

Chapter One

London, 1822

Felicity Ellis's fingers danced over the pianoforte keys, filling the room with music. She shut her eyes as she played, feeling the melody surround her, make her whole. Her heart was so free when she played. She could forget almost anything.

"That is lovely. Do you intend to play it at the recital tomorrow evening?"

Felicity's eyes came open and she glanced across the room. The Dowager Countess Abigail Stanton was doing her needlework, a smile tilting her lips and lining her face.

"Yes." Felicity slowed her fingers and slowly turned the music until the piece changed into Lady Stanton's favorite. Her companion's gaze lifted from the fabric in her hands and met Felicity's.

"It's always such a pleasure to have you come here and play." Lady Stanton sighed. "Wesley hardly ever comes here anymore, now that he is married."

Felicity barked out a laugh as she continued the music. "A marriage *you* had quite the hand in creating."

"Only me?" Lady Stanton arched one fine brow. "You were a most willing spy and partner in my schemes, my dearest."

Felicity sighed. "Yes, I most certainly was. At any rate, I know for a fact that Wesley and Jane were here just yesterday afternoon."

"Hmmm. Seems you are still a spy."

Lady Stanton set her work aside and grabbed for her cane. She motioned for the maid who stood stoically beside the parlor door. The young woman hurried over and helped the elderly lady from her chair. Felicity continued to play even as she watched, ready to come to her friend's assistance if need be.

How hard it was to watch Lady Stanton grow older, her body more frail, despite her sharp mind. It made Felicity think of the future. A distant and foggy thing that often seemed unpleasant and lonely.

The maid stepped back when Lady Stanton had gained her balance and her ladyship shuffled toward Felicity. "Sometimes it seems like everything is changing. Some changes are for the good, like Jane and Wesley's union."

"What else has changed lately?" Felicity asked. For her, life seemed ever the same. By design, perhaps, but still sometimes achingly boring and endless.

"Oh, I did hear some news, though I'm not sure if it is a change for the better or for ill." Lady Stanton braced her hands on the pianoforte. "The old Duke of Windsworth finally took his last breath."

Felicity's fingers crashed against the keys in a mangled and smashed note. Lady Stanton's eyebrows went up.

"Dear heavens, are you well?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

Felicity stared at the sheet music before her, but the notes swam and ran together as her vision blurred and her heart raced. She caught her breath and quickly regained her composure.

"Yes. My hands merely slipped."

Lady Stanton's eyebrow arched. "I have never known your hands to slip before. And with such drama."

Felicity forced a smile. "Ah, you have uncovered my secret. I am not the perfect player that you thought me to be."

Her companion smiled and reached out to lightly tap her nose with the tip of one finger. "No one is perfect, my darling."

Felicity dipped her gaze to the piano keys. "No. No one."

If Lady Stanton noticed the emotion that boiled in Felicity's chest, she made no indication of it. Instead, she sighed. "The Duke was not known as a kind man or a good man or even a prudent man. But perhaps things will be better now that his son has inherited."

Felicity's hands were shaking and she clenched them into fists to make them stop. "His son is dead."

Her ladyship's brow wrinkled. "What? Oh no, you are thinking of the elder son, Jonathon, who died in India a few years ago. This is the younger son, Gabriel. When Jonathon died, he became the heir apparent."

Felicity's body was starting to relax. Her muscles unclenched and her trembling slowly subsided as the initial shock of hearing such news wore off. It meant nothing to her, of course. She had not been acquainted with that family for... well, it was a long time now. Many years. The death of the Duke, the assumption of the title by the younger son she'd never met, those things had nothing to do with her.

"I'm sure Society will be clamoring to see this new Duke," she murmured before she pursed her lips with displeasure. That meant the next few months were going to be terribly uncomfortable. Until the novelty wore off, he would probably be invited to every party. The entire summer would likely hold little pleasure for her, only constant reminders of a foolish moment in her past. She sighed before she refocused her attention. Lady Stanton was speaking, answering the comment she'd really meant only for herself.

"I should say so!" Lady Stanton strummed her fingers along the pianoforte. "After all, he's more than just a new Duke. He has his father and his brother's sordid reputations to overcome. And the man has hardly been out in Society at all!"

Felicity tilted her head. She shouldn't care about this, should avoid the subject, but she found herself curious nonetheless. "Why?"

"His mother and father were estranged. She took the younger child, Gabriel, and retired to the country when the children were quite small. The Duke took the older son and stayed in London and his other estates. From what I understand, Gabriel hardly saw his father until after Jonathon's death."

Again, Felicity flinched as a long buried pain surged back up, dulled but still in existence. Her only consolation was that since this new Duke had not been around all those years ago when... well, when the thing she refused to think about happened, at least he wouldn't look at her with those cold eyes like his father had. Stare at her with accusation and disdain.

At least, she hoped he wouldn't.

She sighed as she reached for the sheet music and folded it away. Getting to her feet, she smiled at her companion, though she could feel that it was a weak rendition of her usual expression. Even for her dear Lady Stanton, she couldn't muster up anything with real joy. Not now. Not when the past was pushing into the present.

"Are you departing?" Lady Stanton asked. "I thought you were going to stay for tea."

She shook her head. "I know I promised, but I find myself suddenly tired. I should probably go and rest since I have the recital tomorrow."

Lady Stanton tilted her head and her piercing green stare snagged Felicity's. "Is something wrong, Felicity? You have not seemed yourself since you stopped playing."

With a shrug, Felicity leaned forward to place a brief kiss on Lady Stanton's cheek. "Of course I am myself. Who else would I be? I shall see you tomorrow for the recital."

Though her companion seemed less than convinced, she nodded. "I would not miss it."

With a slight curtsy and a nod for Lady Stanton's maid, Felicity took her leave. But as she climbed into her father's carriage, she leaned her head back against the leather seat with a sigh. Lady Stanton said she wasn't herself. But who was she, really?

Sometimes, especially when thoughts of the past came rushing up to torment her, she just wasn't sure.

#

Gabriel Morrison lifted his fingers to his temples and pressed, but nothing he did could ease the pressure that made his head throb. Certainly the droning voice of his solicitor did nothing to help. The man went on and on, occasionally running his finger over a crowded ledger or showing him a paper overflowing with his father's illegible scribble.

"And so you can see, Your Grace, the financial situation is not at its best," the man finished with a nod of his head, his tone as benign as if he'd been talking about the weather, not the overwhelming responsibilities Gabriel now faced... the ones that seemed to be getting more devastating by the moment.

"You've given me an enormous amount of information to absorb, Sanderson," he said, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "And I'd like to review all of these records before we speak again and formulate some kind of plan to dig the Windsworth name out of these straits. Can you join me here again in... say a week's time?"

The older gentleman got to his feet with a bow. "Of course, Your Grace. I will be here at any time that is convenient. And if you have any concerns or questions in the interim, don't hesitate to contact me."

Gabriel motioned a farewell to the man as he picked up the top ledger with a grimace. It was going to take years to rebuild what his foolish father had so recklessly squandered. And that was just the money. The family reputation was another issue entirely.

"May I interrupt?"

He looked up to see his mother standing in the doorway. He struggled to replace his undoubtedly dour expression with a smile as he got up and motioned to the place his solicitor just vacated.

"Of course, please come in and sit with me."

She stepped inside, closing the door behind him and sat down. For a long moment, she only looked at him, her dark brown eyes, the ones he had often wished he inherited rather than the Windsworth green, watching him intensely.

“You are unhappy. Worried,” she said softly as she leaned back in her chair with an air of pained defeat. “How I wish I could have spared you all this.”

He winced. “You did, Mother. For many years you did. But now this is the way things must be. I cannot ask why or wish it otherwise. I must simply see this as a challenge. A duty to repair what many generations of sloth and waste decimated.” He tried to look cheery, but her concerned expression did not change. “It is what it is.”

“Yes. It is.” She nodded slowly and after a moment her demeanor shifted. The optimism that was so much a part of her, despite the often painful life she had endured, shone through. “Perhaps it can be the beginning of a new era for the Windsworth Duchy. An era of pride. Of change. If anyone can alter this family’s reputation, it is you, Gabriel.”

He looked at the stacks of ledgers, the slash of red ink that showed how much had been lost. And thought of the stack of diaries he had uncovered just a week ago, detailing his father’s and brother’s underhanded deals and avoidance of duty and honor. Now those deeds were on his head. And he had to make reparation for them all before anyone could ever trust in the Windsworth name again.

“I have no other choice. Though Jonathon and Father certainly made things difficult for me.”

Her face took on a distant sadness. “That is my fault, in part. If I had insisted on removing Jonathon from your father’s influence, as I did with you, perhaps he would not have grown up to be his father’s son in every way. Perhaps he would not have made so many terrible mistakes... perhaps he would not be dead.”

Gabriel flinched. There were many mistakes. One, in particular, stood out in his mind. One stupid, foolish, utterly reckless act that was the first thing Gabriel had to atone for, since it had gone so long ignored.

“You did all you could, Mother. Father never would have allowed you to take the heir apparent from under his wing.”

Gabriel tried not to think about his own experiences with his hard, uncaring father after his brother’s death. Tried not to think of the even worse horrors Jonathon must have endured as a young boy. His actions as a man were almost forgivable considering.

Almost.

“Perhaps.” His mother’s voice was quiet. Strained. “But we shall never know now.”

For a short while, the room was silent as they each contemplated the past. The tick of the grandfather clock was the only accompaniment to the painful thoughts he knew from her expression that his mother was reliving.

Finally, she shook off the effects and smiled weakly. “But this mournful chatter does nothing to aid you. And that is what I long to do. So what are your plans? Is there anything I can do?” Gabriel got up from his desk and paced over to the window. He looked down into the mangled gardens below. Those would need to be weeded, trimmed, replanted. It would be a slow process. Mirroring his own, perhaps. He needed to formulate a plan, start with one little weed and then the next. And then the next. Step by step, he could do this.

He had to.

“Mr. Sanderson was here earlier,” he said. “You probably saw him leave just before you joined me. He will be helping to formulate some kind of financial recovery, though I’m sure it will take time.”

“Good.” She nodded. “You’ve always had a good head for business.”

“With his assistance in that area, it will leave me free to pursue the repair of our social standing.” Gabriel flinched. Society was not his favorite place, he had avoided it when he could. But there was nothing to it. No avoiding it anymore.

“I still have a few friends and family members who are held in high regard in the ton,” his mother said. “I’m sure I could exert a bit of influence in that arena.”

Gabriel cast a glance over his shoulder at her. “I’m going to be married before the end of the year.”

His mother blinked a few times, her face blank as if she had not understood him clearly. “I-Gabriel what do you mean?”

“A Duke-” He stopped himself. “A respectable Duke should have a wife. Settling down will send a message to the *ton* that I don’t intend to follow in the footsteps of my father or my brother. And a wife’s dowry, if it is generous enough, will help to recover some of our losses.”

“Have-have you met a young woman?” she asked, her eyes still wide as saucers.

“No.” He shrugged as he returned his gaze to the garden. “I have not met her... yet. But I do know who she will be.”

His mother staggered to her feet. “Who Gabriel?”

“Lady Felicity Ellis. The Earl of Stoneworth’s youngest daughter.”

“Why her?” Her voice cracked with the shock.

Gabriel clenched his fists at his sides. He wasn’t going to tell her that. It would only upset her beyond measure. And perhaps alter her feelings toward the woman Gabriel knew would soon

enough be his wife. And he wanted his mother to like his wife. They would spend a good deal of time together, he was certain.

“She seems a good fit,” he merely said with a dismissive shrug. “But apparently Father and Jonathon wronged her father in a-a bargain some time ago. I doubt I will be welcomed into their home. But the family is holding a recital tomorrow to celebrate Lady Felicity’s talent at the pianoforte. Do you think your influence could garner me an invitation? I would sorely like to begin my courtship.”

His mother stared at him, mouth partly agape. “Gabriel, I don’t understand what has gotten into you. There is more to this than you are telling me. Honestly, you are frightening me.”

He sighed as he crossed the room to give her a brief hug. “I’m sorry, Mama. I do not mean to frighten you. And I concede there may be more to my decision than I can explain. But will you do this for me regardless of my silence on my true motives? I would be greatly appreciative.”

His mother tilted her head to stare up at him, her gaze searching his for a long moment. Finally, she drew in a harsh breath and nodded.

“Of course, Gabriel. I said I would do anything in my power to help you in your quest. And if this will assist you, I will do my best to make sure you are at the recital tomorrow.” She reached for his hands. “But my darling, I would hate to see you make a mistake in whom you choose to marry.” Her eyes clouded with tears as she drew away from him and headed for the office door. “That would be repeating my sins, not your father’s. And that would break my heart.”

Chapter Two

Felicity shook out her hands, stretching her fingers before she took her place at the pianoforte. She did her best to ignore the crowd. Though she had been performing publicly since she was little more than a girl, she hadn't really been comfortable with all eyes on her since...

Oh, why did she keep thinking about *that*? She had stricken it from her mind long ago and it was best kept that way. She couldn't let Lady Stanton's news of the new Duke of Windsworth put her in a twist. It had nothing to do with her.

She bent her head and began to play, pouring all her tangled emotions into expressing the music. That was her one true escape. The one place she didn't have to hide.

She was midway through the second song in her selection of five for the evening when she felt a shift. A change in the audience, in the very air. Normally, she was hardly aware of those around her at all while she played, but now that was different.

She continued to let her fingers move over the keys as she lifted her gaze and let it flit around the room. Lady Stanton was the first person she saw, sitting beside Jane and Wesley. She was smiling like a proud mother hen and Felicity briefly returned the smile.

Her parents were also beaming from their positions in the front row, full of pride that Felicity wasn't entirely certain she deserved. Other friends watched, debutantes in their first season mostly sat politely, waiting for the musicale to end so they could pick up their flirtations at the soiree afterward.

And then her gaze found *him*. She was thankful that the notes she was meant to play were bold and powerful, because her fingers crashed against the keys before she could gather her composure and control their weight.

She had never seen Gabriel Morrison before in her life, but she was absolutely certain that the man standing in the back of the hall, watching her play like he was the only person in the audience, was him. The dark blond hair and bright green eyes that were so like his older brother's were the first indications, but beyond those tell-tale signs... she just felt it in her bones. In the pit of her stomach.

Tingles rushed up her arms, raced through her bloodstream, lit all her nerve endings on fire. She didn't know how she managed to finish the song she was playing, but she somehow found

herself at the end nonetheless and the audience clapped.

Everyone but the new Duke of Windsworth. He just stared at her with the same cold detachment she had always received from his late father.

Great God, he knew the truth.

Felicity's hands froze over the keys of the pianoforte and she felt the blood drain out of her cheeks to rush to her throbbing heart. She knew she should play the next song, but she couldn't. All she could do was hear the screaming refrain in her mind.

He knows. He knows. He knows.

Suddenly, her father was at her elbow.

"Is everything well, child? You look suddenly pale. Lady Stanton mentioned you left her early yesterday with complaints about being tired."

Felicity stared up at her father's handsome face. If she told him Gabriel Morrison was here, he would come to her rescue. He would throw the man into the street personally. But all that would serve would be to cause an enormous scene and make people ask questions. The kind of questions she had avoided thus far.

She was too old for saving now.

Felicity swallowed past the enormous lump in her throat and somehow managed to fake a smile. "No, father, I apologize. I was... distracted by the crowd. But I can continue."

He wrinkled his brow with concern, but backed away from her with a nod. "Very well."

Felicity forced herself to stop staring at Gabriel Morrison and looked at the pianoforte keys instead. By God, she would not let him know he had affected her. She had that much pride left, at least.

And as soon as she had finished playing, she could hide from him. Pride could only go so far.

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Gabriel took a long drink of punch and wished it was something far stronger. After what he had just witnessed, he could use a stiff drink.

Perhaps this was the very thing that had led his father and brother down the paths of temptation and vice. Just one strong drink had led to another. Just one surprisingly tempting woman had led to another.

Only this time, the tempting woman was the one he intended to marry. Felicity Ellis.

He shook his head. Somehow he had imagined her quite differently after reading his father's

accounts of what had transpired. Somewhere between idiot and cunning whore, the two ways his father had used to describe her. Gabriel had been leaning more toward mislead innocent. But now he had to re-evaluate everything. Felicity Ellis had far more passion than he had expected. It had come out in the beautiful, haunting, intense way she played. And in the azure blue of her eyes as she stared at him with a mixture of horror and utter contempt.

This might be more difficult than he had imagined if Felicity already knew who he was. But the path was chosen and all Gabriel could do was follow it. So he placed his cup on the nearest table edge and began to make his way through the crowd to find Lord Stoneworth. It was proper to garner permission from the father before one courted a young lady, so Gabriel would follow the rules to the tee.

He had made it a few steps when he heard someone calling his name.

“Windsworth!”

He turned in surprise. Though he was garnering a great deal of attention here, which made him believe those in attendance knew full-well who he was, no one had had the gall to approach him yet. But now an elderly woman was coming across the room at an alarming rate of speed for one with a cane.

“I thought that was you, Your Grace,” the woman said with a smile, even though her gaze moved over him from head to toe like she was appraising him. “You probably do not remember me, but I knew you when you were just a child. Before your dear Mama took you away from London. I am Lady Stanton.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened in surprise. His mother had spoken often of Lady Abigail Stanton. He almost felt he knew the lady.

“Why, yes, of course, my lady. My mother will be very pleased that you remember her,” he stammered as he pressed a quick kiss on the elderly woman’s hand.

“Of course I do. Is she in Town, as well? I shall have to call on her. It has been far too long.” A wistful expression came into the woman’s eyes, but then it was gone. “Perhaps I may have the honor of introducing you to our most talented songstress. Felicity, dear!”

Gabriel spun on his heel to where Lady Stanton was motioning wildly. Felicity Ellis did, indeed, stand just a few feet away, but from the way her back curved, it looked like she had been attempting to sneak past without being noticed. Now she slowly straightened up and turned to face them.

“Oh, Lady Stanton,” she said, without sparing him even a cursory glance. “I did not see you there.”

As she trudged toward them, Gabriel sucked in a breath. There was no doubt why his brother had picked her as a conquest. Jonathon had always liked the prettiest girls of their acquaintance and

Felicity was far and away more attractive than any of them. Her dark auburn hair was bound loosely, but tiny curls framed her face, drawing attention to the midnight blue of her eyes and accentuating a few charming freckles that dashed across her nose.

He could imagine she would light up a room if she smiled. But she wasn't smiling currently. And from the way she refused to look at him at all, she would *never* gift him with a smile.

How could one mourn the loss of something they had never experienced?

"Come, my dear," Lady Stanton said with a wide smile. "Meet His Grace. This is Lord Windsworth."

Felicity flinched just the slightest bit and her gaze remained focused on his shoulder rather than his eyes. "Your Grace," she murmured coolly and did not offer her hand.

"Lady Felicity." He tilted his head in a vain attempt to snare her gaze. "A pleasure to meet you. I have heard very much about you."

Now she looked at him, shock draining the color from her face. Gabriel bit back a curse. She thought he was referring to her past with his brother.

"Everyone in Society speaks of how talented you are," he corrected swiftly. "You are very highly spoken of."

To his surprise, her expression did not soften in the slightest. In fact, her eyes narrowed and she speared him with a glare that could have wilted flowers.

"Ah, I see my dear grandson and his wife motioning to me," Lady Stanton said with a wicked smile. "I should join them."

"No-" Felicity began, grabbing for Lady Stanton's arm.

The older woman dodged her quite deftly. "No, no I need no assistance. You should not end your conversation with Lord Windsworth simply because of me. I will speak to you later."

Then Lady Stanton was off into the crowd, leaving Felicity staring after her, her mouth partly agape. Gabriel shifted uncomfortably. This was not going according to plan at all. His intentions had been very proper. To speak to Lord Stoneworth first, then find the right time to approach Felicity.

She spun on him, her full lips pulled into a tight, thin line. "I did not realize you had been invited here today, Your Grace."

He started at her forward statement. "I will admit to you that I was not."

Her eyes narrowed even further. "Aha! I knew it. I knew my father would not invite you of all

people into our home. What do you want? Why did you come here?"

Gabriel fought the urge to step away from her quiet accusations. He had never stepped down in a fight before, he certainly wasn't about to start with this woman who carried half his weight, if that.

"I only wished to speak to you, Felicity."

She stepped closer. "I gave you no leave to refer to me by my first name. I gave you no leave to refer to me at all."

"Your anger toward me is not justified," he said, watching her blue eyes darken with every word. He found himself wondering what color they would become if he dared to kiss her. The thought brought him up short. Those kinds of thoughts could only bring him dangerously close to being his father's son in every way.

"Not justified?" she hissed. "You have come into my home uninvited."

"I came here to speak to your father, nothing more," Gabriel insisted. "And to make amends."

She stopped speaking for a moment and caught her breath with a harsh sound. Her throat worked as she swallowed. "You have nothing to make amends to."

"We both know that isn't true." Gabriel said softly.

She shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about. And I want you to leave. Please--"

She caught her breath again, but this time it was more like a sob. Gabriel's heart lurched. He had never intended to make her cry.

And if she did, it would only serve to draw attention to them. That kind of notice was exactly what he was trying to avoid. He reached out and caught her hand, placing it in the crook of his elbow before she could protest.

She tugged, but he held fast. "What are you doing?"

He pulled her toward the terrace doors. "I'm taking you to get some air before half the *ton* starts listening to our conversation."

That seemed to appease her because she no longer struggled while he took her outside and closed the doors behind them gently. The warm summer air stirred her hair as he moved them away from the doors.

She yanked her hand from his. "Please go away."

He flinched at the broken tone of her voice. "I cannot and you know why."

She shook her head. “No.”

Gabriel clenched his fists. No woman should fight so hard against a man’s attempts to save her, make amends to her. Yet Felicity Ellis was fighting him like a cornered wild animal. And there was only one way to deal with that situation.

Strike directly. Strike fast.

“Five years ago my brother ruined you by taking your innocence.”

She turned away from him with another sob. “No!”

He fought the urge to comfort her and pressed on. “Instead of offering for you honorably, my father and brother refused responsibility, all but daring your father to reveal the truth by calling my brother out. They ignored all demands for reparation. For justice from your father.”

“Stop.” She turned on him and though Gabriel could see the sparkle of tears in her eyes and on her cheeks, she was not openly weeping. Her chin jutted up and her shoulders flexed back with pride.

Wounded pride, but pride nonetheless. He couldn’t help but respect her for that.

“Don’t say any more,” she pleaded, clenching fists at her sides. “Just leave it be. It is so far in the past and I have all but forgotten it.”

“That is a lie,” he said softly. “Everything about your face tells me you have not forgotten a moment of the pain and humiliation my family put you through. And the fact that you have not married, despite your popularity, despite your beauty, tells me my brother’s actions have damaged you. That is the only reason I am here today, Felicity.”

She flinched again at the use of her first name, but Gabriel ignored that. She would have to get used to it once they were wed.

“Why are you here?” she asked with a humorless laugh. “To rub my nose in my past follies? To remind me of what a stupid, ignorant girl I was? Your mission has been accomplished, Your Grace. You can go with a lightened heart. I know exactly what I am.”

He shook his head. “No! That isn’t why I’m here at all. My family name has been devastated by my father and brother’s actions. Their disregard for everyone but themselves has given me a title that no one respects. I am trying my hardest to make amends for those things. I want to start with you.”

“Make amends?” she repeated, arching one auburn brow in disbelief. “How in the world do you intend to do that with me?”

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. This was not proper, but it was still what he had come for. He might as well put his cards on the table, so to speak.

“You and I should marry.”

Chapter Three

In a moment, she would wake up. This would all be a nightmare and she would go on with her life as if it had never happened. Except when Felicity pinched herself... *hard*... nothing changed. She remained standing on the terrace, staring up into the cool, green eyes of Gabriel Morrison.

And he was still waiting for an answer to the one statement she had *never* expected him to say.

“Marry you?” she repeated and the words sounded even stranger when she heard them in her own voice.

“Yes,” he said softly. His tone was surprisingly gentle. Not anything like his brother’s. Jonathon had been many things, but gentle had not been amongst them.

“You must be mad,” she whispered, her voice harsh and raw. “Or this is your idea of some kind of cruel joke.”

She began to turn away, but he reached out to catch her arm. A shocking blast of unexpected heat raced through her at the touch. He must have felt it, too, because his lips parted in surprise and their eyes met briefly. She expected him to pull back, but he didn’t, his strong hand curling around her forearm and holding her steady.

“I am not toying with you,” he insisted, his tone just as sharp as hers had been. “I am nothing like my father, nothing like my brother.”

Felicity struggled for breath, but she couldn’t seem to manage to draw enough. Not when she was so close to this man. Not when he was touching her in such a possessive way. Staring at her with such pleading in his eyes.

“What is going on here?”

Felicity yanked away from Gabriel and turned on the voice that had interrupted her troubling thoughts. Her father stood by the terrace doorway, staring at them with a dark, angry glare. Before he said another word or took a step, Felicity knew he recognized her companion. And judging from the way Gabriel straightened his spine and turned to her father with a deferent bow, he realized it, too.

Her father yanked the door shut and took three long steps toward them. Though he wasn't as tall as Gabriel Morrison, the anger in his eyes would have been enough to make much larger men cower. But Gabriel didn't. He didn't flinch. He didn't do anything to protect himself in case her father struck. He just stood there. Waiting. A look of resignation on his face.

As if he believed he deserved whatever he was going to get.

Felicity wrinkled her brow with confusion.

"What the hell are you doing here?" her father asked, low and dangerous. "I bloody well know you weren't invited."

Felicity flinched. She'd never known her father to curse in front of her. Even the day she tearfully admitted giving up her innocence, he had not spoken harshly or cruelly.

Gabriel dipped his head. "My most sincere apologies, Lord Stoneworth. I assure you that I would not have made entry to your home uninvited except that I didn't think you would speak to me if I sent word first."

"You are correct in that assessment." Her father stepped forward again yet Gabriel still stood his ground. Felicity gasped as her father clenched fists around the other man's jacket and gave him a shake. She had never seen him filled with such fury before.

Fury that was all her fault. The entire situation was her fault. Because she had surrendered control to Gabriel's brother, all these consequences were hers to live.

Felicity stepped forward to intervene if she had to. The Duke was much bigger and much younger than her father. He could certainly put the older man on his back, injure him if he chose to do so. Except... he wasn't. Felicity came to a stop, staring at Gabriel as he simply allowed the threats of violence inherent to her father's brutal grip and flashing eyes. The Duke made no attempt to defend himself.

"Why are you, of all men, alone with your hands my daughter? Wasn't what your brother did enough?" her father continued.

Gabriel winced again. "I should not be, my lord. And if you need to demand satisfaction for my utter lack of propriety, I am prepared to make reparations. In fact, that is why I am here. Not to cause your family," he shot her a pleading glance. "Or Lady Felicity, more grief, I assure you."

Her father gave an incredulous snort, though his fingers relaxed from Gabriel's jacket. He stepped back with folded arms and stared as Gabriel smoothed his mangled lapels. "Felicity, go inside."

She shook her head. She wasn't about to leave him alone with someone from the Windsworth line. Despite the new Duke's attempts at propriety and politeness, she didn't trust him. She couldn't afford to, especially after his ridiculous offer of marriage that still rang in her ears.

“No, Father.”

Gabriel cast her a side glance and his eyes lit up in surprise. As if he hadn't expected her to be so bold as to deny her father's order. Blood burned hot in her cheeks at that expression. He knew what she had done in the past. Probably he thought her nothing more than an empty headed chit with easy virtue. Her chin lifted in defiance as she looked away.

Her father turned on her. “Felicity, what I am about to say is not something for your ears.”

She reached up and placed a hand on his arm and found herself trembling. “This is because of what I-” the blush burned hotter. “-*did*. I want to stay.”

“My lord,” Gabriel interrupted. “I only ask that you hear what I've come to say. If, after I have finished, your mind is not changed, I will completely understand and you may do your worst to me. But I beg only a few moments of your time to hear my statement and my offer.”

Felicity's father held her gaze for a long moment. She expected him to refuse and tell Gabriel to get out, but his expression didn't reflect that. He almost looked... broken. Like he had after his confrontation with Jonathon Morrison and his father five long years before. Like he was out of choices.

He sighed before he turned his gaze on Gabriel. There was a wealth of mistrust in his eyes, but to her surprise, he nodded once. “Very well, Your Grace. I will hear you. But not on the terrace. Come inside where we may have privacy. I do not wish the entire party to be privy to whatever you want to say.”

“Of course,” Gabriel said with a respectful tilt of his head.

Felicity's eyes widened as her father took her hand and led them back inside. What? Was he really going to listen to this man and his ridiculous notions? Well, Gabriel Morrison would be in for an unpleasant shock if he dared to make his impertinent offer for her hand in her father's earshot. And she could not wait to see his face after he did.

#

Gabriel took a deep breath as Lord Stoneworth shut the door to his private office and motioned for him to sit. He did so, facing the settee where Felicity and her father sat together. Both of them were cold, their expressions leaving little of their thoughts about him to the imagination. But he expected that. It was part of what he would have to overcome thanks to his father and brother.

“My lord,” he began. “You have probably surmised that I know of the... incident that occurred between your daughter and my brother a few years ago.”

Lord Stoneworth stiffened and Felicity's face darkened with a blush that made her bright eyes stand out in even starker relief. They were so uncommonly blue, so filled with life and emotion. He stared for a fraction of a second too long before he forced himself to continue.

“And I am also aware of how badly that situation was handled at the time. Now that I have inherited the Duchy, I am doing my best to make reparations for the damage my family has done in many quarters. Starting with your daughter.”

Stoneworth arched a brow and his expression remained incredulous, though there was a faint light of interest in his stare. “You are trying to make amends for their behavior?”

He nodded. “Yes. And it is—it is very difficult, sir. I’m sure you know that yours is not the only family my father and brother betrayed. Their drinking, the excessive gambling, the broken bargains... they are well-known in Society. I realize it could take me years to regain even a fraction of the respect our name once inspired, but I am driven to try.”

Stoneworth’s face relaxed, but Felicity’s demeanor had not changed. She remained sitting bone straight, her arms folded like a shield across her chest, her eyes narrowed. Would he ever crack that icy demeanor and see the real woman inside?

Gabriel started. Did he want to see the real woman? That really wasn’t what he’d come for today. He had to offer for Felicity because of what had been done to her in the past. When he arrived, he’d considered it a sacrifice he had to make to regain some honor and respect.

Now, looking at her, he didn’t feel like it was such a sacrifice anymore. There was something about this woman...

“Your Grace?”

He shook off his musings to pay attention to Felicity’s father. The other man was glaring at him. Clearly he hadn’t missed Gabriel’s blatant perusal of his daughter. Damn, but that was bad form. It only served to prove he was his father’s son.

And he was beginning to wonder if he truly was that. His strong reactions to the young woman his brother had ruined were unexpected. Unwelcomed. He could only hope they wouldn’t prove to be undeniable, as well.

“Do continue,” Lord Stoneworth pressed. “I am fascinated by where all this is leading. Tell me, did you come here to offer my daughter some kind of financial settlement for what your brother took from her?”

Gabriel worked hard to keep his expression blank. Though the world knew about his family’s shames, Society as a whole was not fully aware of their financial troubles. His father had done a very good job keeping that fact utterly private, mostly by cheating merchants and offering ungentlemanly reasons for why he refused to pay debts rather than the truth.

“No, a financial settlement will not be enough, I don’t think,” he said, casting a glance at Felicity. He had to hand it to her. Despite the humiliating topic, she was holding up well. Her face flamed nearly as red as her hair, but she kept that proud tilt to her chin. The fire in her eyes drew him in inexplicably.

“Then what do you suggest?” her father asked.

It was Felicity who answered, thrusting her shoulders back with a bark of humorless laughter. “On the terrace, he offered to marry me. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous in your life?”

Gabriel bit back frustration at her interruption and locked gazes with Lord Stoneworth. He was ready for the man to come flying out of his seat and pound him. Instead, her father tilted his head, searching Gabriel’s eyes for... something. Perhaps it was honesty, perhaps it was honor... Gabriel could only hope he found both there. If he could garner her father’s support, it would be much easier to break down Felicity’s barriers to this union.

“Are you serious in this offer?” her father asked quietly.

Gabriel nodded. “I am, sir. When I saw that your daughter was still unattached, despite her talent and her beauty and her...” he cleared his throat. “...er, charm, I knew that what my brother did must have had some effect on her chances in the marriage mart. If we formed a union, I would make up for what my brother did, as well as align myself with your family.”

“You wish to have the benefit of our respect in Society?” The older man sneered.

“I would be lying if I said no. And I am not like my father and brother.” He shot Felicity another glance. “I do not lie.”

Felicity surged to her feet and turned on her father. “Tell him this is out of the question.”

Stoneworth looked up at her with a brief sadness in his eyes. Something born from such love that Gabriel turned away from it. He’d certainly never seen that expression from his own father. There had only been resentment. Cold dismissal. Anger and pain.

“Felicity, we should speak about this privately,” her father said softly.

Hope sprung in Gabriel’s chest. If her father did not automatically dismiss his offer out of hand, he had a chance.

“Privately?” Felicity repeated and the hope fled at her shocked and horrified tone. “What is there to discuss? Do you really expect me to entertain an offer of marriage from... from...” She cast a quick glance in his direction. “*This man?*”

Her father’s chin dipped in defeat. “I do not like to see you resigned to being an old maid when you are still so young, my dear. I don’t like the idea of you giving up your dreams for children and a home and a life of your own. I know you’ve done that since you-”

“Made the worst mistake of my life?” Felicity said softly, filling in her father’s hesitation. “So you would rather see me married to someone who does not care for me? Who I could never care for?”

Gabriel flinched. Her hatred of him thanks to his family ran very deep. He understood that, but he still despised it for all it represented. This was the kind of prejudice he would be fighting to overcome for years. A judgment based on two men he had hardly known, despite their shared blood.

He wanted to prove her wrong. Prove everyone wrong.

Lord Stoneworth tilted his head. “You are angry now and surprised by this, as I am. But I don’t think it wise to dismiss it out of hand. Not until you’ve given this man a chance to prove he is not like his brother.”

“Or prove he is exactly like Jonathon,” Felicity barked, her gaze snaring his with heated anger that ripped through him.

Slowly, Gabriel got to his feet. He clenched fists at his side as frustration threatened to overwhelm him. “I have told you, my lady, I am not like my brother.”

“Do I take your word on that?” she sneered. “Like I did in the past?”

“No. Give me a chance to prove it to you,” he snapped back before he tempered his tone. “Give me a chance to show you I’m worthy of your trust. I’m certain you would not like to be judged on the mistakes of one night. Please do not judge me based on the actions of another man.”

Felicity jolted back, as if his words had actually affected her. She shook her head like she was shaking off the effects, then turned on her father and Gabriel saw tears sparkling in her eyes. “Please, Father,” she whispered.

“Felicity, you cannot throw your life away based upon one night,” he answered. His gaze snagged Gabriel’s. “I won’t allow you to do that any longer. The young man has asked for a chance to prove his worthiness. You will allow him to do so. I won’t force you to marry him, but I will not let you refuse him until we’ve all had a chance to judge his worth based upon his own actions. His own words.”

Her eyes grew impossibly wide and her mouth opened and shut in mute shock. Then she turned and ran from the room without so much as a glance in his direction.

Sudden exhaustion overtook Gabriel and he sank back down into the chair with a long sigh. He looked up to find Lord Stoneworth watching him. Appraising him.

“She will not make it easy for you,” he said softly and Gabriel couldn’t tell what her father thought of that.

“Nor should she,” he replied, ignoring the throbbing of his head. “I would not expect anything different.”

“Give her a day, then call again,” Stoneworth said as he got to his feet. “I’ll make certain she at least takes tea with you. The rest will be up to you.”

The other man began to leave the room, but at the door he hesitated. “Five years ago when I first approached your father about her ruination, I was not willing to destroy her reputation in order to force your brother into marrying her. Your family all but dared me to go public and challenge him. But if you harm her. If you bring her pain. If you touch her in any way that is inappropriate... I will have your blood. I’ll have your head.”

Gabriel got up with a nod. “I understand.”

“Good afternoon.”

Chapter Four

"I'm not really sure what it is you want from us, Felicity." Jane Hughes sipped her tea as she looked to her husband's grandmother with a shrug. "But you know I adore you and I'll do anything to help you."

"Yes, dearest," Lady Stanton said with a nod. "But don't keep us in suspense any longer. Your note was so strange."

Felicity sighed as she set her untouched tea cup to the side. Clenching her fists in her lap, she looked at the two women before her. Jane had been her best friend for as long as she could remember. Long before she had met and fallen in love with Wesley Stanton, Lady Stanton's grandson. Felicity had a hand in their very happy union and had never been happier for her friend.

But now she needed Jane's help and Lady Stanton's, too. But for the opposite reason. She didn't want them to help her find true love. She needed them to help her *avoid* Gabriel Morrison's advances. And they could never know the true reason why.

"Felicity," Jane said softly. "What is wrong? Why do you look so troubled?"

"Um, well I'm certain you noticed the Duke of Windsworth's presence at my recital two days ago," she began, willing the quell in her voice to cease without success. She arched a brow at Lady Stanton. "I know *you* did. You abandoned me to the man's company!"

A ghost of a smile turned up the older woman's lips. "Abandoned to the company of a handsome, attentive man. What horrors."

"They are horrors to me, I'm afraid," she said with a sigh. "The Duke wishes to pursue my hand and my father, for some unknown reason, has decided to allow that."

Jane rose to her feet, raising clenched hands over her heart. "Oh, Felicity! That is wonderful. I've often wondered why you never accepted the advances of any of the men in our acquaintance." Felicity winced. No, she had kept her secret very well. It was too humiliating to admit she'd surrendered her virtue to Jonathon, even to Jane or Lady Stanton.

"Well, I have no intention of accepting Windsworth's advances either!" she declared with more heat than she had intended. Both Jane and Lady Stanton stared at her.

“Why ever not?” Lady Stanton asked blankly. “What is so terrible about Gabriel Morrison that you would deny him before he even has a chance to court you?”

Felicity bit her lip. “You know how he is viewed. His family absolutely destroyed their name. I could *never* align myself with such a man.”

Jane’s face suddenly paled and she sank back into her chair with a frown. “You aligned yourself with me despite my family’s reputation.”

Felicity spun on her friend in horror. She hadn’t even thought about how her declaration would sound to Jane, who had been punished for her own family shames not that long ago. Now she saw the flicker of self-doubt in Jane’s brown eyes that hadn’t been there since Wesley Stanton declared his devotion to her.

“I never meant that, Jane,” she said as she rushed to Jane’s chair. Sinking down before her, she clasped her friend’s hands and squeezed.

“You ought not judge Gabriel Morrison on his family’s habits,” Jane said softly. “Wesley says he’s made it clear he will not behave as his father and brother. In fact, he seems to already be trying to make reparations for things they did. You should give him the same benefit of friendship as you gave me. Perhaps he’ll surprise you.”

Felicity froze. Jane’s words mirrored Gabriel’s own a two nights before. He had asked her not to judge him on two stranger’s actions, as she would not like to be judged for her foolish surrender to his brother. When he said those things, with a strength and inner power lighting his striking green eyes, she had been surprised by how moved she’d been. How drawn to him.

But hadn’t Jonathon done the same thing? Brought her in with his seemingly earnest declarations about a future and then tossed her aside. She had been afraid to let another man close to her ever since, and for more reasons than that her lack of innocence would come out if a man asked for her hand and she accepted.

“There are things I cannot tell you about my reluctance to allow Windsworth too close,” she finally admitted on a low whisper. She cast a glance at Lady Stanton.

“I wondered why your reaction to that name was so strong,” she said with a tilt of her head. “There is more to all this than meets the eye.”

Felicity nodded as hot blood burned at her cheeks. “Yes. I can’t tell you why, though. I... I just can’t. But I do need your help. I asked my father to allow you two to be my chaperones today and have Gabriel come here for his call on me, rather than my own home.”

“Why?” Jane asked, her gaze still clouded by her own thoughts and memories.

“Because I want to give him every reason not to pursue his notion of marrying me,” Felicity

admitted, surprised that shame filled her at that statement. “And my father would put a stop to it.”

“Oh, Felicity,” Jane breathed as she pulled her hands from her friend’s, got to her feet and paced to the fireplace.

Felicity rose, watching her friend with even more guilt gnawing at her soul. She could simply explain, but... no... no, she couldn’t bear to say what she’d done to Jane and Lady Stanton. It was bad enough Gabriel knew. It was bad enough *anyone* knew about her lack of control.

“Please!” she begged, turning to Lady Stanton. “Please, believe that I know best in this matter.”

Lady Stanton stared at her and there was an unreadable expression in her gaze. Finally, she nodded once. “I think you are making a mistake, but I learned long ago that a young person is difficult to steer from whatever she thinks her destiny to be. What can we do to assist you?”

Felicity sighed, though she was surprised that relief didn’t wash through her like she thought it would. But she shrugged off her odd disappointment and said, “I have brought another gown to wear. I hoped I could take my maid and use one of your rooms to prepare myself. When I return, we can discuss my plan in further detail.”

Lady Stanton nodded once and directed her to a guest room upstairs. After Felicity had gone to collect her maid, Jane turned on her grandmother-in-law with an aghast expression.

“Oh, Grandmother! How could you?”

Lady Stanton smiled as she reached a hand out to Jane. “Dearest Jane, all I said was that a young person was *difficult* to steer, not impossible. Let us simply observe the Duke and Felicity for a little while. And then, when the moment is right, we will simply give her a shove toward what is best for her. Even if it is the thing that makes her look like a frightened deer.”

Jane caught Lady Stanton’s hand with a smile lightening her pretty face. “Ah, you are a schemer, my lady. Which is why Wesley and I love you so. Yes, any man who weds Felicity will need the patience of a saint. It will be good to see how the poor man reacts to her games. But I must tell you, knowing what I do, I tend to take Lord Windsworth’s side in the war.”

“So do I, my dear.” Lady Stanton smiled. “So do I.”

#

Gabriel paced the length of Lady Abigail Stanton’s parlor, watching the door with every step. He had not expected to be called here for his scheduled meeting with Felicity, and he knew from bitter experience that the unexpected was often equated with the unpleasant.

The parlor door opened and Lady Stanton was wheeled into the room by a pretty young woman with sparkling brown eyes.

“Ah, Lord Windsworth,” Lady Stanton said with a mischievous grin that made Gabriel’s

stomach clench. What was he walking in to? “I am so glad you could join us today. Felicity will be with us momentarily. Have you met my grandson’s wife?” She motioned to the young woman behind her.

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure.” Gabriel stepped forward, girding himself for the censure he often found in members of the *ton*.

“Lady Jane Stanton, may I present His Grace, the Duke of Windsworth.”

“Your Grace.” The young woman surprised him by stepping around her grandmother’s chair and offering him a hand with no hesitation. “How lovely it is to make your acquaintance.”

Gabriel stared for a moment before he recalled his manners and brushed a kiss across the lady’s glove. The welcome and understanding in her eyes wasn’t something he was accustomed to. “Thank you.”

“I know you have been out of Society for a long while,” the young woman continued. “I wonder if you and your mother would honor my husband and me at a small party we are hosting Wednesday next? There will only be ten or so couples in attendance, but I can tell you they are lords and ladies that you may wish to make an acquaintance with.”

Gabriel swallowed hard. Was this an angle? A trap? No, he didn’t see anything disingenuous in her smile or stare. Only a genuine desire to... help. Like she understood his position on some level.

“Thank you, my lady. I would be greatly appreciative.”

“Wonderful,” the younger Lady Stanton said as she stepped back to assist the elder Lady Stanton into her chair. “I will send an invitation round in a few days.”

Before he could thank her again for her kindness, the door to the parlor opened and Felicity stepped inside. Gabriel’s words fell away as he took in the sight of her. She was wearing a pink gown that clashed rather badly with her auburn hair, but it wasn’t the color that caught his eye. It was the cut. A swooping neckline that came from a more daring era teased along the slope of her cleavage. And she wasn’t wearing gloves, either.

Rouge, however, she did have in abundance, along with reddened lips either from more make up or... God help him... nibbling.

Instantly he knew what she was doing. Since he was trying to recover his reputation, she was presenting herself in a most scandalous fashion, probably in the hopes of frightening him away. And it should have.

Unfortunately, his immediate reaction was quite the opposite. Seeing her in such a daring, sensual way made him want to cross the room, tangle his fingers in her red locks and bring his mouth down on hers. He wanted to make her groan like the wanton she was trying to pretend she

was.

With a start, he shoved those feelings away. Damn her for daring the rake he didn't want to be to show himself, even for a moment. He smoothed the reaction from his face and stepped forward. He would *not* play her games.

"Good afternoon, Lady Felicity," he said, offering a hand.

She hesitated, her blue gaze darting to her bare fingers as if she hadn't thought through her plan that well. Bare skin would touch bare skin. Utterly inappropriate, despite her gaudy costume.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," she managed to croak out as she took his hand.

Heated lightening struck him at the touch, rocking him back on his heels and making that unwanted rake roar out desire that echoed in his bloodstream.

Immediately he released her hand and let her pass. She took a place on one of the chairs beside the fire. The Ladies Stanton placed themselves side by side on the settee, leaving the chair beside Felicity as his only option.

"Aren't you going to compliment me on my appearance?" Felicity asked, arching a brow in challenge as he sat.

Lady Jane's eyes went wide and Lady Stanton choked on her tea, but neither said anything to interfere. Gabriel cast them both a quick glance. So, Felicity had brought him here so she could do and say outrageous things without her father's intervention. So be it.

He turned toward her and let his gaze slip up and down her form in a lazy perusal that was as much a torment to himself as an embarrassment to her. By the time he met her eyes, her cheeks were blazing and that had nothing to do with her rouge.

"You look lovely, Lady Felicity," he said, swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat. "Very unique."

He could have sworn Lady Stanton choked on a very unladylike laugh, but Lady Jane intercepted before he was certain. She smiled at him.

"My husband mentioned that you were raised in Shelton, Your Grace."

Gabriel nodded, though he didn't take his eyes from Felicity. She was glaring at him openly. He held her eyes until she moved her stare away.

"Yes, it is a lovely part of England. I miss it," he said, smiling that he had won that little mini battle, at least. The larger war was another factor entirely. He sighed. If only there didn't have to be a war. If only Felicity could see that he was trying to do the honorable thing. That it was best for her.

Her resistance was so utterly frustrating.

“What did you do up in the wilds, Your Grace?” Felicity asked as she lifted her cup of tea to her lips with an unladylike slurp. “Garden?”

He arched a brow. Her tone was aggressive and confrontational, her dress utterly inappropriate, but when he searched her stare he didn’t see a calculating woman. He saw a frightened one. Though Felicity Ellis might pretend to be strong and untouchable, she wasn’t. He had a feeling much of her fear had to do with Jonathon. His brother’s betrayal had touched her deeper than she would possibly ever admit.

And seeing the terror in the bright depths of her eyes gave him the most unexpected reaction of all. He wanted to comfort her. Despite the fact that she was behaving badly, despite the fact that she was attempting to thwart his careful plans... he still had a strange urge to whisper to her that everything would be all right.

That he would never, *ever* hurt her as she’d been hurt in the past. And that he would never allow anyone else to hurt her either.

“Your Grace?”

Her snide tone brought him out of his haze and Gabriel forced a smile. She had weapons in her arsenal. Clearly, he would have to challenge her with weapons of his own.

“Yes, I do admit my mother’s estate had a very nice garden and I did occasionally enjoy strolling in it.” He turned and smiled at Lady Stanton. “I noticed your gardens were very lovely, as well. Would you mind if I took a turn about them with Lady Felicity? We would stay within your line of sight, of course.”

Felicity’s eyes went wide and she opened her mouth to protest, but Lady Stanton was already nodding. “Of course, my lord. No one could protest the appropriateness of such a thing. You may exit through the French doors there and if you turn left at the bottom of the terrace stair, you’ll find my favorite rose garden awaiting you.”

Jane clasped her hands together. “A very romantic spot for courting, indeed.”

Felicity’s nostrils flared slightly and she gave her two friends a look that could have frozen hell itself, but when Gabriel got to his feet and offered her an arm, she did not refuse him. Her lips thin and pursed, she got to her feet and gingerly pressed her fingers against his inner elbow and allowed him to take her outside.

As they began to make their way down the marble steps toward the gardens below, Gabriel drew in a long breath. Now that he would be alone, albeit briefly, with Felicity, he had to make the most of their time together.

#

Felicity wanted to scream as they took the final step into Lady Stanton's beautiful gardens. This afternoon was not going according to plan at all. Gabriel hadn't reacted to her outfit with shock or horror, as she hoped. In fact, the way he looked her up and down when she first entered the room had been anything but scandalized.

Scandalous, yes. Scandalized, no. His stare had all but burned into her, searing her flesh. To make matters worse her body, which should have been revolted by his heated appraisal, had instead reacted all wrong. She had gotten... hot. Tingly. And all too aware of parts of her body that she usually tried to ignore. They'd only gotten her into trouble in the past.

And then she'd tried being rude, but Gabriel had reacted with nothing but polite answers to her forward and downright aggressive questions. From the light of amusement in his eyes, it was almost like he was enjoying her attempts to make him go away.

Blasted man.

And while she was at it, blast her 'friends', too. Weren't Jane and Lady Stanton supposed to be helping her? Instead, Jane was being utterly kind and Lady Stanton was practically pushing Felicity into Gabriel's waiting arms.

She pushed herself away from those surprisingly strong arms and paced across the garden to put some distance between them.

"Why won't you just take the hint and go away?" she finally asked through clenched teeth.

"You must be getting desperate now," Gabriel said from behind her. When she turned, she found he had picked a perfect red rose from Lady Stanton's bushes. "You're not even trying to pretend anymore."

Felicity stared as Gabriel inhaled the sweet fragrance of the flower. For some reason, the bold color made her stare shift lower to his lips. Very nice lips they were, too. Full, firm... they looked like they would be nice lips to kiss.

"I'm not pretending anything," she croaked out, shocked by her wayward thoughts. She folded her arms across her chest in an instinctive shield.

Gabriel took a long step toward her, his green eyes darkening. "I think you are. In fact, I think you have been for a very long time. You pretend that what my brother did does not affect you. That you don't care if you're alone. That you despise me. But I think what you're pretending most is that you aren't afraid. You are. I see through you."

Felicity gasped at that bold statement and the truth behind it. How could this man, who didn't even know anything about her except for one horrible thing from her past, see so deeply into the hidden parts of her soul?

"I'm not afraid of you."

He chuckled and the sound cut through the air between them as he took another step in her direction. “Yes, you are. I saw it earlier today and it’s even clearer now that you don’t have your friends to shield you. You *are* afraid of me. You’re afraid of the fact that I know the truth about you and I don’t judge you for it. You’re afraid that that marrying me is the right thing to do. You’re afraid that I might be the very future you’ve been trying to avoid for so many years.”

Felicity could scarce hear him anymore for the violent pounding of her heart. “Stop.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, Felicity,” he whispered as he moved so close that she could feel his body heat. Reaching out he brushed the rose against her cheek. The satin of the petals caressed her skin and she found her eyes closing against her will.

“Yes, I do, Gabriel,” she whispered. Her eyes flew open. Had she just called him by his given name?

Her eyes darted up and what she saw in his stare made her want to run. There was a focused intensity there. A quiet storm of desire that he was attempting to rein in, but failing miserably. And she knew instinctively what was going to happen next. She also knew she could turn away from it. If she did, he wouldn’t follow her. She had already surmised that Gabriel was very different from Jonathon. He might continue to press his suit and her boundaries, but he wouldn’t take what she didn’t willingly give.

But she didn’t run. Not when he dipped his head toward her. Not when the flower he was holding dropped to the ground between them. Not when he cupped the back of her neck.

No, Felicity let her eyes drift shut and savored the long forgotten feel of a man’s lips pressing against hers. She had been correct. They were very nice lips to kiss. Better than nice. Intoxicating.

He drew her a bit closer and Felicity gasped. When her lips parted, he took advantage, darting the tip of his tongue along the crease of her mouth and tasting her. It had been a long time, but instinct kicked in. Felicity fisted her hands against his back and tentatively brushed her tongue to his. He even tasted good.

Then, just as suddenly as the kiss began, it ended. Gabriel released her and took a long step back. Felicity was shocked to find herself reaching out for him and forced her trembling hands down to her sides.

In the still of the garden, they stared at each other. Gabriel’s breath came in harsh gasps and his green eyes were dark as the jungle. The haze of the kiss faded and Felicity realized, with horror, what she had done.

“That-that should not have happened,” she choked out, lifting her fingers to cover her hot mouth. Gabriel groaned as she did so, his eyes fluttering shut like it hurt him to look at her. “No. Certainly not yet. I-I am sorry. I should go.”

Felicity bit back her desire to ask him to stay and watched him give her a short bow and then make his way back across the garden toward the house. When he was out of sight, Felicity sat down on one of the stone benches in the middle of the rose garden. Her heart was throbbing, her head was spinning and emotions hit her from all sides.

Except one. The one she had been expecting more than any other. She felt no shame. Not like the first time she'd kissed Jonathon. Certainly nothing like after she'd given him her virtue.

In fact, when she thought of the kiss with Gabriel, what she felt was... need. She wanted more. With a moan, she covered her face with her hands. More was the one thing she'd told herself she could never have. And now it was being offered to her on a gilded platter, along with a future she had thought would never exist.

Chapter Five

Gabriel lifted a tumbler of sherry to his lips and took a sip of the expensive liquor, a much higher quality than any that remained in his father's home. He sighed with pleasure at the rich flavor. This was the first moment alone he'd had since he and his mother had arrived at Lord Wesley and Lady Jane Stanton's home over an hour before. Not that he was complaining. On the whole, this gathering had been most beneficial.

He watched his mother chat with some of the influential party guests and couldn't help but smile. When they arrived, she had been nervous, certain they would be shunned. But the Stantons had been so open, so welcoming that no one else had dared give them the cut direct.

Lady Jane had been correct when she issued her invitation to the soiree a few days before. Coming here was a very good first step in returning honor to his tarnished family name. And giving his mother back some of her dignity.

He sighed. Those facts, along with the very genuine offer of friendship Wesley Stanton had given him, should have made Gabriel happy. But he wasn't.

Slowly, he let his gaze move around the perimeter of the room until he found Felicity in the crowd. She was standing with a group of giggling debutantes, but from the far away look in her eyes, she was not engaged by their mindless chatter. She looked as forlorn and confused as he, himself, felt.

Gabriel couldn't help but wonder if the kiss they shared in Lady Stanton's garden was the cause of her distraction.

It was bloody well the cause of his. That ill-advised kiss was all he could think about since they parted ways a few days before. The kiss and Felicity, herself. Her image had haunted his days and tormented his nights. In the middle of conversations with the solicitor who was assisting him with finances, he would find himself thinking of Felicity's mouth. Or her laugh. Or her infrequent smiles.

When he was alone, he thought of her stubborn pride. Her rare beauty. Her spirit, which both challenged him and made him admire her all the more.

And with those thoughts, those unwanted intrusions, came an even more shocking realization. Jonathon had been a fool to let Felicity go. After his brother took her innocence, he should have

moved heaven and earth to marry her and erase her shame. Gabriel knew that... and yet he was grateful for his brother's selfish indulgence. Jonathon's weakness had left wide open a door that Gabriel very much longed to walk through.

Yes, he wanted Felicity by his side. And now he wanted that for so much more than the financial and shameful reasons that had been the original impetus for his courtship.

Felicity suddenly snapped to attention and her dark blue eyes focused sharply on him. For a moment, her reaction to his stare was utterly unguarded. She sucked in a breath and a rosy blush darkened the apples of her cheeks. In her face, he saw embarrassment, a trace of anger, but there was something more.

Desire. It flickered, however briefly, in her eyes. And called out to his own need to be near her. To touch her. To have her.

Her lips pursed and the mask she so often wore slipped over her features, blocking out her emotions in a frustratingly quick fashion. Damn, but he wished he could see into her heart more often.

She turned to her companions and quickly excused herself, then thrust her shoulders back like she was about to face a firing squad and moved toward him.

Gabriel caught his breath. Anticipation curled in his belly, made him hot, made him think of things he desperately did not want to consider. Thoughts of sultry nights and tangled limbs. Of waking up next to this woman every morning.

"Your Grace?"

He shook off the thoughts and prayed she wouldn't notice the sudden state of arousal he found himself in. "Good afternoon, Felicity."

She swallowed hard and suddenly began to fiddle with a loose string on the hem of her sleeve. Gabriel could see she was struggling with whatever she wanted to say and prepared himself for the worst. After three days of consideration, she probably had some blistering comments about their kiss.

"I would like to speak to you again about this courtship idea of yours," she finally said.

Gabriel arched a brow. "Yes?"

"Have you not changed your mind yet about your ridiculous notion of marrying me?" she asked, dropping her voice to a whisper as she cast her gaze around.

He stifled a sigh. Dear God, was she still on that subject? She was singular, he granted her that. "Why would I change my mind? It's a capital notion."

Her gaze darted to his. “For pity’s sake, Gabriel, certainly you can see now that we do not suit!”

Her suddenly elevated tone made a few people glance up and Felicity’s face darkened in a deeper blush.

Gabriel clenched his fists at his sides. He was trying to maintain patience, he truly was, but this woman tested him beyond reason.

“Come with me,” he growled as he caught her arm.

She recoiled from his touch, but he held firm, guiding her toward the terrace doors without hesitation. Felicity opened her mouth as if to speak, but then reconsidered and let him take her outside. He led her away from the main area of the veranda to a more secluded corner where they would not be interrupted. Once they were alone, she pulled her arm from his and glared at him.

“This is not a good idea,” she snapped.

“You mean after what happened the last time we were alone?” he drawled, happy he could sound unaffected by her, despite how untrue that was. “I promise you, dear Felicity, I can control myself for a few moments. I have more important things on my mind than kissing you.”

Liar.

Felicity’s eyes widened, but Gabriel did not let her interrupt. For once she would let him have his way.

“I want to know something,” he said, folding his arms as he watched her pace the area. “I want to know if you’ll ever stop comparing my conduct to my brother’s?”

She stopped at that question and turned on him. “Is that what you think?”

“I know that is what you do,” he said on a sigh. “You always believe I am right at the very edge of hurting you like Jonathon did. Despite my actions and my words, you cannot see anything but him when you look into my eyes. Do you deny it?”

With a catch of her breath, she stepped toward him. Her gaze came up and snagged his. She held there for a long moment, watching him. Judging him, he was certain. There was a struggle in her stare, just as there had been earlier. A war inside her. It was the only thing that made him worry about a union between them. The idea that she would always see Jonathon when she looked at him.

“Oh, Gabriel,” she finally said softly. “In the beginning, it is true I compared you to your brother. I thought you were the same man, just in a different package. I was certain you were playing a game like he always did. But-” she stopped. “I cannot believe I am saying this-”

“What?” Gabriel whispered as he moved a few inches closer. God, she was beautiful in the

afternoon sunlight. So fresh. And he ached to touch her, but he couldn't. Not yet.

She swallowed again and tears began to sparkle in the corners of her eyes. "Now that I have begun to know you, now that all the news of your deeds have reached my ears, I can see you're not like him. If I compare you, Gabriel, Jonathon falls far short in my estimation. You are-you are a good man and I think you do have good intentions. And I appreciate your wanting to make amends for-" She blushed again. "-for what I lost. But it is wrong for you to marry me just to prove some point about your character, just to make me whole. You told me when we met that I shouldn't judge you by the actions of another man. Well, you should not base your own future on his actions, either. No matter how noble that may be."

Gabriel stared at her. For the first time since he met Felicity, she wasn't hiding. She wasn't pretending. She looked up at him with such honesty that he ached at the sight. Not with desire, but with something much more tender. Something he had not expected to find in the spirited, closed off woman he thought to marry to pay a debt.

She was so much more to him now. But there was still something he longed to know. "Did you love my brother?"

#

Felicity drew back, stunned by both Gabriel's pointed question and the look in his eyes. There was a softness there that hadn't existed before. A tenderness that both frightened and moved her. It matched her own and that was terrifying. Why did it hurt so much to tell him not to throw his life away on her?

And why did she want so desperately long for him to tell her he still wanted her?

But that wasn't what he was telling her. Instead, he asked her about Jonathon. About her tainted past. He deserved an answer. Perhaps he was the only one who ever had.

"I thought I did love him," she admitted.

Although she did not want to talk about that painful time in her life, for the first time she didn't believe she would be judged.

"You thought you did?" he repeated, tilting his head.

She nodded. "I was young and he was handsome. He was the one all the girls wanted to 'catch'. When he began to pay special attention to me, I was utterly charmed. I should not have surrendered to his desires, but I was so certain he would marry me, as he promised. I thought it was what I *should* want. But it was a foolish notion. Even if he had married me, I would not have been happy."

Gabriel drew back in surprise. "You think not? Why?"

Felicity sighed. That was a subject she had ruminated over many a time during the years of her shame and guilt. And even more since Gabriel came into her life. But she'd never spoken her

thoughts aloud to anyone.

Until now.

“Forgive me for speaking plainly, but your brother was a ne’er-do-well. A dandy and a womanizer. Frivolous to his very soul. And though I was silly in my own way at the time, a marriage with him would have brought me nothing but misery. In the end, I would have wished for another kind of man.”

Gabriel was closer now, though she didn’t recall that he had moved. It seemed like if she took a deep breath, she could smell the faintly spicy hint of his skin, feel the heat of his breath and body heat. It was rather dizzying, especially when coupled with the intensity of his gaze.

“What kind of man would you have picked?” he asked, his voice so low that it barely carried. She looked at him, sunlight glowing down on his handsome face and reflecting in his dark eyes. A voice whispered from within her, echoing in her brain.

You. I would have picked you.

“I would have picked a man with honor,” she whispered, blinking back sudden tears. “A man with purpose. With goals. A kind man. A good man.”

“You said *I* was a good man,” His voice was suddenly low and husky. The rumbling timbre seemed to roll through her bloodstream and settle in her belly. “And I know I mean something to you.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“The kiss proves it.”

Felicity turned her face. She should have known he’d come around to that eventually. “The kiss meant nothing to me. And while I appreciate your misguided attempt to help me, you mean nothing to me, either. So go. Go away and find another woman to marry. It is not meant to be.”

“I’m sorry to disagree with a lady, but I’ve never heard such poppycock in my life.”

Felicity spun back and found herself caught in Gabriel’s arms. He pulled her a little closer and looked down into her face. Her body tingled at the touch, heating and yearning for everything she had so long told herself she would never have.

“The kiss meant something to you, as it did to me,” he said, so low and close to her ear that she felt his breath caress her face. “And I mean something to you, or you wouldn’t spend so much time running from me.”

“Gabriel,” she said, but the sound was more like a sob.

“You are afraid to care for me, for any man, because you don’t want to repeat the past. But you say you can see I’m not Jonathon. And you are not the same foolish girl who believed she loved someone so utterly wrong for her. Don’t destroy your future because of the past. I know how much the past can cut, but we learn from it. We grow from it.” He leaned down and brushed his lips against the tip of her nose. “We move away from it, Felicity. Move away from it with me.”

She shut her eyes. Tremors wracked her and she knew if Gabriel wasn’t holding her, she would not remain upright. How could she deny him when he was offering her so much? But at the same time, how could she take what he offered? She had been denying herself for so long, she was afraid to give in to her desires. To trust. To have faith in herself or him.

But then his hand came up and he cupped her cheek. Tilting her face upward. “Felicity, we could be so happy. I would make you happy. I swear it to you. Please, please marry me. Be with me. Not because of the past. Because of right now. Please.”

Her mouth opened, her lips trembled and she knew she could not deny him. “Yes.”

His eyes widened and the flash of pure joy she saw on his face erased any lingering doubts. Then his mouth came down and erased her thoughts, as well.

If she had been stunned by his first kiss, Felicity welcomed the second. When his tongue touched hers and he stroked across the roof of her mouth, it was as if she had come home. It was right. It was everything she wanted. It was more.

And she would have this... and all the more... for the rest of her life. Suddenly her memories of what happened between a man and a woman were thrilling rather than shameful. Gabriel would touch her, fill her, claim her once she was his wife. She looked forward to that moment, though she felt a pang of regret that her innocence was not a gift she could give him.

Gabriel’s arms tightened and she was brought more fully against his chest. She mewled with pleasure against his lips as her long dormant senses awakened. She was on fire. It tingled in her fingertips, made her nipples harden, and brought a powerful ache to the place between her thighs. And the wanting had never been like this before.

So perhaps *that* was the gift. She came to Gabriel not with her innocence, but with her experience. With all the lessons she had learned over the years about fear. And with all the acceptance he had shown to her. That would make her savor their time together. It would make her less timid. It would allow her to feel all the pleasure with no regrets.

Never again.

With a gasp, Gabriel broke the kiss and gently set her away from him. Their eyes locked and she saw all the control he was reining in as he panted out heaving breaths.

“Dear God, woman, what you do to me,” he said as he ran a hand through his hair. “You bring out every wicked thing in me.”

She cupped his cheek with a smile. “Only be wicked for me.”

His expression softened as he turned his lips into her palm. “I promise.” He leaned toward her second time, but pulled away at the last moment with a growl of displeasure. “No. As much as I’d like to show you how wicked I can be right here and now, that would do neither of us any good. I’d like to speak to your father. To tell him that you’ve agreed to my offer and make the arrangements.”

Felicity nodded as her heart leapt. This was really happening. And she looked forward to it with a hope she’d once thought Jonathon took along with his pleasure.

“Yes, I believe he was in the parlor. You speak to him first and I’ll join you in a few moments.”

Gabriel caught her hand and lifted it to his lips. “I’m glad, Felicity. So very glad that I was able to convince you.”

She smiled, heart swelling, as he turned away and headed for the house. After he had gone in, she turned to look out over the gardens below. Joy spread through her, making her limbs feel light as air. She could fly if she wanted to.

“There you are, Felicity! We wondered where you went!”

Felicity turned to see one of the debutantes she had been speaking to, Roberta Wington, come out onto the terrace. Thank heavens she and Gabriel hadn’t decided to be wicked after all. She smiled at the girl. Even debutante ridiculousness couldn’t spoil her mood.

“It’s a glorious afternoon. I was just having a breath of fresh air,” she explained.

The other girl giggled. “With the Duke of Windsworth.”

Felicity shrugged. There was no use denying it. Once matters were settled with her father, the announcement would be made. “Yes.”

“I hear he’s courting you,” Roberta pressed, looking down at Jane and Wesley’s gardens with a yawn.

“Yes.” There was little use denying that, either.

“It’s a fine match.” The other woman flicked a few pebbles from the stone wall that lined the terrace edge. “You will become a Duchess and he’ll receive your dowry. What was it? Fifty thousand pounds?”

Felicity pursed her lips at the vulgar subject. “I very much doubt the Duke needs my money, Roberta.”

Roberta spun on her with surprise lighting her wide eyes. “Of course he does! He’s poor!”

“What? Of course he isn’t!” Felicity snapped, irritation rising in her. How dare this little snip make such an implication?

“He certainly is! My mother had her eye on him for me when he first arrived in Society, but Father cut that notion off when he discovered Windsworth hardly has a farthing to his name. His father and his brother lost it all. My father said that could make any man, even a Duke, into a fortune hunter!”

Felicity stepped back, eyes wide, as she stared at the other girl. Gabriel had no money?

Roberta looked at her face and Felicity’s reaction must have shown clearly, for the other girl lifted a hand to her lips and covered her mouth. “Not that-not that he is that, of course. I’m sure he wants you for other reasons than just the dowry.”

Felicity continued to stare, though she didn’t really see the debutante any longer. All she could see was Gabriel’s face, floating before her. Smiling at her. Kissing her.

And all along he had been penniless. He had said he came to her to make amends, but her impressive dowry would surely line his lean pockets, as well. While he so generously took her on as wife, with her lack of virtue, he would be amply paid for his sacrifice with fifty-thousand pounds of her father’s money.

No. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t.

Except, he hadn’t revealed the truth about his financial position, had he? She’d heard nothing of the kind from his own lips, and her father made no mention. Which meant he’d kept it a secret. A lie by omission.

And he’d said he never lied.

What a fool she had been. To trust him. To grow close to him. And maybe... for just a moment... for allowing herself to love him and think they could have a happy future.

Chapter Six

Felicity clenched her hands into fists, the hot blood roaring through her veins as she continued to stare over the gardens. Her only consolation was that gossip Roberta Wington had made a hasty exit after her horrible revelation about Gabriel's financial position.

Of course, she was likely already inside, spreading the news of Felicity's newest shame to everyone. And here she had sought to avoid that kind of gossip for so long.

She wanted to run. To bolt away from the party, climb into a carriage and just go, as far and as fast as she could. Change her name, change her life. Find a place to hide from the shame of her past and from the hurt that now blossomed in her chest like a poisonous flower.

She caught her breath just before it became a sob. No. No. *No*. She wouldn't, she *couldn't* run anymore. She wouldn't hide from the past. If anything, she'd learned that wasn't possible. She had let one Windsworth brother shame her into doing that, she wouldn't let the second.

Of course, she could march straight to her father and tell him every horrible thing she could think of about Gabriel. Certainly her father would take care of the situation from there. She would never have to see Gabriel again, and he would quite possibly be just as ruined as she was by the time her friends and family were finished with him.

She stared at the flowers below with another shake of her head. No. That wasn't right either. She was a grown woman; she couldn't let her father take care of her problems forever. As it was, she'd hidden behind him long enough.

Aside from which, she didn't *want* to ruin Gabriel. Oh, yes, some childish part of her liked the notion of hurting him like she was hurting, but that wasn't the answer.

The answer was the thing she feared most. She had to go to Gabriel herself and confront him with what she now knew.

It was strange, but despite everything she felt she *owed* it to him.

And she definitely owed it to herself to hear the truth.

#

"Well, Your Grace, you are tenacious, I give you that," Felicity's father said with a wan smile as he poured Gabriel a drink.

"I think your daughter is a prize well-worth winning, my lord." Gabriel took the whiskey Lord Stoneworth offered. He felt like a celebratory drink.

"She certainly is leading you on a merry chase. Most men give up by this point in her games." The older man sighed and a flash of emotion flickered in his eyes. "I wonder if you will survive her tricks."

Gabriel smiled, passed the nervousness that churned in his stomach. This was the perfect moment to reveal to Felicity's father that the two had come to an arrangement. That she had finally given in to his desires and agreed to be his wife. It was the moment he'd been waiting for ever since he learned of the way his brother and father shamed her. He should have been jumping out of his skin to share the news.

But instead, he was weighing each and every word in his head. Trying to find the best way to approach the subject. Because it meant more to him than it had before. *She* meant more to him. And he didn't just want to disregard the gravity of her acceptance like it was a simple business deal or unemotional partnership. He wanted whatever he said to her father to reflect the honesty of Gabriel's regard for Felicity.

That and the depth of his newfound feelings... the ones he had been trying not to label until now. Perhaps the time had come to do so.

He opened his mouth to begin when the door to the parlor opened. His gaze darted to the intruder and he was surprised to find it was Felicity, herself. He'd thought she would take a few more moments before she joined them, to allow him a moment with her father. But her quick interruption didn't bode well. Nor did her stony face. She was not pleased and hardly spared him a glance.

"Father," she said softly. "Lord Windsworth."

"Hello, child," her father said, motioning her in. He cast a side glance at Gabriel. "Lord Windsworth and I were just discussing you."

"Oh, yes," Felicity said quietly and her gaze held Gabriel's with a hint of... accusation? Why did that emotion darken her gaze again? Hadn't they moved passed all that? "I'm sure you were. May I beg a favor of you, Father?"

The older man stepped forward and caught his daughter's hands. Kindness and love lined his face, along with a hint of regret. Gabriel knew why. Her father would probably go to his grave wishing he could have spared her the humiliation she suffered because of Gabriel's family. He found himself hoping that he could form a bond with this man after his marriage. Perhaps through a friendship and mutual affection for Felicity, they could each help ease the pain of the other's past.

"I wonder if you would fetch me a drink? I'm feeling a bit-" She threw another glance Gabriel's

way. “-a bit tired. I would like to sit for a moment.”

Her father tilted his head. “You are unwell? Should we leave?”

She shook her head. “No, mother is having too good a time to take her away. I’m certain after I rest, I will recover myself.”

“Of course. Lord Windsworth, will you stay with her?” Felicity’s father shot him a glance of concern.

Gabriel tilted his head. Despite Felicity’s statement, she didn’t look pale or tired. She looked... emotional. But he nodded. “Of course.”

Her father slipped from the room, leaving the door open a hair. But as soon as his form disappeared from view, Felicity stepped back and pushed the door shut. When she turned to face Gabriel, the emotions she’d been cloaking became clear.

She was angry. She was hurt. And she blamed him for both, though he had no idea what could change her feelings toward him in such a short span of time.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, stepping toward her.

Felicity stiffened and he stopped instinctively.

“You believe something is wrong?” she whispered, folding her arms like a shield in front of her chest.

He nodded. “I *know* something is wrong.”

“How?” She tilted her head. “How do you know?”

He shrugged. All he wanted to do was touch her arm, comfort her, but her body language told him in no uncertain terms that she would not allow it.

“I can see it in the tightness around your eyes,” he began warily. “The way your mouth is turned down, not just in anger, but with pain. And your shoulders are set back, the way they are when you’re trying to act as if you’re strong, but are actually feeling weak.”

Those same shoulders suddenly slumped, as if his words had deflated her ability to pretend. Her eyes sparkled with sudden tears, which she turned away to hide from him.

“My goodness, Gabriel, you do know me well, don’t you?” she whispered.

That should have been a compliment, but it sounded like a curse. He nodded, taking the chance to edge toward her. “Yes, I do. I’ve watched you, I’ve listened to you. I want to know you, Felicity. A husband *should* know his wife.”

That made her shoulders roll even further forward in defeat. “And what of a wife? Should she not know her husband equally well?”

He wrinkled his brow. This felt like such a trap. “You know me. You know my motives, my past. My shames. And we will grow to learn even more about each other the longer we are together.”

She turned on him suddenly. “But what about the secrets you conceal, Gabriel? How will I ever come to know those things?”

His lips thinned into a line and he reached forward to catch her shoulders. She gasped at the contact and began to pull back, but he held her steady.

“Enough games. What is it you have to say?”

Blue eyes darkened to stormy seas as she snapped, “You dare talk to me about games when this entire ‘courtship’ was a game! And the prize at the end was not me. No, it was my fifty-thousand pound dowry. The one that will help pull you from the financial straits your brother and father caused for your family. When did you plan to tell me? Or did you intend to continue lying until you’d secured your position by making me your wife and claiming my body so I couldn’t leave?”

#

Felicity was surprised by how much confronting Gabriel hurt. Every word seemed to make the pain grow, and when he touched her it exploded, making her snap out hurtful words she wished she could take back. They revealed too much about her heart.

The one that loved the man before her.

And the fact that she suddenly realized she’d fallen in love with Gabriel made the situation so much worse.

His fingers tightened on her upper arms and he stared down at her with eyes flashing with... anger. He was angry? After he’d been caught in a lie, he dared to be upset that she was challenging him about the truth?

“I have endured everything you’ve put me through, Felicity. From the outright rudeness to the attempts to put me off to the denial of your feelings. I have endured those things because I understood their source, I understood your embarrassment and fear and anger. And also because I admired your strength and eventually, I came to care for you. But this is enough. I will not stand idly by and allow you to malign me about my intentions. Not after everything we have gone through.”

She blinked. She’d never seen Gabriel like this: his eyes alive with fire, his lips trembling with outrage, and beneath the anger, a hurt coming to the surface.

A hurt she had caused and foolishly longed to sooth. She fought that inclination.

“So you deny that you came to me with hopes of obtaining the dowry that my father has promised?” she asked, her voice cracking.

He shrugged. “I told you once that I do not lie and I meant that. Yes, when I first heard of the fact that my brother ruined you, I came to you with two intentions. One was to make right what he had done. But the fact that you had such a large dowry certainly did not deter me from my quest. My father wrecked my family’s name and our fortune with his vices. And it is as much my duty to repair that as it was to make you whole. A marriage is as good a way to do such a thing as anything else.”

She winced and pulled away from his arms, but he wouldn’t let her go. He held tight. If anything, he pulled her even closer, close enough that his heat curled around her and woke sinful desires in her own body.

“You may sometimes behave foolishly, especially when you are frightened,” he said and didn’t allow her to interrupt when she gasped in outrage. “But you are not stupid. Certainly you know your father raised the amount of your dowry in the hopes it would bring more men to you for you to choose from. Did you not receive offers before mine?”

She pressed her hands against his chest and gave a push. Finally, Gabriel looked down at his hands, gripping her arms. His face paled and he released her gently.

Felicity paced away, her body trembling from his touch while her mind screamed in pain at his words. Such confusing emotions collided and set her off balance entirely.

She smoothed her skirts, wishing she could so easily smooth away her emotions. Then she turned on him and prayed she looked cool and unaffected.

“Yes, I have received offers. Plenty of offers before yours.” She added the last to hurt him, but her sneer didn’t even seem to register.

He charged forward a step and Felicity’s body reacted against her will at the sight of this normally controlled man losing control in the face of her anger and refusal.

“And did you understand that your dowry was part of their suit? A reason for their offers?”

She folded her arms. “Of course.”

“Did you hate them for it?” he asked, voice now deceptively low.

“No,” she ground out.

“Then why do you hate me for starting out with the same reasoning, Felicity? Why do you shun me and judge me for the very same thing?”

She moved forward now, driven to her own brink and wanting to lash out. “Because I never wanted *them* to care!”

Her hand came up to cover her lips the second the words were spoken. Had she just admitted that?

Her eyes met his and she backed away step by step, retreating from the kindness, the gentleness, the surprise and joy that she saw in his stare.

When he spoke, his voice was calmer and more gentle. “I didn’t tell you about my financial position because I wasn’t proud of what my family was. And ultimately, to be honest with you, I forgot about your dowry. I forgot about the past. I forgot about making things ‘right’. I forgot about everything except for you.”

Felicity stared, as shocked by his admission that she had become such a part of his life as she had been by her own.

He reached for her, catching the hand she still held to her lips and drawing it toward his heart. When he pressed her fingers to his chest, she felt the steady, sure beat of his pulse.

“So take your blasted dowry, Felicity.” He smiled just a little. “Give it away for all I care. Donate it to that Widows and Orphans Society that is all the rage. Or spend it all on slippers and ridiculously expensive hat pins. Whatever pleases you. I’ll happily remake my own fortune.” His smile fell and his dark eyes grew serious. “But whatever you do with it, don’t use the money against me. Don’t make it an excuse. If you don’t love me, if you cannot ever come to love me, than simply state it now and I will cease all my pursuits.”

Felicity blinked up at him. “Do you-do you want my love?”

He seemed surprised that she would ask such a thing. His eyes went wide and the steady beat of his heart suddenly doubled. “I do. But I am not selfish. I ask for nothing I do not freely offer myself.” He pressed her hand more firmly against his chest. “My heart, Felicity. My soul. My life. My future. Do you want those things? For all the joy and heartbreak they may bring? You must be certain of me and of yourself. Because as much as I adore you, I cannot spend the rest of my life with you constantly questioning and accusing me.”

Felicity blinked. His words brought shame rushing toward her. She had been so unfair to this man from the very beginning. She had judged him. She had railed against him. She had denied him. And she had always kept some little part of herself from fully trusting him.

And yet, through it all, he had been nothing but kind to her.

As she stared up into his eyes, she knew what she would say. And she knew she would spend the rest of her life making all those things up to him. She’d spend the rest of her life loving him. A tear she had been trying to keep him at bay now fell freely. She did nothing to swipe it away.

“You offer me your love. Your everything?”

He nodded.

She smiled and for the first time in years the expression went from her lips all the way through her soul.

“I love you, Gabriel. I did not want to, but it happened. And if you offer me your heart, then I take that precious gift. And I swear to you that I will spend the rest of my days endeavoring to deserve it. And to deserve you.”

“Felicity, Felicity,” Gabriel whispered as his mouth moved toward hers. “You deserve already every happy ending I will give you and more.”