

*Miniature
Rose*

English Tea Rose

*To
Capture
Love*

Thereen Vedam



To Capture Love

by

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Matthew 'Stone' Livingston, the sixth Earl of Ashford, tapped his good foot on the museum's marble floor in rhythm to the pounding at his temple. The headaches assaulted him frequently these days, ever since he received news of his brother's death. Waiting a good hour for the artist he'd employed had exacerbated the throbbing. He checked his timepiece, snapped it shut, and slipped it back into his pocket.

"My lord," the curator said, "I'm sure Mr. Black will be here shortly." His nervous glance at the front door dissuaded Stone of any such fortunate occurrence.

Stone strode with his lopsided gait to the window. The museum fronted Montague Street, which was heavy with London's morning traffic of hackney carriages, gentlemen on horseback, and carts carrying produce to the city center. No Mr. Black rushed up the museum steps to keep his overdue appointment.

He could not believe he stood here like a dunce waiting for the rude fellow. If anyone else had dared to keep him waiting, *after* refusing to meet him at the Ashford estate, the offender would have lost Stone's custom within a minute of the appointed time. He approached the opposite window, but it provided no better prospect.

He should simply hire another artist. However, just a week previously, he had seen one of Black's works—a statue of a man petting his dog. An innocuous enough representation. Yet, he'd been entranced by the kindness he saw in the man's face and the depth of feeling shared between master and pet so skillfully depicted in hard cold stone. At that moment, he knew that he wanted only this artist to sculpt a statue of Geoffrey. Just the thought of his slain brother brought a lump to his throat. No, he must have Black. Only he would do Geoffrey justice.

"Enough waiting. I shall attend him at his home."

"But...but," the curator sputtered.

"Come, man. Have I not wasted enough time? Give me his direction."

"My lord, I do not have Black's address. All my dealings with him have been here, at the museum, by way of a third party. That's how we arranged this rare engagement. It took much convincing, I assure you. Perhaps the shy gentleman could not bring himself to reveal who he is."

"That's not acceptable," Stone replied. "I must meet him. Talk to him about Geoffrey. How else will he be able to depict him as he truly was?"

"Perhaps his lordship will allow me to arrange another meeting?" the curator asked tentatively. "I shall stress even more the importance of the interview."

Stone's leg would not allow him to stand still much longer. He sighed in resignation. "Very well." He flung open the front door, and slammed it behind him. Half way down the steps, he crashed into someone running pell-mell the other way. Stone pushed him away and gave a repelling stare that should have quelled the reprobate, only to find he beheld a gently borne female accompanied by a maid.

"My pardon, miss," he said. "You should watch where you step."

"Oh, no," the lady said, glancing at where he gripped her by her arms. "You're crushing my Spencer, sir. Pray, show a modicum of caution. You shall make it seem as if I slept in the thing and this is already the second time I've had to change."

The inanity of the comment struck Stone with force. He released her and bowed. "My apologies for wrinkling your garment," he said with studied sarcasm.

She met his gaze, and he found himself pierced by a pair of clear gray eyes that seemed to perceive him for the first time.

"Oh," she said and stumbled down a step. Pedestrians stopped to view their exchange and whispered among themselves. Stone made to pass by but she halted his progress.

"My lord," she said, with a hesitant smile. "Pray forgive me for..."

He cut her off with a raised hand. So, she had

recognized him as a peer. Well and good. "Kindly step away," he said in a cold voice designed to give the most determined miss a clear set-down.

"But you don't understand, my lord. You see my carriage was caught behind a toppled cart of vegetables not a block away. And I'm..."

"Pray desist! I've no interest in being introduced to you in such a ramshackle manner. Let me make myself perfectly clear, so you waste little time in the coming weeks as the season progresses in attempting to make my acquaintance at a ball, a musical, or even in public in front of the museum. I am not in the least entertained by bird-witted females more concerned with their attire than proper conduct, nor in those who have no more enlightened thoughts in their heads than the cut of their bonnet or the crease on their Spencer."

The young lady looked as if she'd been suitably chastised and a titter of laughter erupted from the crowd gathered. Stone ground his teeth at having provided entertainment for strangers. His head throbbed as he gave the woman a sardonic bow and left.

Pauline Blackburn sent the limping form of the retreating earl a worried look. His proud silhouette reminded her of a fine English Alabaster statue.

"Oh, Miss Pauline," her maid whispered. "What are we to do? This story is sure to grease the mills 'fore sunset. Every household in the city will know that his lordship has given you a set-down. You may be refused a card to Almack's this season."

"I've no interest in attending ever again, so that hardly signifies." Her Almack days were long past. Pauline had made her come-out over three summers ago and had not 'taken,' which, according to her mother, was entirely due to Pauline's forbidding aspect whenever a gentleman came to call on her.

Having successfully married off three other daughters, but seeing no method of getting around their stubborn youngest girl, her parents had relented and allowed Pauline to pursue her passion for sculpting. They only insisted on one caveat, that during the Season, she must attend no less than five assemblies or balls or the theatre, and *smile* at the gentlemen when they asked her

to dance or spoke with her. Pauline had agreed absently, knowing it to be a small price to pay for having gained the freedom to sculpt.

She lost sight of the earl among the crowd and continued on her way inside. The short meeting with the earl had brought back vivid memories along with an uncomfortable fluttering in her heart. Feelings that she thought had shattered into rubble long ago, now reformed.

Though Lord Ashford did not know it, she had met him before, in the Queen's Drawing Room, during Pauline's presentation. He had hardly noticed her then, so focused had he been in conversation with his friends, but she had been entranced by the young officer in red.

He had had a magnificent physique and when he took a lady onto the dance floor, he moved with the grace of an athlete. He cast every other gentleman into the shade, leaving her with an instant tendre for the handsome uniformed soldier. He had been merely Mr. Matthew Livingston then, cousin to the late earl.

Still, the young ladies in the room had used every artifice designed to ensnare him. Pauline too had asked her mother to procure an introduction, but he had hardly given her a second glance. That had been her one and only dart into the realm of love. She had decided soon after Mr. Livingston was shipped off to the Peninsula that her sculptures provided far more entertainment and less emotional turmoil.

Now, he was an earl. His ascension to the title had been quite a surprise, as the late earl had both a wife and a legitimate son and heir. However, a tragic carriage accident had wiped out the whole family last fall, making Mr. Livingston, the new Earl of Ashford.

Her father had said that even after having heard the news, the new earl refused to give up his commission and leave Spain. Only after being wounded in the knee during a skirmish did Ashford's commanding officer order his lordship to return home.

"A regular right one," Pauline's cousin called him. A month after the earl returned home, news arrived that his brother had been killed.

While her maid waited outside the open door, Pauline went into the curator's office for a private consultation. It took much convincing before he believed her tale that she was the commissioned artist, P. Black. He sat abruptly in his chair, his eyes widening like that of a startled mouse.

"What will the earl do to me when he finds out?" The curator grew smaller in his chair, almost shrinking within himself. "He will hold me at fault and I shall lose my position. How will I pay my rent at my lodging house? And I shall have to sell my box at Haymarket Theatre."

"Sir," Pauline said, upset that she had placed this poor man in such a vulnerable situation. "Do not worry so. I'm sure I shall be able to make his lordship understand."

"Understand?" the curator asked in an appalled tone. "His lordship will not understand. He will be furious." The man shuffled the papers covering every inch of his desk as if hoping to somehow find a solution in the surfeit of sheets.

Pauline paused, considering the curator's words. She too wondered at his lordship's tolerance. Recalling his disinterest at the Queen's reception and the contempt he'd shown during their meeting on the museum steps, she had a sudden urge to complete this commission. She wanted the earl to notice her, even if only with a modicum admiration for her work on this commission. Yet, if he knew she was P. Black, he might dismiss her out of hand. A consequence she must avoid at all costs.

"You're right, sir. Best, if his lordship never finds out that I'm not the 'man' he thinks he has employed."

"Exactly, Miss Black," the curator said. His frightened gaze grew thoughtful. "Perhaps we can find another artist and convince him to pretend to be P. Black?"

Pauline shook her head. "If you do, the earl will not be as satisfied with the statue. I recall you saying he particularly liked my style of carving."

The curator spread his arms wide. "Oh, it's hopeless. He will pauper me as just punishment. I shall not have sixpence to scratch with by the end of the Season."

"Calm yourself, sir, for I've an idea." If the curator had known her as well as her family, this statement

would have sent him immediately into doldrums. However, to her favor, the poor man had no such knowledge of Pauline's mad schemes. "We shall simply tell his lordship that the artist is a recluse." She shrugged. "He already believes this and we shall convince him that not even to meet the man who intends to pay the vast sum his lordship has proposed, would she, or 'he' be willing to come out of hiding."

The first sign of hope flashed across the curator's face. "Could this work?"

"Why should it not?" Pauline asked. "I've already displeased him once by missing our appointment. Yet, he still wants me to do the work. There is only one problem I see. To do a credible job of the earl's brother, I shall need to view a depiction of him. And hear stories of his character, his likes and dislikes. I must know him as well as the earl. Yet, how can I?"

"I've a portrait of the gentleman." The curator ran to fetch it.

Pauline waited with a racing pulse, anticipation and fear warring within her. Could she do this? Would she get caught? And what would the earl do if he found out he'd been tricked?

On the curator's return, Pauline pushed away her worries and bent down to study the large canvas. "This is good, but I need more. I need to know what type of man he was."

"How about his friends?" the curator asked. "The men of his company are in town. Since word has spread of the exhibition, they have called on me in droves to confirm that we indeed intend to have a sculpture made of The Honorable Geoffrey Livingston."

"It would be out of place for me to speak with them privately," Pauline said with disappointment.

"Many of his friends are gentlemen of the ton," the curator said. "They travel in similar circles as yourself."

Pauline refrained from telling him that she rarely attended social events any more. However, it might be time she fulfilled her obligation to her parents and took part in the Season's festivities. They need never know that the reason for her sudden interest was not to procure a husband, but rather to quiz the guests for information

about The Honorable Geoffrey Livingston.

Her mind set on her course, she made arrangements whereby the curator could contact her directly if needed and shook his hand to seal their secret pact.

Stone glanced around the ballroom. He felt an idiot appearing at these dances. With his game leg he could neither dance nor stand for long without his bad limb showing its displeasure with a bone-wrenching ache. He had come because he heard his brother's friends planned to attend, and speaking to them of Geoffrey offered him the only consolation these days. Strolling around the perimeter, he saw a group of men sporting the regimental colors of the third Prince of Wales Dragoon Guards.

Ignoring the mamas and their young charges that eyed his sloping walk across their path with keen interest, he halted at the outskirts of the group of soldiers. Something seemed to have the men entranced. He tapped on Patterson's shoulder.

"Stone," Patterson said with unbridled enthusiasm. He turned to his companions and spread the good news of the earl's arrival.

The men parted and Stone saw what had caught and held the men's attention. Beside an older female, no doubt her chaperone, stood the young lady who had run into him on the museum steps. He caught his breath in surprise. She had made herself especially presentable this evening. No longer in a hurry, her candid gray eyes surveyed him with a slow but comprehensive glance that left him a little unsettled.

He frowned. What was it about this young lady that disturbed him? Her features were quite exquisite when she smiled, and she did smile at him, with apparent shyness. He shook himself out of his stupor, remembering that she was merely another in a long line of hopeful females who had placed herself on the Matrimonial Market and dangled after a good catch. Besides, she could hardly be considered shy while surrounded by a bevy of attentive officers.

Patterson did the introduction.

"Miss Blackburn." Stone bowed. "We meet again."

"We were just regaling the lady with stories of

Geoffrey," Patterson said. "Do you remember the time he set up his own foxhunt?" He turned to Miss Blackburn. "We almost lost him when his horse threw him after stumbling across a rabbit warren."

The stories seemed to multiply from that point on as one officer after another remembered their own tale.

Stone listened, feeling his pain lessen as each story brought back his brother as if Geoffrey were standing beside them enjoying the tales himself. He didn't realize he too had joined in until the supper gong sounded.

He glanced up in surprise. How had the time passed so quickly? Patterson offered to take Miss Blackburn into supper and she accepted willingly. Stone watched her depart, his thoughts somber. Why had she not insisted on the men leading her out onto the dance floor instead of listening to them speak of war and a dead comrade? Hardly the most entertaining way to spend her evening.

He left the ball shortly afterward, his leg plaguing him for having stood so long. He spent the rest of his night at his club drinking brandy, trying to forget that Geoffrey would never stand beside him again at a ball regaling him with stories of his escapades.

He awoke the next morning in his own bed, not remembering exactly how he had managed to return home. He had the devil's own head, an aftereffect of too much drink. His temper already short grew stick thin after a meeting with the curator who spun a far-fetched tale of the artist having gone off on a retreat to prepare himself for the work ahead. What was the point of being an earl, he asked himself, if he could not even manage to meet the men he hired?

At the theatre several days later, he glanced at the box directly across. To his amazement, Miss Blackburn was present in the company of her parents. She had on a fetching crepe and muslin dress in shades of pale blue that made her look like an angel. Hardly noticing the play, he amused himself with the idea of wishing her good evening during the intermission.

At the first opportunity, he hurried over only to find soldiers crowding so deep he could not get within two feet of her. Cooling his heels back in his own box, he glared at her from across the theatre. On the very rare occasions

she glanced up, she seemed not in the least bothered by his bad temper and smiled sweetly, taking his breath away and leaving him even more frustrated.

The next day he checked with his friends at Whites if any had heard of a Miss Blackburn. To his disgust, he discovered that she was the newest rave in London, a diamond of the first water, despite no longer being a female of tender years. He put her to be at least one-and-twenty. Why had she not been snatched up before this? She was of good family, with a father who, Stone's friends were quick to point out, had inherited a goodly sum from his mother. As a result, the lovely Miss Blackburn came with at least one thousand a year on her marriage.

At the rate of her rise in society, she would no doubt be betrothed before the end of the season. Before that event occurred, Stone promised himself at least a short dalliance with the beauty. It might be the best distraction for him from his pre-occupation with his brother's demise and his search for an elusive artist.

With that goal firmly in mind, the next morning Stone called at the Blackburn home. The butler invited him into the salon and Stone groaned inwardly at finding not less than seven gentlemen already entrenched in various chairs around the room.

Mrs. Blackburn came to greet him and led him forward. Patterson was present and stood to offer Stone his chair while he fetched another from those arranged along the far wall. All the gentlemen were soldiers, Calvary or Army, and many he recognized as friends of Geoffrey. The lady apparently had an interest in war.

As yet another story began about a dashing officer who fought off impossible odds, escaped nail-biting ambushes, and succeeded in getting through with his dispatch, Stone felt forced to interrupt.

"All is not derring-do and bravery on the part of our soldiers," he said, looking straight into Miss Blackburn's serious gray gaze. Time she understood that war involved loss as well as excitement. "I've seen examples of savagery by the Spanish toward the invading French."

A hush fell on the group, but Stone found he could not stop.

"Have you been told the story of the rifleman who

was cut off from his regiment and nearly starved to death? Or of the wretched Portuguese peasants having their crops stolen, their animals slaughtered, and their women abused? War, Miss Blackburn, is not all pleasantries. Living in the safety of London, with your thoughts on the next ball or the prettiest gown, you may not comprehend the true hideousness of combat. It isn't all wild hunts and chivalrous escapades. War is simply a necessity to ensure your and my freedom."

Silenced reigned in the room. Too late, Stone regretted his harsh words. In Miss Blackburn's gaze, the curtain that hid the darker side of attaining peace had been raised. Hardly the courtly words he'd intended to ply her with. Why was it that every time he spoke to her, he seemed to lecture her on her lack of character?

"I'm sorry if I have disillusioned your perceptions," he said, feeling completely wretched. He rose clumsily to his feet. "I did not intend to spoil your fun."

"Pray, stay sir," she said in an earnest voice. "My interest in the war extends to all aspects of it, both good, and bad."

"My daughter, Lord Ashford," Mrs. Blackburn said with a gentle look, "is exceptional in her outlook on life. She does not cringe from its unpleasant side."

He tilted his head studying her mother. "You do not object to this?"

Mrs. Blackburn chuckled and her glance toward her daughter was filled with love. "Whether I mind or not has little effect on my daughter. I have learned to bend to her wishes in this, as she bends to mine in other areas." She gave a daughter an approving nod.

Stone grew curious as to what it was that Miss Blackburn had bent on to accommodate her mother.

Still standing, he turned to the young lady only to find her trying unsuccessfully to hide a mischievous smile. He wanted to kiss those sweetly curving lips that trembled with humor and perhaps take a taste of the lighter side of life himself.

Her gaze swung up to his and stilled, as if startled by his yearning look. She blinked, appearing set aback. Wishing everyone else in the room to perdition, he could not look away as he felt himself drown in her tender gray

eyes.

"My lord?" Mrs. Blackburn said, breaking into their preoccupation.

Her daughter glanced away first, her cheeks delicately stained like ripe peaches. He breathed through the aching tightness in his body, and realized that this time it was the result of shock and desire, not pain. Mrs. Blackburn observed him with a knowing glance.

He bowed to her and her daughter and bid everyone an abrupt goodbye.

After the earl's visit, a gem of an idea grew in Pauline's mind of how she could fashion the exhibition. She had finally obtained both the information and inspiration she needed to begin her work.

She stopped attending the various functions her mother had procured invitations for, spending the next few weeks instead in the museum workroom. She labored at a feverish pace, her passion to create hammered to life by his lordship's last blistering words to her and then pooling inside her at his hot longing glance.

She did not truly understand what that look had meant, but it had warmed her through and made her want to please him in some way. Since the only thing she knew for certain that he wanted was the sculpture – that was all she wished to do.

She chose English Alabaster for her medium, for it was the softest and easiest of stones to carve. And it had a translucent quality that she enjoyed molding.

First, she roughed out the shape of the sculptures, slowly approaching the particular elements she wished to capture. Next came the detailed carving with a soft steel hammer and chisel. Later, would come the finishing stage with rasps and rifflers, and finally the sanding and polishing, the most strenuous part of the work.

She rarely took breaks, working from sunup to sundown. Her mother insisted on a servant bringing her meals to the museum with instructions that Pauline was not to be allowed to return to work until she had finished every last bite.

All her mother's complaints that Pauline's numerous admirers were petitioning daily for a chance to speak with

her daughter fell on deaf ears. And Pauline enlisted the curator's assistance in fending off the earl's numerous attempts to watch his artist at work.

At last, weeks later, the piece was finished. It took up a good portion of the room set for the display, for Pauline had opted to fashion not one sculpture of Geoffrey Livingston but a complete war scene with many players. The prospect of seeing his lordship's response left her shaking with fear. She hoped she would not disappoint.

The day the war display was ready, news spread around London like wildfire. Stone was surprised to hear the opening would be the very day he heard Black had finished his work.

Why had the curator not invited him for a private viewing first? The man had been acting contrary for months. Now, to hear that the display was ready, months before the expected deadline, and that he would not be given a preview of the work, set his back up. What if Black had not done a credible job? What if he hated how Geoffrey was depicted? These worries warred with the excitement of seeing the statue.

As he dressed, he had an overwhelming impulse to not go alone. The only companion he wanted with him, he realized, was Miss Pauline Blackburn. He had not seen her since his deplorable exhibition at her townhouse. She had mysteriously dropped out of circulation soon after. He had sent a note to her mother, apologizing for his behavior and asking to do so in person. The response said Miss Blackburn had left on an extended country visit and would not be available for a long while. Could she be back yet? He sat at his desk and wrote out an invitation.

Within an hour, a response came that Miss Blackburn had already accepted another invitation to attend this very display and that she looked forward to seeing him there. Stone's chest compressed with disappointment, then he reminded himself that he might see her this evening yet.

He timed his arrival for a fashionably late hour. He wanted the majority of the viewers to have had their fill and to have left the room, so he could view the statue in relative privacy. However, the various chambers were still

crowded with London's elite when he arrived. At least the display was receiving solid attention. The bits of conversation he heard as he strolled by sounded favorable of the artist. He stood in the doorway, but was unable to discern which display was of Geoffrey for the mill of lingering people.

The curator, seeing Stone, rushed to his side. Effectively cutting a path through the throng, he led him to the display.

There was not one, but many statues, taking up a full corner of the room. At the forefront was a soldier on horseback.

Stone gazed at Geoffrey. The translucent features of the alabaster were so lifelike he thought his brother stood before him. The artist had captured every nuance of Geoffrey's devil may care character. That look of utter enjoyment of life, which Stone remembered all too well, sparkled down at him.

Surrounding Geoffrey was the mayhem of war. The good, the brave, and the subjugated. The starving children, the frightened women, and the wounded soldiers. The entire depiction took his breath away.

"I must meet him," Stone whispered to the curator.

The man shied away from him, shaking his head and Stone grabbed him by his cravat and dragged him close. "Take me to him. Now!"

The curator let out a suppressed squeal of alarm and nodded in defeat. "You must not give away who the artist is, my lord. Not to anyone."

Stone nodded impatiently and released his grip.

The curator glanced around, fingers nervously smoothing down his cravat. Stone followed his line of sight, hesitating a moment when he saw Miss Pauline Blackburn looking as lovely as ever. Had she seen the sculpture yet? Did she appreciate it or was she disgusted by it? No, she would have loved it, he knew. He must talk to her, later, after he congratulated the sculptor.

"Where is he?"

The curator's wide eyes remained fixed across the room. "You're gazing in the right direction, my lord."

Stone frowned. The only one who had caught his attention was Miss Blackburn. Beside her were her army

followers. Was one of them the artist?

"Which one?" he asked with impatience.

"Do you see Miss Blackburn, my lord?" the curator asked.

"Yes, but which of the fellows beside her is Black?" As he said the words, he paused. Black. Blackburn.

At that moment, she glanced up at him. And he knew. He had bumped into her on the way to the museum because she had been rushing to keep her appointment with him. The soldiers who fawned over her were enticed to help inspire this work. His gaze swung to the curator, who nodded.

"She's the artist, my lord. I'm sorry for having deceived you."

The rest of the man's words drifted away and Stone felt himself shrink. He recalled every set-down he had given her. The scolding about her preoccupation with her wardrobe. The lecture at her home on her lack of depth in understanding war. A wave of shame swept over him, and turning on his heels, he quickly quit the room.

Pauline watched him leave and shuddered. She rushed to the curator to ask what his lordship had said about the statues.

"He only wanted to meet the artist," the curator said, chewing on his already swelling lip. "He said naught else."

He began to bemoan his career again and Pauline left him, ignoring the noise of the spectators, the compliments that flowed about her work. None of it mattered as much as the disappointment she had seen on Lord Ashford's face when he looked at her. She wished she could curl up into a ball and spend the rest of her life in hiding. She felt as if her whole world had crumbled.

Much later, after all the guests had departed, Pauline stayed behind, wandering around the museum until she arrived at the gallery housing the classical sculpture collection of Charles Townley and other Egyptian antiquities.

She sat on a tall chair, not noticing any of the beauty about her, her mind filled with questions. What could she have done differently? Which strike of the chisel had taken her in the wrong direction? How had she mistaken Geoffrey's character in her depiction? Her maid sat

quietly beside her as the museum emptied of visitors.

Much later, the front doors opened and his lordship's voice echoed in the empty hall and her cold body quivered to life.

The guard on duty let Stone in and he approached the display of his brother, lighted now only by candlelight. He stood silently, entranced by the artfully brilliant depiction of Geoffrey. All his love for his brother swelled inside him. He had returned to the museum because he couldn't stay away from this piece.

"Do you like it, my lord?"

Miss Pauline Blackburn stood in the doorway, alone, but for a maid and the anxious curator. The lady appeared much like a graceful Greek goddess cast in marble. He wondered if she knew the effect she had on men, and then supposed not, for he had been entirely mistaken in her character. She seemed as unaware of the beauty she possessed, as of the beauty of her creations.

"I wanted to be sure the statue was exactly as you saw your brother." She stepped into the room, looking adorably uncertain, and melted Stone's heart.

He strode up to her, hardly noticing his limping gait, and took her hands, kissing each one in gentle homage. "How could you not know that you have given Geoffrey back to me? I'm sorry if I upset you by leaving so abruptly, but you must not doubt your amazing accomplishment for one moment longer. You've captured him perfectly," he finished in a gruff voice.

"My Lord," Pauline began, but Stone laid a gentle finger on her lips.

"Would you do me the honor of calling me Stone?" he begged.

She blushed and he wanted to kiss her. A glance up showed the maid watching them wide eyed beside a suddenly cheery curator. The man caught Stone's impatient head tilt and with a delighted grin, he hurried out, ushering the maid ahead of him. Though they left the door wide open, their departure did give Stone and Pauline a semblance of privacy.

Pauline turned from following Stone's line of sight and her lips curved up in an amused smile. "Stone," she said, sounding breathless. "I'm glad you like the statues. I

wanted to be certain I had captured your brother just as you remembered and loved him.”

He tilted her chin up to better study her beloved face. “You’ve not only aptly captured him, but myself as well,” he whispered and gave in to the temptation that had been plaguing him for weeks.

He had intended to kiss her softly, reverently, in gratitude, but the moment his lips grazed hers, gratitude evaporated, and desire flared. Her lips parted, perhaps in shock, but Stone didn’t care. He invaded, intending to make his unabashed claim to this precious woman. No longer would he play second fiddle to his friends, her art, or to his absurd doubts about her. His hands nudged her forward until not a spec of alabaster dust could divide them.

By the time he withdrew from that soul-searing kiss, Pauline gasped in shock. Her knees would have collapsed but for his holding her up. Like flashes of starburst, wherever their bodies met, happiness sparkled the length of her.

How could she have been willing to abandon ever experiencing this feeling? Her mother was right. Her work was indeed not sufficient to sustain her the rest of her life. And she could not, would not allow this man to slip from her world a second time.

“Be warned, Stone,” she began, determined to make her intentions as plain as she dared, “I am addicted to my art. And if this is the payment you give for your commissions, I will never stop working for you.”

He chuckled, as if her dry humor delighted him. “As tempting as that offer is, I would like to make a counter proposal. You, my love, may craft your amazing statues for any one you wish. But since stone is your preferred art form, as Lady Ashford, you may work on me for the rest of my life.”

The devilish gleam in his gaze alerted and thrilled her before his lips descended to stake his claim on her, as she had him.