

HALIFAX HELLIONS BOOK ONE

IN WHICH
MARGO HALIFAX
EARNS HER
SHOCKING
REPUTATION

ALEXANDRA
VASTI



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Chapter 1

It was the rain that ruined Henry Mortimer's life.

Or possibly a cherry stem. The cherry stem had come first and therefore was chronologically more likely to have been the agent of his downfall.

He'd been twenty-one. Margo and Matilda had just made their debuts, and only as a favor to his best friend, Spencer, had he gone to the drawing room the morning after the eighteen-year-old twins' presentation at court. As far as he'd been concerned, the twins were Spencer's baby siblings, one more part of Spencer's earldom that he—a mere solicitor—would for better or worse never have to worry about.

He'd met the twins years prior when he'd followed Spencer home from Cambridge, and he remembered them mostly as skinny freckled redheads who'd climbed in Spencer's window in the middle of the night and tied him to the bedposts.

So he was not expecting to fall in love with Margo Halifax.

If he'd anticipated the cherry stem, he would never have called at Number Twelve Mayfair. Had he been able to predict the future, he would have moved to bloody France.

When he and Spencer strolled into the drawing room—Spencer carrying two enormous bouquets of irises that Henry had acquired on his behalf—the small square chamber was already filled with gentlemen. Henry spotted Matilda first. It was difficult to miss her. She was sitting atop the pianoforte, swinging her legs in time to a lively Scottish reel being banged out by one of Spencer's idiot Harrow friends. She had an unlit cigar clenched between two fingers, and she waved it at them as they entered.

Henry blinked.

He had not called on many young ladies—none, in point of fact—but he was fairly certain this was not typical behavior. Spencer at his side heaved a long-suffering sigh.

He looked over the small room. He was already feeling dazed, and then his eyes landed on Margo, and Henry Mortimer was instantly, irrevocably, transcendently poleaxed.

They looked similar, Margo and Matilda, but Henry didn't know how anyone could have confused them. Margo was more freckled, a constellation of gold stars trailing from her cheekbone down to the side of her mouth. Her front teeth were a little crooked.

While Matilda looked imperiously out over the callers clustered in the drawing room, Margo caught his eye, winked, and grinned.

"Do it, then," said one of the blockheads encircling her. "No more boasting, Lady Margaret, or I'll begin to doubt your honor."

She held a cherry between her fingers, Henry noticed, a deep wine-y red, and at the blockhead's words, she gave it a slow, sensuous roll. "Doubt not," she said, and then she tugged the stem off with her teeth and sucked it into her mouth.

Just like the rest of the blockheads, Henry was fucking mesmerized. As he watched, Margo's brow furrowed in concentration. Her jaw worked, then set, and he saw a flash of pink tongue, peeking out from her overlapping front teeth. Her lips puckered and pursed, and in his twenty-one years of life, he had never seen anything quite so erotically charged.

She reached up, stuck her thumb and forefinger into her mouth, and pulled them out with a wet pop.

Henry began to fear that he would unman himself.

"Ha!" she said triumphantly. "I did it!"

Between her fingers, Margo held the cherry stem, tied in a knot.

"Christ," said Spencer, "that's revolting."

And Henry was never the same again.

But it wasn't, he reflected now, entirely the fault of the cherry stem. He'd spent the subsequent seven years watching Margo and Matilda flout convention at every turn, drinking brandy out of flasks at the opera,

emerging from closed carriages with gentlemen right on Rotten Row. He'd seen Matilda lay out one overeager young buck with her silk-gloved fist, and beheld with his own two eyes the infamous costume party at which Margo turned up dressed like Lady Godiva, a barely-there silk dress the same shade as her skin skimming dangerously along her breasts and hips.

He'd watched, and he'd listened to Spencer despair over their antics, and he'd even dined and danced and ridden with Margo, without once betraying the fact that he was, like the smarter half of the *beau monde*, completely in her thrall.

As far as he was concerned, he'd been getting along fine enough. Until the bloody rain came and wrecked everything.

If it hadn't been for the rain, he might not have been home when Margo knocked on his door. Or—even if he had been, he could have sent her away.

I'm sorry, he could have said, this isn't a good time. I have company. Or maybe, Let's talk again when Spencer's back from Wales, or even, No, Margo, there's no one here but me, and I need you to back away slowly before I drag you into my apartment and peel you out of that dress. With my teeth.

But it was raining, and it was October and colder than a witch's tit. Her cloak was plastered to her head, and water was dripping in rivulets over her cheek—*do not think about licking that water off, for fuck's sake*—and he wasn't about to send her back out into the weather.

So when Margo said, "Henry? Can I come in?" he opened his door wider and answered, "Of course."

Chapter 2

Oh thank bloody Christ, Margo thought as Henry let her in.

Henry was here. Henry—dear, quiet, sturdy, inimitable Henry—was going to make everything all right.

“Come on,” he said, tucking one hand beneath her elbow and guiding her through the narrow hallway. “You’re soaked. Let’s get you in front of the fire.”

His hands were gentle as he positioned her in his small sitting room, then unfastened the frogs of her cloak. It was that—Henry’s sweet, undeserved gentleness—that pushed Margo over the edge. She shrugged out of her cloak, the heavy wool garment slopping at her feet, and then burst into tears.

She threw herself at Henry’s chest, soaking his waistcoat with her sopping hair and her tears, and the fact that she was making his life worse simply by existing in his vicinity made her cry even harder.

He hesitated for a long moment, and then one hand spread warmly between her shoulder blades. “Margo? What’s wrong?”

She was a disaster. She had ruined everything.

But she couldn’t say that. Not even to Henry.

“Matilda’s gone,” she said instead. She pulled back from his chest—which was startlingly solid, a fact she tended to forget about her brother’s grave best friend—and looked up into his dark eyes. “Oh God, Henry. It’s all my fault.”

“Come,” he said again, and pulled her toward a pair of armchairs in front of the fire.

She'd never been to Henry's apartments before, though she had his direction from one of his calling cards, which she'd inexplicably tucked in her escritoire years ago. When she'd discovered that Matilda was missing, their brother out of town, she'd gone first to Henry's office. It had been closed and locked, and she'd had to hire a hack to take her to Bloomsbury, where his small suite was located. Everything was faintly shabby, but well-kept, a polished shine on each piece of furniture.

She settled into the armchair he pulled back for her, and then winced as her hair dripped audibly onto the navy upholstery.

"What do you mean, Matilda's gone? Where did she go?"

She took a shuddering breath. "Oh, Henry, everything is such a bloody tangle. Matilda—well, you know Matilda. She's so damned *certain* she knows what's best. She's been—I don't know if *courted by* is the right phrase, but she's gotten tangled up with the Marquess of Ashford—"

"Ashford? You're joking."

"That's what I said!" She looked at Henry, at his dear, serious face. Perhaps there had been a time when she had found him handsome, but she could not remember it. His hair and eyes looked almost black here in the dim room, his mouth the same familiar firm slash. "She said she'd finally found someone who saw her for who she truly is. And I—"

God, she couldn't say it.

"I did something awful," Margo said instead. "Something terrible. And I drove her away."

"What did you—"

She tried to laugh, but it came out choked, almost a sob. "Don't ask me that, Henry. Please don't ask me that."

He looked doubtful, but he nodded. To her surprise, he reached out and brushed her upper arm with his thumb, one firm delicate stroke. Unaccountably, she shivered.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're cold. Let me stoke the coals."

"No." She tried to cover his fingers with her own, but he pulled his hand away. Tears stung her eyes again, but she forced herself to keep talking. "Matilda left me a note. She and Ashford have eloped, Henry. They've gone to Gretna Green."

“What?”

It was impossible to believe. Ashford was nearly the age their father would have been, a cold-blooded aristocrat who, rumors said, had driven his first wife to madness alone in the moorlands of Devon. The very idea of the pale-eyed marquess with her *sister*—brilliant, vibrant, mocking Matilda ...

Margo simply could not countenance it.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “I started this whole thing. But I’m going to fix it, Henry. I’m not going to let Matilda destroy herself.”

“Margo,” he said cautiously, “if they’ve gone already to Gretna Green, Matilda might be better off if she goes through with the elopement. Her reputation will—”

Margo startled herself with the crack of laughter that burst from her lips. “Don’t be absurd. You know as well as anyone—better than most—that Matilda and I have no reputation to speak of. If we weren’t the wealthiest unmarried heiresses in London and cousins to a royal duke, we wouldn’t be received anywhere in Christendom.”

They’d made a game of it—seeing how far they could go and still benefit from the privilege of the circumstances. It seemed stupid, somehow, now. What had they been trying to prove?

That they were free? That they were more than birds, fluttering their wings against the bars of a pretty cage?

In the end, they were still caged. They’d only pretended to fly.

“All right,” Henry said slowly. “What do you mean to do?”

She licked her lips and met his eyes. “I want to beat her to Gretna Green. And I want you to come with me.”

Henry appeared to stop breathing. Every muscle in his body went abruptly, unnaturally still.

Had she *killed* him? Surely it was not so shocking a proposal. For heaven’s sake, Henry had been there when she’d gotten slowly and deliberately drunk on Christmas punch and attempted to use a Sèvres platter as a sled.

Then she divined the reason behind what was, for Henry, a startling display of alarm.

“I don’t mean that I want to elope with you,” she said quickly, feeling oddly stung. “I want to track her down on the route or—failing that—be there when she arrives. I think I can bring enough coin to pay off the whole bloody village. If no one will witness the ceremony, she will *have* to think twice.”

Henry was still frozen. She began to worry that he’d ceased to hear her.

“It’s only—well—” She hesitated, disturbed by Henry’s utter lack of response. “I cannot go alone. I need you to come with me, Henry. Please.”

At that last, life appeared to return to her brother’s best friend. He started to blink rapidly, and by God, the man had remarkably long eyelashes. Margo thought she might feel a breeze.

“No. No. Absolutely not.”

Her mouth fell open, and she snapped it closed. “No? Did you not hear me, Henry? I only need you to come along—I don’t need you to *do* anything—”

“You only need me to *take you to Scotland*—”

“It won’t be so much trouble! I promise, Henry, I’ll—I’ll be good.”

His body seemed to shudder, and Margo felt horror flood her before she realized he was laughing. “Margo, you couldn’t be good if your life depended upon it. You are a walking hurricane. Chaos scents you and hurls itself in your direction.”

Well. That wasn’t *not* true.

“Please,” she said, “*please*, Henry.”

“Can you not ask your brother?”

She scrubbed her face with her hand, then tangled her fingers in her wet coiffure. “He’s in Wales.”

“Bloody hell,” said Henry, and Margo felt her brows shoot up in surprise. She could not recall ever having heard Henry curse before. She and Matilda had gone through something of a blue period after they’d ordered a cant dictionary from a catalogue, and even at their worst, Henry had barely seemed impressed.

“I knew that,” Henry continued. “When does he return?”

“Not for another week at least. I have to go *now*, Henry. Tonight, if I’ve any hope of finding Matilda before it’s too late. She’s already had nearly a

day's head start."

"What if you don't make it in time?"

She stared down at the puddle of water at her feet. "I can't think that way. I have to make it. *Please*, Henry." She was begging now, and she couldn't bring herself to care. "I need you."

"Damn it, Margo!" Henry leaped to his feet and started to pace, and Margo was frankly boggled. "I have—I can't—" He choked off his words and tried again. "I am a solicitor. I have responsibilities. I cannot just leave for a two-week trip up the Great North Road and back."

Margo felt cold self-loathing settle in the pit of her stomach.

God. What had she been thinking? Of course he could not simply bend to her every whim. He worked for a living—she had always respected that about him, just as Spencer did. He *worked*. He had responsibilities, and people who depended upon him, and she was just a small, redheaded disaster who needed other people to clean up the messes she'd made herself.

On stiff legs, she rose. "I'm sorry." Her voice was hoarse, but her eyes, at least, were dry. "Of course. I should have realized that sooner, I—"

She was not going to cry. She *was not*.

Henry had risen with her, and his dark eyes were on her face. She blinked hard and looked down, addressing her puddle. "I should not have importuned you so. I'm sorry, Henry."

She tried to escape with some dignity, but his voice trailed her, and she turned back toward him. "Margo—what do you mean to do?"

Shoulders back, chin up. Don't let on if you feel an utter fool.

"I'm not certain. But I will think of something." She tried to meet his gaze and smile. "Don't worry, Henry. Surely after all this time, you know I'm never at a loss for ideas."

"Yes," he said, "I bloody know."

And then he let her go.

Chapter 3

“Damn it.” Henry paced in front of his fireplace. Cursing aloud had not made him feel better, but he decided to try again, for the purposes of experimentation. “Fucking. Bugger. Shite.”

It didn’t work.

Margo’s cloak lay in a wet heap on the floor, accusing him with its presence.

“No,” he said to the cloak, “don’t try to make me feel guilty. I didn’t make her run out into the rain without even your pitiful protection.”

Jesus. He was talking to a cloak. Margo had finally, fatally driven him to distraction.

He could not go with her to Scotland. It was a *terrible* plan. There was no chance they would encounter Matilda and Ashford along the way. The Great North Road was designed for travelers; there were hundreds of coaching inns and public houses in which Matilda and Ashford could take refuge. Did the pair mean to make directly for Scotland, or stop somewhere along the way? Were they riding by day and night, or traveling at their leisure?

Who knew? Margo certainly didn’t!

And beyond the plan’s utter lack of sense, there was Henry’s seven-years-long Margo problem to contend with.

It wasn’t that he did not trust himself in close confines with her. He’d been alone with her plenty. He wasn’t going to turn into a slaving beast and tear her dress from her body—*do not think about Margo with her clothes off*—but he would probably expire from frustrated lust. Moreover,

Spencer Halifax had been his best friend since their school days. He didn't want to do anything that might jeopardize their friendship, and while Spencer was as aware as anyone of the twins' checkered reputations, Henry was fairly certain Spencer would not want him to be party to further compromising either of them.

He also *did* have a job, as he'd mentioned to Margo.

It had been an excuse, though. He had very little of importance on his docket for at least a week, and what was there could easily be fobbed off onto junior solicitors in return for the promise of future favors.

He'd been scrambling to think of something to say, because what he'd been thinking had mostly involved a bouncing carriage and Margo's tits in his face and a very strong instinct for self-preservation that was screaming *absolutely not, you astounding moron*.

He preferred to retain some dignity in the face of his hopeless affection, and he was fairly certain dignity would go quickly on a multi-day carriage ride with nothing between him and a declaration of his undying love but his tenuous self-control.

But Margo. Hell and damnation.

He knew her, knew her blind loyalty as well as he knew the freckles that bracketed the curve of her mouth and her terrible left-handed penmanship. She would *never* let Matilda plunge headfirst into ruin alone. If she thought Matilda was in danger—physical or emotional—she would move heaven and earth to be at Matilda's side.

Margo was certainly not a chastening impulse on her twin—if anything, they encouraged each other like tinder and flame—but she was devoted to Matilda. Matilda had a little cool ironic reserve about her, but Margo had none of the same. She was all feeling, her emotions close to the surface, her heart a generous overflowing cup of affection and warmth.

It was one of the things he loved most about her.

Fucking hell.

She wasn't going to go home and wait patiently at Number Twelve Mayfair until Matilda came back, defeated or victorious. She was going to chase Matilda down, on foot if necessary. She had plunged back out into the

frigid October rain without even a cloak. She'd said she wanted to leave for Scotland that very night. She—

Henry found himself in his bedchamber, stuffing shirts into a traveling bag.

Devil take the woman. She made him insane. He liked things *folded*. He preferred to travel with an iron and a well-organized trunk containing reading material and a small sewing kit.

Henry dashed off a note to his legal associates with vaguely plausible excuses for his absence and instructions for the subsequent week of work, then slid it under his landlady's door to be posted in the morning. He banked the fire and left a handful of coin for the charwoman who came in the mornings and the coal-cutter who would likely be baffled to discover that Henry had vanished without a word.

He did not generally do things without prior preparation.

He went back into the sitting room, and hefted Margo's wool cloak in his hands. It hadn't really dried, and it was heavy with damp. It smelled disturbingly like a sheep.

He spread it across an end table to dry, ducked back into his bedchamber, and tossed his greatcoat over his shoulder for her instead.

"Fine," he said to the cloak as he passed. "You win. I'm taking her to Scotland."



Margo left a note for Spencer. Her brother was due back from Wales in a week, and though he'd long since abandoned any attempt to leave her and Matilda in the care of a chaperone—they'd run off two maiden aunts and one well-paid lady's companion—he certainly would expect them to be in residence when he returned.

But she'd left him a note, Margo reassured herself. He wouldn't worry overmuch. Perhaps if she was unusually lucky, she would encounter Matilda in the next day or so along the road, and they could be back at Number Twelve before Spencer had even returned!

Margo was not, as a rule, unusually lucky, but there had to be a first time.

“My lady, I implore you to reconsider.” Fairhope, the family’s butler, appeared to be wringing his hands as he followed her into the mews.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I only mean to travel a very *little* distance, Fairhope.”

This was true, in a literal sort of way. She meant to travel a short distance, followed by several more short distances, which added together made up quite a long distance indeed.

So, not *precisely* true. But Margo did not have time for precision.

“Thomas and James”—her coachman and the most obliging of the footmen—“will see me safely to Alconbury. I’m certain Matilda meant to stop a while there. You’ll see.”

This part was an out-and-out lie. Once she arrived at Alconbury, she meant to abandon the Halifax family carriage, hitch a ride on the mail coach, and travel the rest of the way to Scotland alone. The idea didn’t exactly fill her with confidence, but she’d come round to it. She’d be perfectly safe on the mail coach, so long as she didn’t advertise the fact that she was traveling with hundreds of guineas.

She hoped she’d brought enough money. She’d need to purchase food—and a spot on the mail coach—and bribes for every resident of Gretna Green if it came to that ...

Margo’s nerve threatened to fail her, but she set her teeth. She only had to focus on the next step, that was all. That was how she’d approached each trial thus far in her life. When their parents had died. When she and Matilda had been sent down from finishing school. When the scandal sheets had taken to calling them the Halifax Hellions, and her favorite bookshop had refused to admit her.

One foot in front of the other, and if she kept on walking, she’d make it through.

She tipped her chin up. “All will be well,” she said to Fairhope, and tried to believe it.

The trio of men must have been as worried about Matilda as she was, because somehow, she persuaded them all to listen. She was halfway through helping Thomas attach the traces to the horses’ collars when a leather-gloved hand closed over her own.

She squeaked in alarm, whirled, and crashed directly into a large male body.

The man grunted, and she practically *bounced* off his torso. She would have toppled backward into the black mare if the man hadn't caught her in both arms.

She looked up into his rain-dampened face, and felt a trifle lightheaded. "Henry?"

That was *Henry's* rigid abdomen she'd just encountered? For all she'd been weeping into his shirtfront not so very long ago, she hadn't realized his torso was quite so ... taut.

"God only knows how many men you've attempted to persuade to accompany you on this mad journey," he said, "but yes, it's me. What in blazes are you doing?"

"Only you." He was still holding onto her arms, and Margo noticed the travel bag slung across one of his broad shoulders. "You—Henry, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question. I thought you wanted to travel in a hurry."

She couldn't stop staring at the travel bag, pleasure ballooning in her chest in a fashion she found most uncomfortable. "I do. I thought to ride to Alconbury and take the mail coach in the morning."

Fairhope gave an audible groan from the other side of the carriage.

"For Christ's sake," said Henry. "Alone, I take it?"

"I wasn't going to try to stuff Thomas and James into my reticule, if that's what you're asking."

Henry sighed. "Come on, then." He waved a hand at the groom, who was frozen with indecision and—Margo could admit it—burgeoning relief. "Unhook your horses, Thomas. We'll hire a post-chaise."

Delight was spilling through her, but she tamped it down ruthlessly. "No."

"If we switch out our cattle and postilion by night as well, the post-chaise will be considerably faster than the mail coach. I—"

She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of the mews and around the corner, where they were out of sight of the house. Henry let

himself be towed.

“No,” she said again when they were alone. “I can’t let you do this, Henry.”

He blinked down at her. He wasn’t wearing a hat, and though the rain had stopped, the air was cool and misty, and his damp hair had a tendency to curl at the ends. “Were you not in my sitting room less than an hour ago begging me to do this very thing?”

“*Begging* seems rather a strong word”—it had definitely been begging—“but in any case, I’ve thought better of it. I was wrong before.”

“What on Earth is going through your head?”

She poked a finger into Henry’s chest. “You!”

Dear *Lord*, the man was solid. Had she a completely wrongheaded idea of what solicitors did all day? What did that rock-hard torso look like underneath his clothes?

Margo buried the errant thought but couldn’t quite stop herself from poking him again. “*You* are going through my head. You were right. You have a position, one you’ve worked very hard for. I am *trying* to do the right thing here, Henry. I am trying not to draw others into my misadventures.”

They had been the Halifax Hellions—ladies of infamy, darlings of the scandal sheets—for seven years now. It had been splendid for most of it—she and Matilda, thumbing their noses at the world. And then, somehow, it had become something rather different.

An expectation that they would once again outdo themselves. Another engraving, another scandalous headline. Another mistake.

She was not certain what she meant to do about her notoriety, exactly. But she knew she had hurt Matilda. And she did not want to hurt Henry as well.

“It dawned on me as I rode home,” she said. “If you are seen with me at a coaching inn on the way to Scotland, it could damage *your* reputation with your clients. It was selfish of me to ask you to come along.”

Henry was staring at her, had been staring at her all throughout her little speech. At this last, he pinched the bridge of his nose.

She was probably giving him a headache. She was fairly certain she had that effect on people.

“It wasn’t selfish,” he said finally. “I—look, Margo, I’m worried about Matilda too. The two of us together will have a better chance of finding her than you alone, won’t we?”

She bit her lip, unable to deny the sense of Henry’s words. He was impossibly sensible. “Undoubtedly.”

“Then it’s no more selfish of you to ask me to come along than it is for me to tell you I will.”

She let herself look at the travel bag dangling from Henry’s shoulder. “You really want to come with me?”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Henry said, “but yes.” He held out a hand, palm up, and she hesitated for a long moment. She weighed his words against the desire that rose in her, strong and sharp, to protect him.

But she needed to go after her sister. She *had* to find Matilda.

Margo placed her hand in Henry’s.

“Let’s find a post-chaise,” he said. “And then let’s go to bleeding Scotland.”

Chapter 4

“Now, listen, Margo. I think it’s time we made a plan.”

Margo looked up at Henry with a start. They were well out of London now, and the road was growing pitted, the carriage swaying from side to side. She’d been watching him sit stiffly in the center of the bench, and every time the carriage took a sharp jounce, she was *certain* she could see the muscles of his thighs flex to hold himself in place.

Good Lord, she was demented. How long had she been staring at the man’s legs? This was *Henry*, she reminded herself. Sober, patient, virtuous Henry.

“I thought we had a plan,” she said. “Is this whole journey not the culmination of our plan?”

“*You* had a plan,” he said flatly. “And it makes no sense.”

Margo couldn’t help herself. She pinched her lips together and raised her chin. “No one asked you to go along with it.”

“For God’s sake, Margo, *you* asked me to go along with it!” Henry ran his hands through his hair, which had long since dried in the carriage. A clump of it stuck up endearingly on one side, and Margo felt oddly delighted by Henry’s dishevelment.

Which was ridiculous. She was always ridiculous.

“Fine,” she said. “We need a plan. Direct me. Consider me entirely under your command.”

A muscle in Henry’s jaw ticked. It was remarkable. Margo had heard of such things, but she wasn’t entirely certain she’d seen it in the flesh.

“Do you not *want* me to be under your command? I didn’t say that to upset you—”

“No. No, damn it, don’t look at me like that, or I’ll call this whole thing off.”

Everything felt upside-down. Matilda had run off with Lord Ashford, and Henry was cursing and discomposed and acting entirely out of character. “Like what?”

“Like I’ve taken your champagne glass and dumped it in the grass.”

Margo felt her lips curl up. “You *did* take my champagne glass and dump it in the grass.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose again. “Yes, well. You were nineteen and your cheeks were nearly the color of your hair. I was trying to save you from yourself.”

She laughed. “I can’t believe you remember.”

“I can’t believe *you* remember. I wouldn’t have—”

He stopped abruptly. His cheeks colored, and Margo was reminded of how delightfully Henry blushed. “You wouldn’t have what?”

“Carried you,” he mumbled, addressing his waistcoat. “Had I thought you would remember.”

She hadn’t been nearly as tipsy as Henry had imagined—her face grew remarkably flushed with very little alcohol, a fact which she had not yet grown wise to at nineteen—only pleasantly dizzy and delighted when Henry had scooped her up after dinner at Number Twelve and hauled her from her spot in the garden to the door of her bedchamber. She’d curled her fingers in his hair and buried her face in his neck, and—

Well, Henry had never mentioned it, and so she’d rolled her eyes at her folly the next morning and attempted to put it out of her mind.

She felt very odd, at this particular moment, upon hearing that Henry had not forgotten after all.

She tried to straighten the seam of one of her leather gloves and then gave up and peeled them off. “In any case. Tell me what kind of plan you’d like for us to have.”

Henry loved plans, and at this mention of his hobbyhorse, he perked up. “As far as I see it, we have two choices. We can stop to search the major

villages along the route or we can attempt to arrive at Gretna Green before Matilda and Ashford, so that we are waiting for them when they get there.”

Margo pursed her lips. “I suppose we cannot do both.”

“Not without the power of flight.”

God. She was not very good at arranging things. She plunged headlong into action, and then, like as not, had to spend twice as much time picking through the wreckage of her impetuous choices.

“Which option do you prefer?” she asked. “Does one stand a better chance of success?”

Henry drummed his fingers on his thigh. Margo was, unfortunately, helpless to avoid watching. His fingers barely made a *dent*. Was the man cast from bronze? Surely he had not felt so *firm* at twenty-two when he’d carried her up the stairs at Number Twelve.

She would have remembered that.

“Obviously finding them on the road would be preferable,” Henry said finally. Margo ordered her eyes to return to his face, which was very grave and Henry-ish. “But I think the risk is too great to take. If we miss them entirely, they could be in Scotland and have the thing done while we’re still searching Nottinghamshire.”

“So we proceed directly to Scotland?” She had to admit, it made sense.

“How do you feel about traveling night and day? If we stop in the morning and evening to change the horses—and prepare to spend a great deal of money on new cattle and coachmen—we can get there in a few days.”

“And then we just ... wait for Matilda and Ashford to turn up?”

Henry’s eyes crinkled in the corners, and Margo felt on more familiar footing. “I know you don’t like to wait, but yes, I suppose that’s what we would have to do. Fortunately the two of you look enough alike that we need only parade you around Gretna Green and tell everyone that they’re not to witness the handfasting of your double.”

He was smiling at her, obviously expecting her to laugh, but instead Margo felt sick. It was too close to what she had done to Matilda, what had driven Matilda to elope with Ashford and she—

Shame was a hot burning sensation in her face and her fingers, and regret tasted sour in her mouth.

“Margo? What’s the matter?”

Bollocks, Henry was so bloody *perceptive*. It was as though he had a tuning fork that caught the shades of her moods.

“I’d rather not say,” she said, and now she was sitting as rigidly as Henry. Every bump of the carriage felt like it rattled her bones.

Henry didn’t say anything for a long moment.

She chanced a glance at him from underneath her lashes. He was scowling rather fiercely at his poor waistcoat.

“Margo,” he said finally, “I don’t mean to pry. But ... has Ashford—that is, have you and Ashford—” He broke off, clenched his jaw, then tried again. “If Ashford has left you indisposed in some way, Margo, you can—”

“Good Lord!” Did Henry think she was *pregnant*? By *Ashford*? She wasn’t sure whether to laugh or vomit. “That *would* be a tangle, but no. No. Ashford’s—bloody hell, Henry, *I’ve* done wrong here. Not Ashford. At least ... I hardly know...”

She trailed off. God. She didn’t really want to share her shame with Henry—most especially not with Henry—but on the other hand, Henry probably ought to know what exactly Matilda had gotten entangled in.

Margo barely knew what Matilda had gotten entangled in.

“All right,” she said. “Fine. Henry, I’m so bloody humiliated over this. I know I’ve done wrong. All right? So please—do not make it worse.”

Henry didn’t say anything, only waited patiently for her to continue, which somehow made her feel both comforted and faintly resentful.

“I followed Matilda. We’d gone to one of Denham’s routs—not really our set, but Matilda had a burning desire to look at some sculpture in his gardens—and she’d all but vanished for half the night. It was peculiar, and then she started acting even *more* peculiar—not telling me things. Holing up in her bedchamber and emerging with ink on her hands.”

It had been so strange, not to be in Matilda’s confidence. They did not always get along, but they were painfully intimate with one another, half in each other’s skin most of the time. It had come, Margo supposed, of how they’d clung to one another after their parents’ death, after they’d been sent

to school and then, quite horribly, sent down less than a year after. Aunt Lavinia had despaired of their ever becoming ladies—recalcitrant hoydens, she had called them—and almost without realizing it, they had decided it was better to flout society's rules than to fail at trying to follow them.

"It was peculiar," she said again, "so one night I listened at the wall between our chambers, and when I heard her go out at one o'clock in the morning, I followed her. She walked straight out of Mayfair and into St. James's Park—"

"Good Christ," Henry said, "in the middle of the night?"

Margo waved a hand dismissively. "I carried a pistol."

He made a choking noise.

"I didn't need to *use* it."

Henry did not look particularly reassured.

"In any case, I watched her walk straight up to Lord Ashford. I recognized him straightaway"—Ashford wore facial hair, which was startlingly out of the ordinary, almost as unexpected as the large white scar that knifed through his beard on the left side of his face—"and then I saw them embrace. He led her off into a darker part of the park, and I turned and fled back to Number Twelve."

"That's not so very bad," Henry said. "Conversation probably would have been preferable to voyeurism, but not so terribly shameful."

Margo made an inarticulate negation. "I haven't even started on the bad part yet, Henry, believe me."

He winced.

"The next day, we had plans to attend one of Lady Montmorency's midnight card parties"—she heard Henry stifle a groan; the card parties occasionally verged on orgies—"and Matilda was dead set on our arriving separately. I knew—I just *knew* she was planning to meet Ashford there. So I arrived ahead of her. I wore one of her favorite gowns, and I—" She forced the words past numb lips. "I pretended to be Matilda. I went right up to Ashford and acted as though I knew him intimately."

She gave Henry a pleading glance, though she had not intended to try to defend herself. "I only meant to try to talk to him, Henry! I wanted to see what he said to her, whether there was anything in his manner beyond

desire or madness. I hoped that perhaps he was different from what the rumors said, that he had a *tendre* for her, maybe that he *loved* her. But he—he—”

Her face was hot, and she pressed her fingers to her cheeks. “He thought I was Matilda, of course. He pulled me into an alcove and kissed me and told me that he wanted to see me—her—to see *Matilda* tied to his bed with the strings of her corset, and he wanted to—to—” Dear God, she was going to die of humiliation. “To use a *riding crop* on her. He probably realized it was me at that point, because I slapped his face and then ran home like an idiotic rabbit.”

Henry had not said a single word, but he was staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face.

“I know it was awful!” she said. “I know I shouldn’t have done it. I confronted Matilda as soon as she returned. I told her what Ashford had said, told her I was just trying to protect her, but she was furious. She told me after everything we’d done together, I had some nerve to cast judgment on her.”

She felt frustrated tears fill her eyes, and she blinked hard so they wouldn’t fall. “I wasn’t *judging* her. I didn’t—I mean—bloody hell, Henry!” She looked across the carriage at his impassive face. “Matilda has never displayed romantic interest in another person before Ashford.”

It was one of the many ways in which they were different. Margo loved pleasure, giving and receiving it. Her first liaison had been with another one of the girls at school—they’d been like two fawns, learning each other’s bodies and their own. In the seven years since her debut, Margo had carried on semi-discreetly with two charming widows and one very decorative and solicitous footman, until Matilda had pointed out that Margo was putting him in an awkward position with respect to his employment, and Margo had broken it off in horror at her own poor judgment.

But Matilda had never done anything like that. She kept her desire for pleasure—if it existed—close to her chest, unlike Margo. She had certainly never told Margo of any romantic attachments, physical or cerebral. And for her first affair to be with *Ashford*—to involve *riding crops*—made Margo half-consumed by worry for her twin.

“I don’t think it’s entirely *regular*,” she finally managed. “Not that either of us is governed by what is typical. But Ashford is so much older, so much more experienced than Matilda, and I—I’m afraid for her.”

There. She’d probably scandalized Henry half to death. He’d witnessed her do plenty of outrageous things, of course, but kissing her sister’s *amoureux* and then confronting him about his sexual proclivities seemed a new level of infamy, even for her.

She peeked up at him. He regarded her steadily.

“Margo.” His voice was kinder than she deserved. “Perhaps—well, I don’t pretend to know what’s in Matilda’s mind. But do you think it possible that if she does have, er, certain specific desires, she might hesitate to share them with you? And that her particular interests could explain why she’s remained single thus far?”

“Of course I’ve thought of that.” She’d thought of nothing *but* that. “But—if Ashford is the first person to meet her needs in this way, I fear she might be blind to his true nature. He did not speak respectfully to me—her—*me*, Henry!”

“I believe some people like that.” The tops of Henry’s ears were red.

Margo blinked. “To be spoken to in such a fashion?”

“To be ordered about. To do the ordering.”

“And you do not think that suggests something dark about his nature?”

“I hope not. I’ve certainly thought about turning you over my knee plenty.”

Margo gaped.

As if he had said nothing untoward, Henry continued speaking. “As long as they’re able to discuss their desires, freely and consensually, I wouldn’t think twice. But I agree that Matilda’s inexperience is concerning.”

Margo had no idea what he was saying. He had *thought* about ... about her? About *spanking* her?

Because she was so ungovernable, surely. Because she was wild and unseemly. Not in a *suggestive* way.

Yet to her abject horror, *she* was now thinking about it in a decidedly carnal fashion. When Ashford had threatened her with the crop, she’d been

equal parts horrified and repulsed. But now—with Henry—warmth prickled throughout her body, an ache rising between her thighs.

She could see it, suddenly. Feel it. Henry's big, blunt-fingered hand on her naked flesh. Her hips lifted for him. His dark eyes hot with desire, her hands digging into his thickly muscled thighs as she writhed with impatience and demand—

“Don't you think?” Henry said.

She looked up. He looked perfectly normal, his expression a trifle concerned.

Her face was hot. The carriage was stifling. She pressed her bare fingers against her skirts and tried desperately to appear as though she had not just experienced the most vivid erotic fantasy of her life.

“To be sure,” she said, and had no idea what she'd agreed to.

Chapter 5

Henry had always thought of his self-control rather like an ewer full of water. He possessed a particular amount of restraint, and when he was around Margo, he used it liberally. He did not stand too close to her. He didn't profess his undying love. He didn't fantasize about peeling her out of her frock and discovering where exactly on her body her freckles stopped.

It took a great deal of his forbearance, and he found his mental ewer soon emptied of water, at which point he needed to go home, seek release, feel decidedly sorry for himself, and avoid Margo until his pitcher of discipline refilled itself.

About eight hours into their journey to Scotland, Henry had realized that there would be no opportunity to recoup his self-control. He was *always* around Margo, what with this plan he'd insanely concocted in which they were never apart, night and day, for an indefinite period of time.

Apropos of this discovery, he'd begun to let certain things slip.

For example, he no longer made any attempt to avoid looking down Margo's bodice. He closed his eyes and relished the shifting sounds of her body as the carriage swayed. He watched as she tapped a finger thoughtfully against her lips and fantasized with ravenous abandon about her mouth.

They'd passed two nights together in the post-chaise, and he used every scrap of his frayed composure to refrain from inviting her to rest in his lap, which meant that when she fell asleep on her own bench, her arm tucked under her head, he was helpless to keep himself from counting the seven freckles that curved around her mouth. When a lock of her flame-colored

hair fell across her face, he reached across the carriage and nudged it behind her ear like a besotted idiot.

Her hair was soft, and so was her skin, and he, given his dearth of opportunities to take himself in hand and briefly slake his lust, was nearly always half-hard. Physically, Henry was in hell, which was unfortunate, because spending every second of every day with Margo was fucking wonderful.

He'd discovered at some point that Margo's reticule—she had not brought a travel bag—contained nothing but money, a novel, and a significant amount of cheese, which was the Margo-est thing he'd ever heard in his life. When he'd produced a stoppered bottle of water and a cloth to wash their faces, Margo had been so pleased that it hurt to look at her.

Left to his own devices, Henry probably would have complained—or, more likely, not gone on this half-cocked journey in the first place—but to Margo it was one more adventure in a lifetime of them. She radiated delight. She was equally well-pleased with a pounding rain—"Doesn't it sound charming on the roof of the carriage? God, I hope the postilion's all right!"—and a weak watery stretch of sunshine. She pointed at cows out the window, and invented names for them. Repeatedly.

Henry loved it, of course, because he was deranged.

In all the years he had known her, they had often spoken together, alone and in the company of others, but to sit across from her with nothing to do but converse was a new and extravagant pleasure. They were not always in accord—Margo had alarming ideas about Gothic novels and how much sugar was acceptable to consume in a single day—but he was struck anew by how generous she was, how openhearted, how ready to see the good in others.

The only time he was not assaulted by emotion was when he slept, which was not especially comfortable either, given the firm squabs of the post-chaise.

Margo also didn't seem to be sleeping well at night, because despite the fact that it was four o'clock in the afternoon, she was currently semi-conscious. Every couple of seconds, her head bobbed forward and then

jerked back upright. She tried to tilt her head back against the seat behind her, but her ripe-cherry lips went slack, her mouth falling open, and she made an inarticulate sound of discomfort.

It was the sound that overruled his better judgment. “Come on,” he said. His voice was rough, but thankfully Margo was half-asleep and wouldn’t notice. “Get over here.”

Her blue eyes blinked open. “Hmm?”

He reached across the carriage, grabbed her hand, and tugged her toward him. “Put your head on my shoulder. Rest.”

She made a happy sound of assent, then settled herself beside him. She’d kicked off her shoes after their last brief stop, and she curled her stockinged feet up beneath her, nestling into his side.

His heart squeezed. She was warm with sleep, and soft, and trusting as a kitten. Her hair, splayed across his shoulder, was so damned pretty—dark red, almost auburn in spots, mixed up with little hints of copper and pale gold.

She pressed harder against his side, her breasts and belly soft against his arm, and despite himself, heat flared up in his body. He could see the freckles that dotted her neck and the brief expanse of skin above her bodice.

He wanted to kiss each one. He wanted to taste her skin with a kind of single-minded desperation he’d never before known.

Her dark green carriage dress had five hooks at the side seam, mostly concealed to anyone who wasn’t obsessed with the idea of removing the damn thing. He’d had plenty of time to explore a whole range of fantasies about how he would undo those hooks if he could.

Slowly—that was one daydream he enjoyed. He’d slip each hook free and then slide his thumb down the thin white swath of her chemise that was revealed. Her dress would sag down in the front and he’d slip it off her shoulders, his eyes on her face. Then he would follow the fabric as it fell, kiss each fresh inch of her body through her chemise, suck until the muslin was wet and transparent.

When he was less in control of himself—increasingly often now—he imagined taking each half of the dress in one hand and yanking them apart, hooks popping free and Margo’s breasts spilling out like a banquet. He

pictured himself shoving her skirts up to her waist and burying his head between her thighs, the globes of her arse in his hands, her quim on his face, her voice breaking in a scream.

Madness. This journey was madness. He was so hard it was an effort not to grip himself through his trousers, though the thought of doing so with Margo sleeping against his side was both horrifying and arousing, in a lust-crazed, forbidden sort of way.

Margo made a sound in her sleep and squirmed against his side.

Henry wasn't entirely sure what to do. Was she uncomfortable? He turned his body toward her, moving her head from his shoulder to his chest. He eased one arm around her body, trying to make his person a slightly softer resting place for her.

Except now she was in his arms, and the idea of his body becoming *softer* was utterly laughable.

She gave a breathy sleep sigh that went straight to his cock—what didn't, at this point—and rubbed her nose against his chest like a cat.

The carriage gave a sudden, abrupt series of jerks as they hit a particularly rough section of road. Margo jolted against his body, her sleep-languid form bouncing a few inches off his chest. He tightened his arms around her, trying to keep her from being jostled straight onto the floor.

The carriage rocked again, harder this time, thrusting them both to one side. Henry slid a bit toward the door, and Margo fell atop him, one leg coming across his thigh. She put a hand to his shoulder to stop herself from falling farther, and then seemed to come awake with a start.

She blinked up at him, face flushed and eyelids heavy. "Henry? What —"

She didn't have time to finish her sentence, because the bloody postilion seemed suddenly bent on taking every rut in the road as hard as possible. She bounced against him, her breasts crushed against his chest, her legs on either side of his thigh. He tried to steady her, which ended with one of his hands wrapped in her hair and the other on the soft curve of her waist.

"Christ," he said, "sorry, Margo, I'm not—"

"No," she said, bracing her hand against the seat back behind him as the carriage continued to sway, "it's my fault, I'm—I'm *trying* to stop—"

And then she looked up and Henry looked down, and he stopped thinking coherent thoughts.

His face was a hairsbreadth from hers. Her lips were parted, and her breath was coming too fast, and her blue eyes were a little glassy, and probably he was addled, but she looked—she looked—

Hungry. Aroused. Wild.

“Margo,” he said thickly, and his hand tightened in her hair.

He wanted. His whole body pulsed with want, every muscle and vein straining to be closer to her, to be *in* her, and he wasn’t moving, he *wasn’t*, but somehow she was plastered full-length against him, her nipples tight points against his chest, his leg wedged between her thighs.

She licked her lips. Her hand was on the bare skin of his neck, and it burned, and he wanted to be consumed.

And then the carriage crashed.

Chapter 6

Margo surveyed the wreckage of their post-chaise and experienced several conflicting emotions at once.

One was definitely worry. The postilion and horses, thank the Lord, were perfectly well, but their speedy progress toward Scotland had abruptly halted. She'd hoped they were well ahead of Matilda and Ashford after two full cycles of day and night riding, but she didn't know for certain, and the delay made her anxious.

She felt a vague sense of alarm when she considered where they were—somewhere in Derbyshire, according to the postilion, but certainly not in any apparent vicinity of a town, a coaching inn, or any other humans. She'd heard of highwaymen and brigands in the remoter parts of the Great North Road, but—

Well, Henry was here, and she found she couldn't muster much real fear.

Which brought her to the third emotion: immense relief.

She'd been dreaming about him, and not the casual kind of dream one had about one's brother's best friend. She'd been dreaming that Henry was naked and beneath her, his eyes black with lust, his hands on her hips as she sank down onto—

Curse her unmanageable body! Surely it was because she had been pressed into his chest, her nose full of his familiar scent. That was the only explanation she was willing to entertain.

But then she'd woken, and his hand had been at her waist, his thumb a bare inch from the side of her breast. The coach had been nearly as wild and

raucous as the desire coursing through her, her body hot and sensitive from her dream. She'd looked at him, and something had caught fire inside her.

He'd looked ravenous. He'd looked like he wanted to inhale her, and his thigh had ground against her sex, and Margo had been quite, quite certain that she was about to get tugged straight into the post-chaise's worn black cushions.

Which would have been a *terrible* idea. This was *Henry*. He might desire her—Margo tested out this new idea and found that it pleased her extremely—but he would never act upon it. He was the most proper, virtuous man she'd ever known, and she was one of the Halifax Hellions.

Henry was not the sort of man who fucked scandalous ladies in moving carriages. He was the sort of man who settled down with a well-bred wife and produced a houseful of little Henrys, which meant that if they committed a carnal act in the post-chaise, he was sure to regret it.

And that, Margo felt, would be unbearable.

So—relief. She was definitely relieved the post-chaise had crashed before anything irrevocable had happened.

At least, she was *trying* to feel relieved, which was almost the same.

The postilion was still begging their pardons and reliving the experience by turns. "A most dangerous stretch of road, sir, and the horses growing tired—my fault, to be sure, all my fault—nearly swallowed my tongue when I felt the chaise tip, I swear I did!"

"That's all right," Henry said. "We're all safe. Can we ride to the nearest posting inn? The lady and I can share one of the horses, and you can take the other." He glanced briefly at Margo and then away so quickly she might have imagined the blush that settled on his cheekbones.

"We-ell," said the postilion doubtfully, "perhaps you could. I'm not sure the horses are fresh enough to carry two—if you wanted to wait here, I could be back in four or five hours—"

"Four or five *hours*?" Margo tried to hold back the horror in her voice, but couldn't manage it. God, Matilda and Ashford could be riding ahead of them even as they sat here on the side of the road.

"I'm not certain we have another choice," Henry said to her in a low voice. "The horses look exhausted. We can't go alone—I've no idea where

we are, and I worry we'd end up riding in circles. And I'd not send you alone with the postboy, as respectable as he seems."

Margo fisted her fingers in her skirts. She hated waiting—it went against her very nature, which even now was urging her to *go*, to *do*. But she nodded. "Yes, you're right, of course."

"Go on ahead," Henry told the postilion, and Margo fished some coins out of her reticule for the man. One of the pleasures of the immense Halifax fortune was that she could tip everyone who worked for her extravagantly.

The postilion blinked at the coins and then nodded eagerly at them both. "I'll have a new post-chaise sent round for you two as quick as lightning." He made to mount one of the horses, but then turned back. "Oh! And you should know—if you've need of it, there's a crofter's cottage about three miles down the road." He gestured vaguely back the way they'd come. "Follow the track, go left at the blasted oak. You can't miss it."

"I don't anticipate going anywhere," Henry said. "We'll stay here with the other horse until a new post-chaise arrives."

"Just in case," said the postilion, and he slung himself up onto the horse. "Just in case."



Of course, it started bloody raining.

What had he expected? That he could sit sedately beside Margo and await the arrival of fresh horses and a well-sprung carriage?

Of course not. He was with *Margo*, which meant that whenever he made a rational plan, it promptly exploded in his face. He could not tell if he was glad the carriage accident had interrupted his lust-addled assault on Margo's person or if he was heartbroken.

"I'm sure it will stop soon." Margo had to half-shout to be heard over the downpour. "Perhaps we can shelter under the remains of the post-chaise!"

Henry gave a groan that he was fairly certain was muffled by the rain. "Come on," he said. "Let's find the crofter's cottage."

Margo tipped her head back to stare up at him, her hair already dark with damp. "You mean—go out to the road? In the weather?"

“Better than sitting here in the weather, don’t you think?”

Her lips quirked in a smile—only Margo would *smile* as they froze to death in northern Derbyshire—and she nodded, hooking her reticule strap over her shoulder.

He wanted to laugh. At least they’d have cheese.

Some indefinite amount of time later, Henry no longer felt like laughing. He felt like locating the postilion and murdering him in cold blood.

Where the *fuck* was the cottage? They’d been walking for—well, Henry didn’t know how long they’d been walking for, because his pocket watch had been smashed in the carriage accident and no longer kept proper time. It felt like hours, though it had probably only been ninety minutes or so.

Margo was struggling. She’d started to limp about twenty minutes in, and when he’d asked her what was wrong, she’d tipped her chin up like a queen and admitted that she had a blister.

A blister. That wasn’t so bad. He tried to tamp down his worry.

But it was growing abruptly dark, and Henry felt cold, which meant that Margo—though she was wrapped in his greatcoat—was probably much colder. A blasted tree—the postilion had told them to look for a blasted tree. Henry wanted to shove a blasted tree right up the man’s blasted arse.

“Henry?” Margo’s voice sounded a little strained, and he looked down. Christ, she was pale. Her freckles stood out against her skin like tiny bruises. “Do you think we can stop?”

He froze. “Is it your foot? I’m so bloody sorry—we’ll stay warmer if we keep moving. I’m sure we’re almost there.”

They had to be almost there. Surely the postilion could not have been so far off in his estimate of the distance.

“I’m only—short of breath,” Margo said. Raindrops clung to her hair, clustered at the corners of her mouth. “Sorry. I suppose I should take more exercise.” She gave him a ghost of a wry grin. “Poor timing for that revelation.”

“How’s your blister?”

Her expression went slightly bemused. “Fine, in fact. I don’t seem to be able to feel my feet.”

Oh, for Christ's sake. He did not like that at all.

He put his hand at the nape of her neck, meaning to draw her closer, though he was wary as always of touching her too intimately. But when his palm closed on her bare skin, the bottom dropped out of his stomach.

She was cold. Her skin was frigid. And she was shivering.

"Goddamnit, Margo."

Her teeth had started to chatter. "W-what's wrong?"

He pulled her into his body, then bent down and scooped her up beneath her knees. She squeaked, but didn't resist, only turned in to him, pressing her icy face into the curve of his neck.

Which only made him *more* worried. When he'd last done this, six years ago, she'd shrieked and laughed and pretended to struggle. Now she was stiff and silent in his arms.

Panic settled into his body, and he walked faster along the rutted track, cold rain snaking down his back. He had to find the cottage. He had to get her warm. If he did not—

He could not think about what could happen if he did not. Even now, shivers racked her body so hard that it was difficult to keep his hold on her.

"A bit longer now," he murmured into her ear. "You're doing so well."

Should he have forced her to keep walking? Carrying her had seemed the right decision in the moment—to hold her close to his body, to share some of his warmth—but perhaps it was all wrong. Perhaps he was making the situation worse. Perhaps—

The tree. He knew it immediately for the tree the postilion had meant. It was an enormous gnarled oak, its top half blackened and burned by what must have been a direct lightning strike. And on the left side of the road, as the postboy had told them, was a small dirt path.

He tightened his grip on Margo's shivering body and turned left. "Almost there. We're at the tree now."

"Is it blasted?" she mumbled, her voice a trifle slurred.

Fuck, he hated this. He hated rain and autumn and Derbyshire. He hated that Margo was cold.

"Yes. Entirely blasted. I think it's been cursed."

She breathed out, and he thought it might be a laugh. “Whole trip—is cursed.”

“Don’t say that. This could be a very nice cottage.” He could see it now, thank Christ, up ahead through the trees. “Just a bit farther, darling, I promise.”

He could feel her breath in his ear, jagged with her shaking, and he wanted to run, but he made himself be careful with her. In another minute or two, they were there, and he tugged open the front door to the small building. Relief speared him at finding the door unlocked and the interior snug and dry.

There was a table, one chair, a narrow bed. A grate with no coal, but a small stack of dry wood and a tinderbox.

He didn’t want Margo’s wet clothes to soak the sheets, so he deposited her trembling body on the chair instead. Her eyes were half-closed, but she made an effort to rouse herself when he set her down. She tried to smile. Her lips were blue.

Fucking hell. He slid his travel bag from his shoulder—the waxed leather had kept the rain mostly out—and pulled out his remaining dry shirts. His hands were shaking too, he noticed vaguely, though he thought it was fear rather than cold.

“Going to start a fire,” he said, “then get you warm, all right? You’re going to be fine.”

“Have any ch-chocolate?”

He thought for a moment she was delirious, and then he realized she was joking. “Left it in the carriage,” he said. “With the champagne flutes.”

He made the fire as quickly as he could, talking nonsense to Margo and trying to make sure she stayed awake. It seemed critical for some reason that she remain conscious.

When the fire was roaring, he turned back to Margo, who was huddled inside his greatcoat on the wooden chair. As gently as he could, he untangled her fingers from where they clutched at the cuffs, then slid the garment off her. It occurred to him that she was dripping, so he sacrificed one of his precious dry shirts to blot her pale face and wrap round her hair. He unfastened the five hooks on her gown and tugged at the ribbon that

gathered the bodice of her chemise. She was stiff, liable to hug her limbs into her body, but he persisted, one cautious unfolding of arm or leg at a time.

Soon he had all the freezing wet layers of fabric off of her body and then—finally—he slipped his other dry shirt over her head. She seemed to catch his intention, because she pushed her hands through the sleeves herself.

He didn't want to touch her—not now, while he was drenched and freezing—but he had to get her wrapped in the bedsheets and in front of the fire. There seemed nothing to do but divest himself of his own garments as well. He had no more dry shirts, so once he was down to his smallclothes, he dragged the sheets from the bed, gathered Margo in his arms, and swaddled them both in rough white cotton.

He settled himself on the floor a few feet from the grate, Margo tucked against his front. It was warm—the fire felt like heaven on his cheeks and nose.

“There,” he said idiotically to Margo, “you see? You did it.”

Slowly, her shivers subsided. The stiffness in her limbs that had spiked his alarm eased. She softened against him, huddled in their nest of blankets.

And finally, Henry remembered how to breathe.

“Margo?”

“Hmm?” She was more than half-asleep now, but she opened her eyes. Her lips were slowly flushing back to pink.

He didn't know what he'd meant to say. Everything had been so bloody cold—the terror spiking his bones, Margo's hands on his back, the diamond-blue pallor of her mouth. Now relief was shuddering through him, and he pressed his face against her damp hair, willing himself not to shatter.

She was safe. He was the one who trembled.

“You can sleep now,” he said.

She tucked her head under his chin, her cheek pressed against his chest, her mouth at the notch of his collarbone. “You—too,” she whispered.

And he did.

Chapter 7

When Margo woke, it was full dark. She could hear the rain, battering the roof of the crofter's cottage, and she hoped the postilion hadn't sent someone in this weather to look for them. They weren't going back to the post-chaise any time soon.

The fire in the grate had burned down to embers, but she was warm and dry.

Henry. Henry had made it so.

They were still on the ground. At some point—Margo did not recall it—Henry must have lowered them both to the wooden floorboards, because he was stretched out on his back. Margo lay half-atop him, wearing nothing but his shirt. One of her bare legs was entangled with his, her face on his chest. Both of his arms were around her, the rough-spun cotton bedsheets drawn up to her chin.

He was asleep. She raised her head and looked at his face.

How familiar he was to her. The straight line of his nose, the firm lips softened in sleep. His eyelashes were thick, lighter at the tips, almost gold in the firelight. His hair was dry, and this close she could see that it wasn't black at all but dark brown.

Familiar, and yet new.

She wanted to touch his hair. She started to slide one hand up from where it had been tucked almost beneath his back, and was promptly arrested by the feel of his body beneath her fingers.

Her mouth went dry. He was hard and hot, the knob of his hipbone pressing sharply into her palm. She drew her hand slowly up his torso and

felt the crisp curling hairs that trailed his stomach and chest.

She stopped. Her hand rested in the center of his chest, flat between the rise of his pectoral muscles, his dusky nipples.

She wanted—

Oh God. She wanted to circle his nipple with her finger, to see if that made him shiver or moan. She wanted to lick him there, bite him, find out what drove him mad and do it, again and again, until he cried out and spilled his seed on her thigh.

She felt her breath start to come faster at the thought. She felt no longer pleasantly warm, but hot. Burning. Melting.

She wanted to touch every inch of him. She wanted to lick into his mouth, to suck on his tongue as she wrapped her fingers around his shaft. She wanted him blind with pleasure, the only word in his mouth her name. She wanted to know what he tasted of.

It seemed somehow not at all strange to feel this way about Henry. She could not say at what point she had tipped over the edge from vague attraction to this potent, painful desire. It had not been altogether sudden. She had always admired him—the way one might admire a peach at the top of a tree, luscious and beautiful and far out of one's reach.

But oh mercy, he was within her reach now.

An ache had built low in her belly, a hard thrum of desire between her legs. She wanted to press harder against him, grind her sex against the jut of his hip. The relief—ah God, the hard edge of his body would be relief from this edgy need.

She could not do it. He was sleeping. She would not wake him with her demands, not when he had carried her and held her and warmed her with his own clothing.

But still the need went on. She could smell him, his familiar clean scent. His skin was warm and if she turned her head, she could taste him. Lick him.

How would he react if she did? Wrapped up in him, in the dark hot fantasy made by their bodies, she thought he would welcome it. His fingers would tangle in her hair, pulling her head back. He would touch her where she was empty and aching.

Her body was a tight spiral of want. She could not disturb him. She dared not wake him, did not want to further impugn him. But she could not help herself—her body screamed for release. Her hand trailed down his chest and across his abdomen, toward the neediest part of herself. She could press against her palm, rock into it, and oh God, it would not be him, but it would be pressure and pleasure. She would not touch him, she would only *think* of his mouth, his blunt fingers, his tongue. She could be quiet as she satisfied her need, it would not take long, she could—

She realized that he'd tensed. His heartbeat thundered in her ears. Her hand froze, and she looked down, not wanting to turn her flushed face toward his.

Through his smallclothes, she could see the outline of his cock, hard and heavy, curving up toward her hand. The muscles of his belly tightened, trembling beneath her palm.

He was awake. Desire for him was hot in her veins, lust edged with familiarity and comfort and something more, something she could not examine too closely. She felt reckless and brave, her leg draped over him, her hand inches from his erection.

She did not decide to kiss him so much as fall into it, his mouth a lure, an irresistible draw. She lifted her head and tightened her leg, her body coming harder against him. And then she pressed her mouth to his.

★ ★ ★

Henry could not tell if he was dreaming.

He had dreamed of her so many times it had become almost absurd. Her body, flushed pink all over, his hands gathering her breasts before him, thrusting his prick between those two pale mounds, licking her nipples, crying out as he came.

He always woke alone, feeling emptied out and ridiculous.

If he was dreaming now, he didn't want to wake. Margo—ah, Christ, he could feel every line of her soft body, the thin fabric of his shirt scarcely a barrier. He could feel the curve of her breast against his side, the tight point of her nipple a shock, a signal of her arousal, a flare to his own. Her leg was thrown across his, skin on skin. If he lifted his hand, he could touch her,

slide his hand from her ankle to the back of her knee. Close his fingers over her thigh. Knead the broad curve of her arse. He wanted to drag his fingers down the cleft of her buttocks and find her sex, wanted to press his fingers into her body and feel the tight clench of her around him.

But he could not move. If he moved, the spell would break. He would wake up, or a tree would fall through the roof of the cottage, or Margo would realize who he was and—

Well. She would be kind when she broke his heart, he was sure of that.

So he held himself still as a stone, except for the way his cock strained up as she slid her hand from his chest down his stomach. Christ—*Christ*, her touch was more than he could have imagined, light and warm and charged with temptation. His pulse pounded in his ears and he prayed that his body would not betray him, that she would keep touching him, that she would never stop, that he could die here and turn to dust and never give up the feeling of Margo's hand a hairsbreadth from his cock, his bones scored from the pleasure of it.

But she stopped, of course. He balanced on a knife-edge of relief and despair.

An instant of pause, then she pressed up. Her body flattened against his, her face swimming into his view, her cheeks flushed and her pupils blown wide. Then her mouth was on his.

For the first time, they kissed. Her lips were soft and greedy, and Henry came apart.

He rolled her over, cradling her head with his hand, his body coming down on hers, pressing her into the floor. She whimpered into his mouth, her body bucking up against his, her fingers fisting in his hair and urging him on.

Ah God, ah fuck—her tongue was in his mouth, and she tasted like rainwater, like lust and cherries, and he sucked on her tongue, her lips, grinding down into her soft, soft body. Her legs spilled apart, and she arched up.

He was lost. His restraint was gone. Margo moaned and writhed, and he had never felt like this—he thought he might come from the sound of her,

from the clutch of her fingers on his back and the shudder of her body into his.

But no—he couldn’t come yet. He had to see her.

He dragged himself away from her mouth, and the needy groan that came from her lips was a drug, a spur to his madness. He came back onto his knees, freeing his hands to shove his shirt up above her breasts. Her arms were still caught in the sleeves, and she twisted, trying to free herself and push the shirt over her head.

He couldn’t help her. He was too far gone to do anything but stare.

She was glorious, flushed all over with arousal, freckled across the curve of her breasts and her ribs and even the top of her mound, above curls redder than he could have dreamed up in his wildest fantasies. Her curves were riper than he’d expected, her nipples darker, tight knots at the tips of her generous breasts. Her tits bounced as she hauled off the shirt, and he didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he wrapped them around her thighs and lowered his mouth to one nipple.

She gasped as he sucked the tight peak into his mouth, gasped and jerked and strained. He pressed his forehead against her skin, drowning in her scent, in the sensation of her stiff nipple on his tongue. He listened for the sounds she made as he softened his assault, laving her, flicking his tongue against the taut bud. He experimented with circles, with the edges of his teeth, his awareness spiraling down to sensation of her body and the sound of her moans in his ear.

Faster—she seemed to like faster, and harder, so he gave it to her, switching to her other breast.

Dimly, he realized that he was kneading her thighs with his hands, that his thumbs were tracing hard circles on her flesh near her sex. His position kept her legs drawn wide, and she bucked into nothing, into air. Her hips twisted.

“Henry,” she gasped. “Please, *please*—”

He brought one hand to her sex and then stopped, dazed, disbelieving. She was wet—ah God, she was so wet. Her arousal slicked her folds, the tops of her thighs, liquid heat on his fingers as he touched her. He gritted his teeth and pressed his face against the curve of her neck.

She closed her thighs around his hand, wedging his palm against her body. “Don’t stop,” she begged. “Please don’t stop.”

He pressed a finger inside her, and when she gasped out her pleasure, added another. His mind was a white-hot blank, an incomprehensible swirl of Margo’s voice, the sight of her body, and need, so much need—the need to be inside, the need to make her come.

He rubbed his thumb at the apex of her sex, finding her most sensitive place. His pace was fast and firm, and it seemed a bare breath before she cried out, rocking against him, her wet heat clenching in rhythmic waves around his fingers. He felt wild, his emotions careening out of control, huge impossible satisfaction rising at the knowledge that he could bring her pleasure with his body. That he’d made Margo fall to pieces with his mouth and hands.

She came down slowly, her eyes blinking open, and he watched her face, his body tense and vibrating with desire. Her lips curled—his favorite sight—and then she threaded her fingers through his hair and brought his mouth down to hers again.

There was no end to the pleasure he took in her. He kissed her slowly, finding the shape of her mouth with his lips and his tongue. He wanted those crooked front teeth to dig into his bottom lip, and when she obliged, he felt drunk on pleasure.

He found himself pressing his fingers into the lines of her rib cage, savoring the edges of her body, the hard and soft. He kissed her jaw, her ear, her collarbone. The tips of his fingers brushed the undersides of her breasts, and she whimpered. Her fingers untangled from his hair and swept down his back, and the faint pressure of her nails was a whisper, a graze, not enough.

“Henry,” she whispered, “you’re shaking.”

God, he was. And when her fingers coasted down his body, traced his hips and his buttocks, then closed around his prick through his smalls, he nearly wept.

“I want to touch you,” Margo said. “I want to know—what you like.”

“You,” he managed. His voice was dark and unfamiliar. He had never felt like this before, his nerves close to the surface, his cock so hard he felt

it in the top of his skull.

She grinned and his heart leaped—or possibly his desperate erection. She was so lovely, loose and pleased, and he had made her so. He kissed the corner of her mouth and then reached down to strip off his smalls.

She made a sound of hungry delight, and when he looked at her, he saw her eyes were fastened on his cock. Her expression was enormously gratifying, and for all that he was nearly insensible with desire, he found he wanted to laugh.

But it was Margo, so that only seemed right.

He'd shifted down when he'd removed his undergarment, and since he was level with her breasts now, he put his mouth back on her skin. She gave a husky little moan, and he swirled his tongue across the plump weight, tasting her, teasing her. He licked her nipple and then moved down to the soft curve of her abdomen, his teeth finding the line of her ribs.

"Oh," she said, and her hand went to his hair again. Not to pull him back this time. No, Margo was shoving him down between her thighs.

Now he did laugh, a muffled vibration into the red curls at her sex, and she gasped and arched up against his mouth.

Fuck, this was—more than he had been prepared for. The smell of her arousal was all around him, and somehow his hands had found her arse, and it was perfect, heavy and lush. He pressed his nose against her, licked up into her, and stars exploded behind his eyes. This was *Margo*. This was *real*.

She was pleading, begging—he couldn't make out her words. Her voice sounded raw, and her hips made sharp frantic pulses against his face. He was going to come, probably, his cock grinding into the floor, and he didn't much care, not when Margo's cunny was hot and wet and desperate on his mouth.

But her fingers tugged into his hair, pulling him up before she broke.

"I need you," she said, "please, Henry—"

Her hips rolled. His cock leaped. He had what she needed and he could give it to her—yes, as hard and deep and fast as she liked. He fisted himself—his body jerked—and he pressed the head of his cock to her entrance. Her

arousal made her slippery, his body pressing into hers, the first sensation of her hot wet channel around him searing in its pleasure.

But for the first time since her mouth had touched his, he hesitated.

This was something new, something irrevocable. After this, he would no longer be a man who loved Margo, helplessly and from afar. He would be a man who had loved Margo, had loved her in this intimate and consuming way. Had been inside her body.

He could never love her from across the room after this. He would not be able to sit and watch her drink sherry and laugh after some dinner at Number Twelve, watch the candlelight flash sparks off crystal and burn in her hair.

Slowly, slowly, he pushed inside her. It felt impossibly good. Never had he felt such raw, blinding pleasure, such shattering bliss.

She was inside him, too, under his skin, in his heart, and he could not separate his want and his love and his need for her. He could not take a breath without her scent in his nose, and when he pulled back and drove hard into her body, her hips met his stroke for stroke, two halves made one.

The crisis was quick. Almost before he'd been fully seated inside her, he'd felt the coming pulse of his orgasm, and when her body rippled around him, Margo finding her pleasure with a hoarse cry, he blindly withdrew, trapping his cock between their bellies and jerking hard against her, spilling his seed on her skin.

When it was done, he felt a painful, mindless surge of the same instinct that had driven him to warm and dry her. He needed her to be safe, to be protected. He lifted her and the discarded blankets and carried her to the bed.

She laughed and put her hand to his jaw, and the sweet low sound and her touch were more than he could bear. He had wanted too much, for too long—gladness felt like fear. He stretched his body out alongside hers, tugged her head to his chest, and buried his face in her soft, woodsmoke-scented hair.

Chapter 8

Margo was warm when she woke. She stretched against the rough cotton bedsheets, flexing and pointing her toes.

She felt *wonderful*. She'd slept like the veriest corpse—after two dreadful nights in the post-chaise, this narrow mattress was a small paradise. Even with Henry mostly beneath her—her lips curled despite herself—she'd been deliciously comfortable.

And *Henry*—good heavens. A new kind of warmth threaded its way down her body. She would never have expected all *that* beneath his proper exterior. She could feel a faint burn when she squeezed her legs together, from where his stubble had scraped her inner thighs.

In fact, the only thing that troubled her physical contentment was the increasing demand of hunger. Fortunately, she had cheese in her reticule. She hoped it hadn't gotten too wet. Could cheese get too wet? Or did water sort of run off it as though it had been waxed?

She sat up, the bedsheet falling to her waist. She'd no idea what had happened to Henry's shirt. She did see Henry, though, dressed only in trousers and kneeling in front of the grate, using an iron to poke at the fire he'd once again built.

Good *Lord*. In the faint watery light of the morning, Margo could see rather more of him than she'd glimpsed last night, and the sight was spectacular.

What *did* solicitors do all day? There was no way that physique emerged from sitting behind a desk. His shoulders were broader than she would have

guessed—no padded jackets for him. The man even had visible musculature in his *back*.

She chewed her lower lip and wondered again whether she ought to take more exercise.

He'd seemed pleased enough by her form, though. More than pleased. The warmth in her body increased, coalescing in certain places that Henry had seemed to find especially intriguing.

Next time, she thought, she would take the lead. She would use her mouth as he had. Perhaps she would make him tell her precisely what he liked. *You*, he'd said. She felt her cheeks flush. As endlessly gratifying to her vanity as that was, it was not very specific.

Really, she ought to be hurrying to dress and go after Matilda—but it was *very* early, by the angle of the sun. They had time. They had time if they were quick—and by the warm heat that had unfurled in her center, the tightness in her belly, Margo felt she could be quick indeed.

Despite herself, a sigh escaped her lips, and Henry practically catapulted from the floor and spun toward her.

Her eyes widened as she took him in. “You look wretched!” she said in surprise, and then clapped a hand over her mouth.

What a thing to say, she chided herself. *Badly done, Margo*.

He did, though. His face was pale, and his eyes looked bruised. He looked as though he hadn't slept all night. He appeared to have shaved already that morning, and with an unsteady hand, because he was bleeding slightly near his left ear.

He didn't say anything. He was staring at her in a fixed, motionless sort of way.

Oh—no. He was staring at her bosom.

Something that had gone tense inside her relaxed. He still wanted her. This was not over yet.

If she'd been the proper lady Aunt Lavinia had tried to compel her to become—the kind of lady who wasn't sent down from finishing school—she'd have blushed and lifted the bedsheet over her breasts in a flurry of modest exclamations.

Actually, she supposed, a proper lady would not have gone to bed with her brother's best friend at all.

But she was not, and she had, and she absolutely did not lift the bedsheet over the part of her body that had transfixed Henry. Instead, she trailed the tips of her fingers down one freckled curve.

Even from across the room, she could see the bob of his throat as he swallowed.

She let her hand fall to her lap, where the linens puddled. She nudged the sheet down on her hip. One inch, then another. Then she slid her hand over to the cool empty space on the mattress beside her.

"Would you like to come back?" she asked. "We could breakfast together. It will be warmer if you sit beside me."

"I—" he said. "I—"

She grinned. She thought he might be blushing. He was mildly scandalized—what a delight he was—if only she could persuade him to come back! She nudged the sheet down her hip a little farther, baring at least ten more freckles. He seemed to like them.

"You should get dressed," he said, and he plucked up the wrinkled green mass of her traveling gown, strode across the room, and dropped it on her lap.

She blinked. That had taken a turn.

Her stomach felt suddenly strange, a nauseous flip, almost as she'd felt when the post-chaise had toppled the day before.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose I shall."

"I'll go outside." His voice sounded choked. "While you dress."

He spun and headed for the door. Margo unfolded herself from the bed. The cottage seemed suddenly freezing, and her dress and chemise were not totally dry. Where the fabric touched her body, she felt clammy and wrong.

After an absurdly long time for a man who was still bare-chested—was he trying to ensure she was dressed when he returned?—Henry reentered the cottage. He nearly bumped into her, so close had she positioned herself to the door.

"Do you regret it?" she demanded.

She winced internally. She'd meant to approach the subject with a bit more tact. He'd made her nervous, that was all, with how long he'd taken to come back inside.

"I'm—sorry?"

She groaned and whirled away. "Last night! Do you regret it?" She didn't give him a chance to answer, just spun back and advanced on him. "You needn't come over all fussy and proper. You haven't ruined me. I ruined myself years ago."

"Margo, I—"

"There's nothing wrong with what we did, you know! Free and consensual—is that not what you said yourself?"

His mouth was serious, so bloody serious. There was no trace of the Henry who had laughed into her skin. "I did. I know. I should not have done —"

"Don't start with your shoulds and should nots!" She felt angry and stupid, stupid for thinking he would come back to bed, for thinking there would be a next time. "It was not the first time I had done that, you know. I am responsible for my own choices."

"It was for me."

She blinked, arrested. "What?"

His ears were pink, but his face did not break from its stern lines. "It was the first time for me."

★ ★ ★

Somewhere inside himself, Henry groaned. He had not meant to admit that.

He was panicked, utterly at sea. He'd woken in the gray hours of pre-dawn, Margo fast asleep on his chest, her body a warm marvel of freckles and curves. He'd wanted her instantly, insanely; he wanted to wake her with his mouth on her quim. He wanted to never let her sleep any way but this, sprawled across him, her hair tickling his mouth.

He wanted to tell her he loved her. He wanted to tell her that he'd always loved her, that he would sell his soul to be inside her once more.

And he wanted to run. He didn't know how to do this any longer. Everything had shifted, a sea change in who they were to one another. Was

he supposed to pretend things were as they had always been?

What if, when she woke, she flashed those crooked teeth in a grin and acted as though nothing untoward had occurred? He would not put it past her: one more adventure, one more laughing plunge into delight.

But—it was both better and worse to contemplate—what if she woke and wanted him again?

What then? murmured his heart. *What then?*

He had no future with her. She was the daughter of an earl, he the son of a pipe-fitter. Even if she did not care about such things—and in truth, he knew she did not—she was *Margo*. She was life and joy and adventure, and he was the man at the side of the room, watching her light. He was no fit match for her.

And he didn't know if he could have her again, without having her forever.

But then she did wake, and he promptly lost his mind. He wanted her—Christ, he wanted her so much—the previous night had not taken even the edge off his black lust for her. But he'd panicked, too: afraid she would say what she wanted from him, afraid she would want nothing from him at all.

When she'd said she was ruined, something had split in his heart. Some dam inside him had burst, and he was going to tell her that he loved her, consequences be damned. But instead the words that had spilled from his lips had been a confession of his recently lost virginity, which was not precisely the way he'd imagined declaring his affections.

"Henry," she said, blue eyes round as coins, "how is that possible?"

"In the regular way, I imagine." Jesus Christ, his face was on fire. "I'd not performed that particular act. I had—I was not—I was not entirely new to the experience."

Henry prayed for lightning to strike him, but none seemed forthcoming. She blinked once, very slowly.

It was suddenly very important to impress upon her that he had not been a complete novice in sexual relations.

Jesus. Had he *seemed* a complete novice?

"There are preliminary acts. Which I had, of course, engaged in. Before, er, last night."

She blinked again, then nodded. “Yes, I’m not surprised. You seemed —” She appeared as lost for words as he was. “You seemed not to, er, require a map.”

This was a disaster. There was no coming back from any of this.

He had not precisely intended to pursue a lifestyle of celibacy. At twenty-one, when he’d first met Margo, he’d been bookish and shy—no opportunities to indulge in fleshly pleasures had presented themselves, and he had been too reticent to seek them out. And after he’d met Margo—

He’d never met anyone who held a candle to her. He’d tried, several times, to disengage his interest from Margo, to make himself admire someone else, but all to no avail. After those failures, he’d taken a passive tack. Surely, he’d thought, surely someday his heart would abandon its hopeless fixation on her.

He was not making very good progress on that front.

“I’m going to dress,” he said. “And then we’re going to ride to the next town.”

“You are?” Margo bit her bottom lip. “We are?”

He tried to ignore those two crooked teeth, sunk into the pink curve. He tried not to think of how frantic with need he had been when she’d bitten his lip the same way.

“Yes. Eat your cheese.”

She looked down at her reticule, then back up at him. “Do we have a horse to ride?”

“Yes,” he said. “I stole one.”

Chapter 9

Everything was completely mad. Matilda had eloped with Ashford. Margo was lost in Derbyshire. She had *slept* with Henry, who cursed now and also was a virgin. Or—no, he was no longer a virgin, because she had in fact deflowered him the night before.

She, a despoiler of virgins! She'd never felt more like a Halifax Hellion in her life.

Moreover, though Henry no longer seemed interested in finding his pleasure with her—which was fine and certainly not a good explanation for the tears that kept filling her eyes—she'd evidently corrupted him in other ways.

Henry had *stolen* a horse. Henry! Who had probably never broken a rule in his life.

He sat now atop the chestnut gelding, gazing down in the vicinity of her boots. She followed his gaze. She was a disheveled mess. She probably smelled. Her traveling dress was not divided for riding.

“Do you want to ride in front or behind?” Henry asked, his fingers gripping the gelding's bridle.

“In front.” She was not about to cling to his back like a limpet. Let him do the clinging.

He looked down at her, and his ears went pink, and she refused to be charmed. “I've reconsidered. You should ride behind.”

She gritted her teeth. “Did you not just ask me my preference moments ago? Whyever would you *ask* if you did not mean to—”

“Fine,” Henry snapped, and, bending, he half-boasted, half-flung her onto the horse’s back in front of him.

She was fairly certain he had not groped her backside, and she found herself absurdly disappointed.

She shifted, trying to arrange her skirts in a way that did not completely restrict her range of motion while also protecting her skin from rubbing raw on the horse’s back. Wherever Henry had managed to find a horse, he’d inexplicably secured a bridle but no saddle. They were bareback and astride, which was perfectly fine with her. She and Matilda had been doing both since childhood, though usually while wearing men’s breeches.

She attempted to lean back against Henry as she adjusted the crumpled fabric, and he shifted backward away from her.

She pinched her lips together. So he wanted to act as though she were repellent now, did he?

It was absurd, insulting. He had been just as willing as she!

But perhaps—well. She had not known he was not experienced. She should have taken things more slowly, been more gentle. Perhaps she had rushed him—she often rushed things, smashed things with her carelessness.

Somehow she had smashed their comfort, the ease of long-held friendship between them.

He reached around her body to grip the reins, his arms coming around either side of her. They rode in silence for several minutes, Henry leading them back out to the road and up the way they had come the day before.

“Henry?”

“Hmm?” He sounded abstracted, his voice and body both stiff.

“Where did you find this horse?”

“I told you.” His voice still sounded strained. The horse missed a step and she rocked against Henry’s body behind her. He made an almost inaudible sound. “It—I went looking for more firewood this morning and found it bridled in the woods.”

“And you simply brought it with you?” She shifted in her seat.

“Yes. I mean to send it back with some coin eventually. I—would you *stop* doing that?”

She craned her head around to look at him, which brought her face startlingly close to his. She could see the faint line of dried blood where he'd cut himself with his razor. Her eyes fell on the curve of his lower lip, which was less a serious slash at this juncture and more of a pout.

"Doing what?"

"Wiggling like that! I am trying to find civilization, and I can't—I can't —"

It dawned on her then precisely why it was so difficult to make herself comfortable in Henry's lap. He was—er. Goodness. She hadn't imagined a man could achieve that state while on horseback, although she supposed she'd never thought about it.

She turned back around, though not before noticing that he was red as a currant.

He blew out a breath, and she felt it stir her hair. "Forgive me. It's not your fault that I cannot seem to keep my mind off of—"

He stopped. She waited with what was, for her, extraordinary patience, but he did not go on.

"Off of...?"

He made a sound that resembled *ggrmph*. "Use your imagination, Margo."

"I don't want to use my imagination. I want to hear yours."

Now he definitely groaned.

"I will forgive you," she added, "if you tell me."

He leaned forward. "Lifting your skirts." His lips were almost at her ear, his voice a growl. "Putting my hand between your thighs. Making you beg."

Margo felt lightheaded. She hoped she did not fall off the horse. "I—see."

Henry's teeth closed over the rim of her ear. A fine tremor ran through her body. Her lips had parted—she could hear herself panting.

Henry sat back. His voice was a trifle grim. "Let's find the nearest village. Then we can talk."

Margo hoped *talk* was a euphemism for something else entirely.

It took hours for them to find Darley Dale, the small coaching town. Margo's legs were jellied from riding astride for so long, and when she slid down from the gelding, she nearly crumpled to the ground.

Henry cursed and caught her, his large hands banded to her waist.

His hands—Margo felt quite warm and shivery all over just thinking about them.

But he pulled back once more. "We should find a public house. You'll need sustenance. It's been quite a while since you broke your fast."

He hauled her across the street like a man possessed, and together they ducked into a small, low-ceilinged tavern. The place seemed clean and well-kept, the early afternoon light spilling clearly through new-glazed glass. When they settled themselves at a table, a round-faced woman in an apron hurried over, placing two tankards of ale on the waxed wooden surface before them.

"What do ye fancy, ma'am, sir?" she asked. "We've game pie today and —"

She stopped abruptly and looked more closely at Margo, who emerged rather breathlessly from her beer. The woman's brows drew together for a moment, and then her face cleared. "Begging your pardon, mum! I didn't know ye at first, since ye've changed your dress. Were the buns to your liking?"

Henry looked up, puzzled. Very slowly, Margo set down the ale glass. "The buns?"

"To be sure," said the tavern keeper. "The caraway buns I sent with ye this morning. After ye broke your fast in the dining room."

"Me?" Margo said, her voice coming out faint. "You saw me this morning?"

"Of course I did," the woman said. She looked to Henry with an expression of concern. "Is the lass overset?"

"No." Henry reached out and caught Margo's hand, and she gripped hard, steadying herself. "You say she was wearing a different gown? But she looked like this woman here?"

"Just exactly," said the tavern keeper. "A blue striped dress, but other than that, it could have been her twin. Same hair. Same freckles, if you

don't mind my saying so."

"No," Henry said. "Not the same freckles at all."

"Matilda," Margo managed. Her fingers were still locked with Henry's. "We found her!" Relief stabbed through her, painful in its intensity. They had started a day after Matilda and Ashford, then had lost another night with the carriage accident and the rainstorm. But somehow they had ended up here, at the coaching village. At the very same public house.

Guilt and alarm made her stomach hurt. Matilda had been here this morning—but where was she now?

She looked up at the tavern keeper. "How long ago did she leave? Do you know where she went? Was she alone?"

The woman's thick gray brows drew together. "A few hours perhaps. But it shouldn't be so hard to find her. She left with a great, silent, bearded fellow. On foot. They can't have gone far."

Chapter 10

They could not find Matilda.

Henry gripped the reins of the stolen gelding and squeezed his knees into the horse's flanks. The motion brought his thighs tighter around Margo's lush hips, but he forced himself not to focus on the sensation.

Darley Dale was just at the southern end of the Pennines, and the land here was wilder than he would have expected. The rolling hills had quickly shifted to barren stretches of moorland and rocky outcroppings made of limestone and shale.

Mrs. Turner, the tavern keeper, had told them she was certain Matilda and Ashford had not taken a horse or coach. Margo had demanded to know whether Matilda had seemed frightened or out of sorts, but Mrs. Turner had shaken her head. "Wanted Chelsea buns," she said, "but took my caraway buns in the end." One corner of her mouth lifted. "A high-spirited lass."

Margo's hands had been in fists on the table. "And you don't know where they were going?"

Mrs. Turner gave an apologetic shrug. "I did tell her of a waterfall near her. Maybe three miles' walk, but it's hard going in the High Peak. Might take her an hour or more to get there."

So they'd set off for the waterfall, having no better direction. It had not been easy travel even on horseback, and Henry found himself growing increasingly concerned. A picnic sounded a pleasant enough interlude—but would they truly have walked so far just to eat caraway buns?

"Surely it must be that way," Margo said, tugging on his right jacket sleeve. He looked in the direction she indicated.

“What makes you say so?”

“The sheer power of my futile hope?”

Henry sighed and turned the horse. He knew all about futile hope and the impossible imaginings it engendered. “Good enough for me. I think there’s a trail there, near that pile of rocks.”

They found the path, though the uneven ground soon forestalled riding. Henry looped the horse’s reins around a stubby hawthorn tree, and they continued on foot. The trail, flanked by gorse and a few scraggly larches, wound down into a little valley. As they descended, the track grew increasingly sheltered by trees, and Henry caught the sound of water.

“Do you know,” he said, “I think you were right.”

She laughed, but to his carefully Margo-calibrated ear, it sounded forced. “What an event! It’s like an eclipse. Or a duke marrying a seamstress. Rare enough to be worthy of a proper headline.”

“Margo—”

But they’d come around a stand of birch trees and found the waterfall. Four separate columns of froth spilled down into a rippling cove, its water clear enough to see the flat rocks and pebbles and scattered leaves at its base. Everything was sun-dappled, shades of white and gray and brown, and Margo’s hair was a beacon for the light.

There was a blanket, spread across a large rock near the foot of the waterfall. On it lay a traveling pelisse, a man’s hat, an empty wine bottle, and the remains of several caraway buns.

“Matilda!” Margo gasped, and then she raised her voice in a shout. “Matilda!”

She shouted twice more, but her voice died beneath the headlong rush of water.

Henry raised his voice to shout as well, but it was useless. The waterfall drowned out their voices. Margo clutched his hand, and the feeling of her palm in his—the cool firm pressure of her fingers—rooted him to the spot.

“You don’t think—she’s—fallen in the water, or—”

“I don’t think she’s fallen in the water.” He squeezed her fingers. Her eyes were big and blue and endless, her mouth caught in a frown. “I think

she had a picnic here with Ashford. I think they're probably somewhere nearby."

She kept her hand in his while they circled back through the trees and down the path. He didn't let her go.

They searched and shouted, but found no trace of Matilda or Ashford. It seemed absurd, impossible. Where could they be hidden?

Eventually, Margo bit her lip and pulled him to a halt. "I think we should split up."

He shook his head, an instinctive denial on his lips before she had even stopped speaking. "It won't—"

"Please, Henry," she said. "We can cover twice as much ground. We're so close—we've nearly found her. We *must* find her, before it starts to grow dark and she heads back to Darley Dale—or worse, leaves altogether. Please, just—do this one last thing for me?" Her fingers were still tangled with his. "This is the final thing I'll ask of you. I promise."

He was helpless to deny her. He didn't even need rain to push him into capitulation. "All right. Meet me back at the waterfall in thirty minutes."

"I don't—Henry, neither of us has a timepiece."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "All right. Not thirty minutes. Before the sun dips over those trees."

She was already nodding, her fingers pulling away from him. "You take this side of the falls, and I'll take the other."

His empty hand felt like a loss. He was absurd. He hated feeling this way, hated how much more of her he wanted now that he knew what was possible. "Don't tumble into the water. I'm not certain my extra shirts have dried."

She quirked a grin, her teeth flashing, and he made his way in the opposite direction of where his feet and his hands and his ridiculous heart wanted him to go.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes, though, when he heard the sound. It was clear over the sounds of water, a sharp crack and a snap. And then a scream.

Henry spun, his boot slipping in muck and rotted leaves, and ran back the way that he'd come.

He was back on the trail, his heart in his throat, before he remembered to shout for her. “Margo! Was that you? Answer me, damn it! Margo!”

But God—God. Matilda, if she was there, had not seemed to hear their shouting. Perhaps Margo would not hear him either. She would not know he was coming for her. Christ, Margo could be calling out for him right now, and he would not know it.

He made himself stop, think. Listen for her.

“Margo!” he shouted again. “Can you hear me?”

He waited, refusing to breathe, until his lungs burned with the effort, his chest tightening with the need for air. If she had responded, he could not hear her.

He inched down the trail she had taken, shouting Margo’s name and pausing in between to listen for her response. He wanted to run—to pray—but instead he made himself walk softly so that his footsteps would not overshadow the sound of her voice.

And then, halfway back to the waterfall, he heard her.

“Henry?”

Her voice sounded calm, blessedly calm. “Margo! Where are you?”

“Just off the path—by the big oaks. What are you—”

He couldn’t make out the rest of her words. He was off the path and around the trees, mindlessly searching for her small form, the red beacon of her hair. When he finally spotted her, twenty paces away, her green dress flirting with the shadows, he wasn’t quite sure how he crossed the distance between them. He was by the trees, then suddenly he had her in his arms.

She squeaked.

“Tell me you’re all right.” He said it into her hair, breathing her in as his hands searched her body. “Tell me you’re not hurt.”

She pulled herself free—or half-free at least, enough to look him in the eye. “I’m not hurt. I’m perfectly well. Henry, what on Earth—”

He dragged her back into his arms and pressed his face into the curve of her neck. “Oh Christ. Margo. I heard a crash. I heard you scream.”

She wiggled, but he could not let her go. Not yet. Not until every part of his body had felt every part of hers. Until his body knew her to be safe.

"I climbed a tree," she explained, "to see if I could spot Matilda. I thought perhaps they'd wandered farther than we'd imagined. Unfortunately, I chose an entirely unsatisfactory tree to climb, and the thing nearly came down on my head."

"It didn't—"

"No. It didn't. I told you, Henry, I'm perfectly well. I'm sorry you were frightened—I never expected that you would hear me."

Now he pulled back, just enough to give her shoulders a little shake. "Damn it, Margo, you took ten years off my life."

Her face was flushed pink, her lips a cherry-colored curve. Where fear had been, coiled in his chest and sparking in his brain, new feelings rose instead. Hotter. Darker.

Her chin tipped back, a familiar gesture of defiance. "You didn't need to come after me. I was fine."

"I didn't need to—" His fingers were tight on her upper arms, and she was so fragile, her flesh yielding beneath him. It made him furious, blackly furious—he couldn't think. "You could have been killed!"

"From climbing a tree? I assure you, I've survived worse."

"Yes, I know! You survived a carriage crash. You survived nearly freezing to death in Derbyshire. You survived a goddamned trek through St. James's Park *alone* in the middle of the night. For Christ's sake, Margo, you have to be more careful!"

He felt her tense beneath him, and he thought she might slap his face. He wanted it—a quick hard spark to shock him back to his senses. Instead her lips twisted down, the constellation of freckles at her mouth a harsh curve.

"Are you only now discovering this? Yes, Henry—I'm careless. I'm reckless." Her blue eyes were bright, bright—her lips were trembling. "What haven't I wrecked in my godforsaken life? What haven't I ruined?" Her palm had somehow come to his chest, flat and warm through the thin barrier of his shirt.

"Damn it, Margo—"

"This," she said. "Us."

And it was true, though not as she meant. He was ruined. He no longer knew how to breathe without the scent of her in his nose. He didn't know where he ended and she began, and he wanted to press his turbulence into her body and bury himself there.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Is that what you want me to say? I'm sorry I climbed a tree. I'm sorry I made you come with me. I'm sorry—"

"No," he said, and then he yanked her back against his chest and kissed her.

★ ★ ★

The heat flared between them as it had the first time, crackling and instantaneous. Margo thrust her fingers into Henry's hair and held him, locking his mouth to hers.

It was the same and different too, this time—edged with anger and hurt and something she could not contemplate. His mouth was seeking, his fingers pressed hard into her back, and without thinking she sucked his lip between her teeth and bit him.

He groaned, a hot, torn-off sound. Desire spilled inside her, pooling in her lower belly, and she arched up into him. His hands found her buttocks, lifting her against him, and she felt the hard press of his arousal.

"Yes," he gritted out. "I'm wrecked. I'm out of my head. I want to check every inch of you for a scratch or bruise, and at the same time I want to pull you down into the dirt and swive you senseless."

Damn him. He had her panting again, pressing her breasts against his chest, desperate for friction. Her dress felt rough and cold, and she wanted his hands, his mouth, anything to ease the ache that had started between her legs then spiraled through her body. Her nipples were tight, and it *hurt*, all this wanting.

"Tell me to stop." His hands pressed into her backside, kneading harder. His breath was in her ear. She felt the scrape of his teeth. "Tell me it's over."

In answer, she fell to her knees on the leaf-covered soil and pulled him down with her.

He swore and took them the rest of the way to the ground.

Margo felt everything. The chalky stone at her back, the leaves that brushed her cheek. Henry's weight on top of her—pressure, friction, *yes* and *more*—and then the small pops of her bodice hooks as Henry yanked them free.

He had her bodice pushed down to her waist, the neckline of her chemise tugged open. She scrambled for the edge of his shirt, his falls, needing his heated skin under her hands. Then her nipple was in his mouth, hard, sweet, shocking pleasure. She pushed her head back into the dirt.

He sucked and licked, and Margo lost track of everything but sensation—feeling it, chasing it, demanding more. Her hips rocked up against him, and she tried to curl one leg around his body, bringing him to where the ache was deepest. But he pressed back, pressed her down. His hand came to her knee, holding her leg open.

There was no relief from the ache then, only the empty space between them. Her muscles felt strung tight. Desire was a wheel, spinning her down into some place hot and desperate. She dug her fingers into the loam at her sides, feeling cold earth on her burning skin.

“Henry, *please*.” She didn't recognize her voice. She sounded drugged, mindless, lost in animal need.

He lifted his head, and she caught a glimpse of his eyes, his pupils wide, his gaze unfocused. He looked as he'd said—wrecked.

He looked how she felt, consumed by lust and happy to drown in it. “I like that,” he said thickly. “When you beg.”

“Please, please—touch me. I can't stand it, I'm going to die if you don't —”

Her skirt was shoved up now, one of his hands at the line where her garter held her stocking up. He massaged the place where fabric ended and skin began. She felt the press of those blunt fingers on her thigh and tried to twist her body into him, but he held back.

“Say my name.”

“Henry,” she whispered, “Henry, please.”

“Tell me what you want.” His thumb brushed her curls, a whisper of sensation against her quim. Her hips jerked.

“You. Touch me. Oh God, please. Touch me and never stop.”

In answer, he kissed her again, and then his tongue was in her mouth, and one thick finger was inside her, the heel of his palm pressed against the apex of her sex.

Oh God, it felt as good as she remembered—better—his finger crooked forward, touching a place in her she hadn't known existed. She couldn't control the way her hips pumped against him in short, rhythmic jerks, and he must have liked it, because he groaned into her mouth.

"Fuck," he said. "Fuck, Margo."

And she was not a good girl, she would never be a lady, because she loved the filthy words in his mouth, and she turned her head to lick up his neck. "More, please. I need more."

He pushed another finger into her, grinding his palm down, trapping her between the soft ground and the sweet almost-pain of her release just out of reach. She was shaking all over, her body drawing taut, her back arching.

"Perfect," he said, "fuck, you're perfect—"

And then she came hard around his fingers, her body clamping down in rhythmic waves that felt as far out of her control as the waterfall's distant thunder in her ears. He pressed his face against her neck as she twisted and writhed against his palm, her body shuddering, and, oh God, the pleasure shattered her apart.

He gave her no time to recover. As soon as her body stopped fluttering around his fingers, he flipped her over and dragged her hips up with one hand.

She gasped, pressing a hand to the leaves near her face. The scent of earth filled her nose.

Her skirts were at her waist now, and she felt cool air on her buttocks, on her still-quivering sex.

She twisted her head back to look at him. He'd freed his shaft from his trousers, and he took himself in hand. The sight made her moan—Henry, proper and upright Henry, undone with desire, his hand fisting his cock, his eyes black as he stared at her.

He saw her looking back. "If you don't want this," he ground out, "tell me now."

"I want it."

In answer, he pressed the head of his cock at her entrance, and she gasped, trying to shove back against him and take him in. His palm on her hip held her still, and she shuddered.

“Henry,” she said, since he seemed to like that. His hips jerked in response, his erection pushing just inside her.

“Henry,” she said again. “I want your cock inside me.”

“Oh fuck,” he managed, and then he thrust hard.

Her face was in the dirt. Henry’s hands dug into her hips. The air was cold on her breasts and thighs, and her hair was tangled in her mouth, and Henry was deep inside her, and it was the most painfully, wildly erotic thing that had ever happened to her.

“More,” she gasped. “Harder. Until you can’t think.”

He gave her more, and harder. He pounded into her, his fingers pressed into her flesh, his hands holding her still so he could drive into her. He set the pace. He took his pleasure from her and wrung soft, helpless moans from her throat.

“I can’t ever think around you,” he said hoarsely.

She whimpered. Her body trembled. He was so hard inside her, his rhythm steady and strong, filling her body.

“You like that? Knowing what you do to me?”

She arched her back, feeling helpless, unable to do anything except absorb the pleasure of his relentless thrusts.

“Do you like driving me out of my mind, Margo?”

“Yes.” She hardly knew what she was saying. “Yes, yes.” If she was to be frantic and ragged with need, then he should be too.

“Christ,” he growled, and then he shoved one hand down between her legs and found her pearl. Her release, which had been coiling in her belly, spun closer, and she cried out.

“I don’t want this to end.” His fingers took up a hard, circling rhythm, his thrusts never slowing. “But when you come around me, I don’t think I can stop myself. Oh God, Margo, you feel—so good.”

She didn’t want it to end either. She wanted to stay like this, her face pressed into the ground and Henry taking his pleasure greedily from her body, until she died of bliss. But he was driving her past the point of no

return with his fingers and cock, and the moans that came from her lips were low and uneven.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s my girl,” and then she was clenching around him, her vision going black, her climax an explosion that rocked her whole body, ravaged her with pleasure.

He was beyond words then, his breath harsh and erratic, and he withdrew, pressing her legs together and thrusting between her thighs with a hoarse shout. She felt his spend, hot and flooding, and she squeezed her legs tight as if to keep him there.

He groaned, shuddering, and pressed his face into her back. He let her hips fall, his full weight coming down on top of her for a moment. She relished it—his body covering hers. Then he rolled to his back and pulled her facedown atop him, and she found she liked that as well.

For long minutes, they did nothing but breathe. Her skirts had mostly fallen back down, but Henry’s hand had made its way underneath. He traced a pattern on the bare skin of her hip.

“What are you writing?” she asked. Her hand, where it rested on his upper arm, had a line of mud across the back.

“Hmm?” His finger stopped, then started again. “Your name, I think.”

And why *now* would she feel trepidation? A small fragile leap in her chest at his words.

“I should be sorry,” he said a few minutes later. “Your hair is full of leaves. I can scarcely see the freckles beneath all the mud on your face.”

“Henry, I—”

“I’m not sorry.” He laughed, a deep vibration in his chest beneath her cheek. “That was the best thing that’s ever happened in my life.”

She lifted her head to look at him. She didn’t know what she wanted from him now, but she wanted it desperately. Her heart was in her throat, hope and fear and—

“Ever?” she asked.

He smiled lazily at her, black lashes heavy over his dark eyes. His fingers dug into her arse. “Oh, to be sure. But I’m willing to try harder, darling, if you have advice. Another four or five minutes and I’ll be at your service.”

She laughed into his shirt. “What a peacock you are! I would never have guessed.”

He hummed, a low amused rumble of assent, and then threaded his hand into her hair. One by one, he plucked out the damp leaves and laid them beside her. “Do you have advice, then? I’m listening.”

He was so good at listening, so patient and diligent and earnest. And more, she was learning, much more than she’d known, more playful and relentless and demanding. So many facets of him, newly brought into the light and shimmering in it.

“I’d thought—” she began, and then hesitated.

He tipped his head up. “Yes? Tell me, Margo. I want to know.”

“I’d thought to take the lead, you know. Next time.” She made herself say the words. “If you want there to be a next time.”

He dropped his head back into the dirt and squeezed his eyes closed. For a long terrible moment her heart plummeted. She bit down hard on her lower lip.

“More than I want air,” he said.

She took a quick gasping breath.

“There’s nothing I want more on this Earth, Margo. Except—except I—

A clear cool voice cut off whatever Henry was about to say. A voice as familiar to Margo as her own.

“Margo?”

She toppled off Henry and landed in the pile of leaves he’d collected from her hair. She yanked at her bodice, hurtled to her feet, and stared into the flabbergasted face of her twin.

Chapter 11

“Margo?” her sister said again. “How are you *here*?”

Margo attempted to answer, but her bodice threatened to flap open. Henry at her side managed his falls in record time. Curse women’s fashions! She had five minuscule hooks to fasten, and she was fairly certain Henry had broken at least one of them.

“Matilda!” she said brightly. “Fancy meeting you here in Derbyshire! What a coincidence.”

Two hooks—two hooks remained of the original five. She briefly considered murdering Henry. This was her only dress!

“Margo,” her twin said threateningly, “stop playing with your frock and answer me.” Her scowl turned on Henry. “And don’t even try to look innocent, Henry Mortimer, when I just saw Margo’s entire fundament exposed to all of Derbyshire.”

“My *what*?”

“Your bum,” said Henry helpfully, and then blushed a delightful carnation pink.

Matilda seemed considerably less charmed than Margo felt. “What are you two *doing* here?”

Margo gave up on her gaping bodice. “For heaven’s sake, Matilda. We were looking for you. We’ve been chasing you ever since you left. Did you think you could run off without a backward glance and I wouldn’t come after you?”

Matilda’s jaw was clenched, and her eyes were bright with rage. “Yes, in fact, I did think that, Margo, because *I told you not to come after me.*”

Margo felt an answering fury rise inside her. "You do not know what you are about."

"Of course I know what I'm about. It's *my life*, for Christ's sake. It's no one's business but my own."

"And Ashford? Where in God's name is he? Or has he left you by yourself out here?"

Matilda's face was white and set. "When we came upon you two rolling around in the dirt, I asked him to let me speak to you alone. And do you know what, Margo? He listened to me. He respected my wishes. Unlike you."

Margo felt the impact of her sister's words, a direct hit in the center of her chest. But it was easy for Ashford—his heart wasn't tangled up in fear and love and worry and anguish as hers was.

"I don't trust him," she said. The words came out flat.

"You don't know him!"

"Neither do you," Margo said incredulously. "You've known him for what—a month? Six weeks?"

"I've known him long enough." Matilda's lips pressed together. "I love him. And it's my choice, Margo. It's not up to you."

Panic had settled somewhere above her breastbone. She didn't know how to get through to Matilda, and she was afraid, so afraid—

She didn't want to lose her.

"Just because you and Ashford have—certain—desires—in common, that does not mean—"

"Stop it," Matilda hissed. "I know you think I am unnatural—"

"I don't, damn it!" Merciful heavens, whatever it was that tangled pleasure up in submission, Margo supposed they shared it. She gritted her teeth so hard she felt a muscle in her jaw creak. "I do not—I am trying not—blast it, Tillie! You can let Ashford whack you with a crop all day if you like—"

"How generous of you," Matilda ground out, "when I just found you arse up in the woods with Henry Mortimer!"

"That's different—"

"How is it different?" Matilda demanded. "Tell me!"

“I am not marrying Henry!”

The words rang out, clear over the distant sound of the waterfall. There was an awful finality to them, a leaden certainty that she had not intended.

She glanced over at Henry. His gaze was fixed on the trees ahead of him, and he did not look at her. But his mouth—his mouth was a grim flat line, and there was no sweet pink flush on his cheekbones.

“I am—” She didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry, Henry, I—” She gave her head a little shake, trying to clear her mind. She couldn’t think about Henry right now. She had to focus on Matilda.

She attempted to choose her words carefully for once. “Could you not simply have an affair with Ashford? Does tying yourself to him for life not seem a trifle precipitate? I am not saying he is not the right person for you, Matilda, but if you would only take the time to be certain—”

“I am already certain.”

Margo drew a breath to try to argue her point, but Matilda gave a short sharp sigh and kept going.

“I am tired of being a Halifax Hellion.”

It shouldn’t hurt. It wasn’t who they *were*, not really. It was just a stupid name, a role they adopted because it was easier to play the part than to try to be something else and to fail.

And yet Matilda’s words felt scored into her skin. It felt like a rejection not of the silly nickname but of *her*, of *them*, of the life they’d shared since before they were born.

“I want to get married,” Matilda said. “I want to be—not respectable, bollocks to that. But I want to be steady. I want to be *me*, not some version of me that we invented seven years ago, that the scandal sheets embroidered into something I barely recognized.”

Margo’s mouth felt dry. She tried to swallow but couldn’t.

“Aren’t you sick of it too?” Matilda asked. “I don’t—I don’t even remember why we started—”

“Because fuck their rules,” Margo whispered, and the far-off thunder of the waterfall nearly swept her words away. She tried again. “Because it’s all a farce—our reputation, our virtue—they’re nonsense terms made up by men who want to control the women around them. There’s no power to the

words if we ignore them. Do you not recall? None of it really matters. None of it is who we really are.”

Matilda threw up her hands. Her blue-and-white striped traveling dress brushed the leaves at their feet, and unlike Margo, she looked clean and put-together. “And what did we accomplish? All that talk of power and scandal, and for what? For a few years of sybaritic pleasure?”

Every word felt like a brand, searing into her. She had felt the same creeping dissatisfaction with their notoriety, with the way they’d built their lives these last few years. It had occurred to her that if she ever did find someone with whom she wanted to spend her life, she had so deeply blackened her reputation that it would be all but impossible for anyone to seriously consider her. Even in the last few days, it had been simmering in the back of her mind—that Henry could not be seen to attach himself to her without his career suffering for it.

“It wasn’t all useless,” she said. Her voice was thin. “There were other girls who saw us—who saw that some made-up notion of virtue is no true measure of their worth.” There had been young ladies whose minor scandals might have been much larger ones had they not been overshadowed by the antics of the Halifax Hellions.

And then for the first time, Henry’s voice cut in, deep and serious and reassuring. “You sell yourselves short.”

Matilda turned toward him, her lips pinched, but he held up a hand, and she didn’t say anything.

“I know,” he said, “it’s not my place to say. But I’ve been there for seven years watching you—not only you, Margo, just *mostly* you—and you do not give yourselves the credit you deserve. Either of you.”

Margo’s chest hurt. She didn’t know how to interpret his words, the shades of meaning that lay beneath them.

“You are good, both of you. Kind. When a debutante makes some silly social faux pas, you two rush in like Spartans ready to defend her to the death. The servants brighten up when you enter a room because you ignore the aristocratic precept that says you’re supposed to demand their service but never deign to thank them.”

“That’s an idiotic rule,” muttered Matilda.

Henry laughed, but his heart wasn't in it. Margo could tell.

"Matilda, I don't begin to know what is between you and Ashford, but don't you think it possible that he was willing to approach you because he was aware of how open-minded the two of you are known to be? It's your reputations, such as they are, that have brought you to this point. And it's for the better, not for the worse. The people who would judge you, either of you, for doing things that hurt no one, that bring nothing but pleasure, are fools."

Margo wanted suddenly to press her face into her hands and hide. She wanted to cry. She wanted to run away and never have to face him again.

Because it wasn't true. She had hurt people. She had hurt Matilda with this godforsaken chase, with her foolhardy decision to confront Ashford in the guise of her twin.

She had hurt Henry. Here in this little clearing.

And before now. A horrible suspicion had crept into her head, and she could not shake it—that she had been hurting Henry, silently, heedlessly, for a long time now.

"For all there are people who'd look at you two and think you've done wrong," Henry continued, "there are ten times more who look at you from the corners of the ballroom, and admire you. Who think you're brave and—splendid—"

His voice trailed off, and when Margo looked at him, he was staring down ferociously at his shoes.

"Thank you, Henry," Matilda said, and her voice was very gentle, as if she thought he might shatter.

Margo couldn't say anything.

Matilda pinned her with a hard blue stare. "I am going to go back to Ashford now. We are going on to Scotland. And then we're going to stop at his country estate for a time after we marry."

Margo swallowed hard.

"I need you to trust me," Matilda said. "I need you to believe that I know what's best for my own life. Don't follow me, Margo, not again."

"I love you," Margo managed to say. "I want—I just want you to be safe and happy, Tillie."

“Oh Christ,” Matilda said, “don’t call me that.” But then she took a step forward, and then another, and then she caught Margo in an embrace.

“I love you too,” she said into Margo’s ear. “You ninny.”

“You promise me you’ll be safe?”

“I promise.”

They were of a height, their bodies the same shape. She knew the curve of Matilda’s shoulders better than her own. She was crying, she realized, hot tears that splashed down onto Matilda’s striped carriage dress.

“You smell like you just got tugged in the woods,” Matilda murmured. “Repeatedly. For several days. Without bathing.”

Margo sniffed loudly and considered rubbing her nose on her sister’s dress. “Did you not hear the part in Henry’s speech where we are good and kind?”

Matilda drew back. “I heard him.” Her expression was unreadable. “I hope you did.”

Margo didn’t know what to say.

Matilda pulled her into one more hug. “I’ll write to you when we’re settled. I’ll miss you.” To Margo’s surprise, her sister’s voice caught on the words. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“Miss you already,” she whispered back.

And with a brief word to Henry and no backward glances, Matilda was gone, darting through the trees and finding her way back to the waterfall, where she’d left her blanket and pelisse and, presumably, her future husband.

Margo tried very hard not to panic at the sight of her sister’s retreating back.

And then she was alone with Henry once again.

Be brave, she told herself, and she made herself look at him.

He wasn’t looking back. He was staring down at the leaf-littered soil, his hands shoved in his pockets, his body a line of tension. His mouth was a grim slash.

“Margo,” he said. He didn’t look up. He appeared to be addressing the ground. “We need to talk about things. About what’s—about what’s happened.”

And her courage broke. "I can't," she whispered.

At that, he looked up. His serious dark eyes caught on her face. "Margo?"

She couldn't hear him over the sound of her pulse beating in her ears. She was alone. She'd lost Matilda. Matilda didn't want to be one of the Halifax twins any longer, and though she knew it was irrational, her heart twisted in her chest.

Had she ruined that, too? Her twin, her other half? Had she driven Matilda away?

They had been equal partners in everything they'd done, Margo had always thought, but perhaps she'd been wrong. Perhaps she'd led her sister into scandal and infamy just as she'd led Henry into recklessness these last two days.

Perhaps the finishing school had been right. She was an appalling influence on others. She was not fit to be around anyone who was good.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so damned sorry, Henry."

And then she turned on her heel and ran blindly toward the sound of the waterfall.

Chapter 12

Henry decided to give her an hour before he went after her.

And then he remembered that his watch had been smashed in the carriage accident, and he swore, aloud and obscenely.

Fine, then. He would give her some time. He would give her—oh hell, he didn't know. Every minute felt like ten.

She was sorry. That's what she'd said when he'd told her he wanted to talk. She was *sorry*.

It did not bode well. She knew—surely she must know by now what he was going to say. He'd tried a half-dozen ways now to tell her that he loved her, and something had come between them each time—an interruption or catastrophe or Margo fleeing the conversation.

He felt grimly certain that she did not want to hear it. If she wanted him—if she wanted his declarations and his stupid bleeding heart—then she wouldn't have taken off like a startled doe.

It wasn't worth it. There was no need for him to bare his soul.

And yet when he finally gave in and started to look for her, the words were on his lips anyway.

I love you, he was going to say. *I've always loved you, since the moment I saw you at Number Twelve in your white dress and a cherry in your hand.*

But then he couldn't find her.

He searched around the waterfall. He made his way back to the clearing where he'd taken her on the ground, hoping like a lovestruck block that she might have returned there as well.

She hadn't. And when he went back to where he'd tied up the chestnut gelding, it was still there, placidly nibbling at the gorse.

She hadn't gone back to Darley Dale. She was somewhere in the Dark Peak, and he couldn't begin to guess where.

"Goddamnit," he said under his breath. He almost wished she'd stolen the horse right out from under him. At least he'd have known that she was on her way back to civilization, and not begun to panic that she'd tumbled into a mysterious crevasse or off another tree or into more ice-cold water.

He circled the waterfall again. This time, he shouted for her.

He felt a complete idiot. Twice now, in a single day, he'd searched for Margo. He'd probably scared off all the birds in the Pennines with the volume of his shouting. He was rapidly growing to despise the natural world, with its crumbling rocks and icy waterfalls and weather. If it started to rain, he was going to move to the Caribbean.

And then he caught sight of her hair. His mind fixed on the bright anomalous red in the green-gray softness of the moors before he discerned that it was she.

She was sitting, he realized. She was tucked mostly inside a small cave amid the flat limestone rocks, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. He could see now how Matilda and Ashford could have disappeared.

Margo would have been almost invisible—her dress a mud-spangled dark green, her freckled arms camouflaged against the stone—if not for the siren call of her hair in the fading daylight.

"Margo." His voice was hard, and he realized as he said her name that he was angry with her. "I've been searching for you—damn it, didn't you hear me calling for you?"

She looked up at him from her place on the ground. He could see she'd been crying, and guilt stabbed at him. He fisted his hands at his sides. No. No. He was tired of chasing her. He was tired of throwing himself in her direction when she could not even be bothered to hold out her hand, and if that wasn't fair to her, well, he couldn't summon up fairness and decency just now.

She rose. Her bodice was split at the side, and he could see a flash of white chemise. She still had leaves in her hair. He hadn't gotten them all out.

"You didn't have to search for me," she said.

"The hell I didn't. What did you expect me to do? Mount the horse and ride back to Darley Dale and leave you to your own devices?"

"Yes."

He gritted his teeth. "For Christ's sake, Margo. I'm not going to abandon you out here—there's a goddamned waterfall you could topple over and about three hundred more trees for you to fall out of, not to mention the fact that I'm not sure you even know how to get *back* to Darley Dale—"

"I know you think I'm an idiot," she said coolly, "but I've survived this long, Henry. I would have made it back in one piece."

Guilt and frustration chased circles around each other in his chest. "I don't think you're an idiot, Margo."

She threw up her hands. "Then why can't you leave me here?"

Henry opened his mouth, then shut it again. It was a precipice, an edge over which he could not see, and he was terrified of the other side. "I want—I want to make sure you're all right. It's not because I think you're incompetent, Margo. I've never thought that—not once."

Her lips curved, a sad, wry smile so far from her usual grin that he barely recognized it. "Don't you? You've plenty of reasons to think so. I act the fool, I know. This whole bloody trip was a fool's errand, and I dragged you along."

"You didn't drag me. I wanted to come."

She'd been looking down, her dark auburn lashes shielding her eyes, but at his words, she looked up. Her eyes were very blue and they burned in the last light of the autumn day. "Why?"

Henry hung, suspended, at the point of falling off the edge. It was stupid—and pointless—he knew what she would say. He was absurd and too much, and if he never told her, he would never have to hear her gently let him down.

"I love you," he choked out.

The words trembled into being between them.

Seven. There were seven freckles at the curve of her ripe-cherry mouth. He'd kissed every one.

"You love me," she repeated. "That's why you came with me? Not to help me find Matilda?"

"Not to help you find Matilda. Not because I think you wouldn't have managed it on your own. I came because I couldn't stop myself—because I wanted to fall asleep watching you and wake up to your voice. I came because you asked me to."

She was blinking rapidly, and she opened her mouth, and he couldn't bear to hear what she was going to say.

"I love you," he said, his words coming faster. "That's—oh hell, Margo. That's why I do anything. That's why I come to dinner at Number Twelve—just to watch you. That's why I took riding lessons five years ago, like a child, because I wanted to keep up with you in the park, and the son of a pipe-fitter in London doesn't grow up on horseback like an earl's offspring."

She blinked.

"I bring irises to Number Twelve because they're the color of your eyes. I didn't take the position with Chatham's in Bath because I didn't want to move—not if you were in London. I buy the fruit-sellers out of cherries all summer long because they make me think of you, and most of the time I think of nothing else."

"Henry," she whispered.

He wanted to keep babbling—perhaps if he never stopped talking, he would never have to hear her response. But his name on her lips silenced him.

She licked her lips. "Why didn't you—why didn't you *tell* me?"

This is why, he wanted to say. He had told her now—and the space between their bodies felt huge and uncrossable.

"There was no point to it," he said. He shrugged, a short jerk of his shoulders. "What would have been the use? There was no future possible between us."

She flinched. "Because I am a Halifax Hellion?"

“Because you—” Henry stared at her in consternation. He wanted to reach out and shake her, but he was afraid to touch her. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head when you fell out of that tree? Not because of *you*, because of *me*. Because you are a lady and I was a scholarship student at school who can barely afford the coal to heat my apartment.”

“Are you joking?” Color had risen to her cheeks. She was pink and freckled and streaked with mud, and he found a strange hot pleasure in the notion that he had made her so. She was so bloody beautiful and desirable that he almost lost the thread of the conversation.

“Not at all.”

She tilted her chin up. “If you truly think I would care about such things, Henry, then I find your declaration rather suspect. A stranger on the street who knew nothing more of me than what the scandal sheets print would know that I do not care about wealth or class or—”

“*I* care,” he snapped. “I care, Margo! I have nothing to offer you, nothing at all beyond stupid pointless words. You are—the sun to me.” He swallowed. Years of habit wanted to force the words down, but he bit back his fear. “You are all the light and joy in the world, and I am good at nothing so much as watching you from a distance.”

“Bollocks,” she said.

He gaped at her. He poured out his heart, laid it on the ground for her to trod upon, and she said—

“I beg your pardon?”

“Bollocks,” she said again, and he supposed it wouldn’t be Margo if she didn’t catch him by surprise. “I think you’ve plenty of fancy words, Henry Mortimer, but you and I both know they aren’t true.” She shook her head, and a leaf fell from her hair and descended to the pebbled dirt. “You know perfectly well that you have something to offer me. You wouldn’t have come if you did not—you would have let me go alone. You wouldn’t have chased after me, over and over, if you’d thought you didn’t have something to give.”

He hadn’t thought of it in quite that way. He felt dizzied, rocked by her words and the sight of her there in the red glow of sunset. “I—”

“No,” she interrupted. “I think you’ve invented this lie about how you are so far below me to cover up the truth.”

His mouth felt dry. “And the truth is?”

“That you didn’t trust me.”

“I—” He wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Of course I trust you.”

“You don’t,” she said. “You don’t trust me to make a fair judgment of you. You invented a whole story in your mind and never gave me the chance to make my opinion heard. You never gave me the opportunity to know my mind, to have some say over what happened between us. If I had not forced the issue on this trip, we would *still* be dancing out of each other’s reach. We would never—”

“Blast it all,” he said, “you don’t have to tell me. I know I’m a goddamned coward, Margo.”

Her lips parted. “What?”

“I’m a coward. I’ve cocked everything up because I was too damn terrified to tell you anything. Because it seemed safer never to tell you, and I wanted what was safe. I would have rather”—his voice went choked and raspy, and he hoped he would not cry—“I would have rather kept what little I had of you. I would have rather talked to you like a brother, like a *friend*, and watched you from across the room, and ridden beside you *forever*, than tell you how I felt and lose it all.”

She bit her lower lip, and the tiny overlap of her front teeth made him want, made anguish and hunger and loss rise in him.

“You’re right,” he said. “I would not have spoken. I would not have acted were it not for you. But I did. We did. And I can’t go back.”

Oh *fuck*, this was a mistake. He heard the words as they came from his mouth, and he wanted to drag them back in. He wanted to shake his head and go down on his knees and beg her to pretend he’d never said anything at all.

But he couldn’t.

“I don’t have very much to offer you.” She opened her mouth as if to speak, but he raised a hand to forestall her. “But not nothing. I want to marry you, Margo Halifax. I want you—in my bed or on the ground or—hell, against a wall, anywhere. I want to give you six redheaded babies. I

want to carry you when you have a blister and bring you a hundred glasses of champagne to make up for the one I dumped in the grass. I want you and your light and your names for cows and your reticule full of cheese.”

Somehow he’d gotten close enough to brush his thumb against the curve of her lips, where her freckles gilded her, the place where he most wanted to put his mouth. “I want your soft, tender heart, and I want your passion. I want it *all*, Margo. No more half-measures.”

It did not seem entirely rational, the way he could watch her lips tremble and want to hold her and comfort her and tell her everything would be all right—and at the same time want to press his thumb into the wet heat of her mouth.

But that was how he’d always felt with her—off-balance, ravenous, careful and ferociously demanding at the same time. He wanted her—he’d had her and still he wanted her with the same keen edge. He could be inside her and it still would not be enough.

When she finally spoke, her voice was low. “It’s not fair to me, Henry.”

He dropped his hand.

He couldn’t imagine why disappointment had him about the throat. He had known. Hadn’t he known—what she would say?

Surely it was not possible that somewhere inside his chest he had still allowed himself to *hope*.

Her lashes fell again over her eyes. “It’s not fair to put all of this on me—with no warning, with no *suggestion* of how you felt—and expect me to answer right away.”

“Of course,” he said mechanically.

“I’m not”—her voice cracked—“I’m not saying *no*, Henry. I need time to *think*, that’s all. I need time to sort out these last seven years, and Matilda leaving, and who I am by myself, without you or Matilda or Spencer or Aunt Lavinia or the scandal sheets.”

“Certainly.” His voice sounded stiff, but he did not care. He was holding himself together by sheer force of will. “That’s more than fair.”

He could wait. He’d waited seven years. It seemed possible that he would still be waiting for her when he was a dried-up husk, a solicitor made of nothing but bones and the memory of Margo beneath him. *I had it all*, he

would say to the fresh-faced law students, his hair white and his voice hoarse with age. *I knew the most extraordinary woman in the world, and for two perfect days in 1821 she was mine.*

“I want to go back to the village,” she said. “Will you ride with me?”

“Go on alone.” He could be patient and calm—he could do this—he *could*. But not just yet. “You and the gelding know the way. I’ll be right behind you.”

Chapter 13

Margo had imagined that it would take longer to determine what she wanted out of her life.

There were, after all, several fairly large revelations to contend with, and it had been a very long day.

Yet by the time she and the chestnut gelding made it back to Darley Dale, things had become quite clear.

She and Matilda had, somehow, grown up. What had amused and delighted them at eighteen no longer held the same satisfaction. They wanted more—both of them. And that didn't mean they'd been wrong in the past, only that things were different now. Matilda had not left her forever. Things were going to be all right.

And Henry—Henry *loved* her. He had loved her from a distance for years, and when their proximity had tipped him over the edge, the passion between them had burned swift and strong.

There had never been a moment when she did not respect him. He had always been Henry—dear, smart, serious, true, precious Henry. And now that their relationship had shifted, like a lens slipping in front of a beam of light, she could name her feelings for what they were.

Love. She loved him in return.

She loved Henry Mortimer, and she needed to tell him so.

Unfortunately, the rapidity with which she had come to this conclusion outmatched Henry's walking pace from the waterfall back to the village, and he was not presently available for her declaration.

She had always been decisive.

She elected to take a room at the inn and, in a blaze of optimism, informed the innkeeper that the room was for herself and her husband. Once ensconced, it occurred to her that she was dirty, hungry, and wearing a stained, wrinkled, possibly odoriferous dress. While she waited for Henry to come back to Darley Dale, she decided to rectify these various personal dilemmas.

She ate. She bathed. She paid an eye-popping amount of coin to one of the tavern maids, who produced for her a clean, if very revealing, frock.

And while she was pondering how pink Henry's cheeks might turn when he saw her bosom in this dress, she stretched out on the narrow bed and fell asleep.

She awoke in a patch of sunlight. She blinked, squinting at the light in the window.

Why on Earth was it so bright? Had someone lit a torch or—
She sat bolt upright.

Morning. It was *morning*. She'd slept right through the evening and night, and—and Henry had not come. She looked frantically about the room, as though he might be hiding behind the washstand, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She threw herself out of bed.

Had he gone back to London? Without her?

Hang the man—he claimed to have pined for her for years, and then he could not wait a handful of hours for her response?

She dashed down the stairs and hurtled to the common room, where the innkeeper was humming and polishing glasses. She realized with some horror as she approached the man that she'd forgotten to put on shoes.

"Have you seen my husband?" she said without preamble. "This is the only inn, is it not?"

The innkeeper gaped at her. "Mum?"

She supposed he was not used to women appearing at this hour in his public room in their stocking feet and with their breasts half-bared. She hoped he would not have her arrested. "My—oh, dash it—a man. A tall dark-haired frowning man, traveling on foot. He should have come here last evening—I thought he would ask after me! Did you see him?"

“Aye,” said the innkeeper slowly. “I know the man you mean. He came in last night and asked if any ladies had taken a room for themselves. But did ye not tell me you were with your husband? I told him I’d had no ladies alone.”

Damn her foolish enthusiasm! Margo bit her lip. “Where did he go? Did he say?”

“Why, he stayed here, mum. Last night. He’s gone over to the tavern this morning to break his fast.”

Relief and delight made her dizzy. She went up on her toes and gave the innkeeper a smacking kiss on his cheek. “Oh thank you, sir!”

He goggled at her.

Pull yourself together, Margo ordered herself. *If you are jailed for public indecency, it’s going to be very hard to declare yourself to Henry.*

But she knew where he was now. He was coming back. He had not left, not at all.

After a quick trip to her room to retrieve her coin purse and a liberal application of tips all around, Margo ascertained the location of Henry’s room. A whispered word to the chambermaid had her inside, but she wanted—

She wanted to do something grand. She wanted a great sweeping gesture for Henry, something meaningful and romantic, something that would show him how true and deep her feelings were, for all that they’d taken her a while to sort out.

She tapped her finger against her lips for a moment and then went back out to find the chambermaid.

Unfortunately, when the door crashed open several minutes later, Margo had only gotten as far as stripping off the low-cut tavern dress and revealing the even more low-cut chemise and stays beneath it.

She whirled toward the door, caught sight of Henry’s terrifying glower, and backed up directly into the bed. She squeaked and sat down hard.

“Margo?” Henry looked utterly thunderstruck.

She did not know what to do with her hands. “Henry!” Her voice came out bright and casual, which only made her sound vaguely demented. “What a surprise!”

“I—what? This is my room.”

“Oh.” She gave a little awkward laugh. “Ha ha! Yes. Um. I thought you were dining.”

“You thought I was—” He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. When he opened them again, his gaze dipped to her bosom and then slowly dragged back to her face.

Ha. Now she *did* want to laugh.

“I thought you’d gone,” he said. “I thought you went back to London.”

“No,” she said. “Oh, Henry, I’m so sorry. It was all a misunderstanding —”

She was interrupted by the chambermaid and three larger men, who bustled into the room bearing a copper hip tub and several buckets of steaming water.

“Good morning to you, sir,” said the maid, grinning widely at Henry. She quickly directed the assembling of the hot bath, steam pinkening her face. When it was done, she gave a smart nod to Henry and winked at Margo.

Then they were alone once more.

“Margo”—Henry looked adorably puzzled—“what in the world is going on?”

“Oh well, you see—” She suddenly felt foolish. She was dreadful at making plans. Her intentions were always so good, and then nothing transpired quite as she intended.

But no. She bit her lip. She was trying not to be so very hard on herself.

“You see,” she said again, “I told the innkeeper that I was here with my husband. I imagined that you would come and find me, Henry. I never in my wildest dreams supposed that you would think I had *gone*. I—”

The door opened again. This time it was the chambermaid alone, bearing a small table. She set it down beside the steaming tub and then flicked open a linen tablecloth, spreading it over the flat wooden surface.

“Thank you,” Margo said, feeling quite absurd as the maid departed again. She looked back at Henry. “I really thought you would be gone longer! Were you not hungry?”

“Not especially.”

She winced. He looked somewhat the worse for wear, his face a little drawn, his mouth curved downward. She gestured lamely at the hip tub. “I—um. I got you a bath.”

He blinked, one slow flutter of his thick dark lashes. “I’m sorry?”

“I, um, thought you might want one. I—”

This time when the door opened, it was the innkeeper himself. He looked in every direction but Margo’s as he placed the items she’d requested on the small table. A bottle of champagne. Two glasses. A knife and a wedge of cheese. And—

“No cherries,” the innkeeper told her. “Not in October. We had quince and raspberries.”

“That’s all right,” she said. Her voice was unsteady. “Thank you for your help.”

And then he left, and her ridiculous plan was complete, and it seemed not at all enough for what she wanted to tell the man she loved.

“Do you want to bathe?” she asked. She was certain she was blushing—her cheeks felt hot, and she suspected the flush went all the way down her body, based on the waywardness of Henry’s gaze.

He made a choked sound. “Not—I don’t—Margo, what is going on inside your head?”

She started to stand, then flung herself back down onto the bed with a sound of disgust. Her breasts threatened to spill from the thin white chemise and she tried to sit with slightly less vigor.

“I am trying,” she said, fisting her hands in the sheets and staring at her lap, “to take care of you, Henry Mortimer.”

“I—I don’t—”

“No,” she said. “Hush. Listen to me this time. I love you, Henry.”

She chanced a glance at him. He didn’t look pleased, precisely. He looked dumbfounded.

She hoped that was a good sign.

“I love you,” she said again. “I think I’ve loved you for a long time, but I wasn’t ready to see it until now. You are perfect to me—you are all I want. You—” She looked around at the little tableau, the bath and champagne and fruit. “You deserve to be cared for. You deserve to have someone give you

everything you want and pet you and hold you and make you happy. You said—”

She swallowed, tears clogging her voice. “You said you were afraid you did not have anything to offer me. But Henry, I know it to be the other way around. I don’t—always do the right thing. I try—I try so hard—but I am not—”

Somehow he was in front of her, cupping her face in his hands. “You’re perfect,” he said hoarsely. “You’re perfect, Margo Halifax, just as you are.”

“I’m not,” she said. “You’re blind and silly and I’m—”

And then he pulled her up, pulled her against his chest, and kissed her until every word in her head was gone, and all she knew was the man in her arms.

“I am going to make you so happy,” she said when he let her go.

And he looked happy—he looked dazed and delighted and undone. “You—Margo—are you certain?”

She looked at him, his beloved dark eyes, and threaded her fingers into his hair.

She wanted to go slowly now. She wanted to get this right.

“I’m certain. I’m impossibly certain.” She touched the line of his jaw with her thumb. “You have been my constant, Henry William Mortimer. I had not realized until things started to come apart—with Matilda, with myself—how true that was. You are the one thing upon which I rely. When Matilda left, it was you I thought of, you I trusted. I think I’ve loved you for a very long time. I think I needed to know *myself* better to realize it.” She took a breath. “I think I needed to trust myself a little bit more. In order to believe that I would not hurt you by loving you.”

His hands were warm on her shoulders, warm and steady. “I trust you, Margo.”

She felt her lips curve. “I know you do.”

“Will you—do something for me?”

She swallowed. “Anything.”

“Say it again.”

She cupped his cheek in her hand. His serious mouth tugged up—a slow, dazzled smile. “I love you, Henry Mortimer.”

“Oh Christ,” he said. And then he kissed her.

Some minutes later, Margo lifted her head. Her breath was coming in short hard gasps, her body plastered against his. His hands had made their way up underneath her chemise. “We should take a bath,” she managed. “It’s going to grow cold.”

“Let it,” he said, and then he pushed her down onto the bed, and she pulled him with her.

★ ★ ★

Much later—it was hard to say how much, as they had no timepiece—Margo lay tangled up with Henry atop the ticked coverlet.

“Are you entirely certain that you were a virgin?” she asked. She was still a trifle out of breath.

Henry laughed into her shoulder and squeezed her rump. “If you count how many times I imagined doing that very thing with you, then no, not even a little bit.”

She rubbed her face against his skin and could have melted into his body.

But no. She couldn’t melt. She had one more thing she wanted to say.

“I thought,” she said slowly, “that we could stay here another night.”

“Mm. Or forever.”

She bit her lip. “Well, I’d—” Why, after everything that had passed between them, was she so nervous? “I’d rather hoped you might want to continue on.”

He lifted his head. “On?”

“Mm-hmm. To, um. To Scotland.”

His brows drew together. “Why Scotland? Surely you don’t still want to go after Matilda. I’m afraid they’re long gone—”

“No, no. I don’t—I’m not thinking of them. I’m only thinking of you and me, Henry.”

He gave her a bemused look, one hand still cupped over her bottom. “All right. If you fancy a trip to Scotland, I’m at your disposal.”

“No, I—” She groaned and rolled off him, flopping onto the mattress at his side. “I am suggesting we *elope*, you perfect blockhead. Did you not say

you wanted to marry?”

He lay perfectly still at her side.

She poked him. “I haven’t killed you, have I?”

“You—want to elope?” His voice sounded quite peculiar.

“Yes. Please. If you still want to.” She turned onto her side, propping herself on one elbow to look at him. “I don’t want six babies though, Henry, so if that’s a condition of the deal, I’d like to negotiate it down to one or two—”

He kissed her. It was a long, slow slide of his lips over hers, and somewhere in the sweet drugging pleasure, she heard *yes*. She heard *mine* and she heard *forever*, and it might have been Henry’s voice or her own.

Acknowledgments

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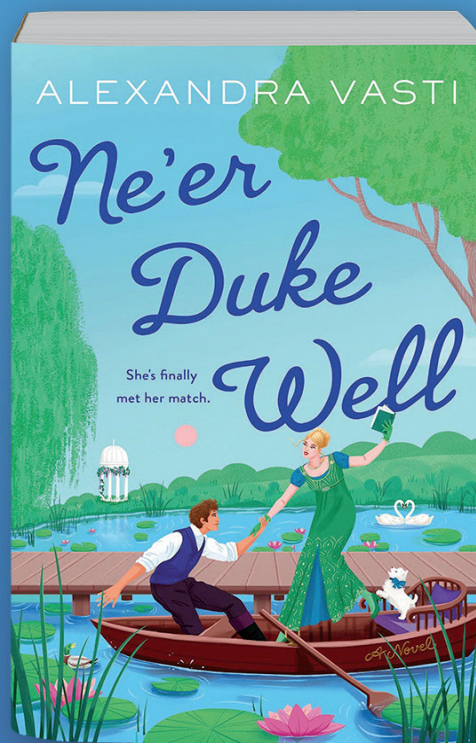
Thank you to Sandrine Lemaître for the French and to Lilo Moore for the Welsh trees, among various other assists! So glad to have you two in my corner.

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Finally, I'd like to take a moment to extend my deepest gratitude to all of you who read the Halifax Hellions when they were available only

through my newsletter. Look at Margo, Matilda, and Winnie now!! You made this happen!! Your reviews, your art, your word of mouth—if it hadn't been for the endless support of each and every one of you, these novellas would never have achieved the audience they have today. I can't tell you how much your enthusiasm for the Hellions has meant to me.

Read on for the first chapter of
Ne'er Duke Well by Alexandra Vasti,
coming Summer 2024!



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Chapter 1

... You may be interested to hear that Peter Kent has finally inherited. You remember what he is like, do you not? One pities the House of Lords.

—from Lady Selina Ravenscroft to her brother, Lord William Ravenscroft, His Majesty's Army, Seventh Division, 1815

Peter suspected the project was doomed.

It had not been a good idea to begin with. Surely he could have found another way to satisfy his half sister's desire for a rapier—one that did not involve dressing her in boy's clothes and smuggling her into a fencing parlor on Bond Street.

He should have *sent* for a rapier, not gone out to fit her with it himself. He could have had someone bring a sword to his house.

He was supposed to be a duke, for Christ's sake.

Peter Kent, the ninth Duke of Stanhope—for all that he'd never set foot in England until two years ago, when he'd become heir presumptive to the dukedom and the Earl of Clermont had dragged him unceremoniously away from his home in Louisiana.

He was the duke now. Had been for three-quarters of a month. People called him Your Grace. He had more money than God.

These facts did not seem to matter to his half siblings.

"Lu," he said to his sister, slightly horrified to hear pleading in his voice. "You sure you don't want the kitten? We might buy it a little collar..."

He'd brought his siblings a soft, fluffy gray kitten in a basket that morning. Freddie, his ten-year-old half brother, had nearly come out of his

skin at the sight of the thing, but Lu had quelled Freddie with a wordless scowl.

Freddie, at least, had wanted the kitten.

“No,” said Lu flatly. “No kittens. Its tail looked like a chimney brush.”

“Its tail looked soft,” mumbled Freddie disconsolately.

“It has claws,” offered Peter. “And teeth. Sharp little teeth.”

He’d felt a right jackass in the carriage on the way to their house that morning, trying to stuff the kitten into the basket. The idea had seemed so promising. What child could resist a kitten?

He’d had one brought in from his country seat in Sussex—because, in-bloody-explicably, he had a country seat in Sussex. And people who brought things at his request.

And then the damned kitten kept popping out of the basket and climbing his coat sleeve with its little needle claws and sinking its tiny teeth into his ear and *shrieking* like the hounds of hell were after it.

Pop pop went its claws as he’d pried it from his coat. Then *meeeeewwww* as he shoved it into the basket. Then *ouch Jesus blasted cockered ratsbane, let go of my goddamned thumb!*

And then Lu didn’t even want the kitten. She’d turned up her nose as if *she* were the ninth Duke of Stanhope and not his illegitimate twelve-year-old sister, the natural daughter of a dead man who thankfully would never darken her door again.

Peter hadn’t even known about Freddie and Lu until he’d gotten to England. He hadn’t been able to protect them from their father’s neglect and cruelty. Just like he hadn’t been able to protect Morgan.

But he was damned if he wouldn’t protect them now.

It would help, though, if he could get the children to trust him. Or at least like him. Or even tolerate his presence without glaring suspiciously in his direction.

“I want a rapier,” Lu said. “So that I might stab people with it.”

You, her eyes said. *So that I might stab you.*

“I’m not sure that there’s actual stabbing in fencing.”

“How do you know?” Lu asked. “Do you fence? Is there fencing in America?”

“I fence.”

Good God, the child didn’t need a rapier to know exactly where to place the knife in his gut and twist. Yes, he was American. Yes, he was damned out of place here on this cold, foggy island, and in the fencing parlor, and in the House of Lords. And no, he hadn’t been to Eton and Oxford, and no, he didn’t know how to convince the Court of Chancery to give him guardianship of Freddie and Lu, and no, he didn’t know how to get Lu on his side.

And no, and no, and no.

But for the rapier, he could say yes.

“I mean to demand satisfaction,” Lu murmured, almost inaudible over the sounds of the street. “From the world.”

God, she was a terrifying creature.

“Good,” he said. “Let’s buy you a rapier. But listen, Lu, don’t talk, all right?”

Her brows drew together. “Whyever not?”

“Because you sound too much like a small, bad-tempered lady.”

She glowered. “I am no lady.”

“Well, you *sound* like one, so keep quiet.”

“How would you know? Are there ladies—”

Peter frowned at her, and to his surprise, she closed her mouth mid-sentence. Frowning? Was that how he was supposed to act like a guardian? God, he hoped not, because the expression on his face made him feel like his father, and he resented it with every fiber of his being.

“In New Orleans?” he finished for her. “Yes, Lu, there are ladies in New Orleans. My mother was a lady.”

“Oh,” she said.

Beneath Lu’s chastening hand on his shoulder, Freddie said, “Was?”

“She died,” Peter said, “a long time ago.”

“Our mother died too,” Freddie said.

“He *knows*, Freddie,” Lu said irritably. “That is why he is trying—and failing—to pry us away from Great-great-aunt Rosamund.”

Ah, yes, their current guardian. The beloved Great-great-aunt Rosamund, who was not, as far as he could discern, actually related to the

children, and who did not appear to recognize them whenever he returned them from one of their outings.

After their mother's death, the children had been passed like unwanted puppies from household to household, settling most recently upon a very elderly thrice-removed aunt. Rosamund nodded off mid-conversation. She rarely rose from her chair. She occasionally referred to Lu as Lucinda, but sometimes she called her Lettice and sometimes Horatio Nelson.

But despite all that, Lu acted like she *wanted* to stay with the woman—even though Peter could buy her a whole room full of fencing masters and send Freddie to Eton and give them everything he'd always wanted and never had.

"Lu," he said now, "I'm telling you, if you talk, it's not going to work. So show me how much you want the sword by keeping your mouth shut, and we'll walk out of here with one strapped to your hip."

She scowled, but she did it. They strolled quite casually into the fencing parlor.

A quarter of an hour later, they strolled back out. Lu was red-faced at the extravagant lies Peter had invented to account for her refusal to speak. Freddie buried his laughter in his hand, and Peter held the sword nearly above his own head to ensure that Lu couldn't stab anyone with it.

Which was how he found himself—bracketed by children and with a small sword held aloft out of a still-sputtering Lu's reach—when they collided with Lady Selina Ravenscroft.

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About the Author



Alexandra Vasti is a British literature professor who has loved historical romance since age eleven. After finishing her PhD at Columbia University in NYC, she moved to New Orleans, where she lives with her very large and noisy family. For sneak peeks and exclusive bonus content in the world of the Halifax Hellions, sign up for Alex's newsletter at alexandravasti.com, or sign up for email updates [here](#).

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