



# Ravensthorpe Heir

By

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Cover Art by Jenny Dixon, © February 2007

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

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## Chapter One

Returning from the dead was such a bloody nightmare. If he had any sense at all he would have stayed dead and let his brother deal with the headaches of the title.

“Are you listening, Your Grace? I said it is gone. All of it.”

Burke Stewart, Duke of Ravensthorpe, stood to stare out the window. He didn’t dare look at the older man sitting across the huge desk from him. Seeing the disappointment in his father’s best friend’s eyes was more than he could bear at this point. So instead, he rested his arms on the either side of the glass staring down at the vast estate he had inherited, but could no longer afford to maintain.

“You’re sure?” His voice was hoarse with suppressed emotion.

“I’ve been through all the ledgers. Your father’s solicitor, Baron Warwick, depleted all the accounts except for the household one and some trust money. I wish my review of your holdings held different answers.” Oliver Springfield, Earl of Stratten, cleared his throat. “You can recheck my figures.”

Burke couldn’t admit that simple task would take him hours and mostly likely produce the same result.

“I trust you. Barclay’s shipping business is still intact, though?”

“Barely. You will have a modest income from that if you make higher than expected profits from these last shipments. But not enough....”

Not enough to keep up his several estates, the town house or pay his mother’s clothing bills.

“If you want my opinion you should contact Inspector Reynolds and let him know the full extent of Warwick’s theft.”

That was the problem; he didn’t know the full extent of Warwick’s deception. And he wasn’t about to tell Stratten how much help he needed to discover the truth. The irony was that he had encouraged his father to retain Warwick after their old solicitor died suddenly. He had trusted Justin with all his secrets. Hell, they were practically brothers. How could this have happened? How could he have been so wrong about Justin?

“I don’t want Scotland Yard involved in my personal business.”

“Then you aren’t worried about the reports that Warwick escaped from Newgate?”

“I’m still struggling with the fact that my best friend plotted to kill my father and ruin my family. Besides, those are just rumors. Scotland Yard claims he died in custody.” He leaned his forehead against the cool glass. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. Right now I have more pressing issues than Warwick. What should I do to raise funds? Aside from bringing my brother, Barclay, back from America.”

Stratten hadn’t mentioned the income from his tenants. Burke wasn’t sure if he should bring the subject up. He’d been trying a profit sharing deal with them or least the ones were comfortable with the idea. At first he had less income, but it had slowly increased or so he thought. Maybe he was wrong and that hurt his situation, too.

Burke cleared his throat. “The profits are up from sheep farms and my other

ones, aren't they?"

"Yes, but not enough to cover all your losses. It will take time. I'm impressed with your ideas. I'm thinking of trying the profit sharing with my own farms."

That shocked him.

"What I'm trying to tell you is that I know you are trying, but it isn't enough in the short term. A quick fix would be to marry well."

Burke snorted. "All the match-making mamas will line up to marry their daughters off to me, a rake who has only recently returned from the dead? If my outlandish drunken behavior didn't scare them off, the curse surrounding my family surely would."

Stratten rounded the desk to stand beside him. He put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You're being too hard on yourself, son. There are women out there who love to buy a title."

Jolly right, he was sure he'd climbed through their bedroom windows to pleasure them when they grew bored with the husband they bought.

"Ironical that I would turn to a loveless marriage."

"It doesn't have to be that way. I'm certain my wife knows women who would be to your liking. I'm wagering you could woo a lady. If the rumors are true you've done so countless times in the past."

He didn't know about winning a woman's heart. He was the man they'd meet in the dark, but not be seen with by the light of day. Not even his title made him respectable company. His twin brother, Barclay, could have fixed this mess.

Fate was fickle. Barclay should have been born first. Instead, the continuation of the Stewart line was in the hands of a drunken rake; make that an ex-drunken rake. He hadn't had a drink since his return from the dead. His father was probably rolling over in his crypt right now. Then again, maybe there was poetic justice in this turn of events. Maybe his father got who he deserved for an heir.

He turned slowly to face Stratten. "Arrange it for me. Help me come out again into society. Don't breathe a word of our financial situation to my brother or mother or even your wife. Rightfully or not, I'm the head of this family and I'll take care of our needs."

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe Walcott tugged her gown's bodice up as she scanned the beautifully dressed people in the ballroom. Her brother, Percy, Marquis Atwood, had wanted it low and that annoyed her.

Up until two weeks ago, Percy had cared not a rip about her, her younger brother Hugh, and little sister Maddie. In the years after their father died and their mother retreated to her chambers to mourn, Percy had run wild, filling the scandal sheets with his exploits. She knew, because her maid secretly snuck them to her. Reading about London society was her favorite hobby.

As child, she dreamed of having a season. In her mind, she imagined going shopping with her mother for new dresses and putting the dancing lessons her father had given her to good use. But those dreams withered three years ago when her father became ill and died. When her mother had refused to come out of mourning, she resigned herself to staying in the country to care for her mother and younger siblings.

Then, two weeks ago, Percy showed up to drag her and her siblings off to London

for her season. What was once a dream now was a nightmare. Percy didn't understand what it took to bring a girl out. His taste in dresses was more suited to older married women looking for an affair than someone her age. So here she stood in a gown she hated and was afraid her breasts would spill out of if she moved wrong, trying not to appear out of place.

"I told you not to be a wallflower."

Phoebe jumped at the sound of Percy's voice next to her ear. She straightened her spine for battle. He expected her to be the belle of the ball, but he gave her no tools. Instead, she looked like a mistress in waiting.

"I'm not. No one has asked me to dance." She let out an exasperated breath.

"No one will if you look so unapproachable." Muttering something rude under his breath, he stepped in front of her, tugging her bodice down. "You don't have that much to offer. You need to make the most of it."

"I don't think this is working. The other girls are more polished."

He rolled his eyes. "You're fine. You just need to act like you know what you are doing. Let's find someone to get you started dancing. All it takes is one gentleman and the rest will follow suit."

He guided her toward a tall, broad-shouldered man with eyes the color of a stormy sky, who stood next to the punch bowl, watching the crowd. The man shifted his gaze to them and looked none too pleased that they were headed his way. Good heavens, it was the infamous Duke Ravensthorpe. Would this night ever end?

Burke almost gagged on the too sweet punch as he saw Atwood dragging his sister across the room. At least he assumed she was his sister, since they resembled each other. Surely, he couldn't be planning to introduce them. What the bloody hell was he thinking?

Did Atwood have money? The nights of carousing with him were hazy. He pasted a smile on his face and decided to find out.

"Atwood." Burke nodded a hello.

"Ravensthorpe. I want you to introduce to my sister, Phoebe."

"Nice to meet you, Lady Phoebe."

Her smile said she was afraid he'd eat her alive.

"I've heard so much about you. It is nice to finally meet you."

He almost laughed at the flush creeping up Percy's neck. She cut them both with two sentences. Jolly good.

"You can't believe everything you hear. If you give me the pleasure of this dance, I'll show you that I can be a gentleman."

Percy looked like he wanted to all but shove her in his arms. That surprised him, since they'd been out carousing together. Whatever was up, he had no intention of embarrassing Phoebe.

She looked like she swallowed a lemon. "This will be my first dance tonight."

"Then I'll try not to step on your toes." He offered his arm.

Without a word, she took it. As they made their way onto the dance floor, hushed whispers swirled around them. Burke groaned at how some of the older matron's voices carried, even though they were whispering.

"I heard Ravensthorpe was dead."

"No, he only pretended to be dead so that he could live in brothels and gamble all

day.”

“That’s not the story I heard. He pretended to be dead so his brother would assume the title. Then he sometimes masqueraded as his brother, so he could have the pleasure of being the duke without the responsibility.”

“I heard....”

Burke winced as he guided Phoebe away from the gossiping matrons.

“How much of it is true?” she asked softly.

“All of it.”

She had grown quiet, making him wonder if she regretted dancing with him. That thought hurt more than he cared to admit.

“If you want to run, I wouldn’t blame you,” he said softly, staring down into her serious expression.

“What, and give them the pleasure of knowing they bothered us? I’m made of sterner stuff than that.”

Her retort surprised him. He wasn’t used to people standing by his side. He wasn’t quite sure how to respond.

He cleared his throat. “Are you enjoying the ball?”

“It’s just like I imagined. All the beautiful dresses and sparkling lights. I’m memorizing everything so I can tell my younger sister all about it when I get home.”

Was he ever that young and enthusiastic?

“You must think I’m silly prattling on like this.”

“No, actually, I find it refreshing.”

She smiled, blushing slightly. He hoped that by dancing with her, he didn’t ruin her chances with other more reputable suitors. It would have been better if he had walked away. That thought tightened his gut.

Yet, despite the fact that he shouldn’t, he couldn’t help but savor the feeling of holding Phoebe. She felt so good in his arms. Her petite frame made him protective. A feeling he wasn’t used to. Most of the women he knew took care of themselves.

He had to remind himself that Phoebe was beyond his reach. But that was easier said than done. She was curved just perfectly in all the right places. In fact, he couldn’t believe Atwood let her wear a dress that was so low cut. Not that he minded the generous view of her creamy breasts. It just bothered him that other men might have the wrong idea about her.

Although the green in her dress brought out the rich green in her eyes, it was not an appropriate color or style for a young woman making her first season. Her golden blonde hair looked like it had been carelessly arranged, making him wonder if she had done it herself. Heaven knows, he usually avoided the marriage mart, so his experience with young debutantes was limited. If he noticed how ill prepared she was then it must be blatantly obvious to everyone in the room. What was Atwood thinking?

“Don’t let them bother you.”

“What?” He almost missed a step when she spoke.

“The trick to avoiding the effects of gossip is to keep your head up and make believe you don’t hear them or better yet, with a toss of your head let them know you couldn’t care a wit what they are saying.”

“Oh, and you have vast experience in dealing with gossip?” He regretted his teasing remark as soon as he saw her eyes cloud over.

"I've had to ignore my fair share of it. My brother is considered a rake, too."

"Too? You mean like me?"

She nodded.

"I don't know if I consider myself a rake. A cad, perhaps, but not a rake. Rakes tend to attract women. Most ladies here wouldn't openly dance with me. At least not the decent ones."

"But they want to. From the looks I'm getting, I gather that half the women wish they were dancing with you and the other half hope their husbands don't know what they are thinking."

He laughed. "And what are you feeling?"

"Nervous."

"Ah. I like honest women. But you have nothing to fear from me."

"Should I be honored or insulted?"

Before he could answer, the music came to an end and Percy grabbed her arm.

"Come, I want you to meet Sinclair."

Was Atwood finding his sister a husband or making her a courtesan? The men he was foisting her on had more interest in a new mistress than settling down with a wife.

"Isn't she a little young for you?" Eve Townsend, Countess Holbrooke, his childhood friend and at one time the woman everyone assumed he would marry said beside him.

At least she was still talking to him in public.

He took her arm. "Dance with me. It will tweak off your husband to no end."

"I'm sure I'll pay."

"And enjoy it."

She blushed, patting her gently rounding belly. How he envied the Townsend's happy marriage.

"What do you know about Atwood's situation?" Burke asked, hoping she wouldn't read too much into his question.

"Probably less than you. I thought the two of you were friends."

"I've been places where he has been, but I don't know him very well." That was partly true. Other than the fact that they liked the same kind of whiskey, wild women and games of chance, he knew nothing about Atwood's private life. "I didn't even know he had a sister until tonight."

"Nobody did until he showed up with her a week ago. I've heard they stay in the country except for Atwood. After their father died a few years ago, their mother became a recluse," she replied, tilting her head up to give him a quizzical look.

He laughed. "I love the ladies' gossip network. I knew I could count on you. I wonder why he brought her out."

She shrugged. "The usual reasons, I assume."

"I'm not so sure his intentions are quite so honorable. He seems bent on introducing her to the wrong sort. None of the gentlemen, and I use the term loosely, he has introduced her to so far are good husband candidates."

"Including you?"

"Definitely, including me."

"Then why are you here?"

He was silent for a long time, wondering what he should tell her. Or better yet,

what she would believe.

"I guess I'm ready to settle down."

She stiffened and he immediately regretted his choice of words. They had been close. He knew at one time she had expected him to propose to her, but he could never bring himself to do that.

"You weren't when I wanted you," she challenged him.

"No, I wasn't ready then. I think I did you a favor. Holbrooke seems like a good husband."

"He is. But I don't understand why now, all of a sudden, you want a wife."

It was his turn to shrug. "I need a family. Taking responsibility for my title made me realize that."

"So you are actually looking?" She cocked her head, daring him to give her a direct answer.

Burke laughed at the glint in Eve's eye. "But don't let it out or everyone will run for cover."

She snorted. "You underestimate the allure of a grand title. What sort of woman are you searching for, experienced or just rich?"

He missed a step. How did she know?

"I caught you." Her eyes twinkled with mischievous delight.

He swirled her out onto the terrace. They stood in silence for a moment.

"Whatever you think you know, for my family's sake, please keep it to yourself. My mother has had enough grief lately."

"I was just teasing."

He relaxed only slightly at the sincere expression on her face. Damn, he had given too much away. He had no idea how to get out of this conversation and was relieved when he saw Reed Townsend, Earl Holbrooke, heading towards them. Holbrooke was bigger than him, but in many ways they resembled each other. They had the same eyes and coloring. If people looked close they could tell they were half brothers. Holbrooke should have had the Ravensthorpe title. It bothered Burke to no end that even his bastard brother would have been more fit than he.

But that skeleton must remain sealed deep in the closet for both their families' sake and he must play nice.

His brother, Barclay, had accidentally opened that door when he attempted to honor the late Earl of Holbrooke's wish to find his long lost son. That search put in motion a chain of events that ended in the deaths of the Fearless Four, including his father, the late Earl Holbrooke's son and wife along with the late Earl Norcott. When Reed came into their lives, he realized why Sheldon Townsend never returned to America. Because of his mother's reaction to Reed's appearance and her part in the scandal, he'd kept a polite distance from Holbrooke. They might have been friends if fate had dealt them a different hand. Now, he didn't know.

"Don't look now, but I fear you are being rescued," Burke whispered close to Eve's ear.

Eve rolled her eyes as her husband strolled out on the terrace. "We were merely talking."

"I trust you, but it's Ravensthorpe I'm concerned about." Holbrooke pulled Eve to his side, putting a possessive arm around her.



Burke felt his cheeks get hot. "I thought we settled all this. What happened between your wife and I is all in the past. I still feel and have always felt mostly brotherly affection for her."

Eve gasped, pulling away from her husband. She put a hand on Burke's arm. "I always thought you let me go, because you didn't care enough."

"On the contrary. I let you go because I care too much to make you an object of ridicule. I never wanted to be duke and you were destined to be more than a disinherited peer's wife."

Silence hung heavy in the air.

Holbrooke cleared his throat. "I meant no offense. I figure the gossips would label me chump if I left my beautiful wife out here alone with the infamous Duke of Ravensthorpe." He grinned, wiggling his brows.

"You are probably right." Burke turned, heading for the door. He wished he could laugh, but the stain on his reputation still hurt too much.

Eve frowned, watching him go. Reed slid his arm around her, making her shiver with awareness.

"What just happened?" He asked close to her ear.

"Ravensthorpe retreated."

He pulled back to stare down at her. "Why?"

"I don't know, but he is suddenly looking for a wife."

"Ah, so that is what made him brave the whispers and join polite society. If you ask me he looks more like he needs a friend. Too bad the dowager duchess would have a stroke if I tried to be one. Good thing I have a plan for that."

She pulled away, staring up at him. "Is that what your lawman buddy and his daughter are doing hiding out on our estate?"

"Who better to keep watch over Burke than an ex-federal Marshall? I just have yet to figure out how to get Drew into Burke's life."

"Ravensthorpe won't like you interfering."

"I know." Reed brushed a kiss over the top of her head as he led her inside.

"That's half the fun."

\* \* \* \*

This turn of events was unacceptable. Baron Warwick, Justin Langford, swirled the brandy in his crystal glass, staring out at the lights next door. By right of birth, he should have been at that party instead of hiding in the shadows, drowning his sorrows.

His plan to bring down the fearless four had been so well thought out and brilliantly executed that he couldn't believe it had blown up in the end. Thanks to Daphne Stewart, Barclays' wife, Dowager Duchess Ravensthorpe and Countess Stratten, he was worse off than he when he began. But not for long. He'd have the last laugh. They thought he languished in prison, but it would serve them all right that he had escaped. He'd never leave the stage quietly or early. Not until they all paid and pay they would. It was time for him to bury his Baron Warwick identity and resurrect Lord Justice. Then they would feel the full weight of his vengeance.

\* \* \* \*

"You didn't do a very good job of attracting suitors tonight. I didn't get a single request to court you," Percy said.

Phoebe settled back in the carriage, letting the darkness surround her, so Percy

couldn't see the hurt on her face. She knew she wasn't the hit of the ball, but she didn't make any major mistakes and was received relatively well. What more could Percy ask of her first night?

"I understand that happens," she said, trying to remain calm.

"Well, I don't have time to wait. I thought I'd have you married off by now. I had no idea it would cost so much to bring you out. Do you really need a different gown for every ball?"

"That's what Madam Regina told me."

"She would." He rolled his eyes. "She has a vested interest in selling you gowns. This is turning into a bigger ordeal than I ever imagined."

She felt the same. Phoebe had always imagined discussing the night's events over teas with her mother. Not arguing over her lack of offers with her unreasonable brother. His attitude was taking all the magic from her season.

"Then why don't you just take me home," she snapped, regretting her tone as soon as she saw Percy's eyebrows rise.

"After all, I'm worried about mother being all alone." Her tone lightened this time.

"She'll be fine as long as Dora keeps the blinds pulled shut and she doesn't have to face life."

Phoebe tossed her fan at him. "How can you be so hard-hearted? Don't you care?"

"Gad, I need a drink." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course I care. Her behavior is a bloody embarrassment to the family. What do you want me to do about it? Being suddenly head of this family is no simple task, you know."

"It would help if you took your responsibilities more seriously."

"I do. I brought you out, didn't I? I had an offer from Baron Neville. He has been on me to let him court you, but I've been putting him off."

She shuddered. Neville was a nasty man who liked young wives. They had a habit of dying a few years after marriage. The man had yet to have an heir.

"His interest in you made me realize that you've grown into a young woman." He continued, seemingly undaunted by her silence. "If I knew it was this much trouble to bring you out, I would have let Neville marry you and be done with it. Finding you a higher titled husband and bigger purse may not be worth it."

Phoebe stiffened. He wanted to sell her off to the highest bidder. Didn't he know that most respectable peers expected a dowry? She didn't like to think what sort of man needed to buy a wife.

She swallowed the fear tightening her throat. "What's the rush? I'm only nineteen, hardly on the shelf."

He sat back in the coach, his face hidden in the shadows like hers. "I--we need money. I've had some luck at the gambling tables, but that will only take us so far."

That shocked her. "I thought Papa left us well set."

"He left us some funds, but no instructions. His man of affairs gave me poor advice, so you are our best hope. Neville will pay off our debts and give me an allowance. I only bought three gowns. If you want someone else, you'll have to make better use of them."

*Our debt.* Anger coursed through her. Of all the nerve. *Our debt.* They had been

scrimping at home, while he played. He didn't care about her at all. He wanted to sell her off, so he could have more pocket money. That thought stabbed through her like a knife.

She could hardly look at Percy without wanting to strangle him. It wasn't her fault he had drank and gambled away her family's future. Be damned if she would marry some nasty old man just to save Percy's hide. On the other hand, if she could find someone nice who could help her care for her younger siblings and get them out from under Percy's control, then she might consider it. Three balls were hardly enough to make a good match.

Their coach jerked to a stop as the one in front of them made an abrupt turn.

"Damn Ravensthorpe," Percy muttered. "Thinks he owns the whole bloody town."

Phoebe craned her neck to see where it turned. Hope fluttered in her heart.

"Is that Duke Ravensthorpe's carriage? I didn't know he lived here."

"Right next door."

Ravensthorpe. Just the thought of him made her skin tingle. She could still feel the warmth of his hands through her dress as they dance. There was something about the way his stormy blue eyes softened when he talked and crinkled at the edges when he laughed. Like all the women in London, she supposed he drew her like a moth to a flame. After everything she had read about him, she hadn't wanted to like him, but she couldn't help herself. He was charming in an irreverent sort of way.

Phoebe sighed inwardly. Despite her best efforts not to let him, Ravensthorpe intrigued her. Try as she might not to, she found her gaze drawn to him. Something about him didn't add up. He had a reputation for being a scoundrel, yet when she watched him this evening he had been unflinchingly kind to everyone. Even those who didn't deserve it. He danced with all the women, young, old, pretty and awkward alike. The way he gracefully handled all the stares, whispers and direct cuts amazed her. If anyone could understand her situation, it might be him.

She sat back in her seat. Fate may have just handed her an answer. For the first time since she arrived in London she felt hopeful. She could feel a plan forming. It was up to her to save their family.

## Chapter Two

"I was wondering if you were ever planning to get up."

Burke paused in the doorway of the dinning room to see his mother enjoying tea and crumpets while reading his paper. Why wasn't she at her own townhouse? He stretched, rolling his shoulders. Was he awake enough for this?

"Isn't it a bit early for a visit, Mum?"

"I forgot you don't keep the same hours as Barclay."

He rolled his eyes at the mention of his twin brother's name. Would he spend the rest of his life in his younger twin's shadow?

"Thank you." He smiled warmly at Emma, the blonde granddaughter of his butler from his country estate, Horace, who put a plate of poached eggs and sausage in front of him.

Shaking out his napkin, he glanced down the table at his mother. "What brings you over here so early?"

She sipped her tea, giving him the 'I waited for you now you can jolly well wait for me' look. Then she unfolded the paper and began reading it.

Burke sighed, taking a bite of eggs. If it wasn't rude to walk out on your mother he might have done just that.

"I heard you were out in polite society last night. Rumor has it you are hunting for a wife. Any truth to that?" She eyed him speculatively over the top of the paper.

"It crossed my mind. Though some days it seems like a better idea than others."

"Don't jest with me. You'll feel more settled with a wife and children."

He sipped his tea, preferring not to comment on that.

"I had a letter from Barclay that I thought you might like to hear. He sent it along with a hefty check."

Which he could use. Barclay had left for America after Burke had been forced out of hiding to accept his title. If it hadn't been so widely known that he was still alive, he would have been happy to let Barclay and Daphne remain Duke and Duchess of Ravensthorpe. In Barclay's shoes, he wasn't sure he could have stepped aside with so much grace. Yet, he envied Barclay some days being far away from the problems and headaches of the title. He continued eating as she unfolded the letter.

*"Dear Mother and Burke:*

*"You won't believe how beautiful it is here. Daphne's parents' home sits up on a mountain. When I stand on the terrace, I feel like I'm on top of the world. It's warmer here than it is in England, but Daphne says to just wait. It will get very cold come winter.*

*"I reopened the silver mine. The check is your portion of the earnings.*

*Don't argue, Burke. Daphne insists we all share in its profits.*

*"I'm running Townsend's store and finding I enjoy being a merchant.*

*"The twins are growing up fast. I swear they skipped walking and started running. You'll have to come visit us someday. We miss you both. Barclay"*

“Oh, I wish we could visit them.” His mother dabbed her eyes with a linen napkin. “I’d love to see my darling grandchildren.”

He would too. It would be interesting to see the country that pulled his father and his friends away from their homes in search of gold, but he didn’t have the funds right now for a trip.

“Sounds as if he likes America.” Burke wiped his mouth, wishing he knew what else to say.

“I’m glad he has settled in so well.”

He was too. But it was easier for Barclay, because he didn’t have to deal with the ghosts. Funny, it had always been Barclay who stayed to clean up his messes. It felt odd to be the one left in charge. It was an overwhelming responsibility being head of the family.

“You’re awfully quiet, dear,” his mother said.

“I’m just slow to wake up this morning.”

She nodded, but didn’t look like she believed him.

“Your Grace.” Williams, his townhouse’s butler, came up beside him, saving him from the rest of this tedious conversation when he handed him a missive.

Burke broke the seal on the note. The penmanship was frilly and obviously female.

*“Your Grace:*

*“I know this may be highly presumptuous to ask you to go riding with me, but I do so miss my early morning rides. I’ve heard you often frequent the park.*

*“Thank you for being so tolerant of my country manners.*

*Lady Phoebe Walcott”*

He couldn’t believe the minx had the guts to contact him. Didn’t she know that she was putting her reputation in jeopardy by doing this? Even knowing it, he felt oddly pleased that she did.

The memory of those pouty pink lips and sassy personality.... He shook off those lusty thoughts.

He shouldn’t meet with her, yet, he didn’t want to disappoint her. She had stood by him during the worst of the whispering last night. The least he could do was tell her in person why they couldn’t see each other.

On the other hand, how could he turn Phoebe away once he’d spent time with her? He enjoyed her quick wit. She treated him like a man rather than a title.

“What are you frowning about?” His mother asked.

He jumped, not realizing he’d been quiet so long.

“A business note.” He stood, folding it up. “I’m off for my day.” He bent down to brush a kiss on her cheek. “Stay as long as you like.”

“Wait, dear.” She caught his arm. “I was considering giving up my townhouse and moving in here with you.”

He tried not to let her see him stiffen. “Why?” He slid down into the chair beside her. “Not that you’re not welcome here. I just would like to know what prompted this sudden urge to live with me.”

She fumbled with her napkin. “I thought I could make you....”

“What?” He offered her a lopsided grin. “More respectable? Are you longing

that much for more grandchildren?"

"It would be nice to feel like a family again. After the last couple of year's sadness, I just want to be part of your life."

He reached over and squeezed her trembling hand. "I'll make the arrangements to have your things moved. It will be nice to have company for meals."

He stood, but she kept a hold of his hand, rising with him. "Dear heart, you don't have to keep up a front for me. You may be head of this family, but I'm still your mother."

He visibly stiffened this time. She couldn't know about the money, could she? "If you are moving back in here because you think we can't afford two residences then you're wrong."

"Am I?" She threw him a pointed look.

Burke glared right back, making her release his hand. He had no intention of burdening her with his problems. Not that he would ever admit it, but it would help their situation to get rid of her extra staff and house.

"Do what you like," he said more casually than he felt.

"Then I'll move in here later this week. I'll keep my cook and maid. I have found positions for the rest of my staff."

He nodded. "Then I'll see you later." He turned and headed off for a ride with Phoebe. He didn't know if he had helped or complicated his life.

\* \* \* \*

"Poor bloke," muttered Inspector Holt as he turned the battered body over with his foot. "Not often you see this sort of thing happening in an upper crust neighborhood. Someone beat the living daylights out of him. Can't say as if his own mother would even recognize him."

Inspector Carson Reynolds stood hands on hips, staring out across the well-landscaped park. "Is he a gent?"

"More than likely. Look at his clothes." Holt reached down into dead man's pocket. "I'd say we found Warwick. That closes this one. Funny that he escaped Newgate only to be done in by footpads."

Reynolds blew out a harsh breath. "Not bloody likely that this was a coincidence."

Holt scratched his head. "You thinking someone had him killed."

"The trouble is this someone is above the law, or so he thinks," grumbled Reynolds.

\* \* \* \*

Burke froze at the stream of profanities coming from Atwood's door after he knocked. He almost reconsidered, but the door flew open.

"What the hell do you want?" A disheveled Atwood leaned against the door frame with a bottle of whiskey in his fist. His shirt was half buttoned and the sleeves were rolled up to elbows. Although he couldn't be sure, but Burke would wager to bet that Percy was still in the clothes he had on from the night before.

It took a few moments of stunned silence for Atwood to realize who he was talking to.

Atwood motioned him inside. "Sorry, Your Grace." He looked sheepish as he sat the bottle down on a marble table near the door and attempted to smooth down his wild

blond hair. "What can I do for you?"

Burke wondered how many mornings his own valet saw him like that. He cleared his throat. "I've come to ask permission to take Miss Phoebe for a ride."

Atwood squinted at him. "You wanting to court her?"

Good question.

"Yes. If that meets with your approval."

Atwood stepped back out of his way. "Might as well. You're the only bloke who has shown up so far. Phoebe!" He yelled.

A flushed Phoebe bounded down the stairs dressed in a deep blue riding habit.

"Looks like you have a suitor. Don't run him off," he leaned down, whispering none too softly.

Burke blinked. He had known Atwood only casually, but he'd never seen this side of him and it wasn't pretty. He felt slightly embarrassed for Phoebe, who was acting as if she didn't notice her brother swipe the bottle and stagger off.

After they were alone, she shifted, not looking at him.

"Are you ready for a ride?" Burke blurted out, because he wasn't sure what else to say.

"Thank you, Your Grace." Her green eyes lifted and brightened.

Well, at least he did something right this morning.

\* \* \* \*

"I might have done you a disservice by letting you be seen with me."

Phoebe jumped at the sound of Ravensthorpe's voice next to her. All the way through the park he had kept silent.

"It was forward of me to send that message, Your Grace. Are you angry?"

He shook his head. "I would hate to be a woman and always have to wait to be asked." He paused, pulling up beside her. "You took a risk with the note, though. If your servants gossip, you could be ruined. You might still be just by being seen with me."

She stopped, turning to look at him. "I don't know why you keep saying that."

"I have a bad reputation," he replied without flinching. "I'm hardly a fit escort for a young woman just coming out."

Phoebe rolled her eyes. "I've heard the talk." She waved a dismissive hand. "I'd have to be deaf not to, but I don't think it is any worse than what they say about my brother."

"I'd beg to differ with you, but this conversation is fast turning to an inappropriate subject."

She couldn't help but grin at his overprotective streak. It oddly pleased her that Ravensthorpe felt her sensibilities were worth protecting. Although, after living with Percy, nothing shocked her. Still, it was nice to be treated like a lady.

"Is it true you're looking for a wife?"

"Maybe." His lips curved into a half smile. "Are you on the marriage mart?"

"Maybe. That depends on who you are talking to."

He threw back his head and laughed. "I don't envy Atwood keeping up with you. I must say I'm a little surprised at his tastes. The men he has introduced you to so far would not be my choice if I had a younger sister."

He'd care who she married. That sent a ripple of pleasure up her spine. She liked

that he actually looked at other things besides just the suitor's pocketbook.

"They are all wealthy."

"Perhaps, but that can be an illusion. Is wealth the main requirement? If that's the case, there are many nice men with fortunes."

How could she tell him that her brother enjoyed taunting her with less than suitable choices? He relished the hold he had over her life. She knew these men wouldn't stand up to Percy, either. Those were the two main requirements--money and a weak will--so he could push them around.

"Pardon me," he said softly. "It is rude of me to probe into such a personal topic."

They lapsed into silence as they rounded the trees.

"Percy feels I haven't the sense to choose my own husband."

"You don't seem flighty. What sort of man do you see yourself marrying?"

*Someone unlike Percy.* "Someone with whom I could have actual conversations. I hope my husband would be faithful."

"I can't see why those requirements couldn't be met."

She cocked her head, giving him an impish smile. "What sort of wife do you want?" She fluttered her lashes. "I'm sorry. That was too personal."

He shook his head. "I haven't given it much thought."

Burke realized with a jolt he hadn't. Bloody hell, he was as bad as Atwood, only seeing the money.

They lapsed into silence as they neared her townhouse.

"Thank you for your company."

"It was my pleasure."

He reached up to help her down; aware of how light she was in his arms. She had looked at him with surprise when he reached for her, making him wonder if she thought him unable to be a gentleman. Or if she was just unused to that sort of deference. This thought bothered him more, though he was not sure why. Burke found himself uncomfortably at a loss for words.

"I heard you tell my brother that you were courting me. Did you mean it?"

"No."

"I see."

She glanced away from him, but not before he saw the hurt in her eyes. He hadn't meant to be so blunt. He was usually glib around women. Why was it this one made him so tongue tied?

"As I told you before, it wouldn't be good for your reputation to be seen with me."

"You don't have to explain. I understand."

The slump of her shoulders said otherwise. He stepped in front of her when she turned to leave.

"It wouldn't be proper for us to be seen together, but if you ever need anything, you can contact me. A quiet friendship is all I can offer. I'll see if I can help Percy find you a suitable husband."

She folded her arms, giving him a defiant look. "Which you're not."

He wasn't sure why it hurt to hear her say it.

"Or is it that I'm not a suitable wife for a duke?"



Not suitable? Hell, she couldn't be more suitable if God had made her just for him. He couldn't in good conscience drag her in to the mess of his life.

"I would only break your heart," he said softly, wishing it weren't so. Before he could stop himself, he gave in to the urge to cup her soft cheek in his hand. She was fresh air and sunshine while he was darkness.

"Good-bye, Phoebe." He brushed a finger down her cheek before stepping back.

\* \* \* \*

"Was he that bad?"

Phoebe closed the door to find her younger sister Maddie, ready to pounce. She straightened her shoulders, preparing herself for the endless barrage of questions.

"Were you spying?"

"A little. I thought he was going to kiss you."

She did too until she realized he wasn't going to court her.

"Well, he didn't. He was a perfect gentleman."

"Is he going to marry you? Can Hugh and I come to live with you?"

"Duke Ravensthorpe isn't planning to marry me."

"Oh." Maddie's face fell. "I was hoping he'd come in because Neville is here in the study with Percy. Boy, is he mad. Thinks Percy is trying to get him to increase his offer by putting you on the marriage mart. He is threatening to withdraw it and call in all Percy's debts."

So Percy was in deeper than he had told her. That figured. Phoebe sighed. "Eavesdropping on them, I see."

Maddie tossed her blonde curls. "Well, somebody has to keep track of what is going on around here. Besides it wasn't too hard since they were both yelling. What are you going to do?"

She shrugged. "Avoid seeing Neville and try to find a way to raise the money Percy owes."

A door slammed. "Phoebe?" Percy's voice echoed through the hall. "Is that you?"

Her shoulders sagged. She'd been caught. "Yes. I had a nice ride with Duke Ravensthorpe."

Maddie giggled.

Percy stomped into the room followed by Baron Neville. He was a big brutish man, whose face seemed to constantly be flushed with anger.

"I thought we had an agreement, Lady Phoebe."

"I don't remember agreeing to anything."

Neville slapped the riding crop against his thigh. "This is unacceptable, Atwood. You either control your sister or I'll expect full payment of all your debts." He stormed out, not bothering with a backward glance.

Percy glared at Phoebe.

Phoebe's hand fisted at her side. "Go upstairs, Maddie."

Her sister pouted. "But."

"Go!" She and Percy snapped in unison.

She flew up the stairs, but her footsteps stopped at the top. No floor squeak sounded to let them know she had left hearing distance.

"All the way up to your room," Percy growled.

Footsteps pounded and a door slammed. Percy glowered at her in an attempt to make her back down. She merely jerked up her chin. He should know better than try to intimidate her.

“What did Neville mean by an agreement? You told me yesterday, that he’d asked. You never said you agreed. Why did you bring me here if I was promised to him?”

“Don’t be impertinent. Mother demanded I give you a season before marrying you off. She thought we could do better than a Baron.”

He had discussed it with their mother. That gave her pause.

“So you didn’t actually promise me to Neville?”

“I told him I might allow him to court you. I never thought he’d be in London. This is your fault. I have no idea what the bloody hell we’re going to do. Hugh can kiss school good-bye.” He swiped his hand across the table of china and glass knick-knacks, sending them flying before he stormed off, muttering curses under his breath.

“Sissy.” Maddie’s upset voice floated down the stairs.

“If you listen when you’re not supposed to, you might not like what you hear.” Phoebe glanced up at Maddie, who hung onto the rail. Maddie’s lips quavered and her eyes filled with tears.

“Percy is so mean. I wish Papa was here.”

Phoebe held open her arms and Maddie ran into them. “I miss him too. Don’t worry, sweetie. I have a plan.” She smoothed a comforting hand down Maddie’s small back.

“You do.” Maddie sniffled.

She wished she did, but had no intention of sharing that with her little sister. All she had was some pin money. Somehow she had to parlay that into the money Percy needed. Or else...? She didn’t want to think about that.

## Chapter Three

Taking a shaky breath, Burke stared up at the sign. Pleasure Palace. What the bloody hell was he thinking? He hadn't been here since the night he supposedly died.

He closed his eyes, not wanting to relive that night, or the fight he had with his brother and the death of their father. He shook off the flood of emotions.

He had changed, he reminded himself forcefully.

"Your Grace."

Burke stiffened at the sound of Inspector Carson Reynolds' rough voice behind him in the dark alley. How had he found him? Damn the blasted man. His brother was gone. Warwick had been arrested. Couldn't he just leave it all alone?

He took a calming breath before turning around. "What can I do for you, Inspector Reynolds?"

"I've called on you, but never found you home."

Burke mentally rolled his eyes. *I wonder why.*

"I've been busy handling my family's affairs. Was there something you needed?"

"I want to discuss the final details of this case."

"You really should have asked my brother, Barclay, before he sailed for America. I wasn't involved in the matter."

"Since you were pretending to be dead, I assume."

Burke inwardly winced at the implication that he had been shirking his duty.

"I was staying out of sight and protecting my brother."

"Is that how he sees it?"

"That is personal and none of your affair."

Reynolds gave him a surprised look. "Touché. But since you are here and he is not, I have some points I need cleared up."

"Such as?" This conversation was getting tedious.

"What happened to your father?"

He had no intention of discussing the full details of his father's death. "My father died of heart problems."

"And that caused the injury to his head?"

"Are you insinuating that I'm lying?"

"No, Your Grace. I just still find it odd that all the Fearless Four died, but only one death was attributed to Warwick."

"What do you mean only one? He ran the late Sheldon Townsend and his wife off the road. He pushed Earl Holbrooke off his balcony and poisoned Earl Norcott. I'd say that sums things up."

"But your father..."

"Died early as did his father and grandfather. It is the curse of men in my family."

Reynolds didn't look convinced, but Burke no intention of elaborating.

"What else do you need to know? Warwick was apprehended and confessed."

“He didn’t exactly confess. Just got caught in an incriminating situation.”

Burke groaned inwardly. “Now that you have him, doesn’t-or should I say shouldn’t-that end this case.”

“It would, except there has been a new development.”

Bloody hell, who else could have died?

“Did you know Warwick had escaped from Newgate?”

“No. I understood he died while trying to escape, though.”

“Too bad it isn’t true. Holt and I found his body beaten to a bloody pulp in the park by your house. You wouldn’t have any comment on that, would you?”

Burke blinked. Reynolds thought he killed Warwick. The expression on his face said so. Why wouldn’t he think the worst of him? Everyone else did. Anger ripped through Burke, making him feel reckless. “Of course I killed him. See.” He held out his hands. “I banged my hands up in the process.”

Reynolds’s eyes narrowed as he examined his unbruised hands. “You think you’re pretty smart, Ravensthorpe. Have an answer for everything. There is the issue of the book.”

“Ah, the famed missing Eccentric Earl book. I assume that is a myth. Did you ever discover the identity of the Eccentric Earl?”

“You know bloody well I did not.”

“Pity. That’s the bloke you should be questioning. If the stories are true, he was there for the original Fearless Four’s adventure.”

Reynolds’s face turned red.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Reynolds stepped in front of him. “This isn’t over, sir, and well you know it. No case in my file is left unresolved. No one gets away with murder while I’m on a case.”

Dread crept up his spine, but he kept his voice level.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Take it as you like.”

“Make all the threats you like, but be forewarned. I’m not a man to cross. Unlike my brother, I have nothing to lose. My reputation can’t get any lower, so I see no reason to play fair.”

\* \* \* \*

Burke wasn’t sure why he thought he could do this. Maybe he should have waited for another night. The conversation with Reynolds had rattled him more that he cared to admit.

Besides, he wasn’t used to gaming alone. He had no choice, though, because his best friends were no longer his friends. Marcus Bancroft, now Earl Norcott, couldn’t forgive his family for causing his father’s death. And Warwick... well it hurt to think of what he did.

He could do this. Burke steadied himself in the doorway of the Pleasure Palace gaming hell and brothel. He had in his pocket all the money he could afford to lose. It seemed like a good idea when he dreamed it up in his study, but now, standing here in the smoke-filled room, he was having second thoughts. He hadn’t been here since he returned to polite society. His days of living on the edge were over, or so he thought. Now that he was here, his hands were trembling. The desire to grab a bottle of whiskey and slink off to a quiet corner overwhelmed him. Dammit to hell, he needed to stay

focused. Do not think about drinking. Just win your money and get out.

If it was only that simple.

Phoebe pulled the hat down tighter over her hair as she tried to walk like a man into the gaming hell. Did anyone recognize her? She hoped not. This seemed like a good idea when she and Maddie put their money together and dressed her in some of Hugh's old clothes. Now, here in the smoky den with her bound breasts throbbing, it seemed less than a viable plan.

"Looking for a game?"

She jumped at the sound of Ravensthorpe's deep voice beside her.

"Yes, Your Grace." Did her voice sound gruff enough to fool him?

"Is this your first time here?"

How could he tell?

"Never been to this one. Thought I'd try it out."

His gaze searched hers. "Do I know you?"

Before she could fabricate another lie, Percy's all too familiar voice rattled what little poise she had left.

"Ravensthorpe. I thought it was you."

Drat. Phoebe cringed at the sound of Percy's voice. Curse it all, why didn't she consider the possibility that *he* might be here. All she could hope for was that he was too foxed to recognize her.

Percy slapped Ravensthorpe on the back. "Did you enjoy the ride with my sister?"

"She is a delightful girl. You should be proud."

"Does that mean you want to offer for her? I'd be happy to get us a bottle, so we could sit or if you'd rather we could go home and discuss the details of her settlement. Since you are my friend I'll give you first crack at her."

Heat crept up Phoebe's cheeks. How could Percy be so crass? She watched Ravensthorpe stiffen. Had Percy offended him? She jolly well hoped not.

"This really isn't the time or place to discuss this."

"Tomorrow morning then?"

"Tomorrow. If you're still standing," he muttered under his breath as Atwood staggered away.

She fought to control her laughter at how well Ravensthorpe knew her brother.

Burke turned to stare down at the person trying to hide in the shadows beside him. It was difficult to tell for certain in the hazy, dimly-lit room, he would wager his friend wasn't male. Someone had tried to rub something on her face to look like a beard, but it was smudging and looking more like dirt. She had the scent and delicate features that screamed female.

"Come, I know a more lucrative gaming hell." He resisted the urge to grab her arm. If he did it might attract attention to them. Something she definitely didn't need. She hesitated and he feared she might refuse, forcing him to create a scene.

"Okay, but I insist we take separate coaches and I'll follow you."

He nodded his agreement. Anything to get her out of here. As they got to the door, Desiree, a doxie with whom he had spent more than his share of pleasurable nights, caught him.

"Burke." She flung herself into his arms. "I have been so worried about you."

She stepped back, raking her gaze over him like he was a piece of candy. "You're looking good. The title must agree with you." She slapped his shoulder playfully. "I never did it with a duke."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his friend slipping away, so he caught her arm.

"Wish I had the time, luv. You know I've never been one for quickies."

The girl stiffened beside him. Desiree just smiled and batted her long red lashes. "I can give you the whole night. I'll take your friend up with us, too. He looks kind of green. Maybe we could show him a thing or two. What do ya say?" She nudged him.

He honestly didn't think himself capable of blushing until that moment. Burke reached into his pocket and pulled out a few coins. "I have to run now, but this should take you off the floor tonight."

"Too bad I'm all primed." She dropped the coins down her dress.

Before he could respond, she was winking at Kirkwood, who seemed more than willing to lead her off.

Burke pulled his friend out the door before anything else could happen.

"Stop, you're creating a scene." She dug in her heels.

"I couldn't leave you in there," he whispered.

"Why the bloody hell not?"

"Don't swear. You know as well as I do why not. Now, you either walk to my carriage or I throw you over my shoulder. Either way, I'm not leaving you in a gaming hell alone."

Phoebe frowned as he motioned his driver. Much to her relief, he let her climb in by herself. Once he slammed the door, he handed her a handkerchief.

"Here. Wipe that dirt off your face, so I can see you clearly."

She reluctantly began rubbing her face as he leaned forward to get a better look at her.

"Bloody bleeding hell, I should have guessed it was you." Burke sat back in his seat, staring at Phoebe, cursing himself for not recognizing her sooner.

She played with the handkerchief, looking utterly lost. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Not what I ought to do with you. I'm taking you home. But first I want a full explanation of what you were doing posing as a gentleman in a gaming hell."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "The same thing you were doing, I suppose."

The minx had spunk.

"Why?"

When she turned away from him, he moved to the seat beside her, catching her cheek in his hand, easing her around to face him. "Tell me," he said softly.

She shook her head, pulling away from him.

"I needed money."

"Taking care of you should be Atwood's job as head of the family."

She snorted.

They lapsed into silence as the coach pulled up in front of her townhouse. Burke climbed down and offered her his hand. She hesitated a moment before accepting.

"You don't have to walk me to the door. Thank you for seeing me home safely."

He didn't reply, just took her arm to lead her up the walk. As they entered the

house, he noticed for the first time the shabby state of their living quarters. He wondered how much Atwood owed. Phoebe was not the heiress he needed.

A little blonde angel flew down the stairs into Phoebe's arms.

"Did it work? Did you get the money to pay back Neville?" She turned to look him over as only a child would dare. "Who is that?"

Phoebe sighed. "Your Grace, this is my sister Maddie."

Maddie beamed at him with adoration in her eyes. "His Grace. Are you the duke who came back from the dead? Nellie, our old chamber maid, said ...."

Phoebe put a hand over her sister's mouth. "What did I tell you about gossiping?"

Her sister twisted free. "I'm not gossiping. Just asking a question." She flashed him an impish grin.

Maddie was a miniature version of Phoebe. He couldn't resist either the little imp or her frustrating older sister. Burke ruffled the girl's hair. "There's nothing wrong with asking questions. I have a few of my own."

Phoebe's back stiffened. How much did he know? How much had he guessed? She met Ravensthorpe's gaze without blinking, daring him to put into words what he was probably thinking.

"What is going on here? Why are there no servants to check on us? Who is watching Maddie?" He folded his arms across his broad chest, giving her a look that said he would accept nothing less than the full truth.

"I watch myself."

Phoebe groaned at her announcement.

"They all left because Percy couldn't pay them," Maddie added before she could stop her. "He owes everyone money. That's why he wanted Phoebe to marry Neville to save us from ruin. But Neville got mad because she was out riding with you."

"That's quite enough, young lady." Phoebe wished the floor would open up and swallow her. "That is a private matter. You know what I've told you about sharing our problems with other people outside the family."

Maddie wiggled free from her arms and went to stand beside Ravensthorpe, taking his larger hand.

"But he might be part of our family, right?" She smiled up at Ravensthorpe.

It was impossible to read his expression.

"Neville?" He frowned. "A Baron? Older man who lives in the country? Am I thinking of the right person? Isn't he a little old for you? Why him?"

"Because he is the only one who asked," Maddie blurted out.

Phoebe rolled her eyes. How she wished she could vanish in a puff of smoke. Or better yet, wave her hand and make Ravensthorpe forget this whole conversation.

"Maddie," Phoebe snapped as Maddie opened her mouth to start again. Fury ripped through Phoebe. "You've said quite enough. Now, scoot off to bed."

"But." She stomped her foot, her face like a thundercloud.

"There is no but. Go or I won't hide any lemon cookies, so Percy doesn't eat them all when he comes home tonight."

"Okay." She marched up the stairs, making more noise than Phoebe thought possible, then slammed the door to her bedroom.

They both jumped at the sound.

"I'm sorry about that. My sister needs some manners."

He laughed. "She is a character. I wouldn't rush too fast to make her lose that innocence. Now, about you. Why didn't you ask for help?"

"Ask who? My mother has locked herself in the bedroom since my father's death and my brother, well..."

"How much?"

"What?" His question took her by surprise.

"How much would it take to get your family out of trouble?"

She rattled off an amount that made him turn white.

"Would that pay off his debts?"

She nodded slowly. "Unless he ran up more tonight."

"What is Neville's part in this?"

She stared at the floor. In a hollow, flat voice, she replied, "He wanted to marry me. In return he would pay off Percy's debts and give him an allowance."

"Didn't your brother inherit money from your father? As I recall Atwood was quite well off."

"Father was and for a while Percy lived off the money, until..." She lifted her hands in a futile gesture.

"Until it ran out. Does he honestly think Neville will support him forever?"

"I don't know what he thinks. I just know I can't marry Neville. Right now, he's mad and just wants his money back and not me. I should be happy, but I'm worried he will change his mind."

Burke cupped her chin in his hand, lifting her gaze to meet his. "I don't blame you. Let me think it over. I'll come by in the morning to call on your brother. Maybe by then I'll have a solution you all can live with."

\* \* \* \*

He loved being dead, Justin thought as he wandered through the dark gaming hell. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of all the delightful possibilities sooner. With no one looking for him, he could carry out his plan without restrictions. Less challenging and definitely more productive.

This place was a perfect hole to set up his contacts. Everyone minded their own bloody business here.

He grinned when he saw Atwood at a dark corner table drinking as usual. Hopefully, he was drunk and frightened enough to be willing to talk. He needed to know Ravensthorpe's most vulnerable points and who his enemies were so that he could exploit them. If the rumors were true, Atwood might be just the gent to help him.

"The bastard always wins, doesn't he?"

Percy swallowed his whiskey, staring at the man dressed in black who had sat down uninvited next to him. The last person he wanted to see tonight was Justin or Lord Justice as he was calling himself these days. The man was a bottom feeder who had a way of manipulating you into a scheme before you even knew you were involved.

"You have to be a little more clear who you're talking about." His words slurred. "I know a lot of bastards these days."

Lord Justice moved his chair into the shadows. "Why Ravensthorpe. His presence in the game is keeping the other suitors away from your sister and yet, he is unwilling to commit."

"Ravensthorpe will offer for her," he said, hoping it was true. That would solve



all his problems. Well, sort of. At least his mother would be happy with the title.

"You really think so?"

"I'm confident that his bloody sense of honor will demand it." At least that was what he was counting on.

The other man shrugged. "Then I'm happy for you. Your sister made a good match. If things change...."

Then Lord Justice was gone before Percy could answer.

"What the bloody hell did Lord Justice want?" Neville asked.

"Wanted to know about Ravensthorpe and Phoebe?" Percy's words were slurred and he took another swallow of whiskey, choking on it as Neville dropped down beside him.

"Even he knows about that," Neville muttered under his breath. "Renegade on our deal, Atwood, and Hugh will inherit his title early just like you did."

Percy felt the color drain from his face. "What are you saying?"

Neville took the bottle and poured himself a glass. "What do you think I'm saying. We have a deal. I get Phoebe and you stay out of debtors' prison. You've been lax in providing the services I'm paying for."

"House parties cost money. Besides the brats are staying with me."

"I'm willing to pay. The vowels and blackmail material we get from those drunken louts is worth it. Your siblings will just have to grow up." He tossed some money across the table. Arrange it and make sure the guest list is worth the price."

Percy stood, dropping some coins on the table. "I'll take care of it."

"See that you do."

As Percy strolled off, Neville raised his glass to the man standing in the shadows. Phoebe hadn't been part of their first bargain, which he doubted Atwood remembered, since he was so foxed. But she had to be part of this one. She knew too much for him to let her go. If she ever put the pieces together he was doomed.

He poured himself another glass. He was getting too old for this game. He hated being the middle man. He wondered how much Lord Justice would pay this time. If it wasn't enough, he might just go to Inspector Reynolds. The inspector had been sniffing around lately.

He swallowed the last of Atwood's whiskey. A man had a right to look out for himself. He'd see they paid well for his services.

\* \* \* \*

Burke leaned forward, staring at the fire, wishing to hell he hadn't poured out all his father's brandy. That sweet release from the world would feel good now. Heaven knows he didn't want to face the events of this night. He didn't want to think about Inspector Reynolds's threats or Justin.

His name alone made him shiver. He hadn't liked imagining Justin lying in prison, even though he knew he deserved that fate. He wished to hell he'd gone to talk to him. Cleared the air between them. Now, it was too late.

Justin was dead. Beaten to bloody pulp. Those words kept pounding through his head. It was as hard to believe as the realization that his life-long friend and partner in many escapades could have betrayed him.

Burke squeezed his eyes shut to block out the memories of their intertwined lives. Images of horse races, school pranks, crawling out their bedroom windows to enjoy

nights of adventure.

His eyes flew open. Somehow those moments and that friendship had meant nothing to Justin. While he had partied and shared secrets with him, Justin had been plotting to destroy his family. Barclay had been unforgiving of Justin's betrayal. He had been, too, at first, but later when his anger cooled, he felt a thread of compassion for his friend. Unlike Barclay, he knew what Justin had suffered at the hands of his mother's cruel lovers. What he didn't understand was why he blamed his family for that. Now, with Justin gone, he would never get the answers to the questions he had been afraid to ask.

What was worst, Justin had almost succeeded. His family's reputation was gone along with the money.

Burke sighed. Which brought him to another problem. Phoebe. What a charming minx. The memory of her in those pants both aroused and terrified him. When he thought of what could have happened to her if he hadn't found her made his blood run cold.

Burke blew out a cheek full of air.

Phoebe had awakened feelings in him he didn't believe existed. He had always tried to be kind and generous to the women in his life, but he had never let them too close. Then again, they never wanted to be too close. They liked his wicked reputation. All they wanted from him was mindless, meaningless passion under the cover of darkness. It was good that was all they wanted, because that was all he had to give.

Until now. Until Phoebe. Since their first meeting, he had seen what it was like to share simple, normal things like a ride in the park with a beautiful, interesting woman. He had enjoyed their lively conversations. No other woman had dared to challenge or tease him so much.

He had danced with other ladies that night, but none of them had captured his imagination the way Phoebe had.

The minx had him tied up in knots. He never wanted to be a good person for anyone, but Phoebe made him want to be the kind of man she would be proud to have court her. It knotted up his insides to tell her that he couldn't be the man she needed. But that was the way it had to be. If she wasn't so innocent and he wasn't so jaded, then maybe....

He wanted to protect her, but had no idea how without linking her name with his. She didn't deserve that.

Besides, he needed an heiress and she needed...what? Someone responsible and kind, who would love and care for her and her family. But who? Who did he trust to do that?

Burke sighed. He'd give that problem to his mother and her matchmaking friends. Right now, he had more pressing issues with Phoebe. She needed money. He had enough to pay off Atwood's debts, if he used the money Barclay had sent him, but that would leave him little money to live on.

But how could he offer funds without offering for her? Atwood's pride might not let him accept the money without giving something in return. Yet, as deep of trouble as he was in, Atwood might not let pride stand in the way of his needs.

The question was, could he help them and walk away? Could he turn her future over to someone else? He leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes, trying not to think of

Phoebe in some other man's arms, some other man's bed. Phoebe sparring with another man over a meal or riding through the park. Maybe it was better that he never got to kiss her. Then he'd have to live with the thought of never doing it again.

"What do you want with my sister?"

Burke jumped and his eyes flew open. There in front of him was a young man who looked barely out of the school room, pointing a pistol at him. Holy hell, he had the look of another Walcott with his curly blond hair, angelic face and intense emerald eyes.

"I asked you what you want with my sister," he snarled.

"Nothing," Burke said in voice calmer than he felt.

"Then why the hell did you take her out yesterday and then bring her home late tonight?"

"Yesterday she wanted to ride and tonight I caught her posing as a man at a gaming hell, trying to win money."

"Bloody hell." The gun in the younger man's hand trembled and he lowered it. He ran a hand through his thick blond hair.

"Do you have any interest in her at all, Your Grace?"

Burke slowly stood. "First, call me Burke."

"I couldn't." The lad actually blushed. "My mother..."

Burke chuckled. "Would have your head? But she isn't here, is she?" Lucky for him. Lady Walcott would have him leg-shackled to Phoebe for sure.

He cleared his throat when he realized how intently the boy was watching him. "I still think of my father as 'your grace'."

The boy nodded his understanding, but didn't speak.

"What's not to like about your sister? She is pretty, bold, but too young for a cad like me."

"Is she better off with Neville?"

"Hell no. Why is Percy so hell bent of marrying her off to him? Surely, there are other men with money who would be interested in Phoebe. Men who would treat her better?"

"Something is going on between them. I think it is more than money, but I can't figure out what. I've pleaded and threatened him to give up on the idea."

Burke scrubbed a hand over his face and dropped down into the chair. He motioned for the younger man to do the same. "You know who I am. What they say I've done?"

The boy nodded. "Your family's name is clouded with scandalous rumors. I know bits and pieces of the stories, but most of the events happened while we were in mourning. I heard something about your brother being involved in the deaths of old Earl Norcott, Earl Holbrooke and your father. I've also heard that you wanted to flee the country, pretending to be dead, so the title would pass on to your brother, but in the end you remained in England to save him and his wife."

Burke was stunned. He had never heard that version of the story. It was odd to be considered the hero for once. Be that as it may, he couldn't let the lad delude himself into thinking he was a proper match for his sister.

"My family is cursed. And I'm..." He waved a frustrated hand in the air. "I'm barely accepted by most members of polite society. If Percy has any sense at all, he will reject my offer."

“Why? Because you’re a rogue?” The younger man snorted. “Percy’s reputation isn’t any better than yours.”

Burke doubted Atwood had sunk to his level, but had no intention of explaining that to the boy standing in front of him.

“Let’s just say I’ve been at my wicked ways longer than Atwood.”

“My brother is afraid of you. I doubt he would refuse your offer, especially since he needs the money.”

“What makes you think I would treat Phoebe any better. I could leave her in the country while I keep a mistress in town.”

“Then she’d be a widow soon. Either by my hands or hers.”

Burke liked this boy. He had guts. “Are you older or younger than Phoebe?”

“Younger. I’m Hugh.”

“Have I met all of you?”

“Except for my mother. She is hiding in the country.”

Burke sighed. It was nice to have someone come to him for help rather than the other way around.

“I’m still not convinced that being married to me is the answer, but I’ll talk to your brother in the morning. Maybe he’ll let me help him chose a suitable husband for her.”

Hugh stood, shifting nervously from foot to foot. “If I may be so forward, Your Grace, but my brother is home now with his friends and Neville. I wouldn’t wait until morning.”

“Do you think Percy will be able to talk to me in the morning?”

“No.”

Burke let out a harsh breath. “Do you think your sister is in danger from Neville?”

The boy looked to him like he was on the verge of tears. “I will try to protect her.”

Burke swore as he stalked out the door. If he was their only choice of hero, they were in a hell of a lot of trouble.

## Chapter Four

Every light was blazing in the Walcott's townhouse when they arrived. This was not a good sign.

Hugh hadn't been joking about Atwood's condition, Burke thought, as they strolled through the door. The house was filled to the brim with drunken partiers and much to his shock and horror-Cyprians. How could Percy have brought all this home in front of his younger siblings?

Shame washed over him at the thought of the house parties he'd attended. How many times were there others in the house to witness his boorish behavior?

"Ravensthorpe." Atwood rose, almost knocking Angela Layton, otherwise known as the naughty Baroness, off his lap. She moved with the grace of a tiger, stretching and purring. If she was involved in this party the children were in for more than an eyeful.

"I didn't expect you tonight." Atwood let Angela move only so far before anchoring her with a possessive arm. She didn't flinch, but the look she gave him made him release her.

"There should be extra women around here," she purred. "What is your preference?" Her eyes raked over Burke, clearly judging him worthy of staying for their scandalous party.

"Ravensthorpe likes them all," Atwood said as he grabbed a dark-hair woman by the arm and thrust her towards him. "He knows he'd better get his fill before he gets leg-shackled to my sister. She doesn't share well, you know."

"I'm not here for a roll. I want to discuss Phoebe."

Atwood waved a dismissive hand. "I only discuss business in the morning."

If he was still standing. Burke kept those thoughts to himself.

The doxie Atwood had thrust at him began teasing Hugh, who scooted away from her clever hands. He saw the flush of embarrassment on the lad's face. It brought back memories of the times his father had taken him out to make him a man. Not a situation he would wish on anybody. Burke had a sudden urge to slam Atwood into the wall, but resisted it.

"I think we need to talk now." His tone brooked no arguments.

Atwood shrugged. "Follow me to my study."

He staggered off, leaving Burke no choice but to follow or stay with the naughty Baroness.

"Out." Atwood waved his arms at the half-naked couple on the couch.

"Ravensthorpe." Marcus Bancroft, Earl Norcott, his ex-friend, shoved the petite blonde behind him, glaring at him. The girl righted herself with trembling hands. "I thought you gave up these parties."

"I did. I have business with Atwood."

Norcott scowled at Atwood. "If I'd known Ravensthorpe was invited, I never would have come."

"Don't worry. He isn't staying. His 'I'm-now-a-saint since I got my title'

attitude would put a damper on the whole evening.”

Burke shot Atwood a frosty glare. “A little restraint might be in order, considering your siblings are in this house.”

Norcott snorted. “A lecture on restraint from you? That’s rich. Trying to ruin Atwood’s life like you ruined mine?”

“You don’t need my help, Norcott. You’re doing a damn good job of that all by yourself.”

Norcott bristled, turning to Atwood, who had flopped down in a chair and was lighting a cigar. “Might we go upstairs? The rooms down here are filled.”

“Be my guest. If the brats are up, send them to the nursery.”

As Norcott tossed the blonde over his shoulder and headed out, Burke fought to control his mounting temper. He shut the door behind them softer than he wanted to. Then, he leaned back against it.

“So you’re sniffing after Phoebe? I worried she might scare you off this morning. She is full of odd ideas. Been out with some ladies who think women need more rights. I’m not sure what the hell for. Seems they have it pretty easy if you ask me. Brandy?”

“No.” Burke pulled away from the door, forcing himself to remain calm.

Brawling, as much as he might want to, would do no good at this point.

“I would like to help you find a suitable husband for Phoebe.”

Atwood swirled the drink in the crystal glass, spilling most of it on the desk. “I’m listening.”

“She needs someone younger and more respectable than Neville.”

“Like who? You?”

Burke arched a brow. “Am I your first choice?”

Atwood grabbed the brandy bottle and splashed more into his glass. “Are you offering for her then? How much?”

“Pardon me?”

“How much? Neville will give me one large sum plus an allowance. How much is she worth to you?”

On second thought, pummeling Atwood might not be such a bad idea. “She is your sister, dammit, not a horse. Have some pride.”

“I can’t afford it. She is the only asset I have left except for Maddie and she is too young. With her mouth I’ll be lucky to marry her off at all.”

He’d heard enough. Burke held up a hand. “How much do you need to pay off your debts?”

Atwood rattled off a number that would take most of his money from Barclay’s check.

“I’ll give you that plus a few hundred pounds extra for good faith.”

Atwood folded his arms cross his chest and rose. “Neville will give me that and an allowance.”

Burke stepped closer, grabbing Atwood’s brandy soaked shirt. “Do you really want to push me?”

Atwood swallowed hard. Ravensthorpe’s eyes were cold as night. In all the time he’d know the man, he’d never seen him so mad. He tried to shrug off Burke’s hold. “I give up.”

“Percy.” The door burst open. “I wanna go to bed, but it’s too noisy.” Maddie

stood in the doorway holding a doll. "I'm hungry, too."

"Go away." Atwood started to toss a paperweight at her, but Burke caught his arm.

"Maddie," Burke said. "Get dressed. Find Phoebe and Hugh." His gaze held Atwood's, daring him to defy him.

"But it's bedtime." Her face scrunched up in concern.

"We're going for a ride."

"Really?" Her voice rose as she raced off.

"So you want the whole lot of them. Take them. Damn nuisances anyway." He waved his hands dismissively. "You going to marry my sister or make her your mistress?" He taunted.

Fury coursed through Burke like lightening. He slammed Atwood against the wall. "She is under my care, so be careful what you say."

"Gallantry from you? That's a laugh."

"Isn't it though. In the morning when your thoughts are clearer, you might ponder how they ended up in my care. And what that says about you?"

"Percy, Maddie said we are...." Phoebe froze in the door at the sight of Burke holding her brother off the ground by his shirt.

When Burke spotted her, he let Percy drop. "That's right. You are leaving with me."

Percy angrily brushed off his shirt. "Ravensthorpe is hard up for a wife."

Burke shot him a quelling look.

She cocked her head. "You want to take me now, in the middle of the night?"

Maddie bounded back with her arms full of toys. "Why did I have to put my clothes on when everyone downstairs is naked?"

Ravensthorpe leaned down to meet her gaze. "Because you're coming home with me. I have a big house and no one to share it."

He straightened, looking directly at Phoebe. "Get your things."

"I don't know."

"Do you really want to stay here with Percy and his partying friends?" His tone lowered to a very intimate tone. "I'll have my mother stay with us if you like."

"My mother is locked in her bedroom. Hugh says she is waiting to see Papa, but he is dead," Maddie said.

"Percy." The naughty Baroness poked her head around the door. "I'm getting lonely. You want me to enjoy someone else?"

Phoebe rolled her eyes. "I'll go. But we have to talk."

At that moment, Hugh raced into the room with a bag. "I have what we need. The rest Percy can send."

Percy dropped down into the chair, saluting him with a drink.

Burke motioned for them to leave. What the hell was he going to do with them? He could hardly take care of himself and here he was taking on three more people.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe found Ravensthorpe later in his study, sitting in a high back leather chair, staring at the fire.

"Maddie loved the green room. She went right to sleep with her toys. Hugh is reading. All he can talk about is how many books you have."

“Barclay collected them. I’m glad they are settled. What about you?”

She sat down on the stool in front of him, folding her hands in her lap. “That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

His dark eyes held hers, but he didn’t respond, so she plunged forward. “What agreement did you make with my brother?”

“I will pay off his gaming debts.”

Her shoulders slumped. “That’s what I was afraid of. Just because you feel sorry for us doesn’t mean you should be forced to marry me.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you.”

“Would you have offered for me if Hugh hadn’t pushed?”

He stood. “No. I explained to you that I’m not a suitable husband for you.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Nothing. I promised your brother that I’d take care of you and I will. I could be your guardian. I’ll introduce you around and find you a good match. I’ll have Mother help sponsor you. She has connections. Between her and Countess Stratten, you’ll find a husband before you know it. One who will take care of all of you.”

She stood, her fists clenched at her side. “I want to pay you back the money.”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“I’ll find a wealthy husband.”

“No,” he snapped, softening his tone when her eyes widened. “You should marry for love.”

“Is that what you plan to do? Hold out for love?”

She had him there. How could he answer that? He wasn’t even sure he knew what love was anymore. His own parents had a cold but comfortable marriage. He had been with many women. All of whom he cared about, but love? That was for the naïve.

“Don’t you believe in love?” she asked softly, watching him intently.

“I think it happens to a few rare people like my brother, Barclay, or Holbrooke and his wife.”

“My parents were a love match. My father said happy marriages might happen more often if people tried harder to find love instead of settling for a good match.”

“I doubt the match-making mamas would agree, but he might have a valid point.”

He watched her as she began to move around his study. She hid her nervousness well. Only the slight tremble of her hands gave her away.

She stopped in front of the window overlooking the street. “I’m sorry we involved you in our family’s troubles. My brother will be angry in the morning when he thinks about it.”

“I know.”

“He didn’t want us there, but he never wanted us to leave, either.”

“Atwood isn’t comfortable with his title or role in your family yet. Give him time, he’ll grow into both.”

“Like you have?”

Burke shrugged. “It’s easier for me because I don’t have any younger siblings to contend with. My brother handles his own affairs and my mother only depends on me for an allowance.”

“Hugh should be in school and Maddie needs parents.” She closed her eyes, obviously fighting tears.



Burke pulled her into his arms and she came willingly. Her head rested perfectly against his chest. He ran a soothing hand up her back. "Things will look better in the morning."

She didn't reply, so he just held her, hoping he was right.

\* \* \*

Phoebe wandered through the rooms of the townhouse. Ravensthorpe hadn't told her which room to take, so she assumed she could have any one she liked.

She opened a door to a large room decorated in pink and roses. It had a beautiful window seat. If it wasn't so dark she could see to the street below.

"It isn't much of a view, but I can snoop on people from here."

She jumped off the seat at the sound of a female voice. She turned to find a striking dark-haired woman in a pink night gown and matching wrap. Was this elegant lady Ravensthorpe's mistress? She hadn't heard rumors that he had one. But that sort of thing was rarely gossiped about in front of women her age.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. Do you live here?" What a dumb question. She slept here, didn't she?

"Sometimes," the woman answered, looking her over with avid interest.

"I'm not a rival."

"Pardon me?"

"I mean, look at me, how could I compare to you? No wonder his grace doesn't want to get married when he has you."

The woman frowned. "Do you know who I am?"

She nodded, whispering, "his mistress."

The woman threw back her head and laughed. "I'm flattered you think I'm that young. I'm the Dowager Duchess of Ravensthorpe."

Phoebe stared, trying to comprehend what she was saying.

The woman patted her shoulder. "My dear, I'm Burke's mother."

Understanding dawned slowly. The resemblance was there in her expressive blue eyes. Phoebe put her hands over her burning face. "I'm so sorry."

The Dowager Duchess pulled them down. "Considering my son's reputation, I'm not surprised you thought that. He loves women to a fault. But you don't seem like his usual sort."

Meredith stared at the flushed, pretty young lady in front of her. She had golden blonde hair that framed her angelic oval face, warm green eyes and a straight nose. What was she doing at her son's townhouse in the middle of the night? She looked far too innocent to be a doxie.

"Since you know who I am, why don't you tell me who you are?"

"Phoebe Walcott."

Meredith searched her memory to place the girl's family.

"Your parents are?"

"My father was Prescott Walcott, the late Marquis of Atwood. My mother is Charlotte."

Recognition dawned on her. "Sorry to hear about your father. I went to school with your mother. I believe your brother, Percy, is about my sons' ages. I remember us being in confinement at the same time. In fact, if I recall right we had our season together. How is your mother?"

“She has shut herself away since my father died.”

Meredith nodded her understanding. “I did the same thing when my husband died. At some point, though, you have to go on living.”

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Meredith patted it for Phoebe to join her. “Tell me why you are here.”

“It is an embarrassing story. Ravensthorpe took me and my siblings away from my brother. He offered to marry me, but didn’t mean it. I think he intends to be my guardian and find me a husband.”

“Ah,” Meredith said, studying the girl’s serious expression. “I’m a little confused as to why my son would only pretend to offer for you. Burke isn’t always a gentleman, but he usually never dishonors innocent women. Normally he is very straight forward about what he will and will not do.”

“Oh, he didn’t lie to me, only to my brother. Well, he sort of lied to him. Percy was so drunk that I doubt he knew exactly what they agreed to. Ravensthorpe told me that all he promised was to take care of us and he will by finding me a husband.”

Meredith sighed. They were talking in circles. “I still don’t understand why Burke won’t marry you.” What excuse did he give this time?

Phoebe blinked, staring at her as though she couldn’t believe she asked the question. “I didn’t think you’d even consider me with my ....”

She waved off her protests. “You come from a good family. Your brother needs to grow into his title, that’s all. I watched many a young man, my husband included, struggle with the new responsibilities thrust on them all of a sudden. It just takes time for them to settle in. Some longer than others. I want to know if my son gave a reason for not marrying you.”

“He told me he was an inappropriate husband for someone like me. Although I can’t understand why, he thinks he is wicked beyond redemption. As near as I can tell he is no worse than my brother.”

“Then you like my son.”

Phoebe nodded. “He is funny and charming. But...”

“But what?” Meredith pressed.

“He doesn’t believe me when I tell him he is no worse than my brother. All the stories I’ve heard are similar to ones I hear about Percy. Of course the ones where they are wicked are probably not fit for my ears. I’ve always wondered why they bother telling you something is unfit for your ears. Just don’t say anything at all. Knowing it is unfit only makes you want to hear the story more.” She slapped a hand over her mouth. “Good gracious, I’m babbling like Maddie.”

Meredith laughed. “I quite agree with you. Why even hint at something you’re not supposed know. As far as being truly wicked, my Burke is not. Now, you would expect his mother to say that. So I’ll be honest with you. Burke has had wild days much like your brother, but when someone really needs him, he is there.”

“Then he’ll help me find a good husband?”

Meredith brushed back a loose curl from Phoebe’s neck. “If that is what you want, dear. He never goes back on his word once he gives it.”

“My brother does all the time. Go back on his word, I mean. I don’t think he means to. He just doesn’t remember what he promised or promises things he can’t deliver.”

"Burke rarely makes promises and only those he knows he can keep."

Phoebe nodded. "I knew I could trust him. He has sincere eyes."

The girl saw behind the face Burke gave the world. Meredith fought back a smile. So her son, the rake, thought he could pass this delightful girl over. She wondered what it would take for him to see what was right under his nose.

\* \* \* \*

"I see you've been busy tonight," Meredith said softly from the doorway.

So she had moved in after all. How convenient. Burke raised his head to stare at his mother. He had almost fallen asleep by the fire.

"I see you've met our houseguests."

"Guests? You mean there are more than one? I've only seen Phoebe. Delightful, I might add."

"You used to be more subtle."

"Pardon me."

"Match-making. The girl still believes in love and happily-ever-after."

"And you don't?"

"I've had too many up close encounters with ton marriages to think otherwise."

"Like your father and me." She sat in the chair beside him.

"I wasn't going to say that."

"No, but that is what you meant."

"Actually, I was thinking of couples I know that have affairs right and left."

"And you don't approve?"

He shrugged. "How can I not when I've been the recipient of their bad behavior."

She rolled her eyes. "Really, Burke. You're just trying to shock me into leaving. Well, it won't work. I know full well you've done your share of bedroom window climbing. I also know you are less on the prowl these days and have never been known to have a mistress. I can't help wondering why."

"That is hardly a topic one wants to discuss with his mother."

"None the less, I still would like to hear your answer."

"I've never felt it was right to link some woman's name with mine. It would make it hard for her to find a protector when she wanted to leave me."

His mother was quiet for so long that Burke thought that might have ended the discussion.

"I've never heard any woman complain about your behavior. I don't think her leaving you would be a problem."

"Mum!"

She raised a hand. "Let me finish. I know your father often made you feel otherwise, but you are a good man, Burke Stewart."

"You should have switched us. No one would have known Barclay hadn't been born first. Heaven knows he would have been better at handling the title."

"Different, not better. There is a reason you were born first. I hope one day you'll see that."

He couldn't meet her gaze, so he stared off into the fire.

Meredith wanted to reach across the years and take the little boy into her arms. He seemed so lost and alone. It hurt to know that a great deal of it was her fault.

"So you don't have any feelings for the girl?"

“I didn’t say that. I’m going to find her a good husband.”

Meredith leaned back in her chair, trying hard to fight the smile tugging on her lips. When would Burke realize he had already found her a good husband?

## Chapter Five

"I'm sorry, but my mistress isn't seeing visitors."

Meredith exchanged glances with Countess Stratten as the maid tried to usher them out the door.

"Tell Lady Charlotte the Dowager Duchess Ravensthorpe and Countess Stratten are here. Believe me; she'll want to see us."

"I don't think..."

Meredith pushed past her, followed by Rose. "Which room is hers?"

"The top on the left, but I don't think..."

Charles, the butler, put a hand on Dora, the maid's shoulder. "Let them go. Our lady can't stay holed up in her room forever."

Dora sighed. "I just don't want them to upset her."

"At this point, I'm thinking that might be a blessing. At least then maybe she'd show some emotion," Charles said, nodding his approval.

Meredith concurred, but wasted no time debating this issue as she determinedly climbed the stairs. She shoved the door open, lavender filling her senses. The room was dark as a tomb with all the heavy purple blinds shut. Charlotte lay on the bed, still as a corpse in her white nightgown, eyes staring at the ceiling. It struck Meredith how much she looked like her daughter.

Rose began opening the drapes, causing Charlotte to sit upright.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Rescuing you," Meredith said as she dropped down on the end of her bed.

"You're wasting your time. Go away," Charlotte groaned flatly, putting an arm over her eyes. "And close the drapes."

"If you want them closed, you'll have to get up and do it yourself."

Charlotte didn't reply.

Meredith glanced over at Rose who shrugged.

"You might as well get up, Lottie, because we aren't leaving until you do."

When Charlotte didn't respond, Meredith and Rose exchanged worried glances. Rose motioned Meredith to keep pressing her.

"I can't believe you want to lay in the dark sulking. Prescott is the last person to want to see you like this. What are you trying to do will yourself to join him?"

Charlotte kicked her off with a swift leg movement and came off the bed in a fluid motion. Hands fisted at her side, she glared at Meredith. "How dare you."

"What? Bring you back to the land of the living. How long has Prescott been dead, two years?"

"You don't understand." Charlotte swiped the back of her hand across her eyes.

Her heart constricting for Charlotte, Meredith slid a comforting arm around her shoulder. "Ah, but you're wrong, Lottie. I do. So does Rose. We've both lost our husbands. We know how hard it is to let go of the grief."

"Easy for you to say, Merry," Charlotte spat, wrenching away from Meredith's

attempts at comfort. She didn't want her pity. "You didn't love Brandon."

"I did so," Meredith snapped back, getting nose to nose with Charlotte.

"Balderdash!"

Rose pushed between them. "Lassies, I think we need to calm down."

Meredith stepped back, opening and closing her mouth before letting out a controlled breath. "I'll admit that I didn't like him half the time, but that doesn't mean I grieved any less. Rose lost her husband, who she deeply loved." She waved a hand at Rose.

Rose nodded. "I willna ever forget my Duncan. It wasna easy to think of living and loving again. But Ollie changed me mind. Taught me you could have second chances. Even at our age we can still enjoy a good roll in the hay."

Despite herself, Charlotte burst out laughing.

They all laughed until tears ran down their cheeks.

"It's true," Rose said, trying not to get the laughing started again. "Your English men arena all that proper once you close the door at night."

Charlotte shook her head. "How did you two ever get to be friends?"

"It is long story." Meredith slipped an arm around her shoulder. "If you actually leave your bedroom and come for tea sometime, I'll tell you."

Charlotte stared at Rose as recognition dawned on her. "Countess Stratten?" She snapped her fingers pointing at Rose. "You're the Yank who stole the most sought after gentleman in London out from under the matchmaking mamas' noses. We all thought he'd never marry and he suddenly arrived back from America with a part Scottish bride no less."

"It was a surprise to me too. And call me Rose. It was hard to marry again, especially an English Earl. The Scottish part of me thought I was sleeping with the enemy. I'd like to think Duncan is laughing his arse off in heaven at me living on an estate in England."

"And shocking the ton?" The corners of Charlotte's mouth turned up into smile.

"I didna think they would ever accept me. Thanks to Meredith, I'm finally getting invited to parties and not just to be whispered about."

Charlotte turned to Meredith. "I read about that nasty business with your husband, the late Earl Norcott and Earl Holbrooke. I wanted to pay a call on you, but Prescott was so ill and died shortly after that, so I never got around to it. I'm truly sorry for your loss. I shouldn't have said that about you not loving him."

"I get what I deserve when I push. You're right, we didn't have as close of relationship as you shared with Prescott. Brandon was a hard man to understand. I learned over the years, though, that underneath the bluster, he was good man."

"I can't believe they are all dead."

"Neither can I. Calling their sons by their titles chokes me up every time. They may be grown men, but to me they still seem like the boys who used to race their horses at Ravensthorpe manor and steal cookies. I guess as mothers we want them to remain our little boys forever."

Rose cleared her throat loudly.

Meredith shot her a frown. "Which brings me to why I'm here. Did you know Percy has been behaving badly?"

"Merry, you're a fine one to talk about sons." She gave Meredith's shoulder a

playful slap. "Burke's antics are legendary. Didn't he just come back from pretending to be dead, so his brother could have the responsibility of the title while he ran wild?"

So that's what people thought. Meredith doubted Burke ever debased them of that notion. He always let the gossips think the worst of him. Why, was beyond her. But she had no intention of letting Charlotte change the subject.

"I'll be the first one to admit Burke isn't a saint. If there is a party with liquor and women he is there. So if he thinks Percy's behavior is bad, it must really be obnoxious."

Charlotte folded her arms across her chest in a defiant pose. "What has he done?"

"Apparently he brought your children to London only to ignore them."

"That's ridiculous. I would have known if they'd left." She marched across the room, throwing open the door. "Dora."

"Yes, my lady."

The maid who had let them in scurried up the stairs.

"Are my children gone?"

"Yes, my lady. They left a few weeks ago with Marquis Atwood."

"Bloody hell," she muttered. "Why didn't anyone see fit to tell me?"

"I tried, but you told me not to bother you with details."

"Thank you." She shut the door, turning slowly to lean against it. "I can't believe my children were gone and I didn't even know."

Meredith stepped over, putting a supportive arm around her shoulder. "Let's sit down on the bed and talk about this."

"That bad?"

Rose and Meredith exchanged glances, before sitting her between them on the bed.

"I'm afraid so. Percy has held parties with rakes and loose women, letting them roam the house with the children there. That's not the worst of it. He has been trying to pawn Phoebe off on some of his unsavory friends. But Burke rescued them. He's made himself Phoebe's guardian and is actively seeking a husband for her."

"What is wrong with her marrying him?"

"He thinks he can't love her."

"Poppycock, the girl is hard not to love."

"That's what we thought."

Rose nodded her agreement.

"So we have decided to help him sponsor her. Make him see what he is missing out on by not chasing her."

Charlotte threw back her head and laughed. "You're wicked, Meredith Stewart. Delightfully wicked."

"We want you to come back with us," Rose said gently.

Charlotte put a hand over her mouth. "Oh, I couldn't. I'm not ready to face society. Most days I hardly have the desire to get out of bed and this house."

"But your children need you," Meredith said firmly. "I can push my son into doing what is right, but I can't be so sure Atwood will agree."

"You think Percy might let Ravensthorpe ruin her?"

"Not on purpose. But these things have to be handled delicately. Right now Phoebe is staying at my son's house with only me as her chaperone. Living under his roof could be her downfall if word got out. I think if we start the right rumors, we could

make the story go our way. That's where Rose comes in. Nobody can get a good rumor going like Rose."

"Rumors are good, but they only take us so far," Rose added.

"That's where you come in, Charlotte," Meredith said. "Our sons are hot headed. We can't leave a situation of this magnitude in their hands."

"You seem awfully confident they'll listen to us. I'm not so sure I agree. They are grown men after all. Maybe you've stayed involved in Burke's life, but Percy has been on his own since he inherited the title."

"Are you insinuating I meddle too much?"

"If the shoe fits...."

Meredith waved off her remark with a flip of her hand. "I only meddle when necessary. Burke avoided polite society for so long that sometimes he needs pointers."

"And he listens to you?" Rose asked in an amused tone.

"When he knows he committed a serious error."

Rose and Charlotte exchanged amused glances.

"Then you really think this plan of yours will work?" Charlotte asked, frowning.

"We can't just do nothing."

"You have a point," Charlotte slowly came to her feet. "If you'll help me pack, I'll return to London with you. I think it is high time I acted like their mother again."

"I'm glad you agree," Meredith said. "I'll tell you the whole plan when we get in the carriage."

\* \* \* \*

"You have news for me?"

Neville stiffened at the sound of a deep voice behind him. Lord Justice. How the hell did he get into his study without the servants' knowledge? The man traveled like smoke.

"I wasn't expecting you to get my message so fast. I thought we'd meet later at the club."

"And risk being seen together? Not bloody likely. Why did you contact me?"

Lord Justice came around to sit on the edge of his desk. "You know how I feel about problems. They aren't mine."

"This is different. It involves Ravensthorpe."

"What about him?"

"He is getting married."

Lord Justice snorted. "Only in Atwood's dreams."

"No, it's true. I heard it from a reliable source."

Interesting. Justin played with a paper weight while the older man swallowed hard. Atwood had no money, he'd seen to that. And Ravensthorpe needed an heiress. He had seen to that also. Perfect. He now had a weapon to bring Burke down. It would be all the more delicious to use Ravensthorpe's own wife to do it.

He rose. "Then our deal is over."

"But?" Neville followed after him. "What about the rest of the money?"

"You'll have to get it from Atwood. You're not any good to me now."

\* \* \* \*

"Good gracious it's dark in here."

Percy rose, squinting as someone ripped open the drapes in his study. "It's...."



He froze as he realized he was standing almost naked in front of his mother, who was standing with her arms folded, giving him that look mothers give naughty boys.

"It's afternoon. Why aren't you up and dressed?" She tossed him his pants that were lying in front of her on the floor.

Angela snuggled deep under the blanket on the floor beside the dwindling fire, avoiding his mother's wrath. Something he wished desperately he could do. Especially since his head was pounding.

"What are you doing here?" Percy snapped as he pulled on his pants. "I thought you were staying in the country."

Charlotte's mouth tightened. She wished she could have remained there. The only thing pushing her forward was anger at seeing the disrespectful behavior of Percy and his friends and the knowledge that her babies had witnessed all of that.

"I was until I learned our townhouse had been turned into a den of iniquity," she snapped. "I found peers in various states of undress all over the house and your siblings are nowhere to be found. Would you care to tell me where they are?"

Percy stalked around his mother to pull the drapes, blocking the sun from his sensitive eyes.

"Ravensthorpe took them. He offered for Phoebe."

"So you gave him the rest of your family as a wedding gift?"

Angela had the gall to laugh at that remark.

"Not exactly. Now, tell me why you are here."

"I'm your mother and I think it is high time I acted like it. Beginning today, we will be having regular meals. Do your friends want to stay for luncheon? You'll have to tell them that they must be dressed if they plan to eat at my table. That includes you, Lady Angela."

She groaned, the blanket shaking with laughter or tears. He couldn't tell which.

Percy blinked as his mother marched off. Did she just invite his mistress, hung over friends and actresses to a late lunch? Gad, he must be more drunk than he thought. He had to be dreaming. How long would it take him to wake up from this nightmare?

\* \* \* \*

Giggles and outright laughter greeted Burke as he strolled through the house. Was this what it was like to have a family? He had been so used to coming home to dark, empty rooms that the thought of having company made him actually desire afternoon tea. Well, almost.

"Good afternoon, dear." His mother smiled as he walked into where she sat having tea and scones with the freshly scrubbed, Maddie, Hugh and Phoebe.

"I was just on my way out."

"No, please sit." His mother motioned to the empty chair beside Phoebe. "We were just discussing plans for the rest of Phoebe's season. I took the liberty of showing her my invitations, so we could decide what balls to attend."

Maddie bounced off her seat towards him. "Her Grace says there are a couple of people with young girls who might let me go and watch the dancing with their daughters."

Hugh looked bored with whole idea.

When Burke finally found his voice, he croaked, "You are really taking our sponsoring Phoebe seriously, aren't you?"

“Well, we have no time to waste. The sooner we get her out there, the sooner she can have suitors. Which is the whole point, isn’t it? Finding her a husband?”

Burke dropped down into the chair at the head of the table. *Suitors*. The word tightened his chest. He didn’t like to think of other men having the right to court to Phoebe.

“Phoebe agrees with me that we need to begin so we can get her settled so we can get on with our lives,” his mother went on, undaunted by his lack of response.

Then he could go back to his empty house and lonely meals. He swallowed hot tea a maid had poured him, not caring if it burned his mouth.

“Of course,” Burke said more lightly than he felt. He glanced over at a worried Phoebe. “Is that what you want?”

Phoebe shrugged. “It’s our agreement,” she replied softly.

“But if Phoebe gets married, where are Hugh and I going to live? I thought we were going to stay here with you.” Maddie leaned over the arm of the chair into his face.

“Sit down, dear,” his mother chided gently.

With a frown, Maddie plopped down in the seat beside his.

Burke cleared his tight throat. He didn’t like to think of them leaving or someone else caring for them. “You could stay with Phoebe and her husband or more likely back with your mother.”

“I don’t wanna stay with mean Percy.”

“That’s enough whining, Maddie,” Hugh snapped.

“Don’t worry, my little dear,” his mother said, and then turned to him, clapping her hands. “There is so much to do. Phoebe needs dresses. She told me she only has three and none of them appropriate for a girl coming out.”

If they looked anything like the one she had one the other night, Phoebe wasn’t exaggerating.

“I made an appointment with Madam Regina,” his mother continued, not seeming to care if he replied or not. “I have the most wonderful idea for gowns. It will be such a treat to have a girl to dress. I know the most splendid hair dresser, too. Mario will find the perfect hairstyle for Phoebe. I’ve put the word out for a governess for Maddie and Hugh.”

Hugh slumped down in his chair. “I don’t need a governess,” he grumbled.

Mother stared at him and then nodded. “How silly of me. Of course you don’t. Burke is going to see about getting you back in school. Aren’t you, dear?”

“Of course,” he muttered as if it were all that simple. Her words rang in his ears. All this took money, which he didn’t have. How was he going to explain to his mother and let her down again?

\* \* \* \*

Colorado Springs, Colorado

Darkness. Death. Barclay sat bolt up right in bed.

“What is it?”

Even the soothing strokes of Daphne’s hand on his back didn’t calm his runaway heart. Barclay gulped in deep breaths, trying to tame the fear pulsing through him.

“Burke is in trouble.”

He closed his eyes as she brushed a kiss on his bare shoulder.

"I'm not going to ask how you know. But do you really think he wants your help?"

"No. He would never accept that from me." Barclay tossed back the blankets and swung his feet over the bed and stood.

Daphne sat up against the headboard with only a sheet covering her. "Then you aren't planning to go back to England?"

"Of course I am." He thrust his arms into a shirt and pulled on his pants. "I didn't want Burke's help, but that bloody well didn't stop him."

"Ah. So you're going to get even."

He grinned, fumbling with his buttons. "You might say that."

She rose, brushing his trembling hands aside, nimbly buttoning his shirt.

"Don't worry, I'll be very discreet."

She tilted her chin, her lips curving in a wry smile. "I'll bet. I can't change your mind, can I?"

"No."

"That's what I thought." She headed for the closet. "Then let's get moving. If we are going to catch the early train, I have to get the children ready and see if their governess is willing to travel to England with us. They'll be so excited about getting to ride on the big boat."

"Just like that you'll go?"

"Of course. Just make sure we have two cabins, so we can have time alone." She wiggled suggestively against him.

"Do that again and we might not ever leave this room."

She laughed, brushing a quick kiss across his lips. "The longer we wait the more fun we'll have."

He groaned as she moved out of his reach.

"Have you decided where we'll stay?"

"I haven't worked that out yet. I'm not sure how I'll get you and the children past my mother. I need to observe Barclay's situation without his knowledge, so I can decide how to help."

Daphne tossed her hands up. "I'm not going to say a thing."

\* \* \* \*

Percy staggered into the overly bright dining room to find his mother holding court with his mistress, two actresses, a semi-sober Marcus Bancroft, Earl Norcott, and two blokes he didn't even remember.

"Good afternoon, dear. Your friends were just catching me up on the latest London gossip," she said as though she had conversations with them every day.

Percy ran a tired hand over his face as he dropped into the chair. He glared at Marcus, who was working hard not to laugh, as he addressed his mother. "I'm sure you heard quite a few tales."

"Yes. While I've been sitting idly by feeling sorry for myself, I've missed so much. It's high time I got back in the game. Norcott filled me in on all the awful rash of deaths involving the Stewarts. Lady Angela and I have been discussing the proper behavior of widows."

*I bet she has.*

"I've been telling her not to give up on marriage." His mum lowered her voice,

leaning towards him. "Not all men have the temper that plagued Hatfield."

Mum motioned with her hands at the other two men, who were eating like it was their last meal. "I didn't realize Brookestone and Mapleridge's sons were old enough to be out engaged in society. It's so hard to be a younger son. Good thing Hugh has you to look out for him."

Percy almost choked on the tea a maid had poured for him.

"Angela, Stella, Cairo, and I were just discussing how hard it is to find work when you are a single woman alone. Take these two. They've been looking for protectors since they lost employment. At least Angela's rat husband, God rest his soul, left her well cared for. She doesn't need anybody."

Angela shot him a look that told him she meant it.

Gad, his mother was not only driving off his friends but his mistress, too. Maybe he should go back to bed, and hope that when he woke up this would all be a bad dream.

"You've been busy, Mother."

"Just making conversation."

He snorted. Coming from the woman who had hardly spoken to him in two years. She picked now to be a conversationalist. Just his luck.

"I'll bet Stella and Cairo have skills they aren't aware of, so there is no reason that they have to live off the whims of a gentleman. What do you think?" His mother smiled at Norcott.

"Yes, Ma'am. I agree with you." He stood checking his watch.

The other two men stood with him.

"I think we'll go. Nice to see you, Lady Charlotte. Come have tea with my Mum sometime."

"I will. Thank you, Norcott. Tell her hello for me. We need to get our sewing circle started again."

Marcus grinned like a fool as they headed for the door. "Looks like you have your hands full for a while."

Not if he could help it, Percy thought. He steeled himself to go back and have a talk with his mother, but she wasn't in the dining room.

"Mother!" he bellowed.

She came out of the cloakroom. "Don't yell, dear. I was getting their wraps. Seems your servants have mostly left. You'll have to get the carriage and take them home. Oh, and don't forget to pay Stella and Cairo."

He heard giggling behind him as he stormed off to find the coachman. He had a blistering headache and his mother's odd behavior wasn't helping. He would just have to lay down the law with her.

After his company left, he found his mother cleaning up the mess from last night.

"You really need servants, Percy. Honestly, this place isn't fit for humans."

He stepped in front of her while she was in the process of emptying an ashtray.

"What are you doing here?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'm cleaning up after you."

He rubbed his throbbing temples. "I didn't mean that. I meant why you are in town?"

She continued picking things up, but didn't answer. Anger surged through him.

"Are you trying to embarrass me?"

She paused, collecting brandy and wine glasses. "Could I?" She pinned him with a pointed look.

"No. I'm an adult and head of this family."

She walked off, leaving him to follow her.

He grabbed her arm. "I said..."

She jerked free, dropping the glasses in the sink. "I heard you."

"You're overstepping your bounds. I'm the head of this family."

"Then act like it." She slammed more glasses down. "You let your brother and sisters witness your debauched behavior. Hardly the act of a good guardian." She waved her hands in indignation. "You let your unchaporaned sister leave with a known rake. Need I go on?"

"No." He folded his arms, leaning against the counter. "Last night..."

"Was one of many. I hear things, too. Your father is turning in his grave."

Percy closed his eyes. He had no doubt she spoke the truth. His father would be appalled at his behavior.

"You can't go back. All we can do is go forward."

"Excuse me?"

"Change. I want to know how you are going to take control of this family and live up to your title."

He bristled. "You have no right."

"I have every right." She finally turned around to look at him. "I may not have acted like it for a while, but I'm still your mother. I have a duty to you, Phoebe, Hugh and Maddie." She tilted her chin, daring him quarrel.

Anger rolled through him. "And you think I don't?"

"I think you know in your heart what you are supposed to do, but for some reason you are unwilling to do it."

His throat tightened. "I didn't ask for Father to die."

She put a hand on his arm, but he brushed her off, refusing to let the offer of comfort cool the fury coursing through his body.

"None of us did," she said softly. "I want you to get yourself and your life together and go retrieve your siblings."

"And if I refuse?" He arched a brow.

"You wouldn't dare," she snapped.

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

## Chapter Six

## A Few Days Later

Phoebe glanced up to find Ravensthorpe leaning against the piano intently watching her.

“You aren’t playing that right, scoot over.” He motioned with his hands.

She slid over, letting him on the bench next to her. “Want me to turn pages?”

“I don’t read music.”

His nimble fingers poured over the keys, playing her song with so much expression it surprised her. Then again, knowing Ravensthorpe, maybe not.

“I’m impressed.”

He smiled. “Thank you. My mother taught me. I wasn’t very interested until I realized that it drove my father crazy. He didn’t think it was a proper gift for a boy to have.” He winked at her as he moved on to a more upbeat piece.

“I like your mother. She reminds me a little of my own. Do you really think she can make me the darling of the season?”

He slid her a look as he began a smooth romantic tune. “Why would that surprise you? You have potential. Besides, if my Mum says she can, she can. She made my wild Yank sister-in-law acceptable. You should be no problem.”

Phoebe laughed.

They lapsed into silence as she enjoyed listening to him play. He looked younger, more at ease here. No similarity to outrageous rake she heard whispered tales of.

“Can I ask you something, Your Grace?”

“Call me Burke. Your Grace will always be my father to me.”

She blushed. “That wouldn’t be proper.”

“No, but isn’t being improper half the fun?”

No wonder women found him so charming.

“Only when we are alone.”

“Agreed. Now what did you want to know and don’t say nothing, because your eyes tell a different story.”

“I... Are the rumors about you true?”

His fingers missed a note. “Some are. Some aren’t. Most aren’t fit to discuss with an innocent young woman.”

“Have you really been with many women?”

“Yes.” The music turned dark, moody.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I like them, they like me. This is a subject I ought not discuss with you. My mother, not to mention yours, would have my head if they walked in here and heard us talking about my affairs.”

“It isn’t anymore improper than me calling you by your Christian name.”

“You have a point. I did open the door to your questions. It would be

ungentlemanly of me not to answer them, so ask away.”

She wasn’t sure where to start.

“Don’t be shy now.”

“If you enjoy women so much, then why aren’t you married?”

“I never found the right lady.”

“Oh.”

“Is my mother putting you up to this? Since my brother got married, she is bent on getting me settled down too.”

“No. I just heard things.”

He stopped playing and stared at her. “You might as well tell me what sort of things.”

She looked down at her folded hands. How could she ask him what she really wanted to know? Was he involved in the deaths of his father, Earl Norcott, Earl Holbrooke?

He caught her chin, forcing her to look up at him “What is this all about? I promise you that despite what you’ve heard, you and your siblings are safe here with me.”

“I’m not worried.” Well, a little.

Burke blinked, wondering if he heard her right.

“I’ve never seen you be unkind to anyone, even my brother, who I might add, richly deserved it. I was just wondering why you let people think you are a wastrel.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond. No one had ever bothered to look beyond the surface that he showed to the world.

“What makes you think I’m not? I did pretend to be dead and let my twin brother assume my responsibilities.”

“There must have been a reason.”

*Other than the fact that I’m worthless at being a duke.*

“Why do you say that?” He began playing a dark, soul- searching piece.

She put her hand on his arm. “You didn’t have to help us. You could have walked away or worse yet, stayed at Percy’s party. But you didn’t. You’ve been patient with Maddie’s non-stop talking. You treat Hugh like an adult and you have yet to seduce me.”

She said the last part so softly that if he hadn’t been listening carefully, he wouldn’t have heard her.

“Are you hurt or happy that I haven’t tried to seduce you?”

Her lips twitched into a slow smile. “I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

He tucked a loose strand of curls behind her ear. “Me either. You would tempt a saint, my dear, of which I’m not.”

“Then why?” she whispered.

“Because you’re too special for someone like me.” *And I need an heiress.*

He began playing a rowdy drinking song. She just stared, wondering why he thought so.

\* \* \* \*

Percy unfolded his newspaper, leaning back in the heavy leather chair. Maybe at his club, he’d find some peace. Lord knows he wasn’t getting any at home since his mother had taken up residence.

"Are you ready to talk? We are both reasonably sober." Neville dropped into the chair beside him.

Bloody bleeding hell. His hope of relaxing went out the window. Would he have to return to the country to get out of this bloody mess?

He tried to ignore Neville, but the infuriating man kept clearing his throat. With an angry motion, he folded up his newspaper.

"I'm listening," he snapped.

"Our patron ended his need for our services. This is your fault and I want to know what the hell you're going to do about it." Neville glared at him.

"How the hell is this my fault? I held the parties. Invited everyone I know. I even provided entertainment. What more could he want?"

"Keep your voice down. You're attracting attention." Neville glanced around nervously at some of the gents peeking over the tops of their newspapers. "All I know is that our deal is off," he whispered. "Now, I'm...." He waved a frustrated hand. "We're out the money and I'm out Phoebe."

"Having my sister married to a duke might be a good thing. The connections...."

He grabbed Atwood's shirt. "I don't give a rat's ass about your connections. You screwed this up. Now fix it or I want my money back."

He released him, letting him fall back in his chair.

Atwood groaned as Neville stormed off. This was bloody great. Damn Phoebe and Mother. He couldn't pay Neville back. What the bloody hell was he going to do? He slammed his newspaper down.

Going home seemed like a good idea. At least there, he could have a bloody drink.

\* \* \* \*

Burke ran his hand through his hair in frustration, staring down at the ledger on his desk. He wished to hell that he was better at this. He could add in his head all day, but numbers and words on paper were difficult for him to cipher. It took all his focus and still it was a struggle. How was he going to get his family out of their financial situation if he couldn't pinpoint what the problem was?

"Burke." His mother poked her head in the door. "Sorry to bother you, but I was just checking to see if we were still going to Weatherford's ball tonight."

He rolled his stiff shoulders. "As far as I know."

"Good. You should see our new dresses. Phoebe looks like an angel -- a tempting angel."

Now, that was an image he didn't need floating around his head. He had been trying not to think about how close he had come to kissing her this afternoon. Sister. That's what she was and what she must stay in his mind, because she needed a respectable husband and he needed an heiress.

"Are you all right?" His mother stepped into the room and shut the door.

*Just what he needed.*

"I'm just busy."

Her look said she didn't believe him and for a long moment she just stood there watching him.

"Then I'll leave you to it. Phoebe and I have a fitting, so we're off. Maddie is taking a nap and Hugh is reading. We'll be back for tea. I'm having cook fix those



cookies you like.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Bloody wonderful. “Have a good time.”

Burke’s head fell to the desk when his mother closed the door. He could hardly afford to pay the staff. How was he going to afford dresses? He had been selling off horses, but he was going to run out of those soon. He had to find a way to earn extra income before his mother ran through all of it.

\* \* \* \*

“I’m not going.” Percy tossed down his napkin. His head was pounding. Mother had caught him before he could even get his drink. He wasn’t going to be ordered to a ball like a lad in short pants.

“Of course you are. I need to resume my place in society and you need to get on the road to recovering your reputation.” His mother sipped her tea. “Besides, this will be your sister’s first party as Ravensthorpe’s betrothed. We need to give her our support and show everyone that we approve of her upcoming marriage. This discussion is over.”

Percy rolled his eyes. He wished there was more than tea in the cup. Damn his mother for making him feel like a school boy. What she would do if he behaved the way he felt tonight? Would Angela be there? How would his mother react if he flirted with Angela in public? Give up and go home. One could only hope. That thought almost made him smile.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in the gilded entryway, Burke couldn’t help but take a second glance at Phoebe as he offered her his arm to enter the ballroom. She was pretty before, but he had to hand it to his mother, tonight she was gorgeous.

“Is something wrong? You’re staring,” Phoebe said.

Burke grinned as Phoebe fussed with the pearls in her hair.

“You are breathtaking in that dress.”

His mother glowed at the praise.

“I’ll give you credit, Mum. You picked out perfect dresses for the both of you. I’ll be the envy of all the men walking in with two of the most beautiful women in all of London.”

“You’re making me blush.” Phoebe swatted his arm.

Had no one ever told her how pretty she was? He was stunned how sincerely embarrassed she was at his compliment. Her innocence made him want to carry her off before the ton had a chance to get their jaded claws into her.

“Are you ready?” He offered her his arm again.

“Honestly, no. My brother made such a muck of things last time that I’m worried about what everyone will say.”

“They won’t dare say anything,” Meredith said.

Not to her face, but behind her back was another story. He knew all too well how cruel people to be. He fought the urge to go with her fear and leave.

“Trust me,” he said softly. “They’ll be talking more about me than you. As a wise woman once told me ‘hold your head up high and after a few dances it will be old news’.”

She smiled at his reference to her comments at their last ball. “But what if Percy comes?” she whispered.

“I doubt he will, but if he does, I’ll handle it.”

She squeezed his arm, sending a shiver of awareness through him. He had thought himself too jaded to have a simple gesture like that arouse him.

"I'm not sure why you are so nice to me, but thank you."

"It's my pleasure." He only hoped she wouldn't regret being seen with him before the night was over.

Burke enjoyed watching the different expressions pass over Phoebe's face. He knew she was soaking it all in, something he had long ago given up doing. To be that excited again. He wasn't sure he had ever been that young.

People around them were whispering and he knew he had better move her into the crush before the vultures could circle.

"Let's start with some easy conversations. Do you know the new Earl Holbrooke and his wife?"

"No."

He leaned closer, so only she could hear. "Holbrooke is someone you can depend on if you can't find me. He is one tough character. He used to be a federal marshal in America, but now, to the shock of the ton, he practices medicine with my cousin, Cameron Stewart. Holbrooke inherited his title when his grandfather and father died a couple of years ago. They live next to my house in the country."

She nodded.

He realized his mistake as soon as he saw his mother stiffen next Phoebe. He may have just made the first blunder of the evening.

Meredith's whole body tensed. Surely her son didn't intend to put her on the spot like this. What was he thinking?

"Mrs. Stewart. Ravensthorpe." Holbrooke nodded a greeting.

That deep drawl made her want to run. How could Burke do this? Holbrooke had some gall, approaching her like this in public. In private it had been one thing, but here, no, it was beyond the pale. She had always imagined cutting him if they ever crossed paths, but with Burke pulling her towards them retreat was impossible. It would cause an even bigger scandal. So she gritted her teeth, squared her shoulders and smiled at her late husband's illegitimate eldest son.

She almost gasped when she saw him. Reed Townsend, Earl Holbrooke looked so much like her late husband that it almost hurt.

Determined to end the tense silence, Burke stepped beside his mother. "Evening, Holbrooke. Lady Eve. I would like to introduce you to Lady Phoebe Wolcott. She is Marquis Atwood's younger sister."

Phoebe wished she understood the tension surrounding this couple and Ravensthorpe's mother. Up until they stepped near the Holbrookes, the Dowager Duchess had been warm and friendly. Now, her eyes and smile were like ice.

Lady Eve was a dark-haired beauty, who looked to be between her and Ravensthorpe's ages. Her husband was a mountain of a man, who had an odd resemblance to Ravensthorpe.

Lady Eve smiled. "Nice to meet you. Reed." She nudged her husband. "Why don't you ask Lady Phoebe to dance?"

"It would be my pleasure." Holbrooke offered Phoebe his arm.

Burke fought the urge to grab her out of his arms. The other women in his life all had husbands. It never bothered him when they danced with other men, so why did

watching Phoebe with someone else make him so crazy? Maybe it was the knowledge that she could never be his.

"It is bad form to drag your mother over to talk to us. She should initiate any contact," Eve said, bringing his gaze back to them.

His mother relaxed some at Eve's words, making him wonder how he could have been so blind to her feelings.

"I'm sorry for that, Your Grace," Eve said gently.

"It's all right, dear." His mother sighed. "I have to get used to seeing Holbrooke. All dressed up your husband looks so much like my Brandon."

Burke rolled his eyes. "This is all in your head."

"Men don't understand these things." Eve gave him a pointed look. "Go get us a drink, while we compose ourselves."

\* \* \* \*

"Thank you for asking me to dance, Earl Holbrooke," Phoebe said.

He chuckled, pulling her in his arms. "Why don't you call me Reed? I'm still not comfortable with all this title business."

She blushed deep red. "Oh, I couldn't. That wouldn't be proper."

He chuckled. "Nobody ever called me proper. I won't tell if you don't."

"Agreed." She nodded.

"Are you a friend of the Stewarts?"

"Not exactly. Burke - uh- Duke Ravensthorpe took pity on me and my siblings and is watching out for us. He is going to find me a suitable husband."

Reed didn't answer. Why hadn't Burke snapped up this beauty for himself, instead of feeding her to the wolves?

"Are you related to the Stewarts?"

Earl Holbrooke tensed, making Phoebe wish she could take back her question.

"No. My sister, Daphne is married to Ravensthorpe's brother, Barclay."

"Oh." That didn't explain why he looked like Burke or why the Dowager Duchess was obviously uncomfortable with him.

"Do you know everyone here?" he asked.

She glanced up to meet his gaze. "Actually, I know no one, except Ravensthorpe and his mother."

What happened to some of the men she had danced with the other night?

As the music stopped, Reed took her arm. "I know someone else you should meet."

She followed him through the crowd to a stately older couple.

"Earl Stratten, Countess Stratten, this is Lady Phoebe Walcott."

Countess Stratten had silver hair, yet still looked young. Her husband was a balding gentleman with a white mustache.

"I knew your father," Stratten said. "I learned of his passing when I returned from Scotland. He was a fine man."

"Thank you."

"May I have this dance?"

The sound of Percy's voice made her jump. What was he doing here? She couldn't refuse her brother and not make a scene.

"Of course." She smiled at him with more warmth than she felt. "Will you

excuse us?"

"Are you enjoying your new life?" Percy spoke loud enough to be heard over the music.

How could she answer that without starting a fight? Considering how calm he was, she wondered what, if anything, he remembered from that night. That angered her. Didn't he even care that she was flirting with ruin by living at Ravensthorpe's house? Fury made her bold.

"I'm surprised you even noticed we were gone," she snapped. "Did you miss us?"

He lifted a careless shoulder. "Why should I when you are safe and planning your wedding?"

That statement made her miss a step. How could he have made light of her current situation? She must have heard him wrong. "What?" She shouted above the music.

Before she could protest, he had whisked her outside.

"That's better. I never did like raising my voice to be heard over the music. I guess you'll enjoy having a higher rank and lord it over me. Will I have to call you 'Your Grace'?"

"Why would you do that?" Why was he teasing her like this?

"Because it is the formal address of a duchess." He gave her a playful nudge. "Didn't Mother teach you the protocol of peerage?"

"I know all that, but I still don't understand your question. I'm not going to be a duchess."

Percy's face darkened. "The bastard," he spat. "I thought when he marched into my house he had a special license."

Phoebe bristled. "He never promised any such thing. He merely said he'd take care of me."

"I'll kill him." Percy's face was red with anger.

Phoebe caught his arm, but he brushed her off, knocking her into Ravensthorpe, who had miraculously appeared at her side and was now reassuringly squeezing her shoulders.

"I'll take care of this," he whispered.

"You're a frigging lair," Percy spat. "I knew you were a ruthless bastard, but I never thought you'd stoop to seducing innocents. My sister deserves to be more than your mistress."

"I agree," Ravensthorpe said calmly.

Percy lunged forward, striking him in the jaw. "I'm calling you..."

"Don't say it," Charlotte stepped outside followed by the Dowager Duchess. "This is my fault."

Phoebe gasped at the sight of her mother here in public.

"Please do something before they kill each other," Phoebe pleaded, peeking out from between her fingers.

"Percy!" Charlotte snapped, but he ignored her.

"For the love of..." Meredith pushed between the two angry men. "Really, Children," she glowered at both of them, "you're drawing a crowd. This is a discussion better done in private."

"I agree," Charlotte spoke up, ringing her hands.

Percy took another swing at Ravensthorpe, who didn't move or try to stop him. Stratten grabbed Percy from behind.

"This has gone far enough," Stratten growled. "I recommend, Atwood, that you sober up and calm down. Tomorrow morning present yourself at Ravensthorpe's and we'll hash this out."

Atwood opened and closed his mouth. "So she gets to go home alone with him?"

"No," Meredith said. "I'll be going home with them, too, so they won't be alone."

"I'll go, too." Charlotte said, giving a pointed glower to Atwood.

Atwood sucked in a deep breath. "We're not through, Ravensthorpe, but I'll wait until morning. You damn well better have a plan by then or my threat holds."

Ravensthorpe nodded his agreement.

"Now, all of you back inside." Stratten motioned with his arms. "We need to create a united front or the gossips will go wild."

Without a word, they all headed inside. Stratten caught Burke's arm as he tried to pass and gave him a pointed look that made him want to squirm. "I suggest you cool your temper and decide what you are going to do before morning. Whether that was your intention or not, the girl is ruined. It is up to you to make this right. Do you understand me?"

Burke nodded, his throat too tight to speak.

\* \* \* \*

Burke stared up at the stars, wondering if he could go back to being dead. How the hell did his good deed get so far out of control? He wanted to help Phoebe, not marry her. He didn't want to imagine having her witness the embarrassment of him going broke.

"Burke?"

He closed his eyes, trying to calm his mounting temper at the sound of his mother's voice behind him.

"I hadn't intended for things to work out his way." She stepped in front of him.

He wanted to walk around her, heaven help him, he wanted to leave this battle. The look on her face told him she wanted to fight. Even his scowl hadn't sent her away.

Burke took a deep breath and gave her what she was itching for. "Don't lie. You planned this..." He waved a frustrated hand in the air. "To trap me into doing what you wanted me to do."

She violently shook her head.

"You thought you knew what was best for all of us. You always do."

"Not always," she said softly, her eyes filling up with tears.

Tears. Oh great, she didn't want to fight fair. Tears usually worked with him, but not this time. She had pushed his patience past its limits. He held up a hand as she opened her mouth. "Don't put on an act with me. You planned everything. Even stooping to getting Phoebe's mother out of hiding. Well, you got the result you wanted. I hope you jolly well enjoy it. I hope to bloody hell Phoebe will be happy. Because I'm not sure my soul can take ruining one more person's life."

## Chapter Seven

Phoebe paced outside the door of Ravensthorpe's study, wishing Percy and Burke would talk louder, so she could hear what they were saying through the door. It was unsettling to know that her brother and Ravensthorpe were deciding her fate without her.

She jumped when the door crashed opened. Ravensthorpe poked his head out. "Good, I'm glad you're here. Do come in."

She squared her shoulders and brush past him, regal as a princess. Both men looked serious as Ravensthorpe shut the door.

"He's agreed to marry you," Atwood said without preamble. "This time we are very clear on that."

Unwelcome tears formed in her eyes. She had always hoped Ravensthorpe would grow to like her and possibly offer for her, but she didn't want him like this. A marriage that started out under these conditions could only end in unhappiness.

"I won't." She tilted her chin up defiantly.

"You will and you'll bloody well like it." Percy shook her, but she broke free.

"You can't make me." She turned, running from the room with her vision blurred by tears.

"To hell I can't!" Percy yelled after her.

Burke grabbed his arm as he attempted to go after her. "She is my responsibility. I'll handle it."

"You deserve her." Atwood jerked his arm free. He stopped, arms braced on either side of the doorframe, head down. Sighing, he turned slowly to face Ravensthorpe. "You know I'll have your balls if you hurt her in any way."

Burke only nodded. Funny, he felt comforted that at least Percy had enough brotherly instincts to make the threat.

\* \* \* \*

Burke heard Phoebe crying as he came to the door of her room. Maddie and Hugh were standing outside. They both looked worried. Hugh was trying to pick the lock.

"Why did you make Phoebe cry?" Maddie glared at him.

"I didn't mean to." Burke held out his hand for the lock pick and opened the door with ease.

They both stared at him.

"Don't ask. Let me talk to her alone."

Hugh nodded, dragging Maddie away.

He walked in, shutting the door silently behind him.

"Go away." Her voice was muffled by the tears and the fact that she was face down on the bed.

Without a word, he sat down beside her. His hand trembled as he reached out to tentatively stroke her back. "Would it be so awful to be married to me?"

She didn't answer, just sobbed. Maybe he had mistaken her feelings for him.

He cleared his throat. "You'd find me a permissive husband. You'd have more freedom as a married woman. You could go riding whenever you wanted."

Her sobs stopped and she hiccupped.

"Think about it. You wouldn't have to be under Percy's thumb."

"But you--don't want me." Her voice shook.

"I never said that."

She rolled over to face him. Her face was all red and eyes swollen. The affect made her look much younger than her age. A fact that made Burke feel all the more guilty for forcing her into marriage.

"Yes, you did. You said you wouldn't marry me."

He brushed back a lock of damp curls. "I said I shouldn't marry you. There is a big difference. But that is a moot point now, because we will be married. I think a wedding would be preferable to running off to Gretna Green. I'll make Percy walk you down the aisle. Our mothers and Countess Stratten can outfit you and we'll send Percy the bill."

She giggled nervously.

Relief poured over him. "So you aren't going to jump out the window?"

She shook her head. "But." Sniffle. "I have one more question."

"Ask away."

"Are you planning to keep a mistress?"

Her bluntness took him back. Although considering his reputation, he should have expected the question.

"Because if you are, I want you to know that I don't share well. Ask my siblings if you don't believe me. So if you think I'll sit meekly home in the country while you and your mistress go to the opera, then forget it."

"I see." Burke almost laughed at her serious expression.

"I won't be a meek, obedient wife."

"I never thought you would be. If I understand you right, you're telling me that if I want a mistress and a wife, then I should choose another wife."

She nodded.

"What if I told you that I've never had a mistress?"

She just stared at him.

"Since you are worried about it, I'm assuming you want to share my bed."

"I do," she said softly.

"I'm relieved to hear that. Let me add that I don't share well, either, so I'll keep you too busy to take a lover."

He wanted to hug her when she blushed. "Good. Now that we have that clear it is only right that I ask you properly. Come here." He patted the edge of the bed next to him.

She moved toward him slowly, eyeing him warily. When she finally got close enough, he took her small hands in his.

Clearing his throat, he tried to meet her gaze directly. "I'm a little nervous, because I've never proposed before."

"Really?" Her eyes widen.

He smiled. "Really. I don't want you to tell our children that I didn't ask you."

Phoebe's heart skipped a beat. Their children. She was really going to marry this

handsome man.

"Phoebe Walcott, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? I promise to take care of you and if need be, your siblings. I know it is a little too late to ask, but will you?"

She nodded, her throat too clogged with tears to answer.

He smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out an emerald and diamond ring. "This is yours. I wanted you to have one of your own. Not one from the collection of family jewels in the vault. I hope you like it. It reminded me of the dress you wore the night we met." He took her hand, sliding it on her finger.

"I didn't expect you to do this."

"That's why I wanted to. I better let your siblings in before they think I've killed you." He stood, heading for the door.

"Burke?" She twisted the ring nervously on her finger.

He froze with his hand on the door knob. "Yes."

"What made you decide you should marry me?"

"Nothing. You don't deserve me, but I will endeavor to see that you don't regret marrying me more than you already do."

\* \* \* \*

"How did you get in here?" Angela folded her arms across her chest, glaring at Percy, who lay sprawled out on her bed like a big cat.

"Through the window. I didn't feel up to the game of whether you'd see me or not. I know you're miffed, but I need a friend."

Angela sighed, closing the door. That was the problem; she had trouble staying mad at him. He looked so innocent lying back against the light blue velvet headboard and pink pillows with his arms behind his head.

"You take too much for granted, Percy. Just expecting me to be at you're beck and call."

"Isn't that what mistresses are for?" He grinned, wiggling his blond brows.

That did it. He'd crossed the line. "I'm not your mistress. I'm your lover. There is a big difference. Mistress implies that you own me, which you don't. I decide when and if."

His smile vanished as he moved to the edge of the bed. He sat there for a long moment, holding on the sides of the mattress with his head down. When he looked up, his expression was remote.

"You're right, I shouldn't have come here." He rose, heading for the window.

"Wait."

He froze, straddling the window sill. He glanced at her, but didn't respond.

"I didn't mean to insult you. I feel defensive right now. This whole situation of being caught by your mother made me question our relationship."

"And?"

"There is no and. You know how I feel about marriage."

Percy sighed, swinging his foot back into the room to sit on the window sill.

"Why does this...?" He waved his arms almost losing his balance, catching himself on the sides. He pulled himself in and stood. "Why does this have to be so complicated?"

"It just does." She backed away as he started towards her. She put out a hand, pressing it against the solid wall of his chest. He stopped, although they both knew he



didn't have to. He was both taller and stronger than her. He could take her down anytime he wanted and there was nothing she could do about it.

Percy saw the trepidation in her eyes and felt the tension in her body. He cursed her late husband for putting it there. Although he never laid a hand on her, nor would he, she still feared him. He'd been to her townhouse on many occasions, but never to her bed there. She came to him or not at all. It was an unspoken rule between them. One he vowed to change, but accepted for now.

He raised his hands, backing away. "I didn't come here to fight. I was just feeling old. Giving one's younger sister away will do that."

"Then Phoebe is marrying Ravensthorpe?"

"Yes. Next week and I'm giving her away. I want you to be there."

She shook her head. "That wouldn't be proper."

He sighed, heading for the window. "I get tired of caring what people think. Maybe Ravensthorpe had the right idea. I think I'll disappear and let Hugh have the title. Then he can be flipping good all the time."

She moved over to the window as he put his feet in the trellis. "And what would I do?"

"Come with me and find out."

She laughed despite herself. And gave him a quick kiss.

"You're breaking my heart, lass," he whispered, but didn't deepen the kiss. Instead, he dropped down to the ground.

She leaned against the frame, watching him go. Little did he know, it was breaking hers, too. He needed a full woman and a respectable wife. Both of which she was not.

"Oh, Percy," she whispered, hands pressed to her lips. "What are we going to do?"

\* \* \* \*

It felt good to be back on British soil. Shifting his sleeping son higher in his arms, Barclay stepped on the dock, staring across the town he'd once considered home.

"Have you decided what to do now that we are here?" Daphne cooed to her daughter to sooth her back to sleep. It had been a long trip and both children were cranky and tired. She rested her head against Barclay's shoulder.

"Get a room, lay low and wait."

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Then you aren't going to announce our presence here?"

"What would be the fun in that? Besides, Burke would never let me help him if he knew I was here. So my only option is to find out what is going on and help him before he realizes I've done anything. That way he is in too deep to reject my services."

"Sounds like you borrowed his plan. I don't understand why you two can't just talk like normal siblings."

He turned to her, arching a dark brow. "You and Reed communicate so well. Is that what you're telling me?"

She snorted. "He orders and I refuse. Now that he is an earl he is really bossy. But we aren't talking about me and my brother. You conveniently changed the subject."

"I'm not changing the subject, I'm avoiding it, because we can't stay there," Barclay whispered harshly over his sleeping son's head.

"We can't stay in a rooming house with two active children for any length of

time. Besides, my brother is an ex-federal marshal. If anyone knows how to find out what is going on, it's Reed."

"I can't involve any more people in this. It will only embarrass Burke more."

"Oh, and you poking around in his life won't."

Barclay sighed. How could he explain it to her?

"My brother is going to put the pieces together you know. He saved your life, remember?"

How could he forget? Justin had given him a cure for his headaches that could have been deadly. He kept upping the dosage of the powder until it got harder and harder to wake up. Reed, being a doctor, knew what it was and what to do. His brother had saved him, too, in his own way. Burke had kept his secret by posing as him when he was incapacitated. He fooled everyone; even Daphne.

Barclay knew it was his time to return the favor. He owed it to his brother to keep this as quiet as Burke did during his problems. Burke took the blame and for once Barclay let him. His guilt wasn't letting Burke keep the score uneven.

"I'm not sure this is a conversation we should be having in public."

"Fine," Daphne said as the coach pulled up. "We'll fight in the carriage on the way."

Barclay ground his teeth. He loved his wife, but dammit she could be so infuriating sometimes, especially when she thought she was right.

"Besides," she said with a toss of her head, "you're quibbling over this to avoid the real issue."

"And what is that?" Barclay asked, although heaven help him, he already knew her answer.

She shot him that look. "Why you and Burke feel the need to constantly try to outwit each other."

Barclay handed his son, Edward, up into the coach, laying him gently on the seat. Then he took Amelia so that his wife could climb up. He paid the carrier to put their bags in the coach. When he climbed in, he was thankful his children were still sleeping peacefully snuggled up next to their mother.

After the coach began to move he finally spoke. "Blame my father. He put a wedge between us. He made Burke defensive all the time."

"Oh, and you aren't." She shook her head.

Barclay sighed. Her comment had hit its mark. "I never doubted my ability to handle things. I stepped in too much for Burke while we were growing up. I'll admit that. Father loved to rub his nose in the fact that he let me handle the important matters. He made it clear that I should have been the heir."

"So why didn't he disown him? Burke wouldn't have minded, I'm sure."

"That's just it. Father never meant it. He told me so one night after he'd been drinking. Father thought by pushing Burke that he'd grow into the title. Instead, he ran from it."

"So now, you are once again going to rescue him. How do you think that will make Burke feel?"

"Like I don't think he can handle the situation," Barclay said quietly.

"So once again you are dancing to your father's tune. Why can't you just leave Burke alone?"

“Because I created this mess.”

“No, your father did and by rushing in you will once again prove that Burke is unworthy of the title. Maybe your father isn’t the only one who liked this game.”

Barclay stared out the window, not answering. Was his wife right? Did he think Burke unworthy or incapable of fulfilling the role he was born for? Was that why he always rushed in to save him?

Even the comfortable warmth of Daphne’s hand didn’t warm the icy dread rushing through his veins. Was their father still pulling the strings?

\* \* \* \*

The next day

Phoebe glanced up to meet her mother’s tearful eyes in the mirror.

“Do you really like it?” Phoebe swirled around to give her mother the full effect of the dress. “Lady Meredith talked me into this style. She’ll be right back. She went to the sewing room with Madame Regina to get pins.”

“I know. I caught her in the hallway and told her to give us a few minutes. I need to talk to you.” She put her hands on Phoebe’s cheeks. “When Percy finally came home he told me you were marrying Ravensthorpe. I just wanted to make sure that was what you wanted.”

Phoebe dropped her eyes. “I don’t have any choice.”

Her mother tilted up her chin. “We always have choices. If that isn’t what you want, I’ll take you back to the country with me and let the scandal die down.”

“Oh, Mama.” She threw herself into her mother’s arms. “I messed things up. Percy wanted me to marry Baron Neville. I didn’t want to...”

“There, there.” Her mother soothed, stroking her back.

*It felt so good to be back in her arms again.*

“Take a deep breath and tell me everything. How did Ravensthorpe get involved? I want the truth. Did he compromise you?”

“No.” She pulled away, swiping the back of her hand across her eyes. “He tried to help me. Now, he is paying for being kind to me.”

“Ravensthorpe is a grown man. He doesn’t have to *do* anything. He obviously wants to marry you.”

“I wished I could believe you.”

Mother pulled her close. “I let you down. All of you. I’m so sorry. I let my grief and anger over your father’s lingering illness and death blind me to your needs. I should never have allowed Percy to take you off to town by himself.”

Phoebe pulled away, wiping her eyes. It was good to have her mother back.

“Percy needs money, Mama.”

“I know, sweetie. Don’t worry about him. I want to talk about your situation. You never answered my question. Do you really want to marry Ravensthorpe?”

“I like him, but I’m worried. He is so worldly. Do you think he could be happy with someone like me?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out.”

Phoebe stared at her mother as understanding dawned on her. “No!” She shook her head.

“Yes, dear. I need to speak with Ravensthorpe. At this point I don’t trust Percy’s

judgment.”

She nodded her understanding. She didn’t, either.

“Trust me, sweetie. This time I won’t fail you.”

\* \* \*

Charlotte paused, taking a deep breath before she knocked on Ravensthorpe’s study.

“It’s open,” came a deep voice.

Straightening her shoulders for battle, Charlotte turned the knob. Ravensthorpe was at his desk with his coat off, sleeves rolled up, revealing strong forearms dusted with dark hair. He looked like he had run frustrated fingers through his dark hair. He jumped to his feet in surprise when he saw her.

“Lady Charlotte. I thought it was Hugh coming to borrow another book. I didn’t realize you were here.”

“I spoke with Phoebe upstairs and got a peek at her wedding gown. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“As sure as I’ll ever be.” He motioned to the large leather chair. “Please sit. I can order tea if you’d like.”

“No thanks.”

Burke leaned nervously back on the edge of the desk, staring at Countess Atwood. She was a gracefully older version of Phoebe. He had no idea what to say to her. This was the first time he had faced a woman’s parent.

“I’ll get right to the point, Your Grace. Why are you marrying Phoebe?”

The question surprised him, although he knew it shouldn’t. “I didn’t compromise her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No.” She waved a dismissive hand. “I never thought that.”

He couldn’t hide his shock. Most people thought the worst of him. “I was trying to help her, but instead I made things worse. Marriage seemed the only respectable option left.”

“So you care for my daughter?”

If she was looking for declarations of love, she would be sorely disappointed. He wasn’t sure he knew what love was.

“I like her,” he said slowly. “She is bright and interesting to talk to.” He ran a hand over his face. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m not in love with her, but then neither are most of the ton couples that get married.”

“I didn’t expect love. That takes time. You hardly know each other. I want...” She rung her hands. “I know it is common practice to have a wife and a mistress, but please be discreet.”

“I’ve never kept a mistress. With a vivacious wife like Phoebe, I’m hardly likely to start now.” Not that he could afford to keep a wife and a mistress even if he wanted to. He could barely afford the ring he bought with the remaining money from Barclay.

“I’ll take Maddie, Hugh, and Phoebe home with me. She’ll stay at our house until the wedding. That will quiet the wagging tongues.”

Burke nodded. He knew they had to go, but he’d miss them none the less. “It will be quiet around here.”

She laughed. “After having Maddie for a couple of days I’m sure there isn’t anything about our family you don’t know. I’m surprised you still want in our family.”

“Maddie is a delight. I had forgotten how life looked through the eyes of a child.” He stood. “I’m glad you came by.”

“I haven’t been much of a mother lately, but that is all going to change.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond to that. She was watching him too intently for comfort.

“If I thought for one minute you’d hurt Phoebe I wouldn’t agree to this match. You know, despite all his ranting and raving, Percy wouldn’t either.”

“I know,” he said softly. Somehow, he had just gotten accepted. He just hoped he didn’t let them down too.

He would never admit that he was more nervous about getting married than anything else he’d ever done.

## Chapter Eight

The church was filled to the brim. It seemed everyone in London wanted to be there to see if Duke Ravensthorpe actually went through with it. Burke chuckled. At least this time the gossip about him would be good. No one could say they weren't married.

As the music started, he could see Percy bringing his bride down the long aisle. Phoebe's mother must have had a hand in Percy's appearance, because he looked like a gentleman rather than a disheveled rake. Phoebe floated like an angel.

His stomach tightened as she got closer. She blinked at him under her veil, looking as nervous as he felt. He wanted to grab her hand and bolt, but instead took it and squeezed reassuringly.

"You're beautiful," he mouthed, enjoying her blush.

The ceremony was a blur as she held on to him for dear life. But her voice didn't falter when she said her vows. His didn't either, which surprised him.

The room got quiet and it took a moment to realize everyone was staring at him.

"Kiss her," his cousin, Cameron whispered, "and let's be done with it."

He tried to keep his hands from trembling as he lifted Phoebe's veil. It wasn't his first kiss, but he damned if he didn't feel like an untried lad. She lifted her chin, staring up at him expectantly. He tucked a finger under her chin and bent to kiss her. He meant a gentle brush of lips, but her mouth was so soft and sweet under his that he found himself wanting to taste her fully.

She stiffened and he pulled back, realizing just where they were as Cameron cleared his throat. He wasn't sure what to read into her expression as they turned to face the crowd. It would be his luck to bloody well scare his bride off.

\* \* \* \*

This day was getting better by the minute. Percy couldn't help but smile when he saw Angela across the crowded room. He had been good all morning. This was the diversion he needed. Just to add spice to the situation, he made sure his mother was watching as he made his way toward Angela.

"I thought you weren't coming." He drew her into his arms for a dance before she could refuse.

"I wasn't, but your mother insisted."

"What?" As he swirled her around, he caught sight of his mother trying not to smile. Damn, leave it to her to suck the fun out everything.

"We really shouldn't be dancing. It isn't proper, you know."

"Why? Only the two of us know what we do behind closed doors in the dark," he whispered huskily, pulling her close, letting her know just what he meant.

"Really!" She wiggled to make him loosen his hold. "Don't you care what other people think?"

"Why should I?"

His mother frowned as she watched them dance and that amused him.

Unfortunately, Angela's gray eyes followed his.

"I'm not a toy to annoy your mother with. I know she thinks she can wave her magic wand and make me respectable, but she can't."

"I'm not sure I'd want her to. I like you the way you are."

Her eyes chilled. She ripped free of his embrace and stalked off, leaving him alone on the dance floor. Bloody, bleeding hell, what did he say this time?

\* \* \* \*

"I think things are going rather nicely," Meredith said, making Charlotte look away from the scene between Percy and Angela.

"Yes," she mumbled, not really listening.

"I must say Percy looks quite dashing. Charlotte?" Meredith tapped her on the shoulder. "Are you following me? I get the feeling you're distracted."

"I'm sorry. I was just watching my son make an ass of himself."

Meredith coughed. "So I guessed right. You're trying to match him up with Baroness Angela Layton. Do you really think that is proper? She is his mistress after all."

"That was my original observation of the situation, but then I spoke with her. I get the feeling she isn't as bad as she wants everyone to believe. She married Hatfield too early and him dying in a duel was quite a blow. I think she may be like our sons, not quite what she seems."

"Meddling is such fun. Speaking of which, I see Viscount Etheridge heading this way. He has been staring at you all afternoon."

"Really, Merry." Charlotte thumped Meredith with her fingers. "I don't need a man in my life."

"Uh huh."

"Hello, ladies." He smiled at them. "It's good to see you back in town, Lady Charlotte."

Meredith flashed her a look that made her want to create a scene by hitting her. Good gracious, the gel was pushy.

"I'm going to see about some refreshments." Meredith winked as the wicked woman sauntered off, leaving her with Viscount Etheridge.

It took all of Charlotte's will power not to run after Meredith. How could she leave her alone with this man? She of all people knew how close they'd once been. How he had teased and talked to her during her first season, but never asked her to dance. Instead, he stood by watching her with those big sad, brown eyes. She had danced with Prescott to make Etheridge jealous.

Sparks had flown between her and Prescott and they'd married before the end of the season. Etheridge had married a quiet girl named Judith. When his wife and daughter died during birth, she had tried in the beginning to help. Then Prescott grew ill.

Now, here they were, two lost souls, trying to make their way without their spouses.

Etheridge shifted nervously before boldly meeting her gaze. "Your daughter looks marvelous. It seems like just yesterday Prescott bought her one of my ponies."

His deep voice jolted her back to reality. Say something. "Yes. Time flies."

"It is hard to get back in society alone. Judith handled all the invitations and chose the best balls to attend."

She nodded. "That was my role, too. I would have been content to stay in the country, but my children are getting older and needed to be brought out into society."

"My daughter, Alexandra, had her season last year. She married Viscount Stoneridge. He is a good husband and I know they are happy, but I sure miss her."

"I'm lucky that I have Hugh and Maggie still at home. Although, Hugh should be off at school."

"Then Maggie has a few seasons to wait before she can come out?"

"She is only eight."

He nodded. "Will you stay for the whole season now that Phoebe is settled?"

"I haven't decided."

"If you do then maybe we could spend some time together." His tone sounded hopeful, but his eyes remained steady.

She stiffened. "I don't think that would be proper. I'm barely out of mourning."

He moved quickly to block off her path of escape. "I know how hard it is to lose someone. I thought I'd never recover from losing Judith and our baby." He sighed.

"Look, I don't do this lightly, but I'm asking you to the opera."

She worried her lower lip. "I don't think I'm ready. You've had more time to adjust to being alone."

He nodded his understanding. "Just know that I'm here if you need a friend. It can be lonely being the only parent."

He walked off, leaving her fluttering her fan to cool her hot face.

"What did he want?" Meredith slipped up beside her, handing her a drink.

"He wants to take me to the opera."

"Oh, really." Meredith raised her dark brows. "And what did you say?"

"What do you think I said? I'm hardly ready to be out in society. I can't imagine being with another man."

"Wouldn't it be nice to have someone to lean on?"

"Yes, but..." Charlotte took the last sip of the sticky punch and placed her glass down on the table. Hands on hips, she turned to Meredith. "Then why aren't you seeing someone?"

"I'm too busy."

"Meddling in your children's affairs."

"You should know."

"At least mine are young enough to need me meddling."

Meredith laughed. "I deserved that. I'm not sure what I'll do now that all this is settled. I do so hate sitting back and being the Dowager Duchess."

"It will be odd to give my power over when Percy marries. Of course, until then he may need my advice."

Meredith smiled. "So we meddle."

"Isn't that what we are supposed to do?"

They both laughed, taking another glass of punch from the maid that walked past them.

\* \* \* \*

Lord Justice stepped into the shadows, watching the wedding dance. It rankled him that he was forced to lurk there, when he should be mixing with his peers. How he hated the Stewarts. It was their fault he was hiding in the shadows like an animal.



From his vantage point, he could see Burke taking glimpses of his lovely bride. She was so sweet and innocent. Not what he'd expected Burke to marry. Not that he'd ever expected him to marry. From their years at school, he knew that Burke's scars ran deep. Almost as deep as his. That was one of the reasons it had been so easy to strike up a friendship with him.

Burke had been harder to hate than his brother, Barclay, who was cold, aloof, and always the perfectionist. It was easy to imagine killing Barclay. Wanting him to suffer had been a grand dream that ended up being a nightmare when Barclay's wife and mother had foiled his plot.

After his escape from Newgate, he considered leaving it there. But visions of his mother's fragile body wouldn't let him. The Fearless Four had ruined his life. He'd ruin theirs or die trying.

It didn't matter that players were aligned differently, he could still set up a win. All he needed was a revised plan.

He slipped out of the room, smiling. The challenge of it all pulsed through his veins. He could see the end game now and was confident this time he would win.

\* \* \*

"You got my sister, now aren't you going to bloody well dance with her?" Percy taunted.

Burke frowned at him. "I was letting her mingle. I know once I get her in my arms I won't want to let her go."

"How bleeding romantic. I hope you'll remember tonight that Phoebe is an untried girl and not one of your ladyloves."

Burke flinched at Percy's crude words. "I'm well aware of that. I have every intention of treating her gently."

"See that you do. If she comes home to me in the morning, I'm calling you out. I've been itching for a fight all night."

Before he could reply, Percy stalked off, leaving him watching Phoebe. Who was he kidding? He knew nothing about being a husband. How does one treat a wife? Different from one's mistress he supposed, but then he had never had one of those, either.

Great, now here was Hugh heading toward him like a man on a mission.

"Are you and Phoebe going to be okay alone tonight?" Hugh asked sort of out of breath and slightly red-faced. "Phoebe seems a little nervous."

Good gad, even Hugh thought he was going to ravish her. So much for changing his reputation.

"We'll be fine. I'll bring Phoebe over tomorrow, so you can see for yourself that I didn't kill her."

Hugh tried to grin. "Tommy Sands said I should have a brotherly talk with you. About what, I'm not sure. Is this it?"

Burke contained his urge to laugh, because he didn't want to embarrass the lad, who was trying so hard to protect his older sister.

"You did a great job. Now, I think it is high time I danced with my wife."

Phoebe felt Burke's presence beside her even before he spoke. Whenever he was around she tingled. Would he ever stop making her nervous?

"Are you having a good time?" He pulled her into his arms as the music started.

"Wonderful. Are you?"

"Except for the part where every male member of your family thinks I'm going to ravish you, yes."

"Well, aren't you?"

He missed a step as she looked up at him with her eyes twinkling with merriment.

"No, I..."

Phoebe realized with a jolt that Burke was just as nervous as she was. That knowledge sent a rush of warmth through her body.

"Are you daring to tease me?"

"I grew up with brothers. Teasing is second nature."

He laughed, pulling her tight to him. "The nice thing about being married is that we can dance as close as we want."

He was close all right. Too close. She could hear the steady rhythm of his heart beat under her ear. His warm hand burned through the back of her dress.

"I'm ready to go home whenever you want," he whispered. His warm breath tickling her cheek.

*Go.* Her heart jumped. *Home.* To his house. To their bed. The thought was both exciting and frightening all at the same time. Her mother had told her to relax, that Burke was experienced and he would know what to do. But that was the problem. He might be disappointed in her.

"You're being awfully quiet," he whispered against her temple. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No." The music stopped. This was it. How could she tell him how scared she was? He would think she was a baby.

"I'm ready to leave." Her voice sounded surprisingly steady.

"Good." He brushed a kiss on the top of her forehead. "I'll order the carriage."

Would anyone notice if she fled? Phoebe tried to smile as she made her way through the crowd, following her husband. *Her husband.* Merciful heaven, tonight was her wedding night. Her mother's talk had made her more apprehensive. Before that she hadn't given much thought to what happened after the wedding. Now, she'd find out.

## Chapter Nine

He couldn't remember being this nervous about anything in his whole life. Burke paced outside the door between his room and Phoebe's. *His wife*. The thought sent a shiver through him. What did he know about virgins? He had never been anyone's first choice for anything, except for the order of his birth. He wanted it to be good for her so she wouldn't seek satisfaction elsewhere.

The irony wasn't lost on him. That he was nervous about making love to his own wife when he hadn't been concerned at all about making love to other men's wives. Burke ran a hand over his face. Here he was on his wedding night feeling sorry for the blokes whose wives he bedded. He wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign.

He had to stop thinking about this. Had it been long enough for her to get ready? He didn't want her to feel rushed. On the other hand, he didn't want her to have enough time to start worrying. Did women worry? If his friends knew they'd laugh at how jittery he felt. He was one of the biggest rakes in London and yet felt like an untried lad. This was it. He took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in."

Sweet mother, he wanted to pretend he hadn't heard her. But instead, he pushed open the door.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, standing as he entered. He mentally thanked whoever picked out the soft mint green gown she wore. It clung to her like a second skin, showing off all her heavenly curves. His body tightened. She was so beautiful and she was all his.

Phoebe squeezed her hands nervously together. What did he expect her to do? Should she stand or be on the bed? Her mother hadn't given her exact instructions. Only that she should trust Ravensthorpe.

He smiled at her as he closed the door. Why did he suddenly seem so much larger in the black satin dressing robe? She swallowed hard.

"There now, luv. It's going to be okay." He stepped closer, but didn't touch her.

That sent a shiver of anticipation up her spine. She hoped he didn't notice her shaking.

"We'll take this slow," he whispered gently.

She nodded, because she couldn't force words out of her dry throat.

Gad, she looked terrified. If he said boo, she'd run. Burke forced a smile and gently cupped her cheek. "We don't have to do anything tonight."

"We don't?" That comment confused her. Was he trying to get out of their marriage already?

"Don't you want to?" *Was that her voice croaking?*

"Of course I want you." He stroked his thumb down her cheek, making her shiver. "It is just that I know it has been a long day for you. If you'd rather...."

She closed her eyes, gathering courage. "I'd rather not wait. I'd rather get this over with."

His expression turned serious and she wondered if she had angered him. He was quiet for a long moment, but kept stroking her face.

"I don't know what you've been told, but I don't expect you to give me something that you aren't ready to give."

"That's not what I meant. I'm just nervous and I don't want to wait any longer to find out what happens between married couples."

He slowly grinned. "Did your mother talk to you?"

"She said you'd know what to do and that I should follow you."

"Good advice, except that I've never been married either, so how about we teach each other?"

Phoebe nodded.

He slid his thumbs under her chin, tilting it upwards. "Have you ever been kissed? Really kissed?"

"Only by you at our wedding."

A sense of fierce protectiveness ripped through Burke at her answer.

"Have you?" She blushed. "That was a stupid question. Of course you've kissed women."

He brushed a thumb over her lips. "That was my past. You are my future. Tonight it is you and only you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. I like kissing and I will endeavor to see that you like it, too."

His mouth covered hers.

If this was a kiss, she wanted more. His lips brushed, coaxed and teased hers, making her whole body tingle. Before she could think any further, he scooped her up in his arms and dropped down in a chair with her across his lap. His kisses melted her bones. His hands gently slid over her, burning a trail through her nightgown.

Burke couldn't believe how lucky he was to have this warm, responsive woman in his arms. As he lifted his head, she stared up at him, so trusting. What did she expect from her wedding night? He wasn't sure, but he knew other women had been unhappy with theirs. So he fought the desire to pull off her clothes and sink into her. Tonight would be about getting to know each other.

\* \* \* \*

Angela briskly brushed her hair until a hand caught hers, taking the brush.

"Let me do that. Did I ever tell you how much I love your dark hair, especially when it cascades over us when we make love," Percy whispered huskily, his eyes meeting hers in the mirror. "And your exotic gray eyes that change color with your mood. Let's see what color I can turn them tonight. I need you, Angel."

She shivered at the promise in his voice. "You shouldn't be here." Her voice sounded as unsteady as she felt.

"I know, but that's what makes it so much fun."

Drat him. She couldn't give in to her desire and maintain her resolve. She stood, taking a deep breath and turned, holding out her hand for him to give her the brush.

Percy sighed, recognizing that mulish expression. He gave her the brush. What the bloody hell had he done this time?

She rose, moving a safe distance from him, which didn't bode well for this situation.

"I've decided our relationship is over," she said without preamble.

"What?" Percy stepped back, totally stunned by her statement. "Why?"

She pulled the dressing gown tight around her. "It just is. I think you'd better leave."

He had no response. No usual glib retort. All he could do was watch her standing there, arms folded, grim-faced.

"Not until you explain it to me."

She took a deep breath. "I realized after talking to your mother that all I've done is to help you avoid your family responsibilities."

He threw his hands up. "So this is my mother's doing? I might have known." He stalked off to the window.

She grabbed his arm. "Wait. Yelling at her won't change my mind."

"No." He jerked free. "But it will make me feel better. I thought we were friends."

"We are. That's why I'm letting you go. I'm not what you need."

"How can you say that when I don't even know what I need?" As he came closer she put up a restraining hand.

"If you are holding out for marriage...."

The word hung heavy between them.

"I'm not," she said softly. "I've told you I never want to get married and I meant it."

"So this is it?" He held up his hands in frustration. "We're done?"

She nodded. Her eyes filling with tears.

In one smooth movement, Percy swung his leg over the window sill and dropped into the darkness. He stepped into the shadows, but glanced back up at her window. Gad, he needed a drink and he needed to yell at his mother. He just wasn't sure at this moment which one he needed more.

\* \* \* \*

Barclay gently shut the door to their hotel room when he noticed the twins were sleeping soundly in their bed.

"Sorry it took so long." He shrugged out of his coat, dropping it on the rocking chair. Checking on the sleeping twins he made his way over to the bed. He brushed a kiss across Daphne's temple as she lay reading. "Did they give you any trouble going down for a nap?"

Sliding the marker in the latest Eccentric Earl book, she smiled up at him. "No. The little dears were all worn out from our ride in the park. They were asleep before I even finished the story."

"Good," he whispered, dropping down on the bed beside her.

"You look worried. What is wrong? And don't say nothing. The intense look in your eyes tells a different story."

He laughed, laying down beside her, pulling her into his arms. "You know me too well." He held her for a long moment before letting out a harsh breath. "My brother got married."

Daphne's eyes widened. "To who?"

"The late Marquis Atwood's oldest daughter."

"Do you know them?"

“Not very well. Her brother Percy or should I say Atwood is a year or so younger than us and had the face of an angel. Women loved Percy. Together he and Burke broke many hearts. I never knew the younger ones. Their father grew ill and died around the same time ours did.”

Barclay rolled abruptly away from her and stood. He began pacing back around the room.

Daphne sighed, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. “Maybe you were wrong about Burke being in trouble,” she said calmly. “I suggest we go home and give him time to adjust to married life.”

Barclay stopped pacing and frowned. “And not see our families at all while we are here? I thought you wanted to stay with your brother.”

“I did. I do. But you wanted to stay out of sight and spy on Burke. Do you have any idea how hard it is not to attract attention with two active children?”

He didn’t reply, just started pacing again. After a long moment he paused, running a tired hand over his face. “I’m just not sure what to do now.”

“Did you get the answers you came here for?”

“Yes and no. I found out part of what is going on with Burke, but now I have more questions. How could he marry like that without telling us?”

She shrugged. “Burke is impulsive.”

He shot her a sideways glance. “Not about something this important. Believe me, it would take an act of God to get my brother to marry.”

“God or your mother?”

Barclay snorted. “You have a point. Her hand might be in this. Miss Walcott is from a good family and all, but...”

“Maybe he fell in love.”

Barclay shook his head.

“You did.”

“Eventually I did, but that wasn’t the reason I married you.”

“I know. You wanted to keep me from finding out the truth about our fathers’ misdeeds.”

“I wanted to keep you safe from the curse of the Fearless Four.”

Daphne frowned. “Was the late Marquis Atwood a member of the Fearless Four?”

“He knew them. I’m sure they were the same age, but I don’t think he and our fathers were close friends. The late Atwood was into fox hunting among other things. He raised and trained hunting dogs. He was a quiet sort of man. Not given to adventures. He rarely came to town for the season. But then he was ill for some time. From what I heard he ended up in a wheel chair and over the course of a number years wasted away.”

“How sad for their family. Maybe if Burke knew her brother, he somehow knew her and had a normal attraction to her.”

Barclay shook his head. “I wish I could believe that. I just have this nagging feeling that something isn’t right.”

Daphne stood, putting a hand on his tense arm. “Burke didn’t ask for us to come.”

“I know, but...”

"You have to meddle."

"He is my brother."

"He is a grown man with responsibilities. Who, I might add, seems to be taking them seriously."

Could he let go and just leave like that? Barclay tipped his head back and let out a slow, deep breath. "I can't shake the feeling that he needs me," he said softly.

"Yes, but does he want you?"

That was the big question. One he already knew the answer to and didn't like it one bit. Surely, Daphne was wrong. There had to be a way to help Burke without hurting him. Or was there?

"If you insist on staying then we are going to my brother's house tomorrow."

"No."

"Yes. We can't keep two busy children here anymore. They need to run and play."

"But how am I going to keep this quiet with our families involved?"

"That is your problem." She folded her arms defiantly over her chest. "Just remember." She wiggled her brows. "If we are at Reed's then the twins will have their own bedroom and we won't have to be quiet."

Barclay didn't bother to answer. He just pulled her tight and kissed her hard.

\* \* \* \*

Percy slammed the front door to their townhouse, making the sound reverberate through the house.

"We're in the parlor." His mother's voice echoed over the noise.

He groaned. "We" implied his siblings were up. That was just bloody great. They'd have an audience.

As he stalked into the room, his mother paused with her sewing needle in her hand, glancing innocently up at him. Hugh was reading the latest Eccentric Earl book out loud to a wide-eyed Maddie, who was curled up next to him on the sofa. Seeing them together should have cooled some of his anger, but it didn't.

"Mother, I want you to accompany me to my study."

She stood stiffly, putting the needlework down and followed him.

Hugh only paused for a moment to look up at him and then began reading again. Maddie didn't seem to notice what was going on. She was too involved in the story. Good, maybe that would keep them from eavesdropping. One could only hope.

He jerked the door to his study open, ushering his mother inside with a wave of his hand.

She turned to glare at him as he shut the door less loudly than he would have liked.

"I really don't think it is appropriate for you to summon me to your study like this."

Percy squared his shoulders for battle. "Would you rather have me air my dirty linens in front of my siblings?"

She colored slightly, which he knew should have made him back down, but instead made him all the more upset.

"You miscalculated with your meddling. I'm no closer to finding a wife. In fact, thanks to you, the only woman I have ever even considered marrying doesn't want

anything to do with me.”

“I see.” She dropped down into a chair. “So Angela broke things off.”

He began to pace. “She thinks that is best for both of us.” He stopped in front of her. “How the hell is that best? What did you say to her? The truth.”

She squeezed her hands tight together. “Nothing really. We discussed being widows. I never brought up her reputation. I guess I did mention that you were having trouble assuming the responsibilities of your title. Maybe that scared her off.”

He began pacing again. “Why would that worry her? She knows what I’ve been up to. Hell, she has been there with me. She was fine with all of it until marriage got thrown into the mix.”

“Stop pacing, dear, you’re making me dizzy. Then you wanted her for more than your mistress?”

“Yes.” Unable to stand still, he kept walking back and forth.

“Does she feel the same way?”

“No. She doesn’t want to get married. Claims she doesn’t want to be tied down to one man. Although, I don’t think she has been with another since we began our affair.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I can’t believe I’m discussing this with my mother.”

“That’s what I’m here for to give you a woman’s opinion. What do you know about her late husband?”

He stopped, turning to look at her. “That he died in a duel.”

“Can you imagine how embarrassing that would be to have your spouse die that way? I mean having everyone know he had been with another. Perhaps, she sees your relationship ending the same way.”

“But I’m not like that. Angela is the only woman I’ve ever been with.”

That surprised her. But then again, knowing the tender-heartedness beneath the bluster, maybe not.

“Does she know that you’ve been faithful to her? That she has been your only?”

“Of course not. One doesn’t talk about one’s experiences. I can’t believe I told you.” He dropped down into the chair beside her.

She smiled, patting his hand. “Your secret is safe with me.” She paused for a long moment, looking away from him.

“I suspect she sees your behavior as reminiscent of her late husband’s.”

He opened his mouth to comment, but she held up a hand.

“Hear me out. It may not be the womanizing that worries her as much as the wild parties. If you were married, she might not be included in those. Think about it.”

Percy had no response. He’d never looked at it from that viewpoint.

Her brows furrowed. “There is something else you should know.” She paused, frowning. “I think there was a darker side to her marriage.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think she was mistreated.”

His head snapped up. He had wondered this himself, but hearing someone else say it made the possibility frighteningly more real. The thought of someone hurting Angela made his fists clench.

“How do you know this? I wasn’t aware you knew each other.”



"All I know is the whispers. Most of which were about the duel. Some said that the late Baron Hatfield had quite a temper. It wasn't the first duel he had fought. Countess Norcott took in a maid once that he had beaten up."

"You think he hurt Angela?"

"It's possible. That may explain her skittish behavior. You'll have to ask her."

He doubted she'd tell him. She never mentioned her late husband.

"I recommend you give her some time. Then court her properly. Show her you are serious about marriage, if indeed you are."

Was he? Marriage had been the last nail in coffin that would make him like his father. Could he go back to his wild days without Angela or go forward to what he didn't know?

\* \* \* \*

"I thought I told you to wash the sheets," the housekeeper snapped.

"But they didn't need washing," the younger maid whispered.

"How can that be? Last night was His Grace's wedding night."

The younger maid shrugged.

Phoebe stepped back out of the kitchen, not sure what to make of that conversation.

"Spying?"

She jumped at the sound of Burke's voice.

"You learn the best gossip from the maids. Find out anything interesting?"

She put a hand over her heart. He had scared the life out her. She straightened her shoulders. "That was improper of me. I'm sorry."

Burke's grin vanished and he watched her carefully.

Phoebe trembled under his intense gaze. She cleared her throat. "Did you need something?"

Burke couldn't figure out why she was suddenly so nervous around him. Last night she had slept nestled in his arms. He'd lay there wishing he'd given in to his temptation to take her. When she told him it was better than she expected, he'd known she thought the touching and kissing they'd done was all there was to making love. Now, how was he going to explain to her there was more? The irony of the fact he had yet to make love to his wife wasn't lost on him.

She continued to eye him warily.

"Is there something wrong?"

"No."

He wasn't sure he believed her.

"Your mother is here with Maddie. They are in the parlor."

"Thank you."

She moved around him like a skittish colt. What had she heard? Burke fought the urge to barge in and demand answers from the servants. Being mistress of the big house was hard enough without her feeling ill at ease around them.

Maybe she would feel more comfortable in the country where there would be less people watching them. Heaven knows, he didn't enjoy the stiffness of the social season. Even more so since he quit drinking and gambling. It was hard to avoid being handed a drink. Just the thought made a shiver run up his spine. Maybe they needed a change.

## Chapter Ten

“Hello, dear.” Her mother greeted her with a hug. “I hope we didn’t arrive too early.”

“Mama and I’ve been talking about you all morning.”

“Maddie.” Charlotte gave her stern look.

“Well, we were,” Maddie mumbled.

Phoebe suppressed a laugh.

“Did you have a good night?” Her mother went on as if Maddie hadn’t spoken.

How could she answer that with Maddie standing there? She had some questions for her mother, including the one for the conversation she overheard, but she would have to wait until they were alone for that.

“It is different being married.”

“I agree,” Burke said from the doorway. “Rather like playing house. We just have to adjust to each other.”

He came up beside her, slipping an arm around her shoulder and brushing a kiss on the top of her head. “I’ve ordered tea and cookies to be served in the sunroom.”

A rush of pleasure rolled over her at his touch.

Maddie’s eyes lit up. “Lemon ones?”

He smiled, tweaking her nose. “Of course.”

“Then let’s go eat.” Maddie bounced off, leaving their mother to trail after her.

As Phoebe started toward the door, Burke caught her arm. “Are you sure everything is all right?”

What should she tell him? She didn’t even know what to ask. Phoebe swallowed hard, nodding. “I’m just nervous about having my first guests, is all.”

His gaze swept over hers for a moment before he offered her his arm. “Then let me help. I’m good at making conversation.”

As they walked into the sunroom, her mother was making Maddie put some of the cookies heaped on her plate back on the serving dish. Maddie was frowning and very reluctantly doing so.

She noticed when Burke sat down, he gave Maddie a wink and slipped her one of his cookies.

Her mother gave a nervous cough. “Lovely day.”

When did it get to be so hard to talk to her family?

“Yes,” Burke piped up to fill the silence. “When the weather is this warm it makes me long for the country. I was considering heading out to my seat this week.”

Alone in the country with Burke. She wished Burke wouldn’t keep staring at her. He was making her nervous. What was she going to do alone with him without her family around?

\* \* \* \*

“My lady.”

Angela looked up from her writing.

“You have a caller.” Rebecca handed her the card.

Her hand shook when she took it. Marquis Atwood. What was she going to say to Percy? Why was he here at her front door instead of crawling through the window as he usually did?

Percy fidgeted with the flowers. It had taken everything in him to come to the door and knock. What if she refused to see him?

“Lord Atwood.”

Angela came toward him all proper in demeanor. This didn’t bode well for him.

“This is a surprise.” She lowered her voice. “What are you doing here?”

He held out the roses before he dropped them. “I’m here to court you properly. I don’t know whose permission I need ask, but tell me and I will.”

She stared at the red and white roses. Never had she expected this. She just assumed he would move on to someone else.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Then we are even, because neither do I.”

She buried her nose in the flowers. “Thank you. They are beautiful.”

“I think I remember you telling me that roses were your favorite.”

“That’s right.”

She shifted nervously, staring down at the flowers.

If he was going to get through this he had better do it now before she kicked him out.

“I’m sorry if I offended you, Lady Angela. I would like to start over.”

She frowned. “How can we pretend what happened between us never did?”

“I wish I knew. I’ll keep those nights of pleasure in my dreams forever. But starting now, my intentions are honorable. The next time you come to my bed it will be as my wife.”

“Then there won’t be a next time for I have told you that I have no intention of marrying again.”

“Not to me or anyone?”

She handed him the flowers. “This conversation is over. I can’t give you what you want.”

He pushed them back to her. “Keep them. I’ll be back every day until you change your mind.”

“Then you will be wasting your time.”

He shrugged more nonchalantly than he felt. “It will be my time to waste.”

\* \* \* \*

“Don’t you think we should have warned Reed and Eve we were coming?” Barclay asked as he raised the knocker.

“What, and give you one more chance to change your mind?” Daphne teased.

Before he could reply an elderly butler pulled open the door.

“Lady Daphne. Lord Barclay.” His eyes lit up.

Edward picked that moment to wiggle free. “Down,” he groaned.

Deciding it wasn’t worth the battle that was sure to follow, Barclay set him on the ground. Luckily Reed came around the corner as Edward began to charge into the house.

“Hi, squirt.” Reed scooped up the wiggling child. “Why am I not surprised to see you and your meddling parents? Don’t you have a hug for your Uncle Reed?” He

winked at Barclay over top the wiggling child's head. "Just can't stay away, can you?"

"No more hold! Down!" Edward squealed.

Reed threw back his head and laughed. "Must take after his mother. She never wanted to be still either."

"Me-me too," Amelia chanted, squirming free from her mother's hold to run to Reed.

Barclay laughed as Reed swooped her up, tossing her in the air. She squealed with delight.

"Just what you deserve, Imp, one daredevil and one in constant motion."

Edward stopped running when he saw Amelia getting all the attention and tugged on Reed's coat. "Me too, me too."

He sat Amelia down, who bellowed with dismay as he scooped up Edward.

"I never realized that twins are twice the fun, but twice the trouble."

"That they are," Barclay said as he tossed his daughter up in the air.

"I can sure tell who they belong to, Edward looks like Daphne and Amelia has your coloring."

"Reed," Eve hollered from the doorway. "Don't tell me Emily is up...." She squeaked when she saw Daphne and flew into her arms.

Reed leaned toward Barclay as he got ready to toss a giggling Amelia in the air and whispered, "You know you'll have a hell of a lot of explaining to do when we get the children off to the nursery. I'm glad to see you, but the sudden appearance isn't your style."

"Reed," Eve playfully swatted him before taking Edward. "Don't start interrogating him. Let's get these little sweeties settled in first." She patted Edward's cheeks. "Then we'll talk."

Twenty minutes later, after the twins were settled in the nursery, Edward playing with toy soldiers and Amelia a set of dolls, the adults gathered by the fire to talk.

Barclay sat on the sofa, hands folded in his lap, watching Eve and his wife chatting away across the room. It was odd to see them so friendly with each other, when at one time Eve had seen Daphne as a rival. She had wanted to be duchess badly enough that she had been willing to trap him or Burke into marriage. Thank goodness Reed swept her off her feet. It must have worked, because they seemed happy.

Reed cleared his throat as he handed him a brandy. "I suppose you want to know what has been going on."

"That would help," Barclay remarked dryly. He took a short swallow. "Start with my brother's sudden marriage."

"I don't know too much about that. Burke has kept his distance since your mother is still trying to decide if it is acceptable to socialize with me or not."

"I thought she had let go of those concerns since I married your sister."

"In private she is friendly, but in public I get the sense she would like to cut me, but isn't sure if she dares."

Barclay shook his head, sitting the glass down on the end table. "She blames herself for cheating you out of a title."

Reed stared blankly at him. "I have a title."

"You have to understand that in her world a higher rank is all important. The fact that you look like my father reminds her of that every time she sees you. I'm sure she

thinks everyone knows her secrets.”

“I doubt that. I’m used to people staring at me. Mostly because I talk funny and blunder with English social etiquette. I try not to embarrass the Dowager Duchess, so I try to avoid parties she might be attending. That’s not always easy to do.”

“And more than likely fueling the gossip. By you two attending different functions, it draws attention to the fact that you two are uncomfortable with each other. So, of course, when you are seen together there is speculation about what will happen. That only increases the interest in your situation.”

Reed shook his head. “I never thought of that.”

“You didn’t grow up among the intrigue of the ton. I’ll talk to Mother while I’m here and help you settle this. The longer the situation goes on, the more it will heighten the speculation.”

“Let me think about it. I don’t want to hurt your mother any more than she already has been.”

Barclay nodded. “Now, back to my brother. What do you know about his wife?”

“She is young and beautiful, although beautiful is an understatement. The girl is breathtaking. Her brother inherited his title too soon and ran wild instead of shouldering the responsibilities for his family. I’m not sure how Burke got involved, but he wanted to help her. I think his plan was to find her a suitable husband.”

“And he chose himself?”

“Ironical, isn’t it? I’m not sure he intended to have her, although it was obvious to me the first time I saw them together that he was attracted to her.”

“Burke has a reputation with women, but to my knowledge no one has yet to take his heart.”

“He may have met his match, then.”

“So this marriage isn’t a bad thing?”

“He may have inherited some problems from her family, but I doubt it is anything he can’t handle. My big concern is Baron Warwick.”

Barclay stiffened. “What about him? I thought he was in prison.”

“He escaped. Rumor is that he was killed by footpads, but that is a little too convenient for me to believe. I think he is out there plotting against our families.”

“Then my premonition that Burke is trouble is valid?”

“Eve thinks I worry too much, but I think it is no coincidence that Burke has been pulled back into society or that he has become involved with a family mired in troubles.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“I’m still working on that.” He leaned down and lowered his voice. “An ex-federal Marshal friend of mine, Drew Hutton, and I have a plan to make him and Burke business partners.”

Barclay rolled his eyes. “That won’t work. Peers don’t enter into a trade.”

“Trust me, if anyone can convince Burke to risk this it will be Drew. The man blends in anywhere. He can use most any accent. His father was British. A younger son, of who, I can’t remember, who settled in America and made his fortune in banking among other things. Drew can be polished or not as the situation demands. He is very persuasive. I know we need to tread carefully here. Burke is growing more comfortable with his role and I’d hate to jeopardize that.”

He would, too. Barclay’s eyes met Daphne’s across the room. If he messed up

this time, Burke might leave him the title for good. He sure as hell didn't want that. They would have to tread carefully or else risk playing into Justin's hands.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe peered out of the carriage, staring up at the huge house. Their country estate was large, but this was twice the size. It was surrounded by breath-taking gardens. Who would have guessed that Burke lived on such a lavish estate?

"Welcome home, my love." Burke climbed down, reaching out for her. "Never fear. Even though it may seem secluded you are far from alone here. Over there, behind those flowering bushes is Stratten's estate. When they aren't in London or off to parts unknown, I'm sure Countess Stratten will be calling on you."

Phoebe smiled. It would be nice to have another woman around.

"Behind those rose bushes is Holbrooke Hall. And way at the end of the yard behind that huge grove of trees in Norcott Manor."

"I didn't realize you all lived so close."

"Marcus and I did. I didn't know of Reed's existence until he showed up a couple of years ago to claim his title. Mother's cottage is on the other side of the house. She can be here as often or as little as you want. Normally, we have tea together and sometimes dinner, but that is up to you. I'm not sure if she is remaining in London for the season or not."

*After the way he talked to her and the coldness between them, he would be surprised if she showed up here. But then again, maybe not.*

He paused, tucking a curl behind her ear. "I guess I should have asked if you wanted to stay for the rest of the season before I whisked you off. Being your first one and all that it was thoughtless of me. I'm sorry."

She blinked in surprise at the realization that he was just as nervous as she was.

"That's fine. This will give me time to adjust to me being a wife before I take on society again."

"Are you always this agreeable?"

She laughed "No. Ask Percy."

Glancing around him, she realized they had an audience. His gaze followed hers and he took her hand.

"Come. I think you need to meet everyone." He squeezed her hand, pulling her toward the crowd gathering on the front lawn.

They stepped up to an older couple first. "This is Horace, the butler and his wife, Ester. They've been running this house for as far back as I can remember. If you need anything, Ester has all the answers."

"This is my wife, Lady Phoebe."

The round, gray-haired woman blushed. "It is nice to meet you, Your Grace. You're the third bride I've settled in."

*Bride.* It hit her. This was her home.

## Chapter Eleven

Where had her husband gone? Burke had vanished after showing her to their rooms. Hers was a light, airy room done mostly in gold with a big window overlooking the garden.

His had been through the door connecting their dressing rooms, which he left open. It was dark maroon with heavy velvet drapes and a huge bed. The thought of their spending time in it made her shiver with anticipation.

Burke had kissed her after telling her to get settled. He informed her that they could sleep in which ever room she liked and promptly left.

Phoebe sat on the bed for what seemed like an hour. Settling in? What was there to settling in? Someone had put away her things. She had no idea what to do next. What had the other duchesses who graced this room done?

She stood. This was getting her no where. She needed to find Burke and figure out her responsibilities.

She headed out the door and down the hallway the way they'd come up. She paused at the top of the elaborate staircase to admire the view of the entryway. The sheer power of this house made her shiver. Did she really belong here?

She shook off any nagging doubts. Right or wrong, she was the lady of the house. She wished she'd listened more to her mother's advice on running a household.

She made her way down the stairs across the black and white marble floor to the room with its door shut. The knob turned hard in her hand. Pushing it open, she found herself in a large library with floor to ceiling bookshelves. A large dark wooden desk dominated the room. The heavy, deep green velvet drapes were shut, blocking all sunshine, making it dark and stuffy. Was this Burke's study? If so, why did it seem so deserted?

"Excuse me, Your Grace."

She turned to find the butler, Horace, if she remembered his name right, at her arm.

"Can I help you find something?"

"I was looking for my husband and wandered in here. Is this his study?"

"No, Your Grace. It was the late Duke of Ravensthorpe's. If you'll follow me, I'll help you find his Grace."

Was his voice shaking? Why did he seem to be so nervous? He had gently taken her arm and she had the distinct impression that he was pulling her out of the room. But why? Something about this room frightened and enthralled her. She fought the urge to drag her feet like she did as a child when confronted with something she didn't want to do. He ushered her out the door, pulling it shut behind them.

"There you are, luv. All settled in?" Burke came striding towards them and Horace visibly relaxed.

"I was looking for you."

"Well, you found me." He took her arm. "Come, let me show you around."

Did he want her to leave, too? Why? She glanced behind them and noticed that Horace was locking the door. That was enough. She began dragging her feet.

"Wait a minute. He is locking the door."

"I know." Burke kept a firm grip on her arm as he guided her down the hall.

"Why?"

He sighed. "Mum's orders. She likes to keep it as a shrine to my father."

The flat tone of voice told her there was more to the story.

"Does it bother you to be back here in the home you grew up in? Inheriting your father's title and role, I mean."

He ushered her into a room filled with windows and plants. "This is the sunroom."

She broke free so she could face him. "It is beautiful, but you didn't answer my question."

"About being duke?"

She nodded.

"I should never have been duke, but that doesn't change the fact that I am."

She wasn't sure why, but he seemed like a different person here. More distant, less friendly. Maybe it was the imposing feeling of the house or the realization that he was lord of this grand estate, she wasn't sure, but something made him different.

She swallowed hard. "I always knew I would get married, yet I never paid attention to my mother's lessons on running a household."

His lips quirked into a half smile. "Then we are a like. I never wanted to be bothered with the details of being a duke. I guess I never thought I'd inherit."

He had a far off look as he stared out through the window for a long moment before glancing back at her.

"I've been informed my mother is back at her cottage. I'm sure she can tell you what you need to do. She might actually enjoy having someone ask her."

She nodded; disappointed that he was probably going to leave her to her own devices.

"Are there any other secret rooms in this house?"

The oddest expression crept over her husband's face. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he went pale.

"I was joking."

"This house has a habit of overshadowing all who live here," he said in a flat tone. "I may have made a mistake bringing you here."

What an odd thing to say. She stared at him, dread creeping up her spine. Gone was the care free, teasing man she knew in London and in his place was a remote stranger.

\* \* \* \*

Angela stared at the flowers with tears trickling down her cheeks. Drat the man. Who would have thought he'd actually come to court her? Couldn't he see that she wasn't what he needed, that she could never give him what he wanted? He had brought her back to life, she owed him for that. But, despite the fact that they were the same age, she was worlds apart in experience.

Her first marriage had left her empty inside. Not only couldn't she have children, but she couldn't love.



She put the flowers up to her nose. How could she make Percy see that it was pointless?

\* \* \* \*

"I'm so glad you found my cottage." Meredith poured Phoebe some tea. "I was just debating how long to wait before coming up to visit you. I didn't want to intrude."

"That's funny. I worried about knocking on your door for the same reason. It must be odd not to be the lady of the house."

"It is a relief actually. I took back the duties when Burke regained his title and Barclay and Daphne moved to America."

Phoebe sipped her tea, unsure of how to respond.

"You don't have to be nervous around me."

"I'm not."

Meredith patted her leg. "It's only natural. I remember how shy I was around Brandon's mother. He inherited the title shortly after we were married when his father got lung fever. I was so nervous about running the house. Johanna, God rest her soul, helped me. I never got the chance to with Daphne. It will be a treat to do girl things. If you have any questions, just ask."

Phoebe sipped her tea, wondering if it would be rude to ask about the locked room. Meredith was staring so expectantly at her that it gave her courage.

She cleared her throat. "I was wondering about the locked room."

"What?" Meredith's cup rattled.

Had she made a mistake asking?

"The library. Horace ushered me out of there when I stumbled upon it this morning. Then he locked it. Burke said I should talk to you about it."

Okay, she lied. He did say she ordered it locked, though.

"Oh, he did, did he?" She put the tea cup and saucer on the table none too steadily. "What exactly did he tell you?"

"That you locked it up in memory of your late husband."

She relaxed a little. "That's true."

"Well, I was curious about reopening it. All those books." She waved her hands. "It would be a shame to keep them locked up."

Meredith was quiet for a moment before picking up and drinking her tea with a trembling hand.

"You don't really want to go in there. It is better left locked," Meredith whispered. Her face went pale. "Trust me."

\* \* \* \*

"Might I have a word with you?"

Percy turned to see Viscount Etheridge standing behind him. What was the man doing in town and here at this ungodly hour? He was in no mood to talk after Angela dismissed him. Instead of walking away like he wanted to, he met the older man's gaze.

"I'm busy this morning, but I'm sure I can spare a moment. Come inside and we'll talk."

"I'd rather not come inside. If you wouldn't mind I'd like to walk. The streets are so quiet this time of day."

A walk. Holy hell. All he wanted to do was shut himself in the study and drink.

"That would be nice." *Liar.*

"I'm not sure how to put this politely," Etheridge began.

*Get to the point, so I don't have to walk too far.*

"Don't worry about being polite with me, just say it."

Etheridge stopped, making him pause.

"I would like your permission to see your mother. Just as friends, mind you. We are both lonely and could use someone to go to the opera with and other places."

That took him by surprise. His mother attracting a suitor. Hell, why not? She was still young.

"At the Ravensthorpe's wedding dance, she said she needed time. I thought if you approved, she'd be more likely to try."

His mother going out? Now, there was an interesting idea. If she had her own love life, maybe she'd keep her nose out of his.

"Jolly good idea." Get Mother out of his hair and all. "Why don't you come back to my house with me?"

"I'd rather not. I have to take this slow. She needs to adjust to the idea."

To be dashed with slow. He hated slow. Why was it women wanted you to take things slow?

"You have my permission."

Etheridge's face brightened. "Thank you." He pumped his hand.

Percy almost smiled as the man bounced off. He couldn't believe that he found himself whistling as he headed home. The look on his mother's face would be worth it.

He rounded the corner, and took the steps two at time. His mother met him at the door.

"What did Etheridge want?" she asked, arms folded across her chest.

Gad, he loved having her in the hot seat for a change.

"He wants to court you."

She rolled her eyes. "You didn't give him permission, did you?"

"I told him it was a capital idea. You need a life."

The expression on her face was priceless. Percy fought the urge to laugh. She wanted to meddle. He would show her what it felt like. No wonder she enjoyed it so much.

\* \* \* \*

Burke had forgotten how this house made him feel. Why the devil hadn't he stayed in London? He had felt more comfortable there. Although, less so, since he gave up drinking and gambling. Now, he didn't feel like he belonged anywhere.

Burke walked into the barn to find Jamie, the groom, talking to an oddly dressed man he had never seen before.

"Here he is now." Jamie smiled at him. "Mr. Hutton was just asking about you, Your Grace."

The man extended his hand. "Andrew Hutton. My friends call me Drew."

Even though this man was disarming, Burke wasn't sure he wanted to be that familiar with him yet. He took his hand anyway.

"Ravensthorpe. Do you live around here?"

If the man was taken back by the cool formality, he didn't show it.

"I rent a cottage on Holbrooke's land. I was admiring the horses in your pasture and Jamie invited me to see your stables. I hope I haven't overstepped myself. I'm still

getting use to the rules of your country.”

That explained the clothes and accent. “You’re an American?”

“Guilty. I grew up with Reed--uh, Earl Holbrooke. When I needed some time away, he invited me here to stay.”

Burke nodded. So he was a friend of Holbrooke’s. That explained his boldness.

“Are you looking to buy horses?” Heaven knows he was looking to sell some quietly.

“Actually, I have an offer to make you. Reed, a...Holbrooke told me you are the person with the connections I needed to gain access to society.”

Burke frowned. “Connections to do what?”

“I train and raise horses. I need a partner to get me in with the people here. From the look of your animals, I can tell you know horses and you know the ins of this world. I’ll pay you for your help and offer you a percentage of the horses we sell.”

Money. A business. Burke leaned back against a stall. Midnight poked his head over, nudging him for attention. He needed this opportunity, yet his mother would die to see in him trade. They had Barclay run their shipping company and pretended it wasn’t a trade. Could this work, too? Why him, though?

“I’m curious why Holbrooke didn’t accept this offer?”

“He is too busy with doctoring and running his estate. Besides he isn’t a horse person. I understand you are and that you have a way with animals.”

Burke felt his face color. Not many people knew he tended sick animals. “Come up to the house later and we’ll talk more. I have to give it some thought.”

The older man nodded and set off down the path between his and Holbrooke’s land.

“Burke.”

He turned to see Phoebe striding towards him.

“Hi, luv. What is it?”

“I just had the strangest conversation with your mother. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was trying to scare me away from this house.”

## Chapter Twelve

How could he explain to Phoebe what this place did to him? What it did to all of them.

"I warned you about marrying me." He headed off toward to house.

Phoebe frowned. That was it? That was his explanation? She hiked up her skirts and ran to catch up with him. Once she got close, she grabbed Burke's arm.

"Wait. You've been a different person since we got here. I want to know why."

Burke tipped his head skyward and was silent for so long that she feared he wouldn't answer her.

"I'm not different, Phoebe," he said softly. "You are just seeing me for what I am. I warned you that I was not a good husband for you."

He pulled away from her and she let him go. Hands on hips, she watched Burke stalk off toward the house.

\* \* \* \*

"About time you came for a visit." Meredith stirred her tea, giving Burke a pointed look.

Burke rolled his eyes as he dropped down on the flowered sofa in his mother's cottage. "It isn't a visit," he muttered. "More like a summons."

"Don't be dramatic, dear." After a taking a sip of tea, she added another cube of sugar. "Would you like a cup?"

He shook his head. "Is this about the room?"

She froze with her cup half way to her lips. *Good, he rattled her.* She put the cup down without taking a drink.

"Phoebe told you about that?"

"She wants to know why the room is locked. I have nothing to tell her."

He rose, standing over by the window. "I know you want me to settle in here as lord and make a life like you had, but I'm not sure I can. This place..." He trailed off with a frustrated wave of his hand.

"Somehow we have to let go of the ghosts of the past." She came over to stand by him, patting his arm.

"I'm not sure how I can do that when you insist on keeping them locked up."

\* \* \* \*

A little girl with dark, uneven braids sat among her prized flowers. Meredith stopped short at the sight of her. She had come here to be alone after that most distressing conversation with Burke. It was odd to find someone here because most people knew this was her private garden and stayed out. She didn't recognize the girl. Where had she come from?

"Hello."

The girl jumped like a frightened rabbit and bolted behind the rose bushes and ivy. Not a very good place to hide if you didn't want to get stuck by thorns.

"Come on out, dear. I'm not mad. These trees are prickly and you might get

hurt.” She stepped carefully around the flowers to try to follow her.

“You better listen to the nice lady, Cassie. ‘Cuz I’m not coming in after you if you get lost in the tangles.”

The deep voice behind her made her jump. She turned, hands on hips to face a tall, rugged looking man standing at the edge of her garden.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say. You should be reassuring her, not threatening her. No wonder she won’t come out.”

He raised a blond brow. “And I suppose you want me tramping your garden to get my wayward daughter out.”

“Well, no.”

“I didn’t think so. Cassie, she isn’t going to hurt you. Now come out.” His tone held a command that dared no defiance.

Slowly the little girl climbed out of the bushes.

“What do you tell the lady?”

The little girl squeezed her doll, staring at the ground and didn’t answer.

Meredith’s heart melted. “That’s all right. She didn’t hurt anything.”

He ignored her comment. “Cassie.” His tone brooked no argument.

“I’m sorry,” she said so softly that Meredith could hardly hear her. Her eyes lifted to meet her father’s.

“Your pony arrived, but since you ran off I’m not sure I should let you ride it.”

“Please, Papa, Please!” She bounced up and down.

“Earl Holbrooke is at the barn helping unload horses. You can watch if you stay out of the way. I’ll be there soon.”

She nodded and took off.

“Cassie didn’t have to apologize.”

“Yes, she did. I’ve told her this is not like home where she has free run of the place. She could have hurt your flowers.”

“But she didn’t.” Goodness knows, she was staring. The man was.... Overpowering. Large and solidly muscle. His light brown hair was a bit shaggy, but he was clean shaven. His amber eyes held hers and sent a shiver of desire through her. She was a widow with grown children for goodness sake. Men weren’t supposed to send shivers through her anymore.

“I’m Drew.” He held out a hand.

She was taken back by his informality. He obviously didn’t know who she was. That thought sent another tingle through her. Could she drop the cloak of Dowager Duchess? Did she even want to?

She swallowed hard, taking his work-roughened hand. “I’m Meredith. Do you live here?”

“I rent a cottage from Reed--ah--Earl Holbrooke. I raise and train horses. With the Duke’s help, I hope to sell them to gentry.”

Good gracious, she was ogling a horse trainer. Brandon would be rolling over in his crypt.

“I take it this is your house.” He motioned toward the rose cottage.

“Yes, I retired here after my husband died and my son inherited the title. When he married I felt one duchess in the house was enough.”

Drew stiffened. This beautiful woman was Ravensthorpe’s mother. That

knowledge should have chased him away, but somehow he couldn't let go of her hand.

"Daddy." Cassie rushed towards them. "Earl Holbrooke says I can ride my pony. Please."

"Okay. I'll be right there to watch."

She darted off.

"Nice meeting you," he said politely.

Meredith watched him walk off after his daughter. She wanted to kick herself for telling him who she was. Now, he would avoid her. Which was a good thing, wasn't it?

\* \* \* \*

"Percy!" Angela squeaked as he grabbed her from behind.

"I got your message." His lips brushed her ear. "I'm so glad you changed your mind."

Despite the tingling of her body, she wiggled free and turned to face him. "I made a mistake."

He frowned, but let her step away from him. "I don't understand."

"I didn't realize you'd consider it an invitation to my bed. I thought you'd come to the door."

He folded his arms, leaning back against the window. "And risk being turned away again? Not bloody likely. Besides your note said you needed to see me and I assumed...."

"That I'd changed my mind. I'm sorry this was a mistake."

"Then what did you want?"

"I heard some gossip that I wanted to let you in on while you were still in a position to do something about it."

"Go on."

She squeezed her hands together. "I can't believe I'm telling you this. Promise you won't go off half-cocked."

His lips quirked in a wry smile. "I'll try to control myself. What is it?"

"I heard rumblings among the servants that Ravensthorpe isn't intending to make Phoebe his full wife."

Percy frowned. "I'm not following you."

"Their marriage hasn't been consummated."

"Legendary Burke." He threw back his head and hooted with laughter. "Oh, that is rich."

She hit him. "It isn't funny. If their staff doesn't see her as their mistress, they won't respect her. Trust me. It is a position she doesn't want to be in."

"And you know this from experience?" He reached for her. "No one would ever have to doubt you're my wife."

"Percy!" She pushed against his hold. "You aren't listening."

"I am. I'll have a talk with Ravensthorpe. He wouldn't want this to get out."

"And neither would she."

"Now, back to us." He stepped forward, pulling her into his arms for a deep kiss. Heaven help her, it felt so good.

"I knew you'd come to your senses."

His words were like cold water. What was she thinking?

"No, Percy." She shoved against him, but this time he didn't let her go. "You

have to stop.”

“Why should I when this is what we both want.”

That did it. Something inside her snapped and she found the strength to break free. She stalked across the room and opened the window. “Get out.”

“But?”

“You don’t understand and I can’t explain it to you. Just leave before we say things we’ll both regret.”

Percy leaned back against the wall for support. All he could do was stare at Angela. In the past she had protested his behavior, but she had never actually thrown him out.

He took a deep breath, slowly unfolding himself from the wall.

They stood there in awkward silence, close enough to touch, but yet so far away. What if there wasn’t any way to make this right?

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe couldn’t believe her husband had dismissed her concerns like that. She clenched her fists at her side in frustration wondering what to do next. She had been walking around the better part of the afternoon letting her temper cool before confronting Burke.

Every where she had gone, she met friendly tenants who regaled her with stories of young, wild Burke or about the changes he’d implemented that allowed them to keep money to support their families. It was obvious that his tenants felt a great deal of affection for her husband. That knowledge made her all the more curious as to why he felt so unworthy to be lord here.

On her way back to the house, she discovered the barn. Never being one to pass up a chance to visit horses, she decided to see what sort of stable Burke kept.

“Hello,” she hollered, walking into the huge stone building. “Anybody in here?”

“Aye, my lady.” A huge man with red hair and beard came out of the one of the stalls, wiping his hands on his dark pants.

“Are you the new lady? I’m Jamie, head groom around here. You wanting to ride?”

“I’m Phoebe. I’m not in the mood for a ride, but do you mind if I look around?”

“Help, yourself, Your Grace.”

She wondered up the sides of the stalls, noticing many of them were empty. The ones that weren’t had horses with their heads out, watching her.

“Have you been here long, Jamie?”

“All my life. I was born here. My father and grandfather took care of the Stewart horses, too.”

“So you know my husband well?”

He paused, tossing hay into an empty stall. “Aye, since he and his brother were wee lads. They played with me boys. I taught them how to ride. His Grace loves animals. Has a way with them, he does. Never met a horse he couldna ride.”

“What was his brother like? I heard they were twins.”

“More serious. Some say he should have been duke, but I dinna agree. His Grace has a way with people. He isna afraid to get his hands dirty. He’d help anyone. I dinna understand why his father couldna see the good in him.”

She blinked. Burke’s father didn’t like him? What would that feel like? Hers

had been utterly devoted to his family.

“Why did His Grace’s father think he was bad?”

“I dinna know. It was just always so. I shouldna be telling you this. But I’m thinking His Grace still feels the sting of that. What he needs is someone to believe in him. I’m thinking you might be that person.”

She froze, staring at Jamie. Burke might need her. Maybe there was hope for them.

\* \* \* \*

Someone was knocking on the door. Why was someone here at this unseemly hour in the morning? Better yet, why didn’t anyone answer it? Charlotte realized with a jolt that there was no one to answer it. Heaven only knew where Percy was. Hugh had gone for a ride in the park. She had let Dora and Charles go off to help their daughter with the birth of her fourth child. Should she respond or just let them keep knocking? Maybe if she ignored it they’d leave.

The knocking persisted. For the love of... She ripped the door open to find herself face to face with Viscount Etheridge. He blushed.

“A good day, Lady Charlotte.”

This was awkward. If servants had been home, she would have refused to talk to him. Now, she was stuck being polite.

“Viscount Etheridge, what a surprise.”

“Your son gave me permission to call. I thought you might enjoy a ride or a stroll.”

“I really shouldn’t...”

His face dropped. “I understand.”

She sighed, hating to hurt his feelings. “How about some cakes and tea. My daughter is sleeping and I hate to leave her here all alone.”

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

Bless him. He didn’t ask why she had no one to watch her. Instead he followed her into the drawing room. She sat on the edge of the sofa. Then it hit her that they were all alone in the house, except for a sleeping Maddie, so there was no one to get the tea and cakes. The urge to throttle Percy washed over her.

Etheridge smiled. “How do you like London?”

She forced a smile. “I enjoy all the activities, but I miss my garden.”

“I miss my daily walks by the river.”

They lapsed into a nervous silence.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come. I just thought ...” He squeezed the brim of his hat. “I’m not looking for romance, Lady Charlotte. I just enjoy female companionship.”

She stiffened. “Then get a mistress.”

“Not for that.” He turned beet red. “Although, I do miss that part of marriage, too. But what I miss the most is having someone to talk to at meals and go to the theater with when I’m in town. Could we be friends?”

“But what will people think?”

“Do you care?”

“Yes. I’ve have enough scandal lately. Seems my son is making an art of it.”

“I see.” He rose. “Then I’ll leave.”

“Wait.” She stood. “Tea and cakes once in while wouldn’t hurt.”



He nodded, grinning.

"Maybe we could take in the theater. It has been so long."

"Why don't we meet there? We would attract less attention if we arrive separately. Then we'll just be friends sitting together."

She nodded.

"I'm going to go before you change your mind."

Good gracious, what had she done? It irked her that Percy would enjoy this development, or would he? It sounded well and good to think about her seeing someone, but it was different to have it happen. She almost smiled. It was his turn to worry.

"I'll see you tonight."

\* \* \* \*

Voices echoing from the room she had been directed to as Burke's study made Phoebe pause with her hand out to knock.

"If you weren't going to sleep with my sister, why did you marry her?" Percy's voice was hot with anger.

Outside the door, Phoebe put her hand over her mouth. Burke hadn't wanted her after all.

"That is none of your damn business."

"You're wrong. I would have never given Phoebe to you if I thought you weren't going to make her happy."

She jumped as the door crashed open.

"Get your things." Percy motioned with his hands. "I'm taking you home with me."

"Over my dead body you will," Burke growled.

Percy balled his hands into fists at his side. "That can bloody well be arranged."

Phoebe turned, fleeing up the stairs.

Burke swore under his breath. "Why did you wait until after we were married to develop a frigging conscience? If you'd had one earlier we wouldn't be in this situation."

Percy opened and closed his mouth.

"I'd better go talk to her." Burke turned, heading up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe was aware of Burke standing behind her in the doorway as she tossed a couple of dresses on the bed.

"That explains why the maids were gossiping about me."

He sighed, shutting the door. "You aren't leaving this house."

She stiffened, spinning around to face him. "Why not? You don't want me."

"This family has had enough gossip. I won't have my wife go back to London and add more rumors to the mill. I warned you..."

"I know, you told me what a bad husband you'd make. Seems you want to prove yourself right. Just like you proved your father right about you being bad." She pulled another dress out and tossed it on the pile.

"Pardon me."

"You heard me. For some reason you want people to hate you."

Did he? Burke bristled at the idea and yet...?

"Be that as it may, you are not leaving this house."

"And how are you going to stop me?"

Burke almost laughed at the defiant toss of her head. She was half his size, yet didn't seem to let that stop her from defying him.

"You don't walk away from things that easily."

She paused to look up at him and he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. "I do if I know I can't win."

His heart tightened. "This isn't a war, Phoebe."

She didn't answer, just looked away from him.

Burke closed his eyes and let out a harsh breath. "Take what you like and I'll have the rest sent."

He walked out without shutting the door, although he felt like slamming it. He'd never had parting with a woman hurt so much.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe collapsed onto the bed after Burke shut the door. Drat him for making her feel all turned inside out. She ran her hand over the clothes. Did she really want to leave as much as she wanted him to beg her to stay?

She lay back on the bed, staring up at the beautiful crystal light fixture dangling above her. Jamie's words kept echoing in her ears. Could she leave if Burke needed her? Did she really want to return to her family home and have to explain to her mother what happened?

A smile crept across her lips. How long would Burke and Percy wait downstairs without killing each other?

\* \* \* \*

They reminded her of couple of angry dogs circling each other. Phoebe fought back her laughter as she walked down the last step.

"You ready?" Percy snapped. "Where's your bag?"

"I'm not going."

Burke stared at her.

"I'm a married woman and this is my home. Be darn if I'll be chased out of it."

Percy muttered a curse under his breath. Burke appeared to relax.

"You heard her, Atwood. She is staying. Give my regards to your mother." He pulled open the door.

"You're sure?" Percy pinned her with hard look.

"I'm sure."

"You better be certain because I'm not coming back." He stalked through the door and turned to say more, but Burke slammed the door in his face before he could offer another comment.

He grinned at Phoebe.

"Don't get too confident, Your Grace," she said with a toss of her head, "because I expect you to show me tonight just what I've been missing and explain to me why I've been missing it."

## Chapter Thirteen

It was after midnight when Burke began getting ready for bed. He was in the process of tying his robe when the door between his and Phoebe's rooms shut. The sound made him freeze with his hands pulling the knot on his robe tight.

He turned slowly to find Phoebe leaning against it, arms folded, chin up, daring him to make a move. She had on a clingy pink gown that left little to the imagination. He almost swallowed his tongue.

"Were you planning on coming to my room or were you hoping I'd fall asleep?"

"I was..."

"What?" She moved away from the door towards him, ready for battle.

"Stalling." He couldn't believe he said that. What had he been waiting for? He was hard and throbbing.

"Why? Don't you want me?"

Burke swallowed hard. She was obviously not experienced enough to notice his condition. That thought did nothing to cool his desire for her. "I want you more than you know." Gad, he was babbling like a school boy.

"Then why? What did Percy mean this afternoon about you not making love to me?" She stopped directly in front of him.

He couldn't take the disappointed look on her face. How could he tell her?

Phoebe blinked. Burke was speechless for the first time since she had known him. Gone was the glib rake. In his place was a vulnerable man. A man she could... Phoebe swallowed hard. A man she could love.

"I know there have been other women." She knew she had made a mistake as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

His eyes changed.

"That's right. There have been countless women." He stepped towards her.

She stepped back, not liking the dangerous expression in his eyes.

"Do you want to know what I learned from them?"

"No," She croaked.

"Oh, but I'm very good."

Her heart was pounding in her ears. How could she have thought to pull the tail of the tiger and not get bit? She backed up until she was flat against the door.

He had his arms on either side of her head before she could retreat. She was caught between his hard body and the door. Heaven help her, she liked the feeling.

He lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was hot and plundering. She was fully aware of the differences in their sizes and his strength. His lips traveled to her ear and he blew. She shivered.

"Ah, luv. I've been waiting for this."

*Luv.* She recoiled. How many times had she heard him use that term? With the woman at the gaming hell. Other women he teased. He had called her that before, but it never bothered her until now. *Luv.*

Burke felt her body tense. What the hell had he done wrong? She was pushing him away.

“Stop!”

He dropped his head on top of hers with his lips pressed into her hair. Heavens, he was close. She could feel his breath and heartbeat.

“I thought this was what you wanted,” he said after a long silence. He lifted his head, but did not move away.

“It is. I mean not. I mean... Let me loose, Burke. I can’t think with you so close.”

“You’re not supposed to think. If you can, then I’m doing something wrong, Luv.”

He wiggled closer, making her all the more aware of how little either of them had on. How easy it would be to melt into his arms. She wanted to give in, but there was that word, stopping her cold.

“Don’t call me Luv.”

Burke stiffened and stepped back. At least she had his attention.

“Why shouldn’t I call you luv? That’s what you are.”

She stayed with her back pressed against the door for support, staring at him. Could he really be that obtuse?

“I most certainly am not. I’m someone you married out of duty. I’m not one of your...” She waved a frustrated hand at him. “luvs.”

He looked stunned. “I don’t have luvs plural.”

“You most certainly do. I can think of at least three women you’ve called luv.”

He didn’t respond for a long moment, just stared at her.

She turned to leave.

He softly said, “You knew what I was when you agreed to marry me. I warned you.”

That did it. She whirled around. “You love throwing that warning up in my face. It is your way of reminding me that you are this big, bad rake and I’m a dumb innocent country girl. Who I might add is the only lady in London not to sleep with you, or so my brother and apparently the servants say. So I’m not your wife.”

“And you don’t want to be my Luv.”

She flinched.

“So what do you want to be?”

“How about someone you love and cherish. But then, maybe I’m asking for too much.” She turned, throwing the door open and stalking through it, slamming it behind her. She didn’t care if the whole house heard.

\* \* \* \*

Dammit, he wished he could stop worrying about Phoebe. Percy shuffled the cards nervously. Had he made the right decision leaving her there with Ravensthorpe?

“What is your new plan?” Neville dropped down beside him.

“I’m working on it.”

“You better try harder. If the rumors are true, you won’t be welcome in the clubs much longer.”

Percy snorted. He was a Marquis. They wouldn’t really cut him off, or would they?

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay you back.”

“I’m worried about how good your word is. You promised me Phoebe. In return I promised you money and security. Now, we are both out in the cold. My patience is at an end. I want money or else.”

“Or else what?” He sounded tougher than he felt.

Neville leaned across the table, grabbing his shirt. “Don’t underestimate me. You have a family to care for. I’d hate to see anything happen to them. Do we understand each other?”

Percy pushed his hands away, picking up the deck of cards and shuffling them to hide his nervousness. “I’ll get your money.”

Neville stood, straightening his coat. “I’ll see you tonight.”

Percy sighed, tossing down the cards. He’d have to be damn lucky to win that much. The trouble was he didn’t feel lucky. Bloody, bleeding hell.

\* \* \* \*

Charlotte couldn’t believe she had agreed to this. She glanced over at Etheridge, who was intently watching the opera. What could be the harm in this? Just two lonely people enjoying a night out.

She settled back in her seat, glancing around at the crowd.

“Are you enjoying the show?” Etheridge whispered, squeezing her hand.

“Yes.” She could barely whisper back.

He smiled, patting her hand.

Across the way she spotted Olivia Hamilton peering at them through her gold opera glasses. Charlotte wanted to sink under the chair. Olivia was the biggest gossip in the entire ton. By tomorrow all of London would know she sat with Etheridge at the opera and that he, gulp, held her hand. Merciful heaven, what had she done?

\* \* \* \*

He hated sitting in the cheap seats. He couldn’t see a bloody thing.

Cursing his fate, Justin stood, glancing longingly up at the box his family owned, but he could no longer claim.

There in the box next to his old one he noticed Viscount Etheridge sitting mighty close to Lady Charlotte. He wondered if her children knew she was out on the prowl. Would they appreciate a stepfather of a lower rank?

He smiled as he lost himself in the crowd. He’d file that tidbit of knowledge away. Who knows when it might be useful?

\* \* \* \*

His wife had slammed the bedroom door on him. Burke didn’t know whether to laugh or yell. He now understood how men made such a muddle of their marriages. He’d been so smug in his belief that he’d have known how to treat a wife. And now here he was, staring at the door between him and Phoebe. What the hell should he do?

The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on him. He guessed no man truly knew how to be a husband. He never dreamed she would want him to love her. Nobody had ever wanted that from him. To the other women he’d been with, he’d been an amusement or more often than not an act of revenge against their unfaithful husbands.

Phoebe wanted his love. Burke closed his eyes. Did he have it to give?

He lifted his hand and knocked.

“Go away!” Phoebe shouted.

"I'd rather not."

Silence.

"I could sing or recite poetry, but I'd rather come in and talk."

"We already have."

"Not really. Not honestly. Give me another chance. Unlock the door."

"It's open," she said softly.

He twisted the brass knob and walked inside, gently closing it behind him. She stood arms folded, back to him, staring out the window at the dark gardens.

He cleared his throat. "First off, I didn't marry you out of duty. Your brother would have been happy to find you another, better husband. Besides, as anyone will tell you, I never do things against my will. I could care less about my reputation." *That was hardly the truth, but if he kept saying it often enough, he might come to believe that it didn't hurt that people always thought the worst of him.*

She turned, her eyes sparking. "Then, why did you marry me?"

"Because I liked you. You have spirit and charm. And you aren't afraid to stand up to me."

She raised a hand. "Don't flatter me."

"I'm not. I never planned to marry. I figured Barclay should have been duke, so I'd pass the title on to him."

"Is that why you won't sleep with me? Because you don't want to have children?"

"No," he said hoarsely. "It isn't that I won't touch you. I'm just nervous."

"But you're...?"

"Experienced. In some ways, yes. But I've never been anyone's first choice for anything. I know you were aware of my reputation and I didn't want to disappoint you."

*Disappoint her.* Phoebe almost dropped her jaw.

"I don't expect... I don't have expectations. I mean..." she swallowed hard. "I just thought we'd..." She waved her hands in place of words. "That we'd do what married couples do."

The corners of his mouth lifted in a half smile. "And what is that?"

"Burke!"

"Sorry. I'm teasing. I'm sorry people gossiped about you, about us. That was never my intent to embarrass you."

"What exactly were your intentions? To not have... to not share my bed? Which isn't exactly true, because we have slept together. I'm not sure what we didn't exactly do." She dropped her face into her hands. "I'm so confused."

"Shush." His arms were around her. "It will be all right."

"Really?" she croaked.

"Really. Can we start over?"

"I'd like that." It felt so nice to be wrapped in his arms. "But first you have to tell me what we didn't do."

"How about I show you? I'm much better at that. We have way too many clothes on. Have you ever imagined being together skin to skin with nothing between us? I have," he whispered, sliding the gown off her shoulders in one smooth move, making her skin burn under the gentle brush of his fingertips.

"I want to touch all of you." His hands skimmed a hot trail down her back to rest

at her hips.

“Can I touch you?” Her voice was a breathy whisper.

“Of course. That is one of great things about being married to a rake, or should I say reformed rake. Nothing is off limits. Just undo the belt on my robe and I’m all yours.”

She gave a nervous laugh, lifting her head to gaze up at him. “You may regret this.”

“Never.”

Her trembling fingers undid the black satin belt. She slid her hands inside, relishing the warmth of his solid chest.

“Take it off if you dare.”

As she pushed the robe off over his shoulders, he pulled her close, making her acutely aware of his hard body. He was sleekly muscled with dark hair on his chest that arched down across his flat stomach to... oh my gosh. Her gaze flew up to meet his probing one. It hit her then what they hadn’t done. She should have known from growing up in the country. Her father raised hunting dogs, for goodness sake.

“You don’t have to explain. I feel like a ninny.”

Burke framed her face, kissing her. “Forget what you think you know and relax,” he whispered against her lips as he laid her down on the bed.

She tensed. “That is why you’ve avoided doing this. Because you knew it wouldn’t work. You’re too big.” She tried to pull away, but he held her close.

“This is one of those times when you’ll have to trust me. You promised to, remember?”

She swallowed hard. “I’ll do what you want.”

Good one, Burke. Now she was lying stiff as a board.

He ran his hand down her flat stomach to tickle the hair below. “Sweetheart, I know what to do to make me fit.”

“You do?” Her voice sounded hopeful, but unsure. “Then why?”

Burke sighed, propping himself up on one elbow to look down at her. “I never realized how lonely I was until you came into my life.” He caressed her silky body while he talked. “You are like a special gift I never thought I’d get. I guess I’m greedy. I like to unwrap things slowly. That way I can enjoy them longer.”

“So you were trying to court me.” Phoebe shivered as his hand dipped down between her legs and she arched against his stroking fingers.

“I wanted to savor being married. Take it slow. We have our whole lives. We could enjoy exploring each other’s bodies. I knew you didn’t want to marry me, so I didn’t want to rush you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” She cupped the back of his head, trying to pull him down on top of her. “I wanted you. I just didn’t know how to express it.”

Burke didn’t reply. He just kissed her with all the passion he had locked away.

“You want to be mine?”

“Yes.”

He slid slowly into her welcoming heat. She was so tight and warm that he had to force himself to stop when she tensed.

“Why are stopping?” She moaned against his shoulder.

“Because....” His words were lost when she lifted her legs, bringing him deeper

inside her. Then she climaxed around him, sending Burke over the edge. He wanted to go slow, but heaven help him, he couldn't. He gave her everything he had to give.

Afterward, she held him tight, pressing kisses on his shoulder. "I can't imagine why you worried that I wouldn't like it."

For that he was grateful. He never, ever lost control. This sweet woman, hanging on to him for dear life had made him feel things no one else ever had.

"It will only get better. I promise."

"I'm counting on it."

"Do you want to see how much?"

"I trust you."

Those three words meant more to him than she could ever know. In that instant, he knew he'd never let her go.

"How naughty do you want to be?"

"As naughty as you'll let me."

He rolled her on top of him. "That's good, because being naughty is only the beginning."

\* \* \* \*

Percy leaned back against the building, swallowing a long drink of whiskey he'd bought with the last of the money. Where the bloody hell could he go? Not home. Not without money. He tipped the bottle again, wishing the fear would go away. Maybe he'd just stand here until it did.

\* \* \* \*

"You have a caller, my lady." Dora, her ladies' maid, poked her head in the study, where Charlotte sat sewing. But more often that not, staring into the fire, thinking about her evening with Etheridge and how she would handle the gossip.

"At this hour? The children are even in bed. Who is it?" She stood, folding her needlecraft and straightened her dress.

"Lord Neville. He wanted to see Marquis Atwood, but when I told him he was out, he insisted on seeing you. Charles is resting from his bad fall, but I can wake him if you want, my lady."

Charlotte waved off the idea of waking the butler. "Let him sleep. Dr. Stewart's medicine will make it hard for him to get up, anyway. I'll deal with Neville."

The weasel. She sucked in a harsh breath. What could the man possibly want that couldn't wait until morning?

"Lady Charlotte. Sorry to disturb you at this late hour." Neville entered the room like a man with mission.

"Yes. Well it is quite late. My son isn't here. Maybe this should be kept until morning."

"I saw Atwood tonight and I told him I would meet him tonight. You can't blame me for his inability to be here on time."

"No. Of course not." She moved to put the desk between them, wishing she'd invited Etheridge to stay for coffee. This large man made her nervous. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you aware that your son owes me a great deal of money?"

"Yes. I'm also aware you tried to buy my daughter."

He frowned. "I was willing to overlook the debt for a family member. But since



that didn't happen I see no reason to prolong this situation. I want my money and my ties to Atwood will be done."

"I don't understand. I was under the impression Ravensthorpe paid off your debt."

"If he gave Atwood money, I never saw any of it."

"I see." Boy, did she see. Just wait until she got her hands on Percy. Neville wasn't going to be the only one he regretted crossing.

## Chapter Fourteen

So, Neville took his recommendation to collect his money from Atwood. Interesting. Justin tossed down his cigar, grinding it under his book heel. Maybe he could use that to his advantage. He had too many players in the game.

What he needed to do was clear the board and sacrifice a piece. The question was which one? Whose life held the most value to his plan of attack and whose was expendable? Justin smiled as the various scenarios ran through his head. So many options, so little time.

\* \* \* \*

“Phoebe?”

“Hmmm?” She snuggled closer to Burke, savoring his solid warmth.

“Do you think I should go back to my room?”

Her eyes snapped open. “Why?”

“It would be the proper thing to do.”

She brushed a kiss across his shoulder. “Do you really think anyone expects us to be proper?”

His laughter rumbled under her ear.

“No. I doubt anything I’d do would shock the servants.”

He grew quiet, but kept his hand brushing up and down her spine, sending shivers of awareness through her.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

She sat up, pulling the blanket around her. She leaned against his bent leg, so she could better read his expression.

“Try to remind me how bad you are.”

He shrugged. “I am bad.”

She playfully hit his shoulder. “You aren’t getting out this conversation that easily this time.”

He propped himself up against the headboard, not seeming to care if he was naked or not. He smiled at her blush.

“You’re trying to distract me.”

“Of course,” he said, attempting to pull the blankets off her.

She grabbed them tighter. “I want to talk.”

“Now, what would be the fun in that? I can think of more interesting things to do with our mouths.”

“Burke!” She felt the heat creep up her cheeks again.

“What?” He wiggled his dark brows, sliding a hand under the covers to caress her bare leg.

“I think I’ll go back to my room. Oops. I guess we are in my room, so you’ll have to leave.”

His head snapped up, meeting her eyes directly.

Good, she finally had his attention.

"You don't want a wife. You want a live in mistress."

"What's the difference?" His hand smoothed back up her leg, coming dangerously close to her throbbing center. She tried to block out the waves of desire pulsing through her.

"A wife is your partner. Someone you share your whole life with. A mistress is .... well... a toy."

"You think men confide in their wives, my dear?"

"My father did. Didn't your parents?" She caught his questing hand.

For a moment they sat staring at each other.

Burke laughed without mirth. "Mine couldn't decide. Sometimes they led separate lives and sometimes they were lovers. Why can't we be both?"

She sighed as she let go of his hand. "I'm trying, but you keep closing me out by throwing all the other women in your life up in my face."

He frowned, pulling away from her. "There haven't been all that many women."

"Balderdash!"

He leaned back against the headboard. "I'm not going to lie and say that there weren't women before you. But I haven't been with all the ones who whisper about me."

"Then why do you let everyone think you have been with the entire ton?"

"Because I hate correcting people's assumptions about me. They think the worst, so why bother. The rumors are much more fun than the truth."

"I think deep down you enjoy your bad reputation."

"Sometimes." He grinned sheepishly. "It keeps the matching-making mamas away."

She scooted closer, putting her hand on his bare thighs. "But it keeps others away, too. You want most people to think you're a rogue. What I don't understand is why you don't let anyone see the good things you do."

"I'm no saint, sweetheart. Some of the rumors are true. I've been known to drink too much and gamble recklessly."

"Yes, but you did settle down and take your responsibilities seriously."

"Not without a fight. I wanted Barclay to be duke."

"I can't imagine you not being a duke."

He stared at her, because despite his years of training, he couldn't imagine himself actually being the duke.

"You have the attitude and bearing for it. People jump when you talk. You carry authority well and don't abuse it."

He started to talk, but she raised her hand. "I've watched you be warm and friendly to all your staff. You even call them all by name. When I wandered about your estate the other day I heard story after story about your kindness."

Burke shrugged. "Of course they said nice about me to your face. They wouldn't dare say anything else."

She straightened, staring up at him. "Their affection for you is very real. I can't believe you think otherwise. I've never seen you raise your voice or give someone reason to fear you. Be honest. What would you do if someone complained about you to me? I can't see you turning a tenant off their land for that."

He sighed. "You have a point. I'd probably just have a discussion with them

about the problem. I'd be hurt that they didn't come to me.

"I'm no saint, my dear. I do have a temper, but I'm not prone to having it snap. Barclay gets angrier faster than I do. Although, I've never known him to be unfair to anyone either. I was raised to be considerate of those under my care. My father may have been a bit of scoundrel, but he wasn't totally heartless."

"And neither are you. I heard from the maids the story about how you helped Annabelle marry the boy she loved instead of one her father had arranged for her to marry. They told me romantic details of how you politely changed her father's mind and gave the boy a job along with moving them into an empty cottage."

He shrugged. "I have soft spot for ladies in distress. I always have had an empathy for women. I guess it is because I know what it is like to be stuck in a situation that you have no control over. To have your life decided by birth, fate and society's rules."

"I've watched you dance at balls with all women, young, old, pretty and not so pretty alike. That's why I can't understand how you could go about ruining marriages without a care. It just doesn't add up."

"I try to help not ruin them."

"How? By sleeping with them when what they most need is a friend."

Burke frowned and she feared she had pushed him too far this time and that he wouldn't answer.

"My mother was set on me marrying and being settled before taking on my title. That annoyed me. My father wanted me to sew my wild oats. He even took me to brothels."

Phoebe gasped.

"Don't look so surprised. Everyone knows he had a wild streak a mile wide."

He tipped his head back and stared up at the ceiling. "I've never told anyone about this. Not even my brother. I shouldn't be telling you. It isn't fit for a woman's ears."

Phoebe squeezed his leg. Burke could see understanding, not the pity he feared in her eyes. Maybe it was time to let go of some of the memories.

"I can't explain it. Sometimes my father was like two different people. Sometimes he would whip me for not being proper enough and other times he was hauling me out to gaming hells and brothels. I soon learned there were certain rules even he wouldn't break. So I began breaking them. I went after other men's wives to anger him and horrify my mother. I wanted them to disown me."

He fell quiet, wondering how much to tell her. Instead of pulling away, she took his hand.

Burke sighed. "In my younger days, I enjoyed the chase. I got a rush from doing the forbidden. Back then, I chased after older women who were friends of my parents. I got a double sense of pleasure out of rubbing his nose in my behavior and poking their husbands, who I knew were unfaithful, because I'd witnessed their behavior.

"Later, though, I found that I could influence a situation just by flirting. What they told their husbands was their business. I just helped make the men jealous. It was a game, I guess."

"I see. So even you quit breaking the rules."

"Let's just say, I enjoyed pushing the boundaries of good behavior."

“And tormenting your mother.”

“There is that. Although, lately, I derive less and less pleasure from toying with her. She has suffered enough over the last few of years. I have always had a better relationship with her than with my father.”

“I see, so why do you still taunt her?”

“Habit, I suppose. It keeps a distance between us. I’m not used to letting people close.”

Before Phoebe could react, she was on her back with Burke braced above her.

“Have I satisfied your curiosity, little cat?”

“Maybe.”

“Then can we move on to some more pleasurable activities?”

His lips skimmed her throat where he could feel her pulse jump.

As his mouth took hers, Phoebe decided it was better to surrender to the moment. He slid slowly inside her. There was a sense of tenderness in their passion that hadn’t been there before. They made love slowly, gently. The white hot passion had given way to real emotions. In that instant, she realized that Burke was giving her more with his body than empty words could express. And greedy person that she was, she would soak up all of it.

\* \* \* \*

Justin stepped back into the shadows as Percy and his drunken entourage stumbled from the carriage.

“Enjoy your last days,” he muttered. “Your time is coming to an end.”

\* \* \* \*

The sound of singing woke Charlotte up. Her eyes flew open and she stared into the dark bedroom. “What the....?”

“Mama.” The door flew open and Maddie marched in with a blanket under one arm and a stuffed bunny under the other. “I can’t sleep. Percy’s friends are making too much noise.”

Charlotte groaned, throwing her legs over the side of the bed.

Maddie dropped down beside her. “Can I sleep with you?”

She ruffled Maddie’s hair. “You can crawl in my bed, but I’m not going to stay. I’m going downstairs to talk to Percy.”

Her eyes widened. “Is he in trouble?”

Charlotte laughed. “Yes.”

“Can I have his cookies?”

She laughed again at Maddie’s reference to her usual punishment of missing dessert.

“I think he is too big to lose dessert, Sweetie.”

“Not fair,” Maddie pouted.

She kissed the top of her head. “Go back to bed, Sweetie. I’ll be back up in a minute.”

Charlotte pulled her robe tight and squared her shoulders for battle. As she started down the stairs, she could hear yelling.

“This is my house and I can do whatever I want,” Percy shouted.

“Does that include embarrassing us?” Hugh snapped.

She rounded the corner to see Percy and Hugh shoving each other while a group

of young men and loose women watching.

“Go to hell,” Percy growled.

“I’m sure I’d be in good company since you’ll be there too,” Hugh taunted.

With angry sigh, Charlotte pushed her way between them. “That’s enough.” She glared at her two angry sons. “Both of you. Hugh, go upstairs, and get Maddie, who I’m sure by now is spying at the top the stairs and take her to bed.”

Hugh glared at her and stomped off up the stairs.

“Put me down,” Maddie yelled.

“Hush, brat.”

“I want to see Percy get in trouble.”

Hugh’s reply was muffled by the slamming door.

The group around her, including Percy, fought back smiles. That made her even madder.

“What do you think you’re doing, bringing guests home at this hour?”

Percy crossed his arms, giving her an arrogant look. “I’m head of this family and I can bring any bloody person I want at any bloody hour I please.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s no bloody wonder Angela didn’t want to put up with you.”

“Saw to that, didn’t you.” He grabbed one of the girls and pulled her roughly to him, kissing her soundly. “If you don’t want to watch, you’d better go upstairs with Hugh and Maddie.”

Fury coursed through her. “Maybe I’ll just join you.” She grabbed a shorter blond man standing beside him and kissed him soundly.

Percy’s mouth fell open as she let Oscar go. Cat calls sounded around them.

“Wow, Atwood, can I...?” Oscar sputtered.

“No, you bloody well can’t court my mother.”

“You’re mother? Who a..” His eyes widened.

Charlotte tossed her head. “Why can’t he? I don’t you think you have much to say about it. If you can have affairs, I see no reason why I can’t do the same. I’m a respectable widow, after all.”

Percy stared at her. She stood arms folded, chin up. Bloody hell, he’s never seen her so fired up.

“Well, are we going to party or what?” Matthews grumbled.

“Not.” He threw his hands up in the air. “Mother, you know how to suck the fun out of everything, don’t you?”

“That’s my job.”

Percy sighed, ripping open the door. “Out, everyone.” He waved with his hands as the last of them staggered out into the night, slamming the door loud enough to wake the dead. He stared at her, daring her to make a comment.

She put her hand over her mouth, trying to control her nervous laughter.

“What is so frigging funny?”

“I can’t believe I kissed Oscar.”

Percy laughed despite himself. “I just hope he is too foxed to remember or his mother may be over here in the morning demanding satisfaction.”

They both laughed. Percy watched as she dropped down into a chair.

“You got my attention, Mother, now what do you want?”

“Neville was here.”

That sobered him up. “I tried to win back his money, but I lost it all.”

“I guessed that.” She frowned. “I was wrong to let your father convince me to keep you at school instead of bringing you home to be trained for your new role.”

He blinked, not quite comprehending what she was saying.

She patted his shoulder. “Your father couldn’t admit he was dying, even though it was becoming obvious to those of us around him. He didn’t want to upset you unnecessarily. He was wrong.” She waved a hand. “We were wrong. You should have been told and prepared. Instead, I just dropped the responsibilities in your lap.” Her voice choked off in tears.

Percy let out a harsh breath, leaning over to put his arm around her trembling shoulders. “Don’t cry, Mum. It was a confusing time for all of us.

She pulled back, nodding and wiping her eyes. “I can’t go back and change the past, but maybe I can help you now.” She stood. “Follow me.”

His chest tightened as she headed for the study. “Not your jewels, Mum. That’s all you have left of Father.”

She didn’t reply, just opened the safe, pulling out a black velvet box and handed it to him. “That’s not all your father left me,” she said softly. “I have you children.”

He swallowed hard, pushing the box back at her. “I won’t take those. I got us into this. I’ll get us out.”

She nodded, cradling the box against her chest, tears filling her eyes. For the first time, he knew he meant it. Bloody hell, he’d grown up and hadn’t meant to.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Blast Neville," Percy muttered, taking a swallow of whiskey. What right did the bastard have to come barging into his home, demanding money and frightening his mother?

He swallowed again. The whiskey tasted bitter in his mouth.

Yes, Neville did give him money, but he also got money from Lord Justice. Maybe it was time he confronted the bastard.

Percy stood, fumbling with his coat. Neville would leave his family alone or else.

\* \* \* \*

"Cassie," Drew hollered as he stepped through the hedge dividing Holbrooke's property and Ravensthorpe's.

No answer. Where could she have gone this early in the morning? He thought his talk the other night about her scaring him when she disappeared had made an impression on her. But apparently not. He'd let her run wild after her mother died. Maybe that had been a mistake.

Laughter, voices. Drew paused, listening to tell which direction it had come from. He followed the sounds.

He stopped short as he rounded the corner. There, snuggled on Mrs. Stewart's lap was his daughter, who rarely talked to strangers. They were reading a picture book Cassie had brought from home. One she had refused to look at since her mother's death.

The Dowager Duchess smoothed Cassie's hair. "Have you ever seen any of these places?"

Cassie nodded. "We lived in the mountains. Does it snow here?"

"Yes. But it rains more."

"I like the rain. Not thunder and lightening, though."

"Me either. I used to tell my boys it sounded like a herd of elephants."

Cassie's eyes widened. "Have you ever seen elephants?"

"Once, when my husband and I traveled to India."

"Will you tell me about them?" Cassie snuggled up closed as Meredith put a comforting arm around her.

"Hello," he said in an unsteady voice.

They both looked up with shocked expressions.

"We were just reading," Cassie said.

"I can see that. What did I tell you about leaving without telling me where you were going?"

"I forgot."

He gave Cassie a look that made her drop her eyes.

Mrs. Stewart squeezed her. "It was my fault. I should have asked Cassie if you knew where she was. We got busy looking at my flowers and then at her book. She wanted to know if any of the flowers pictured in her book bloomed in my garden. I



showed her the ones that were.”

The woman was defending his daughter. His heart skipped a beat. Right then and there, Drew fell in love.

“I thank you for taking the time with my daughter.”

“It was no problem. My days are lonely since I’ve given up being mistress of the house.”

“Mrs. Duchess says we can have tea and crumpets.”

“Not today, Muffin. Eve promised you a bath in the big tub, remember?”

Cassie grinned, sliding off the Dowager Duchess’s lap.

“Lady Eve is going to let me bring my dolls and take a bath in her big tub. On a counts that I don’t like the metal tub over at our house. Daddy gets the water too hot. Lady Eve has bubbles and everything.”

The dowager Duchess smiled. “Then you better run along before the water gets cold.”

Cassie disappeared through the bushes.

Drew shifted nervously now that he was alone the duchess. “I appreciate you talking to her. Cassie doesn’t make friends easily. After her mother was killed, she has not had much of a woman in her life.”

“I enjoy her. I’ve never had a little girl to spoil.”

He grinned. “What about you? Who spoils you?”

She blinked. “Are you flirting with me, Mr. Hutton?”

“I reckon I am. How do you feel about that?”

“You are barely older than my sons.”

“I’m older than you think.”

“I doubt that.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Of what?”

“Of having feelings for me?”

She took a deep breath. “I don’t mean to be rude, Mr. Hutton. I realize you are from America. But, here in England women don’t have relationships with younger men. I’m a duchess. A dowager duchess. A relationship between us would be unheard of.”

“You mean between gentry and commoners?”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

It was his turn to be taken back at her honesty. She didn’t realize who his family was. A thrill went through him.

“Ah.”

She glanced away. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too. But that doesn’t mean I intend to give up.”

“What?” Shock was evident on her face.

“As you said I’m an American. Where I come from we believe rules were meant to be broken.”

\* \* \* \*

“I wondered where you hurried off to.” Burke scooped Phoebe off the chair and sat her in his lap.

Phoebe giggled as he polished off the piece of toast in her fingers.

“Yum, jelly. Just the way I like it. So you worked up an appetite, too.”

"You're bad," she playfully hit his shoulder.

"If we were alone I'd show you just how bad I feel this morning." He wiggled his brows.

"Ah, Your Grace." Ester came into the room, carrying a pot of hot chocolate. She smiled at the sight of Her Grace sitting on Ravensthorpe's lap, eating strawberries from his fingers. She should be shocked, but they looked so natural together, how could she be?

"I'll bring more food."

"Thanks. More toast would be nice. Seems my wife ate all hers."

Phoebe giggled again. "I think you embarrassed her."

"Maybe. But she ought to be used to it by now. I heard that Daphne, Barclay's wife, was known to run around clad only in a sheet."

"Are you saying all the men in your family are naughty?"

"It's a family tradition. One our women never complain about."

"Ahem, Your Grace." Horace cleared his throat loudly. "You have a company."

Burke rolled his eyes. "Send them away. I'm busy."

"Since it is Inspector Reynolds, I don't think that is a good idea."

Burke's face lost all color. "I wonder what the bloody hell he wants." He stood, depositing a surprised Phoebe on the chair next to him. "Let's get this over with. Send him in."

"Who is Inspector Reynolds?" She asked, straightening her clothes.

He dropped down in the chair next to her. "He investigated my father's death along with the deaths of older friends of my father's known as the Fearless Four. The man is obsessed with solving the case."

"What does that have to do with you? You didn't have a hand in your father's death, did you?"

"No, he did that all on his own."

Phoebe didn't have a chance to respond before a huge man stalked into the room.

Her husband stood. "What brings you here at this early hour, Reynolds?"

"Baron Neville was killed outside a gaming hell you are known to frequent."

Phoebe gasped, putting a hand over her mouth. She didn't like Neville, but that didn't mean she wanted to see him dead.

"How?" Burke asked, putting his arm around his trembling wife.

"He was shot at close range. I understand there was bad blood between the two of you."

"I hardly knew him."

"But you stole his fiancé." Reynolds eyed Phoebe.

"I was never his fiancé," Phoebe snapped, rising to her feet.

Burke put a restraining hand on her shoulder, which angered her.

Reynolds's eyes hardened. "That's not the way I heard it. Rumor has it that Neville and your brother had a deal and Ravensthorpe whisked you away before it could be completed."

Phoebe opened her mouth, but Burke squeezed her shoulder in a silent promise that he would take care of this, so she closed it.

"We didn't elope." Burke said evenly. "I married her in a proper wedding, although it was by special license. Once I saw Lady Phoebe, well, I couldn't wait. I

never talked to Neville about her.”

“For the record, you were seen at the gaming hell last night.”

“That’s impossible.” Phoebe pulled free from her husband’s grip. “Ravensthorpe was in my arms all night.”

Reynolds glanced back and forth at Ravensthorpe and his wife. It was obvious from their state of undress that they had spent the night together.

“You’re brother, Barclay, isn’t back in London, is he?”

“Not that I know of.”

Reynolds nodded. “So you are saying that you have no grudge with Neville. What about Her Grace’s brother, Atwood? Was there bad blood between them?”

“Maybe, but I think it was more a case of whiskey talking than any deep hatred.”

“Thank you for your time.” Reynolds nodded at them. “I’ll leave you to your breakfast. Sorry to bother you.”

Phoebe and Burke stared at each other while Horace led Reynolds out.

She turned to leave as the door slammed, but Burke caught her hand. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To London, of course. He has the pieces or at least enough of them to question my brother next and I need to warn him.”

Burke frowned. “You don’t think Percy could kill Neville, do you?”

“No, but it is not uncommon for Percy to have lapses in memory. I have to warn him.”

Burke nodded. “Pack light and I’ll get the coach.”

\* \* \* \*

“My Lord.”

Percy lifted his head off the desk to stare at Charles, the elderly butler his mother had sent here from their country estate.

“You have a caller.”

Bloody hell, his head was pounding and he’d slept in the chair. He didn’t even remember how he got there or what time he got in. His present condition didn’t exactly making him fit for company.

“Tell them to bugger off.”

“I would, except it is a Scotland Yard Investigator and he refuses to leave.”

Percy sighed. “Bloody hell, send him in and bring me some coffee.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Percy stood, straightening his clothes in front of the mirror. Gad, he looked a fright. From the bruises on his face and knuckles, he’d guess he’d been a fight. Over what, he had no frigging idea. He’d make a hell of an impression.

Just as he finished putting himself together, Charles led in a huge man.

“Marquis Atwood, I’m Inspector Reynolds. I regret to inform you that Baron Neville was murdered last night. Shot in the chest outside the Black Sheep gaming hell.”

*Neville was dead?* He knew he shouldn’t feel it, but relief poured over him.

Oddly enough, fear also tightened his gut. He wished he could remember where he went last night.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Was it footpads?”

“I don’t think so. He had all his money. A big stash of it, since he won.”

“Percy!” Phoebe’s voice rang out as the front door slammed.

*What the bloody hell was she doing here?*

"I got to town as fast as I could. Neville was murdered and I wanted to warn you that a Scotland Yard Investigator might be knocking on your door."

She flew around the corner, stopping short at the door. Reynolds was already here, talking to her brother, who looked like he'd spent the night drinking and brawling.

"And why would you need to warn him, Your Grace?" Inspector Reynolds stepped forward.

"I just..." Phoebe stared helplessly at her brother. She could feel Burke behind her, but he said nothing.

"My sister is a busy body, who thinks it is her job to take care of everyone."

"Especially those who can't seem to take care of themselves." She shot Percy a withering look.

"I would say your brother looks like he has been fighting. Care to explain where you were last night, Marquis Atwood? I was told you had a violent confrontation with Neville at the Black Sheep gaming hell and that you both were tossed out. Want to tell me what happened after that?"

Percy ran a trembling hand over his face. Bloody hell, he didn't remember anything. How could he answer? He didn't even know how the hell he got home.

"I was a little foxed last night and my memory is a bit hazy."

"I see. Then I have no choice but to arrest you for the murder of Baron Neville."

\* \* \* \*

"How could you just let Reynolds take him away like that?" Phoebe dodged Burke's comforting arms.

Burke sighed. He hated seeing Phoebe like this. "There wasn't much I could do, my dear. Your brother had no one to vouch for him and he couldn't tell Reynolds what happened. I have a friend who is a barrister. I'll talk to him about getting your brother released. Meanwhile, I need to talk to some people to see if I can find out what happened last night and how your brother got home."

"I'm going with you."

"Not bloody likely. The places I'm going aren't fit for a lady."

"I'm fully aware of the types of clubs Percy frequents."

"That doesn't make it proper," Her mother said from the doorway. "I agree with Ravensthorpe. You need to let him handle it. Our family doesn't need any more gossip. With my reclusive behavior and your hasty marriage and now this--we'll be lucky to survive the whole the season."

Mother wrung her hands. "This is all my fault. Neville was here last night and I argued with Percy." She put her hands over her face and the rest of what she said was muffled in tears.

Phoebe threw her arms around her mother.

"Listen to your mother." Burke dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "I'll be back as quickly as I can. And I promise to share every detail with you."

Phoebe frowned. "Okay, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

\* \* \* \*

"I don't think it is a good idea that you come see me right now." Charlotte wrung her hands as she met Etheridge in the entryway.

"Why ever not? We're friends."

*Friends.* She shivered. The way he said it sounded so personal, so intimate. "I may have been too hasty in my decision to see you."

He stared at her. Hurt was evident in his eyes. "You don't mean that. You're just scared."

He stepped towards her to offer her a comforting hug, but she avoided his touch. He let his arms drop.

"Please," she pleaded softly. "My family has enough gossip swirling around it right now. I haven't the strength to deal with any more."

"If I can help...."

"You can't."

He started to go and then turned back. "You don't have to go through this whole mess with Percy alone."

How did he know? Good grief, the news of Percy's arrest must be all over London by now. She swallowed her tears, but didn't respond as he began to leave.

"He is right, Mama," Phoebe said behind her.

"Viscount Etheridge doesn't know what he's asking for." She couldn't look at her daughter. She did not want Phoebe to know how upset she was.

"I can't talk right now. I have a call to make. Watch out for your siblings."

Charlotte pulled on her cloak. She only hoped that she'd been wrong about where Percy went last night. All she could do was pray that Angela hadn't given up on Percy, either.

Phoebe frowned as she watched her mother leave. How could Burke and her mother think that she would stand helplessly by while Percy suffered? She grabbed her cloak.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hugh stepped in front of her.

"To save Percy."

"Do you have a plan?"

"It isn't a good one, but if I hurry it just might work."

Hugh reluctantly moved out of her way. "I'm going with you. Percy would have my head if something happened to you. And if he didn't get me your husband surely would."

\* \* \* \*

"Atwood." The burly guard opened his cell. "You have been saved by your woman."

"My what?" Percy stared at the open cell door.

"Your woman."

He didn't have a woman, or at least not one who would rescue him, but he wasn't about to share that tidbit with the guard who was letting him out of this dark hole. He just hoped to hell it wasn't his mother or Phoebe for that matter.

When they rounded the corner he saw Angela peering out at him from under a deep blue cloak. His heart jumped.

"After your mother and sister visited me, I knew that I needed to come down here and explain what happened to Inspector Reynolds. I told him how you rode home with me after our night of gambling and stayed at my house," she said softly.

Good Gad, his mother and sister paid a call on his mistress. His father must be rolling over in his crypt.

As he met her serious gaze, Percy's heart sank. She was lying about being with him last night, he knew by her tight expression and the way she wouldn't look him directly in the eyes. Why would she ruin her reputation for him? Unless...? He didn't want to go there, but she must fear that he was guilty.

"That's good that you filled in the details, since I don't remember a bleeding thing." That wasn't exactly true, because bits and pieces were coming back and he didn't like how they were beginning to fit together.

Her mouth tightened.

"But you must think I'm guilty or you wouldn't be here," he said low enough that only she could hear.

Angela's eyes widened. "I know... you're not..."

"Guilty? How do you know?"

When her gaze dropped, he had his answer. Heaven help him, it would be so easy to walk out of here with her. But he couldn't let her do that. She deserved better.

Percy turned to Reynolds, who was heading towards them. "Angela." He used her Christian name to goad her into getting angry and leaving. "Was once my mistress. She has a soft spot for me. That's why she is trying to protect me. I don't know if I killed Neville or not. My memories of the night are murky. But I do know that I didn't spend the night with Lady Angela, because *that* I would have remembered."

\* \* \* \*

"What did you find out?" Phoebe ripped the door open for Burke. She had been pacing back and forth in front of it all afternoon, waiting for him.

Burke opened his arms and she came willingly into the comfort of his embrace. He lifted her, carrying her through the house to his study where he kicked the door shut so the servants couldn't hear, and dropped down on the sofa with her in his lap.

"It doesn't look good, my dear. Apparently Percy had been at the Black Sheep off and on all night. He'd left earlier with some rowdy friends. Then returned really foxed a few hours later and fought with Neville."

"Then they were asked to leave?"

"Yes. No one knows what happened after that. Neville was found dead in the alley by a couple of Barry's girls on their way home."

"Mama wasn't much help, either. All she did was cry. Hugh told me that they had argued when Percy came home with a bunch of drunken friends. Maddie says Percy got in trouble, but she didn't get his cookies."

Burke couldn't help but grin at Maddie's version. "I bet Maddie knows all the details."

"Some of them. Seems Hugh carried her off to bed before she got to see Mama yell at Percy."

"He must have left after that. No one seems to know how he got home."

"Mama didn't even know he had gone back out, or come back home for that matter until she saw Inspector Reynolds talking to him. It was obvious when she saw Percy that he'd been out all night. He looked like he'd been in a fight."

She was quiet for long moment. Burke sensed she wanted to say more, but was mulling it over. He remained quiet, waiting for her to speak.

"Angela was no help, either."

"Angela," he sputtered. Holy hell, she had gone to see her. He wasn't sure if he

was appalled or angry that she had disregarded his order to wait for him.

“Mother and I had the same idea and ended up at Angela’s townhouse. She hadn’t seen Percy that day at all. In fact, she didn’t plan to see him again until we told her what happened.”

Burke tensed. He didn’t like where this story was going. “So what did you do?” He hoped they didn’t visit the prison, although it wouldn’t surprise him at all if they had.

“Mama and I didn’t do anything. Angela went over to lie for Percy, but he refused her help.”

“He doesn’t want her dragged into this scandal any more than I want you involved.”

“But we have to help.”

“No, you don’t,” he snapped.

Her eyes widened at his sharp tone of voice. He didn’t like getting forceful with her, but dammit he had to protect her.

“I told you to let me handle this.” He let out a sigh. He reached for her, but she stood, backing away from him.

“I thought you promised that you’d give me unlimited freedom.”

“Within reason.” He stood, too.

“I don’t remember any stipulations on it.” She folded her arms across her chest, shooting him a look that dared him to deny it.

“Dammit, Phoebe, I’m your husband. It’s my role to protect you. I don’t give you orders very often, but when I do, I expect you to listen.”

Her jaw tightened. “Or else what? Will you beat me?”

“Of course not.” Although the urge to shake her a little poured over him.

“Then what will you do? I need to know what to expect from you.”

“Isn’t it a little late to ask me if I’d beat you?”

Her eyes widened.

“Before you ask, the answer is no.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I never thought you’d hit me, but then I never thought you’d be so autocratic.”

Autocratic, him? What a laugh. He couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. He’d never been the dominate one. Barclay liked to be in charge. He’d never been responsible for anyone before, he realized with jolt. Gad, it was a bloody pain in the arse. No wonder Barclay resented him ducking his role.

Burke took a deep, calming breath. “Phoebe. I don’t want to control you. Heaven knows I hate having someone put restrictions on me.”

She relaxed a little, but did continue staring at him.

“I just care about you. I didn’t promise your family much, but I did promise to take care of you. Be reasonable. Would either of your brothers or father let you go alone to a prison?”

“I wasn’t alone. I was with Mama, Angela and Hugh.”

Great. He felt much better knowing that their safety had been in the hands of a boy.

“They shouldn’t have been there either. All you succeeded in doing was make Percy mad. Did it ever occur to you that it might have looked bad for Percy to have someone lying for him? That might even make him look more guilty.”

“I never thought of that.” She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “Percy is going to hang, isn’t he?”

Burke smoothed a comforting hand down her back. He couldn’t reply, because he didn’t want to lie.



## Chapter Sixteen

Two days later

“Your Grace.” Ester poked her head into the sitting room.

Phoebe looked up from a book she had been trying in vain to read ever since Burke left. “Yes.”

“I have a note for you. The young man who brought it was very insistent that I give it only to you. He is waiting for a reply.”

She held out her hand to take the note. Scrawled across paper in dark, heavy print was:

*Lady Phoebe,  
I have the answers to your current questions about your brother. If you  
are interested in making a deal, send a note back with my messenger. Do  
not involve your husband or the deal is off.*

*Lord Justice*

Phoebe stared at the note for a long moment. Should she...? Burke would be mad if he knew. Yet, how could she not try everything possible to save her brother. Without pausing to change her mind she jotted her reply that they had a deal.

“Give this to the boy and make sure you feed him. Be sure he has extra cookies to take with him, too.” She pulled out some money. “And give this to him.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Why was this man coming to her instead of her husband? She had no idea, but she planned to do whatever it took to save Percy. After all, it was partially her fault that he was in this mess.

\* \* \* \*

Percy blinked in surprise. He never expected Ravensthorpe to visit him in this hellhole.

Burke shifted nervously in front of a filthy Percy. Thank goodness Phoebe wasn't here to see him.

“I paid for better food and blankets for you,” he said, trying to sound calm. “I contacted Brooks Reardon. He is supposed to be the best barrister in London.”

“Thank you,” Atwood said stiffly.

“I promised Phoebe I'd help you get out of here. Do you remember anything?”

Percy shook his head. “I've been all through this with Inspector Reynolds. I recall bits and pieces of that night. Neville came to my house while I was out gambling and threatened my mother. He wanted the money I owed him.”

Burke tensed. Please don't let him be deeper in debt. He had sold his grandmother's silver to buy the stuff and pay for Brooks. “I thought I paid all that off for you.”

“I spent it gambling in order to increase my purse so I could pay off more debtors. Of course, I lost it all.”

Burke could hardly blame him when he would have done the same thing.

"Did you two fight?"

"That's what I don't remember."

Percy grew quiet. "I know this is a great deal to ask, but look after my family and Angela."

"You know I will."

"I don't mean for now you know--in case I--hang. Don't let them suffer."

Burke stared at him. Did Percy suspect himself of being guilty?

\* \* \* \*

If Percy thought he could dismiss her like that, he was sorely mistaken. Angela paced nervously around her parlor. She didn't believe for one minute that he killed Neville and she intended to prove it.

\* \* \* \*

Meredith stopped short when she found Drew sitting on her bench in the garden. She reminded herself to quit thinking of him as Drew. He must stay Mr. Hutton.

"It really is improper for us to be alone out here together," she said without preamble. "With my son gone, I mean."

He rose, handing her a bouquet of wild flowers. "I don't see why."

The spark in his eyes told a different story.

She frowned, taking the flowers. The man was too handsome by far.

"Come now. You may be from America, but you aren't a complete savage. I notice some polish in your voice and manners."

He grinned slightly. "What does manners have to do with enjoying the company of a beautiful woman on a bright, sunny day? You can't tell me you enjoy sitting out here alone day after day."

She winced at the implication. "I like to read and be alone. There is nothing wrong with that. Although, lately, I've had Cassie to keep me company. By the way, where is she?"

"Lady Eve is getting her nursery ready and Cassie is helping."

He moved close--too close.

"So that leaves us alone."

"I told you that..."

"It's not proper." He caught her chin, tilting her head up. "Come on, Merry, haven't you ever wanted to be improper? To do something really scandalous?"

His smooth voice combined with that light touch made her pulse race. "No. Yes. You are confusing me."

"Good. His arms closed around her back, drawing her closer.

He was going to kiss her, she realized just before his lips touched hers. It was no polite kiss. This one sent her senses reeling. Her arms went around his neck as she hung on for dear life. Drew definitely knew how to kiss.

Slowly he pulled back, staring down into her flushed hot face. "When you are ready for more, let me know."

She blinked, realizing what he had just said. She stepped back, straightening her clothes. "There won't be any more kissing."

"If that is what you truly want." He brushed her cheek, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

"It is," she said more firmly than she felt. What was wrong with her? If he hadn't stopped, she had no idea how far she would have let it go. She had to end this madness. She was a respectable widow for goodness sake and he was.... Still watching her intently. She swallowed hard.

"It is just the way things have to be."

"Don't you ever get tired of letting life, society and other people dictate for you? What fun is there to being a Duchess if you can't do what you want?"

He had a point. Other women did have affairs. But not with commoners young enough to be their sons. She mentally shook herself.

"You need to leave."

He nodded. "I will for now, but I'll be back."

"Then I'll be...."

He moved close to her. "You'll be what?"

She blinked. What would she do?

He grinned. "You may not think so right now, but one day you'll be ready and I'll be here."

When she became Queen of England.

He kissed her forehead as he turned to leave.

The gesture seemed far more intimate than a real kiss. She touched the spot, watching him go. If she kept telling herself that she wasn't interested in Drew long enough and loud enough she might eventually believe it.

\* \* \* \*

Reed fought back a smile as Drew stepped through the hedge dividing his land and Ravensthorpe's. His always perfect friend's hair looked like someone had run their fingers through it.

"Did you find out what Lady Meredith knows about Marquis Atwood's arrest?" Reed asked.

"I don't think," Drew sputtered, obviously surprised to see him. "She didn't mention it."

No surprise there. From the flushed look on Drew's face, Reed doubted the man had done much talking at all.

Reed crossed his arms over his chest. "Then you don't intend to tell her about Atwood?"

"She might be better not knowing until it is all over. That way there is less chance of her rushing into danger."

The man had it bad. "Uh, huh." Reed's lips quirked into a smile. "I thought you were watching the house not romancing Lady Meredith."

"I'm not.... I'm...." Drew let out a harsh breath. "I'm attracted to her. Let me rephrase that. I think I love her."

Reed whistled tonelessly. "Does she feel the same way about you?"

"I think so, but it is hard to tell. In her world peers don't mix that much with commoners."

"Then she doesn't know about your family?"

Drew shook his head. "I intend to keep it that way. I want her to love me for me, not because of who I am."

Reed nodded his understanding. "Do you want to go to London to keep an eye on

Ravensthorpe?"

"I'd rather not. I'll keep an eye on the house and stay to protect the Dowager Duchess."

Reed snorted. "I'll bet."

"Really. Justin wants to bring them all down. Couldn't he have lured Burke to town to have an opening to get to her? After all, she was involved in whatever happened all those years ago and she foiled his plan last time."

For a long moment Reed stood silent, pondering what Drew had said. "Good point. Barclay and I will go to London. You stay and watch over the ladies. I think I should warn you that Her Grace might not be the only one who has reservations about your relationship. Burke and Barclay may have a few for you."

"I'll speak to them."

"Meanwhile, it goes without saying that although Lady Meredith would sooner cut me than not, I have a soft spot for her. Hurt her and you'll have to answer to me, too."

"You don't have to worry. My skills in courting are a bit rusty, but I do know how to treat a lady."

Reed didn't answer. He hoped to hell Drew was right or his half brothers would have his head.

\* \* \* \*

Justin rubbed his hands together as he reread Phoebe Stewart's note. At last his plan was coming together. She had agreed to make a deal with him. Should he toy with her or go in for the kill? Dragging the game out would be fun, but too risky. While he had her hooked, he needed to act.

"Boy," he shouted as he scrawled the note. "Take this to Duchess Ravensthorpe. Show it only to her. Don't wait this time. Her response will take a while. Tell her I'll contact her in three days to see if she has kept up her end of the deal."

\* \* \* \*

"Your Grace."

Burke was surprised to see Horace waiting for him outside his carriage. The older man looked world-weary and worried.

"I know Ester would be angry at me for telling you this, but someone has been sending messages to Her Grace and waiting for their replies."

"Do you have any idea who?"

Horace shook his head. "It was a young lad who brought the messages. Ester fed him at her grace's insistence, but told me to keep mum about it. But the lad was unkempt and I worry about what sort of person would need to send messages that way."

"I agree." Burke patted the older man's shoulder. "I'll check into it without getting you in trouble with your wife."

Horace nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

"I appreciate you looking after Her Grace."

"We don't want to lose her. She is a bright spot in this gloomy house, I must say."

Burke grinned. "That she is."

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe dashed down the stairs to greet him as soon as he shut the door. "I wasn't

sure when you'd be back. Cook is holding supper for us."

Burke caught her as she came towards him and kissed her hard. "I thought it was you that smelled so good."

Phoebe giggled.

Burke lifted her up in his arms as he headed for the dinning room.

"You're going to have to stop carrying me everywhere."

"Why?" He dropped down in the chair with her in his lap. "Tell me about your afternoon."

"There isn't much to tell. I tried to read and did the menus for the next couple of days. I didn't know how long we would be here, so I didn't plan too far ahead. What about you?"

Burke tried not to stare at her. She was smoothing his jacket and not looking him in the eye. Had their previous conversation left any impression on her? Would she tell him about the messages?

"I had work to do on the dock and I've been asking questions about Percy. So far no one knows anything. I went to see your brother."

Her eyes widened. "How does he look?"

"As one might expect of someone in prison. I paid for his clothes, blankets and I hired Brooks Reardon to defend him."

Phoebe whistled. "I hear he is tough. Thank you."

He tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. "I keep my promises. What about you? Have you heard anything?" He kept his voice neutral, but he wondered if she would tell him anything.

She cocked her head, staring straight up at him. "No, nothing."

Burke's throat tightened. His wife was lying to him. He stood, setting her on the ground. It annoyed him that she kept putting him in the position of having to assert control over her.

"Pack your things." Not having the energy to fight with her, he turned to leave.

Phoebe caught his arm. "But why?"

Because you are lying to me, he wanted to snap, but couldn't without getting Horace in trouble with Ester. No sense both of them being on the outs with their wives.

Whatever scheme she was weaving, he had to put an end to it. "We are going back to my country estate."

Her eyes widened. "But I thought we were going to stay here and fight for Percy's freedom."

"I can't give my full attention to helping Percy unless I can trust you to stay safe."

"But I didn't leave the house all afternoon."

No, but you aren't telling me everything, he fought the urge to blurt out.

"Then you are going to lock me away in the country."

Maybe if he didn't respond, she'd let go of this battle.

Phoebe clenched her fists at her side. "I don't think I like being married. I don't feel very much like an adult. You keep treating me like a child."

"You're in good company. I hate being the villain in this scene. But contrary to popular belief, I do take my responsibilities seriously."

"So now I'm a responsibility."

Burke squeezed the bridge of his nose. "You're twisting my words around and it

won't work. I've made up my mind. I'm taking you to the country so you can avoid any further temptation to get deeper in Percy's troubles."

She opened and closed her mouth. Then stormed out of the room.

"Not very well done, Your Grace," Horace said behind him. "You might as well have told her that you knew about the messages. She is a bright lass. I doubt it will take her long to piece it all together."

"Then she'll have to confront me with it and tell me about the notes. Until then, she'll just have to stay mad. I'm beginning to see why men avoid the parson's trap. Dealing with wives is a bloody pain in the arse."

"Ah, but think how boring our lives would be without them."

"I could take a little boredom right now."

Horace chuckled. "You'll figure out how to get along with her. It just takes time."

He hoped to hell Horace was right. He could hear Phoebe slamming around upstairs. It was going to be a long ride to the country unless he could change her mind.

## Chapter Seventeen

"Horace says you aren't ready to leave," Burke said, leaning against the doorframe of Phoebe's bedroom.

Phoebe stood with her back to him, arms folded, staring out the window.

"That is because I'm not going." Her voice was flat with just a hint of defiance.

Burke sighed, pulling away from the door. He shut it gently so their conversation would be private. Even though he doubted that was possible, he still wanted to keep the gossip among the servants to a minimum. "I'm not going to argue about this," he said firmly.

"I know," she relied softly, not turning to face him. "I don't want to, either. You can't change my mind. I'm not going."

Burke tensed. Did he hear her right?

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me." She turned. "I'm not leaving my family alone in the middle of a crisis. You are stronger than me, so I suppose you could haul me off against my will. But I won't stay. I'll find my way back to London."

"I could lock you in your room."

"You could." Her chin jutted up.

He crossed his arms, watching her intently, trying to gage the full extent of her temper. "But I gather you'd escape."

"If I need to, yes."

She wasn't afraid of him. He wasn't sure if he should be shocked, irritated or relieved that she trusted him not to beat her.

"Then I suppose we should call a truce."

She nodded slowly.

"Before you agree, you should listen to my conditions."

"Begin."

"First, you must inform me of all your comings and goings."

She opened her mouth, but he raised a hand to silence her. "This is not open to debate. Second, you will share with me any and all things you've learned. Third, no acting alone. I can't protect you if I'm not there."

"Agreed." She flew into his arms in a hug of relief.

He lifted her off the ground, holding her tight. Dammit to hell, the minx had agreed without telling him anything.

\* \* \* \*

This was so frustrating. Angela sighed, pulling her cloak tighter around her as she leaned back against the cold brick wall in the alley where Neville had died. She had talked to everyone in the gaming hell and still she was not any closer to finding any answers. She closed her eyes, fighting tears.

"Can I help you, miss? This is no place for a lady to be all alone."

A deep male voice made her stiffen. How had he moved so quietly? He called

her a lady. It had been a long time since someone had referred to her that way. Especially since she had purposely ruined her reputation. She glanced up into Burke's -- Ravensthorpe's face.

"Your Grace." She straightened her cloak, pulling herself away from the wall.

He watched her, but didn't reply. How unlike Ravensthorpe to be so quiet. Something about him was unnerving her. He seemed different tonight. There was a hard set to his mouth and he seemed colder, more assessing. She wondered if he was angry about his wife coming to see her.

After a long silence, he finally spoke. "Lady Angela," he said gently. "I'm Barclay."

Now, she was embarrassed. She should have known. "I'm sorry that I didn't recognize you."

She hadn't seen Barclay very often, but knew Ravensthorpe well. He had kissed her once and she considered letting him into her bed. But that was before Percy. His name made her eyes well up with tears. Percy with his warm, expressive green eyes and gentle touch. He could be so tender and yet, so wild sometimes. She'd....

Gracious, she was crying. Sobbing actually.

Suddenly she was wrapped in comforting arms and pulled deeper into the shadows. He was shielding her from view of others coming down the alley. She had the urge to tell him that it wasn't necessary to protect her reputation, but it felt so good to be held that she couldn't spit out the words.

"Can you tell me what is wrong? What you're doing here, alone at this hour, hiding in an alley."

That soft inquiry coupled with his warm embrace made the dam burst open. She began blurting out the whole sordid tale. She told him about Neville, the parties, his murder and Percy's arrest. When she finished, she couldn't look at him. How could she have told this quiet man so much? Despite the fact that he had Burke's face, he was still virtually a stranger.

He remained silent for a long time, making her wonder if he was regretting asking.

"Don't be offended," he said gently. "I know Percy--Atwood--not as well as Burke does. They ran around more together than we did, but I know him well enough to know that he'd not want you out here like this, risking yourself."

She sniffled, pulling back to stare at him. "But he needs me."

"I'm sure my brother is doing everything in his power to help him." Barclay could say that without reservation. Burke was loyal to a fault to his friends. Even doubly so now that he was married to the man's sister. Had he married Phoebe to protect her from this scandal or had their marriage occurred before?

"I can go...."

"No, you can't," he said firmly, then eased up on his tone when she backed away from him. "I know you don't want to hear this, but go home. You'll cause more harm than good. I promise to get to the bottom of this situation."

"Will you keep me posted?"

"Yes. Do you need a ride?"

"No. My carriage is around the corner."

"I'll walk you there." That was the least he could do since Lady Angela had filled



in the missing pieces of the puzzle for him.

His gut hadn't been wrong. Trouble was a foot. But just what Burke's part in it would he wasn't sure. The last thing his family needed was another scandal. And avoiding one would impossible at this point.

\* \* \* \*

It was after midnight when Phoebe padded across the cold marble floor, wishing she had thought to put her slippers on. But then, stopping to do that might have risked waking up Burke. They had a tense evening after their confrontation over her not going to the country. He had been remote and quiet. But she couldn't blame him, because she had been equally so.

Later on that night, though, they had made love with a desperation that left her rung out. It was as if both of them expressed in passion what they couldn't say with words.

Phoebe swallowed hard. She couldn't keep lying to Burke. It was too hard. Maybe once she found the answers she could share them with him. He'd keep her from searching if he knew, but once she had the information.... What? She shook off those thoughts. She had to find the book Lord Justice wanted. With the household asleep, she would be free to search for it.

By pushing to stay in town, she may have lost her chance to find it. She hoped not. She'd start with Burke's study. Once inside, she closed the door quietly behind her. Thank goodness the moon was full, so she didn't have to light a candle. She pulled back the heavy, maroon velvet drapes, letting the moonlight stream in.

Now, where to begin her search? She somehow doubted the book would be on the shelf or Lord Justice could have gotten it just himself.

Phoebe dropped down on the floor beside the large desk and pulled open the bottom drawer. It was full of papers and an empty whiskey bottle. The drawer below it held more papers. As she reached down below them, she found a leather bound book. In gold lettering the title read: *The Further Adventures of the Eccentric Earl: Gold Fever*. She gasped. This was it. Could it be that simple? Her hear pounded in her ears. Hugh would have been so excited to see the infamous missing Eccentric Earl book.

She quietly shut the drawer and climbed up onto the window seat so she could get a better look at the book. Curling her cold feet up under her, she flipped it open. She had to hold it really close to her face to make out the words in the dim light.

*The adventure began in an empty, seedy tavern by the docks.*

*"Pick a card, any card." Sheldon Townsend fanned the deck of cards out on the table in front of Brandon Stewart.*

Oh, my gosh, Burke's father. Phoebe sighed. Maybe she would find the key to the old duke's personality. Could Sheldon Townsend be Earl Holbrooke's father?

*Rolling his eyes, Brandon carefully selected one, the queen of hearts, without showing it.*

*Sheldon took away all the cards but two. "Put it down." He smoothly shifted them around. With a wide, teasing grin he said, "Now, find your card. Do you know which one it is?"*

*"That's easy. You put it..." Brandon's mouth thinned as he stared at the three of clubs in his hand.*

*Sheldon wiggled his brows and smiled. "Wrong card?"*

*"How the bloody hell did you know?"*

*"I'm magic."*

*"Are you falling for parlor tricks, Stewart?" Derek Langford dropped down into the chair beside Brandon.*

*"Shut up," Brandon muttered.*

*Sheldon flamboyantly shuffled his deck with one hand. "Want to try your luck, Langford?" He spread them out on the table. "Draw a card."*

*Derek shook his head, laughing. "Are you kidding? I taught you this trick."*

*"Sure enough wager on it?"*

*With a snort of disbelief, Derek picked the king of spades.*

*Scooping up all but two cards, Sheldon shot Derek a challenging glance. "How much to prove that you know this trick better than me?"*

*"Two...." Derek's jaw dropped as he flipped over the ace of hearts. He tossed the card and his money at Sheldon.*

*Brandon hooted with laughter.*

*"Want another go, Stewart? This time for money?"*

*"I lost everything to you last night." Brandon pulled out his empty pockets.*

*"Money well invested, I promise." Townsend did a fancy shuffle of the cards before handing them over to Derek. "When Stratten gets here, he'll tell you all about our latest big adventure."*

The breath caught in Phoebe's throat. Earl Stratten was involved in this? She would have to talk to him since he was the only one from this story that she knew was still alive.

*"This had better be good." Brandon lit his pipe. "My father is none too happy with my recent losses. In fact, I believe he said..." Brandon stood up, holding his jacket, mimicking his father, "and I quote, if you don't earn back some of those markers you're out of my will. At this rate you're going to let Boris the wolfhound inherit my title before I'd leave it to you."*

Phoebe blinked, staring at the pages. Burke's father had a bad relationship with his own father. That would explain some of his behavior toward Burke. Did Burke know of this?

*"Sounds like you are in the same boat as Townsend. Aren't fathers a pain." Derek played with the deck he had taken from Sheldon.*

*Brandon glared at him. "I wouldn't make light of my situation if I were you. I heard you didn't inherit near enough blunt to pay the taxes on your entailed estates."*

*Derek jumped up, chair and cards flying and lunged at Brandon. "You take that back. It is merely a rumor. Now, I know where it started."*

*"Are you insinuating that I talked out of turn?" Brandon shoved Derek.*

*"Now, chaps, are we going to come to blows before we even start out?" Sheldon pushed between the two angry men. "Here comes Kyle with Stratten. We don't want Stratten to back out of this venture."*

*Brandon and Sheldon straightened their coats, picked up their chairs, and sat. Sheldon picked up the cards scattered around and began shuffling his deck, spreading it out on the table.*

*"Pick a card, Stratten."*

*Oliver frowned, considering his choices. Then picked one.*

*With a flourish, Sheldon swished the three cards around on the table. "Can you find yours?"*

*Oliver shrugged, turning over his card. All mouths in the room fell open. Sheldon offered him a nod of respect.*

*"Enough of these games. I have a proposition for you blokes. How about I give the Fearless Four one more chance to be famous? I'm researching my new book on the California gold rush. I only have part of the blunt I needed to finance the expedition."*

Phoebe clasped the book over her chest. She now knew who the Fearless Four were. Her heart pounded in her ears. And, if she had read right, Earl Stratten was the Eccentric Earl. Over the years, she and her siblings had read all of the Eccentric Earl books. She never would have guess.

Excitement raced through her as she lowered the book to read more.

*"So you want money," Kyle asked as he leaned against the wall with his arms folded.*

*"Only a small portion. Say all of you together could put in a fourth. I think I have a backer for the rest of it. The money is not your most important contribution."*

*"Then what is?" Derek eyed him warily.*

*"Letting me write about your outrageous escapades. If you provide your usual fodder for my story then I'll provide you with a grand adventure and a promise of wealth beyond your wildest dreams."*

*"Sounds like a fairy tale to me." Kyle Bancroft spoke before any of them had a chance.*

Bancroft? Phoebe blinked. He must be Marcus Bancroft's father. She remembered Percy saying how he had inherited his title when his father died under mysterious circumstances. He and Marcus had spent more than a few nights getting drunk and bemoaning the fact that they had taken the responsibilities for their families while they were still young. She only wished she could remember exactly what happened to the members of the Fearless Four. They had died about the same time as her father. The gossip had heated up, but during her mourning period, mother had insisted they withdraw from the world. By the time she was allowed to read gossip papers again it had blown over. The papers then were full of exploits of the sons. Maybe now, she'd find out what she had missed.

*"Ah, a skeptic." Oliver raised a finger. "I like those. They add drama and challenge to the story. Tell us, what are you afraid of, Kyle."*

*"Nothing."*

*"Then prove it."*

*Kyle glanced at the eager expression of his friends. I'll put in my half," he grumbled.*

*"Let's toast our venture at my house," Oliver said with a big grin. "There I'll give you all the details."*

*Kyle caught Sheldon's arm as they departed and stopped him.*

*"Are you sure about this?"*

*Sheldon pulled a coin from thin air, winking at him. "There is no luck in my games of chance, my friend. We'll stack the deck in our favor."*

*"But you don't have any money and neither, if the rumors are true, do the others."*

*Sheldon patted Kyle on the back. "A lack of funds never stopped me from betting before. I won on a bluff last night."*

*He started to walk off.*

*"Life isn't all a bluff," Kyle hollered after him.*

*"Mine is." He held up his hands.*

*"Bull. None of us are as cavalier about our circumstances as we pretend to be. What happens if this blows up in our faces?"*

*Sheldon put his arm around Kyle's shoulder. "You think too much, Bancroft." His hand painted a picture in the air. "Let it happen. We'll all see a reversal of fortune. I can feel it."*

*"That's just it. At the moment I'm getting along with my father."*

*"Then you have nothing to worry to about."*

*"Or more to lose. I may regret this, but I'm in."*

*Sheldon patted his shoulder. "It will be an experience you'll never forget."*

*"That's just what I'm afraid of," Kyle muttered as he followed Sheldon out of the tavern.*

"If my wife chooses to be up reading instead of in bed with me, then I must be doing something wrong," Burke said.

Phoebe jumped at the sound of his deep velvet voice. She stood almost dropping the book.

"Is it that good or are you bored already?"

"I...ah....couldn't sleep and since you looked so peaceful, I couldn't stand to wake you."

"You woke me the moment you left my bed, my love," Burke said as he lifted her in his arms. "You're shivering. You would have to pick the coldest room in the whole house to read."

"It had the best light and I knew I wouldn't disturb anyone down here." Phoebe snuggled into Burke's warm chest. He was right about her being cold. She had been so caught in the story that she hadn't realized how chilly she was.

He started up the stairs with her. "The big question is what were you reading that had you so caught up that you'd rather read than sleep?"

How could she answer that question? "The Eccentric Earl's latest book." A partial lie, but one none the less.

Burke's deep bellied laugh rumbled under her ear. "Why shouldn't I be surprised."

He looked at her intently for a moment, making her wonder if he would ask her to share the book. Should she lie? Did she dare?

"Why didn't you go into your own room to read? There is at least a lit fire in there."

Good question. One she didn't have a ready answer for. "I... left the book in your study when I was searching for a book marker earlier. Once I settled into the story I lost track of time."

He paused staring down at her. Did her words sound as false to him as they did to her?

"It is late and we are both tired." He forced a smile that was more tired than angry. "We'll talk in the morning. For now, how about I warm you up."

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

Burke let her slide down his hard body. “What do you think?”

That he was granting her a reprieve. In the morning, she was sure he would press her for answers. She wondered if either of them would sleep.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He responded by pressing her back against the door.

Then again, who needs sleep anyway?

## Chapter Eighteen

Phoebe had expected a confrontation, but had been surprised when instead Burke had slipped out of their bed before she awoke. He'd left a note telling her they'd talk when he returned from dealing with an urgent estate matter.

She had been hurt that he left that way, yet relieved that she didn't have to face him until she finished her investigation.

With few servants in their house, it had been easy to slip out. Since Earl Stratten's town was around the corner she decided to walk. Ordering a carriage would have attracted too much attention to her departure. Besides it was sunny and the walk would give her a chance to figure out what she would say to Earl Stratten if he happened to be home.

Before she could complete that thought, she found herself staring up at Stratten's door with its gargoyle knocker. Phoebe swallowed hard. Did she really have the guts to follow through on this plan? Of course, she did. Percy needed her. She squared her shoulders and lifted the knocker.

She was greeted by a huge burly man who looked nothing like a butler ought to. He ushered her into the entry way to wait.

She was right about the Earl Stratten's other identity, Phoebe thought as she glanced around his receiving room where she was surrounded by all sorts of paintings, masks and other objects from all over the world. Hugh would have gone crazy here.

"I know I should have stayed in the entryway," she said as Earl Stratten came towards her. "But I just had to see these wonderful things you collected."

He grinned. "My treasures do have that effect on people. I'm afraid my wife is gone for the day. She went shopping."

"I didn't come to see her, my lord."

He cocked his head, giving her a quizzical look.

She cleared her throat, summoning her courage. Her speech sounded good on the walk over here, but now in the room with the infamous man, she wanted to chicken out.

"What can I do for you, my dear?"

"Can we go some where private and talk?"

"Come to my study." He walked, letting her follow him through the maze of Egyptian artifacts, suits of armor and gold statues of half dressed people.

His study looked exactly the way she always imagined it, filled to the brim with treasures. His desk was piled high with papers.

Motioning for her to sit in a huge leather chair, he moved some papers, so he could see her before he sat behind the large ornately carved desk.

Phoebe squeezed her hands together. Now, that she was here, she had no idea where to start. Silence hung heavy between them as the minutes ticked away on the huge clock.

"What can I do for you, my child?" He lit his pipe and took in a big draw. Fragrant smoke encircled his head.

She blinked, staring at him. How could this grandfatherly looking man be the eccentric earl, who had all the adventures?

"I need help or rather my brother needs help."

"Yes, I heard about Atwood's arrest. I can't believe he'd kill Neville. Not that the bugger didn't deserve it, but I can't see your brother doing that and leaving his family to pick up the pieces."

Phoebe snorted. "My brother doesn't give a fig what happens to us."

"That's where you're wrong." He pointed the end of his pipe at her. "Your brother cares too much. He just doesn't know how to show it. I'm sure that's how he got in the fix in the first place. I'm not sure, though, how I can help."

"Before I tell you, you have to promise not tell my husband about our conversation."

He frowned, appearing to consider it, puffing on his pipe. "This will remain between us."

"Good." Relief poured over her. "I'm not sure where to start, so I'll just try to go back to the beginning." Phoebe took a deep breath and plunged forward. "I have been contacted by a man who calls himself Lord Justice. He wanted me to give him something in return for information that might save my brother."

"And did you?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I found what he wanted, but I don't know if I should go through with the exchange."

"I see. Why are you sharing this with me instead of your husband?"

"Lord Justice made me promise to not tell my husband."

"Ah. A clear sign the man is up to no good. What exactly does he want?"

"A book. Actually it is a rare book."

"And you've gotten possession of this book or are you wanting me to help you acquire it?"

"I found it in the late duke's study. I'm just afraid after reading some of it that people may be hurt if it fell into the wrong hands."

His pleasant expression didn't change, but his large body tensed. "Why tell me this?"

She sighed, pulling the book out of her coat. "Because I have a feeling that you most of all might be hurt."

His face went ashen as she handed it across the desk to him.

"If I can figure out from reading this that you are the Eccentric Earl, then others could too."

He held up his hands, refusing to take the book from her. "My identity is the least of the consequences of this sorry tale. It is cursed. All who have had anything to do with it have died."

Ice coursed through her veins. "Then what should I do?"

"I'd say burn it, but you are in too deep. You've read enough, I presume, to know the secrets it details."

She nodded.

"Then go home and confess all of this to your husband. He is the only one left who can break the curse and end it once and for all."

"But Lord Justice said..."

He sat down his pipe and rose, rounding the desk to sit on the edge close to her. "You are in danger, there is no doubt, but Lord Justice miscalculated. He is also in danger. More so than you. For this time he won't escape."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't. But it isn't for me to elaborate. It is time for Ravensthorpe to face the past."

He strode to the door and threw it open. "Roarke," he hollered, shutting it.

Within moments a very large man appeared.

Phoebe stood nervously, unsure of what to say.

"Take Lady Phoebe home."

"I can walk."

Stratten took her hands. "Indulge an old man, who has made too many mistakes."

Oliver stood, arms behind his back, watching out the window as Roarke walked Lady Phoebe down the street. Ice coursed through his veins. Justin was alive and free to cause trouble. He would give Phoebe a chance to tell Burke. Then he would visit him in case she did not. He only hoped this time the curse could be lifted or they were all doomed.

\* \* \* \*

"Burke!" Phoebe shouted as she came through the door.

"His Grace is off making inquiries about your brother, Your Grace," Horace said stiffly. "He didn't inquire about your whereabouts, so I didn't have to lie. His Grace just wanted me to inform you that he will be home in time for the evening meal."

The older man had protected her. Phoebe's heart slammed in her chest. Burke would be angry when he discovered she had gone off alone. No telling what he'd do when he found out, so she had to make use of whatever time she had before her husband returned to read and piece together what she could. Maybe if she understood what happened, she could understand why they were all so afraid.

"Thank you, Horace. I'll be in my room. Have someone tell me when my husband gets home."

It took all her willpower to walk up the stairs. Aware that Horace was watching her, she continued walking until she was out of his sight and then she ran to her room, closing the door behind her, flopped down on the bed and opened the book to the middle and began reading.



## Chapter Nineteen

Phoebe had no idea how long she had been lying there reading. She felt like she was peeking into someone else's private life and not liking what she saw. Maybe she was lucky she had couldn't ever meet the men in the story. Because if she could, she'd give them all a piece of her mind. Especially the late Duke of Ravensthorpe. Brandon would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Imagine after losing their money in a big poker game, he had thought to gain back his wealth by toying with the affections of a gold-miner's daughter. He had promised her father to give the boyish girl lady lessons in return for a part of the ownership of the mine the old man thought was played out. She had a sinking feeling Rebecca was falling for the smooth-talking Englishman and the ending wouldn't be pretty. She flipped the book back open to read more.

*"Why are you practicing to be something that already are?" Sheldon looked up as Rebecca strolled in his tent store all dressed up like a lady.*

Sheldon. She blinked. Daphne and Reed's father. Why could Rebecca only see Brandon when Sheldon was much more of a gentleman? Love was fickle sometimes. She began reading again.

*She thrust the supply list at him. "Brandon convinced me that I need to be a lady to get a proper husband."*

*"To get a proper husband or get Brandon for a husband? Even though, he is heir to a duke title, do you really want someone you can only get by not being yourself?"*

*Who was he kidding? Of course, she wanted Brandon. Damn Derek for losing all their money in that poker game. Damn Brandon for giving her false hope of a relationship with her in order to gain her father's mine.*

*"What is wrong with wanting a someday duke? I'll have the last laugh at the ladies who talk behind my back. What about you? I thought you were after the easy riches of the gold fields."*

*"I've learned there is no quick path to being rich. With all the gold miners here there needs to be places for them to buy supplies. That's where the money is to be made. Selling supplies to those who dream of instant wealth."*

*"Is that what you want--to be rich?"*

*Sheldon shrugged. "I used to think so. I was just sure that the next turn of the card would set me for life. Now, I've discovered I'd rather be comfortable and worry free."*

*She fingered the only dress in the store.*

*"That would look good on you, but I prefer you the way you were."*

*"Dressed like a man." She waved a dismissive hand. "I seriously doubt that."*

*"Being yourself. You don't have to impress me. If your father thinks about it, he doesn't need you to impress him, either."*

*She let go of the dress as if it were hot.*

*"You're just like all the other slick talking Englishmen. You only want me because Brandon does."*

*"Think what you like. It doesn't change anything."*

Phoebe couldn't stand it. She had to know what happened next. She flipped through the pages, finding the next part with Rebecca.

*"How could you?" Rebecca marched into Brandon's hotel room after he opened the door. He stood with his mouth and shirt hanging open.*

*"How could I what, my dear?"*

*"Don't you 'my dear' me." She poked him in his warm, bare chest. "I thought you cared about me."*

*"I do. I helped you become a lady, didn't I?"*

*"It was to win a bet with my father." She held up her hand. "Don't deny it. I overheard the whole conversation. Then Sheldon made me understand."*

*"Sheldon doesn't know a damn thing about how I feel, Becca." He reached out for her, but she backed up, tears running down her cheeks.*

*"You never saw me as a woman."*

*"That's not true. In fact, I couldn't see you as anything else." He grabbed her shoulder, yanking her into his arms. His mouth came down on hers, hot and hungry. She trembled in his arms.*

*He pulled back, looking deep into her eyes. "I wanted you from the first day."*

*"Then prove it to me."*

*Brandon lifted her his arms, kicking the door shut behind them.*

Phoebe swallowed hard. Brandon made love to Rebecca. That meant...? She flipped further to find out what happened next.

*"You son of a bitch." Sheldon slammed Brandon against the wall of their boarding room. "How could you?" He growled.*

*Brandon shoved him away. "She called my bluff."*

*"So you're leaving just like that?"*

*"Want to take another swing at me?" Brandon held up his hands in mock surrender.*

*Sheldon lifted his fists, but ended up kicking the wall.*

*Without a word, Brandon stalked into the hallway.*

*Kyle caught him outside. "You lost your bluff. Got emotionally involved, didn't you?"*

*"I'm returning home. I have enough passage for the both of us."*

Phoebe sniffled, wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. Poor Rebecca. She should have known that Rebecca didn't end up with Brandon, since Burke's mother's name was Meredith. She shifted positions and flipped more pages, hoping for a happy ending, but not counting on it.

*"He left me too." Sheldon dropped down beside a crying Rebecca on the grassy knoll.*

*She looked over at him. "I don't care."*

*"I'll let you believe that."*

*"What do you want?" Her voice was hoarse with raw emotions.*

*"To marry you," he said softly.*

*"Go to hell."*

*"No thanks. I've been there watching you and Brandon."*

*"I can't marry you." She stood, stalking off up the hill.*

*Sheldon ran to catch up with her. He grabbed her arm, turning her around to face him.*

*"We've all made mistakes. My father disowned me. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."*

*"What do you know about my problems?"*

*He raised his hands. "Nothing--just guessing."*

*"I won't be your penance."*

*"If getting my dream is my penance, I'll gladly accept it any day. Don't you know that I love you, Rebecca? I could go back with my money and prove my father wrong, but that would be a hollow victory. My life is here with you."*

*"You'd be sorry."*

*He tilted up her chin. "Not in this lifetime. If you can overlook my past, I can yours."*

*She opened her mouth, but he sealed her protests with a kiss.*

*"We'll conquer whatever happens. I love Brandon like a brother. We grew up together. He conned me into many things. I won't hold it against you if he charmed you, too."*

Phoebe closed her eyes. She now knew why Reed Townsend looked so much like her husband and why the dowager duchess wanted to cut him.

"Horace said you wanted to see me."

Burke's voice brought her back to reality.

"He was worried, because you had disappeared all afternoon."

Phoebe slammed shut the book and stared at her husband. How on earth was she going to tell him all she learned this afternoon? Would he be angry that she had so much intimate knowledge of his family's private scandals?

\* \* \* \*

"Mrs. Duchess, would you like to go on a picnic?" Cassie asked.

Meredith wanted to smack a grinning Drew. He knew Cassie was too hard to dismiss.

"We have a basket packed. Papa says there is a place by the stream. But we have to ask you on accounts it is on your land."

"So that's the only reason you want me to come?" She shot Drew an inquisitive look.

Drew ruffled his daughter's hair. "You know better than that, Merry."

"You really shouldn't call me that."

"Why? It suits you more than Meredith."

Odd, only her very close friends called her that. Yet, when he said, it sounded far more intimate.

Cassie tugged her hand. "Are we going?"

"Yes, Sweetie. Will you go run and tell my cook to pack some cookies and tea."

Cassie grinned, running off in the direction she pointed.

She straightened up, glaring at Drew and crossed her arms over her chest.

He shrugged, not the least bit intimidated by a look that usually sent people scurrying. "I told you I'd come back."

"Not fair. You brought reinforcements."

He grinned sheepishly. "I'll take any edge I can get. I'm shameless when it

comes to you.”

Before she could respond, Cassie bounded back into the room. He had her cornered with no wiggle room.

The spot Drew had chosen with its lush grass and cool shade trees and view of the bubble stream was perfect for an outing. She sat next to him on the blanket, watching Cassie over under the trees making flower necklaces for her dolls.

“I’m glad you agreed to come.”

She glanced over at him nervously as he scooted closer to her.

“Cassie really enjoyed this day.”

“I enjoyed it, too.” Her gaze dropped. “I just don’t want her to get too attached to me.”

“Why is that?” He asked in her ear.

His warm breath sent a shiver of awareness through her. Why did the man have to be so damn desirable?

“I told you that it can’t work between us. It wouldn’t be right to expose her to the scandal of our affair.”

Drew pulled away from her, looking offended. “Who said anything about an affair? My intentions are honorable.”

Meredith stared at him. It hadn’t occurred to her that he might want marriage.

“You can’t be surprised. Surely you can see that Cassie and I are smitten.”

She stood, tears forming in her eyes. “I should never have let things get this far.”

Drew caught her arm as she started to leave. “Tell me what I’ve done wrong,” He said softly. “Is it because I’m not a peer?”

She swallowed hard, trying to free the lump in her throat, shaking her head.

“Then why?”

“I killed my husband,” she whispered so softly that she wasn’t sure he heard her.

\* \* \* \*

“I’m sorry,” Phoebe said, wiping her red-rimmed eyes as she moved from her stomach onto her knees to face him.

Burke didn’t know what she had to be sorry about. All he knew was that she looked utterly miserable. Her face was tear-streaked and ashen.

“I’d say that book needs to go if it is that sad.” Burke sat on the end of the bed, not sure how close she wanted him.

She sniffled. “For more reasons than you know.” She lowered her gaze for a moment before looking directly at him. “I have a confession to make. I now know why your mother wants to cut Earl Holbrooke.”

Burke stiffened, but didn’t respond. He waited to see just what she thought she knew.

“The whole sordid story is in this....” She held out a book to him.

He took it, slowly making out the words of the golden title letters. He swallowed hard. It was *the* book. The one that cursed his father, the Townsends and late Earl Holbrooke. He thought all the remaining books had been destroyed.

“Where did you find this?”

“In a drawer of your study under some papers.”

Why the hell had she been going through his desk? Her hands were shaking so that he couldn’t very well rail at her the way he wanted to. Instead, he took a deep

calming breath. “Why didn’t you tell me about this last night when I found you reading?”

“I wanted to know more before you took it away from me.”

There was something she wasn’t telling him. He could see it in her frightened expression. She was trembling.

“More about what?”

She dropped her head. Her voice was so soft that he could barely understand her.

“I was contacted by a man who called himself Lord Justice. He offered to help me free Percy in return for this book. When I found it, of course, I had to read it. After I realized how scandalous the contents were, I didn’t know what to do, so I went to see Earl Stratten and he told me to give it to you.”

Justin was alive. Burke felt a shiver run up his spine. Not only that, but he was now involving Phoebe in his deadly game of revenge. Would he ever leave his family alone?

“Burke,” she said, reaching out to him. He moved away. The look on her face told him that he had been quiet too long.

Phoebe wished she could read her husband’s expression. His avoiding her touch wasn’t a good sign. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or hurt that she went to Stratten instead of him.

“I know I should have told you.”

“But you didn’t think I could handle things.” He stood abruptly.

She scrambled after him. “That’s not true.”

“Then why did you tell him and not me?”

The accusation hung heavy between them.

“You beg me to trust you and confide in you and yet, you run off to someone else the minute you get frightened.”

Phoebe opened and closed her mouth. She reached out to touch him, but he shrugged her off. She crossed her arms over her chest to hide the hurt.

Burke stepped back. He knew he was overreacting, but dammit he couldn’t help himself. Having his own wife go to someone else for help stung. Did anyone in his life think him capable?

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

He was too. His throat was too tight to respond, so he just nodded. He held out his hand for the book and she reluctantly gave it to him.

He was afraid to look at her, so without a word, he turned to leave.

## Chapter Twenty

He had been avoiding her all evening. Phoebe sighed, staring at the ceiling of her bedroom. As the clock downstairs chimed midnight, she knew Burke wasn't planning to visit her tonight. Her heart ached at the thought of not sleeping nestled in her husband's arms.

As the last chime echoed through the house, she threw off her blankets. Someone had to put an end to this.

She padded across the floor, through the dressing room to the door connecting their rooms. She held her hand poised to knock and then decided against it. She couldn't bear for him to turn her away.

Taking a deep breath, she shoved the door open. The room was empty. Phoebe blinked back tears. Where had Burke gone?

He hadn't left the house. Of that much she was reasonably sure. The question was where did he go to sulk?

Maddie hid in her dollhouse. Percy retreated to their father's study. Hugh rarely sulked and Mother always retired dramatically to her bedroom. She didn't have a spot she felt comfortable in this house. At home, she liked the sunroom. It always cheered her up. Not knowing this house very well, she had no idea where Burke went to be alone. He didn't have a favorite room that she knew of, except the bedroom. A tingle went over her at that thought.

Without a goal in mind, she began wondering the dark hallways. This townhouse was huge. It had more than one wing and more rooms than the one her family owned. He could be anywhere.

He could even have left, she thought glumly.

As she turned the corner to go down a hallway, a light under one of the doors caught her eye. Her heart jumped. Could it be?

She pushed the door open without knocking. Her husband sat on a big bed with ledgers spread all across his lap. He jumped up when she entered the room, knocking some of them on the floor. He hastily picked them up.

"I've been looking all over for you. I had no idea where you went when you were unhappy."

He didn't respond, just stared at her.

Something about him was making her uncomfortable. She couldn't put her finger on what. He just seemed different. More reserved. Less approachable. He had a serious look on his face that she had never seen before.

"I was just going through accounts." His voiced sounded forced.

"I can see that. Why are you doing it in a bedroom that I didn't know you used instead of the study?" She stepped forward, painfully aware that he stepped back. Since Burke had decided to marry her, he was rarely near her that he didn't touch her. More often than not, she was on his lap.

His odd behavior stung.

"I can spread them out here. It's late. Why aren't you in bed?"

"I couldn't sleep without you. I'm sorry." She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his shirt.

He stiffened and she started to pull away. He let out a slow, deep breath and pulled her close. His large hands made soothing circles on her back. Odd, she didn't feel the usual tingle of awareness that came whenever he touched her.

"Things will look better in the morning."

She wasn't so sure. Something was wrong. Very wrong and she had no idea how to make it right.

\* \* \* \*

It was late and he hadn't planned to come here when he took off walking. But somehow he'd found his way to the family crypt where several generations of his family were buried. Hesitating for a moment, he pushed open the heavy wooden door. He hadn't been here since his father had been laid to rest. Maybe it was time he faced him and his feelings.

Moonlight cast an eerie light through the open door as he walked past the row of tombs. When he reached the one engraved with his father's name, he leaned back against the cold stone wall. Then slid down it until he sat on the cold marble floor. He drew his knees up, resting his chin on them, staring up at his father's tomb.

"Papa." He snorted shaking his head. "Funny, now that it's too late, I wish I would have listened to you. Could still listen to you."

"I'm glad to know that I'm not the only one who comes to talk to our father."

Burke didn't look up as Barclay lowered himself down on the floor beside him. He'd wondered if Barclay was back ever since Reynolds said that someone had mistakenly spotted him in a gaming hell. He'd know in his gut as soon the trouble started, Barclay wouldn't be far behind. He had hoped this time would be different, but as usual, Barclay didn't think he could handle things. He just wished to hell it didn't hurt so much.

They sat in silence for a long time. He would be damned if he'd give Barclay an easy opening.

Barclay cleared his throat. "I met your wife. Have to hand it to you, she is stunning."

Burke's lips curved into a smile. "She took me anyway."

"If I wasn't so in love with Daphne, I gave her a serious look."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah. I didn't tell her who I was. Guess that was payback for the way you played with Daphne."

Burke nodded his understanding.

Silence hung between them.

"I was surprised that you married so fast." Barclay grinned, shaking his head. "Then again, after meeting her, maybe not. I know about the trouble with Percy. I ran into Lady Angela. She was in the alley behind The Black Sheep trying to help Percy by getting information."

Burke paled. "Bloody hell. I promised Percy I'd watch out for her. I didn't dream she'd act on her own. I should have known, though."

"Don't worry. I sent her home. I think I convinced her to stay there. If not, I

have a man following her.”

Burk let out a sigh. “Thanks. Percy would kill me if anything happened to her. I think he loves her.”

They lapsed into silence again.

“What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t shake the feeling that you needed me. Daphne warned me about meddling....”

Burke glanced at him. “But you can’t help yourself. Mother would be proud.”

Barclay snorted. “No, she’ll be piqued when she realizes that I’ve been in town and haven’t contacted her.”

Burke laughed.

“Seriously though, I want to know what is going on. And don’t tell me nothing. I know better.”

Letting out a long sigh, Burke tipped his head back against the wall. “Justin is still alive. He contacted Phoebe to convince her to bring him the book in return for helping free her brother, Percy, from prison.”

Barclay closed his eyes, letting out a harsh breath. “She found my copy, didn’t she? I should have burned it, but I didn’t have the heart to. It was all I had left of Father’s life. Did she give it to him?”

“No. But she has figured out about Stratten’s secret life. She went to him for help. Fortunately, he told her to come to me.” Burke stood and began pacing. “I can’t solve this bloody puzzle, because I can’t read the frigging book.”

“Don’t feel bad. I haven’t been able to force myself to read the whole blasted thing either.”

Burke stopped, staring at him. “You haven’t?” His jaw dropped.

Barclay shook his head. “I couldn’t bear to know the truth. I feel responsible for opening up all those wounds. This is my fault.”

Burke slide down the wall next to Barclay. “It didn’t help that I shirked my responsibilities.” He put his hands over his face. “And you don’t know the worst of it.”

“That Justin took our money.”

Burke groaned. “How did you know?”

“I’ve been through the ledgers. The funny thing is that he thinks we’re broke.”

“What do you mean thinks? We are broke.”

“No, we’re not. Our Father had two accounts. Since he didn’t trust anybody, he held money back from his advisors.”

“You kept that from me.” Burke rose in one fluid motion. “You didn’t trust me, either.”

Barclay stood to face him. “That’s not true.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” Burke shoved past him. “Go ahead, rescue me. I cease to care what you think.”

He stalked out, leaving the lantern on the floor.

Good Gad, Daphne had been right. He’d damaged him more than their father ever could have. He ran trembling fingers over the cold inscription. “We may have lost him this time, Papa.”

\* \* \* \*

*I killed my husband.* Drew couldn’t have been more shocked than if she’d



slapped him. He let her leave, which he knew was a mistake at the time, but he was too stunned to do anything else.

He'd taken Cassie home and tried to speak with Meredith. She had refused his call. So now, he was reduced to tossing rocks at her bedroom window. At least he hoped it was her bedroom window.

After a few moments, Meredith opened the window. "I told you to go away."

"You knew I wouldn't let this go without answers."

Meredith sighed at the sight of Drew standing there in the moonlight. The blasted man was too appealing for his own good.

"I told you too much already."

He didn't reply. With the grace of a cat he climbed up the trellis. Before she could move away, they were face to face.

"This isn't a conversation we need to have at a yell."

She nodded, stepping back to allow him in the room.

"I never told another person about this," she whispered, unable to meet his gaze.

He cupped her chin in his warm hand and lifted it. "Your secrets are safe with me. Did he--hurt you?"

She shook her head sadly. "We hurt each other. I forced him to marry me. His father and mine had an agreement. When he went off in search of gold, I hated him for leaving me. Brandon wrote me while they were in America that he wanted to end our engagement. I thought I loved him and couldn't live without him." She let out a harsh laugh. "I went crying to my father, who put pressure on his. Old Duke Ravensthorpe demanded that he come home and honor our agreement or he'd disinherit him."

"So he took out his anger on you?" Drew asked softly, brushing a thumb down her cheek.

"That was just it. He tried in the beginning to be nice. I kept him at a distance. I wanted to punish him for daring to leave me. After the boys were born, we settled in. Brandon was moody. Some days we got along and other times he ran wild."

Drew nodded his understanding. "You loved him anyway."

"I tried. It wasn't always easy. There were times when I didn't like him."

"You don't sound like a woman who killed her husband."

Meredith tensed as he put his arms around her. That didn't deter him from offering her comfort. He didn't speak, just held her, patiently waiting for her to continue.

"Three years ago my husband went mad." Her voice shook. "He stopped sleeping and began having nightmares. He was so jumpy that I couldn't talk to him. At first I blamed my son, Barclay, for opening up the past. I later learned, though, that Justin Langford, Baron Warwick, was frightening my husband and his oldest friends to death in a twisted game of revenge."

"If Baron Warwick did this then how can you believe it is your fault? I don't see how you can claim you killed your husband."

She sighed, pulling away from him. "I knew Brandon was unstable. Our staff wouldn't go near him. He had all but locked himself in the study. I should have removed the gun, but I got busy and that night he turned it on himself."

The rest was muffled when she covered her hands over her flushed face.

"I never meant to tell anyone outside the family. It would ruin us. We could lose our inheritance and title."

Drew pulled her back into his arms, brushing a kiss across her temple. "Shush. What you told me stays between us."

Relief poured over her and she gave in to the tears that had been building up inside of her for years.

He rocked her and let her cry.

They stood in silence for a long moment after she stopped crying.

"Are you afraid Reed will take over you son's role?"

She tensed, pulling away from him. She wiped her eyes, trying to get a hold of herself.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Come now. I'm not blind. I've seen the resemblance between Burke and Reed."

"Are you threatening me?" She snapped.

"Good heavens no. I'm just trying to remove all obstacles from our path. I think you need to make peace with your past before we can go forward."

"You assume too much."

"Do I? You can't tell me you're immune to me. I can read the feelings in your eyes."

"Having them and acting on them are two different things. I have a life here."

"Admit it. Your job here is finished. Burke is a grown man. He doesn't need you to meddle. Cassie and I on the other hand need you very much."

"It's more complicated than that."

"Is it? Your husband is gone. Hopefully finding the peace he missed during his last months on earth. Do you have to wait to go too before you find peace?"

She turned away from him, arms folded. The fact that he was right didn't make his words sting any less.

Drew turned her around. "It is hard to start over. I know. I lived a dangerous life as a Federal Marshall. I vowed never to marry, but Jane caught my heart. I tried to settle down on a ranch, but trouble found me. When she was killed, I hunted down those men and dealt them justice."

Meredith gasped.

"I left all that behind when Reed asked me to come here. Cassie needed a new start. For some of us forgiveness and peace are hard to find."

"I don't know if I can let go of what is expected of me and do as I wish," she whispered brokenly.

"All I ask for now is that you think about it." He kissed her hard. "We could all use a second chance."

\* \* \* \*

Burke found Phoebe pacing in the front hallway. Before she could protest he scooped her up in his arms. He wanted to lose himself in her. No questions. No debates.

He didn't give her a chance to talk when they hit her bedroom. His mouth came down on hers as he let her feet touch the ground.

Phoebe could feel the desperation in his kiss. He needed her and she let him have her.

Before she could think to protest, he had her pinned to the door and was inside her warm, slick passage.

"Ah, Phoebe. I need you," he groaned as they climaxed together.

Without a word, he undressed her and himself before laying her down on the bed. He pulled her close stroking her back.

There was a stillness about him that frightened her. This was the first time he had not talked during their loving making. She had so many questions, but some how as he held her close she knew there would be another time for answers.

## Chapter Twenty One

He left the book. Phoebe's breath caught in her throat as she noticed the Eccentric Earl book on the nightstand. Why hadn't he hidden it from her and those who wanted to steal it?

She looked over at her sleeping husband. Should she take it and find out the remaining answers? Her fingers trembled as she picked it up. Quietly, she padded across the room to her own. Just this once she would look again and then be done. If he caught her it would be worth the risk.

Phoebe gently closed the door and found a light near her bed. She slid down on the floor setting the light beside her.

She flipped through the pages looking for a scene with Derek. Ah here, right after Brandon left Rebecca.

*"I'm glad I found you." Brandon dropped down on a stool next to Derek in the dark tavern.*

*Derek took a swallow of whiskey. "Yeah, why is that?"*

*"I have booked us our passage home."*

*"How the bloody hell can we go home? We lost all our money." He motioned for another shot.*

*"My father has ordered me home. He is ill. According to the letter from my mother he doesn't have long to live. She wants me to grow up and accept my responsibilities."*

*"Bully for you," Derek slurred.*

*"What about you? Do you have any plans? Sheldon is staying here. Kyle is heading back with me. Stratten left this morning to go exploring some other mines."*

*"I can't go home with out money for my estate taxes."*

*"Then you're going to stay?"*

*"I have no frigging idea."*

"I thought you agreed to let me handle this situation," Burke said in a tired tone.

Phoebe jumped at the sound of his voice. He held out his hand for the book.

She stood in one fluid motion to face him, avoiding his outstretched hand. "You set me up."

Burke dropped his hand. She was right. There was no denying it. He knew the temptation for her to read the book would be too great for her to ignore.

"You had to know I'd be drawn to it. So why offer the book to me if you didn't want me to read it?"

How could he answer that?

"I don't understand. Why haven't you read it yourself?"

Burke looked down at the floor.

"I can't," he said softly, lifting his gaze to judge her expression. "I can't read."

He waited for the look of shock and pity to cross her face, but it never came. Instead, she just stood patiently waiting for him to finish explaining.

"I can't read. No." He waved a frustrated hand. "That isn't exactly true. I can read. It is just hard for me. It is such a slow process that I don't bother trying anymore. Now, you know why my father would rather not have had me inherit. I tried to get him to disown me, but he steadfastly refused."

"Then he obviously was only looking at what you couldn't do instead of seeing the person that you are."

Burke blinked. She hadn't recoiled or offered to help him.

"I have to admit after reading this book that I'm not a big fan of your father's. He didn't strike me as being a very nice person. I can't imagine you deliberately hurting someone the way he did Rebecca."

He had never looked at his father's behavior that way before. He was stunned that after he told her his shameful secret, she was still looking at him like he could solve all her problems. It amazed him that there was no doubt in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. If you've never read it, you probably don't know what happened between your father and Rebecca." She patted a spot beside her for him to sit down.

He did know the story. That part he'd had another friend read to him, but he let her continue. She launched into the tale without leaving out any details. Her tone told him exactly what she thought of his father's behavior.

He listened patiently, relieved that she was finally opening up to him.

"Do you think Reed is your half brother? It sounds that way from the story. Is that why your mother is uncomfortable around him?"

"Considering his looks, I'd say yes. He is the image of my father. I'll have to show you the portrait of my father sometime. If you saw that there would be no doubt in your mind."

He paused, sliding his arm around her and giving her a warm squeeze. "Thanks for sharing with me. It is nice to know what happened, but that still doesn't explain why Justin is so upset. I don't know what became of his father."

"Who was?"

"Derek."

"I'd forgotten about him. I got so caught up in the love story."

"Will you read the rest to me? In order to solve this puzzle, I need all of the pieces to fit together." He held out his hand.

She nodded, taking it.

He pulled her close. Lifting her up in his arms, he carried her to his room and settled her on his lap in a big chair by the fire.

"From what I read before you found me, your father intended to take them all home with him. Sheldon wanted to stay with Rebecca. Kyle said he'd go if they could talk Derek in coming along. Kyle had been worried because Derek had been depressed and drinking heavily after he lost their money and discovered the mine was tapped out."

She flipped through the book. "We need to find out what happened between the three of them before they returned."

Burke didn't respond. He just wrapped her up in his arms. The nagging feeling that this story ended badly wouldn't leave him. He knew Justin's father never returned. He just didn't know why.

*"We can't just leave Derek here." Kyle pulled on Brandon's arm.*

*"Why the hell not?"*

*"Always so caring." Kyle rolled his eyes. "We have to talk to him at least."*  
*Brandon groaned as he followed Kyle down the mine shaft.*  
*As they entered the mine a gun exploded. Rocks rained down on them.*  
Burke shivered. It couldn't be a coincidence that Derek died that way, too, or could it?  
*Brandon grabbed Kyle's arm. "We have to get out of here."*  
*"Not without Derek."*  
*"I was afraid you'd say that."*  
*They had to climb over rocks to get to an area where they heard the gun shot.*  
*Brandon shown the lantern around until it illuminated Derek. He could hardly look at his friend. Derek's face was gone, splattered all over the rocks.*  
Burke closed his eyes. Images of his father's death assaulted him. No wonder those men all had nightmares. Did Justin know all of this or did he just try to frighten them in hopes of them telling him.  
"Are you all right?"  
Burke blinked, suddenly aware that Phoebe had stopped reading and was staring at him.  
"Go on. I have to know the rest of it."  
"Are you sure?"  
"I'm sure," he said hoarsely.  
"Holy hell," Brandon muttered.  
She blushed at the swear word and he squeezed her shoulder to continue.  
*Kyle sucked in a harsh breath. Rocks rained down again as the walls seemed to shake.*  
*"We have to get out of here." Brandon glanced around at falling rocks.*  
*Kyle blinked back tears, still staring at Derek.*  
*Another rumble made them both jump.*  
"We have to leave."  
"I know," Kyle groaned. *As he leaned down to move rocks off Derek's broken body more rocks rained down on him.*  
"Kyle," Brandon shouted as rocks began covering Kyle.  
*Frantically Brandon pulled the rocks off Kyle. The lantern went out.*  
Phoebe gasped. She shivered. "Can you image how scary it was to be down there in the dark?"  
He pulled her close. "That explains why my father was never without a light."  
"I can't say as I blame him."  
"Hold still, I have another match." With trembling, fumbling attempts, Brandon finally relit the lantern. Her voice grew stronger with each part.  
"I'm not sure I can move." Kyle's voice was weak.  
"You have to." Brandon pulled up on him. "I can't leave you behind, too."  
"My leg."  
"Lean on me."  
Kyle nodded as they slowly, painfully made their way out of the mine. As they got to the opening, another rumble sounded.  
"Why the hell didn't you tell me you were going after Derek?" Sheldon helped steady Kyle as Brandon climbed out.

*"I figured you were too busy."*

*"For my friends? No, I'm not like you." He sat Kyle on a rock.*

*Brandon lunged at him. "You want a piece of me. Get it over with."*

*The ground behind them shifted as rocks flooded the opening. Brandon and Sheldon froze in mid punch.*

*"Derek," Kyle groaned.*

*"We have to get him out." Sheldon began throwing stones.*

*Kyle winced as he pulled himself up and caught Sheldon's arm. "It is too late. He killed himself. The gunshot triggered the cave in."*

*Sheldon turned white. "We can't leave him buried there."*

*"I don't see that we have a hell of a lot of choice," Brandon said.*

*They all grew quiet, staring at one another.*

Phoebe slammed the book shut. "I can't take reading anymore. What happened to those men?"

"They led normal lives until a couple of years ago when Justin drove them all stark raving mad."

## Chapter Twenty Two

Phoebe shivered at Burke's softly spoken words. "How?" she whispered.

"By playing on their guilt and fears."

She turned in his arms so she could read Burke's expression. "What happened to them?"

He was silent for so long that she feared he wouldn't answer.

"The late Earl Holbrooke fell to his death from the balcony of his house in the middle of the night. My brother found him the next morning along with a couple of servants who went looking for the old man when he came to call. No one could ever prove he was murdered, but I know he was. His heir and wife, Sheldon and Rebecca, were run off a mountain road." He paused.

His voice shook with emotion. "My father shot himself in the head."

Phoebe gasped. She had no idea.

"That's not the official version of the story," he said slowly. "Mother and Barclay told the world that he died from heart problems. Our family would be ruined if anyone knew what really happened. The crown could take our title."

"I won't tell." She buried her face in his chest, putting her arms securely around him.

His arms closed around her, too.

"I know," he replied softly. "It's hard to talk about. My mother...."

"Locked that door to hide the truth. No wonder she was so upset when I brought it up. I feel awful."

Burke stroked her trembling back. "I understand why she did, although, I don't agree with her decision."

"I never meant to hurt you when I kept my discovery of the book from you. I know this is a poor excuse, but I wanted to help my brother. I was afraid you'd shut me out of the investigation once you knew what I found."

"I would have. I'm not very good at sharing things with others."

"I'm so glad you found out." She squeezed him again as relief poured over her.

"Now, that we have no secrets we can plan how to save Percy."

Burke's arms tightened around her. "Absolutely not."

"But...." Her heart sank. He was going to shut her out after all.

"There is no but. There is no *we* in the plan. Baron Warwick is crazy. He wants to destroy my family and everyone connected to them. I'm sorry that your family got drawn into his twisted game."

"Then you think my brother might be innocent?" Her voice sounded hopeful.

"It could be a coincidence. Since Justin contacted you, I have my doubts."

"Are you going to give him the book?"

"I have no idea what to do."

"Percy wouldn't want you to ruin your family to save him. There must be another way."



"I wish to hell I knew what that was. All I know is that Justin started this, but I have to finish it."

\* \* \* \*

"Mrs. Stewart." Reed was surprised to see Burke's mother slipping through the hedges. He would have expected her to come to the door with a calling card.

She dusted herself off, looking a bit flustered at having been caught walking through the bushes.

"Hello, Holbrooke. I'm sorry to barge in like this, but I wanted to talk to you without the servants listening. I thought coming to the door might attract attention."

*And sneaking through the bushes wouldn't?* Reed fought back a smile because she looked so serious.

"Come and sit. My wife has done a good job arranging this garden for company. You are the first person to actually visit."

She sat, hands folded on the stone bench.

Reed sat across from her with his hands on his knees. She looked so scared that he wanted to comfort her, but didn't know how. Instead he cleared his throat.

"Whatever you have to say, Mrs. Stewart, it can't be that bad. It is Mrs. Stewart, right? I have to confess that despite all Eve's reminders, I still get what to call people wrong more often than naught."

She smiled faintly. "The proper greeting is Your Grace, but Mrs. Stewart is fine." She paused, taking a deep breath. "I want to apologize for the way I have treated you."

That caught him off guard. "You haven't...."

She raised her hand. "Please, let me finish. If it weren't for your wife and my son, I would have cut you directly. Heaven knows, I wanted to."

"I don't understand. Why are you apologizing because you didn't act on your impulse to cut me?"

"Because I wanted to. Because I stripped you of your legacy. You were entitled to so much more than you got."

"Whoa." He moved to the seat beside her. "You seem to be under the misconception that somehow I was mistreated. My parents loved me. No one ever made me feel less than anything. Sure, I had differences with my father. We argued sometimes. But he never treated me any different from Daphne. In fact, I never would have known about all this without Barclay contacting my father."

"That's just it. If it had been up to me he never would have done that. I wanted the past and my role in it to stay locked away."

"My mother did, too. She was none too pleased when Barclay appeared at their door. She sent the letters back that your husband wrote. I think she was afraid someday that he'd take me away from them. She died before I could ask her, but that is what I assume. Would he have?"

"I don't know what Brandon would have done if he'd known about you. I'm not sure if he knew or not. He and Sheldon exchanged a few letters. But then they started coming back unopened, so he stopped writing."

She grew silent, staring up at the sky. In a choked voice she continued without looking at him. "It would have been upsetting to him that you were cheated out of your title. Especially since he never trusted Burke to handle its responsibilities."

She put a hand over her mouth, staring wide-eyed at him. "I can't believe I said

that.”

“Are you worried that I will challenge him for the title? I’m not even sure I could if I wanted to. They seem to have strict rules about inheritance here. Believe me, being an earl is hard enough, I can’t image being a duke.”

“I cheated your parents out of a life of privilege.”

“I don’t think they missed this. My father made a fortune with his stores. They lived in a beautiful house on a mountain. I doubt my mother ever wanted for anything. She would have hated living here with all the restrictions and would have driven the society matrons crazy.”

“So they were happy?”

“Very. They loved each other.”

“I liked Sheldon. He was a good man. I’m sorry that he felt he couldn’t return to his homeland.”

“I’m not sure that was totally your doing. From what I’ve heard my grandfather was hard-headed. I think my father not returning had more to do with pride than fear of your husband.”

He watched her, realizing she had not relaxed. She was squeezing her hands so tight that the knuckles were white.

“I didn’t grow up here, so all of this doesn’t mean to me what it does to your sons.”

Her eyes began to shimmer with tears and he regretted his words.

“I mean.” He put a hand over his heart. “I want it to mean something because it did to my grandfather and I suspect to my father as well. He drew and painted so many pictures of this place. I don’t regret the way I grew up. I’d rather be outside than inside. My skills in doctoring and catching bad guys will never be totally accepted here.”

She smiled.

“I needed to settle down before learning to be a gentleman. Maybe things just worked out the way they were supposed to.”

“Maybe they did.”

“I might be out of line here, but give Drew a chance.”

She stiffened. “I beg your pardon.”

“There is more to him than you see. He is a good man. He’ll treat you right. Don’t let your past experiences keep you from loving again.”

“I,” she stood, “better be going.”

She was flushed. Reed pulled her into his arms and hugged her. She leaned into him and gave into the tears he knew she’d been fighting since she got there.

All he could do was hold her. Maybe that was enough.

“I’m sorry.” She pulled away.

“Don’t be. I’m glad we had this talk.”

She nodded, wiping her eyes.

“I’ll keep this between us. Never fear.”

“Thank you.” She turned to leave.

“Mrs. Stewart..”

“Yes.” She turned back.

“You deserve to be happy, too.”

\* \* \* \*

Justin swore as he stared down at the note on his desk. The duchess had double crossed him and told her husband after all.

Scrawled across the paper in Burke's careful block printing was: *The game is up. If you want the book you'll have to deal with me now. Let's finish this.*

*Ravensthorpe.*

So the bastard thought he could take control of the game. Well, he thought wrong. There would be only one winner and no draw.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe paced back and forth in the parlor after she saw her husband ride out. She hoped her note got there in time. That she wasn't too late. Could Burke forgive her for interfering again?

"Your Grace."

She jumped at the sound of Horace's voice and put a hand over her heart. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry, my lady, but you have callers."

This quick. Her shoulders relaxed in relief. "Send them in."

Reed strolled though the door even before Horace had a chance to get him, followed by her husband.

"Burke," she threw herself in his arms. "I know you are going to be unhappy with me, but I couldn't let you face Warwick alone."

He stiffened in her arms. His deep voice rumbled under her ear.

"Not nearly as mad as I would be if I was your husband. Right now, I'm just mildly amused."

She stepped back to stare up into a face so much like her husband's and yet there were subtle differences if she cared enough to look close. His eyes had green flecks in them. They didn't crinkle at the edges with laughter. Instead, there was a coldness to them. There was a stern set to his mouth.

Understanding slowly dawned. "Barclay? It was you the other night with ledgers."

"Guilty. I wanted to see the situation for myself before I decided to trust you."

"Your note said it was urgent," Reed interrupted.

Phoebe smacked her head. "How could I have gotten so distracted? Burke went off to confront Baron Warwick."

Reed and Barclay exchanged glances.

"I don't have time to explain. I have an idea where they might go. Take me along and I'll explain everything on the way."

"No!" Both men said in unison.

Phoebe folded her arms defiantly across her chest. "We are wasting time. I won't tell you anything."

Barclay snorted. "Burke deserves you. I might just have to stay around and watch the fireworks." He glanced at Reed, who was frowning. "I say we take her if she promises to mind us and stay out of harm's way."

Reed threw up his hands and motioned towards the door. "If she did, that would be a first," he grumbled. "Seems we all love women with a perchance for getting in the thick of things. Why should Burke's wife be different?"

## Chapter Twenty Three

"I'm surprised you came, Ravensthorpe." Justin stepped out into the moonlight alley.

Burke was shocked by Justin's rumpled appearance. He no longer looked like the dashing rake he'd once ran with. His once well tailored clothes were ratty and prison had turned some of his curly red hair gray.

"Didn't it occur to you that I could kill you?" Justin asked.

Burke shrugged, intently watching his old friend. How had they come to this pass? "You had your chance before and didn't. Besides, Barclay was meant to be heir."

"Ah, but you have a wife now. Don't you care about her?"

"As much as I do about any woman," Burke lied, hoping that if this went badly that Justin would leave Phoebe alone. The thought of her being hurt sent a jolt of panic through him. "This is between us," he said evenly.

Justin raised a red blow, but didn't respond.

"I have the book."

"Then give it to me." Justin held out his hand.

"Not until we talk. Have you actually read it?"

"As much as you have."

Burke's face heated at that comment. How unlike the old Justin to throw up in his face something they shared in private. It was a harsh reminder that he really didn't know him at all.

"It doesn't matter if you give it to me or not. I already know what happened."

"Or do you just think you know?"

Justin glared at him. "My father's friends killed him so they didn't have to share what little gold they found."

His voice held all the contempt Burke knew he must feel. Maybe if he explained things he could change Justin's mind.

"Little is the key word. In fact, I'm not sure they found any at all. The way I understand it, Sheldon Townsend was the only one who got rich from their venture and he made his money with a store."

Wrong way to start. The heat flickering in Justin's eyes told him that he'd missed his mark.

"I don't believe you," Justin spat.

"Think about it." Burke stepped closer. "They all lived off the money they inherited with their titles. My father and Norcott invested well. You know that because you handled their finances the last few years. Did you find extra money?"

"There were deeds to the mines."

"Yes, but were there signs of money from those mines?"

"Not after I shut them down."

This was pointless. He wasn't going to change his friend's perception of the past. Burke sighed, reaching into his pocket and pulled out the book. "Take it. I doubt you'll

find what you think. I'll say I'm sorry in advance."

Justin grabbed it, rubbing his thumbs over the gold lettering.

Burke turned to leave.

"Wait. You're going to give this to me and walk away?" Surprise was evident on his dirty face.

Burke realized with a jolt that he had fully expected a showdown tonight.

"I came alone. This isn't a trap. Unlike you, I value our friendship."

"How can you, when I set you up?"

A chink in the armor. Maybe they were making progress.

It was Justin's turn to step closer.

"I don't begin to understand how I could have thought we were friends for all those years while you secretly hated me. Something inside me tells me that you didn't want to hate me or maybe it is just that I want to believe that our friendship was real. That it wasn't all just part of your sick game. If I'd known your problems, I would have helped you."

"How?" He snapped. "I couldn't even help myself."

"Then our friendship was no accident?"

"When my mother's latest lover agreed to pay for my schooling, I went after you and Barclay."

"Why? How did you know?"

"Mother talked or should I say ranted when she was drinking about the Fearless Four and how they ruined her life."

"How did she know about the book?"

"She had an affair with Earl Stratten."

Burke stiffened, knowing now who paid for his education. Holy hell, that explained a great deal. He understood why Justin let Stratten live. It also explained why Stratten was reluctant to be forthcoming about the details. This was a piece of the puzzle he never would have guessed.

"Stratten thought he was too good for her. He married a commoner and a yank. Then she went back to playing the whore."

"Justin." Burke closed his eyes, hating to think about all their past pain.

"What's wrong? Don't you have the stomach for my sordid life story? Don't you want to know what kind of reprobates my mother enjoyed bringing home?"

Burke swallowed hard as Justin grabbed him by the lapels. He should push Justin off and fight back, but honestly, he didn't think he could. "Go a head and pummel me if you it will make you feel better."

Justin stared, tightening his grip on his lapels.

"What's the matter? Can't you kill up close? Can't look me in the eyes and dispatch me to hell? Was it easier frightening old men to death?"

"Are you dying to meet their fate, Ravensthorpe?"

"Are you? Or are you too afraid to pay for your crimes? The man I knew at Oxford wouldn't let an innocent man hang for his deeds. Then again, I never really knew you, did I?"

Justin blanched, shoving him backwards. "Bugger off."

Heaven help him, he wanted to walk away, but he knew he had to finish this. "I understand your hatred of the Fearless Four. I don't agree with your methods, but I

understand your motives. But why frame Percy Walcott?"

"I thought you'd be pleased that I removed Neville from the game."

"In the process framing my brother-in-law. Not bloody likely. Tell me, why Atwood? Does he have a part in this that I'm not comprehending?"

"He was merely a decoy to draw you back into the game. Besides," Justin shrugged, "he was easy."

"Unlike me." Barclay said as he stepped out the shadows.

Bloody, bleeding hell. Burke winced at Barclay's sudden appearance. How long had he been listening? Good Gad, this was all he needed.

Justin smirked. "So you didn't come alone after all. Needed your brother and half brother, huh? Still not fighting your own battles I see."

He raised his hands in the air in mock surrender. "Go ahead and kill me, Barclay. Everyone in the ton will want to know why."

"My pleasure," Barclay replied in a deathly soft voice.

No! Burke's mind raced. Reed and Barclay both had guns. He pushed himself between them and Justin. "You can't do this."

Burke closed his eyes as a warning shot was fired behind him. Gad, Justin had a weapon, too.

"Step out of the way, Ravensthorpe," Justin order. "Who do you think is the best shot--the ex-lawman, ex-military man or the crazy man?"

"It isn't going to be you," Barclay growled.

"Prove it. Let's expose all our secrets."

"You've done a damn good job of making our private feud public. Believe me I'd have no regrets about killing you." Barclay motioned with his revolver. "Get out of the way, Burke."

Burke's stomach tightened. Gad no, he didn't want this. There had been enough blood shed. "I'm not moving. What would killing each other solve? Would it bring back our father or the others back?"

"What will standing here letting him justify his actions solve?" Barclay snapped back. "Are you buying his lies?"

Burke could see Justin grinning at the fact that he had them both at each other's throat. He wished he knew what Barclay was thinking, but his face was unreadable. Thankfully, Reed was silent. He had to end it this, but how? He took a deep breath, breaking the tense silence.

"That's just it. Some of them aren't lies. You know as well as I do, Barclay, that is the problem with whole debacle--there is a grain of truth and half truths in the stories. So I gave him the book."

"You what?" Barclay exploded.

He hoped to hell he hadn't miscalculated, but it was done. There was no turning back. "Justin has a right to know all of it."

"Like hell he does."

"Tsk. Tsk. Dissension in the ranks," Justin said. "This is even better than I expected. Maybe now I'll find out what you've been hiding all these years. I assume you read the book, Barclay."

"Stop it," Phoebe said.

Burke groaned as she stepped out from behind Reed. This bloody mess was

getting better by the minute. Apparently she didn't trust him either.

She boldly pushed between him, his brother and Justin. Reed was no help. He merely shrugged, giving him a she- is-your-wife look. This was just bloody great. Now, they'd all see that he couldn't control his wife, either. He held his breath, waiting for her outburst.

"How dare you all stand here arguing over a mere book," Phoebe said. Then turning to Justin. "They are all dead. Isn't that enough for you? I read the blasted book. None of men were heroes. Well, maybe with exception of Reed's father. The rest of them took what they wanted without regard for anyone else. They were young and no different from all of you as far as I can tell. But that doesn't mean they deserved to die."

He had never thought of it that way. Burke glanced at Justin, trying to gage his reaction.

"I see," Justin remarked dryly. "And you think you know everything?"

"I know enough to know there was blame all around."

Burke sighed. This was getting them nowhere. "Phoebe," he said with strained patience, pulling her away from Justin. "That's enough."

"Wait." Justin stepped in front of her. "Tell me, Your Grace, how did my father die?"

"Don't," Burke pleaded, grabbing her arm. "This isn't the time or place...."

"He took his own life," she replied softly ignoring his plea.

"What?" Justin's voice was hoarse. "No, they killed him."

She shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry. No. He couldn't face the thought of returning home broke. If the others were guilty of anything it was not understanding how desperate Derek was. They were too caught up in their own troubles to see how overwhelming his situation had become."

"You lie." Justin grabbed her throat, shaking the life out her.

"Let go of her!" Burke lunged at Justin, trying to pry his hands off Phoebe. Why the hell were Reed and Barclay just standing there? Finally a right hook got Justin to release Phoebe.

She coughed, trying to catch her breath as Justin took a swing at him.

"Go head, take me on," Burke growled. "We've both been aching for a fight."

Justin came at him, knocking both of them to ground. He landed on top of Burke.

Burke was vaguely aware of the fists flying. A gun exploded. Phoebe screamed. Justin's weight fell heavily on top him. Something warm and sticky was running down his shirt. Holy hell, Justin had been shot.

Before he could think, Reed and Barclay were pulling Justin off him. As he sat up, his gaze met Phoebe's shocked one as with trembling hands she lowered Justin's gun. He had no idea how or when she'd gotten it.

"Would anyone like to tell me what the bloody hell is going on here?"

Burke groaned at the sound of Inspector Reynolds's voice booming out of the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Burke paced nervously around his parlor. It seemed like hours since they brought Justin back with them. Reed had taken him to the office he used to see patients and left him, Barclay and Phoebe to answer Inspector Reynolds's tedious questions.

His throat tightened. He didn't want Justin to die, but he had no idea how he

would handle things if he lived either.

“Now let me get this straight, Your Grace.” Reynolds moved to the edge of his chair, looking directly at Burke. “You’re telling me that Baron Warwick faked his own death to get back at your family. Then he killed Baron Neville and framed Marquis Atwood. Once Atwood was arrested, Warwick contacted your wife. For what purpose did he do that?”

Good question. Burke let out an impatient sigh, dropping into a chair across from Reynolds. He couldn’t answer without explaining about the book and he had no intention of doing that. Barclay stood, arms behind his back, staring out the window. Of course the one time he could use his interference, Barclay was conveniently leaving him on his own.

“Baron Warwick said he had information that could free my brother,” Phoebe spoke up before he could form his own response.

Burke winced at her words, wondering if she knew what she giving away by telling Inspector Reynolds this?

“And what information was that?” Inspector Reynolds turned his full attention to her.

She sat pale and trembling, hands folded in her lap. “I don’t know. We never got that far. Once my husband found out about him contacting me, he took matters into his own hands.”

Burke blinked at her reply. Jolly good. It frightened him a little how easily his wife could tell white lies.

“I see.” Reynolds turned back to him. “Then you arranged to meet him in an alley? Why there?”

“I thought in an open place the situation would be less likely to escalate into violence.”

Before Reynolds could press him further, Reed came into the room looking somber. “I’m sorry, but Warwick passed away without waking up.”

Burke swallowed hard. Beside him, Phoebe took his hand, squeezing it. “What do we do now?” he rasped hoarsely.

“I’ll contact the undertaker to come get him.” Reed said. “I have no idea if he has family to contact.”

“None that I know about. His mother died a few years ago.” Barclay, who had remained quiet throughout their discussion and turned to speak.

“What about my brother?” Phoebe glanced around at everyone.

“If all you say is true, then I’ll have to release him,” Reynolds said, standing. “But there are still questions that need to be answered.”

“I afraid most of them died with Warwick.” Burke stood, too. “I’ll show you out.”

Reynolds gritted his teeth, hating to be polite. Once again they were pulling rank on him and keeping him from finding out the rest of the truth.

He whirled around to face Burke as he tried to usher him out the door. “You may think this is over, but I won’t let it rest until I get all my answers.”

“Really.” Burke lifted a dark brow. “Then I guess you’ll have to live with disappointment then, won’t you.”

He let the door slam before Reynolds could answer.



“That wasn’t very polite of you,” Phoebe remarked behind him.

“I’m not feeling very polite right now.”

“That could be good.” She reached out to touch him, but he backed away from her.

He couldn’t explain his reaction. He usually more than welcomed her advances.

“Are you still angry with me for calling in Reed and Barclay?”

“I don’t know how I feel. Right now, I’m dead inside. I can’t take any more games, betrayal or lies.”

Her eyes widened. “But I never...”

“What?” he snapped, “lied to me or went against my expressed wishes or was it just that you think me incapable of defending myself?”

“I didn’t mean to shoot him, you know. It all happened so fast. One minute you were hitting him and the next he had you on the ground and I panicked, grabbing Justin’s gun when it fell out of his coat.

“Oh, your poor face.” She started to reach up to touch his bruised cheek, but he back away from her.

Burke closed his eyes. He knew he should offer her comfort, but he couldn’t. He knew he shouldn’t be upset at her actions. But dammit to hell it stung that she had taken the situation out of his control.

He opened his eyes, staring at her tear-streaked face, wishing it didn’t all hurt so damn much.

“I’m sorry I killed your friend.” Her voice shook.

“I know,” he said quietly. “I don’t blame you for that. It’s just....” He sighed. “I can’t put my feelings into words.”

She nodded, stepping closer.

He put up his hands to stop her. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

\* \* \* \*

“Don’t you think you are being a little hard on Phoebe,” Barclay said, breaking the stillness of Burke’s secluded spot in the garden. “You’ve hardly spoken to her all evening.”

Burke glared at his brother as he sat down on the bench next to him. “I can’t see that my relationship with Phoebe is any of your bloody business.”

“Probably not, but Daphne won’t let me into our bed until I talk to you. She threatened to come find you herself.” Barclay’s lips twitched into a knowing grin. “The way you’ve been sulking, maybe you deserve her female ire.”

Burke rolled his sleeves up. “I’m not sulking, just sorting things out.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is. She was only protecting you, you know.”

Anger poured over him at the thought of Reed and Barclay letting his wife take such a risk. “How the hell did you two let it happen? How did she end up with Justin’s gun?”

“It all happened so fast. Reed tried to grab her, but she fired before he could stop her. Knowing you killed a man for better or worse isn’t an easy thing to live with.”

He had no idea how to respond, so they sat in uncomfortable silence.

Finally Burke rose and left without commenting. Thankfully, he knew his usually quiet brother would understand. He made his way through the dark house to his room.

After he slipped out of his clothes and into his robe, he moved through the dark

dressing room. At Phoebe's door, he hesitated. Would she lock him out? Considering his behavior, he wouldn't blame her if she did. To his utter amazement, the knob twisted freely in his hands. He closed it gently behind him.

Phoebe braced herself up on her elbows, glancing at him as he came toward to bed. The fire light cast shadows on her face making it hard to read her expression. "I wasn't sure you'd visit me."

He sat on the edge of the bed watching her. "I wasn't sure you'd want me too."

Her only answer was to move over, opening the covers to make a place for him.

He let his robe drop, climbing in beside her.

"Burke...."

He kissed away her words. Tonight words would only get them in trouble and blissfully she let him express with his body what he couldn't say.

\* \* \* \*

Rose found Oliver alone on a bench in their moonlit flower garden, staring down at the package that had arrived earlier that day. He looked so forlorn and alone that it broke her heart. She sat down beside him.

"It's over," he whispered hoarsely not even looking up at her. "Warwick is dead. Ravensthorpe sent me the last copy of the book."

Rose put a trembling hand to her mouth. "Oh dear. You wanted to save the lad, dinna you. Despite it all, you couldna let go of him."

His head dropped lower. "This is all my fault. Me and my stupid quest for adventures. I regret the day I talked the Fearless Four into one of my high risk schemes. I knew they were in debt. Hell, I held vowels on Brandon. I thought...."

She patted his leg. "That you could help them and get a story in the process."

He snorted. "My last book was big hit. My publisher was pushing me for another. I couldn't come up with idea until I ran into Brandon one night at a gaming hell."

She took his hand, encouraging him to continue. "You hadna idea things would go so terrible wrong. You arena a seer."

He squeezed her hand. "After I returned, though, I shouldn't have used their real names or the complete story. I knew it was wrong when I was writing it. My only excuse was that I hadn't written very many books."

She didn't reply, just kept holding on to his hand.

He turned, looking at her. "I've never told you about the other women in my past with exception of my late wife."

"I dinna think men ever do."

He laughed. "Usually that is best. But I want you to know that I did more to Justin than getting his father killed on one of my misadventures. I slept with his mother."

She sucked in a harsh breath, not expecting that. "Did you love her?"

"No. I should never have taken Jocelyn to my bed. I knew it was wrong when I did it. I tried to give her money and help her because I felt guilty about her losing Derek."

"But...?" She pressed when he grew quiet.

He stood, running a hand through his hair. "I don't know how it exactly happened. I came to call one night and things got out of hand. Before I knew it, we were in bed and she was my mistress. I assumed she'd let me take care of her and Justin. I

was incorrect in that assumption. She enjoyed men--many men and loved flaunting them. I...."

He ran a tired hand down his face. "Haven't had many mistresses. But the ones I have had are exclusive. I guess I like being control."

"So what did you do?"

"We broke things off. I bought her a house and paid for Justin's schooling."

"It doesn't sound like you treated her badly."

"No, but I knew the men she associated were... I'm not sure how to say this. Some of them had odd reputations. I wish I would have stepped in to protect Justin. I know he blames me for those men and his life."

She stood, facing him. "What could you have done? You were his father."

"Something. Anything. I don't know."

"All you can do now is pay for his proper burial and look out for the others. Maybe you could help his heir. Do you know who that would be?"

He shook his head. "A distant cousin I suppose." He grew quiet.

"You've done a good job of looking after the other sons. Ravensthorpe is well settled as is Barclay. But Marcus...."

"Now, my dear, I don't like the gleam in your eye."

"What gleam?"

"The match-making one."

"Then you're thinking what I'm thinking?"

He laughed. "You're scaring me, love. Heaven help, Earl Norcott. Little does he know his bachelor days may be numbered."

\* \* \* \*

Angela jumped when she realized she wasn't alone in the bedroom. Someone was standing in the shadows beside her window.

"I know I shouldn't have come here in this condition, but I didn't know where to turn. I've been walking around in shock all evening. All I knew was that I couldn't go home and let my family see me like this."

Percy. Her heart leapt into her throat. She backed up with a hand covering her heart. "Your.... I've been.... So...."

"Shush." He closed the space between them, pulling her into his arms. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" She moved back, wiping her eyes.

"For showing up in this condition."

He'd repeated himself. It took her a moment to fully understand what he was saying. Percy was filthy.

"I'll have a bath drawn for you."

"I'd rather no one knows I'm here. That's why I came in through the window."

"Yes, of course. Wait here. I'll see about getting you some clean clothes."

He caught her arm as she turned to leave. "Even though it is good to be with you, I promise not to make more of this than it is."

She held his gaze. It was difficult to read his expression. "We'll talk after you've had a chance to clean up."

It felt so good to have him here, she wondered if she could even have the strength to let Percy go again.



## Chapter Twenty Four

"Where did you get these clothes?" Percy looked up at Angela as he finished buttoning his shirt.

She closed the door, leaning back against it. He appeared pale and a bit thin, but much better than he did when he first arrived.

"I contacted Hugh and he brought them over. I couldn't stand the thought of you going home in the dirty ones you had on." She pulled away from the door to move up in front of him to help his trembling hands with the buttons. "I had some food made for you. Hugh is downstairs eating. I considered sending him home, but thought it might make it easier to face your family if you were with him."

She lifted her eyes to meet his. He studied her in a cool silence that was disconcerting. Rarely had she seen him this pensive.

"I appreciate your efforts," he said slowly. "When they released me it all happened so fast that I had no idea what to do or where to go. I walked around for awhile before deciding to come here. I didn't want to impose, but..."

"It is no imposition. That's what friends do. They help each other out in complicated situations."

"Is that what we are? Friends? I had hoped we were more than that."

"Percy." Her voice came out as almost a sob as she stepped back.

He took a hold of her arms, not letting her retreat too far. "I'm not sure what you want me to do," he said harshly. Closing his eyes to hide the pain expressed there, he abruptly released her.

She reached up with both hands to frame his whisker-rough face. "I wish it were that simple, but it isn't. Despite how much I wish otherwise, I can't be the wife you need."

"I don't give a damn about your reputation. The ton can all go to hell if they can't forgive and accept you."

She sighed, stepping back away from him. "The ton's acceptance is the least of our problems. You need a wife who is young and ...."

"Don't give me that excuse. You are only a year or two older than me."

"In years yes, but in other..."

"I don't give a damn about your past. I haven't been a shining example of proper behavior myself."

"You don't understand."

He caught her arms, giving her a light shake. "Then explain it to me."

"I can't have children."

"What?" That made him freeze. Of all the things he had expected her to say, that wasn't one of them.

"See." She jerked free. "That does give you pause. You want your own heirs."

"I want you."

"You're thinking with your cock."

He stared at her. She had never said anything so crude before.

"I can't love you."

"Can't or won't?" He tossed back.

"Both. I'm dead inside."

"Oh really?" He walked purposefully toward her. "I bet I could prove otherwise."

"Don't." She held out a hand to stop him.

She was trembling, he realized as he stopped close enough to touch her, but refrained from doing so. "Angel, do you really think I'd force myself on you."

"My husband did." Her head dropped with the brokenly whispered confession.

Percy's chest tightened. He wanted to pull her into his arms, but he knew in her current mood that she would never surrender to his embrace. Heaven help him, he had no idea how to respond.

They stood in tense silence with her words hanging heavily between them.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. There was heat and a bit of anger there, but not the pity she had expected and feared she'd find. "Now, do you see?"

"That Hatfield is damn lucky he is dead, because I'd kill him."

"Percy." He didn't understand. She couldn't explain it. Instead of trying she walked over and opened the door. "You'd better go get some food before Hugh eats it all."

She was shutting him out. Percy wanted to swear. He wanted to rip the door out of her hand and slam it, but he didn't want to frighten her.

He gently took her chin when she refused to meet his gaze. "You shocked me, yes. I'm angry. You'd have to be blind not to sense that." He ran a thumb down her wet cheek. Then let it drop.

"I won't say I don't have a temper. That would be a lie. I have gotten into friendly fisticuffs with other guys. I duke it out with Hugh sometimes, but I have never laid a hand on anyone weaker than me. I can understand since Hatfield abused you why you worry about being under another man's control. But I'm not Hatfield."

"I know," she said softly.

"You are the only woman I have ever loved. The only one I have been with."

Her head snapped up.

"Think about that. I'll be back to see what you decide. I'll not force you. You'll marry me freely or not at all."

She opened her mouth, but he put a hand over it. "Don't--say something you will later regret, because I won't ask again. Just promise me you'll think on what I've said."

She nodded.

"Good." Percy didn't look back as he headed down to eat. He knew if he did, he couldn't walk away from her. As much as it tore him apart, he'd given Angela a choice. And so help him, he'd honor her decision even if it killed him. After all she'd been through, she deserved nothing less.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe sat up as sunlight streamed into her bedroom window. She was surprised and more than a little hurt to find herself alone in bed.

But then again maybe she shouldn't have been. Burke had made passionate love to her, but refused to talk. Every time she started he kissed away her words.

She flung her legs over the side of the bed, deciding it was better to face him now

than lay there worrying about it. Sooner or later they had to talk. They couldn't keep avoiding each other or could they?

\* \* \* \*

"Mind if I join you for breakfast?"

Burke looked up from staring at his eggs as Barclay sat down. He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Barclay smiled up at the girl who brought his plate. "Thanks. Daphne took the twins over to play with Emily. I should warn you that mother is back. Right now, she is playing with my children. But I'm sure she'll be over here soon for a full report. She is furious that we left her out of the Justin situation."

"That's bloody great. Seems all the women in my life are upset with me."

"Then you didn't resolve things with Phoebe last night? I assumed since you stayed in bed until late that you two.... Barclay coughed. "Sorry. That was improper of me."

"Since when has that ever stopped you from commenting on my social life?"

The both laughed nervously.

"Anyway," Barclay forked some eggs. Did you know Mother is having an affair? Well, affair really isn't the word. She is being courted by Holbrooke's friend, Drew Hutton. The chap actually cornered me and asked if he could marry her."

Burke stopped with the fork half way to his mouth. "Only if he promises to take her to America."

Barclay threw back his head and laughed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Then she'd be your problem."

"Actually, on second thought, she needs to stay here and help Phoebe."

"Help Phoebe with what?"

Burke glanced up to see his wife in the doorway. "A--handling household affairs. We were discussing mother."

"She is here. I ran into her in the entryway. She has gone upstairs to freshen up after playing with her grandchildren."

"Think I could leave before she gets here?" He winked at Phoebe.

"I wouldn't if I were you. She would only come find you." She sat on the chair next to him. "She seems bent on a full explanation of last night's events."

"No all of them I hope."

Phoebe turned pink. "Burke." She playfully hit him.

Barclay coughed.

"I see I'm not too late for breakfast," Meredith said from the doorway, removing her gloves and bonnet and handing them to maid. "Now, who wants to go first? Burke?" She pinned him with a hard glare.

Her tone made him stiffened. In reaction to her dominating attitude, he rebelled. He wasn't ready to talk about that. "I don't have time for this. I have matters to attend to. I need to check on Atwood's release."

"It already has been taken care of," Barclay spoke up. "I hadn't gotten around to telling you that Phoebe's mother sent a note earlier this morning while you were still in bed."

Burke felt the heat rush to cheeks at the mention of their late morning. He couldn't help but notice that Phoebe's face turned pink too. He wondered if she'd been

remembering as he had why they were getting up so late.

His mother brusque tone broke the mood. "I'm still waiting for any explanation. Norcott's mother sent me a stiff formal note thanking you for resolving things. I have no idea how to respond, since you have all chosen to keep me in the dark about this matter."

"We were trying to keep you safe," Burke said gently.

"I appreciate that, but I think now that it is over, I deserve a full explanation. After all, it will be up to me to sooth all the social implications of this scandal."

*Dammit to hell, she was still treating him as though he were a naughty boy.* His temper snapped. Burke dropped his fork and stood, stalking off before he said anything he'd later come to regret.

Phoebe wasn't sure what to say when her husband so abruptly and rudely left the room.

"Well I never," Meredith sputtered, dropping on to a chair.

"Easy, Mother. He is still reeling from what happened in the alley."

She raised a dark brow. "What exactly did happen in the alley?"

"I killed Baron Warwick before he could beat my husband to a bloody pulp," Phoebe said.

Meredith stared at her. "You what?"

"I shot Baron Warwick."

"How could you? I thought he was already dead."

Phoebe shook her head. "He faked it so he could continue his revenge on Burke."

"I see." She put a hand over her heart. "Then this is over?"

"We hope so," Barclay spoke up. "I returned father's copy of the book to Earl Stratten. Unless Reynolds turns up more problems his investigation is done."

"Oh dear, you don't think...?" She glanced helplessly at Barclay.

"No." Barclay cast Phoebe an uneasy glance. "That is settled."

Meredith sighed, patting her chest.

Barclay glanced over at Phoebe, who was staring down sightlessly at her uneaten food. "You'll have to excuse my brother. This has been hardest on him. Justin's betrayal and father's death..."

She looked up with tears in her eyes. "Do you think he will ever forgive me for killing Warwick?"

"It isn't a matter of forgiving you. He blames himself for Justin's actions and not stopping him. They were so close."

Phoebe rose. "Will you excuse me?"



## Chapter Twenty Five

“How are we going to resolve this distance between us if you refuse to talk to me?”

Burke stiffened at the sound of Phoebe’s voice behind him. He hadn’t expected her to follow him to his bedroom in the daylight. His throat went dry.

“Aren’t you going to talk to me?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Fine, then I’ll go so you can hole up here feeling sorry for yourself.”

That made his tempter spark. He spun around to face her as she threw the door open.

“I don’t...”

“To hell you don’t.” She let the door slam loudly behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe stood heaving in angry breaths with her arms folded. Be damned if she would let Burke make her cry.

A click made her jump and she realized she wasn’t alone in the dressing room connecting their rooms. She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting tears. “Just go. You’ve made it clear that you’re through with me.”

“I’m... I thought you trusted me.”

She wiped her eyes, turning to face him. “I did. I do.”

“Then why did you run to others for help? Why didn’t you let me handle the situation with Justin?”

“I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“I might not have military training like Barclay or be an ex-lawman like Reed, but I can defend myself.”

“I never thought you couldn’t. It is just that Justin is crazy and when I realized you were alone with him that it hit me that I love you and didn’t want to lose you.” Her words came out in a rush as she swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “I know Burke, the rake, doesn’t want anything as trite as his wife loving him.”

She turned, fleeing through the door to her room.

*She loved him.* Burke couldn’t move. Of all the answers he’d run through his head, that hadn’t been one of them. *Oh, gad, she loved him.*

In two steps, he reached the door and found it locked. “Phoebe, sweetheart, let me in.”

“I’ve had enough humiliation thank you. I told you once before that won’t be your mistress.”

“You aren’t my mistress,” he said harshly.

“Then why do you continue to treat like one. Why am I good enough to sleep with, but not to confide in?”

“That’s not what last night meant.”

No response.

“Phoebe, my love.”

“Please, go away.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Open the door and I’ll tell you.”

After what seemed like an eternity, she pulled the door open. “You can’t make this better.”

“I wouldn’t begin to know how. All I can do is tell you that you are not alone in your feelings.”

“I don’t understand.” She sniffled.

He stepped closer, taking her into his arms. “I love you, too. I suppose that is why I rushed in to save you.”

She shook. Why, she wasn’t sure, but he held her tight.

“I guess I can’t be upset with you when I did the same thing.”

“But I thought...”

“That I couldn’t love. So did I. Never have before. But you were different. I offered for you, because I couldn’t let you go. I was just too blind to see why. So, stay, Phoebe, and be my love.”

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He lifted her up in his arms, kicking the door shut behind them. “I need you,” he murmured into her hair. “I’ve always needed you. I guess my heart knew that before my mind could grasp how I felt. Do you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. All I ever wanted was for you to love me.”

“And I do.” He tipped her head back, looking down into her eyes. “Think they’d miss us if we spent the afternoon up here?”

“Burke.” She playfully hit his shoulder.

“What?” His eyes danced with mirth. “I think it’s high time I showed you the difference between being a wife and mistress.”

\* \* \* \*

That evening

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

Percy froze in the process of taking off his shirt at the sound of Angela’s sultry voice. It couldn’t be. He blinked. Angela in his room? Maybe he should have had that drink after all, because now he was seeing things.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” She stepped closer.

He backed up. “I’m not talking to myself.”

She smiled, putting a soft hand on his bare chest. “Does this feel like you are imagining me?”

Good grief, she was real and in his bedroom in the middle of the night.

“Oh, Angel,” he groaned, pulling her in to his arms, kissing her hungrily.

Her arms came around his neck holding him tight as she kissed him back with equal enthusiasm.

He didn’t know how long they stood there wrapped in each other’s arms.

“I couldn’t stay away,” she whispered against his lips. “I needed you.”

She felt so good that Percy couldn’t stop kissing her. He wanted her in his bed, in

his life as his....

Percy reluctantly pulled back staring down into her bright, passion-filled eyes. He must be crazy, but he knew....

"I can't do this, my love."

"What?" That got her attention. She stepped back with hurt written all over her face. "Why not? Have you replaced me already?"

He caught her arm as she turned to leave.

"Let go," she spat. "I should have known better than to come here."

"Not until you stand still and listen. I'm not letting you go because I can't." He pressed his hips against her, making damn sure she could feel him. "I'm having you leave because I love you too much to let you stay."

"I don't understand." She stepped back and this time he let her.

"If we do this now--that will be all we'll be--just lovers in the dark. I want more than that." He put a hand over his heart. "I want you in my house. Most certainly in my bed, but more than that in my life. I want to sleep with you, wake with you, eat meals with you, enjoy the day with you and have a family with you."

She raised a restraining hand. "I can't have children. I told you that."

"Because you never conceived with Hatfield. I know."

"I never did with you either."

"I know. If that is the case, then I can live with that. Hugh would inherit. But it doesn't change the fact that I want a respectable life with you. I want our children, if we are blessed with them, to be legitimate. I don't want to be climbing through your bedroom window like I'm embarrassed any more."

"You want to marry me? Really--marry me?"

He nodded.

Angela couldn't speak. For the first time since she'd known him there wasn't a trace of alcohol on him. He wasn't going to forget this conversation in the morning.

"I..." She swallowed hard.

He didn't say anything. Just stood there patiently watching her.

She tried in vain to swallow back her tears. "I don't always want to--you know...." She squeezed her hands together for courage.

"We don't have to. We can sleep snuggled in bed and talk or you can have your own room to retreat to if you want. I'd rather you slept with me, but if you'd feel more comfortable having separate bedrooms...."

His eyes were warm and understanding.

"I do care about you. I really do. I'm just--scared." There, she said it.

"Of me?"

"Of being married. I wasn't very good at it. We fought. He...."

"What?" Percy said softly. Not sure if he really wanted to hear her answer. "Tell me."

"I often made Edgar angry and he hit me. I never...." She put her hands over her face.

Angela could sense him wanting to move towards her and heavens, she hoped he didn't, because she'd melt in a puddle of tears if he did.

"Made him happy." Her voice was barely audible.

"You make me happy," he said quietly. "I love everything about you--your eyes,

hair, kisses, smiles, body and sassy retorts.”

She blinked back tears, staring at him. “What if that grows old?”

“You mean, what if I stop loving you?”

She nodded.

“I won’t. But if it makes you feel better you can keep control of your money and house, so you’ll have a place to go if you need to get away from me. Maybe one day you’ll let me into your house. Into your bedroom and bed.”

“How can you offer me that? If the rumors are true...”

“I need the money. Is that why you think I’m asking you?”

His eyes searched hers. The hurt and regret there and it made her heart tighten.

“No.”

“I can take care of you. Even with my situation, I’d never expect you to bail me out. I can and will provide for my family.”

Angela didn’t know what to say. Her knees were weak. She had to sit down on the edge of the bed.

Without a word, Percy turned to the dresser and picked up something and sat down beside her.

“Angela, I love you. Will you marry me?” He opened his hands to show her a large pear shaped diamond ring.

She closed her eyes, fighting tears.

“Oh, Percy.”

Say yes, he prayed, but remained quiet.

She opened her eyes, gazing into his hopeful face.

“You’re sure?”

“More than about anything in my whole life. I promise....”

She put a hand over his lips.

“Yes.” Her voice shook with emotion.

He kissed her palm and pulled her to her feet. “I’ll get a coach to take you home.”

She shook her head.

“I told you I don’t want you to stay as my lover.”

“Then take me to Gretna Green, so I can stay as your wife.”

\* \* \* \*

Gad, he hated working on ledgers. Burke shifted uncomfortable in his chair, glaring down at the paperwork strewn across his desk.

“May I come in?”

Burke looked up as Barclay cleared his throat. It was odd to be the one at the desk with Barclay asking permission to enter.

“I’m just trying to....” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Figure out those ledgers?”

Burke laughed at the way his brother could finish his sentences.

“Then you know I never mind the interruption.”

Smiling, Barclay shut the door and dropped down into a chair. “I hope I don’t offend you, but I have an idea.”

Burke raised a quizzical brow.

“It isn’t an idea exactly. More like a....” Barclay let out a harsh breath. “Daphne keeps telling me to stay out of your business. That I treat you as though you’re

incompetent.”

“Because I am.”

“No you’re not!”

Burke stared at him, surprised at the conviction in Barclay’s tone.

“I know Father made you feel that way.”

“He didn’t make me. I just am.”

“No, you’re not.” Barclay emphasized each word. “He thought if he told you that often enough you’d rebel and try harder. That you’d get mad enough to prove him wrong.”

Burke opened and closed his mouth. “How do you know this?” he asked slowly. Barclay let out a harsh breath. “He told me. He had a twisted sense of handling things.”

His throat tightened, so he just nodded.

For a long moment Barclay was quiet.

“Why are you telling me this now?” Burke finally spoke, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Because I want you to understand what I’m about to say is a not condemnation.” Barclay stood and began to pace.

Burke leaned back in his chair, watching him. What had his usually unflappable brother so nervous?

Neither of them spoke.

Finally Barclay paused. “I was wrong to treat you as if you were unsuitable to be duke. To act like only I could handle the duties, including the books. Not to tell you about the secret accounts.”

Burke started to protest, but his brother raised his hand to stop him.

“I should have shown you how to do all the accounts, instead of just walking away. Maybe I secretly wanted you to fail. I don’t know.” He ran a hand over his face. “All I know is that I left you with a mess. One I might add you, did a good job of cleaning up. You made deals with the tenants that I never thought of making. You even got better prices for their crops. I’m--proud of you.”

Of all the things Barclay could have said this was something Burke never expected.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“If you want help with those ledgers, I think I can show you a way to make it easier for you.” Barclay held up his hands. “Not that I don’t think you can do it. I just know....”

“That it takes me a long time.” Burke’s face brightened. “I’d gladly take your help. It’s very frustrating.”

Nodding, Barclay moved his chair around behind the desk.

Phoebe quietly shut the door when she saw her husband and his brother huddled over the desk.

“Seems we both like to spy,” Daphne whispered.

She jumped, putting a hand over her furiously pounding heart at the sound of Daphne’s voice. She loved her new sister-in-law. A big part of her wished they’d stay in England rather than returning to America.

“I think our men finally let go of their pride and are working together,” Phoebe

whispered back.

“Thank goodness. Now, maybe Barclay can let go.” She hugged Phoebe. “I’m glad to see Burke so happy.”

“He won’t be when he finds out about the ball he is sponsoring next month.”

Daphne laughed. “On the contrary, he’ll be in his element. Hopefully there with his family beside him, he will truly feel like the lord here.”

## Chapter Twenty Six

They were actually married. Angela clung to Percy's neck as he carried her through the door of the rooming house. He had insisted and nerves making her legs wobbly, she agreed.

As he shut the door and back against it, she stared up into his deep green eyes. He looked like an angel framed in the firelight with his light brown hair and thick lashes.

"I still can't believe we did it," she said softly.

"Me either. I didn't know how saying those vows would make me feel."

"Scared?" There was a catch in her voice. What if he regretted...?

"Content. You're finally mine. No games. No sneaking around."

"You won't miss...?"

"Being stupid and irresponsible. Gad, I hope not. I promise those days are over. You won't be bored with all the...?"

"Never," she said firmly. "I want to explain about that. After Edgar died, I wanted to get back at him."

"I know," he said gently. "You don't have to explain."

She continued despite his assurance that it wasn't necessary. "I flirted around, but never--until you. My reputation was more whispers than truth."

"That makes two of us."

"I was afraid of letting someone have that much control over me again."

"I won't--control you."

"I know. I've learned there is a difference between caring concern and possessive behavior that suffocated me."

"I won't promise not to be possessive. I love you and want to protect you and care for you."

"But you won't hurt me."

"I'll try not to. Sometimes I can be thoughtless. You'll have to tell me if I am."

She nodded and he lifted her up higher in his arms.

"I won't make love to you without asking. Can we? Do you?"

She reached up to stroke his beard-roughened cheek. She loved this time of night when he had a shadow beard. "What do you think I've been waiting for?"

He lowered her to the ground. Taking her face gently in his warm hands, he kissed her deeply, tenderly, reverently.

She clung to him, returning the kiss. She could have stood there all night wound up tight in his arms, kissing him.

Percy took a step back, but kept his hands on her face. "I love you," he whispered hoarsely.

"I love you, too." She flew back into his arms. Some how in the midst of all those glorious kisses their clothes ended up on the floor and she ended up on the bed.

His warm, sure hands were everywhere, teasing and stroking. She couldn't get enough of him either. When he finally moved on top of her, she trembled as he slowly

entered her.

Later as she lay nestled in his arms, she relished the feel of him next to her. She lost count of how many times they had made love.

“What are you thinking?” Percy’s lips brushed her ear, feeling her shiver.

“I don’t need my house or an extra bedroom. I’m safe right here in your arms.”

He levered himself up, so he could look at her. “You’re sure? You’re not saying that because you worry that I can’t afford to keep your house.”

She patted his cheek. “I’m absolutely sure. You are my home.”

He leaned down and kissed her. Then slid inside her making sure she knew she was his, too.

\* \* \* \*

One month later

“You ready?” Phoebe asked from the doorway.

Burke met Phoebe’s eyes in the mirror. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into throwing a ball.”

She smiled, stepping in front of him, moving his hands away, so she could fix his coat.

“We have to celebrate my brother’s marriage and your brother’s return home for a visit. And what better way to quiet wagging tongues than by being seen together at a ball.”

She looked so damn beautiful in the soft satin rose colored dress. His grandmother’s diamond and ruby necklace glimmered seductively between her breasts. He couldn’t deny her anything.

“Let’s get this over with.” He offered her his arm.

As they made their way down the stairs to the people milling around, he realized with a jolt that this was his party. He’d helped choose the flowers, the music, the food and the guest list. For the first time in his life Burke actually felt like the head of the family.

“Shall we dance?” he leaned down to whisper in his wife’s ear.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

It was nice dancing with Phoebe as his wife. He could hold her as close as he wanted. In fact, the imp encouraged him.

As the song ended, she said softly, “As much as I loved dancing with you, I know we need to mingle.”

He nodded, reluctantly letting her go, but only so far. He kept a hold of her hand as he made his way through the crowd.

“Oh my gosh, Burke, here comes Earl Norcott. I invited him, but I never dreamed he’d come. You don’t think he’ll create a scene, do you?”

“Gad, I hope not. But avoiding him will only fuel the gossips.”

“Norcott.” Burke nodded a greeting.

“Ravensthorpe.” Norcott nodded back. “Lady Phoebe. I was surprised at your invitation. I’m not sure what prompted you to include us, but my mother was thrilled. She and your mother have been talking nonstop since we arrived.”

Phoebe forced a smile. “I’m glad you came. With Baron Warwick’s passing, I was hoping we could all put the past behind us.”

Burke stiffened beside her, wishing she hadn’t brought up Justin.



Norcott glanced apprehensively at him. "I'll try. Now, that Percy has given up partying, I may need my respectable friends again, eh, Ravensthorpe?"

A slow smile spread across Burke's face as he realized the truce being offered. "Don't look now, Norcott, but I see our mother's conferring with Countess Stratten and they keep looking this way."

"Bloody hell," Norcott muttered. "Now, that the rest of you have gotten leg-shackled my mother thinks I should be next. She is giving me no peace on that score, either. I bet they have some silly chit all picked out for me too."

"Marriage isn't so bad, is it, my love?" He squeezed Phoebe's shoulder. "In fact there are many aspects that can be quite pleasurable."

Phoebe blushed, nudging him to hush.

Marcus rolled his eyes. "I better go nip Mother's plotting in the bud."

"Do you think he stands a chance?" Phoebe whispered as they watch Norcott push through the crowd.

Burke chuckled. "Hell no. Once the Mums and Countess Stratten get on the matching making trail your sewing wild oats days are over." He brushed a kiss on the top of her head. "But don't ever let them know that I thank them every night for bring me to my senses or there will be no living with them."

Phoebe laughed.

Drew Hutton stepped in front of them before they could move to dance. "Good evening, Your Grace."

"Hello." He shifted nervously, not sure what to say to this man since Barclay had told him that he had an interest in their mother.

Phoebe gave his hand a be-nice squeeze. As if he needed a reminder.

Drew cleared his throat. "I know we never got the horse training partnership off the ground."

"We were preoccupied."

Drew's lips curved into a wry smile. "So you know?"

"That you are interested in my mother? Yes."

"I'm more than interested in her. I love her and want to marry her."

Phoebe gasped beside him.

Those remarks took him back, too. Even Barclay had said so he didn't believe that Drew had the guts to ask for her hand.

"Do you want my blessing?"

"As head of the family, I feel I need it. But before you answer, I feel there is something you should know about me."

He stood silent, letting the big man speak. It surprised him that the man seemed to be shaking a little.

"I bought an estate not far from here. It will need work and we might stay at your mother's cottage for a while until it is done."

"You bought an estate?" The unspoken question was did he have that much blunt or was he expecting him, as head of the family, to pay for this?

"I have other businesses besides the horses. I'm actually quite well off."

Now, that shocked him.

"I thought you were a law man."

"I was, but I was a lawyer first. I gave up my law practice and went in search of

revenge after my father was killed in a bank hold up. Like you, I didn't want the responsibilities of my family. When I came back from my quest, my younger brother had taken over my family's bank, so I settled down to raise horses and farm. My wife was killed by brothers of the men I hunted down. I learned a painful lesson that revenge creates a cycle."

Burke just stared.

"I handled the situation and followed Reed to England to start over. I don't want to be looking over my shoulder all the time."

Burke nodded his understanding.

"I'm serious about the horses."

"Does my mother know about the money?"

Drew gave him a sheepish look. "No. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell her. I want her to marry me without it."

Burke glanced across the room at his mother, wondering if she would do that. Accept the man just like that. *Trusting soul* wasn't one of the qualities he most associated with his mother. Was Drew prepared for that and the reaction of the ton?

"There will be talk," Burke said.

"I know," he replied without the least bit of concern in his voice. "I'm prepared to deal with that."

I'll bet you are. This Yank had no idea just how ugly it could get. "I can help." Gad, how it felt good to say that.

"Then I can marry her?"

"Be kind to her. She deserves that. My father..."

"Wasn't always," Drew finished quietly. "I know. She told me."

That surprised the hell out of him. She never told anyone. He only knew because he'd witnessed some of it. She must really trust this man.

As if summoned, his mother pushed through the crowd. She gave Drew a nervous sideways glance.

"This all went well, don't you think, dear?" Meredith asked smoothly.

Burke smiled at her. "You, Phoebe and Daphne get most of the credit. It wouldn't have been a success if you hadn't helped guide them."

She blushed at his praise. "Thank you."

"Would you like to dance, Mother?"

She cocked her head. "Yes."

As he moved to the dance floor, he caught her glancing back at Drew.

"He is a nice man."

Her gaze shifted to meet his. "Yes, he is."

"He asked me if he could marry you."

She almost missed a step. "What did you say?"

He chuckled. "Yes, of course," he said deliberately misinterpreting her question.

"There is no *of course*. I can't.... I shouldn't.... It wouldn't be proper."

"Why not?"

"He's...."

"A kind man--a little rough around the edges, but you can polish that off. On second thought, the rough parts might be fun. Especially in the...."

She shot him a quelling look.

"He loves you," Burke continued. "He told me so. I say take a chance. I think he and his daughter need you more than I do."

The music stopped and there was Drew to get her for the next dance. As he watched them on the floor, he could see they were talking. Good. He hoped she had the good sense to say yes.

"I'm glad your matching making worked out. My mother is in full retreat mode," Percy said beside him.

"I think Mum was ready. Yours is doing well to just get back in society. Give her time."

He nodded. "You may be right."

Burke tried not to stare at Percy. Damn, he looked good. His eyes were clear and he seemed more relaxed and happy.

"Thank you for whatever you did to get me out of prison."

"I didn't really do anything. Phoebe pointed out to Inspector Reynolds that Justin admitted his part in killing Neville so that he no longer needed to hold you."

Percy nodded. "My sister seems to have recovered from her part in that ordeal. You are good for her, I think."

"I try to be."

"I want you know that I'm going to take this second chance and straighten up." He paused, shifting nervously. "I've asked Barclay to help me understand how to manage my holdings. My father was worried that by training me he was admitting he was dying. I know it is a poor excuse for my boorish behavior, but after he died I threw up my hands instead of digging in and taking control of the situation."

"You don't have to explain anything to me," Burke said softly. "I understand completely how overwhelming it can be to suddenly have the responsibility as head of the family."

Percy nodded.

"I still worry that I will let her down," Burke said softly as Phoebe made her through the crowd to him.

"Not a chance of that." Percy chuckled, shaking his head. "I shouldn't admit this, but even foxed, I knew you'd be the perfect husband for my sister."

Before Burke could respond, Phoebe grabbed his hand. "Can we dance? This my favorite song."

He watched Percy grinning like a fool as she pulled Phoebe into his arms. Damn, he was lucky. For the first time in his life he felt like a duke and liked it.

\* \* \* \*

Didn't I tell you this was a great spot for spying, Maddie?" Burke lowered himself down on the top step beside the two adorable girls, who had been watching the party all night from their spot at the top of the stairs. .

"The very best, Burke." She stepped around the little dark-haired girl who was staring at him, to launch herself into his arms. "Thank you for talking my Mama into letting us come."

"You're very welcome." His voice cracked. He closed his eyes, touched by her expression of gratitude. If only he could make all the women in his life this happy this easily.

"That's what big brothers are for to spoil their little sisters," he said when she

pulled back, beaming at him. "Who is your friend?"

She giggled. "This is Cassie. She lives with her papa at Earl Holbrook's. I met at her Mrs. Duchess's garden. Mama got us little ball gowns after you said we could come." She whirled, showing off her dress.

"You're beautiful. Good thing I have Percy and Hugh to help me fight off the suitors you'll during your first season."

He turned to the little girl, who had yet to speak. "Hello, Cassie. Did you have a good time, too?"

She nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Duke."

Burke laughed. "How about you call me Burke since I'll be your big brother soon. That is if my mum is smart enough to say yes to your Papa."

Her brown eyes widened. "I always wanted a brother."

"Well you got one. Two actually." He grinned up at Barclay, who was coming up the stairs.

"Evening, ladies." Barclay smiled at the little girls.

"Did you know that Cassie is Drew's daughter?" Burke looked up at his brother.

"I've seen her running around Reed's, but we have never been introduced. "I'm Barclay. I think you were playing with my twins yesterday."

"You're Amelia's and Edward's Papa." She frowned, looking back and forth between them. "You two look alike."

"That's because we are twins." Burke bumped Barclay. "We used have great fun fooling people."

"When I think of all the trouble we caused, I'm glad mine aren't exactly alike."

"Do you need something or are you just saying goodnight?"

"I was planning to go back to Reed's, but the twins are sleeping so soundly that I hate to wake them. Do mind if we stay?"

"No. Take the room near the nursery. In fact," He winked at the girls. "Why don't you two stay, too. I know a room with big bed all ready for a couple of princesses."

Barclay grinned, offering Burke a hand up. "I'll go tell Daphne and Mum. They are in kitchen enjoying the food they were too busy to eat at the party."

"Why don't we find them together? I happen to know that there is chocolate cake and other treats left. We could have our own party."

"Can we dance?" Maddie's eyes lit up.

"I don't see why not. The musicians haven't left yet. I'll see if some of them will stay. It would a shame to waste those ball gowns."

The girls squeezed each other with delight.

As Burke headed down the stairs he heard Maddie whisper none too quietly to Cassie. "Burke is favorite big brother. Mama says he is only part way my brother 'cuz he married Phoebe, but part is better than no way. And besides I love him."

Burke grinned.

"I'm not so sure the Mums will approve," Barclay said beside him.

"I know. That's half the fun of being the head of the family. I finally get to overrule them in favor of fun."

"And be the hero."

"Of course. Don't you think it's about time."

Barclay laughed. "I'd say you were long overdue."

\* \* \* \*

One week later

"You aren't going to tell me where we are going?" Meredith glanced across the carriage from Drew to Cassie. Cassie looked like she was overflowing with a secret.

"You'll see when we get there." He pulled up by a long row of trees in front of a large manor house.

"Who lives here?"

"We do," Cassie squeaked as she jumped down to race across the yard.

She shot a look at Drew. "We what?"

"I bought this place for us. It has room for my horses. A great area for Cassie and our other children to play."

"But? I thought..." She sputtered.

"We'd stay at your cottage. We can if you want until the work here is done."

"You let me believe you were the horse trainer," she said flatly.

Drew's stomach tightened. He hoped he hadn't mucked this up.

"I am, but I'm also wealthy. I own horses among other things."

"I see. Then why did you let me believe otherwise?"

"You assumed and I never corrected you."

"Why?" She pressed.

"Because I wanted you to marry me for me. Not for..." He expanded his arms. "All my life I've been the Hutton heir. I wanted to be just Drew. Can you understand that?"

She nodded, swallowing her tears. She could definitely understand.

He brushed back a tear with his thumb. "So you aren't sorry you married me?"

"No, I've never been happier." She meant that. Drew was a good friend, great husband, an inventive and considerate lover. Their wedding day had been so special. She cherished the dress her new daughters surprised her with for the ceremony. Her children handled everything. Burke even gave her away.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Just remembering the wedding and the wedding night."

He kissed her. "Welcome home, Duchess. You can meddle in my life anytime."

"Daddy!" Cassie yelled, bounding across the yard. "My pony is here. We are really home."

She touched Drew's face. "Yes, we really are."

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe snuggled next to Burke in bed, savoring the soft morning light, but in no particular hurry to get up. "I can't believe all the thank you notes I've gotten from our ball last week. It was a big hit. Did you enjoy it too?"

"I did." He trailed a finger up her spine. "In fact, I might let you talk me into having another one."

"You just liked the party we had in our room afterwards."

He nuzzled her neck. "That, too."

She moaned with pleasure. "Percy seems happy."

"Hmmm." He kissed her shoulder.

"Your Mother seems happy."

“Uh-huh.”

He trailed kisses up to her ear, making her shiver. He blew in it.

“What about you?” His breath was hot on her face.

“I’m very happy. I got to marry the infamous Duke Ravensthorpe.”

He snorted. “I’m sure that is a worthy prize.”

“Oh, but it is. Know why?”

“Why?” He pressed his lips to her throat.

“Because nobody but me gets to know how wonderful you are. Mama was right, ex-rakes do make the best lovers.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“If you’re up to it.”

He laughed, pulling her over on top of him. “That depends on how naughty you feel.”

She grinned, sliding down on him. “As naughty as you’ll let me.”

“Then, my love, I’d say the possibilities are endless.”

THE END