.

Now, she turned slowly on the spot at the center of an elaborate theater just off Covent Garden. Her heart fairly hummed as she took in the gold-painted balconies and the red velvet orchestra seats. It was a decadent building, like a courtesan who knew her worth and wasn't afraid to add a little color to her cheeks.

A massive chandelier dangled overhead, its crystals winking in the candlelight. It descended from the center of a colorful painting of the seasons and astrological symbols.

Gold scrawled over the silk-embroidered walls, and the great, red velvet curtain had been pulled back to reveal the backstage and its bones.

It was marvelous. She wanted it. And she was going to buy it. Here, she would do magnificent things. Things that gave her joy. Far more joy than drinking weak ratafia whilst speaking to geriatric inbreds at Almack's.

There was just one thing that gave her pause in all this decadent glory. It was next to a club as notorious as she. A club owned by a man she loathed from the top of her curled coiffure to the tips of

her embroidered slippers. A man who had jilted her right in front of the priest with a few choice words she could barely force herself to recall without shivering.

Lord Edward Hart was a bastard in action if not by birth, and it was tempting to avoid him entirely. But that was the sort of thing the old Emmaline would have done. The new Emmaline had very different ideas about how to proceed and none of them included behaving as a lady should.

She took a step towards the actress, Mrs. Barton, a magnificently beautiful woman who had befriended her in arguably the darkest time of her young life. "Shall we do Shakespeare first?"

Mrs. Barton's rouged lips curved. "Oh, yes. You shall take it?"

Emmaline swept her gaze around the sumptuous building that seemed to whisper with promises of future stories. "Oh, yes."

"And your neighbor?" Mrs. Barton queried, cocking her head to the side which caused her dark curls to dance. "You won't be able to avoid him. Not entirely."

"Never fear." Emmaline waggled her brows, drawing herself up, anticipating a forthcoming battle. "I shall make good work of him if he darkens my door. No doubt, I shall enjoy it very much."

Mrs. Barton tsked, waving a ruby, leather-gloved hand. "He's not the boy you remember."

"Thank goodness." Emmaline shrugged, wishing she could appear as if Edward Hart gave her little pause. But despite her wish, her deuced heart still ached over the loss of the love she'd thought was hers. "It would be very sad if he'd been entirely unaltered by his actions."

"Oh, he is altered," Mrs. Barton drawled.

Emmaline eyed her older friend. Mrs. Barton had always been merry and mischievous. But now there was a certain glint in her eyes which did the most alarming thing to Emmaline's insides. It intrigued her. "You don't like him, do you?"

"Like him?" Mrs. Barton echoed before she let out a rich laugh. "No, dear. No. I wouldn't say that."

Emmaline nodded. "He's an absolute ponce. I shan't argue it."

Mrs. Barton merely smiled. "If you say so."

"He betrayed me," Emmaline pointed out, mystified by Mrs. Barton's behavior.

"So he did," Mrs. Barton agreed adamantly, yet she didn't look suitably upset as she sashayed down the center of the theater, running her gloved hand along the gilded seats. Rather, she appeared a trifle amused as she all but bounced as she went along.

"In the end," Mrs. Barton said over her shoulder with a wicked smile, "aren't you glad? If he had not, you would be Lady Emmaline Hart, wife of the brother of the Duke of Huntsdown."

Emmaline sighed. "I have already considered that. How boring my life should have been."

"Would you have been happier?" Mrs. Barton inquired with what appeared to be genuine curiosity.

Shrugging, Emmaline began to slowly back up the center aisle towards the corridors, eager to seek out the man responsible for the sale of the establishment. "It is impossible to know. They do say ignorance is bliss."

"You seem rather blissful now and there isn't an ignorant bone in your body," Mrs. Barton pointed out.

No. There wasn't. Of that, she had made certain. That day in the church when Edward had condemned her so vilely had been the worst day of her life. She'd died that day, the old Emmaline had slipped away like a consumptive, and then, miraculously, she'd been reborn.

Mrs. Barton turned, then took several pointed steps back up the aisle. "Will you seek him out?"

Emmaline's lips quirked, unable to contain her sudden rather strange sense of anticipation. "Oh, yes. I shall not let our encounter be at random. Though it doesn't paint me in the best of light, I cannot wait to witness his face when he sees me as I am now."

Mrs. Barton eyed her up and down, taking in the stylish cut of Emmaline's clothes which no country-born lady could even dream of. "No doubt, he shall be rendered speechless."

"Edward?" Emmaline scoffed. "I doubt that. Whilst I look forward to showing him I am unconquered, I'm sure he will be delighted to be vindicated in his slander of me. He called me a whore once when it wasn't true. I imagine it shall make him feel much relieved that he can besmirch my character now so accurately."

"But your fall was his fault," Mrs. Barton replied.

Emmaline nibbled her lower lip, having contemplated this many times. "I don't know. For once I fell, I embraced it. I would not be driven off to a rotting, drafty cottage in the wilds of nowhere to live out my life alone and derided. No, I chose to revel in my circumstance and so I thrived. Perhaps, I was always destined to fall."

"It is what I most admire about you, your sense of adventure," Mrs. Barton enthused. "It is hard to believe you used to be such a lamb."

"My cousin, Harriet, would have said a sheep," Emmaline corrected, feeling a spasm of longing for the cousin she had not seen in so long. She cleared her throat, determined not to let such a thing sadden her now. Oh, no. She would not allow melancholy or regret to ferret into her heart. Such was the way of taking to one's bed.

"And she was right," Emmaline added forcefully. "I do look forward to seeing her again. Even her husband, Edward's brother, who seems to have come up to snuff despite his bloodline." Once, she'd been so angelic, so perfect. Now, she thrilled at her own lack of perfection and all that the world had to offer. It was a far more interesting place than the pale drawing rooms she'd been required to inhabit before.

Now, she was a fallen woman in every way and, in the great strange manner of society, she was now. . . Dare she say, a celebrity? For though she was not allowed in the hallowed halls of Almack's, she was allowed in more halls of power than most women. For she was not a lady. And she never would be again.

Chapter 2

“The rumors are true?”

Edward Hart stood at the tall windows overlooking the street, which was dirty, bustling, and loud in the late afternoon. It was a street he adored with every fiber of his being. The very sight fortified him as he braced himself to answer the Duke of Huntsdown, his eldest brother. For Edward was in total hell now. Hell had arrived less than a week ago and taken up residence across the street. It had then leached over to him and consumed him. Before, he'd just been in purgatory. Now, he was in Hades proper.

Slowly, Edward faced his elder brother, who was the picture of manly perfection in almost every way. “Yes,” Edward replied. “The rumors are indisputably true.”

“But—” James' brow furrowed and his usually confident voice deepened with dismay. “She did not tell me she was returning from Paris.”

A dry laugh rolled out of Edward. “Did you think she would?”

“Well, I . . .” James scowled. “I made several overtures. I apologized publicly. I—”

Edward blew out a derisive sound before he gave his brother a withering stare. “We ruined her life.”

James had the good grace to look duly chastised. His usually swarthy countenance, made so by hours out of doors, paled. “So, we did.”

“No matter how many letters or apologies, there's no escaping that,” Edward bit out, driving a hand through his already wild hair. “She wouldn't even see me when I chased her to Paris.”

James sighed. “Now, she owns the theater next door.”

Edward laughed. A slow, dry sound. “It's worse.”

Cocking his head to the side, James did not appear convinced. “Oh?”

A pained smile pulled at Edward's lips. “She has converted a temporary apartment in it whilst her house near Green Park is completed. She lives there.”

James gaped then tugged on his black, silk waistcoat. “My God.”

Edward folded his arms across his chest. “I think God has very little to do with this.”

James took a step further into Edward's office. “How are you coping?”

Edward swung his gaze to the wooden target board at the end of the room. Several knives were embedded in it. The room itself was masculine elegance. Dark, leather chairs were positioned before a tall fireplace, decorated with an elaborate marble mantel. His desk was mahogany and large enough to seem a small island in the room bathed with light from the windows. Rapiers hung on the wall. All of them had been used in battle, two of which had been his on the Continent. The daggers he'd finally pulled down well after midnight, unable to bear to watch the candlelight in one of the high windows across the street any longer for he had seen her shadow dance against it, again and again. It had been sheer torture.

James contemplated the elegant blades embedded into the polished wood wall. “Ah.”

Edward shrugged as if he had not been living in torment since her return. “One has to do something and I'm not going to risk fisticuffs, at least not out of the ring.”

“Good,” James replied firmly.

Edward had been a soldier. . . . But in recent years he'd taken his martial abilities in a different

direction. He could box with the best of them and his bastard half-brother, John, had taught him to fight as they did on the streets. . . Without honor or mercy.

It had been the only way he'd been able to climb out of the black hell he'd found himself in after so thoroughly wronging the young lady he'd been so certain he was in love with.

But his half-brother, John, ultimately had been correct, as he usually was. Edward had not been in love with Emmaline. He'd been in love with the *idea* of Emmaline. How could he love a woman he barely knew?

Somehow it made the whole situation worse.

He'd been a total fool, worshiping a beautiful girl but not really knowing her at all. He'd demanded perfection and found out that perfection did not exist, and he was the one who was the most flawed of them all.

He'd been so ready to betray her.

She would never forgive him for that. Nor should she.

Hell, he'd never forgiven himself for that. He never would. His life had taken a very different turn from the one he had imagined. There was no small estate with dogs and horses, a lovely, young wife to keep his house and raise children with him.

No, he'd thrown his lot in with the dark side of London and he had not looked back. He wasn't worthy of the light.

James cleared his throat. "Are you going to call upon her?"

"Don't be absurd." Edward dropped his arms back to his sides and crossed to his desk. "I'm not a masochist."

James crooked a wry smile. The first he'd shown in their meeting. "I rather thought you were."

Edward arched a brow at his brother. "I have no intention of darkening her door. I'm certain she has no wish to see me."

James strode across the room and flung himself into a chair before Edward's desk. The sturdy wood creaked under James' massive frame. "Aren't you curious?"

"Of course I'm curious, damn it," Edward growled. "I've heard the stories. I've read the news sheets."

James leaned forward. "Then perhaps—"

"No."

"But—"

"No."

"You haven't even let me—"

Edward slammed his hands down onto his desk and bit out, "It is your ideas that got us here in the first place."

James was silent for a long moment before he said calmly. "Only because John lied."

Edward gave his brother a merciless stare.

James frowned then sighed. "Fine. John merely exposed the sort of fellows we were. But we've changed."

"Have we?" Edward countered, not convinced.

James leaned back into the chair and said quite arrogantly, "I have."

Edward slid his hands along his desk, standing straight. "Bravo you, then."

"Edward, you need to stop punishing yourself," James said kindly. "Come to the opening of her

play.”

“I’d rather be dead,” Edward retorted, loathing the idea of being in her company. Not because he wouldn’t like it. But that he might like it too much. “I’d rather go to the darkest heart of the darkest jungle. Or the hottest desert in the—”

“Are you going to say Antipodes next?” Garret asked lightly as he strolled in.

“Bloody hell,” Edward groaned, pressing a hand to his eyes as if he could make them both simply vanish. He returned to the window, wishing he could just jump out to escape the filial affections inflicting him at present. “You’re not invited. Neither of you are invited. Why are you here?”

“We’re brothers,” Garret said far too happily as he unbuttoned the silver buttons of his coat. “An invitation is not necessary.”

Edward began fiddling with the latch to the window.

“Whatever are you doing?” James asked.

“I’m going to throw you both out,” Edward retorted. “If I can make the latch work.”

“It’s been painted shut,” Garret informed as he leaned against the fireplace mantel.

Edward threw up his hands in frustration. “I am not interested in a family reunion—”

James cleared his throat. “I must point out that it wouldn’t be a family reunion without—”

“Me!” crowed John as he strode through the door.

Edward let out a disgusted sigh and drove his hand through his hair. Again. He would be fortunate if he were not bald in a fortnight.

“Now, you know I don’t need an invitation,” John pointed out blithely. “I’m a co-owner of this club.”

“I’m leaving,” Edward said, feeling deeply annoyed that his brothers had all come at once and clearly by design.

John grinned. “Surely not. The entertainment is just beginning.”

“It’s not entertainment,” gritted James who, at best, got on with John but never really understood him.

“Oh, it is,” countered John.

Edward looked between his eldest brother and the man who had completely altered their lives. John did love to drive James mad and James would allow him to do it. As much as James had changed over the years, he still was a duke and had a certain certainty that was difficult to shake. Even now. Even after the mistakes they had made. Still, James was not as heavy-handed as he had been.

Edward stopped, suddenly aware that something was amiss. He glanced from brother to brother to brother then back again. They had all decided that John was truly a brother long ago and called him such. “What is it?”

John’s eyes positively danced. “His Grace here thinks that we, as brothers, should prostrate ourselves before the wronged party.”

James’ face tightened with strained patience. “I did not say that, John.”

John patted, yes patted, James on the shoulder. “Near enough, brother dear.”

Edward swallowed. “I don’t understand.”

Garret cleared his throat. “James thinks that we should visit Emmaline and apologize personally.”

“I beg your pardon?” Edward said, the idea of such a moment all but crushing the air out of his chest.

“You know, old boy, apologize. You look her in the face,” John began. “And you—”

James closed his eyes. “You’re not putting this well at all, John.”

“Is there a better way?” John queried.

“She won’t see me,” Edward pointed out. “She made that very clear in Paris.” Edward shook his head. “How many letters did you write her asking her to let you make amends, James?”

James frowned.

“How many?” Edward demanded.

“Five and twenty,” James admitted. “But I cannot bear that I have still not made things right.”

“I do not know that they shall ever be. Not to your way of thinking,” Edward said with as much kindness as he could muster. In the end, the only one to blame for his misery was himself. So, he continued, “Emmaline has no wish to see us. She hates us. Despises us. No doubt, she’d burn her theater down before letting us step into it.”

“Post, my lord,” one of the club’s footmen said at the still-open door.

Perhaps he should consider nailing it closed.

At last, Edward nodded towards his desk and the young man quickly deposited the letters. The footman, sensing the power and tension in the room, exited as quickly as a mouse upon sensing a cat.

John began to sift through the letters as Edward continued, “So, you must understand that this debate is pointless.”

John began to laugh.

“None of this is funny, John,” James gritted.

“Oh, it is.” John coughed, then laughed again.

“How exactly?” Edward scowled. “I do feel I’m about to remember why I should despise you.”

“Oh, you’ve never forgotten. You’ve just learned to appreciate my fine qualities.” John held up a card. “This is what has amused me.”

Edward shook his head. “What is it?”

John licked his lips and paused. “An invitation.”

Edward’s guts tightened with dread. It couldn’t be possible.

“Lord Edward Hart is most cordially invited to the opening of the Rivals Theater to see Miss Emmaline Trent in her London debut in William Shakespeare’s comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*.”

“You were saying?” James drawled, far too pleased with himself.

“She will poison our champagne,” Edward declared, even as his heart began to pound. He would be in the same room as her. Sharing the same air. The same candlelight. . .

“It is a chance we shall have to take,” Garret said, his amber eyes shimmering with interest.

“I will not attend,” Edward growled.

John eyed him carefully, assessing him with a bold thoroughness that only he possessed. “Still a boy, then?”

Edward looked away, his hands curling into fists. Drawing in a breath, he forced himself to return his gaze to his brothers. “Damn it, John.”

“You owe her this, old boy,” John said softly, lifting the invitation. “You owe her the chance to make a fool of you.”

Edward gave a tight nod. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

Crossing the room, John thrust the letter into Edward’s hands then clapped him on the shoulder. “Good man.”

But as Edward once again turned to the towering windows he loved and looked out to the grand theater across from his club, he could barely draw breath. He had not seen her in years. The only place he'd seen her was in his dreams. For the last time he had, indeed, laid eyes upon Emmaline Trent, he had left her sobbing on a cold, stone church floor surrounded by her horrified family. And now she was the most notorious woman in Europe.

He leaned forward and pressed his head to the cool glass pane.

But then again, he'd become notorious, too.

Chapter 3

The largest, most imposing townhouse at the edge of the ever increasing West End of London was not owned by a duke, an earl, or a prince. One would have thought that the butter-yellow stone, the Doric pillars, the lead glass glistening windows, and the elaborate gardens about it denoted a person of the highest rank of the land. An ancient title, at the very least, owned such a plot.

If a person thought so, they'd be very much mistaken, indeed.

Emmaline had the very good fortune to inherit hundreds of thousands of pounds. The number neared the million mark and it had turned out that she had quite a good head for investing. Some young women would have turned the business of their finances over to a man. Not she. Emmaline had come to deeply distrust men and she certainly wouldn't put her future or her wellbeing into the hands of one. Not again. It mattered not how they bowed or scraped, flattered or seduced. She could not be taken in by the assurances of a man.

Oh no, she'd learned her lesson some time ago. Her father had begun her vast fortune, bringing the family up from barely genteel poverty to a wealth so great that members of the East India Company eyed her with lascivious envy.

She owned more ships than some countries had in their navies.

She knew. She'd named several of them herself and pored over their drawings from their conception to their launch into the sea. While she preferred to spend her time at the theater, she did not shirk from the columns in ledgers which denoted what kept her from poverty and shame.

It was her wealth that had saved her from misery, after all.

She'd seen what became of fallen women in Paris. Her understanding of the ways of the world had been increased greatly over the last years. She knew its dangers and the ways in which women paid for daring to set a toe off the assigned path. Of one thing she was certain: such a fate would never befall her.

No, she would not be shunted off to live in an obscure street in a lesser part of town. She would make Londoners take notice of her even if they looked with a bit of a squint.

As it was, she had commissioned the house whilst she still lived in Paris and it had been built with remarkable speed given her willingness to sink thousands into its construction. The craftsmen who had built her house had been paid exceedingly well and promptly. Her goodwill and care of them had made the building of the establishment painless, enabling it to be occupied in a far shorter time than most of the houses being built in the area.

Which was really quite excellent for she had no desire to rent a property.

So now, half of the *ton* drove by her grand house every day, their necks craning in an attempt to get a better look. A great deal of gawking and fan fluttering did occur.

Emmaline smiled as she sipped her delicate hibiscus tea from a cup that had traveled all the way from China. She looked down at the bustling road which led towards the center of the city.

Gentleman in fine clothes rode their beautifully-groomed horses. Divan chairs darted here and there, the poor men who carried them, shoulders bent, footsteps quick under their loads. Street merchants hawked their wares, hoping to find last moment buyers for strawberries and flowers. It was a glorious sight. The sounds of it all drifted into her newly furnished apartments.

The last of the workmen had only just left at the end of the week and the house had then been

decorated with the items she had collected on the Continent. It was good to be away from nights at the theater. . . And him.

Emmaline blinked. She would not think on how strange it had been to sleep but a feet away from his club.

It was far better to contemplate the heady knowledge that she was surrounded by beauty and power here in the most exclusive part of London. Nothing could hurt her now. She'd seen to that.

"Lady Harriet Hart, madame," her butler, Francois, called from the arched doorway.

Emmaline turned towards him, her rose, silk brocade skirts swishing about her silk-stockinged legs.

She met Francois' green eyes and could not fight back her grin. "Marvelous! Show her in."

Francois inclined his perfectly-coifed, blond head. The man was an absolute angel to look upon. In fact, she doubted there was a prettier man in all London. His crimson livery made him look like a treat for he filled it out in the most pleasing of ways. He was a connoisseur of all beautiful things and he ran her household to perfection.

He also did not judge her fall, being the child of a courtesan. They had come to an early understanding and all had gone well ever since.

Footsteps pattered outside in the hall along the checkered floor and then Harriet, Lady Hart, burst into the room, blond curls bouncing, blue eyes flashing, and her mouth curved in a delighted smile.

Emmaline lingered back for a moment, unsure how this meeting would proceed. Her initial joy had dimmed, touched by a shocking dose of. . . Fear. They had exchanged several letters but they had not seen each other since that fatal Season.

Harriet seemed not to notice any question in Emmaline's countenance, for she bounded across the room with her skirts fluttering. Ignoring Emmaline's cup of tea, Harriet swept her arms about her cousin.

"Emmaline!" Harriet exclaimed happily, squeezing her. "How is it possible it has been so long? It is a delight to have you here again."

"Why, thank you, my dearest cousin. I'm glad to be returned," Emmaline said, happily embracing her cousin in turn. For one moment, she allowed herself to press her face into Harriet's shoulder. The scent of lavender wafted about her and she savored the feel of the cool muslin against her cheek.

Tears stung her eyes for the briefest moment as she recalled the promise of a very different life. One in which she had known no fear or unkindness. One in which the world had seemed perfect and sublime. In that world, she and Harriet never would have needed to be separated.

Now, she knew the world was a knife's edge. So, one might as well dance gaily along it before one felt the sharpness beneath one's slippers toed.

She pulled back, a hand resting against her cousin's beautifully dressed form. Emmaline looked her cousin up and down. Harriet had plumped just a bit and it was truly becoming. Emmaline tilted her head to the side then nodded. "You look as if marriage agrees with you."

"Oh, it does," Harriet assured brightly. "Garret is always a good deal of trouble and I adore it. And our children."

"My goodness," Emmaline gasped. "It is amazing to think of you with a brood. You were always such a bluestocking."

"I still am," countered Harriet. She winked. "I just have little people to manage and turn into future bluestockings."

Emmaline laughed but then tsked. “Even the boys?”

“Especially the boys,” Harriet enthused clapping her lace-gloved hands together.

Emmaline took her cousin’s hands. “You haven’t changed!”

“Not a whit,” Harriet agreed, but then she stepped back and circled Emmaline slowly. “But one cannot say the same of you.”

“No, they can’t,” Emmaline concurred. She stretched her hands out and displayed herself playfully. “And what do you think?”

Harriet tsked. “Get a bit of tea in me first.”

“Tea?” Emmaline shook her head. “I think we shall require champagne.”

“I shan’t protest.”

Emmaline nodded again, feeling the oddest sort of girlish glee in her cousin’s company. They’d always been so close. It had been terribly painful to be parted from her for so long. Quickly, she crossed the room and pulled on the bell pull.

Within moments, Francois, who had clearly been waiting to be summoned, returned.

“Bubbly, my dear man,” Emmaline instructed with a dramatic flourish of her hand.

Francois gave an equally dramatic bow of acknowledgment then made his exit.

Harriet eyed the door. “He is. . . Positively ravishing.”

Emmaline laughed, loving the feel of it. Once, she’d laughed so often with Harriet. “Isn’t he just?”

Harriet pressed her lips together then grinned. “Is he your. . . Erm. . .”

“Lover?” Emmaline finished easily.

Harriet’s cheeks turned crimson.

“You are blushing, Cousin!” Emmaline gaped. “I cannot believe it.”

When she had last been in England, before she had been cast out, it had been Harriet who was the one that loved to be naughty. Now, it seemed it was Emmaline’s turn.

Harriet cleared her throat. “Yes, well, last I saw you, you were as innocent as a—”

“Fool,” Emmaline interjected with a lightheartedness she did not quite feel.

Harriet shook her head, her golden hair glowing in the light pouring through the tall windows. “I wouldn’t have said that.”

“I would,” Emmaline countered. She drew herself up and admitted, “And do. But no, Francois is not my lover. He is merely someone beautiful to look upon and he is excellent with my guests. They will do anything he asks, male or female. He is most persuasive.”

“I imagine.” Harriet wagged her brows. “I’m sure he knows exactly how to handle silly old trouts.”

As if on cue, Francois returned with a silver urn filled with ice and a green bottle of the best champagne.

He easily slipped the cork soundlessly free then poured champagne neatly into two crystal glasses.

Offering one to Harriet, he bowed, his perfect shoulders stretching the fabric of his livery.

Harriet’s eyes danced with amusement as she took the stem of the glass.

Emmaline nodded at Francois as she took her own glass and her butler left them wordlessly.

She gestured for Harriet to take one of the seats before the mammoth fireplace.

Harriet had never been particularly graceful. She’d always been more of a plucky sort of person and the years had not changed that, given evidence by the way she quickly strode to one of the striped,

pink, silk chairs and plunked herself down. Her skirts fanned about her legs and she smoothed them into a semblance of place. Harriet took a long swallow of champagne.

“Garret did not come with you?” Emmaline inquired, sipping from her own glass, enjoying the crisp notes of apple and the bright bubbles.

Harriet sputtered on the champagne. “No.”

Emmaline arched a brow. “Afraid of me, is he?”

“I think he felt you might not wish to encounter him just yet.” Harriet leaned forward. “Besides, I wished you to myself.”

“Does he think me a terrible sort?” Emmaline asked, her heart rate increasing in a most irritating fashion. She did not care for the considerations of others. Especially not one of the Hart brothers, even if Garret had proven himself the best of them. “I’m surprised he condones your visit.”

Harriet snorted. “Condone? Do you think I ask his approval? Garret would never be so foolish as to approve or disapprove of my actions. We are generally in accord and we are certainly in accord on my visiting you. He always liked you. He took your part after all.”

“Yes,” Emmaline all but whispered, her throat tightening. She forced herself to draw in a considerable breath for she would not submit to silly tears now. Not after all this time had passed.

Harriet’s husband had more honor and intelligence than his brothers. Never, not even for a moment, had he believed Emmaline had done what she’d been accused of doing. And Garret had stood up to his own brothers, which was quite something given his elder brother was a duke.

Emmaline gave a careless smile, though she felt a great deal of care, in truth. But she had long ago mastered the art of hiding her emotions. “I suppose Garret is a tolerable fellow.”

“Glad you agree,” Harriet sallied before she took another drink. “I quite like him.”

“You didn’t always,” Emmaline teased.

“How true.” Harriet laughed. “We loathed each other for a good while, but we had our reasons and we sorted those out.”

How lucky her cousin was to have sorted out such troubles and found love.

That would never happen to her. The wound was far too deep. She doubted she’d ever marry or find love as true as the one her cousin had.

Emmaline turned to the cold fireplace, collecting her thoughts. As she did so, she leaned against the mantel, enjoying the brazen behavior she could exhibit now that she was not a *lady*. “So, you will risk your reputation visiting me?”

Harriet rolled her eyes. “You are one of the most famous people in Europe. My reputation shall only be increased if I can secure you for a party.”

Emmaline stared then laughed. “You are serious?”

“I am.” Harriet’s brows rose as if to emphasize her sincerity. “It seems you have become much sought after. Besides, Garret’s brother has been singing your praises at every turn. It is hard to argue with a duke.”

Emmaline groaned and took a long swallow. “James?”

Harriet nodded, her lips twitching. “Oh, yes.”

Emmaline rubbed her temple. “He did keep writing me to return.”

“I think everyone knows that if they say an ill word against you they shall face his wrath,” Harriet said simply.

“How odd that the man who essentially ruined me is now my greatest protector.”

The mirth died from Harriet's face. "Slandering you in error nearly destroyed him."

It was on the tip of Emmaline's tongue to reply *good*, but to do such a thing would give James power that she had no wish for him to have. It would be acknowledging how profoundly he had affected her. Nor was she so cruel as to wish pain on others.

"Yes, well." Emmaline looked way and said quickly, "We've all learned not to be quite so naive, now, haven't we?"

Harriet paused. "Edward, I think most of all."

Emmaline whipped back to her cousin and laughed at the absurdity of her cousin's comment. "More than me?"

Harriet frowned. "Do you know so little about him?"

"I have deliberately ignored him and his doings."

"He went through quite a dark period—"

Emmaline stood. "Harriet, I don't wish to know."

Blinking, Harriet looked down at her glass. "I see."

Wincing, Emmaline cursed herself for letting her pain unleash upon her cousin. Harriet had never done her ill. Her cousin had supported her in everything. How could she be so unkind to the woman?

Gathering herself, Emmaline sat again and said calmly, "He owns a club now."

"Not just a club," Harriet countered. She arched a brow. "*The* club. For gentlemen and a certain sort of gambling lady, that is."

Emmaline's brows rose and she was unable to hide her surprise. Edward had always walked such a straight and narrow path. She could hardly countenance Harriet's words. "Courtesans, too?"

"While I do think people get up to quite a lot at his establishment," Harriet began, "there is nothing of that kind as I comprehend it. He and John won't stand for the use of women like that. Blood spilling seems to be a different matter."

Emmaline struggled to make sense of Harriet's words. Edward had always been so. . . Well, staid. So good-natured. He'd never stepped a toe out of line. He'd been the perfect son, soldier, and gentleman. It was why the idea that she'd been unfaithful to him had been so horrifying to him.

He'd thought she would be as angelic as he. And she had been.

Emmaline cleared her throat and looked away, desperately hoping Harriet would believe her to be disinterested. "Well, I'm glad he has a hobby."

"I don't think I'd call it that," observed Harriet. "He's a different person now, Emmaline."

Emmaline fiddled with her glass. "Oh?"

"He's dangerous."

Emmaline laughed. "Edward?"

Harriet leveled her with a serious stare. "Proximity to pain is the only thing that has kept him afloat over these years."

She could hardly countenance it. Edward had been almost puppyish in his enthusiasm for life. A liking for pain? Surely, that was impossible. "I would have thought he'd have married, settled in the country, and had a host of children."

Harriet shook her head firmly. "Far from it."

Emmaline blanched, hating the thought of him with another even if he had ruined her life. She'd loved him. "A host of mistresses then?"

Harriet eyed her then asked carefully, "Do you care?"

“No, not a whit.” She swallowed the last of her champagne. “We should speak of something else.”

Taking Emmaline’s suggested direction, Harriet suddenly smiled and leaned back in her chair. “Such as your opening night?”

Emmaline grinned, relieved Harriet would not press onward with such a painful conversation. “It will be marvelous.”

Harriet gave her a wicked look. “You’ve invited all the Hart brothers.”

“Oh, yes,” Emmaline acknowledged as she stood and filled her own glass again then filled Harriet’s to the brim.

Harriet studied her. “You think you’re going to shock them, don’t you?”

Emmaline rolled her eyes. “No. But I do want them to see I have not been defeated.”

Harriet eyed her up and down. “Of course, Cousin. Of course. There isn’t a hint of defeat about you. In fact, you are a returning conqueror and I hail you. I shall be delighted to witness you storm London.”

Emmaline kneeled down before Harriet and took her hand. “I’m glad you will be my friend.”

“Emmaline.” Harriet blinked, tears shining in her eyes. “I was always and will always be your friend.”

Matching tears stung Emmaline’s gaze and she turned away, unable to speak. Instead, she nodded, swallowing back her grief. Despite the horde of company she’d kept over the last years, in her heart, she’d been so very alone. And now, here in London, she suddenly felt it keenly.

But she could let no one know that.

Oh, no. She was going to convince them all her heart was made of ice now and that no one had ever touched her, not truly, and that she would never be touched again. Certainly not by Edward.

It didn’t matter what Harriet said. James might have suffered for his actions. Edward, too. But nothing would change what they had done. How they had cast her out so easily. . . And how she had spent the last years away from the only home she’d ever known because of the arrogance of men.

She couldn’t wait to show them how far above them she was and always had been. And she’d do it with bells on, no matter how much it hurt her once-kind heart to do it.

Chapter 4

“You’ve a case of the nerves.”

Edward shot John a ball-crushing stare as they made their way through the packed club. “Go to hell, Brother.”

“Already been, thank you very much.”

“Surely, they’re missing you,” Edward drawled as he flexed his hands. The energy of the gamblers usually fortified him. Tonight, it was driving him over the edge of tautly controlled emotions. When Emmaline had first left London, he’d been a wreck. A gin bottle had been as dear to him as any of his limbs. Perhaps dearer. Then he’d discovered the thrill of owning a club. . . . And fighting in it. Slowly, he’d gotten himself together and he’d become the master of his emotions.

Now, he was rattling on a course of destruction at the very idea of seeing *her* again. Which was damned amusing. For once, he’d have done anything to see her again. *Anything*.

The last days had been hell. It had been all he could do not to go over to the theater, charge in and see her. Just so he would not have to wait. Just so that they could meet without hundreds of people watching.

Fortunately, he was now above such things. Or so he told himself. Besides, it was fairly clear she had their meeting planned and, tempting though it was, he wasn’t about to steal that from her. She deserved to be in control of this. Any action on his part to take that from her would be selfish in the extreme.

Even so, he found that with every hour that brought them closer to reunion, his insides twisted with self-loathing and anticipation.

What the hell was he going to say to her? *So sorry for ruining you, but I would still bring down the stars for you.*

Ha. She’d laugh in his face and rightly so. Besides, she was a different person. A woman he hardly knew now. A few years had aged them both and they’d both been forged in the fire of pain. Gone was the innocence they’d both basked in.

Now, they understood the vagaries of people. And he especially knew that men like he, men who threw girls into the gutter, even if he had been entirely misled to believe she’d betrayed him, deserved a special place in hell.

It was why he’d started The Healing Home. No one knew he was the founder and keeper of it, of course. But he’d built the place, funded it, and selected the workers who took care of the women destroyed by society. He pored over the reports and did everything in his power to see it improve and expand.

Still, no matter how many he helped, he’d never make amends or escape the sort of man he’d proven himself to be.

That particular charitable endeavor was a far cry from the club he and John owned. Well, John was more of a silent partner now. His brother had gone off to Scotland when he wed and had seldom come back to London. The keeping of this den of iniquity had become Edward’s dearest child.

He knew the sinners better than he knew himself and he could spot trouble at a hundred paces. Some nights he welcomed it, savoring the chance to spill a little blood. Tonight was one of those nights.

In but an hour's time, he was to head across the crowded street and sit through a performance of an exceptional play. . . With his former intended upon the boards. Everyone would be watching and speculating.

He needed to get blind drunk and he needed to hit someone or be hit. Repeatedly. Drunkenness wasn't truly an option. He wouldn't do that to her. Or his family. Stumbling about and slurring hardly seemed an appropriate way to present himself.

"Hell, has found a new prince," John quipped.

If he'd been talking, Edward had not heard until just now. He stopped. "You mean me."

John shrugged. "You do seem rather determined to live in the mire."

"I like the mire." Edward narrowed his gaze, drawing in a breath thick with the smoke of candles and the fumes of liquor. "It suits me."

John sighed. "I suppose it's better than the gin bottle."

Edward laughed dryly. "I like that, too."

"Edward, you need to take a moment away from all this and—"

"I've no idea what you mean," Edward cut in quickly as he strode down a narrow hall, determined not to allow his brother to probe an old wound too deeply.

"You're out for trouble tonight," John warned.

Perhaps he could get someone to call him out. Then he wouldn't have to go to the damned opening night.

John grabbed his arm. "Don't do it."

Edward halted and flicked his gaze down to the strong hand resting on his sleeve. "Do what?"

John blew out a breath. "Break someone's skull open."

"I should never do such a thing."

John arched a brow.

Edward cocked his head to the side and smiled coldly. "Not without cause."

John tsked. "What a mild fellow you used to be."

Edward snorted. "I was an ass."

"You still are." John dropped his hand. "You're just aware of it now and act accordingly."

"Damn it, John." Edward shoved a hand through his hair. "This is insupportable."

"What?" John queried, shadows dancing over his face in the dark corridor.

"I don't wish to see her," Edward admitted, each word like a blade in his throat. "I never want to see her again."

"Lies. Lies."

Edward ground his teeth. "Do you want me to pop you one?"

"The wife would be most dismayed," John replied lightly. "She thinks I've given such things up."

"Meredith knows you better than that."

A positively nauseating look of bliss crossed John's face. "She does, doesn't she?"

Edward scowled. It amazed him that John had found love. He'd always thought his bastard brother too cynical for such a thing. But he had tossed himself off the cliff of bachelorhood and seemed to quite enjoy it.

Once, he, too, had longed for such a thing. It had been all he'd wanted. A quiet life with a loving wife and children.

Well, he'd thrown that away.

Now, he knew he'd never marry. He didn't deserve to.

"You're not the least bit curious about how she looks now?" John asked as they began to head down towards one of the side rooms which dealt in more illicit gambling. Edward was leading the way and he wasn't even thinking about where his feet were taking him.

Edward ground his teeth together then snapped, "She was always beautiful. No doubt, she's still beautiful. My seeing her again won't alter that. And I don't love pain."

"Yes, you do," John countered, apparently determined to be relentless in his honesty.

"Not that sort," Edward growled, taking in the shouting and general noise from the rooms to his left. "I nearly killed myself trying to see her in Paris. I gave up on ever seeing her again some time ago. So now?"

John waited then prompted, "Now?"

Edward glanced back over his shoulder. "I can't imagine what will occur."

"Perhaps, she'll give you the cut direct."

"One can only hope," he drawled but that did not stop his heart from hammering against his ribs, his gut from twisting, or his whole body from humming with anticipation. What would she do? For even though he desperately tried to convince himself he did not, he desperately wished to see her again. To hear her voice. To. . . What?

He strode into the bare-knuckle boxing room where men of all walks of life packed the space.

Cheers and roars went up as a man suddenly landed on the ring's rough floor, blood splattering out around him.

The referee grabbed the winner's ham-like fist and thrust it into the air.

Cheers went up and pound notes fluttered. Coins chinked and bookmakers quickly rifled through the pages of their records.

Fast calculations of winnings were made. . . And, of course, there was the cut for the club.

Edward eyed the makeshift ring.

"Don't do it—"

But Edward wasn't listening. This was what he needed. He needed to get out of his head and away from the pain of the past. If he could but feel a fist in his gullet, he could forget the agony gnawing at his insides.

So, he whipped off his coat. "Who wants to fight?" he bellowed.

Several ladies in masks let up cries of delight.

For everyone at the club knew that Edward had fists like hammers and a body that would not quit, no matter the punishment it took.

There was a general burst of excitement in the dark, smoke-filled room.

Torches blazed at the corners and several men eyed each other wondering who would volunteer to chance it and have his teeth knocked in.

Edward seldom lost.

The sudden wave of feeling that crashed down upon him sucked the air out of his lungs. He closed his eyes for a moment and immediately he was in Devon. On a spring morning. Emmaline was in the church, her eyes wide with horror and full of tears. . .

He'd ignored her protestations of innocence and her cry of agony still rang in his soul.

He'd done that.

Good God.

A cheer went up and a man stepped forward. Six foot and built like a bull, Edward knew him on sight. Tom Boyd made the rounds every few months and he knew exactly what he was about. The other man looked as if he spent his life in a forge shaping iron. Some said he'd been a blacksmith before he'd come to London to pursue fighting.

Edward smiled grimly. This was what he needed.

The man gave a curt nod, his curling, black hair dull in the light. Tom Boyd's eyes stared with that unmistakable look. The look that said he'd seen death on every corner since childhood and he was not afraid.

Forcing himself to draw in a slow breath, Edward took off his waistcoat then reached down and yanked his linen shirt from his breeches.

With one solid tug, he pulled it over his head and tossed it to the crowd.

A shriek of excitement went up from the ladies, many of whom were cooling themselves with painted and feathered fans, their jewels shimmering in the torchlight. This was the place wealthy ladies came to spend their coin at the tables and witness a bit of rough life, all with the safety of a mask.

He didn't judge a single one of them. They were all unhappy with the lot men had given them and sought pleasure wherever they could find it.

Edward strode around the ring, feeling the power well up in him, the need to fight. The need to win.

The referee called him and Tom Boyd to the center of the ring.

They took their stances across from each other, boots to the drawn line on the floor then touched knuckles. The referee jumped back.

Immediately, Boyd swung forward, his giant arm arcing.

Edward darted back and danced to the side of the ring. The rough touch of the crowd brushed him. He ignored it and readjusted his position.

He was taller than Boyd and almost as broad, but he'd learned to street fight only in the last few years. Oh, he knew boxing's rules as well as he knew his Latin, but this? This was new and he loved it. There weren't rules. There was just blood and flesh and bone.

The man he was fighting? He'd breathed it, eaten it, and lived it since childhood no doubt. Life was no feathered bed for men of Boyd's class.

Edward kept his fists up and tucked his elbows in, looking for a way to land a blow.

He stepped forward and hooked. Immediately, his fist landed on Boyd's granite jaw.

A fist slammed into Edward's back before he could dance to the side.

The wind rushed out of him and he saw white as he whirled away. His insides shook with the force of it and he staggered one step before he got his feet under him.

Unshakable, Boyd followed, driving his fist into Edward's belly.

The pain coursed through him. Delicious agony driving any thoughts he'd entertained entirely out of his head.

Edward grunted, ducked and jabbed. He gave a jerk of his chin, forcing his hair out of his face. Sweat slipped down his face and chest and he blinked the sting away.

Dropping and darting fast to the left, his fist cracked against Boyd's cheek. Blood spurted across the room as his teeth cut flesh.

A squeal went up from a lady as it sprayed across her gown.

They pounded each other, each looking for the best way in, the hardest hit. The blow that would drive the other to the ground.

Blow after blow landed until he tasted blood in his mouth and the entirety of the room vanished.

This was living.

This was the art of being totally alive in the moment.

And it was then that he landed an uppercut to Tom Boyd's chin.

His head snapped back and he staggered. Boyd swayed and then he fell to his knees with a hard thud. Blinking, Boyd sprawled forward, face down.

Edward stood, waiting for him to get back up, ready in case he came for more. But his opponent did not. He let out a groan and tapped the floor.

Edward's chest pumped up and down as the room slowly came back into focus. He bent, offering Boyd his hand and pulled the other man to his feet.

The ref came forward and grabbed Edward's arm, shoving it into the air.

He sucked in smoky air, blinking as the room burst with the excitement of his victory.

And then he saw her.

Emmaline Trent stood in the corner of the room, a crimson hood covering her pale blond hair. Her blue eyes shone like rare diamonds as she stared at him.

It was impossible to assess what she thought.

Her lips, tinged rose red, parted, baring pearl white teeth.

The room stilled, the cheering vanished again, the jostling bodies diminished. All he could see was her. Standing there. A pillar of perfect, cold beauty as she took him in.

The peace that the fight brought him disappeared in an instant as every fiber of his being demanded he stride to her. He took a step forward as if he could embrace this primal moment and seize her in his arms. As if he could cut across a sea of resentment, anger, guilt and blame. . .

And then, she whipped away, her cloak fluttering behind her.

Leaving him victorious and utterly defeated.

Chapter 5

Emmaline could not draw breath as she stood in the dark shadows of the club.

The sight before her. . . Could it be true? She struggled to make sense of it. The person she'd known had been a gentleman without a stain of impropriety about him. He'd behaved perfectly, following the edicts of society.

This was a beast of a man.

Edward Hart, youngest brother of the Duke of Huntsdown, the man who'd stolen her heart then destroyed it beyond recognition, stood over six feet and three inches. His dark hair, far too long for fashion, danced about his hard face made of angles. There wasn't a hint of excess flesh about his frame. Every bit of him seemed carved from stone. He moved with liquid grace about the ring, completely unbothered by the roaring crowd surrounding him.

In fact, he seemed completely at home as if he were an animal that thrived best when fighting to the death.

Blood was trickling from his lip. His eyes, once brown and full of hope, now shone with the promise of pain. He cocked his head down, his massive fists curled into twin weapons.

He whirled and his fist shot out. It met the other man's face.

In that moment, everyone knew instinctively the fight was done. The loud crack of the sound of flesh and bone shuddered through them all. And Edward's opponent all but tumbled to the floor.

She gasped, overwhelmed by the frenzy of the room and the sight of him victorious.

Edward stood, his chest rising and falling in rapid breaths, his body still and powerful as sweat shone upon his hard flesh.

She could scarce believe the sight of him in naught but his boots and breeches which clung to his legs like a second skin.

Where was the boy who had come home from war still determined to lead a good life? Gone. He was gone. Replaced by a devil in black. A Hercules of a man who looked more at home in Hades than Olympus.

And she was awestruck. She could scarce think beyond the wonder that Edward truly was an entirely different man than before. His muscles fairly bulged from his shoulders. The cheers surrounding him made it clear that he was a champion of the night, a beloved fighter who pounded men into the ground with routine ease.

Just as the referee seized his hand, lifting it high to declare victory, Edward turned in her direction.

She longed to run, but her feet were frozen to the floor.

His gaze caught hers and his brown eyes widened with recognition. His entire being changed in that moment. The beast inside him, though it did not drop away, faded for an instant and his face softened. . . Not with love. . . But with horror.

He took a step forward but before he could break free from the referee's hold, she whipped around and ran out of the room. She did not wish to see him like this. Not in his club, with him half-clothed, the victor of a fight. With both their emotions running high.

No. She could not bear it. For what would they say to each other? What wounds would they open, never to heal again?

Oh, why had she come? What a fool she'd been to let curiosity get the best of her!

Without daring to look back, she darted through the crowded hall of drunken men and women, dressed in silks and satins, throwing their money into Edward's purse.

Emmaline's hands shook as she raced across the street, narrowly avoiding carts, curricles, and coaches as they rushed through the choked road.

Truly! What had she been thinking?

She was mad!

The performance was to begin in less than two hours and here she was, across the street in *his* club.

But all day long, Harriet's words had echoed through her and she'd struggled to believe them. Edward could not be so very changed. Surely, he was still the boy she knew. He wasn't a hard club owner as her cousin claimed.

She sucked in the sooty air and darted into the grand foyer of her theater.

How mistaken she'd been to doubt Harriet.

The image she'd carried of Edward was, indeed, gone. The young man who had been a solid yet still so genteel had disappeared.

She pressed a hand to her mouth as years of emotion barreled forward.

When he whipped off his shirt and stepped into the ring. . .

She had seen nothing like it in all her life.

He had looked like he could kill a man if he so chose without the rules of war.

How could that be her Edward?

She blinked. But he wasn't her Edward anymore. He hadn't been for a long time.

It had been utterly clear that he had loved the fighting. He hungered for it. He'd looked like a tiger, pacing its cage waiting to strike. And strike he had.

It had been both beautiful and terrifying.

He was beautiful and terrifying.

Anything boyish about him had entirely vanished.

His chest had rippled with sculpted sinew. His jaw had been as strong as granite and as chiseled. His eyes had shone with determination and the entire room had responded to his presence.

Especially the ladies.

Ladies.

The married women of the *ton* who were bored with their lives and came in disguise for a bit of temptation.

Did Edward give it to them?

The idea sent a shocking wave of anger through her. She shouldn't care!

She *didn't* care.

Edward could do as he pleased.

Quickly, she strode into a side hall, yanking at the strings of her cloak. Her fingers caught in the knot and she cursed as she struggled to free herself from the tangle.

Soon, the foyer would be full with people in their finest clothes and jewels. They were all coming to see her. To see if she would make a fool of herself or if she would live up to her reputation as notorious siren and now actress.

And what had she done? She'd slunk away to spy upon the man who had ruined her.

Something had compelled her to abandon her dressing room and see just what it was he did with his life now.

Perhaps, it had been seeing the hordes of lords and ladies entering his establishment. Of seeing the rough men and women, too. It was a strange mix of people, his club. A place she could hardly fathom even given her new experience of the world.

She had assumed he would be sitting in an office somewhere, poring over accounts or giving orders to his servants. But as soon as she'd entered, she'd spotted him and his bastard brother slipping through the crowd, heading to a different part of the club.

Edward had always been the perfect gentleman, beautifully dressed, well mannered, elegant of speech. The man she'd just witnessed beating another man to a pulp? It couldn't be him.

It barely looked like Edward.

But it was. It had been impossible to mistake him or the way her soul had leapt at the sight of him.

She slipped through a side door to the far less glamorous part of the theater. As she headed down narrower stairs, she swished between set pieces and walked beneath ropes and fly systems.

The curtain was down as she headed across the stage and, for one moment, she stopped and drew in a long breath.

She'd come to feel at home upon the stage. For her, she could pretend to be anyone she wished. She could leave everything behind. She could glory in the magic of it all and escape the pain of the past.

The painted set behind her was elaborate and beautiful to behold what with its layers and moving parts.

Who needed the reality of life when one could come inside and see the wonder of the imagination?

She bit down on her lower lip. Yes, she had found a far better place than Edward.

Her demons had been chased largely away with champagne, beautiful clothes, and the pageantry of plays.

Edward had thrown himself into the darkness of life.

She could hardly fathom it.

Shaking herself, she headed across the stage, into the dark but busy wing as the stagehands prepared for the rise of the curtain.

Her dressing room was down the far hall and she was happy to share it with Roderick Belgrave, one of the most famous actors London had ever known.

She placed a hand on the brass door knob, girding herself. For Roderick was great fun but a terrible gossip.

Opening the door, she pasted a cheerful smile upon her lips.

Roderick did not even turn as he drew in his already dark eyebrows with charcoal. "Cutting it a bit thin, aren't we, darling?"

"Last minute business to attend to, Roddy," she said lightly. "Owning a theater is devilishly difficult. . . And good fun."

"Ah." Roderick pursed his lips as he leaned forward, eyeing himself in the candlelit mirror. "I could have sworn I saw you trotting over to that club."

"What?" she asked, blinking. "No."

Roddy wagged his now dark brows. "Wasn't that fellow, Edward Hart, the owner, your

intended?”

He already knew the answer to that question. Of course he did. All London did.

So, she sat, picked up a cloth and tossed it at him.

He caught it easily then wiggled with delight. He was naked from the waist up, his strong, young body beautiful to behold. “Now. Now. He’s quite a bit of elegant rough, your Hart.”

“He’s not my Hart,” she huffed, pulling her hair back so that she might begin the application of her own makeup.

“Of course not,” Roddy replied as he reached out and patted her hand. “Couldn’t resist going to see your old amour, though, could you?”

She sighed. “I admit to curiosity. I have heard the strangest things.”

“Hmmm.” Roddy leaned forward and whispered dramatically, “You mean you’ve heard he is the most delicious monk that all London knows and that both lads and lasses do pine away for the loss of him?”

“Monk?” she echoed.

Roddy nodded, smoothing the rouge he pressed lightly to his lips. “Surely you knew?”

She sat up straighter. Was anything she now knew about Edward to be believed? She never would have imagined he would choose the path of celibacy. Surely, such a rumor was false.

“I have deliberately avoided all mention of him, Roddy.”

“Tut!” he tsked. “I never took you for a fool. Information is power, darling girl.”

She rolled her eyes. “Out with it.”

Roddy turned to her, his eyes all but glowing with excitement. “Well, legend has it, and he is the stuff of legend now, that he is entirely celibate. That he will not indulge in the flesh. For the longest time, some thought it was because he liked the lay of the land on the other side, don’t you know, and couldn’t bring himself to admit it. . . But no.”

Roddy clasped his hand to his chest. “It is because his heart is broken.”

She snorted. “A broken heart never stopped a man from rogering, to my knowledge. And who the devil broke his heart?”

She found herself suddenly aghast that he had fallen in love whilst she’d been in Paris and had his heart broken.

Roddy gaped at her. “You, you silly nit.”

She stared back then laughed. “Do not be ludicrous.”

“I could never be such a thing,” Roddy scoffed indignantly. “Now, get out of your kit, my dear. Or you shan’t be ready for your night of glory.”

She nodded. There really was little time to ensure her makeup was perfection, her costumes right, and her prop pieces tucked away in the correct places. “What would I do without you, dear Roddy?”

“You’d be an utterly lost lamb. Which is why you are family now. There is no better family than the theater, my dear. And well you know it.”

She did. The theater accepted one exactly as they were. Come thick or thin, her little family of actors and players that she had known in Paris and now London had always been merry, kind, and willing to help her.

Her young dresser slipped into the room, carrying Emmaline’s first costume carefully.

It was a scrumptious scrap of fabric that gave the air of modesty but was scandalous in the extreme. The cream-colored fabric was all but translucent and clung to her frame when she moved

about.

Yes, it was the perfect gown for her.

She was going to take London by storm. And she could not wait.

Beatrice was the perfect part for her. It had been tempting to do a more dramatic work. But she longed to laugh and not cry any longer. She'd done enough of that in private without having to do it on the stage as well. So, she had taken to playing the greatest comedies ever written, reveling in their absurdities.

Once, she would have played Hero, the young innocent ingénue who took whatever pain was given to her without complaint.

But that was not who she was anymore. No. And she never would be such a lady again, thank goodness.

Her mind fluttered back to Edward and the dark look that she had witnessed.

She shivered. He would be no easy fellow to handle now. A smile and a flick of a fan would not manage him. Perhaps, she should just give him the cut direct. That would settle things quickly.

But she was no fool. His club was across the street from her theater. His brother was the Duke of Huntsdown. There would be no war between their two houses. For she was going to make England her home now. It was the place of her home and she'd felt its call in her bones.

Oh, no. She would make peace. . . Even if she had to lie through her teeth now to get it. But that did not mean she could not enjoy herself along the way. Oh, yes, she would find a way to make Edward dance to her tune and she'd avenge her wounded heart. . . Even if she had to smile the entire time she was doing it.

Chapter 6

Edward stood across from the theater under the arched columns of his club. Groomed and now dressed in his evening kit, he lifted a cheroot to his lips and took in a long draw of smoke.

Humanity bustled about him. He allowed the pace of it to soothe him in a way a salon never could now. People going about, living their lives in the moment. . . It fortified him. There was no falsity here. Not in the people going by his door.

On the other side of the teeming road, a long line of coaches filled the street as they set down some of the most powerful people in all of England to see the woman they had all so eagerly condemned but a few years ago.

He'd been one of them.

It was disgusting. Vultures who had been happy to devour her now came to laud her.

As for him? It mattered not that he'd agonized over what he'd done. Every day, he'd lamented it. Most nights, he'd drunk himself mad. Despair had dragged him down so entirely he'd been barely able to speak. . . But he'd condemned her as easily as the next man, believing his bastard brother, John, who'd had a very good reason for lying.

And he'd thrown her to the wolves without truly listening to her or her protestations of innocence. He'd believed men when he should have believed *her*. Oh, the readiness that he and his brother, James, had to believe ill still choked him.

There was no going back now.

So, instead, he stood still, a rock in the flowing waves of people, forcing himself to quell the violent emotions shaking him.

When she'd run from him, he nearly given chase tonight. Every fiber of him had demanded that he charge after her, that he seize her, press her back to a wall, and let their bodies do the speaking.

Such a thing would only have solidified his position as a monster to her.

But he'd been slammed by so many opposing emotions when he'd seen her that he could scarcely make heads or tails of them.

Desire. There was no questioning that. He'd been seized by unrelenting desire for the beautiful and mysterious woman who had come to witness him at his worst. And there had been something else. A call so deep inside of his heart that he'd felt a stab of pain so exquisite he was stunned he'd been able to go on inside his club with seemingly no effect from the encounter.

John had no clue she'd been there.

Edward winced. Why had she come then? When he had been indulging himself in his favorite darkness? Violence. He loved the feel of that edge of pain, that edge which obliterated all other unbearable feelings.

She'd witnessed that and he'd seen the shock on her beautiful face. Time had played with both of them, but she still bore the glow of a goddess from a great master's painting.

And he'd recalled how much he'd worshipped her, his angel. How he'd been crushed beyond all belief when he'd been given evidence of her fall. If only he had. . . No. There was no point in thinking such a thing. He knew. He'd spent months repeating *if only* to no avail.

He swallowed and drew in another long inhalation of the spicy smoke then blew it out into the night air.

The area by his club and her theater was lined with torches, illuminating the street hawkers and the lower middle classes who were choking together as they struggled to make it into the cheaper seats of her theater.

Large posters had been positioned about the theater, declaring it a sold out run. Not a sold out performance, but a sold out run.

No doubt, half the people who attended her theater would stumble over to his club after. . . Or some of the men would wander over to the Temples of Venus just around the corner in Covent Garden.

He curled a lip at the thought of those meat markets which were so many women's only option at financial independence. . . So often, that road was one to enslavement by a pimp or madam into never-ending debt, disease, and premature death.

He wanted to kill every man jack of them that dragged women into such hell. . . But he'd have to start with himself. For wasn't it he who'd driven his angel to become one of the most celebrated jewels of the demimonde? He was simply lucky that her life had not descended into hell as so many others had done. In fact, it seemed as if she had emerged like a Phoenix from the ash of her destruction.

He'd never forgive himself for it despite her success. It was no surprise that she wouldn't either. But it had been a surprise that she had come, unannounced, to spy upon him.

For she'd rejected his visits vehemently when he'd sought her out years ago. In fact, she'd all but made it clear he was dead to her that last night in Paris when he had prostrated himself before her house, begging to see her.

Why had she sought him out so privately? So intimately? She'd not wished him to know she'd been watching him. Of that, he was certain. So the visit had been for her and her alone. That meant only one thing. She was curious about him. Why? After all this time, what could she possibly wish to know?

Had she come to see if he suffered? If he was unaffected by what had transpired?

Bloody hell, he wished he could have stopped her and had but a bit of honest conversation with her.

That would be impossible tonight. For half of London would be watching them together. To see if they bloodied the floor with each other.

Bloody hell, his heart, which he'd thought he'd long ago brought into control, was aching again. It hurt. It hurt like the devil. And there was nothing that would assuage it permanently.

"Are you ready to face her, then?"

He did not look at John, but rather peered at the glowing lights of the theater, deeply admiring of Emmaline's tenacity. She'd taken destruction and turned it into creation. How many could do that? He couldn't even count the number on one hand.

"We might as well get on with it," Edward said, bracing himself for the night to come. "There's no hiding myself, after all. We are both notorious."

John laughed. "The two lambs have become the wolves."

It was a stunning thing to say. But it was true. All those years ago, he and Emmaline had been so innocent, so naive to the ways of the world. Swallowing back a wave of pain, Edward gave a tight nod. "We've both adapted to the wilds."

John clapped him on the back. "Come on, then, to your doom."

Edward threw his cheroot down and stamped it out. He eyed the towering temple to Dionysus, struggling to believe that those events years ago had finally led him to this moment. It was going to be a most curious night.

He'd ordered his own box in the theater. He'd be damned if he was going to sit with James, Garret, John and their wives.

He'd rather gouge his eyes out. No, tonight he was going to suffer on his own. But he would not scrape the ground, bowing and professing how he longed for her forgiveness. Not again. He'd already tried that. It hadn't worked.

Now, he'd simply have to meet her on equal footing. One notorious underworld figure to the other.

So, as he strode across the road and into the gilded hall, he did not shirk.

The crowd all but parted for him like a veritable Red Sea of society's most venomous and powerful people.

Whispers rushed about him, so many of them, they formed a crescendo of sound. He gave John a tight nod as he turned and headed to the stairs which swept up to the opposite side of the orchestra.

John merely arched his brows in question but then nodded his understanding.

Edward climbed the stairs. His gaze was straight ahead, ignoring all the fans waving, tongues wagging, and *pince-nez* squinting.

It seemed half-mad that Edward was grateful for John, given that one could argue that without John, he'd be married to Emmaline. None of that mattered now. He'd found his peace with his bastard brother who'd taught him more in a few years than he'd learned in a lifetime. John could be a damned nuisance but he was seldom wrong about things and he was far more practical than his other brothers.

John understood this was a gauntlet Edward needed to walk alone and walk it he would. He was no longer the youngest son who needed cosseting and protecting. He would not allow James to shield him from the consequences.

Edward paused before the lush curtains that led to his box. Spotting a serving boy, he waved him over. "Wine. Lots of it. Charge it to the club across the street."

The young, handsome boy's eyes widened. "Yes, my lord. Anything else, my lord?"

Edward sighed. "A knife to slit my throat?"

The boy's eyes bulged. And Edward laughed. "A bit of gallows' humor, lad. Never fear. I shan't stain the carpets crimson. They are new, after all."

The boy swallowed then scampered off to collect the wine.

Edward pulled back the curtain and stepped into the sumptuous box. The balcony was gilded with golden nymphs and flowers. The crimson, silk chairs were luxuriously cushioned and the wood was painted gold.

There were four seats.

Only one would be filled. Of that, he was damned sure.

He did not sit immediately but rather gazed out over the sea of people filling the theater.

The curtain would go up in but a few minutes and the building was humming with excitement. In any other circumstances, it would have been a wonderful moment. He adored the theater.

But the moment he stepped into the golden light of the central chandelier that danced along his box, a hush fell over the company and he felt hundreds of pairs of eyes fall upon him.

Once, he'd barely been worth the *ton's* notice. After all, he was the youngest son. The youngest

son of a duke, true. But still, he'd been nothing more than a soldier with a decent allowance. That had all changed with the scandal surrounding him and Emmaline.

Now, he was a great source of intrigue and gossip, made greater by his own disinterest in the approval of those interested in him.

The hush that fell suddenly erupted into gossip, no doubt about his presence.

After all, he and Emmaline, to their knowledge, had not been in the same room since the debacle in the church. And they would have been right but for that brief glimpse in his club.

He lowered himself to one of the red, silk chairs and leaned his forearm against the railing.

Much to his relief, the serving boy ducked under the curtain of his box bearing a large decanter of wine and a pair of glasses.

He eyed the second glass with irritation, for he had no intention of hosting anyone, but said nothing.

The boy quickly set the items down on the small table tucked in the curve of the box. Deftly, he poured a full glass.

"Well done, lad," Edward said as he slipped a shilling from his pocket and flicked it to the boy.

The boy's eyes rounded at the size of the tip and he gave a quick bow. As he exited, he said brightly, "Thank you, my lord."

Edward took his glass up and drank deeply. There wasn't enough wine in the world for this night. Gin would have been preferable. But even he wasn't going to openly drink gin at Emmaline's opening night.

He leaned back, determined to keep an unaffected air, even if it killed him.

"Ah! My lord!"

He closed his eyes, hiding a wince. What the devil? Was this night to grow in difficulty?

Slowly, he opened his eyes and forced a smile. "Mrs. Barton."

"You know the sound of my voice, my lord." She smiled, that slow, perfect smile that had devastated thousands of London theatergoers and many men in less public conditions. "I'm honored."

Edward ground his teeth together. Mrs. Barton had been instrumental in the proving of Emmaline's innocence. Really, he was deeply grateful to her. She was one of the best people he could know. But at this moment, it seemed as if every second was designed to remind him of the agony of that particular time.

"How could any man not recognize such a rapturous voice?" he said simply, meaning it.

Mrs. Barton was still one of London's darlings. An actress of incredible beauty. And a woman undaunted by her birth, or the precipitous climb she had made to make it into society. Even now, she was one of the most beautiful women in England. Her dark hair was coiled about her head in soft tendrils. Emeralds and green silk were artfully woven through her tresses. The bodice of her green, silk gown clung precipitously to her magnificent bosom and her skirts, though of the deepest emerald, were translucent over an ivory skirt.

"You have learned to flatter, Edward," she said as she sashayed forward. Without waiting for an invitation, she sat beside him.

He drank. "Is it flattery if it is the truth?"

"You see?" she gestured towards him with a pale hand, the massive emerald ring on her right hand winking. "Even better. And yes, I would adore a glass of wine."

What had he done to deserve this? Oh. . . What a foolish question that was. Wordlessly, he poured

the wine then handed her the glass.

He refilled his own.

Mrs. Barton contemplated the dark red hue of her wine. "I wondered if you would come."

"Did you?" he drawled.

"Yes," she confirmed, cocking her head to the side, causing her emerald earbob to dance. "But you have become a man who doesn't shrink, haven't you?"

He lifted his glass in salute.

Mrs. Barton leaned casually in her chair which showed her figure off in a remarkable way to anyone who might be watching. "You're not going to hurt her again though, are you?"

He stared at Mrs. Barton for a long moment then threw back his head and laughed. "You cannot be serious."

She smiled. "Oh, I am."

"She loathes me, madam," he pointed out, anger sparking that she would even suggest such a thing. "I doubt that I could get close enough to her to touch her hand let alone hurt her."

"Life is a mysterious thing," Mrs. Barton took a long sip of wine. "As is the heart."

"I take your warning then," he replied evenly. "Perhaps, you should warn her, in turn, since you care so deeply."

Her dark brows lifted. "Oh?"

"Coming to my club without a mask is not the most advisable thing for a lady. Though I suppose she is not. . ."

"A lady?"

Edward frowned, feeling completely adrift. "I am at a loss as to how to classify Emmaline. But I don't want her hurt. . . Not like that."

Mrs. Barton laughed, shaking her head. "I highly doubt she'll come to your club."

He stared back, saying nothing.

"My God," Mrs. Barton gasped. "She already has."

Edward looked away but found nowhere to fix his gaze and, once again, he looked upon the actress.

Mrs. Barton drank deeply. "I was afraid of this."

"Afraid of what?" he bit out.

"It matters not, my lord," she rushed. "I ask only that you don't trifle with her."

"I doubt we shall exchange words after this night," he said quietly. An odd bitterness and regret deepened his voice, even to his own ears. "So, you needn't fear."

Mrs. Barton nodded and stood. She drained her glass. "I do believe the show is about to begin."

With that, she headed for the arched doorway.

Edward reached out and touched her hand. "I had no idea I'd been so thoroughly cast as a villain."

She eyed him carefully. "Didn't you? You should. Likeable as you are, Edward dear, you *are* a villain. Your own heart proved that some time ago."

He let his hand drop and nodded. "Then I must play the part I have been given I suppose."

She drew in a sharp breath. "I did not mean—"

"What did you mean then?" he challenged. "That I should be a villain but act the angel? You ask too much, Mrs. Barton. Perhaps, you should have asked nothing at all."

Her face hardened and she strode from the box.

He cursed silently. He had not meant to make an enemy of her. He'd always admired her. But to hear her call him a villain. It . . . Hurt.

God, he was such a child. He always had been. And that was his failing.

He knew it well.

The curtain of his box parted once again and Garret popped in.

"Good God," Edward exclaimed, not giving a fig for the people who were no doubt eagerly watching. "I obtained a box of my own to avoid this very thing."

Garret ignored him. "That meeting looked quite serious."

Edward sighed, knowing there was no fighting his brother. The Harts were a stubborn lot. "It was."

"Look, old boy," Garret encouraged. "You needn't look like you're at hell's door. Emmaline has always been a good sort. She won't make your life unbearable now. I'm certain of it."

"Of course not," Edward ground out. "I'm the unbearable one."

He curled his hands into fists. He sounded like a complete arse.

Garret tensed. "That's not true."

"Look," Edward drawled, hating himself as he realized he was donning armor to show everyone that he was not completely shaken by the idea of seeing her again. "You proved yourself the hero, Brother. I didn't. We can't go back and you can't save me from myself."

"No," Garret placed a hand on Edward's shoulder. "But you needn't—"

"What?" Edward broke in, his voice low. Despite his earlier feelings, he didn't wish to start a shouting scene right before the curtain was to go up.

Garret locked gazes with him. "You needn't hate yourself."

Edward gave his brother a tight smile, even as his insides twisted. "Why not? Everyone else does."

"That's not true," Garret countered firmly. "They envy you, society."

Edward nodded. "Not quite the same thing as being a good man, now is it?"

"No," Garret granted. "But I know you—"

"Garret, we cannot change the past," Edward cut in firmly. "No matter how much we wish it."

Drawing in a slow breath, Edward forced himself to say with all sincerity, "Besides, things worked out very well for you in the end, did they not?"

"Yes," Garret replied, taking Edward's cue. He laughed softly. "They did. No thanks to my addleheaded brothers. I sometimes think I'm the only one of us with half a brain."

"John has the other half," Edward pointed out.

And with that, several of the lights about the theater were put out and the lanterns at the foot of the stage were quickly lit.

As the curtain was pulled back, Edward held his breath.

He had good cause.

In the opening scene, several characters lounged about upon rich cushions as a musician played his lute. A painted set of Messina sprawled behind their languid forms.

Emmaline, on the other hand, was not lounging. Emmaline was dancing to the music. The seductive folds of her cream skirts slid over her body.

He could see every shadow between her legs, every curve of her body. She was almost naked

and, yet, she was entirely clothed.

It was a trick of the new fashion but, somehow, she made it all the more irresistible.

Her blond hair was curled and tumbled down her back freely.

The way she moved was hypnotic and he immediately understood why she had seized Paris. For he could look at no one but her upon the stage.

The entire theater seemed to be holding its breath and whilst he knew characters were speaking, he could not look away from her.

And as she took the hands of another young actress and twirled around upon the stage giggling about “catching the Benedick”, his heartbeat thundered in his ears. His entire body tensed as if hungering for something it could not and never would have, yet desired above all things.

The torture of it was almost bliss, simply seeing her as she was now. So full of confidence and commanding every single member of the audience to look upon her.

Her voice, which was deep and rich now like the most elegant of slow burns sliding through a Scottish glen, filled the theater. Those tempting notes caught every single person in her spell.

She was magnificent. A goddess. A siren. Every single person sat a little further forward, desperate to be bathed in her light.

The spell wove about him and, much to his horror, his chest tightened with pain. Pain at a loss so great he would never recover. And the worst part? There was no one to blame but himself.

But there was one clear thing.

Emmaline had never been destined to be his young wife, running his little manor in the country. No. She'd been destined for this. She'd been destined to command a room and fill it with the greatest words ever written by one of the greatest souls to ever live.

And he knew, that despite it all, clearly destiny had struck. And her destiny had not been to be his but to be all of London's.

The realization hit him like the worst blow but he also felt a degree of relief. He had not ruined her life. On the contrary, his misdeed had freed her to live the life she was meant to lead.

Chapter 7

The hordes of admirers had long ago left the theater, leaving it an echoing, glittering cavern. The Hart brothers, too, had departed. The four exceptionally handsome men had been dutiful. They stood at the end of the performance, though they'd occupied different boxes. They'd bowed. They'd applauded.

As soon as the last line had been uttered, she'd allowed her vision to slip to the audience and she'd seen him. Alone, a daunting figure, Edward Hart had risen to his feet clapping, smiling even though it wasn't joy which caused his mouth to turn, she thought. But then he had inclined his head in the most distinct ways, honoring her, acknowledging her. It had felt as if the stage boards would open beneath her and swallow her up into the workings of the area in which so many things were stored away for a later date.

It had been shocking, that incline of the head. She had not expected such complete approval.

As expected, the crowds had poured out of the theater as she had taken off her costume and makeup. A few people had come to her dressing room bearing flowers. Overzealous gentlemen had brought a few jewels and promises but she had turned them away as quickly as they came.

She had no use for such false friends or lovers.

By the time she had finally donned her evening attire, the theater was all but empty. Only the stagehands and workers were still in the space, clearing things away, making things safe, and readying for tomorrow's performance.

No, the real performance was about to begin.

Much to her relief, nerves had not gotten the better of her and the play had been a rousing success. But now, her insides hummed just as fiercely as they did when she waited in the wings for her first entrance. In a few minutes' time, she would attend several parties thrown in her honor. The Duke of Huntsdown was hosting one of them. He'd promised firmly that all of the Hart brothers would be in attendance.

Since the duke had proclaimed *all*, there was little to do but assume Edward would be there will he or nil he. She had little doubt that particular Hart had slipped out quickly after the performance.

It was difficult to blame him. For even she knew that they were the subject of a great deal of gossip. But would he truly attend his brother's ball?

It had been tempting to refute her own invitation to the duke's ball, but such an action would be foolish. Worse, it would indicate that she was still deeply affected by what had transpired. The only reason she had invited them to the play was to show how little they bothered her and that she wished them to see firsthand the sort of person she was. . . Which was not a demure, suffering young woman.

James and Edward had made her life hell with their imperiousness. But she could not deny that they had lent their clear support to her endeavor now. Even if Edward had sat by himself looking like some sort of god of old, *judging* the mortals below him.

Yes, it was going to be a most interesting evening. She hoped to God she had the fortitude to survive it. Emmaline laughed at herself. Of course she did. She had already survived much.

Still at her looking glass, she took up her fan and reticule, slipping the golden strings about her white-gloved wrist.

Quickly, she picked up her coffee cup and took a last sip of the divine beverage.

She would not see her bed until dawn and so she had drunk the glorious, dark stuff while readying herself for the night.

Roderick had already left for his own celebrations, which had little to do with the stuffiness of the *ton*. Her young dresser had also left. She bit her lower lip and looked again to her mirror, attempting not to feel vain or doubtful. Her crimson, silk gown skimmed her cream-colored shoulders and teased the curves of her breasts. It was a suitable gown for a woman of her status. She wasn't a courtesan. But she wasn't a lady. The fabric was shot through with embroidered gold roses which laced the hem and traced along her sleeves, sleeves which were little more than scraps of chiffon.

The gown was entirely suitable to her. Nor was it particularly shocking, in truth. She wasn't wearing white that had been dampened to her bosoms and legs. She would not be showing the color of her nipples to the world, thank you very much.

Yet, it was undeniable she was that odd, colorful, exotic thing.

An eccentric.

A soft knock at her door startled her from her reverie.

"Come, Sandrine," she called, certain her dresser must have forgotten some detail. She took another fortifying sip of coffee as she waited.

The door opened slowly. "Alas, it is not she. I hardly think I could be considered a Sandrine. I'm certainly not French."

Edward!

She stared into her mirror, seeing his imposing figure lingering in the doorway. She felt frozen and, yet, entirely alive at the same time. Her entire body thrummed with it. Dear God, it was not fair that, after all this time, she could not be a goddess of ice.

As slowly as she could, she turned and looked back over her shoulder, pinning him with her gaze and then she stood, allowing her skirts to swish about her legs.

She took him in as he dwarfed her dressing room, demanding her errant wits to come to heel.

In the soft candle glow that mixed with the silver moonlight spilling in through the high circular window, he looked almost otherworldly.

"You shouldn't be here," she said at last, her voice puncturing the silence with a far more breathy tone than she had intended.

"I'll go if you wish it," he replied simply. His once dancing eyes were shadowed, his cheekbones twin slashes along his noble face. He was a man who had become familiar with darkness and knew little true laughter.

Her heart did the most traitorous spasm.

"I wish it," she declared, still drinking in the sight of him like a dying man witnessing a mirage, willing water to be on the horizon.

He lingered for a moment, his presence somehow filling up the entire dressing room, then he nodded. He turned, but just as he was about to stride back into the hall, he stopped and glanced back over his broad, black-clad shoulder.

"Thank you," he said, his voice a low rumble. Without adding any sort of explanation for his comment, he began to close the door behind him.

"For what?" she called before she could stop herself. She was compelled to understand why he would say such a thing.

"Your performance." A slow smile turned the corner of his lips with admiration. "I have never

seen anything like it.”

She stilled. He'd enjoyed her performance? That was what he had come to say? “Why are you here?”

His smile dimmed and his eyes sparked with intensity, with curiosity. “I could have asked you the same but a few hours ago.”

She bit her lower lip, cursing herself. “I did not intend it.”

His brows rose almost imperceptibly. “To wander over to my club?”

She nodded. Impulsively, she gestured towards him. “I had heard that you are very changed. I found I had to see for myself. I felt I would see best in your own club rather than in my theater.”

“And do you agree?” he asked softly, cocking his head to the side. “Now that you've seen me?”

She thought of the many times he had tried to see her in the past in Paris. Of all the times she had turned him away. She had never actually seen him then. She wouldn't allow herself. She'd been too worried she would be unable to turn him away if she witnessed him begging her.

She could not imagine this Edward begging. “Yes,” she said softly. “I should hardly know you.”

“Strangely, I know myself far better than I did when we were engaged,” he replied, almost to himself. He shook his head and snapped his gaze back to hers.

“You were magnificent,” he said.

“You approve?” she challenged, hating that she did feel pleased, and wondering if he could truly mean it.

“Oh, yes,” he said easily but then his brow furrowed. “Why wouldn't I?”

She laughed dryly and scoffed, “You shamed me once for even wishing to know you intimately, my future husband. Look at me now?” She raked her gloved hand before her crimson gown. “A fallen woman.”

He stared at her, his gaze slowly trailing down her frame, skimming the curves of her breasts, her hips, her thighs, then back to her face.

It burned, that look, but not with pain. She could scarce draw breath. For it had felt as if he had stroked her from head to toe in one sinful caress.

Edward's gaze darkened. “You did not fall, Emmaline.”

“I am still an angel then?” she mocked softly.

“You were never an angel,” he whispered, his voice rough. “Angels aren't real. And you didn't fall. You were pushed.”

“By you,” she replied, her throat tightening in the most maddening of ways.

He took a step forward, his massive body overtaking the room. How did he do that? For it had already seemed as if he were in every corner, but now, his presence was in every nook, every cranny, surrounding her and it was. . . Tempting. So very tempting.

Firelight flickered over his hair and his gaze danced with pain as he agreed, “By me.” He pressed his lips together, lips now that seemed to offer the promise of sin rather than duty. “I—”

“Yes,” she urged.

The muscles of his throat visibly worked as he struggled to make his confession. “I called you my angel, because I had created you in my mind.”

“I assure you I do exist outside of it.”

He smiled, a pained expression. “Oh, I am aware. But I never really knew you, Emmaline. That's why I made you an angel, a mythical thing. Not a woman of flesh and blood with thoughts and desires.

How could I know something that wasn't real?"

She swallowed. His words crashed down upon her. "It sounds as if you did not love me at all then."

"How could I? How could I love you in the way you deserved?" he asked unapologetically. "I didn't even know you. I never truly tried to know you. I *worshipped* you. That is very different than knowing."

Her heart cracked at his honesty. It was why he had rejected her so thoroughly. For he had put her on a pedestal and he'd thought she had fallen from it and cracked upon the ground like a porcelain angel. "I see."

"I do not expect your forgiveness. I don't deserve it."

"No," she said absently, still shocked by his frank words.

He hesitated. "But I did want you to know. . . I admire you."

She folded her hands, wishing that she did not have to feel like this. It was so much easier to condemn him and not see that he understood exactly what he had done. "Is this really necessary?"

He gazed down upon her. "Necessary? Yes."

"Why?" she queried, her voice almost a breath.

"Because you came back to London."

She lifted her chin. "I didn't come back for you."

"Didn't you?" he challenged gently. "In the end? Didn't you wish me to see how wonderful you have become? Without me? Despite me?" he said tightly.

"I think you should go," she bit out.

He nodded. But then he stopped. "What did you see in my club? What change?"

"Pain," she whispered. "I saw pain."

"Then you saw well," he said. "Emmaline," he declared and, for the first time the kind, gentle Edward she had known shone through. "I am happy for you."

Those words fell between them and she could make no reply for they were so far away from what she had expected that she could not make herself speak.

With that, he turned to leave. But as he stopped at the door, he glanced back again as if he could not force himself to go yet. "Please don't come to my club again," he requested, the timbre of his voice ragged. "I could not bear it. For, Emmaline. . . Though I am happy for you, though I know you are better off without me, I won't lie to you. Not ever again."

She swallowed, swaying forward by the lure of whatever it was he was about to say. "Why shouldn't I come?"

"Because I want you still," he said passionately. "And I always will."

Silent now, he slipped through the door.

She stared after him, her heart racing and her body tight. Tendrils of desire curled through her.

Damn the man. Damn him to hell. For despite it all, she wanted him, too.

She'd known it in the club, witnessing the beast within. For she had not been horrified. No, not at all. She had been compelled.

She was drawn to the beast he was now. Fool that it made her.

So, she would have to do as he bid. She would have to stay out of his club. . . And away from the beast.

Chapter 8

Edward still couldn't quite believe he'd seen her. Alone. In a dark room lit with candles and bathed with moonlight. She had shone like the moon herself under its rays. It had ripped his heart out seeing her, knowing she would never be his. That he could not claim her. That he had thrown her away so foolishly.

It had taken every bit of his will not to cross to her, to pull her against him, and take her mouth with his. . . As if that might solve all their past agonies. He was no fool. Passion solved nothing.

Still, the power of his body had very nearly taken over the reason of his brain seeing her sitting before her mirror in the soft light, her golden hair pooling about her.

She was like a balm for the soul that he could not have, that was just out of reach.

And now, he was stuck in a grand ballroom in his brother's London house, leveling withering stares at anyone who dared come within five feet of him.

He was a man of exceptional fortune now. And he came from a powerful family.

Mamas did periodically eye him. It was the way of things. Some ladies did think the risk worth it if they were desperate enough for their daughters to rise at any cost.

His cold look quickly sent them on their way.

He was not going to marry a sheep-brained miss. In fact, he would not ever marry. Of that, he was certain.

That also meant he was going to die celibate.

There was no one in the world for him except Emmaline. Despite the fact that he had mistaken his feelings for her so badly. He knew she was the only one for him. . . Because, well, no one drew him as she had done and he could not bear the coldness of. . . Fucking. For that was what it would be.

The hard word matched the hard deed. The idea of such joinings filling his nights? They sickened him. His soul was already dead enough. If he started such empty copulation, he'd lose what little feeling he had left and become nothing but a hollow man.

Some men could go from married woman to married woman blithely, not giving a whit that they cared neither for the lady's mind or heart.

Edward could not. His heart and soul had been claimed long ago. He could not give them again. Not when, despite his youthful mistakes, they would always belong to Emmaline.

It simply was not in him. That left him with blood sport and managing the rather violent people near his club to still his raging urges.

The sugary notes of the orchestra filled the room and, much to his horror, he heard the name Madame Trent called out.

It struck him as strange that she should be called Madame now. But no doubt, it was a nod to her profession. Actresses couldn't be misses after all.

As soon as she entered, the orchestra paused and began to play *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow* which, ironically, was a most popular tune in France.

The company sang the words then burst into applause.

It made him sick. The way these people had vilified her and now fawned over her. How quickly they turned. How quickly they forgave themselves for the unforgivable.

His class of people really was despicable. There was no escaping it.

Emmaline swept into the packed ballroom, her crimson, silk skirts trailing behind her. The color contrasted shockingly with her creamy skin which was quite exposed. Rubies lined her throat and decorated her curled hair.

She waved a silver fan slowly before her giving a mischievous smile.

Before she had even gone five feet across the floor, James had invited her to dance.

She curtsied, the bend of her legs and incline of her head perfection. With absolute ease, she extended her gloved hand and allowed him to lead her onto the floor.

James was a good dancer. There was no questioning it.

But it was Emmaline who shone as they traveled about the polished wood floor.

Much to his irritation, song after song, dance after dance, Emmaline was swept across the floor by powerful man after powerful man.

She danced without pause, welcoming each lord with a nod and a smile.

She'd conquered them all and they were all gleefully happy to be at her services. Where were any of them seven years ago? Where were their smiles?

The ladies seemed most intrigued by her, whispering behind their fans. Instead of the usual poison that was spewed, they whispered of her exceptional talent and what a fortune she possessed and surely she was lucky to have the Duke of Huntsdown as a patron.

Edward forced himself to move from his position ensconced at the back of the room.

He had sworn to himself that he would ask her to dance one dance strictly to put the gossips to rest.

For several of them had been eyeing him and then turning to Emmaline. Speculation was rife about him.

Yes, their former relationship would always be under consideration until it had been made absolutely clear that there was nothing and no ill will between them now.

So, he strode about the room as the allemande entered the last notes. Just as the music came to a pause, he positioned himself near Emmaline and her current partner, Lord Cartin.

Edward strode up to them.

She turned and spotted him.

Her cheeks paled.

Slowly, pointedly, he bowed and extended his hand.

As he did so, it seemed as if the entire room pivoted towards them.

“Would you do me the honor?” he asked.

His stomach tightened for she looked at him for a long moment. And then he realized, here it was. . . The moment she had no doubt been waiting years for. The very public moment in which she could reject him.

The tension in the room built as he stood, gloved hand out, waiting for her to break the silence with her assent or rejection.

One could have heard a gown rustle.

She was going to say no.

He deserved it. He willed her to do it. Perhaps then, they could move on. Perhaps then, they could leave the past in the past.

But then, she did the most remarkable thing.

Emmaline Trent lowered herself into the most seductively beautiful curtsy he had ever seen. Neck

curved, breasts on displays, legs bent but unshaking. And then she lifted her gaze to his and stood very slowly. "With pleasure, my lord."

As she slipped her gloved hand into his, the shock of sensation that traveled through him was terrifying.

The strains of a waltz sifted through the air, enfolding them in its rapturous notes, and there was nothing to do but slip his other hand about her waist and do as he'd longed to do. He pulled her to him. And the room suddenly disappeared. He could see no one and nothing but Emmaline and he knew he was on dangerous ground, indeed.

Chapter 9

They spoke not a word as he circled her about the room, his arm wrapped about her waist. Emmaline could see nothing but Edward. His presence swallowed her up. The guests had vanished. The other dancers were gone. The towering, gold-trimmed walls and ceilings were but a distant memory.

All she could see was his tortured, beautiful visage before her.

He towered over her and she had to tilt her head back to keep his gaze. But she could not break it. Some strange spell had forced her to meet his gaze and now, now it held her.

Heat and hunger raced through her and she fairly gasped at it. Once, she had desired him. She'd wished to climb into his bed, knowing he would be her husband.

But that long-ago emotion paled to what he invoked in her now. She did not understand it. Once, he'd caused her so much pain. Now, he was all but a stranger. Yet, her soul, her heart seemed to refuse to believe that. In fact, with every moment she was with him, it felt as if her body was calling out to another who was more recognized by it than anyone ever had been.

'Twas as if he was her harbor. . . Which was madness for it had been he who had cast her into the storm.

Still, the feel of his hand against her back sent the most shocking of sensations along her limbs. Her body urged her to move forward, to press into his embrace. All the while, her mind rebelled against those feelings. But even so, her mind seemed encompassed with curiosity for who he had become.

He did not try to fill up the silence with idle prattle. Oh, no. He but looked upon her. It was something that set her in a state of bewildering anticipation.

"You did not reject me," he said at last.

She could feel the rumble of his voice as if it were a real touch upon her body. "It was my plan."

He smiled then. "I thought as much. Why didn't you?"

"Your brother has gone to a great deal of trouble," she teased.

"No, Emmaline," he replied factually. "It's because you're not an utter ass. Not like me."

She laughed then, shocked. "I suppose you're right. I've dreamt of it, you know. Many nights."

"Of me?" he asked disbelievingly.

"Oh, yes," she confirmed. "I've laid in my bed, sleep but a distant, taunting hope, imagining the look on your face when I cut you dead. It kept me warm on many cold nights, that thought."

His lips twitched. "I am lucky you did not wish to do me worse."

"Oh, I did," she assured him as her toes skimmed the floor under his excellent leading skill. "After I became accustomed to the shock."

His eyes narrowed slightly in confusion. "The shock of—"

"Your betrayal," she said without mercy.

He did not flinch or deny it. He took her comment with the grace with which it was required. Then he asked, "Shall we pretend to the world that no such thing occurred?"

"It seems that they have all veritably forgotten it, in any case."

"The devil they have," he protested. "Why do you think the entire room is watching us dance?"

"Are they?" she asked, not bothering to look at the *ton* surrounding them. She cared not a fig for

them in any case. They were all sycophants. "I hadn't noticed."

He arched a brow.

"I do not know if I can pretend with you, Edward," she said at last. "The idea is quite tiring."

"Then after this dance, we shall part ways?"

The emotions inside her swelled, contesting what her mind knew was best. Still, she spoke. "It's for the best."

He nodded. "For the best."

"Why haven't you married?" she suddenly asked.

"Such a thing is an impossibility," he declared as if it were obvious.

Perhaps it was. So, she queried, "Doing penance, are you?" Then she smiled gently. "I free you of your sins. You must try to find some happiness now."

He shook his head. "I'll never marry, Emmaline."

"Never is a dangerous word," she countered.

"I had my chance." He lowered his head towards hers ever so slightly. "I threw it away."

"You don't believe in second chances?" she asked.

His eyes grew dark and hooded. "Do you?"

She licked her lips, realizing the power of the question she was asking. Could she ever give him a second chance?

Then he looked abruptly away. "Of course not. You made that clear in Paris."

"Yes, I did," she agreed, her pulse racing at the madness of this conversation.

"And you, will you marry?" he asked with forced cheer.

She shook her head. "I'd never give my life into the hands of a man again."

"Very wise," he agreed. "We're deeply untrustworthy. So, you have forsaken love then? I should hate myself forever for doing that to you."

She peered up at him. "Love? I believe in love, Edward."

"You do?" he asked, stunned.

"Oh, yes," she said firmly. "I always will."

And then the music came to a halt. "But I see that you don't," she said sadly. That sadness penetrated her very bones as she studied him. "And I see now, that in the end, it is you who is ruined. I find I am sorry for it."

He held her in his embrace for one lingering moment then his face transformed into a hard mask. "Don't feel sorry for me, Emmaline."

She gazed up into his eyes, amazed at the depth of feeling she saw in his dark gaze.

"I wish you well," he said quickly before he bowed abruptly then turned away.

As soon as he had walked away, she felt the whisper slither about the room. The gossip was beginning. For he had left her on the dance floor quite quickly. Some would assume it had been coldness and not pain that had driven him to do it.

A curse teased her lips.

Now, how the devil had that happened?

It seemed she and Edward were destined to turn the gossip mill forever.

And if they were, what was the point of resisting?



“What the devil was that?” James growled, following Edward to the foyer of the opulent ducal townhome.

Edward could not stop his determined stride. He felt as if a demon had seized him.

James grabbed his arm, forcing him to halt. His older brother held him now, a hand gripping each arm. “Out with it, Edward. What is amiss?”

There was no fury or derision on James’ strong face, only regret and sympathy.

It was almost worse than if James had looked furious.

But he knew why his brother wasn’t tossing him out or ranting at him as their father would have done. James was a good man and he, too, had been complicit in all this.

“She feels sorry for me,” Edward bit out. “Christ. I ruined her and she feels sorry for *me*. If ever I hoped I wasn’t a complete and utter devil, I hoped in vain. She may not be an angel but she’s still too damned good for me.”

James sighed. “I won’t argue Emmaline’s estimable worth. But do you understand you just caused a good deal of conversation by your actions?”

Edward shook his head. “Whatever are you saying? The music stopped. I just—”

“Left her alone on the dance floor,” James pointed out, lowering his hands. “The woman you left at the altar.”

Edward closed his eyes and wiped a hand over his face. “I must give up hope of intelligence, too.”

James smiled wryly. “It seems so.”

Edward looked about, at a loss. If he went back into the ball and attempted an apology, he would only cause more gossip. Besides, she did not wish to see him again.

“Can you make my apologies?” Edward asked roughly, desperately wishing to make his escape. “I am not fit for Polite Society this night.”

“I will do my best,” James soothed. He looked back to the ball, clearly contemplating his guests. “Who knows how she will take it. Emmaline is a very different woman now.”

Edward stilled, his heart doing the most damnable of painful palpitations. “She’s marvelous.”

James nodded. “Better than any of us.”

Edward smiled bitterly. “I still won’t have her feeling sorry for me.”

James’ face transformed, tensing with frustration. “Then do something about it. Stop acting like a ___”

“James,” Edward broke in. “I appreciate your concern, but I think I must ask you to cease your interference in this matter.”

James halted, his lips parting to argue further as he was wont to do, but then he groaned. “It is a lesson I still struggle with, interfering.”

“You’re a duke and my brother,” Edward conceded. This time he placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder, wishing to assure James that he bore him no ill will. “It would be shocking if you didn’t try.”

James smiled tentatively or as tentatively as a duke was able. “I’m glad you at least don’t loathe me for it.”

“I never could,” Edward assured him. “You’re my brother and you have supported me at my worst. Now, let it be. The wound between Emmaline and me? I doubt it shall ever heal. Like any old injury, we shall feel it whenever the weather turns.”

James did not laugh at Edward's attempt at humor. Instead, he sighed. "I suppose I should be pleased at an outcome as good as the one we have."

Edward laughed dryly. "Things could have been much worse."

"Yes," James acknowledged. "Thank goodness she is a stubborn one. She has done very well for herself."

Edward's lips curved in a wry smile. "She is, isn't she? I think. . . I think she was always too good for me. And in the end, I'm damned glad she's shuck of me."

"Edward—"

He whipped his hand from his brother's arm and held it up in protest. "It's the truth, James. And that's all there is to it."

Turning from his brother and heading out the double doors and onto the exclusive street, he strode out into the dark night, his demons stirring. The fight hadn't been enough this night. Right now, he was going to have to go a lot further to drive the darkness out of his heart and head.

But how did he begin?

Chapter 10

To prove she had been undaunted by Edward's sudden exit, which she knew had not been meant to be taken so ill, Emmaline had danced every dance and drank champagne until dawn. The sound of her laughter had filled the room and she had chatted and cided on dit after on dit until her mind felt like a sponge. Her feet ached, but it was the ache of the vindicated.

Perhaps, the gossips would be speaking of her and Edward again, but they would also be speaking of her success and her talent. Of that, she was certain.

Now, having gotten out of her luxurious bed at a remarkably early hour given her role in society, she stood outside The Healing Home, her reticule in hand. She sucked in a fortifying breath.

It was going to be an exceptionally busy day.

She would decide on the next play that would follow the closing of *Much Ado About Nothing*, interview potential actors and actress, and engage a new builder of sets. Still, she was determined to provide a bit of meaningful help in a city that often destroyed the good.

The blue-painted door opened and a mob-capped matron stood in the frame. "Good morning. . ."

"Mrs. Trent," Emmaline supplied brightly. "I have an appointment."

It was so odd calling herself Missus but it was a long-standing tradition. Women who went upon the boards took the title of Missus whether married or not.

"Ah, yes," the older lady said kindly. "I'm Mrs. Darby and we are expecting you."

Mrs. Darby stepped back, her dark, cotton skirts whisking the plain but freshly kept floor.

As Emmaline entered, she took in the cheerily-painted, cream-colored hall, decorated with paintings of various vivid flowers.

Sunlight spilled through a window at the end of the long corridor and a bright yellow runner was underfoot.

There was nothing grim about this place, not as one might expect a place for fallen women to be.

In Emmaline's experience, when people did the good deed of helping those in need, they usually also felt the need to ensure repentance among their charges. Repentance usually came with austere, gray walls and quotes from a vengeful God hanging about. Meals consisted of thin gruel and porridge. Few kind words were uttered, but she had heard the opposite transpired here.

"Is the rest of the home like this?" she asked as they made their way along the hall.

Mrs. Darby smiled which did the most remarkable thing. Despite the lady's years, which seemed to be at near sixty, she had the deepest of dimples in her soft cheeks. Her blue eyes shone wisdom, understanding, and strength.

Really, what with her soft, curling, silver hair under her cap, those twinkling eyes, and smile, Emmaline found herself wishing she could sit down to tea with this lady and pour her heart out.

How odd. She was not usually given to such things. But what she immediately understood was that Mrs. Darby had the sort of kind face which induced confidences and she appeared sufficiently motherly enough that one could cry upon her shoulder, be given a loving pat, and then a cuppa after. She also looked as if she wouldn't take any nonsense and could quickly assist in the sorting out of troubles.

This establishment was already a far cry from some of the places she had seen in Paris and, no doubt, from several of the places here in London.

Mrs. Darby waved her down the hall. "Come and see."

They quickly ascended the stairs to the first floor. They turned down a narrow but cheery corridor only to stop at the first door. Mrs. Darby gestured for her to look.

Emmaline peered into the room through the open door.

Several beds made with pressed white linen lined the walls. The room was full of light pouring in through the generous windows and, once again, there were flowers everywhere. Paintings of cardinals, bluebirds, and sparrows filled the prints that were hung above each bed.

The sight touched her.

It was a room meant for hope.

"Where do the babies go when they are born?" Emmaline asked.

Mrs. Darby blinked. "Go?"

Emmaline nodded, her eyes stinging at the very idea of infants being separated from their mothers. But so many mothers were not able to keep them given there was not societal support for unwed mothers. "Are they taken and sent to a nursery?"

Mrs. Darby gave her an odd look. "They stay with their mothers."

"They do?" Emmaline all but gasped.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Darby said proudly. "We find it essential that the babies be in the vicinity of their mothers for as long as possible. We have several members of our staff to assist them during the mothers' recovery from birth. And anyone who comes here is guaranteed employment for life."

Emmaline gaped at her, certain she had misunderstood. "I beg your pardon?"

"Our patron has a series of homes in the country where the ladies can go and work," Mrs. Darby explained proudly. "Usually making knit goods or other artisanal objects. There is child care there so there is never any fear for the babies."

Emmaline could scarcely believe it. She had never heard of such a scheme. It was a brilliant one and so very beneficial to so many. "My goodness. . . Your patron is very. . ."

"Kind," Mrs. Darby said. "He is determined that the ladies and their children are treated with respect and good feelings."

"I see." Emmaline felt her heart swell with hope. So often, she felt dismay at society's condemnation of the vulnerable. But whoever had opened this home was quite the champion. "I should, indeed, like to make a donation myself and perhaps seek advice in the opening of another series of establishments that are similar."

"That is very noble, Mrs. Trent." Mrs. Darby clasped her hands before her and all but bounced on her heels with dignified pleasure. "It is wonderful that someone of your means and talent should give it such thought."

Talent. Was Mrs. Darby serious?

"You approve of my acting?" she queried with some suspicion.

Mrs. Darby's cheeks pinkened and she clapped her hands. "I adore the theater."

"Do you?" Emmaline asked, astonished.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Darby said. She leaned forward conspiratorially and added with a grin, "We read Shakespeare at least once a week and I, if I do so say myself, do a very good job with the voices."

"I'm sure you do," Emmaline said without teasing, for it was clear this woman had a love for life and the people in her care. Such humanity would always be in affinity with the Bard.

Mrs. Darby's eyes lit up. "Perhaps one evening you could come and give a recitation to the young ladies. . . Though you probably do not have time—"

"I would like that very much," Emmaline happily volunteered but then she paused, her insides twisting with a surprising dose of nerves. Not everyone admired her profession or the way she had come to it. Some might think her a poor influence. "Your patron would allow it? He would allow me to be near the ladies here?"

"Why would he not?" Mrs. Darby asked sincerely.

"Well. . ." Emmaline swallowed, always hating to have to explain her situation to those who might not understand. Then again, Mrs. Darby had, no doubt, heard things that would shake even her. "You see, Mrs. Darby, some might suggest that I am not the best influence. My money, of course, is valuable but—"

"I think you will find our patron is not a hypocrite," Mrs. Darby suddenly said, her face now serious and rather motherly. "You are capable of taking care of yourself and seem to be living quite a good life."

"Who *is* your patron if I may ask?"

Mrs. Darby's gaze grew guarded.

"Why do you hesitate?" Emmaline asked. "Could it possibly be a secret?" Who would wish to hide some good work? One would have thought that they would proclaim it far and wide so that others might emulate them. For clearly, whoever it was, was a person of means. Possibly even an aristocrat since they had properties in the country.

"Not exactly," Mrs. Darby hedged. "But he does not wish for his identity to be bandied about."

"Well, I should like to meet him and seek his advice." Emmaline gave Mrs. Darby an imploring glance. "Could you arrange it?"

"I certainly can try," she replied, though she did not look overly hopeful. "At the very least, I can let him know you very much wish to meet."

"That would be most acceptable," Emmaline replied gratefully. "Now, may I see the rest of the establishment?"

Mrs. Darby nodded, contented that they had settled the slightly difficult matter. She was clearly eager to show Emmaline the rest of the home she ran so well.

As they trailed through the rooms, Mrs. Darby explained how everything took place and was taken care of. Emmaline wondered how she had managed to be so lucky. She had never found herself in such a position to need such a place like those that came to this particular refuge. Those who came here were lucky compared to the others with no place to harbor or were forced into places which shamed them and took their infants. What had made her so very different when she had been shamed?

Her father and his fortune that she had grown.

It was as simple as that.

If it had not been for her father, she'd have had little recourse but whoredom. A bastard child inevitably would have resulted, and then she'd have been on the street.

So it was that she was determined to put a good portion of her resources to the care of women and their children. Of all walks of life, fallen women, seamstresses, servants, women with little help especially when they had children.

As it was, it was monstrous the way mothers and babies were put into workhouses and the state of orphanages was not to be discussed.

No. She did not care if she spent hundreds of thousands of pounds, she would do all she could to help people. It was possible, she believed, to be both grand and good. And she was most excited to meet the person who had made this place possible, and apparently several other places, too.

Would the patron sneer at her? An actress? A notorious figure? Mrs. Darby seemed to think not. But sometimes, it was hard to tell.

Still, she'd bear it. For such a man deserved her respect even if he might be reticent in giving it to her.

After spending another hour in the mothers' home and having dinner with the young women, she at last stepped out onto the pavement, feeling a touch of hope.

The world could be a brutal place. But sometimes, one could see the light. She smiled and headed for her coach. Quickly, she climbed up and as the sumptuous vehicle rolled away, her stomach dropped as she caught sight of *him*.

Edward Hart strode down the crowded street, a god amongst men, his greatcoat flying behind him, his hat cocked to the side, his black-gloved hands flexing.

He looked utterly at home amidst the East End. As if he had never worn a fawn-colored coat or danced the minuet. As if he had not been raised in silk-decorated rooms. No, from the way he walked through the throng of people, he looked like a man who had pulled himself up from the gutter.

It was there in the hard line of his jaw, the stony glance of his gaze and the squared jaunt of his shoulders.

Was she never to be free of him?

She'd come back to London, determined to prove she was not affected anymore by what the Hart brothers had done. But from the way her heart leapt into her throat at the sight of him, she knew herself to be a fool.

Edward Hart would always make her heart pound with fury. . . And with desire.

Just as she was about to whip her glance away, she spotted him run up the steps to the mothers' home. The door opened and he slipped in as quickly as a thief.

Her hands curled into fists on her lap.

What the devil was he doing there? A horrifying but possible thought ricocheted through her mind. Was he the father of one of the babies?

The thought surged through her and she felt sick.

Surely not. Edward had been so adamantly good. . . Until he'd proved he was not. She'd been told by multiple sources that prostitution of any kind was not allowed at his club. . . But there were whispers of a secret room. A pleasure room. Could a child have been the result of an assignation there? Did Edward have a lover? Lovers? He certainly had the virility for it. But it was nigh impossible for her to imagine Edward being such a notorious rakehell. Some claimed he was celibate. . . But could it be true? From her experience, most men, especially powerful men, did not go long without the company of a woman. So many of his class did not think twice about laying with a woman.

Once, Edward had been so determined to maintain her innocence. But so much had changed since then. My God, she had changed more than she ever could have imagined. What was the nature of his soul now? She wanted to believe it was still, at the essence, good. But the sort of people he interacted with at present. . .

She nearly choked.

Had he cast aside his morals, too, when he'd descended into darkness?

She blinked and looked away. She would not consider it. Surely not. But then again, she thought of the beast she'd seen in the boxing ring.

There was really only one way to find out what he was doing at the home. And that was to ask him. Gossip was beneath her and she wasn't going to torment herself with hours and hours of fruitless contemplation. Though she loathed herself for it, she found she very much needed to know what had driven him to enter the establishment.

For surely, she would not have to cast aside the last of her goodwill towards him.

Then to her utter horror, she realized that she still had hope in Edward. Hoped he was a good man despite what he had done to her. She hoped he cared about people as she did. Though no doubt it made her a fool, she whispered a prayer that he had not lost himself entirely the day he had cast her out.

She winced, digging her fingertips deeper into her gloved palms.

For if he had. . . She felt that the last of her innocence would finally slip away.

Chapter 11

Days of staring across at that damned theater was proving to be the undoing of Edward's sanity. He'd always loved his office. Its windows looked out onto the thousands of people who made up London's colorful city. If he opened the window, the din of the harsh East End accent and dozens of different languages would drift to him, mixed with the sounds of carts, horses, and street musicians.

Together, they formed a great orchestra that filled him with awe at his city. London was made great by the many voices that came from around the world.

Now, he could look no further or see no further than that damned building. A beautiful building true, but *her* building.

The run of *Much Ado About Nothing* had almost another week. Then the theater would launch a new play.

It seemed his Emmaline believed in quick turnarounds.

He could not deny her intelligence for she understood that the best way to keep people captivated was to always be changing the entertainment.

His Emmaline.

Even after all this time, his brain insisted on using such a phrase. It was absurd and painful. It was also false in every tangible way.

And he was going to have to see her again soon. . . Aside from the times he had witnessed her sweeping up to the stage door.

It was hell, catching glimpses of her.

In fact, he found himself wishing to go back to the days in which he could not see her at all. They had been damned painful, but he'd become accustomed to the gaping agony of her absence.

This? This was like being stabbed over and over again then doused with salt.

It was sheer torture seeing her, knowing that they would never stand on easy ground again.

Then again, he shouldn't even wish a thing. He wasn't worthy of it. He never would be. Every day was a struggle to look at himself in the mirror.

A thunderous knock on his office door penetrated his reverie.

"Come," he called, still facing the window, still faced with the dancing images of the past and the way she'd once smiled upon him.

"Mrs. Trent," his secretary announced as the sound of rather determined feet stepped into his office.

Slowly, he turned towards the sprightly noise, disbelieving his ears. Surely, she would not seek him out?

Mr. Johnston, his man of business, blinked nervously and his hands clutched a bound ledger tightly. "I am sorry, my lord, but the lady was most determined—"

Edward raised a hand. "It's quite fine. This lady will always have claim to my time."

Mr. Johnston nodded his russet hair-covered head with relief and made his hasty exit.

The door snicked shut, and Edward finally dared to let himself fully look upon Emmaline in the light of day.

Her sapphire gaze was vibrant, her cheeks pink, her lips parted ever so slightly, appearing slightly out of breath.

The forest green bonnet perched on her head only served to lighten her blond hair. A gown of a similar color skimmed her body, the thin muslin dancing over her curves.

God, she was beautiful. And fiery. What the devil had brought her to him in such dudgeon?

“Do sit,” he said calmly, gesturing to the chair before his large desk.

Her hands tightened on her reticule. “I cannot.”

Immediately, he tensed, for she seemed upset. “Is something amiss?”

“I’m not certain,” she confessed. “In truth, it is mad that I am here at all.”

He studied her carefully, surprised by her agitation. She had been so assured in their previous meetings as of late. “I’m glad you felt you could seek me out.”

“You won’t be,” she warned. “Not in a few moments.”

Edward stepped away from the window, ready to listen to her carefully. “Emmaline, you startle me.”

“I find I simply must ask.” The red of her cheeks deepened. “I hope you will forgive my rudeness.”

He gave her an assuring smile, hoping she would simply be out with it. “The only way to find out is to be out with it.”

Her eyes widened and her lips worked before she finally began, “Do you . . . Have you . . .”

He angled his head to the side, feeling some relief. At last, she had come to rail at him for his behavior.

“How terrible can it be?” he teased lightly. “Come, now. You can say nothing worse of me than I have thought of myself.”

“Do you have a bastard child at The Healing Home in the East End?” she blurted.

The question lacked judgment or condemnation. It was a simple inquiry, though it seemed to upset her, the need to ask.

The air slipped out of his lungs and he stared at her, barely comprehending the question.

“You must think very little of me,” he whispered, shocked that he could still ache so deeply at how he had failed to keep her good opinion in any way.

Her lips whitened. “That is not an answer,” she returned.

“I cannot blame you for your ill opinion of me. Only I am to blame for that. But I wish to be absolutely clear. As I understand it, you believe I have hidden a lover away in a charity home? And my child?”

The words ripped out of his throat, though his voice was astonishingly quiet.

“I-I don’t know what to think,” she rushed as she twirled her fingers about the string of her reticule repetitively. “Only, I saw you go in and I—”

He swallowed as he stared at her. God, had he ever hoped that she might think well of him again? If he had, that hope died in that moment. She thought him capable of the worst behavior. Still, once again, there was no one to blame but himself.

How she must hate him.

He strode to the carved mahogany table at the end of the room. It was covered in crystal decanters and snifters. Quickly, quietly, he poured out two glasses, filling them with far more than he usually would.

Bracing himself, he turned and strode back to her. “Sit,” he said roughly.

She began to take a step back. “I—”

“If you wish my answer, you’ll sit and you’ll drink a brandy with me,” he said, feeling as if the room were almost spinning. For this was a conversation that had never entered his wildest imaginings. “After that, you never have to see me again.”

She hesitated then nodded.

He gestured to one of the leather chairs before his desk.

Slowly, she sank into the green leather surface.

He sat across from her, their knees but a few inches apart.

He passed her the brandy and, for the briefest moment, their fingertips touched.

Despite her gloves, his stomach tightened at the caress which once would have been intimate but now just emphasized how very far apart they had become.

Lifting his own crystal snifter, he said, “To the truth, no matter how much it pains one.”

Her eyes glimmered with an unknowable emotion but she matched his salute. “To the truth,” she said.

“I was not visiting a lover,” he said flatly. “Or a child.”

“No?” she asked, her throat visibly tightening. The tension running through her was visible in the way she sat on the edge of her chair.

“No,” he said. He stared at her for a long moment. He rarely told anyone what he was about to tell her. No one really. Except for the necessary people. But. . . “As a matter of fact, this afternoon, I was to write a card for you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Edward’s breathing slowed and he said simply, “Mrs. Darby said you wished to meet me.”

“I already know you,” she protested. “Why would I ask such a thing and of her. It’s. . .”

Dawning comprehension filled her gaze. “My God,” she whispered. “I’ve done you a great wrong, haven’t I?”

“To think an aristocratic owner of a gambling club got a bastard and pawned it off on a charity?” He gave her a bitter smile. “It’s not such a very shocking conclusion.”

“Oh, Edward,” she gasped, pressing a gloved hand to her cheek. “How did we come to this?”

“Quite simply really.” He lifted his snifter and took a deep drink before he explained. “I believed the worst of you when it was not true. Why would you not believe the worst of me? I’m glad it doesn’t happen to be true in my case. . . As it was not in yours.”

Edward shrugged, trying to hide the way all this was affecting him. “Even so, even if it had been true, such a thing would not have ruined me. Not as I ruined you. Not as my family ruined you.”

She nibbled her perfect, rose-colored lips. To her credit, she did not look away. “Do you think. . . Do you think after all this time, we might manage to be pleasant to each other?”

Emmaline absently smoothed a hand down the front of her perfectly-pressed gown. “I do not like the idea of living out the rest of my days avoiding you and thinking ill all the time of you. It is. . . Very tiring.”

The air around him seemed to thicken. He could hardly fathom her question. Surely, he could not have heard correctly. “You hate me,” he said softly.

Her brow furrowed, a sheen brightening her eyes before she said tightly, “I have never hated you.”

“You acted as though you did,” he pointed out and then he added, “with reason, of course.”

“I was very hurt and I was disappointed. I thought you loved me.” She smiled sadly. “I thought I

loved you. But I find I am truly tired of all this animosity between us.”

Relief rushed through him. “I’m glad. Do you think we could begin again?”

She sat a little straighter. “Do you wish to?”

“Yes,” he said so quickly, he shocked even himself.

She swallowed the rest of her brandy, placed her glass down then extended her hand. “How do you do? I’m Emmaline Trent.”

He blinked.

“You said you never really knew me,” she explained, her hand still outstretched. “I’m offering you the chance to know me.”

Slowly, oh so slowly, he reached out and took her hand in his. “A pleasure, Emmaline Trent. Edward Hart at your service.”

“There,” she said. “We’ve begun again.”

“So we have.” He knew he should let go of her hand immediately. Instead, he lingered, her touch binding.

She locked gazes with him and, instead of a mere friendly gaze between them, a spark ignited. A blaze lit. Years of separation and distance evaporated and suddenly they were two souls, together, their fingers touching.

God, he wanted to kiss her. To take her mouth in a savage kiss as he’d never dared to do before. The old Edward thought Emmaline should be protected from such a thing. Now? He knew life was far too unpredictable to deny one’s self such a thing.

“Edward,” she whispered. “You’re still holding my hand.”

“So it seems,” he agreed. He should pull his hand back. They’d just taken the path of possible friendship. Throwing such a thing away seemed the height of foolishness but he wasn’t the staid, well-mannered boy of the past. Not now.

“I admire you,” he said. “You are an independent woman.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. “And you an independent man now.”

He laughed, a low rumble. “We are both independent.”

She smiled slowly. “It seems that we have made ourselves anew. Both of us are Phoenixes in our way.”

“I’d like to kiss you,” he said softly before he could stop himself. “It is a mad thing to say, but it is the truth. And I would like us to always be truthful now.”

She stilled, a single blond brow arching. “Ah, but sir, I have just met you.”

He groaned. “How forward of me.”

Her lips curved in a tentative smile. “We cannot pretend the past did not happen. I will not lie. I still find you decidedly handsome. More so now, actually.”

More so? That flamed his hope in a way he’d never dared experience. But what hope was that? That they would fall in love? He shook the foolish thought away. She’d never love him.

“Thank you for your honesty, Edward. If I am ever in need of a lover, I know where to find you.” She cocked her head towards the window. “Just across the street.”

With that, she stood and walked to the door. She stopped then glanced back over her shoulder. “You really do shock me, Edward. I never imagined such words crossing your lips.”

He leaned back in his chair. He should be disappointed that she had not said yes to his comment. But how could he be? They were conversing again. “I do many things that the old Edward would not.”

She nodded. "Do let me know when we can meet again. . . To discuss the charities I wish to establish and how I might help yours."

Then, Emmaline swept out of the room, head high.

He stared at the vacant doorway, stunned.

She wished to see him again.

Gone was the edict from the ball that they should not encounter each other. Today, he had earned a place in her life again and he did not know what to make of it.

A flicker of an emotion he could barely recollect fanned within him.

He wanted her. Damnation, he did. Neither of them were innocents anymore. Neither of them was dancing upon society's whim.

Perhaps. . . Perhaps, he could still pursue her with the passion she'd always wished from him that in the past he'd kept from her.

Was it worth the risk? For, Emmaline? He stood and strode to the window.

He looked down onto the crowd and spotted her making her way easily to her theater. She moved with such grace, such confidence as if nothing could shake her now.

She had always been calm, unshakable even. She still was. God, how he admired her. How he wanted her. And that wanting her made him curse himself anew.

For though they had begun again, he still could not stop cursing himself for losing her.

But had he? Entirely? She had come back into his life and he would be a fool now if he did nothing to keep her in it, to make her more than someone he saw in passing.

He considered again. Would it be worth it to risk pursuing her? To be close to her? For Emmaline, a voice inside him roared, anything was worth it. Anything at all.

Chapter 12

The Duke of Clyde was not a gambling man. He was, however, a fighting one. Over the last months, Edward had come to appreciate the scarred peer who had come down from his Scottish estates to be near his sister and make friends with Edward's brothers.

It was rather remarkable, for Clyde liked few people, spent little time in company, and preferred the tavern to the salon.

So it was that Edward sat now in the Maiden's Legs drinking gin waiting for a duke.

The cacophony of dockside workers and East End people whose very existence was a daily battle surrounded him. He, too, had come to prefer it in many ways to the gilded halls of his youth.

Everyone was so bloody bored in the *ton*. They all desperately sought something, anything to do. Any amusement, such as the gambling away of thousands and thousands of pounds. Amounts which could have supported the occupants of this entire room for all their lives in relative comfort. At least, none of them would have been cold or hungry.

But that was not the way of the world. Not now. He wondered if that would ever change.

Edward lifted his glass of gin and peered through the smoky room. Clyde had yet to turn up and he was already several ounces of gin in.

He hadn't seen Emmaline for over two weeks. . . Except for when he'd occupied his box. And even that would end soon, for her show was coming to a close.

For all that she had claimed she wished to see him again, she had made no attempt and not given enthusiastic response to his suggestion that they take coffee together. In fact, she had written rather tersely that the details of moving to London and her theater were keeping her particularly preoccupied.

Of course they were. It was completely understandable and, yet, he had thought something had changed in their last meeting. That there had been an agreement that they would, at the very least, be friends.

No doubt, she had just been being kind. She didn't wish to have to spar with him in public or face the stares of society waiting to see if they would explode at each other over the past.

He slipped his forefinger over the rim of his glass, then tapped it lightly to the tune played by a ragged fiddler in the corner of the room.

He nodded to Jenny to take the musician a drink.

The barmaid glanced at him over the crowd and gave a quick smile, her rouged lips parting to reveal slightly yellow but good teeth.

Edward sighed, a feeling he generally tried to avoid drifting over him. He preferred to keep himself busy, occupied, so he would never have to be too still with the pain that stewed inside him over the man he was.

"Oi, Rob! Have you seen that actress over from old Paris?"

Edward stilled.

"The one what wears next to nuffing, Henry?" Rob said behind him.

"Oh, aye," Henry slurred. "That's the one."

"Me cousin went in for one of the cheap seats and he said, she did have legs what would give a man a cock as hard as a stone."

“She’d know what to do with such a hard cock, I warrant.” Henry laughed before he tossed the contents of his tankard back.

“You think I should offer her mine?” Rob asked, grinning like a fool. “I reckon she’s never seen one so big. You think she’d swoon?”

“She’d choke on mine, old lad,” Henry tsked. “But that’s what actresses are for.”

Edward’s fingers curled around his glass and he struggled to slow his breathing lest he murder the men who had never been raised to see the world above the gutter. It was then he realized that another group of men had slipped into the bar, men just like him. . . Well, not just like him, but lords. Lords who liked to slum.

The entire room stared at them for a moment.

But one of them, a dark-haired fellow stopped at the table discussing Emmaline.

Edward tensed.

He leaned over, braced both his hands on the table, and declared, “Lads, she loves a good cock. Of that, I can assure you. And I’m sure she could handle two at once.”

Edward turned a little more to see the lord clearly and he nearly cracked the glass in his hand. He knew that man. It was one of the men who’d helped to ruin his and Emmaline’s lives. His name was Lord Conrade.

The room, despite being a throng of men and women, drinking, laughing, and doing their best to forget the cares that made their lives a never-ending toil, quieted. His heartbeat slowed, his vision sharpened.

Rage filled him.

Emmaline might be an actress, a public figure, and the source of gossip. . . As was he. . . But he could not turn from this particular lord making such commentary. Not from such filth. Not from a man who thought nothing of destroying the lives of innocents with no remorse.

Slowly, Edward stood and faced Lord Conrade. “Would you care to repeat that sentiment?”

The dark-haired lord caught sight of him and, for an instant, he flinched, but then he grinned, bearing a wolfish smile. From the top of his immaculately groomed hair to the tips of his polished Hessians, the man was a perfect dandy. . . And a devil to boot.

“Ah!” Lord Conrade said, his eyes narrowing. “Here’s a man who knows what a whore the actress is. Lord Edward, how good to see you.”

Edward curled his hands into fists. “Rescind your statement,” he gritted.

“How can I?” mocked Lord Conrade, winking at the drunken men. “I’ve known the wench myself.”

It was a lie. A refuted lie. Refuted by everyone involved except, apparently, this bastard that the Hart family had been certain had gone off to the Continent never to return.

“I believe my brother and I made it clear that your claims are not to be believed,” Edward warned. He clung to reason. Conrade might still go. He might quiet. But another part of Edward, a deeper part, longed to crack Conrade’s teeth in.

The lord forced a laugh. “Fools the both of you, taken in by a bit of silk skirt. She’s a comer, Lord Edward. Apparently, she still has you in her thrall.”

Edward sucked in a harsh breath and, before he could think another thought, he hauled back his fist and punched the bastard in the face.

Lord Conrade’s head shot backwards and blood splattered across the two rough men he’d been

exchanging such filth with. Conrade stumbled against a table and crashed into a group of men.

Henry and Rob darted up from their table, clearly furious that there bit of sport was being interfered with. "Want a fight toff?" one demanded.

Edward glared, his stance loose but ready.

He was about to get pounded into the floor, alone as he was, but he was going to make them pay for it.

He grinned, a wild, furious grin then lifted his hand and waved them forward.

Henry, a blond-haired man as broad as a bull, picked up his flagon and brandished it.

Edward twisted between the tightly-packed tables and managed to drive a fist into Rob's soft gut before the tosser could even ready himself.

This wasn't a fair fight. No rules here, and Edward found himself hungry for it.

Henry launched himself forward and brought the flagon down on Edward's arm.

Pain lanced through his shoulder and down his back. He bit back a grunt then hammered his own fist into Henry's jaw.

He stumbled back but even as he did, Rob recovered and vaulted forward, seizing Edward.

Edward twisted but not before a knee came up into his gut.

Instead of punching, Edward grabbed the leg in contact with his stomach and shoved it to the left and twisted.

The man screamed as a pop filled the room.

His victim collapsed on the straw-covered floor, screaming.

"Take it back now," Edward demanded. "Every damned word."

"Fighting for a whore? So noble," Lord Conrade gritted as he forced himself up, whipping a knife from his coat.

Edward spotted the silver flashing.

Several women nearby screamed but the men pounded their cups against their tables.

The chant, "Fight! Fight!" filled the air.

Someone grabbed Edward from behind and as he attempted to break free, Lord Conrade whipped his knife forward.

The blade nearly sliced his face as Edward arced back.

Suddenly, Lord Conrade screamed as a polished piece of wood came down on his shoulder.

The Duke of Clyde stood behind him, a cane in hand.

Edward laughed, a stunned sound.

Half the room stilled. They all knew Clyde. They liked him. For he was a man with the face of a demon and fought as brutally as his visage suggested.

The man with the flagon backed up. "Clyde, we got no quarrel with you."

"Just with my friend?" the duke asked as if querying the quality of the gin. His rough Scottish accent rumbled through the now quiet room.

The tough dropped his flagon and lifted his hand. "We want no trouble, Your Grace."

Clyde turned his face so that the scarred side showed best. "Then get out of here, and take this scum with ye."

Clyde kicked Lord Conrade in the back of his leg.

The lord squealed and stumbled. "Y-your Grace—"

Clyde grabbed him by the scruff of his coat. "Never come back, mon, or I'll personally crush yer

skill with my cane.”

The Scottish duke shoved the now whimpering lord away from them.

And the men who had so happily maligned Emmaline? They limped through the crowded tables and chairs, straight out of the establishment.

Every instinct screamed at Edward to follow them and do his best to slay them in an alley.

Clyde grabbed his shoulder. “Sit, Hart. Lest ye wish to have yer brains splattered on the floor. There’s too many of them tonight.”

Edward glanced about, realizing that Clyde was correct. Half the room might rise to protect the rough men he’d attacked. After all, he wasn’t one of them. He was permitted to be there but, in the end, he was one of their oppressors.

Clyde was different. He was Scottish. A duke. And he’d proven himself more times in this room than he could count.

Clyde loved the rough crowd and they loved him. Edward liked it for the way it kept him on edge, but the men here would never truly like him. Not the way they liked the duke.

Edward nodded and sat back at his table, wincing as he finally felt pain coursing through his body.

Clyde lowered himself in a mountain of limbs. He kept a hand on his cane as he surveyed the still tense crowd.

“Drinks all around for my friends!” Clyde called and the general tension evaporated under a cheer of goodwill.

Clyde doffed his hat and placed it on the rough-hewn table. “Now, would ye care to explain what madness you were at, ye daft Englishman? Or do ye simply wish to be disposed of in a back alley in yer prime?”

Edward stared at Clyde, uncertain what to say. “That man, Lord Conrade, isn’t worthy of the title ‘man’. He betrayed my family’s trust and that of Emmaline Trent.”

Clyde twirled his cane’s handle. “Och. I see. The young lady ye left at the altar.”

Edward gave a tight nod.

Clyde cocked his head to the side, his dark locks brushing his smooth temple. “That’s the mon who claimed to roger her?”

Edward grabbed his glass and drank deeply. “The very one.”

Clyde gave a contemplative look. “I should have killed him.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Edward agreed, willing the aggression still pumping through him to ease.

“Och,” Clyde winked. “Mayhap, we still will. But no’ in a tavern. We’ll get him on his own. He can die in the mud. It’ll be a suitable end for the tosser.”

Edward gaped at Clyde, uncertain if the man was in jest or serious. “He doesn’t deserve to live.”

“Did it feel good then?” Clyde asked, leaning back against the chair. “Beating his face in?”

“No,” Edward admitted through gritted teeth. “It wasn’t enough.”

“Ye’ll never be able to heal yer own wounds inflicting them on others, dinna ye ken?”

Edward groaned at the wisdom of the words. “I can’t bear the memories being invoked these last weeks. With her return, it seems everywhere I turn is a reminder—”

Clyde wagged his brows, a feat given his scars. “Of what a complete tosser ye are yerself?”

“Yes,” Edward admitted, suddenly tired.

“I’m no’ judging ye, Hart.” Clyde shrugged and peeled off his black gloves. “Ye’re no’ a bad mon. If ye were, I’d have let the crowd strip ye of yer skin. I certainly wouldna drink with ye.”

At that, Jenny sauntered across the room, a tray held high. “Your Grace,” she said with a bright smile. She placed a fresh bottle of gin upon the table and a cup. “Shall I see you later?”

“It’s the only thing which will make my night bearable, darling Jenny,” Clyde replied with surprising sincerity.

She grinned then sashayed off.

“Do ye think she smiles at me thus because she likes me?” Clyde asked, his voice low.

“She seems to,” Edward said, not sure what to say. It was always a bit hard to know with barmaids.

Clyde laughed. “What woman could bear a man like me without the inducement of coin, Hart? That’s why she smiles. I’ll pay her well and, I’ll please her. But if I was a poor man. . .”

Edward winced inwardly. Every man had his sorrows. The duke had more than most. “Clyde—”

“Dinna deny the truth,” Clyde suddenly snarled. “Ye’ve got a good face. Ye should try to keep it.”

Edward did not flinch at Clyde’s turn. He could not blame the man. “I’ll endeavor to do just that, but bastards like that—”

“Make ye act a fool,” Clyde said icily but with a good deal more calm. “Ye dinna stop men like that in tavern brawls.”

Edward sighed. “No.”

“Ye need to get away from London.” Clyde lifted the gin bottle and drank straight from it. “As do I. I find the city to be wearing on me in a way I didna anticipate.”

Edward kept silent, wondering if it was the way people stared at Clyde wherever he went. The way people recoiled from him. It couldn’t be easy. . . In fact, it was likely exhausting. It was rumored he’d not left his estate in Scotland for years after it had first happened.

The invitation to escape the city was tempting. Still, it might be impossible. “The club requires a dedicated master—”

“What kind of master are ye then if ye canna leave it to someone for a few weeks?” Clyde pointed out just before he drank again.

It was a valid point and he did have a good man of business. Could he go? Should he? He envisioned the feel of cool northern air on his skin, air free of coal dust. “Is this mere musing or have you something to suggest?”

“I have, indeed,” Clyde replied as he leaned forward and placed an elbow on the table. “Come to Scotland. I long for the Highlands, and I think the wilds would do ye well.”

Edward took a good swallow, no longer bothered by the acidic nature of the gin. “I’m loath to leave London. I’m expecting an important appointment.”

Nodding, Clyde asked indulgently, “Are ye then?”

Edward nodded tightly, feeling more and more like a fool.

“Who is it with if I might be so bold?” Clyde’s eyes narrowed. “Ye seem oddly dedicated to it.”

Edward ground his teeth, unsure if he should admit it but he found he needed to tell someone. For he could no longer be as honest with his brothers as he longed for. They did not understand him. Not any longer. They all wished to forget the pain of a few years ago and pretend as if they had all moved on from it.

Well, he supposed, in truth, his brothers had. They’d all married. They all had lovely wives who

they loved dearly. They all had babes in arms.

What did he have?

His damned club.

He'd never have more than that.

"Emmaline Trent," he said quietly.

Clyde's jaw all but dropped. "Ye canna be serious, mon!"

Edward nodded. "Oh, yes. I'm to give her advice on a business matter."

Clyde blew out a stunned breath. "She seeks yer advice?"

Edward laughed dryly. "Sounds impossible, does it not? But it's true. I have a particular expertise and she says she wishes us to begin anew."

Clyde's lips twisted with amusement. "Begin anew?"

That very amusement on Clyde's face told him he was, indeed, being a fool to sit and wait and hope. "She doesn't mean it, of course. She merely wishes us to get on in front of company."

"Ye *wish* she meant it?" Clyde observed quietly. "Dinna ye?"

Edward stared at his gin. "We cannot go back."

"Indeed, we canna, lad." Clyde lifted the bottle and gave it a far more pensive look than it likely deserved. "The past is for those who wallow in drink and despair. Only forward, good Hart. Only forward. And lingering about waiting for her to call upon ye? I dinna suggest it."

The duke clapped his hand on the table for emphasis. "Ye must live yer life."

"I was," Edward protested passionately then he sighed, his shoulders bowing. "I had been. But now she's in London. . ."

"Ye can think of little else but her?" Clyde finished.

Edward gave a tight nod.

"Ye love her then?"

"No," Edward gritted. "I proved I didn't."

"By casting her out?" Clyde offered. He shrugged his giant shoulders, which stretched his pristine black coat. "It was an ill-advised action, but ye must stop whipping yerself over it. Would ye do such a thing again?"

"I think not," Edward ventured. "But how can I be certain?"

"Ye canna," Clyde agreed, making no attempt to convince Edward what a good fellow he was. "In this life, nothing is certain. Now, ye come to Scotland. Breathe the Highland air and let yer mind clear."

A strange look of what Edward was almost sure was anticipation shone in the Scot's eyes.

Clyde lifted his bottle in salute. "Ye'll feel a good deal better and know what needs to be done when ye return."

"Don't make promises, Clyde," Edward warned. "They can't be kept."

"Och, I always keep mine, Hart." Clyde swigged the gin. "I always keep mine."

How Edward wished he could say the same, but a trip to Scotland? Yes, it was for the best. He had to decide on a course of action with Emmaline. For he had waited and waited. Now, it was time for him to do things differently and, in Scotland, he could decide exactly what course to take.

Chapter 13

After only a few weeks in London, it had surprised Emmaline how ready she was to take up an invitation to a house party. The Rivals Theater was an unparalleled success by any standard. After a run of productions that sold out every single night, she'd drawn a deep breath, looked about her, and realized she had not stopped to rest since she had escaped to Paris some time ago.

Yes, she very much deserved this time away.

The invitation from the Duke of Clyde had been most fortuitous and somewhat surprising.

The man had a reputation himself for a steely nature, dangerous temperament, and a face that looked like the devil had cast it. He was also known to be most unique, supporting the rights of women as well as men.

She'd been most intrigued.

Scotland.

The word fairly ricocheted about her mind like a promise of bliss.

A grin pulled at her lips as the exceptionally well-sprung coach bounced over the rough roads of the western Highlands.

Crisp, cool air slipped in through the open window. She'd been surprised to discover she'd required a light blanket upon her lap despite the late-summer months.

All the books she'd brought to entertain her upon her trip lay next to Mrs. Barton, who was napping, a silk scarf over her eyes.

The further north they had traveled, the more Emmaline had been unable to tear her gaze away from the landscape. In fact, she'd all but rested her arms on the ledge, stuck her head out and gaped.

She'd given away any ideas of dignity the moment they'd left Stirling, abandoned the Lowlands and begun to climb.

Some might have loathed the days of travel to reach a party.

Not she. Oh! What bliss, to be mostly alone and stare at the wild glories of the world.

Her soul fairly sang with it. Over the years, she'd spent so much time in cities, surrounded by their teeming masses, their pungent aromas, and driven nature. One rarely paused in the rush of life in London or Paris.

But here? One could watch a hawk fly or a rabbit dart across the heather.

Much to her astonishment, she'd even spotted deer and a great buck with horns that were almost as wide as she was tall.

The majesty of it all stole her breath. Just when she'd begun to believe she could be no more awed, they ventured over a heather-covered ben to spot a silver sea loch which shone like diamonds under a perfect blue sky.

In the distance, a castle stood proud and imposing. It hugged the mountain, the ben, like an old warrior that had hunkered down and would never be convinced to give way to history, wind, or man.

The parapets were adorned with flags whipping in the wind and, for one moment, she could have sworn she heard the call of a Highland bagpipe singing on the sea wind, calling the clansmen to battle.

The coach rattled down to the narrow road which ran along the loch and, before long, they were crossing a stone bridge which led to the castle.

She could scarcely blink at the towering stone walls and shining glass windows, most in the shape of slits meant for a day when archers ruled warfare.

“Goodness, have I awoken in the fourteen hundreds?” Mrs. Barton inquired.

Emmaline laughed merrily. “One might think so.”

Mrs. Barton blinked and leaned forward. “It’s exceptionally grand.”

“Is it not?” Emmaline all but shook with excitement. She could not wait to discover the corridors and hideaways that the castle had to offer.

“Do you think we shall find a few braw Highlanders?” Mrs. Barton asked, her voice deep and full of teasing.

“If we do, you may keep them all,” Emmaline said sincerely. She had no time for such nonsense. No, she was here to be restored not shaken apart.

Mrs. Barton laughed. “My dear, at some point surely you will find a lover.”

“I think I am done with the male sex except for friendship.” She shivered dramatically. “Really, they are far too much trouble.”

“They can make up for it in certain ways,” Mrs. Barton reminded. “Oh, I say. Do you think Clyde wears a kilt when he’s at home?”

Emmaline nibbled her lip. She’d never seen a man in a kilt. The very idea seemed astounding. A man going about with his limbs exposed to the elements.

“I suppose we will soon find out,” Emmaline replied, unable to stop smiling.

“I think we have,” Mrs. Barton whispered, gesturing to the towering arched doorway with its portcullis that had been cranked up, its teeth barely exposed.

A giant of a man, several inches over six feet, stood in the stone corridor. Wild, black hair framed his face. A face that looked as if it had been split in two. For one side was the face of a god. Hard, sculpted, swarthy, with a perfectly-shaped aquiline eye. The other was raked, destroyed by a blade and a barbarous surgeon was unable to put it back to rights.

Though it took effort, Emmaline tore her gaze away from his scarred face. The Duke of Clyde stood with the sort of imperious strength of a man born to power and who would keep it come what may.

A dark green jacket clung to his broad shoulders. Its tails skimmed a . . . Kilt. The green wool had been folded and folded again, creating the most intricate look, but the fabric was not stiff. Oh, no. It swung about the man’s tree-like legs.

“My goodness, he is made of earth, do you think, or some stronger metal?” Mrs. Barton all but purred.

“Surely he walks the ground like the rest of us,” Emmaline said, but she almost didn’t believe herself.

The coach rolled to a halt before him.

No smile cracked his face but he raised a hand in greeting and instead of waiting for one of the footmen to jump down and open the coach door, he strode forward and did the task himself.

“Welcome to Castle Clyde, ladies.”

His rich Scottish brogue rolled over them like an ancient brandy. No, not brandy. Surely whisky. He was rougher than brandy.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Emmaline replied quickly as she took his offered hand.

For one brief moment, she prayed she would feel sparks at his touch.

His hand, after all, was as big and magnificent as the rest of him.

Alas, the ground did not shake upon their touch, which she supposed was for the best. She was here to rest, not to swoon about after a duke.

He helped her down as though she was but a feather.

And once her boots had touched the slick cobbles, he reached out to Mrs. Barton.

As though such a thing was commonplace, Mrs. Barton exited the coach, her long, sapphire skirts swooshing about her legs. She gazed up at the duke and smiled, a smile which shook lesser men. "How kind of you to invite us, Your Grace. No doubt, we are the luckiest actresses in the world to be given such a treat."

"I've no doubt, Mrs. Barton, that ye are accustomed to the best," Clyde observed. "And it is I who am lucky to have two such ladies grace my home. Now, let's get ye settled. Such a journey is not an easy one."

"Oh, we are made of stern stuff," Emmaline replied, unable to stop gazing about. "I find I am eager to explore."

He stared at her for a long moment. "Are ye, indeed? Ye're no' tired?"

"Life is too short and precarious to be tired," Emmaline said easily, for she felt it to be true. "At least, too tired to take in such a place as this. For I have never seen the likes of it in all my days."

"Are ye sure there isn't a Scot somewhere in yer lineage," the duke teased. "If ye love this place so well so soon?"

Emmaline allowed him to take a step back and gesture for them to proceed through to the courtyard.

"Your Grace, my lineage is not overly long," Emmaline pointed out. There wasn't an aristocratic bone in her body, after all. "I think my family is only recorded for a few generations, unlike your own, so it is very possible."

"Och, aye," Clyde mused. "Well, I can count every member of my clan back for seven hundred years. How wonderful that ye might, in fact, be one of us."

How she wished she could reply that, in fact, she was one of no one. Not anymore. She'd been forced to give all that up. But now was not a time for such thoughts.

"Perhaps ye require some refreshment before yer adventure begins," he said as they mounted the steps into the castle proper.

Emmaline gasped as they entered a massive hall.

She'd seen many great houses and chateaus over the years, but none like this. None that seemed to have the ancients written into every stone.

No prancing, lace wearing, powdered fools had ever ruled this fortress. Of that, she was certain. No, this was a place that required hard men, yet it was beautiful.

The towering ceiling overhead bore wooden timbers older than her own theater. Elaborate, colorful banners of the duke's sworn men and armies hung from them, their colors fluttering ever so lightly as the sea air swept inside from behind them.

Stained glass filled a great window at the opposite end of the long hall, sending reds, blues, greens and purples dancing over the polished wood floors.

Great swords and axes hung upon the walls as well as tapestries that showed scenes of maidens fair in forests at ease with unicorns and other fairy beasts.

"It is beautiful," she breathed.

“It’s a grand old room,” the Duke of Clyde said with simple pride. “That banner, the first there, it was the banner of the first great Clyde who marched with The Bruce.”

She allowed her gaze to trail along the banners until she came to the newest ones. . . The ones that had, no doubt, flown over Culloden Field. How had his family survived such a thing? His clan?

For even she knew that most great families had not survived the razing of Scotland.

The Clydes were a clan of survivors. That was clear.

“Come,” Clyde urged, remarkably genial for such an intimidating specimen. “Ye must become acquainted with some of my other guests. I ken they are most eager to ken who they shall be feasting with over the next days.”

She nodded and he and Mrs. Barton began to engage in chatter.

She paid little attention to them as she looked about while they headed towards another part of the castle. She really had very little interest in feasting, though she did adore a good meal. Oh, no, she could not wait to walk the parapets, to feel the sea wind in her hair, to walk the hills, and feel what she knew was in the air flow through her bones.

Magic.

This was a place of magic where anything could happen.

They stepped over a threshold and into a room as large as the hall they had entered. But it held less of a medieval bent.

Oh, tapestries decorated all the walls. The ceiling did soar. But here, there were also paintings by the great masters of the Enlightenment upon the wall. A rich Axminster rug of the deepest green stretched along the floor.

Several Chippendale tables and chairs filled the space, inviting guests to sit and make discourse. A fire, despite the summer months, blazed in the great hearth. Unlike what she had expected, the mantel was carved of Italian marble with flowers so vibrant she felt she could almost smell their fragrance in the air. But then she realized several vases of roses and heather were strategically placed about the room. Light filled the space, spilling in through paned glass, mullioned windows.

A few guests were already imbibing in claret at the far end in a corner of the room which bore a table meant for playing cards.

The strains of a soft Highland tune filled the room and she sought out its source. A pianoforte sat in an opposing corner. Instead of a lady, as she had expected, a tall man sat playing it, his fingers all but spinning over the ivory keys. At the angle he was sitting, she could not make out his face.

A strange sensation danced through her belly.

There was something about the way his head was inclined as he played, in the breadth of his shoulder, and the russet color of his hair which was quite untamed.

She swallowed. “I think. . . I think I prefer to rest,” she whispered.

“I thought ye were no’ tired,” the Duke of Clyde boomed gaily. “Come have a glass of wine to restore yerself.”

And as soon as the duke spoke, the music stopped and the man at the piano turned.

Emmaline could not draw breath. She’d traveled hundreds of miles out of the city, away from this man. She’d been happy to avoid him. To avoid the feelings he’d set ablaze within her. Yet, here he was.

Edward Hart met her gaze and, though she tried to fight it, heat stole through her body, dancing along her skin, and slipping straight to her belly.

Good Lord, he was beautiful. Now that all boyhood had escaped him, his strong face which bore no smile at present, was the most appealing she'd ever seen.

Unlike his unreadable face, his eyes, his penetrating eyes, blazed with emotion.

Mine, a voice inside her seemed to whisper that he did, indeed, belong to her, no matter what reason might insist. And she longed to scream at her traitorous self. A self that seemed determined to ignore all sense.

Edward Hart was here in the Highlands of Scotland where magic was in everything. And she longed to rail at the gods for putting her here with him.

A sudden thought hit her and, with it, a shocking dose of calm acceptance.

It was time to stop railing. For no matter what she did, she and Edward seemed destined to be thrown together.

London had been of her choosing.

A meeting at Castle Clyde?

That bespoke of fate and it felt at long last that she was tired of resisting. Perhaps, it was time to do as she had always wished. To know Edward Hart. To know every bit of him, his skin, his muscled body. Yes. . . Now that she wasn't a lady, there was no reason for either of them to resist.

Not ever again.

Chapter 14

Edward was going to kill Clyde. Slowly. Whilst it sounded mad, he'd known. . . The moment she'd entered the room. He'd felt it in his very bones.

Oh, he'd been playing the beautiful pianoforte, eyes closed, lost in the beauty of the Skye Boat song. As he entered the soulful strains of the chorus, his body had begun to hum, much as the keys beneath his fingers.

He'd refused to look back at first, certain he had lost his wits. Certain he was simply haunted by thoughts of her. For not a night had gone by that she had not haunted his dreams. He could not sit by himself without thoughts of Emmaline slipping into them. But then her voice had echoed across the room and he had no choice but to turn and witness her presence.

After traveling hundreds of miles to escape his club across from her theater, just so he might decide what to do next, he was in the same room with her. And because of that, he could no longer make a perfect plan. He could not linger over the details of how best to win her.

Damn Clyde.

Edward waited, hands tense upon his thighs. He waited for her gaze to crackle with fury, for her to turn from the room or for her to simply let her gaze sweep over him as if he were not there.

Instead, she stood still, unbent, glorious. Her blond curls, half-unpinned from her long journey, glowed honey about her face in the late light.

She did not look displeased nor did she dismiss him. In fact, she stared at him.

Even more, she held his gaze. And there in the depths of her eyes was something he had not expected to see again.

Desire.

No, not desire. That was too tame a word for what he saw. Hunger. Unapologetic hunger shone in her sapphire orbs.

A distant memory danced before him. Once, she had offered herself to him. He had denied her, determined to wait for marriage. Determined that they be *good*.

What a fool he'd been. Life had offered its glorious possibilities to him and he'd been too damned idiotic to take them. He'd been determined to follow society's edicts.

That determination had added to the destruction of his life.

So, as he, too, held her gaze and felt his blood begin to sing for her, he tossed the artificiality of societal *goodness* to the winds.

The only thing he was interested in now was Emmaline Trent in his bed and in his arms. The rest could be damned.

As if compelled by his presence, Emmaline left Mrs. Barton and the Duke of Clyde's sides and crossed the room.

He could not tear his gaze away, nor did he wish to. He was transfixed by the way her hair coiled over her shoulders and the way in which her crimson travel costume skimmed her body like it was a lover.

How he longed to strip that travel jacket and frock from her person. He'd savor every pale inch of her body, pleasing it as she'd always deserved.

But first, first, he longed to take her mouth with his, that rosy, lush mouth which had once always

held a smile for him.

When she stopped before him, he still could not speak. He was overwhelmed by the power of his own feelings.

“Hello, Edward,” she said softly.

That voice. . . God. It did things to him. Things which nothing else could ever hope to do.

“Have your wits gone wandering?” she teased.

“No, Emmaline,” he said, speaking without allowing himself to censor his thoughts. “They are engaged.”

“Oh?” she breathed. “In what?”

His hands were but inches from skimming her skirts. How he longed to reach out and. . . “You might not forgive me if I say.”

“I thought we were to have no lies?” she whispered.

At long last, he glanced about, noticing the company and how several of the guests were staring. He did not give a fig for them but he and Emmaline were not there for the entertainment of others.

Oh, no. At long last, they were there for each other.

He slid along the piano bench. “Sit beside me,” he all but whispered back.

She bit her lower lip. Then much to his relief, she did exactly as he hoped.

“Shall we play together then?” she asked as they faced the keyboard.

“I think we shall make a fine harmony together, do you not?” he asked, his voice deep with promise.

Her hands trembled slightly but her voice did not shake as she replied, “I always thought so.”

Edward placed his hands beside hers. “Then let us begin.”

Chapter 15

As the last notes of the duet filled the air, Emmaline willed herself not to fly apart. All of this seemed so impossible. . . But she could not deny that she and Edward had been hurtling back together again from the moment they parted.

Mad as it sounded, it was undeniably true.

Oh, they had taken different paths. They had both suffered. And as she slid her fingers off the keys, she knew one thing. They would never, ever speak of the past. It had to be an unspoken agreement between them. There would never be any true recovery from what happened. It had been too deep, too powerful, too awful.

But now, if they could but forget, they could revel in each other as both of them had always wanted to do, before the actions of others had driven them apart.

She glanced at Edward through her lashes, barely able to contain the feelings rioting through her at the feel of his body so close to hers. If she moved but a little, her entire side would brush his. Heady stuff, indeed, given their prolonged distance. “Will you walk with me, my lord?”

His fingers trailed along her hip in the barest whisper as he stood. “It would be my pleasure.”

Carefully, as if committing herself, she took his offered hand and allowed him to help her to stand.

Ignoring the curious looks of the company, she and Edward began to stroll towards the hall.

“Lord Hart,” the Duke of Clyde said from his place by the fireplace. “No doubt, the lady needs to stretch her legs after so long a confinement in her coach. I suggest ye show her the grotto.”

If she’d been an innocent miss as she had been so long ago, her cheeks would have burned. But it was clear that Clyde expected his guests to treat his home as if it were their own, and he was not about to start ensuring they all behaved exactly as a London mama might hope.

Well, how a London mama might hope until after her child was locked in matrimony.

Edward gave a small bow towards their host and then, as if they were children released from the last day of school, they made their way out of the castle with undue hurry.

They walked wordlessly, both of them unwilling to break the agreed upon truce.

Edward, who seemed very acquainted with the place, led her to a stone path that descended towards the loch.

The feel of her legs eating up the rough ground was delicious after sitting for so very long. She could have marched up into the high bens if he had been so inclined.

But no, it seemed as if he would lead her deeper into the glen.

Before long, they came to a copse of oak trees planted in a bowl shape. The branches bowed down, providing the feel of an artificial tunnel.

And in the tunnel was a set of damp stone stairs that twisted even further downward.

Edward paused, his hand firm about hers.

“Why have you stopped?” she queried, desperate for them to reach their destination.

“We can’t go back,” he whispered. “Not after this. Is that what you truly wish? Do we descend or. . . Should we return to the castle?”

“I wish there to be no more words about it,” she replied with all her heart. “I wish us only to be present in this moment.”

Then, much to her amazement, he swept her up into his arms, cradling her against his hard chest.

He descended the twisting stairs easily as if carrying her were the most natural thing in the world. It felt natural to be in his arms, as if she had been made for his embrace.

When they reached the bottom, the sounds of a waterfall met her ears and she gazed about at the flowers and greenery growing about it. It was a hidden paradise and, just overhead, there was an opening allowing the late-summer sun to spill in.

The scent of earth and foliage surrounded them. It was the most seductive spot she'd ever seen. It was perfect.

Isolated. A cocoon for them to slip away from the world.

He allowed her legs to slip from his arm and he held her tightly against him.

Her booted toes touched the stone floor and she marveled at the way her body fit against his with such perfection.

Every hard inch of him pressed into her softness, including his sex which she felt against her belly like an iron rod.

That was for her. All his desire. It was for her.

He tilted her head back, all words left behind in the world above them.

His gaze traveled over her face, as if he could memorize her every look, her every feature in this moment. The rough pads of his fingers traced along her chin then he delved one hand into her hair and let the other trail to her hip.

She clasped his shoulders instinctively, willing him to kiss her.

He pulled her upwards against him and then he bent his head closing the several inches between them.

The scent of him, spice, leather, and oranges surrounded her.

Her lips parted and he took her mouth like a man knowing he had but one night left to live.

A moan tore from her throat the moment their lips met. This was no sweet kiss. No tempered action.

It was a storm of desire unleashed upon them both. The moment he kissed her, she held on to him, kissing him back with every fiber of her being.

Never again would she be afraid to seize what she wanted. She would let nothing stand in her way. Once, she had allowed his doubts to rule their lives. Never again. There would be no apologies. There would be no hesitation. For life was full of pain in any case, and one had to take what one could when it presented itself.

She grabbed hold of his coat and pulled him closer, arching her body into his.

He groaned and as his mouth opened, she touched her tongue to his.

He met her passion, sucking her deeper into his mouth, tasting her and teasing her.

His hands roved over her back then gripped her hips, curving her hips into his hardness.

His mouth turned to the line of her neck, kissing down to the hollow of her throat. He pressed open-mouthed kisses to her skin. When he met the edge of her traveling jacket, his fingers reached for the fabric and tugged.

The buttons gave way easily.

He pulled the fabric and she twisted, helping him divest her of it.

The coat fell to the stone floor and his fingers went to the laces at the back of her gown.

The way his fingers moved, it took several moments for him to free the string.

Then, she recalled the rumors. That he had been celibate. He certainly did not undress her as she

expected a practiced man might. Quite the opposite. In his passion, he struggled to free her.

She did not cease kissing him as he eased the muslin from her shoulders.

The ruby gown slipped downward and pooled at her feet, leaving her in nothing but her thin chemise and stays.

He let out a sound of rugged appreciation at the sight of her.

For a long moment, he stared at her stays as if mystified.

And she realized, he was.

He reached for the paneling and began to tug at it. But then she whipped around, giving him her back, determined to be free of her clothes as quickly as possible.

They had made the leap to lovers in an instant, and she could not wait to be one with him.

His touch slowed and she felt him begin to undo the complicated lacing at her back. He spread the stays until he could slip them away.

Gently, he kissed and nipped at her back, caressing her thighs with his hands.

She pressed her palms into the cool stone walls, wild with her need for him.

He grasped her chemise then slid it upward, exposing her bottom. To her surprise, he knelt behind her.

She gasped at the first kiss to her thigh. But then he was kissing and tracing the line of her buttocks.

Forcefully, he turned her and gazed at the apex of her thighs.

He was a man possessed but there was nothing violent about him in this moment.

Oh, no, he touched her with awe.

Gazing down on him, she stroked her hands through his thick hair. Their eyes met and the look she saw in his eyes nearly undid her heart.

Edward slid his hands over her hips, then pressed a kiss to the crease at her thigh.

“I’ve dreamt of this,” he whispered. “It has tormented me. Now, I’ll never let this go.”

Before she could even contemplate what he would do next, he parted her thighs and kissed the apex.

Her legs shook and she let out a cry of surprise.

His mouth worked over her most sensitive spot, his tongue circling.

Her head dropped back against the stone wall and she allowed herself to be transported.

In all her life, she’d felt nothing like it. As he teased her, circling and caressing, her body reacted in the most wild of ways.

She could not control the pleasure that coursed through her and, suddenly, she was gasping, unable to take the onslaught anymore. Wave after wave of release coursed through her.

He did not cease until she was languid and he stood to hold her.

He cupped her chin then kissed her softly.

“I want you,” he whispered.

“Then have me,” she urged.

Edward made quick work of the buttons at his breeches. Urgency drove them, both of them knowing how they had suffered to reach this moment.

He parted her thighs and she felt the hard head of his cock rub against her slick core.

He thrust upward and she cried out in shock.

She knew it would hurt, that it would be difficult, but even she was surprised by the sudden and

piercing pain.

“E-Emmaline?” he gasped.

Though it hurt, she was determined. “Do not stop,” she demanded. “Do not.”

He slid a hand to the nape of her neck, his gaze full of confusion but still hot with desire.

“Whatever you bid,” he said. “Whatever you wish.”

And he began to rock gently against her. He reached down and lifted one of her legs to his hip, holding her so that he might enter her with more ease.

After a moment, the discomfort was gone and, soon, the deep stroke of his shaft began to feel just right.

She was so full, so full of pleasure now. It was a new world. And she loved it.

She grabbed his head and pulled it down, taking his mouth.

As she kissed him, the way his body rocked against hers managed to touch that magical spot again and again. She once again crested into pleasure.

And as she pulsed about him, he cried her name.

The tension in his body eased and he rested against her.

Slowly, he lowered her leg and he rested his head atop hers.

Their breaths came as one.

Her heart slammed against her ribs and the wild, perfect, recklessness of what they had done occurred to her and she wouldn't trade it for anything. Not for anything in the entire world.

“I love you, Emmaline,” he whispered. “I always will.”

And she swallowed, stunned by his admission, lulled by the pleasure they'd shared. And to her shock, she spoke without allowing herself to think. “And I you, Edward. And I you.”

Chapter 16

Now that the barrier seemed to have fallen between them, Edward was happier than he had ever been in the entirety of his life. He could not recall a time of such absolute bliss. Such joy. In fact, such was his happy state that he was not certain if he was truly awake or simply in the most glorious dream of his life. If he was dreaming, he hoped most passionately that he never awoke.

He and his darling Emmaline did not care about the company. They ignored it entirely. They were completely absorbed by each other and the unexpected pleasure of meeting each other anew.

The Duke of Clyde seemed to have expected this outcome, the devil. Surely, he was a soothsayer. For such a hard man could hardly have been pictured as a matchmaker. But there it was.

In fact, the duke's clear intention of throwing them together was such that he had sent them off to a hunter's cottage at the edge of his estate.

It was, perhaps, a good thing that there were no unmarried members of their party. In fact, every single person seemed to have been picked not to blink a lash at the idea of two lovers trysting together.

No doubt, there was a great deal of scampering about the corridors of the castle at night. Even so, he wondered if worries of propriety could have stopped him and Emmaline from their reunion.

After all, their scandal was complete. Come rack or ruin, they had chosen to be lovers and hang anyone who decried them.

Bloody hell, what was the point in being notorious, as they both so publicly were, if they did not behave in a suitably notorious manner?

So, they had. . . And they would continue to do so for as long as possible if he had anything to do with it. And he did. So, he would do all in his power to keep her happy and at ease with him.

It was why he had said nothing about her virginity in the grotto or since. At the moment, the riot of emotions that had gone through him had almost caused him to let loose his thoughts into the air.

Thank God, he had stopped himself.

Who knew how she would have reacted to such questions.

Upon the realization that he was her first, the immediate emotions had been a combination of shame, horror, and honor.

He'd accused her of being unfaithful. . . The things he and his brother had said in the church on what should have been his and Emmaline's wedding day. . . They had been doubly heinous in hindsight.

Her virginity in and of itself was not important. He had learned long ago not to value such a thing the way some men did.

A woman who was confident in herself was the most important thing. She was not ruined or used once it was gone.

No, she was simply enjoying what God had given her. . . Her body.

How he wished he had learned that lesson as a boy. His father, an imperious man, had bedeviled his sons in what he deemed the requirements for a perfect bride.

Still, it had been difficult not to ask her why the devil she'd held on to it. She certainly could have given it to anyone she pleased. He would have thought no less of her. Society thought her to be a loose woman. . . She never had been. He had a feeling she never would be a woman who easily gave

her favors. Just as he had not been able to do so.

For him, his chosen celibacy had not been about morals but the simple fact that he could not imagine being intimate with anyone but her.

Was she the same? Was he the only one she ever wished to be with? God, he hoped so.

It was so very tempting to ask. But he would not. No, instead, he had focused on everything else. On what she hoped for, what she enjoyed, what made her smile and what caused her heart to ache.

So after several days of reveling in each other's bodies and souls, they sat atop a great ben, a basket of cheese, bread, wine and summer strawberries tucked on the corner of their blanket.

The purple heather unfolded before them in a colorful blanket down to the silver loch.

Was there such bliss anywhere else?

He never wished to leave this place or these days.

She had tucked her head against his lap and peered at her book.

Gently, he stroked her hair, fanning it over his thigh. He savored every touch, every hue of the blond locks.

Even years ago, when they first knew each other, it had not been like this. The first throes of young love had been exciting, thrilling even, but this? This touched his soul in ways he'd never imagined.

They'd both known such darkness that now the light felt all the more beautiful.

How had he existed without her? Life had been such a desert. Now, it was verdant and full of possibilities.

"Whatever are you contemplating?" she asked, as she closed the leather-bound pages of her novel. "You look quite transported."

"I was contemplating you," he said honestly.

"Me?" She laughed. "I am the source of such a look?"

"Yes," he replied. "For I have never known such happiness."

She rolled over and sat up, her skirts fanning about her and exposing her stocking-clad calves. "It *is* wonderful, is it not?"

He nodded as he idly plucked the heather from her gown then caressed her calf.

"You are such a remarkable person now," she observed.

"I?" he scoffed. "I am the owner of a club of vice."

She pushed him playfully before she took his hand and said earnestly, "And a champion of the vulnerable."

He looked away, amazed to feel embarrassment. He had not begun those works for praise or esteem. It was why he had essentially kept himself anonymous.

"I think you are very unkind to yourself, Edward."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he would be unkind to himself until the day he died, for he would never be able to serve a long enough sentence for what he had done. But he did not. For if he did, it would open the wound that they were beginning to heal.

"Your good opinion of me is all I could ever wish for," he said softly.

"Well, then, you have it." She lifted his hand and kissed it. "I think you have proven you are a remarkable person. As I said."

He swallowed. "Do you . . ."

"Yes?" she asked, caressing the back of his hand with her thumb.

Good God, he felt like a boy again in his hope. "Do you forgive me then?"

In an instant, her face grew guarded. "Edward, I do not—"

He leaned forward and stopped her mouth with a kiss. It had been foolish to ask. He'd nearly broken the moment.

But then she pulled back and touched his chest. "Edward, I do forgive you. I think I forgave you a long time ago."

"You cannot mean it," he rasped.

"I do," she declared, her gaze burning with truth. "You were young and easily led. It did not occur to you to seek me out. But you were convinced by people you trusted of my false nature. If anything, you are a victim, too."

"A victim?" he choked, barely able to believe how she exonerated him now.

She nodded. "You trusted them. And so you believed them."

"I should have trusted you."

She was silent.

"Emmaline, I am so very sorry. I—"

She lifted her fingers to his lips, but he gently pulled her hand away. "I know I apologized before but, even then, I do not think I understood the enormity of my actions. The fact that I did not trust the woman that I was to wed is beyond the pale."

"And now?" she asked him, curling her fingers about his. "What do you know now?"

He paused, raking over his thoughts, determined to answer truthfully. "Not to judge others. Not to believe the worst of anyone until I have spoken to them, until I have irrefutable proof of my concerns. What I have learned is that we must seek to understand, not judge."

"Then you have learned a great deal."

"When we return to London, what will happen?" he dared to ask, shocked that the words slipped past his lips. For had he not, but a moment before, sworn to himself that he would not press her?

"When we return to London, nothing will change," she assured him, as if that were the answer he hoped to hear. "We will go on now."

"As lovers?" he queried.

She nodded. "We were always destined for each other, I think. I fought for so long, but I am glad I did. For though we suffered, we learned so much. For you, you are a man of so many parts, of such depth. You have experienced pain but you have not allowed that to make you hurt others in turn. On the contrary, you help others."

Her words of esteem overwhelmed him and, suddenly, he found himself throwing himself into the breach. "Would you ever. . ."

He stopped himself. What was he doing? He was mad.

She arched a brow. "Do not be afraid, Edward. We must be past all of that. For did we not say no more lies? If we are afraid to say what is in our minds and hearts then are we still not lying to each other by omission?"

At the rightness of her words, he took his courage in his hands. "All I wish is to spend the rest of my days with you. You are my happiness. My life has been bleak without you. You are the sun upon my heart. All else is shadow."

"Tell me what it is you envision," she urged gently. "Tell me what you dream of for yourself."

"My dream?" he echoed, half-terrified, half-soaring with hope. "The dream I have tortured myself

with for thousands of nights but even more so since your return?"

She nodded.

"I wish us to be together, to grow together, to face this world together," he proclaimed. "I wish to be your husband if you would allow it."

She blinked. "You wish to marry?"

He nodded.

"Truly?" she asked, her voice low with surprise.

"I do." He swallowed. Now that he had said it, there was no going back. So he ventured further. "I wish children. I never thought I could. Not after what happened, but. . ."

"Edward," she said softly. "I do not know that I can ever marry."

He stopped, his stomach dropping. "I see."

"It is not because I do not hold deep affection for you. But as a woman, my entire independence can vanish in matrimony," she explained gently and without acrimony. "I would become your property. All that is mine would become yours. Any children I would have would become yours."

He nodded. "I understand."

"Do you?" she asked as she lifted his hand and placed it on her cheek. Then slowly, she turned her lips to his palm.

"It is a great deal to ask," he said, touched by her gesture.

"It is, but I promise you this," she said as she continued to hold his hand. "I will think on it."

"You will?" he gasped, astonished that she had not declined the proposition entirely.

She smiled. "I will. But promise me this."

He waited, his entire world off balance awaiting her request.

"Promise me that my answer will not end what we have now," she pleaded. "For you have awakened my heart again, too. I never thought to feel as I do. It is only you who makes me feel so entirely alive. Can that be enough?"

"Yes," he said firmly, even as his heart sank, even as a moment of shadow passed over him. But he would not allow his dream to ruin their reality. For he would not be a fool again. He had Emmaline in his arms. How could that ever not be enough?

So, he cupped her face with his palm and kissed her tenderly, determined that she know the depths of his feeling for her.

As they lay back on the blanket on the heather, entwined in each other's arms, he knew he was the luckiest man in the world because she loved him.

Chapter 17

The Notorious Madame T has been seen frequently in the company of a certain Lord H, the owner of one of London's most infamous clubs.

Their names were in every paper in London. Almost every day. Once again, they were on the tips of everyone's tongues. But it wasn't poison that was being spread. It was delicious gossip that all seemed to savor and marvel at.

Even so, Emmaline did not care. Not one whit. For she had found that after being exposed to so much scandal, being linked to the man she loved could not shake her.

Besides, she did not have a reputation to lose any longer. So many of the ladies of the *ton* had lovers. Many were open secrets. She had no intention of keeping secrets. After all, she was an actress. She could bloody well do as she liked.

If she was never invited into another ballroom, she would not cry. Much to her amazement, her invitations had actually increased. She and Edward were a curiosity.

"You, dear girl, look as if you have seen heaven's gate," Roddy teased mercilessly as he flung himself into the wood chair before his dressing room mirror.

She grinned. "Oh, I have."

"Let the angels sing!" Roddy cheered happily. "It surely was bliss given the look upon your face."

"Were you so very certain I had not seen it before?" she asked. He was so terribly naughty, but she adored Roddy's good heart. For he truly cared about his friends.

He plunked his chin on his hand and gave her a knowing look. "What do you take me for, sweet young woman? I know a tulip from a turnip."

"Are you comparing me to a root vegetable?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Indeed, no, but you were certainly unearthed. Now, you blossom."

"Thank goodness you have not taken to writing plays," she drawled. "Your prose would be a travesty."

Roddy tsked. "You adore it, my darling. I know you do! Now, you did, of course, take the proper precautions."

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Roddy turned to her, mouth agape. "You are not some ignorant house maid, Emmaline Trent. Tell me you took measures to ensure you would not increase."

Her eyes widened.

Roddy rolled his eyes and sighed with resignation. "Dear girl, for all that you have a reputation for sin, you really are the perfect innocent."

"I would not go that far," she countered.

"I would." Roddy shook his head at her. "Any courtesan could have told you. . . I could have told you."

She scowled at him. "I did not have a vinegar sponge at hand."

He huffed. "I do hope you have a spot in Italy picked out for when you no longer fit your costumes."

She gasped. "You assume—"

“You’re a woman. He’s a man.” Roddy shrugged. “You have tuppé. There is a natural result from such goings-on and pleasure is not always it.”

“Roddy!”

“Do not act the miss with me,” he returned. “I am your friend. And I would not see you ill prepared.”

She paused. Of course she should have given such a thing thought. She knew many women that had children out of wedlock. Wasn’t she even preparing to help those women who had no recourse?

But her own inclination and passion had driven the thought from her mind. . . Or was it simply that she had not cared or minded the possibility of a child with Edward?

Did she wish a child with him? The thought gave her sudden pause. She must have secretly been perfectly at ease with it, for she did not think she could have allowed herself to be swept up so thoroughly if she was not.

“You are well and truly gone, are you not?” Roddy sighed. “Well, I do hope he’s no longer a bounder.”

“He’s not,” she protested. “Not in the slightest. Well, perhaps a trifle. But I like him for that little bit.”

“Is he so changed?” Roddy queried through narrowed eyes.

She considered her answer, for she did not wish to sound like a besotted bit of lace. “I think he was always a good man, a misguided man, and he has learned the error of his ways.”

“You are most forgiving. And I am glad. We should not live in misery if we wish happiness.”

“I agree.” She paused and looked to her mirror, studying her own face with far too much focus. “He asked me marry him.”

“Do tell!” Roddy squealed as he picked up his grease paint. “Will you risk being denounced at the altar again?”

She winced. “I thought you just said the past—”

“I didn’t say to be a fool.”

She frowned. “So, you think I should not marry him.”

“I think you should be very careful,” Roddy replied gently. “For your heart is full just now, overruling your head. Then again, you have let your head rule for overlong. Do you trust him?”

She considered this. The truth was she had never not trusted Edward. He had never lied to her. He had never tricked her. *He* had been tricked. Horribly. And it had caused him to do the most terrible thing.

It had been the pain caused by his actions that she had not been able to forget.

Really, it was Lord Conrade she wished great ill.

She didn’t even loathe John who had started it all. He, too, had been hurt and betrayed by those who should have loved him. John’s own misdeeds had been borne out of the pain of being a most abused bastard son. But Lord Conrade had acted out of sheer cruelty when he had seduced her cousin and claimed it had been she. He was a man without morals or remorse.

“What will you do?” Roddy asked as he began to apply his makeup.

“I shall savor this happiness.”

“Very wise.” Roddy nodded. “I am sure the answer will come to you. When do you see him again?”

“After tonight’s performance,” she said brightly.

Roddy pursed his lips which were partially rouged. "My, he does like the theater now. I do not think he has missed a performance."

"He has not," she confirmed, most proud of the way Edward supported her endeavors.

"And what will you tell our dear Hart? Yea or nay?"

Emmaline breathed slowly as she opened her own rouge pot. "I do not know."

"Whatever you do," Roddy said with a flourish of his charcoal stick, "require a contract! Always require a contract, darling."

Emmaline laughed, but she understood his meaning. As she went to the work of smoothing her grease paint, she pondered the possibility. Could she do it? Could she marry Edward? Did she wish to?

She certainly wished to spend the rest of her days with him. Of that, she was growing ever more certain. If they did have a child, bastardy was nothing she'd wish on her child. Oh, she'd manage, and she would shower such a child with love. But could she deny a child those advantages? The world could be most cruel. The way John had been treated for years was evidence of it.

Luckily, she was not required to make her decision immediately and, more to the point, Edward was content to wait which only made her admire him more. He had not pressed since the day he had asked her in Scotland. And every day since, he had shown her his love with notes, books, flowers, poetry, and good conversation.

He'd found her an exceptional man of business to begin her own charitable establishment and had recommended an architect to design it.

Soon, she'd meet with Mrs. Darby to select a suitable staff. And Edward *had* attended every single performance that had taken place in her theater, always sitting in his box and standing at the end. But he never made her feel as though she could not mingle with guests afterwards. He was content to love her but not own her.

Not once had he shown a shade of jealousy.

Still, her mind rebelled and even her heart had not been entirely able to quell its protestations.

Could she marry? Could she dare?

She felt certain that, soon, she would have an answer for him and whatever it was, she knew he would accept it. And that? That was a very good thing, indeed, for she could no longer imagine her life without him.

Chapter 18

“Mon, are ye no’ sick to death of the theater as of yet?”

Edward laughed at Clyde as they made their way out of the Maiden’s Legs into the winding warren of London’s East End.

“Will ye truly go *again*?”

“Yes,” Edward replied happily. He loved to see Emmaline in her element, for she glowed upon the boards. The audience hung upon her every word.

Night was falling and, in this part of town, there were no lamps to light the narrow ways. Only the faint red tinge of dusk lit their path.

The hour was not too late for him to cross towards Covent Garden and he would make the curtain for Emmaline’s performance just in time. He had not been able to turn an invitation down from Clyde for a few drinks beforehand. After all, the man was responsible for Edward’s unexpected joy.

“I will happily sit in my box every night if it means she spends the rest of the evening with me,” Edward informed him. “And the daytime, too.”

“Yer business will fall to rack and ruin,” Clyde declared dramatically.

“Did you not say I should leave it to my man of business?” Edward reminded. “He is quite skilled. In all events, I still spend a good deal of time at the club. Her nearness now is quite a fortunate thing.”

“Curses have turned into blessings?” Clyde asked as he swung his cane.

Edward smiled, a true smile. One untouched by irony or bitterness. “More than I could ever count.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“How did you know to invite her?” Edward suddenly asked.

“The look in yer eye, mon,” Clyde said with a sly grin. “Ye were as sick as a moon calf. I either had to invite her or put ye out of yer misery. I had a feeling she had the same feelings for ye. If she’d truly hated ye, she never would have bought a building near yers.”

Edward laughed. “You are a wiser man than I.”

“Was there ever any question?”

As they strode down a narrow street, a flash of white caught Edward’s eye from a small close. His head jerked slightly towards it.

But not in time.

Lord Conrade darted from the passage and drove a knife deep into Edward’s side.

“How’s that, you bastard?” Conrade snarled. “Talk of killing me in an alley, did you?”

The Duke of Clyde whipped up his walking cane but before he could attack, a pack of men descended upon him, their bodies a jumble of jerking black and gray clothes.

Edward could not react. He could not move. He could do nothing but feel the blade embedded in his flesh.

The pain of it was white and cold. He blinked as Conrade yanked the blade free.

“Your family has ruined my life and now I’ve ruined yours. Again.”

Conrade whipped back down the small close, his coat flapping behind him.

The laughing conversation he’d had with Clyde about killing Conrade in an alley came back to

him in a flash. Had he waited for them and overheard it? He must have. . . And he was going to die all because of a jest.

Blood gushed from his side as he spun towards Clyde who was fighting like a tiger, fist flying, cane brandishing.

Edward stumbled, his boot catching on a loose cobble as he attempted to help his friend.

But as soon as the attackers saw his blood-soaked shirt, one of them whistled and they disappeared into the night as quickly as they'd appeared.

Edward blinked. The alley grew dark and his vision swam. He fell to his knees. They cracked against the mud-covered cobbles.

He sucked in ragged breaths as he collapsed onto the ground.

Somehow, he found himself in Clyde's arms, a cloak pressed to his side.

He could not understand the shouted words surrounding him.

But as he felt himself slipping away, he grabbed Clyde's arm and gritted, "Tell Emmaline. Tell her—"

"Tell her yer damned self," Clyde growled. "Ye hold on, mon. Ye bloody well hold on."

He tried to nod but, even as he did, he felt his hand slip from Clyde's sleeve and the world went black.

Chapter 19

Emmaline paced back and forth in the wings.

She'd made her entrance and Edward had not been in his box. When she'd looked up as she always did, her heart had nearly stopped at the sight of the empty chair.

The scene taking place upon the stage was one with only men, something that happened quite often in Shakespeare.

She should not have expected him, she told herself. He'd simply been delayed. Or he'd been invited somewhere he could not refuse. After all, he'd been here every night. Of course, something might have occurred to detain him. Or . . . Or was he discontent with her prevarication about marriage?

No, Edward would not be so small-minded.

Something had happened. Good God. Something had happened. She felt it in her sinew.

She'd never left a performance, but she was growing frantic without news.

She turned to Andrew, the young stagehand who was so very capable, and whispered, "Any messages at all?"

He shook his head.

Twisting her hands she walked back and forth by the ropes twisted about intricate rigging which could fly set pieces onto the stage.

This was no small, petty thing. No lover's quarrel or dismay. She knew it. Edward was above such things. He would never intentionally cause her distress.

A sudden commotion came up from near the back of the wings and she jolted to it.

Quickly, she darted towards the small cluster of people whispering passionately. Her blood turned to ice. For one of the stagehands was whispering urgently to John Forthryte, Edward's bastard brother.

The floor swayed, feeling as if it had dropped out from underneath her feet. For John looked most grave.

In fact, she'd only seen the saucy John look thus once and that had been the night he had exposed the ruse he had played on his brothers which had revealed their aristocratic arrogance and cruelty.

She ran to him. "Where is Edward?" she choked.

"You must come," John said, his voice breaking.

She nodded. Without thinking twice, she turned to the stagehand, Andrew, who was in charge of the running of props backstage. "Find Joan. She must go on at once."

Andrew gaped then nodded.

It would be the understudy's chance to prove her metal, but Emmaline thought nothing of that as she joined John. "Take me to him," she demanded.

He whisked her out the back, their steps racing along the rough wood stairs.

A coach awaited them with the ducal crest of Huntsdown.

As soon as they were inside, sitting upon the green velvet squabs, she grabbed John's hand. "You must tell me what has happened."

A muscle tightened in his jaw. "You must be brave, Emmaline."

"I am brave and well you know it." She leaned towards him. "Now, tell me."

"He has been stabbed."

“My God,” she gasped.

“The surgeons are with him but he has lost a great deal of blood,” John said in a stunned rush. “If it were not for the Duke of Clyde’s quick actions, he would have died in the gutter.”

“We must hope,” she said immediately, even as she felt like casting up her accounts.

John looked away, his free hand balling into a fist.

“What is it?” she demanded.

“It is my fault,” John bit out before he made a shocking cry of anger.

“How can it be?” she commanded.

“Lord Conrade,” John said, lost in his fears. “The very tool I used to hurt James, to hurt Garret and Edward. . . And you by default. . . It is he who stabbed Edward.”

“Conrade,” she whispered. “I thought he was gone from England.”

“We all thought so,” John said, his gaze wild. “How I wish he could have been banished.”

“He’d committed no real crime,” she said softly. “Only cruelty.”

John nodded but, to her shock, tears shone in his eyes.

“Damnation,” he growled. “He can’t. . . He can’t die. I love the fool.”

She squeezed John’s hand. “As do I.”

“Emmaline, I am so sorry,” John lamented.

“Quiet now,” she soothed. “I will have none of it. John, we are victims of the past. And you did what you did for good reasons. I cannot blame or hate you. And you must not blame or hate yourself now. Were we not in accord when I left London years ago?”

He nodded as he blinked his tears away.

“Then we must be in accord now. For we will be family.”

His gaze widened.

“I won’t let him go,” she vowed. “Not ever again.”

Unless he was taken from her. Anguish coiled in her belly.

Edward, a fool? No, that was her. For she’d had happiness and what had she done? She’d prevaricated. She’d done just what she’d sworn not to do. She’d been afraid. She’d chosen fear over love.

How she wished she could go back to that Highland hill and say yes, again and again.

What if now she never could?

No. She would not believe it. She could not. She refused to believe her love had been ended in a back alley by a man not worthy of the mud Edward had no doubt fallen in.

Edward Hart was going to live. And she was going to be his. Emmaline repeated it again and again to herself, for surely if she said it enough times, she could make it true.

Chapter 20

Emmaline lingered in the doorway, terrified by the hushed tones of the sick room.

A fire flickered in the hearth, its flames bathing the room in red.

A surgeon lingered over Edward and all of his brothers were in the corner looking as if death were waiting to pay call.

Their horror washed over her and, for one brief moment, she despaired. She bit back a sob. It could not be true. She would not allow it to be true.

Shaking her head, and the despair away, she squared her shoulders. She would not give way. She and Edward had survived too much. They had suffered too much. It could not end like this.

She strode across the room and, without waiting permission, she knelt beside the bed. Her skirts belled about her as she gently leaned against the bed.

The surgeon's gaze snapped to her. "Who are you, madam?"

"I'm going to be his wife," she returned, slipping her hand around Edward's still one. She did not even look at the man who would hopefully save Edward's life.

The only place she could look was at Edward. His eyes were closed, his lashes dark crescents on his shockingly pale cheeks.

His naked chest, save for a large white bandage about his middle, rose and fell in rough draws. How had her beautiful, darling Edward been hurt so gravely? For in her eyes, he had been untouchable. Yet, here he was.

"He will live," she said firmly.

"I'm glad you are confident, young woman," the surgeon replied as he stood. "The blade struck between his ribs and did not penetrate any vital organs. I've stitched the wound. Now, we must wait and see if he will survive the blood loss and any potential infection."

"He will," she decreed.

"Emmaline," James ventured as he crossed to her. "I am so sorry—"

"There is nothing to be sorry for. He will be fine," she countered firmly, even as her eyes swam with tears. But she would not succumb.

"I've done all I can," the surgeon said as he went and washed his hands in a porcelain bowl near the fire. "Give him water or broth. Keep him cool. That is all we can do now. Besides changing his bandage and keeping an eye out for infection." The surgeon paused. "If he survives the night, he has a good chance."

With that, the older man crossed to the duke and whispered in his ear. James nodded tightly and the surgeon left, his footsteps barely making a sound.

Emmaline looked up at the grim faces of the Hart brothers. "I'd like a moment with him, please."

None of them argued. They all looked heartbroken. But she would not allow that to affect her. She could not.

James touched her shoulder tentatively. "We are here for you. Please know that."

"Thank you, Your Grace," she managed, though words could barely pass her tight throat.

Silently, they left her alone with Edward.

She waited several seconds then squeezed his hand and leaned over him. She stroked back a lock of his hair from his brow. "Now, you listen to me, Edward. You are going to live. You are going to

live and we are going to be married. And have a host of children. Who knows, perhaps I am carrying your child now," she declared, determined to convince his soul to fight.

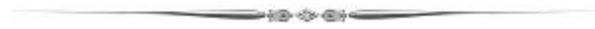
She bent her head, refusing to shed tears.

Instead, she pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "I love you. I will love you forever and you must not leave me again," she said, desperate. "We cannot be parted by circumstance again. *I will not allow it.*"

A faint tightening of his hand around hers caused her to gasp.

"Edward? Edward?" she asked. "I know you hear me. You will never leave me again. Do you hear?"

"N-never," he whispered so quietly she might have imagined it. But that single word gave her hope and she held on to his hand, determined to never, ever let him go.



The night was hell.

The brothers came and went quietly, helping her to keep the vigil.

She cared not that she was still wearing her costume, or that her back ached with the position she was forced to hold to keep his hand in hers. Nothing mattered but Edward and willing him to stay.

All through the night, she spoke to him. She spoke of the life they would have, the children who would grace their lives.

Of the plays she would perform and the ways they could improve his club.

She listed the many charitable works they could begin. *Together.*

She did not stop, even when her voice grew hoarse.

Well past midnight, a sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead.

The terror of it nearly undid her and Garret passed her cool cloths to keep his fever at bay.

When the first rays of dawn crept through the window and over the soft blue carpet, his breathing eased and the ruby color of his cheek faded to a more comfortable hue.

She pressed her head to the bed, still speaking to him, still urging him to stay with her.

"Y-you have quite a-a list of things to. . . Do."

Her heart leapt and, immediately, she looked up into his opened eyes, hardly daring to believe she wasn't dreaming.

"Yes," she answered as she caught full sight of him. "I have no intention of doing them by myself."

He licked his lips. "I won't do them with you. . . Out of pity."

"Edward," she said, her body nearly shaking with the feelings overflowing her being. "Last night, I was afraid you were going to take my heart with you. Now, I have an answer to your question."

"Which was that?" he asked, his pale lips parting in an attempt at humor.

She smiled with him, loving him more for his bravery in the face of such a night. Still, tears slipped down her cheeks, now that he had opened his eyes.

"Marriage," she replied, sniffing. "You silly man."

"Don't cry, my love," he said softly. "You don't have to answer now."

Even now, he was trying to think of her. Of what she wanted. Well, she was ready to tell him exactly what that was. "I will marry you today, tomorrow, every day, Edward," she pledged. "If you want me."

“Emmaline,” he rasped, “I have wanted you every day that I have known you, and I will never stop. Not even a knife can stop me.”

“Be my husband?” she asked simply.

Slowly, he lifted her hand to his lips. He kissed her hand though his arm shook with the effort.

“With all my heart, Emmaline. With all my heart.”

At last, Emmaline truly allowed herself to cry. Tears of joy.

Chapter 21

Edward stood by the altar of the small nave on the Duke of Clyde's lands, a cane in his right hand. It was damned annoying that he needed it, but need it he did. He'd all but recovered but, every now and then, he still lost his footing. But with Emmaline at the helm, he would be fully mended soon.

Every day, she had sat with him and read to him. They had covered almost all the literature written in the last three years. He found he quite liked *A Lady* very much. Whoever she was, she had a most excellent sense of humor. Everyone really should read *Pride and Prejudice*, he had surmised.

Though he had touched death's door, the days after his near miss were halcyon. For little had disturbed his time with Emmaline.

Due to Clyde's quick action, Conrade had been caught trying to flee out of Portsmouth.

Currently, he was in Fleet Street prison awaiting trial which would almost certainly lead to a verdict of a drop and quick stop at the gallows.

Arguing with a witness who happened to be a duke would be impossible. Conrade's impulsive, selfish cruelty had ruined his and Emmaline's lives nearly twice. It had certainly ended his own.

"You're not going to do anything silly, are you?" Garret asked behind him.

"That is not a jest in good taste," Edward replied.

"Perhaps not," Garret said jovially. "But I couldn't resist."

"Try."

Garret grinned. "I'm delighted to see you renounce the title of bachelor. It never did suit you."

Edward smiled at his brother. "I couldn't agree more."

James nodded. "Indeed, happiness is in the getting of a marvelous wife."

John rolled his eyes. "You were all loath to wed. Every man jack of you."

"That is not accurate," replied James.

John snorted. "You *had* to marry to get an heir. You didn't particularly wish to."

"Well, that is more accurate," James agreed, a pleased smile softening his usually proper expression.

"And you, John?" Edward asked. "Your thoughts on marriage?"

"Bliss, old boy. Sheer bliss." John winked. "If you pick the right one or she picks you. And you have. Without question."

"When do you think Clyde shall discover the conjugal club?" Garret asked, fiddling with the flower in his buttonhole.

"Clyde?" James scoffed. "He's declared himself a bachelor and I believe him. He shall never wed."

Just as Edward was about to wax on about the dangers of the word *never*, the doors at the back of the church opened, the organ struck up and the bridal march began.

It was all he could do not to turn around and catch sight of her.

But he held his ground, just as he was supposed to. And once he finally felt her presence, he turned.

His heart swelled with awe and love. Emmaline stood in a soft yellow gown, her hair pinned with white roses. She beamed at him.

"Who gives this woman away?" the vicar intoned.

“I do,” the Duke of Clyde said grandly and then he took a pleased step to the side. In fact, Clyde had been very pleased for days, telling everyone he had arranged the whole thing.

Which. . . He had.

Edward took Emmaline’s hand.

As she came to stand beside him, she whispered out of the corner of her mouth, “You don’t intend to make a bolt for it, do you?”

“Emmaline!” Edward could hardly believe her sense of humor, but good Lord, he did love her for it.

The vicar blinked and began the service in a voice that could have put the congregation to sleep. But Edward did not care, for he only had eyes for Emmaline.

“You are absolutely terrible,” he whispered.

“And you adore it,” she whispered back.

“I do. I adore everything about you.”

She glanced up at him, her eyes shining with love. “I’m glad because you’re going to have all of me.”

“Forever,” he said, leaning his head towards her, feeling as if the happiest years of his life were finally about to begin.

Epilogue

When she gave birth, Emmaline did not go to Italy. Instead, she and Edward took a small house in Scotland near both John and the Duke of Clyde.

The house was fairly full what with herself, Edward, the midwife, and servants. Mrs. Barton had come to keep her entertained and because she had never witnessed a birth and very much wished to do so. And, of course, Harriet had insisted on being present because a woman who actually had given birth should be present to assist the lady who had not. Or so Harriet had adamantly proclaimed.

Emmaline had been very grateful for so much goodwill and friendship.

In the last several weeks, she had become accustomed to a lack of sleep and her current state of exhaustion. Not because she did not have help, for Edward was a dear and always at her side, but because she had managed the remarkable task of giving birth not to one, but *two* babies.

Rose and Adrian were feisty, hungry bundles of joy. She had been determined to nurse them herself rather than pass them off to a wet nurse. It had been a wonderful and somewhat overwhelming experience.

Every day had been better than the last.

Now, as she sat outside on a blanket in the garden, the bens beckoned in the distance like ancient guardians waiting to bloom again with purple heather. The first breeze of summer danced over her skin.

Was there anyone in the world as fortunate as she?

Emmaline ticked Rose's foot and the baby made sweet gurgling sounds.

Adrian had the good sense to be asleep.

Edward, too. Father and son were curled up together, eyes closed, dreaming.

She and Rose were making great big eyes at each other, reveling in the discoveries of hands and rings.

Harriet and Mrs. Barton were inside overseeing the astonishingly vast amounts of laundry. Mrs. Barton was reading to make the task pass quickly and Emmaline could hear her reading *The Country Wife's* most wickedly funny lines from the open window.

So much pain had touched them. But now?

Now, they were surrounded by love.

Curses had turned to blessings and Emmaline knew one thing deep in her heart. While she and Edward were still notorious, as they always would be, they were the *luckiest*, notorious pair in all the land.

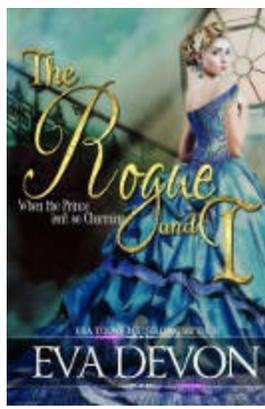
The End

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[The Rogue and I](#)

A Lady Ready for Battle:

Miss Harriet Manning once made the mistake of falling completely, totally, and irreversibly in love with a duke's son. It's a mistake she won't repeat twice. Truly. Especially since he abandoned her just when they were about to elope to Gretna Green. Five years later, Harriet hasn't forgotten the way

Lord Garret's smoldering gaze and wicked sense of humor touched her soul. Still, there's no way she'll forgive the traitorous libertine, no matter how he stirs her passions. Now, Harriet is determined to show him she doesn't care, and never did, by making merry right under his nose but a tragic turn of events at her cousin's wedding has her wondering if just maybe, love deserves one last chance.

A Lord Who Lost His Heart:

Lord Garret Hart, second son of a duke and now brother to the present Duke of Huntsdown, is never ever EVER getting married. Bachelorhood is for him. After all, women are the very devil. Especially one woman. Miss Harriet Manning is Garret's own personal Medusa and she has turned his heart to stone. Indeed she has, but not before she absolutely ripped it to shreds, leaving him a complete wreck. Nothing will ever induce him to matrimony or nauseating protestations of boyish love again. But when

he is forced into close proximity at his brother's wedding with the woman who first taught him to dream and see the world as a wondrous place, sparks flash and passions explode. Still, Harriet is not to be trusted. She callously betrayed him once. So how can he ever allow himself another chance at love when love always seems to hurt so much?

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[If the Rogue Fits](#)

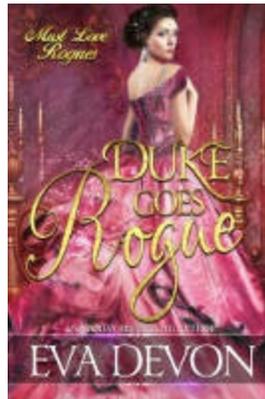
A Misunderstood Shrew:

Lady Margaret is infamous throughout London as the most volatile and shrewish of all young ladies. After four years on the market, with a vast fortune, her determination to remain unwed is legendary. Having a decidedly plain face, Margaret has learned that men only want her for her money, and the unkindness of those around her has led her to protect her heart with a cutting tongue and willingness to shove silly young men into orchestra pits. When she meets the Earl of Carlyle, the beautiful and seductive lord, who makes her body yearn for his touch, seems like he might be different than the rest. But when Margaret finds out the earl has been less than honest in his pursuit for her hand, will she ever be able to forgive him and find a way to love?

A Lord Who Has No Wish to Tame Her:

William Deveraux, Earl of Carlyle, is in desperate need of funds. His father, a ruinous gambler, has driven the earldom, its estate, and his tenants, into destitution. There's only one thing for William to do. Wed and wed well. Undaunted that the only available lady with a sufficient fortune at present is Margaret the Mad, he's determined to win her by any means. . . Even by deceit. But when Margaret discovers his lies, he finds he's fallen for the plain yet oh so witty woman who is his savior in many ways. Will he ever be able to win her heart and convince her that she is the most wonderful woman in the world? Or will her years of being treated foully by society, ensure Margaret never lets him into her heart?

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[Duke Goes Rogue](#)

A Duke Who Demands Perfection:

James Hart, Duke of Hunsdown, is ruled by duty and honor. All his life he's been driven to be the antithesis of his father. Every choice he has made is weighed by whether it is the right thing to do.

When scandal does brush his ducal role, he only works harder to ensure that he hurts no one and nothing by his power. In his noble work for the impoverished, Hunsdown comes to rely on and value his new secretary, Mr. Stanhope. But when the duke discovers his secretary is a woman in disguise he knows he must, for propriety's sake, send her away. Yet, his admiration now has turned to passion.

Now, he longs to possess the young woman who has broken society's rules. Will he yield to temptation or cut the rebellious young lady from his heart?

A Lady Who Breaks Every Rule:

Miss Olivia Stanhope has known a life full of adventure aboard her father's ship. But when she tragically finds herself alone in the world, she is left with few options. When forced between giving

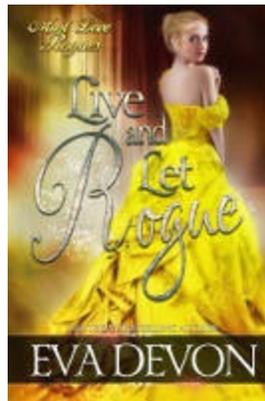
up her independence or duplicitously working in the Duke of Huntsdown's employ, she chooses the latter. But from the moment they meet, she cannot deny her feelings. Falling in love with her employer isn't the safest thing she can do, but when he discovers she's a woman, Olivia knows that she will do anything to have him.

And a passion that cannot be denied:

When the duke insists that they must do the right thing, Olivia refuses to give into a life of propriety and decides to help her duke go rogue.

Will these two passionate people learn to fight together or will they be torn apart by the rules of the ton?

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[**Live and Let Rogue**](#)

When the Prince isn't so charming, you can either Live and Let Rogue. . . Or bring him to his knees.

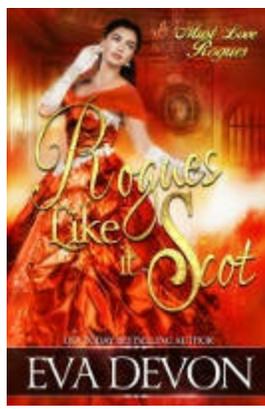
A Rogue Who Demanded Revenge:

John Forthryte, the newly made Earl of Mooreland, is an absolute bastard. Born the illegitimate son of a duke, hate has filled John's heart since he watched his mother die in harrowing poverty. Once a small boy, forced to survive alone, John desired only vengeance. But after years of planning, successful feels hollow. Worse, he's hurt a young woman in his relentless pursuit. Much to John's shock, that woman awakens his cold heart. Now, he's determined to see her happy. . . Without him. For a bastard and blackhearted rogue could never deserve her love.

A Lady Who Loves Life:

Meredith Trent, known as Merry, loves life. Perhaps too much, for her wild love nearly caused her ruin. When the man she loathes shows up at her isolated home in the Highlands, offering to atone for his role in her fall, Merry tells him to go to the devil. But the more time she spends with John Forthryte, the more she sees he is a heartbroken man longing for love. When he fights again and again for her happiness, she cannot help but fall in love with the wicked man. But can a man as broken as John ever abandon his past and choose love?

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[Rogues Like it Scot](#)

A Lord Who Loathes London:

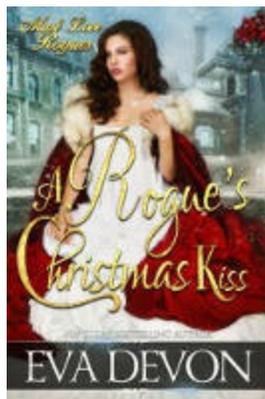
Years ago, after having his heart and soul destroyed, Lord Damian Peterboro turned his back on society and left for parts unknown. Now, he's returned, the rudest, most scandalous, most shocking man to come out of the wilds. An avid adventurer, determined to preserve the antiquities of the old worlds, Damian needs funds badly. What better way to get them than to marry? But when he meets

Lady Andromeda, he cannot deny that she is the most intelligent woman he's met in London who makes his blood sing with desire. But can he chance his heart again to love or will he disappear as he did once before?

A Lady Who Will Not Wed:

Marriage almost broke Lady Andromeda, sister to the Duke of Clyde. A wealthy widow, she has every intention of enjoying her position as one of the ton's most glittering hostesses. But when Lord Peterboro crashes one of her salons she is both shocked and absolutely drawn to the wild and scandalous man. With each day that passes, she finds that he understands her as no one ever has. Yet, can she trust him with her tragic secret? Or will she cast away her only chance at love.

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[A Rogue's Christmas Kiss](#)

Bah and a hum bug:

Sebatian Rutherford, the new Earl of Gray, has no desire to settle down. Ever. The only thing he dislikes more than the idea of taking over his recently inherited earldom, and all its responsibilities, is Christmas. So, when he agrees to an arranged marriage to the former earl's daughter, he plans on a quick wedding and a quicker return to his adventures abroad. Surely, even a hint of Christmas cheer

won't need to be shared? But when his clever new wife, Lady Marabelle begins to thaw his heart, he finds that not only is family a joy, but Christmas may be the best season to lose one's heart.

Deck the Halls:

Lady Marabelle loves Christmas. She loves everything about it. So, when she faces her first Christmas since the death of her beloved father, married to a man she's never met, she decides to make sure that the Christmas hating new Earl must be taught the spirit of the season. But with each day toward Christmas that comes her way, she begins to find that perhaps a marriage of convenience can be a marriage of the heart and a veritable Christmas miracle.

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Don't forget to try The Dukes' Club Series too!



[Once Upon A Duke](#)

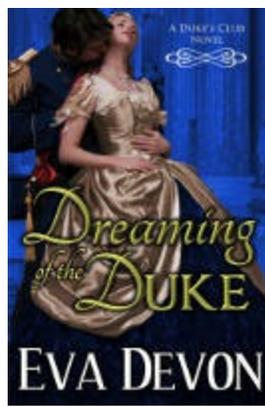
What a Widow Wants:

Everything is going swimmingly for Kathryn Darrell. She's got an annuity of a hundred thousand a year, her lecherous-heart breaking husband has had the good graces to pop off, and best of all, she has her freedom—Something she has every intention of reveling in to the fullest. And who better to revel with than Ryder Blake, the infamous Duke of Darkwell?

A Duke's Desire:

Ryder Blake, Duke of Darkwell, known as the Duke of Debauchery, is certain he will never love again. His heart lies buried with his wife and he has vowed to never give more than his body to a woman. But when Kathryn shows up on his doorstep, quite literally, demanding he show her the ways of London, he finds that his heart longs to love once again.

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[Dreaming of The Duke](#)

A duchess who desires her freedom.

Cordelia Eversleigh, Duchess of Hunt, has spent her entire life in Egypt, sifting through the sands, cavorting with the local tribes, and uncovering the tombs of glorified ancient Egyptian accountants.

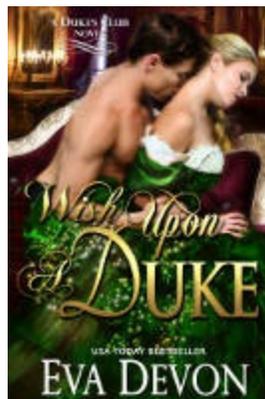
Now, all she wishes is to go to Paris and study the mysteries of the hieroglyph. There's only one problem. She needs to annul her marriage to the husband she has never met. But when she comes face to face with the infamous duke, he stirs a wicked desire in her nature that shocks her to the tips of her oh so practical toes.

A duke longing to be tamed.

Born the second son, Jack Eversleigh, now the Duke of Hunt, has accepted he is going to be a terrible duke. Loving wine, women, and song, he knows there's only one thing to do. Live up to his debauched reputation. But when a young woman tracks him down in a London pub, prim, proper, and with a tongue that would make the devil envious, he is captivated. . . Until he discovers that she is his wife.

Can these two embrace an arranged marriage á la mode or will their stubborn minds conquer their passionate hearts?

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[Wish Upon A Duke](#)

A Widow Who Knows What She Wants:

Lady Imogen Cavendish loves making merry. After surviving years of marriage to an old man, having seized her freedom seems the only intelligent thing to have done. Even so, years of dancing her way through parties has lost its' luster and all she wants now is to spend most of the year on the small

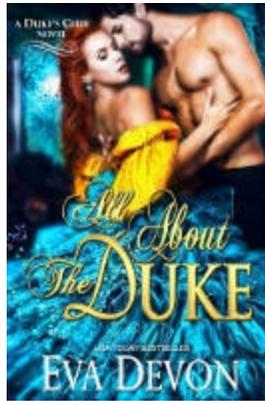
estate she's purchased in Scotland. There's just one thing. Her neighbor is an infuriating, superior, and exceptionally handsome duke!

An Arrogant Duke Who Knows It All:

Duncan Hamish Fergus, Tenth Duke of Blackburn, does everything right. Duty might as well be his middle name. After his father very nearly ruined his mother and sister's life, Duncan is determined to never let the family name be tarnished again. Sacrificing his own pleasure seems a small price to pay until he meets the mad capped English woman, Lady Cavendish. In all his years on the path of righteous, no woman has ever tempted him to stray into sin, but no woman has ever been as mischievous or voluptuous as his saucy sassenach neighbor.

Can Imogen teach the oh so proper duke how to have a little fun or will two hearts be broken by propriety?

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[All About the Duke](#)

A Lady Who Vows Never to Wed:

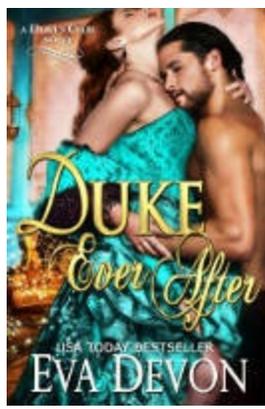
Lady Allegra Portmund knows the cost of marriage. After the death of her dearest and only sister, Allegra swears she will never suffer the same fate. She will not become a possession shaped and destroyed by a husband. So, when her parents insist she marry the man of their choosing, there is only one thing for Allegra to do. Run. But when she runs, determined to be free, she meets the Duke of Roth, a singular man who sees her unique and vital spirit. Now that her heart is awakened to the most dangerous longings for love, how will she resist the temptation to break her vow?

A Duke Ruled By Honor:

Nicholas Andrew Edward Forth, Duke of Roth, values family above everything else. Despite his wild reputation, having lost both of his parents when he was a child, his most secret wish is to have a family again. When he meets a young lady in disguise, Nicholas quickly realizes that she is unlike any woman he's ever met and is also the only woman for him. But when he discovers how quickly she has abandoned her own family, he doubts whether she is the exceptional woman he believed her to be.

Now, that he knows the truth about Allegra's past, will his own sense of honor destroy his only chance at happiness?

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[Duke Ever After](#)

A Duke With A Scandalous Secret:

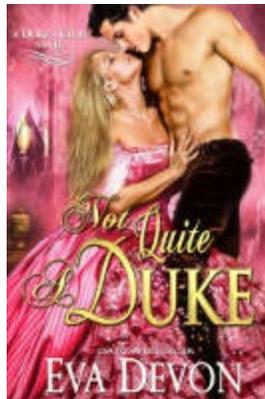
The Duke of Aston has always been the talk of the ton. Wild, passionate, and eccentric, women fall at his feet and gentlemen won't dare to meet him on the dueling ground. But the duke has a secret. A secret that could destroy his family. While the world sees him as a prince of the realm, he knows that in truth, he's worthless. So, when Lady Rosamund enters his life demanding he teach her the artful ways of seduction, he's happy to oblige until he realizes she is the best woman he has ever known and therefore a woman he can never have.

A Lady Who Won't Be Intimidated:

Lady Rosamund, only sibling of the Duke of Blackburn, is lonely. Raised in the remote glens of the Western Highlands, Rosamund has lived a sheltered life where only books and long walks have relieved her isolation. When she meets the Duke of Aston near her home, a man as delicious as the heroes she's read about, the passion that sparks between them is undeniable. Adventurous spirit that the duke is, Rosamund knows he's the man for her. But as she grows closer to the duke, opening her heart to him, his own heart closes.

Can she teach this tortured duke that he is worthy of love or will his past drive them apart forever?

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[Not Quite A Duke](#)

A Rake With A Broken Heart:

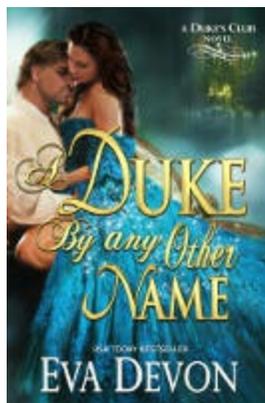
Deadly with a rapier and one of the most notorious rakes London has ever known, Lord Charles, twin brother of the Duke of Hunt, is hiding a dark secret. Wine, women, and song can't drown his pain but

when he wins Barrow House in a night of gambling, he finds that he's also won an entanglement with the owner's niece, Lady Patience. Prickly, forthright, and clad in black from head to toe, she's the opposite of every thing he's ever desired in a woman and yet, Lord Charles is inexplicably drawn to her. When he discovers she has a secret just as serious and scandalous as his own, he knows marriage into his powerful family is the only thing that can rescue her. But can a rake take a chance at marriage and risk losing his heart?

A Lady in Disguise:

Lady Patience has no wish to be rescued but nor is she willing to give up her double life as the extremely successful author P. Auden. When her secret identity is exposed, she has no one to turn to but the rake who won her family house in a card game. But Lord Charles is all that she dislikes in a man. A womanizer and a gambler, she should abhor him. Only Lord Charles is not as simple as he seems. With each day she discovers the hidden depths and pain under his witty and cold exterior. And as she finds that underneath he is a good man nearly destroyed by a terrible secret, she cannot help but lose her heart to the rake who has sacrificed everything for his family's happiness. Can she save him from his past just as he has saved her? Or will the past claim them both and ruin their chance at love?

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[**A Duke By Any Other Name**](#)

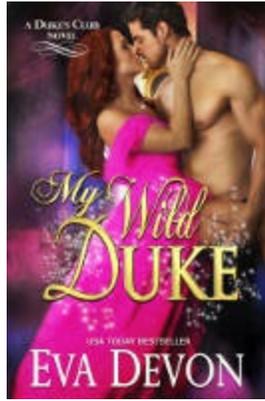
Her dance card is nearly full.

The only sister of the Duke of Hunt, Lady Gemma, is finally ready to settle down. After all, she's spent too many of her days frolicking all over town. As an Eversleigh, she's ready for an excellent match. Desiring a serious, reserved, and strong husband who can handle her antics, Gemma handpicks Captain Duke. Surely, she's selected the perfect man, but perfection may not be as it seems.

This pirate is treading on dangerous water.

Alexander Duke knows the violence of the seas, the brutality of humanity, and the dangers of fighting for a cause. He has no patience for a silly and persistent woman, who exudes more bubbles than a bottle of champagne. But when Lady Gemma turns on the charm, no man can resist her wiles, not even a rugged and courageous pirate. However, protecting his heart is Captain Duke's number one priority. When a scandalous event shocks his hardened soul, he's forced to take action, turning his back on his lifelong oath. Suddenly, he's asking for her hand and putting both of their hearts on the line. Can two stubborn people relinquish control to know true love or will they rock the boat too violently to find their happy ever after?

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[My Wild Duke](#)

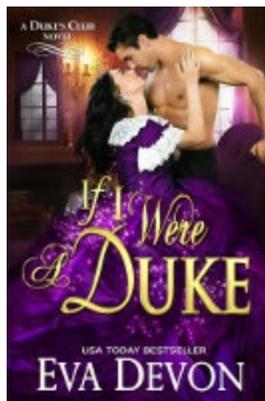
An Unlucky Lady:

Lady Beatrix Westport was once destined to be the most successful debutant the ton has ever seen. Now, it is all she can do to recover from the brutal coaching accident which killed her entire family. Now, she has only one purpose. Continue her family line and secure her father's earldom. When she meets Captain Duke, who awakens her heart and desires, she knows he's the best choice for husband. But will her dedication to her duty destroy her only chance at love?

A Wild Duke:

Captain Adam Duke loves adventure and justice. After spending his entire life working to free slaves, he comes to London to open offices. When he meets the wounded Lady Beatrix, he immediately feels a deep connection to her and longs to free her from her pain. But he refuses to be just the stud she longs for. Can he convince her to choose a life of love and adventure or will her broken past drive them apart?

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[If I Were a Duke](#)

A Perfect Lady:

Lady Eleanor Paisley always does the right thing. After all, her work with the tenants on her guardian's land is the only thing that has made her lonely, orphaned life bearable. So, when she's informed she'd been matched with the new Duke of Ayr, a dissolute but oh so charming rake, she knows she can't say no, but she doesn't approve of her intended. Not at all. Yet, when she meets the

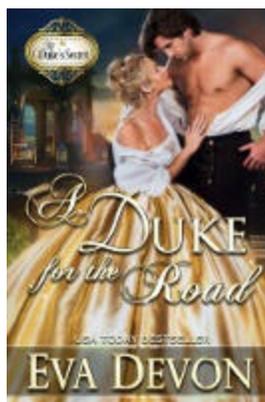
recently elevated Anthony Burke, she discovers that while he might be a man of sin, his heart is kinder than any she's ever met. But will a lifetime of loss prevent her from taking a chance at love with her handsome, seductive husband or will she give in to temptation?

A Charming Rake:

Anthony Burke hasn't always led a charmed life. Once, he lived in poverty and knew the violence this world has to offer. But now, ascending to the title of duke, he's as charming as they come, for he's never let the dark side of life get him down. So, when he is informed he's too marry the terribly proper Lady Eleanor, he's not thrilled, but being a man of optimism, he knows exactly what he must do. Seduce his own wife. When he discovers that behind her prim, distant facade is a woman suffering from too much loss, he vows to show her happiness and to teach her that love always triumphs in the end. But even Anthony's optimism might not win the day if Eleanor will not let him shine love into her life.

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[A Duke for the Road](#)

A Duke With A Secret:

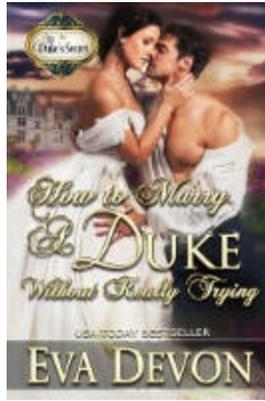
Robert Deverall, Duke of Blackstone, is cursed. Or so he thinks. Inheriting a dukedom bankrupted by his dissolute grandfather, father, and elder brother has made him determined that the male line will end with him. He refuses to allow any one else to suffer at the hands of a Deverall man. When he meets his childhood friend, Lady Harriet Cornwall, he is determined to stay away from her, despite the fact she makes his heart sing and his body ignite. When the two are caught in a compromising position, he has no choice but to marry the wild, independent Harry. But will his determination never to have children, and his fears about his family line, destroy their chance at love?

A Lady Determined to Unmask the Duke:

Lady Harriet Cornwall is determined to marry and quickly. After all, she loathes the uninspiring parties a proper unmarried lady can attend. No, she longs to be just like her mother, a beacon of culture, literature, and fun. And like her mother, she longs for a large family. When she meets Rob again, she can hardly believe the transformation from mischievous boy to sardonic and mysterious man. In the breath of a single dance, her heart is lost. From their very first kiss, she knows he is the one for her. But he has a dark secret. Will he push her away as he has done to everyone else? Or will

she be able to coax her dark duke back into the light to find love?

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[How to Marry a Duke Without Really Trying](#)

A Duke Determined to be Perfect:

George Cornwall, Duke of Harley, is a perfect duke in almost every way. . . Just as he promised his father he would be. There's only one problem. He doesn't have an heir. When he encounters his childhood friend, Lady Eglantine, again he immediately knows she will be the perfect duchess and mother of his children. There's only one thing. She refuses to marry him without love. He desires her, admires her, and longs to make her his, but George knows that something so wild as love might lead him from his path of perfection. Will he be able to let himself lose his heart or will his quest to be the perfect duke be his undoing?

A Lady Who Will Marry for Love:

Lady Eglantine Trewstowe is interested in only one thing when it comes to matrimony. Love. Having the good fortune to be an heiress, educated, and part of a loving family she's in no rush to throw herself onto the mart. No, Eglantine is quite happy to wait for an unremarkable match to a marvelous second son who loves his library as much as he loves her. But when the Duke of Harley decides she's the lady for him, even if he doesn't love her one little bit, she rejects his cold proposal. . . Even if she finds her dashed heart has been lost to him. Will her merry manner crack the duke's quest for perfection or will her chance at love vanish?

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