

A MURDEROUS
MASQUERADE

A MURDEROUS MASQUERADE

RELENTLESS SOCIETY
MYSTERIES
BOOK 2



RONDA GIBB HINRICHSEN

A HISTORICAL MYSTERY ROMANCE

RKH Press L.L.C.

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Book Cover by Sheri McGathy

(ebook) ISBN: 979-8-9925721-4-8

(print) ISBN: 979-8-9925721-3-1

(audio) ISBN: ISBN: 979-8-9925721-5-5

To Ella,
My sweet girl

Chapter 1

JULY 1819

Miss Leah Crauford shifted her white satin masquerade mask upward and peered out the barouche's open carriage door. Briarwood Hall, with its imposing stone walls, tall, arched windows, and lantern light glowing across its façade, seemed a brilliant beacon against a star-lit sky. And the guests! Ladies with their high-piled hair, brilliant silks, and bejeweled masks glowed like moonbeams on the grand staircase. Their counterparts, gentlemen costumed in drab servants' clothes or bright turbans and false beards, were just as elegant. No, *elegant* wasn't the right word. It was more like *alluring*. Or *mysterious*.

"If only 'mysterious,' in this case, didn't also mean 'doomsday,'" Leah muttered.

Her dearest friend, Miss Susanna Talbot, who sat on the seat next to her, must have heard her, for she giggled softly.

Father, on the other hand, who'd climbed from the barouche ahead of Leah, held his hand out to her. "Come along, my dear, if you please." That familiar smile that said he loved her even when she frustrated him tugged at his lips, and her heart twisted. She was trying his patience.

"I just need another moment." Leah adjusted the golden rope belt that cinched her waist.

Susanna smirked. "Stalling?"

Leah scrunched her nose. "You would also think it was doomsday," she whispered, "if you were in my position."

"Nonsense. I'd demand that doomsday pass me by and leave something better in its wake."

"Something like returning to Brighton?"

Susanna frowned at Leah's goading remark. True, Susanna had successfully convinced her mother, Lady Talbot, to let her spend most of the season with Leah, but Lady Talbot's generosity had run out. "*Brighton is lovely, and I miss you,*" her mother had written in her last letter. But as Susanna's brother, William, had clarified in his own letter, the full truth was that several eligible young men had moved to Brighton. Men, according to Lady Talbot, whose characters and interests would match perfectly with Susanna's. Susanna, however, was certain the man of her dreams lived in London. Or so she'd told Leah at least a dozen times.

"Dearest Leah," Susanna said, "tease me if you must, but let's do what we can to enjoy the evening."

"Very well. I'll follow your lead."

Susanna tied the ribbons of her lightly bejeweled mask at the back of her ringleted blonde hair. "And smile a little. Truly, Leah. This is a masquerade ball. There is nothing serious about it."

Not for you, perhaps, but there is for me.

"Leah?" Father said.

Leah pasted on a smile, turned back to him, and took his offered hand. "Forgive me, Father. I fear I'm a bit nervous."

"That's only natural, my dear. This is an important night for you." His eyes softened. "But rest assured, all will soon be settled." The last word caught in his throat, as if he wasn't quite as confident as he wished to appear.

Leah exhaled a long, slow breath. She lowered her head so he wouldn't see her frown and gathered the skirt of her flowing silky white gown. She stepped out of the carriage.

Father likewise helped Susanna out. Then the three—Leah costumed as the goddess Minerva, Susanna dressed as a Roman empress, and Father, whose only guise was a purple eyepatch that contrasted with his blue tailcoat—headed up the cobblestone walk.

"If only Brighton's balls attracted as many eligible young men as this one surely will," Susanna said. "If they did, I wouldn't mind one iota that this is my last London ball."

"Now who's being too serious?" Leah said. "This certainly isn't your last London ball. Not for forever."

"Perhaps not. But it is for this season. If only I didn't already have to return to Brighton."

"If only I was going with you."

"Don't give up on that hope yet. I still have a few ideas up my sleeve."

Leah frowned. Susanna had said that almost every night since she'd come to stay with Leah and her father, yet every excuse or scheme Susanna had devised had failed. Father would not let Leah accompany Susanna back to her home in Brighton for the simple reason that he intended for Leah to marry his business associate, Mr. Fortescue. As Leah had frequently pointed out to Father, Mr. Fortescue, nearly sixty years old, was much closer to Father's age than he was to Leah's twenty-four years, but according to Father, none of that mattered. Mr. Fortescue was a well-established widower without an heir. He could provide Leah with the long-term financial security Father had never been able to procure. Besides, Leah had no other prospects who met Father's approval. Two other young men had wanted to court Leah in the last year, but Father had objected to them both. They, Father had noted, showed more interest in Leah's dowry than in her person. Admittedly, Leah had thought that as well, and she'd easily discouraged their attentions. But no matter what she did or said with regards to refusing Mr. Fortescue, Father would not change his mind.

"Come now, daughter," Father had frequently said, thereby dismissing her objections. "This is the right course for you. I am sure of it. Simply consider how free and happy you will be to raise your children as you see fit."

By "free and happy," Father meant that Leah would end up a rich widow. Such a prospect was real, considering Mr. Fortescue's advanced age, but the greatest freedom she saw in marrying him applied to Father. He owed a great deal of money to several businessmen in London, and as part of the marriage arrangement, Mr. Fortescue had promised to pay them in full on Father's behalf. That deal would bless Father's life. Hers too, truth be told. Many times, she'd wished she could relieve Father's financial burdens. She believed they were the reason he walked with a stoop.

Leah, Susanna, and Father climbed Briarwood Hall's grand staircase. When they reached the landing, brilliant candlelight basked over them.

"Mr. Crauford, Miss Leah Crauford, and Miss Talbot," Father said to the butler.

A footman marked their names off his list, and the butler motioned to the open double doors at their right. "That way to the great hall, sir, ladies."

"Thank you." Father said.

The three made their way to the great hall, but before entering, Father turned to Leah. "Be sure to save two dances for Mr. Fortescue."

"Two dances?" Leah frowned. "What will people think of us? We haven't an understanding—" *yet*.

Father patted her hand, his touch gentler than usual. "Everyone will think what they should think. That Mr. Fortescue has singled you out." He hesitated, then lowered his voice, "Indeed most will be pleased for you both. Though . . ." His tone lightened, but something in his eyes betrayed his struggle. ". . . I suspect some of the young ladies will find themselves quite jealous of your conquest."

Leah's stomach turned over. "More likely, they'll laugh at me behind my back."

Leah and Father stared at one another. In all probability, she'd spoken so quietly that he hadn't heard the full of her comment, but when he gave her his "I'm very displeased" look, she knew he had at least understood her meaning.

She winced inwardly. *If only Mother was alive.*

Father's expression tightened, and Leah looked away.

In truth, Leah had very few memories of her mother, since she'd died when Leah was only two years old. Leah knew even less of her mother's character. Neither Father nor any of their relations ever spoke of her. Still, Leah imagined she would have stood up to Father on Leah's behalf on matters as important as her daughter's future happiness.

Susanna nudged Leah's arm, indicating she say nothing more. She then curtsied to Father. "Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Crauford."

"Not at all." Father nodded and led them farther into the dance hall and on to the refreshment table. He then left them to collect his usual plate of spice biscuits and a glass of sweet wine.

"I can't understand why your father insists on that nonsense," Susanna said to Leah. "You are much too young to waste yourself on such an old man as Mr. Fortescue."

Leah frowned. Susanna hadn't said "much too young and beautiful," only "young." And there was no reason that she should do so. Leah was slighter than most young ladies—bonier, too. In truth, to Leah's way of thinking, her body was perfectly suited to the daily workings of her life, but she couldn't help wishing she possessed more idyllic features. Like, perhaps, blue rather than dark brown eyes. And straight rather than wavy brown hair. Not because beauty did anything for a person's character, but if she had been beautiful, she might have been able to persuade Will—er, to choose her own marriage partner.

"It's kind of you to worry about me," Leah said to Susanna, "but we both know Mr. Fortescue is the only suitor who will ever meet with Father's approval. Maybe Father will even turn out to be right. Mr. Fortescue does seem to like me for more than my dowry."

"Like your ability to give him children."

Leah lifted her chin, pretending indifference. "Unlike you, I do not have many options. I am not a beauty."

Susanna huffed. "Double nonsense. There is much more to the value of a woman than beauty. Even William says so."

Leah's heart skipped a beat. *He does?* But then, he certainly wouldn't have been referring to Leah. To him, Leah was nothing more than his younger sister's friend. "Like one's dowry, you mean," she said.

"I wasn't thinking of anything so mercenary," Susanna said. "I was thinking, as you so frequently remind me, of a woman's mind. Of her talents and capabilities. But now that you've brought it up, your dowry *is* in your favor. Three thousand pounds, while not a grand fortune, is not to be cast aside. I'm certain that in time, a good man will see both your personal and monetary worth and wish to marry you."

Leah's chest tightened. A man marrying her for her dowry, even in part, wasn't any more comforting than a man marrying her to produce children, but there was no point in pressing the issue. Susanna would forever see Leah's circumstances the way she wanted to see them—as nothing more than a hurdle Leah could easily step over.

Leah sighed and gave Susanna a slight smile. "Let's not quarrel."

Susanna studied Leah. Finally, she linked her arm through her friend's. "Forgive me. We were going to enjoy the evening, weren't we?"

"That was what you said."

"A well-aimed reprimand."

The two laughed, and together they turned their attentions to the costumed crowd. Most guests were much too disguised for Leah's liking. Indeed, Leah only recognized a few of the people such as the ball's hosts, Sir and Lady Colborne. Their costumes were nothing more than blue bejeweled facemasks. Dancing near the musicians' gallery were the illustrious Mr. Harcourt and the young lady he was wooing. Leah believed her name was Miss Beaumont. They wore a swashbuckling pirate getup and a rustic shepherdess dress respectively. Near them, Miss Ashburn, the owner and head mistress of the ladies' seminary Leah and Susanna had attended together, wore a simple Shakespearean gown. Her partner, whom Leah didn't recognize, wore a ruffled shirt and a wide-brimmed hat reminiscent of a Spanish explorer. Most striking of all, the beautiful Misses Gibbs and their male counterparts, who were gathered on the other side of the ballroom, were dressed in layers of rather sheer fabrics as fantastical unmasked nymphs and satyrs.

"Look there," Susanna said. "They have noticed us."

Leah followed her friend's gaze toward a group of young men. All were masked. One wore a ruffled jester's costume, another wore a padded soldier's uniform, and two wore feathered hats and bulky cloaks. All, as Susanna had said, peered in their direction.

"They've noticed *you*, you mean," Leah said.

Susanna shook her head. "Two of them are coming toward us, Leah. *Two* men. One for you, and one for me."

"It's more likely they'll both vie for your attention."

"Why do you think so?" She furrowed her brow. "Actually, do you recognize them?"

"I don't. Not through those costumes. But surely they wouldn't approach us if we hadn't already been introduced."

"You're right. How silly of me. We probably met them at a previous ball. Smile, dearest. They're almost here."

Leah obeyed.

Both men were only a few inches taller than Leah's and Susanna's five-foot-nothing heights, though one was taller than the other. Both also appeared broad-shouldered and strongly built, yet that could be due to their bulky cloaks. And both had chiseled cheekbones. From what Leah could tell of their faces beneath their long-feathered hats and masks, they were quite handsome, though neither seemed familiar.

Leah bit the inside of her lower lip. If those young men did intend to seek her and Susanna as dance partners, and if they hadn't previously been introduced, someone would have to do the job. Where was father?

She glanced over her shoulder. The gaming tables? He often went to such places to escape the formalities of balls, yet it was odd that he would have done so already. Especially considering they hadn't yet met with Mr. Fortescue.

Leah's thoughts jumped.

That was probably where he'd gone. To find Mr. Fortescue.

"The young men are almost here," Susanna said behind her smile. "Follow my lead."

"What's your plan?"

"The only thing I can think of. To pretend we know them."

"I'm not good at that kind of pretending," Leah whispered.

"Don't worry. Leave the talking to me. Then, while we're on the dance floor—yes, I'm certain they'll ask us to dance—keep your eye on me, and I'll do the same for you. We'll be each other's chaperones."

"I don't know how to be a chaperone. And anyway, what do we do if we find ourselves in any sort of trouble?"

"We will give each other a signal."

"Like what?"

"Like . . . this." Susanna held her hand in front of her mouth, shielding it from onlookers, and pursed her lips. She scrunched her nose, too.

Leah pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. "We couldn't possibly do that."

"What, then?"

"Oh, all right. We'll purse our lips and . . . and nod. We won't scrunch our noses."

"It's a pact," Susanna whispered. "Hush now."

The two men reached them. As they bowed, the feathers in their hats fluttered. But when the one directly in front of Leah straightened, his hat shifted sideways. So did his hair. Leah scrutinized the thick, black, yarn-like strands.

Even their hair is fake.

A wet, inhaled breath through teeth—a slurp—followed by a low, smooth voice sounded behind her. "Pardon me, Miss Crauford."

Leah stiffened. *Oh, no! Mr. Fortescue.* She clenched her fists and nodded to the men in front of her. "Please, excuse me."

They nodded back to her, and she turned.

Both Father and Mr. Fortescue stood before her. Mr. Fortescue was a couple of inches taller than Leah. He had green eyes, a thin strip of salt-and-pepper hair that circled his otherwise bald head, and he wore a smart though slightly out-of-fashion tailcoat. No costume. Apparently, he, like Father, had little if any interest in frivolity.

She sighed. *What dreary lives men live.*

Mr. Fortescue bowed. Then, peeping up at Leah over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses, he said, "Miss Crauford. Or should I say, my dear goddess? Will you do me the honor of joining me in the next dance?"

Leah clenched her fists even tighter. If only one of the young men behind her had already asked her to dance. If he had, and even if they hadn't been introduced to one another, she could have postponed this moment. Or avoided it altogether.

Leah peered up at Susanna, who was frowning, and down at Mr. Fortescue. "Of course," she said to him.

Mr. Fortescue grinned and again stood upright. He offered his arm to Leah, and she set her hand on it.

He motioned toward the dance floor. "Shall we?"

Leah swallowed. She smiled up at the two costumed men, who nodded to her in return, and followed Mr. Fortescue onto the dance floor.

"Your costume is quite striking," Mr. Fortescue said. "Indeed, I do not believe I have seen any of the young ladies looking nearly as pleasing as you do this evening."

Leah held back her frown. By “pleasing,” he surely meant “strong and healthy.” While Leah was much too thin according to society’s standards, she’d often noticed Mr. Fortescue’s gaze slip down the front of her. Assessing her, she’d assumed, and her ability to bear children.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Please, God, if I must marry this man, let there be no more than one child with him.*

Mr. Fortescue, holding Leah’s gloved hand, led her to a group of three other couples. Together, they formed a square. Mr. Fortescue squeezed Leah’s hand before releasing her. His gesture was firm and not out of the ordinary, but something about it felt . . . possessive? A coldness quivered through Leah’s core.

The music for the Quadrille began. She and Mr. Fortescue stepped toward one another. He took her hand, firmly like before, and the two, dancing the Grand Promenade, moved into the first figure. The footwork was intricate, and twice they changed partners as they weaved in and around one another, but the dance was only mildly spirited. Indeed, as they moved into the next figure, Leah felt rather invigorated. Mr. Fortescue, however, breathed heavily.

“Are you well?” Leah asked him.

“Of course, dear lady. Shall we?” He peered down at the golden belt cinched around her waist and pulled her closer to his side. Together they began the graceful steps of *La Pastourelle*.

His breathing quickened.

Leah slowed her steps, and he, as she’d hoped, slowed his too. She softened her voice. “The dance does become more rigorous, sir. Perhaps we should sit a while.”

He clasped her hand tighter. “You need not concern yourself over my welfare. I am not as young as the lovely goddess before me, but I assure you, I am quite fit.”

Leah bit back her irritation even as her chest tightened with unwanted sympathy. It was just like last week, when he’d nearly fainted from standing in the sun at that garden party, determined to shield her with his umbrella, even though she’d advised him against it. Then, as now, he’d heard her words and recognized her concern for his comfort, but he’d discounted them. It was always that way. Would Father be so insistent that she mar-

ry Mr. Fortescue if she revealed that the gentleman, for all his eagerness to please, thought so little of her opinions? Father, who'd noted similar indifferences in her previous suitors, had steered Leah away from those relationships because he'd believed they wouldn't make her happy.

She glanced across the dance floor toward Father. He, watching them, gave her a slight, encouraging nod.

Leah stood taller. Happy? Many times, Father had told her he sought her future happiness. And yet, when she'd told him she didn't want to marry Mr. Fortescue, that he couldn't make her happy, *Father* had been the one who'd discounted her opinion.

"Nonsense, daughter," he'd said. "I've struggled all my life, and I know, first hand, that poverty breeds nothing but misery. Mr. Fortescue is devoted to you, and he will provide you with a life of comfort and security. *He* is your best chance for happiness."

Leah had wanted to disagree with him, but Father's insistent gaze, combined with the tremble in his voice, stopped her. He really wanted her to marry Mr. Fortescue. And when it came right down to it, what did it matter if she did marry him? To be sure, he would never own her heart. Another already did. But Mr. Fortescue wasn't vicious. That certainly was a good thing. Besides, while marrying Mr. Fortescue might never bring her true bliss, she could be content. After all, as Samuel Johnson wrote in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, "Our own felicity we make or find."

The dance music ended.

Mr. Fortescue inhaled with the damp, audible hitch she had termed "the slurp." "Dearest goddess, I find I am not yet ready to be without your company. Please join me in the next set."

Leah blinked. A second dance already?

His cheeks were flushed, sweat dripped down the sides of his face, and his breath was erratic. Surely he needed to rest first. A second dance, so soon after the last, might bring about his sudden death.

Would that be such a bad thing?

Leah set her jaw. She must not think such thoughts. They were unkind. "Perhaps we ought to wait for a calmer set. The next one is a Scotch Reel."

"I am not at all opposed to the Scotch Reel. In truth, I'm looking forward to the exertion." He again clasped her hand as if taking possession of her.

Leah shuddered over the intimate look in his eyes, inched backward, and paused. *Keep control of your emotions.* She forced what she hoped was a pleasant expression and stepped toward him again.

One of the costumed gentlemen who'd initially approached her came up beside them. He glanced down at Leah through his mask.

His eyes are gray. Do I know anyone with gray eyes?

"Excuse me, sir," he said to Mr. Fortescue. His voice was low and rough. "I'm sorry to intrude, but Miss Crauford has promised me the next dance."

"That cannot be the case," Mr. Fortescue said.

The man, still watching Leah, quickly lifted an eyebrow.

Leah blinked. Was he signaling her?

His eyebrow arched higher.

He *was* signaling her. But about what?

Understanding flooded through her. His claim that she'd agreed to dance with him *was* a lie, but he was helping her escape Mr. Fortescue's company. Why would he do that? They were strangers to one another, weren't they?

Regardless, I should not miss this chance to get away.

"Oh!" Leah said louder than she'd intended. "That's right. Forgive me, Mr. Fortescue. This gentleman did seek me as his partner. Remember? He was standing with me and Susanna when you approached us."

Mr. Fortescue harrumphed.

Leah pulled her hand out of Mr. Fortescue's grasp and took the other man's proffered arm. Without even a nod to Mr. Fortescue, he led Leah to an entirely different area on the dance floor. She took her place in a square of three other couples.

"Thank you," Leah whispered. "I don't know why you did it, but thank you."

"In truth, I wished to seek you out the first moment I saw you."

Heat flooded Leah's cheeks. The man was likely feeding her a practiced complement, one he could easily give to any young lady. Still, the comment was rather gratifying.

"Forgive me," Leah said. "I'm sure I should know who you are, and yet—"

"You don't," he finished for her. "Secrecy. It's part of what makes masquerade balls so enjoyable."

Leah, tilting her head, studied him. "Enjoyable" wasn't exactly how she'd describe her consternation. "Intrigued," perhaps.

The music for the reel began, and Leah, her rescuer, and the other couples in their group joined hands. They followed the top couple's skip-change steps, turns, and figure eights.

At length, they joined hands again and exchanged positions with another couple. "Where are we going?" Leah asked when he tugged her from the dance floor.

"Forgive me."

Leah glanced back at the other couples. They, also no longer dancing, stared after them. "But how will we . . . they'll have a hard time finishing the dance without us."

"They might, but some things are more important. That old man—"

"You mean Mr. Fortescue?"

"Is that his name?"

Leah nodded.

"Mr. Fortescue appears to be searching for us. Or, rather, for you. No, don't look back. You'll catch his eye. Follow me."

Still holding Leah's hand, he guided her through several large crowds and back to where she'd first seen him. By then, the music had also ended, and the other similarly-costumed man likewise arrived with Susanna.

Susanna grabbed Leah's hands and looked back at the two men. "Please, could you help us?"

"It would be our honor," Susanna's partner said. "What do you need from us?"

"Would you stand just there? Next to that gentleman? Miss Crauford and I are trying to avoid a particular man's notice, and I'd like you to block his view of us. Oh, and don't follow us."

"Your wish is our command," the man with gray eyes said.

The two men stepped exactly where she had indicated.

"Perfect," Susanna said. "Thank you." She then tugged Leah around several groups of people to an empty hallway. They ducked inside it and hurried to the far end.

"That was close," Susanna said.

Leah, catching her breath, slumped against the back wall. "Too close. But it won't last long. Mr. Fortescue will catch up to me sooner or later."

"Let's pray it's later." Susanna leaned against the wall next to Leah. She inhaled and peered dreamily at the ceiling. "Weren't those two men just as men should be? Handsome, valiant, and with perfect manners?"

"I'll only admit that Gray Eyes was perfect compared to Mr. Fortescue."

"Gray Eyes?"

"The man who rescued me."

Susanna giggled. "I never thought I'd see this day. The granddaughter of a bluestocking admitting she's a damsel in distress."

Leah groaned. "I suppose I did, didn't I?"

"And rescued by a stranger to boot. Unless . . . did he introduce himself to you?"

"No. What about your young man?"

Susanna furrowed her brows. "He seemed so familiar to me, but . . . well, let's not worry about that now. We'll keep our eyes and ears open. Someone's sure to know who those men are."

"Good plan."

The two edged along the wall to the hallway's entrance. Staying in the shadows, they surveyed the ballroom. Gray Eyes and his friend still stood where the young ladies had left them, and Mr. Fortescue was with Father. Both elderly men peered about the room.

Susanna and Leah ducked back into the hall.

Several silent moments passed.

"Your young man seemed especially interested in you, Susanna," Leah whispered at last.

"He did, didn't he?"

"I suppose that means you're pleased."

"How could I not be? He was handsome, valiant, and—"

"Perfectly mannered. I know. And yet . . . ?"

"And yet, Mother's words keep pounding through me. 'Do not believe every compliment a young man gives you,'" Susanna said, replicating her mother's rounded, all-wise tone. "'Especially those given quickly. At all times, a young lady must be cautious.'"

"Especially with young men to whom she hasn't been introduced," Leah added.

Susanna frowned. "Now you're starting to sound like William."

Leah's breath tripped. Sir William Talbot was Susanna's older brother. He was the heir to the Talbot estate. But more than that, he was the handsomest, kindest, most congenial young man Leah had ever known.

She closed her eyes. She pictured that long-ago day when William had helped her from the carriage. Then, she'd been a mere girl of thirteen, about to enter the ladies' seminary, and he, at twenty-two, was already one of Brighton's most eligible bachelors. All he'd done that day when he'd first taken her hand was smile at her. *Smile*. Simply that.

Yet, something in that smile had pierced straight to her heart, and she found herself falling deeper in love with him.

Nothing would ever come of that love, though. Some doors remained forever closed.

Footsteps, followed by Mr. Fortescue's slurp, came from somewhere nearby.

Leah grabbed Susanna's hand. "How can I get away now?"

"I hate to say this, but I think we're out of choices. Dance with him, refuse his proposal, and forget it ever happened."

"I wish I could refuse him, but Father won't hear of it."

"What won't I hear?" Father, with Mr. Fortescue close behind him, stepped into the hall.

Leah stiffened.

"Ah, Miss Crauford." Mr. Fortescue smoothed the sleeve of his jacket. "Whatever are you about in this dark place?"

"That was my doing." Susanna pressed her hand against her chest and took a deep breath. "I needed a break from the stifling air, and as it wouldn't be right for me to go out on my own, Leah obliged me."

"I see." Mr. Fortescue turned back to Leah. He tilted his head. "Is your dance card free now?"

"I—" Father gave her a hard, insistent look, and she slumped her shoulders. "It is," she said.

Mr. Fortescue's stance relaxed. He stepped toward her and held out his arm. "Shall we?"

She glanced at Susanna before taking it. He then led her from the empty hallway, past Gray Eyes, who, though he was speaking with another lady, watched Leah, and back to the dance floor.

The music began.

"Ready, my dear goddess?" Mr. Fortescue, his voice low yet hesitant, whispered close to her ear. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

Leah pinched her lips together, fighting her cringe. "Ready."

Mr. Fortescue took her hand and waist in the proper dance position and took his first forward step. His knee bumped hers.

Leah winced. *If only Gray Eyes would rescue me again.*

Chapter 2

FORTUNATELY, FATHER DIDN'T INSIST Leah spend more time with Mr. Fortescue. Nor did Mr. Fortescue ask her to do so.

Unfortunately, no other gentleman asked Leah to dance for the rest of the evening, either. Not even Gray Eyes, though she had twice noticed him watching her. And quite approvingly, she had thought.

Leah sighed. She must have been wrong about that.

However, Susanna, a well-looking-upon beauty, danced all but one set. Each with a different partner, which was just as well, Susanna told Leah, since she didn't have a particular interest in any one young man.

"But..." Susanna removed her eye mask. "I must admit that dancing the night away was the perfect ending for my last night in London. I do wish you could have danced as much too."

The carriage dipped and rose along that section of the often travelled road's uneven terrain, and Leah braced herself against the carriage wall. "Nonsense. I danced three times, which is more than I usually do."

"Now you're sounding like your father. Next you'll tell me that your two dances with Mr. Fortescue were nothing short of a dream come true."

Leah groaned. A dream? The only way that night could have been a dream for her, a happy one at least, was if Susanna's brother, William, had been there. And if Leah had danced at least one set with him.

The carriage jostled, this time over what must have been a small pit in the dirt road. The rocking wasn't so much that Leah needed to steady herself, but it was enough that surely Father would open his eyes.

He didn't. He, snoring softly, only slept on the rear-facing seat across from Leah and Susanna.

"Dancing with Mr. Fortescue wasn't your dream come true?" Susanna continued with her tease.

“Dancing with him? No. But hiding from him? Delightful.”

“Hiding does seem to be one of your talents.”

Susanna handed Leah her eye mask, and Leah slipped it with hers inside her reticule. “I’d hardly consider hiding to be a talent.”

“What else could it be? No matter how many times we played hide-and-seek as children, you were always the last one found. Though I suspect discovering places to hide on Brighton Beach was much more entertaining than hiding in that ballroom.”

Leah rolled her eyes. “It was. But the truth is I simply went where no one would think I would go.”

“As I said, a talent.” Susanna, smiling a little, leaned against the seatback. She closed her eyes. Leah glanced between her and Father and likewise closed her eyes.

Sleep didn’t come.

Instead, memories of her childhood danced in front of her. Especially of when she and Father had vacationed at the Talbots’. In those days, Father and Sir Talbot had been both friends and business partners. As such, Father and Leah had spent nearly every August with them in Brighton, even after Sir Talbot had died.

“My dear husband may have returned to God, but I see no reason why that should mean our families’ friendships should end,” Lady Talbot had reassured Father.

Leah had been most grateful for Lady Talbot’s kindness that day, and every day since. Without it, she’d have lost both Susanna’s companionship and all chances of ever seeing William again.

Father inhaled a deep, noisy breath, and Leah shifted her position. But rather than finding rest, Leah’s memory of William’s dear face filled her. His topaz-blue eyes and thick blond hair. His tall, well-built frame. His Grecian profile. Most of all, his ever-ready smile.

Leah smiled back at the image that never fully left her thoughts. At the same time, memories of his fun-loving teasing flooded through her. Especially when he, nine years her senior, proclaimed that Leah must obey him because he was more mature than either she or Susanna. Leah had never quite believed his claim, but she hadn’t opposed it, either. She, a child, had been happy to do whatever she could to please William. And

it wasn't as if he'd ever asked her to do anything amiss. Nor would he ever do so. It wasn't in his nature. Indeed, his goodness was one more thing she loved about him.

"William," she whispered.

"What about my brother?" Susanna whispered back.

Leah blinked from her reverie. "Oh, um, I was thinking of how nice it will be for you to see your family again. I suppose I am a little jealous of that. Of you getting to spend August in Brighton, I mean."

Susanna opened her eyes. "Please, dearest, let's not talk of Brighton tonight. It reminds me too much of all I'm leaving behind."

"Including me. No, don't deny it. I know you've done what you can to help me, but I'm afraid the writing, as they say, is on the wall. We are stuck spending the rest of the summer without one another—"

Horses' hooves thundered behind them.

"Someone seems to be in quite the hurry," Susanna said.

"One of the other masquerade ball guests?" Leah peered into the darkness through the window. "I know we left earlier than most of the others, but I cannot imagine any of them would be—"

"Halt," a rough male voice called out.

"Nothing doing," their carriage driver yelled back.

Their barouche lurched forward. Horses' clompings surrounded them. The barouche jerked to a stop.

What was happening? Leah's breath fogged the window glass, but she couldn't miss the two riders materializing from the darkness of Hounslow Heath. They possessed long, heavy coats and wore black bags over their heads with slits for their eyes and mouths.

"Highwaymen!" Leah said. Then, louder, "Father, wake up."

"It can't be." Susanna, her eyes wide, scooted next to Leah. "Highwaymen haven't wandered these roads in years."

Father scrubbed his hands over his face and sat up. "Why have we stopped?"

"We're being robbed." Leah said.

Father shook his head as if clearing it, took his money from his pockets, and slid it under the seat cushion.

The highwaymen jumped off their horses. They climbed up to the coachman's seat, rocking the carriage with every step. A pistol flew to the ground.

Susanna squealed.

Leah clamped her hand over her own mouth.

Father swore.

The driver yelled. A moment after, he toppled to the ground. His motionless body lay next to the pistol. Was he dead?

"We're next, aren't we?" Susanna cried.

"Hush." Leah drew her friend close. "We don't know that." The barouche door swung open. A hooded, broad-shouldered man wrenched it wider. Susanna, cowering against the other side of the carriage, squealed again.

"What's the meaning of this?" Father demanded.

The highwayman grabbed Leah's arm and dragged her from the carriage. She squirmed, elbowed, and kicked, but to no avail. His grip tightened around her waist.

The second attacker seized Susanna, hauling her out after Leah. He shoved her toward a clump of bramblebushes.

"Hey!" Leah's captor hollered at the other highwayman. His voice sounded muffled as if he was speaking through rags. He jerked his head toward the barouche.

Father emerged from the carriage, half-running, half-stumbling toward them.

"Father," Leah cried. "Get away."

Her captor clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Leave her alone," Father yelled.

"Leah, run!" Susanna called from where she'd regained her footing near the brambles.

The other highwayman caught Father. He punched him in the face and gut over and over again until Father slumped to the ground. Was he unconscious? Still alive? The hairs on the back of Leah's neck bristled, and she kicked backward. "No!"

Her captor stumbled. His hand slid from her mouth, but he didn't release her waist. Leah, squirming, clawed at his hand. He swore and

wrapped his free arm around her upper torso. She grabbed the bag on his head, and while pulling at it, kicked backward.

The bag didn't come off his head. Worse, he held her tighter.

"Get the other girl," Leah's captor yelled to the second highwayman.

That ruffian returned to where he'd left Susanna, but she was no longer in the brambles. Somehow, she'd slipped away and was running down the road back in the direction from where they'd just come. *Well done!*

He chased after her.

At the same time, Leah's captor wrapped his arms around her and dragged her toward his horse.

The other highwayman caught Susanna. She flailed her arms and smacked her attacker's throat. He choked, dropped her, and doubled over, his wheezing audible even through the hood.

Susanna scrambled to her feet. She raced to Leah and plowed into her captor's side. "Release her."

He barely moved at the impact. Instead, he pivoted, crushing Leah tighter against his chest.

The other ruffian grabbed Susanna. She screamed, elbowed him with her other arm, and yanked off her necklace. "This is valuable." She flung it at her captor. "Take it and let us go."

"And I—I have a ring," Leah said. "It's worth a hundred pounds. You can have that too."

Both men's grins shone white through the slits in their head coverings as they took the lady's jewelry. Susanna's captor then threw Susanna over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried her toward his horse.

Leah's breath hitched. *He's stealing her!*

She clawed at every part of her captor she could get hold of. Twice his grip weakened, and both times she pushed back from him, trying to get away, yet each time he caught her again. Finally, she spun within his arms and grappled for his eyes. He turned his hooded head. She grabbed the bag's mouth slit, jabbed through his whiskers, and clawed downward, scratching the flesh around his neck. He swore, grabbed her wrists, and held her hands down at her sides.

Susanna's captor, having reached his horse, dumped Susanna, stomach first, across the front of his saddle. He then climbed on behind her.

“What do you want?” Leah yelled at her captor.

He, still holding her around her waist with one arm, clamped his other hand over her mouth.

Leah tried and failed to bite his fingers. He growled, released her waist, and reached down behind her knees. Leah gasped. He was about to pick her up.

She sucked in her breath, relaxed, and slid to the ground out of his grip.

The ruffian swore. He grappled for her shoulders. She, kneeling, gritted her teeth, and yanked his feet out from under him.

“Ahhh!” He swung his arms back to re-catch his balance, but in doing so, he knocked Leah onto her side. She scrambled away from him, jumped up, and charged into the closest grove of trees.

He swore again and chased after her.

Leah dove behind a broad oak tree. Breathing hard, she hunched within its shadow, dropped as low into the undergrowth of bracken ferns and grasses as she could, and held her breath. She willed her pounding heart to still. It didn’t obey.

The ruffian stopped a few feet away from Leah.

Leah ducked lower. She waited . . . waited . . .

He took several steps, brushing his foot through the surrounding foliage, once getting so close to her that the grasses brushed her arm. But at last, he strode away from her.

She exhaled.

His footsteps paused, and she again held her breath.

His footsteps returned. This time, he stopped even closer to where she hid.

Leah clamped her hand over her mouth.

“Fool,” the man growled.

Still, she didn’t breathe.

Finally, the ruffian left. He ran back toward the road where he’d attacked them.

Sweat poured down Leah’s neck and across her shoulders. Were the others all right?

The words *probably not* pounded through her, but she pushed them away. They had to be all right.

Leah peeked above the ferns and peered deep into the shadowed grove as far as she could see in every direction. There was no sign of the ruffian.

Clutching her skirt, she jumped out of the undergrowth and raced to an even wider tree. Again, she paused. Again, she searched in every direction.

Still seeing nothing of her captor, she ran until she reached a tall, fence-like thicket of thorny hawthorn bushes. Beyond it lay the vast grassy field they'd already crossed on their way home from Briarwood Hall.

Running footfalls pounded the earth behind her. *He's back.*

Leah dove into the prickly thicket. Sharp thorns tore at her clothes. They scratched her face and hands. Wetness—probably blood—dribbled down her neck. She gasped and bit her lip to keep from hollering. She hunkered as low to the ground as she could get.

Once again, the ruffian's footfalls moved close to where Leah hid.

*Don't breathe. Don't move. And—*Leah winced—*don't even brush that spider from your hand.*

Finally, the footfalls moved away from her. Was he giving up his search? Perhaps letting her go?

Hope surged through her, but she quickly squelched it. The villain wouldn't just abandon his prey. Not after attacking her and Susanna so ruthlessly.

The footfalls silenced. Crickets chirped. Whispering breezes surrounded her. Was he really gone this time?

She didn't know, but in case he wasn't, she waited longer.

After several more moments, she lifted her head above the branches. This time, the man really was walking back toward the road where he and the other ruffian had attacked them.

Leah closed her eyes. She said a quick prayer for the others and clambered out of the brambles. More thorns snagged her skirt and scratched her skin, but no matter. She had to get back to Briarwood Hall. Had to get help.

Hunching low, she raced back to the road in the direction opposite of where her attacker had gone. Nothing but gray moonlight blanketed the . . . hold a second! A light—no, two lights, and both of them flickering—moved toward her. They wobbled back and forth. Oil lamps at the front of a carriage!

Please let its occupants be friendly. She bit her lip. Perhaps even coming from the ball?

Leah hoisted her skirt above her ankles and raced toward the approaching carriage. In like manner, it seemingly raced toward her until she, not more than a hundred feet ahead of them, waved her arms above her head. "Help," she called.

The driver pulled back on the horses' reins. "Whoa!"

Leah veered to the side of the road, and the carriage slowed to a stop. It was a barouche. Gilded scrollwork wrapped the lamps' brackets, and a gold-painted letter H adorned the door. It was Sir and Lady Harcourt's carriage, and Mr. Harcourt, their adopted son, had been at the Colborne's ball. It was perfectly providential.

"Help!" Leah yelled again.

"What are you doing out here, lady?" the carriage driver called.

Mr. Harcourt, in his pirate costume sans tricorne hat, opened the carriage door. Miss Beaumont, still wearing her wide-brimmed, shepherdess hat, peeked out from behind him.

"Miss Crauford," Mr. Harcourt said. "What has happened?" He peered down the road ahead of them. "Where is your carriage? And your companions?"

"We were attacked." Leah quickly recounted the event, including that her father and their carriage driver might at that moment be dying, and that Susanna had been taken. "Please, please help us."

Mr. Harcourt climbed out of the carriage and took hold of her arm. "Come. Let's get you back to Briarwood Hall."

Leah pulled from his grasp. "No. We have to go back. The others are out there. And they're hurt or . . ." A sob rose up inside her, and she covered her mouth.

"Of course," Mr. Harcourt said. "But you are in no state . . . What I mean to say is, my groom and I will find your companions." He glanced up at Miss Beaumont, who was then climbing from the carriage.

"And the driver and I will take you back to Briarwood Hall," Miss Beaumont said. "Please, dear, you are injured."

"It's nothing. Scratches and bruises are all. Nothing. But my father and Miss Talbot—"

"Yes, they need help," Miss Beaumont cut in. "And Mr. Harcourt will do everything he can. You can be certain of that." She urged Leah with her to the carriage. "And while they are seeing to your companions' needs, we will get you back to Briarwood Hall."

"But—"

"And we'll contact a constable. The sooner the law knows what has happened, the better off everyone will be."

Leah wrung her hands. The law. Yes, she needed help from the law.

Miss Beaumont pressed Mr. Harcourt's forearm. "Go ahead. I'll take it from here."

Mr. Harcourt gave her a crisp nod and looked up to the groom who stood at the back of his carriage. "Separate out one of the horses. We'll take it to find this lady's companions."

"You *will* find them, won't you?" Leah asked Mr. Harcourt.

"We will."

"Calm yourself," Miss Beaumont said to Leah. "You can trust them. Implicitly."

Mr. Harcourt gave the lady a quick smile, and she continued speaking to Leah. "It's time for us to leave. Come."

Leah took a deep breath, and after glancing back down the dark, empty road, made herself climb into the Harcourts' barouche. She settled herself on the seat next to Miss Beaumont, and watched out the window as the groom led one of the horses to Mr. Harcourt. Mr. Harcourt climbed onto it, his groom leaped on behind him, and together they headed east.

Before they'd disappeared into the darkness, the carriage driver turned the Harcourts' barouche west. About a half hour later, they reached Briarwood Hall.

There, Sir and Lady Colborne had just said their farewells to their last guests. Both Leah and Miss Beaumont told them all that had transpired, and Sir Colborne immediately sent for the magistrate. Likewise, Lady Colborne sent for a physician to see after Leah's wounds. The magistrate and physician arrived within the hour. They were very kind and accommodating, and both urged Leah to rest. Leah, with Miss Beaumont's kind ministrations, truly tried to do so. But no matter how many pillows Lady Colborne brought to where Leah reclined on the couch in the drawing

room, or how many cups of tea Miss Beaumont offered her, Leah couldn't close her eyes. Her fears for Father, Susanna, and the coachman ever pounded through her. Were they alive and safe?

At last, gray morning light slipped through the slits between the drawing room's thick blue velvet curtains.

Lady Colborne entered. "The men are back. Come along."

Leah and Miss Beaumont followed her out the front door and to the wide drive.

Mr. Harcourt and his groom walked in front of two horses. And there—Leah's heart nearly burst—there was Father, riding the frontmost horse. His posture was slumped, but he was alive.

Tears blurred her vision. "Father!"

Mr. Harcourt helped him down, and Leah threw her arms around him. She breathed in his familiar scent of bergamot and tobacco. "You made it," she whispered into his coat, holding him as if she could keep him safe through sheer force of will.

Father leaned against the horse, pain lining his expression. "I did, but that is more than I can say for the driver." His hand trembled as he patted Leah's back, whether from injury or emotion, she couldn't tell. "Which is what would have happened to me if you hadn't sent these men to help us. Thank you." The words caught in his throat, and Leah heard what he didn't say. *I failed to protect you again.*

She hugged him tighter. *You've always protected me, Father*, she wanted to say to ease his guilt, but instead, she merely said, "The driver's dead, then?"

"He is, dearest girl."

Leah sniffed. She wiped away the new tears and looked to the other horse—no one sat astride it. She searched the others' faces. Both Father and the groomsman studied the ground. Mr. Harcourt, his countenance empty, focused on her. A sudden ache burned the back of her throat. "Where is Susanna?"

Father again lowered his gaze. "I'm afraid they still have her."

"No." Leah backed away from him. "Susanna gave them her necklace. I gave them my ring. We gave them everything."

Father dropped his gaze. "I—I tried to stop them, but . . ." He shook his head. " . . . they took her."

Leah's breath hitched. A sob rose up from her gut, and she covered her mouth with her hand. She'd so hoped she'd escaped.

Miss Beaumont wrapped her arm around Leah's shoulders. "It will be all right," she soothed. "The magistrate will contact Bow Street. They'll find your friend."

Leah wiped the tears from her cheeks even as new ones filled her eyes. "Bow Street. Yes. The magistrate will contact them, and I . . . I must contact Susanna's mother." She left Father to Mr. Harcourt's care and followed Lady Colborne back into the manor. Lady Colburn provided Leah with paper, a quill, and ink. Then, after Leah wrote a quick, albeit desperate, message to Lady Talbot, Sir Colborne procured a messenger.

Leah handed him her letter. "Deliver this to Seawind House in Brighton."

Chapter 3

SIR WILLIAM TALBOT SNAGGED two warm scones from the sideboard and dropped into the chair across from Mother at the small mahogany breakfast table. "I'll gladly join your investigation today, but might you persuade Dr. Fletcher to meet earlier? The morning would suit me better."

"It would have suited me as well." Mother poured more tea into her cup. "And I told him as much. But he said he already had two other important appointments this morning."

William slathered his favorite strawberry preserves across every inch of the scone, then took an enthusiastic bite. He washed it down with his morning chocolate, ignoring his mother's pointed look at his hasty table manners. "Sounds as though Dr. Fletcher wasn't all that keen to share his information with you."

"He wasn't. He said he'd already given what information he had to the *real* investigators."

William grinned. "Impossible. Surely he's realized by now that you are Brighton's *real* investigator. Or at least, it's best one."

Mother smiled at that. "One would think so."

William spread preserves across his second scone, but just as he lifted it to his lips, heavy pounding struck the front door.

He took a bite and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Who could that be?"

"I don't know. I'm not expecting anyone."

The pounding grew more insistent.

Mother stood. "I'll go see what has happened to Mr. Seton."

Mr. Seton, their butler, was new to Seawind House, but he had come highly recommended by one of Mother's closest friends. Surely he knew that answering the door was one of his responsibilities.

William stood and urged Mother back into her chair. "Stay and finish your breakfast. I'll see to this."

"Thank you." She gave him a soft smile, and he strode from the breakfast room. He glanced down the hall toward the servants' staircase. William had seen Mr. Seton that very morning, speaking with the housekeeper, so the man certainly wasn't ill. Had something untoward happened?

More pounding.

William quickened his pace. He and Mr. Seton reached the front door at about the same time.

"Forgive me, sir," Mr. Seton said. "I was in the wine cellar helping the steward with his assessments."

"Thank you, Mr. Seton," William said, "but you can leave this to me."

Mr. Seton nodded and stepped back, allowing William access to the door.

Another pounding.

William flung open the door. A man in a gray tailored coat and a wide-brimmed hat stood before him. His horse, tied to the hitching post in the roadway, seemed to be breathing almost as hard as the man was.

The man held out a missive. "An urgent message for Lady Talbot."

William took the letter from the courier and read the address. It was from Miss Crauford. What reason could she possibly have to send an urgent message? Unless, of course, Susanna had created a ruse of some sort to stay longer in London.

William harrumphed, paid the courier, and returned to the breakfast room. He handed Mother the letter. "It's from Miss Crauford. The man said it was urgent."

"The courier said that when he delivered Susanna's last letter too. Yet, all it contained was a list of reasons why Susanna felt she could not return home this summer."

William rolled his eyes. Would the girl never grow up? He chuckled at that thought, knowing Susanna had frequently said that of him.

Mother set her napkin next to her teacup and scanned the front of the letter. "Miss Crauford. What a lovely young woman that girl has become. And always one with such good sense. I never would have believed she'd give in so easily to Susanna's cajoling."

"You say that as if you already know what's in the letter."

"I fear I do." Mother unfolded the note and began to read. But after a moment, she paled. Tears filled her eyes, and she peered up at William.

"Not again."

"Not what again?" William dragged his chair close to her and sat. He squeezed her hand. "Mother?"

Mother, her hands trembling, swallowed and handed him the missive. "Oh, dear Susanna! How could this happen? She's a fighter . . . but sometimes she's so frivolous! How will she bear it?"

Mother covered her face with her hands, and William read the missive. Rage at his beloved sister's attackers filled him. Fear over what they might do to her crashed through his senses.

Not again indeed. Before Mother had married Father, she'd been abducted by an unscrupulous man who had forced her into an illegal marriage. Soon after that, she'd found herself with child. The criminal then tried to use Mother's pregnancy to extort her substantial dowry from her father.

William squeezed the paper, crinkling its edges. If not for Father—dear, honorable Father—who had already loved Mother then, the scandal might have destroyed her. Instead, Father had quietly arranged the marriage's annulment, married Mother himself, and later adopted Owen, William's older half-brother, as his own.

William flung the missive on the table. No one would hurt his family like that again. "Don't worry. I'll get her back."

"I'll help you." Mother stood and called out for her lady's maid. "I'll just pack a few things and—"

"No, Mother." William clasped her shoulders. "Please. I must leave now. The sooner I find her trail, the better chance I have of finding her—"

"—before it's too late." Mother's lips quivered. Then she, holding William's gaze, lowered herself back into her chair. "Very well. Go."

William, still clasping her upper arms, gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "I—I mean, Susanna and I—will be back soon."

"Please be careful. From what Miss Crauford wrote in her letter, those men are dangerous."

I'll be the dangerous one if they've hurt Susanna. "I'll be careful," he said aloud. He then rushed from the room.

Chapter 4

LEAH DIPPED HER SPOON into her teacup, watching the amber liquid swirl into a miniature maelstrom. This couldn't be real. Nearly an entire day had passed since Susanna had been kidnapped, and here Leah sat. Safe in the drawing room with Father and Mr. Fortescue. Taking tea as if it were any ordinary afternoon while Susanna was out there somewhere . . . facing ruination? Fighting for her life?

Bile filled Leah's throat, and she stirred the tea harder. The spoon clinked in protest.

"The magistrate assured me that his men are searching every road between here and Winchester," Father said. "But you understand, daughter, why we couldn't cancel today's meeting. With matters as they are, we must ensure your future security."

The words "future security" scraped against her nerves, and she squeezed her spoon. She should nod, should play the dutiful daughter, but her neck felt locked in place. What madness had possessed Father to think this meeting with Mr. Fortescue couldn't wait? Even Mr. Fortescue would have agreed to postpone, wouldn't he? Despite their fortnight of planning?

"Leah." Father's voice sounded weak, almost pleading.

Leah pursed her lips. He reclined on the pale-blue upholstered couch across from where she and Mr. Fortescue sat in matching armchairs. The bruising along his jaw had darkened to an ugly purple, and he winced as he shifted position, one hand pressed to his ribs. Her throat ached. Not only was Susanna missing, but she had also come close to losing her father.

Father reached out to her, though the movement clearly caused him pain. "Do you agree?"

"Forgive me, Father. I fear I'm struggling to stay focused today. What was your question?"

He frowned, glanced at Mr. Fortescue, and said a bit too evenly, "I asked your opinion about Mr. Fortescue's estate. He is having it cleaned, the furniture refurbished, and a new coat of paint added to both his drawing room and bedchamber."

Mr. Fortescue straightened his cravat. "I do hope the changes meet with your approval, my dear."

Leah lifted an eyebrow. Housekeeping? That was what they were worried about?

"Leah?" Father pressed. "Isn't it good of Mr. Fortescue to be so solicitous of your feelings? Are you not pleased?"

"Oh." Leah swallowed the sour taste in her mouth and slid aside her dishes. "Of course. Thank you, Mr. Fortescue. You are very kind."

Mr. Fortescue nodded. He shifted in his seat. "We haven't yet mentioned my favorite part of the remodeling. I've commissioned one of London's esteemed artists to recreate Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. I can only imagine how well it will add to the aesthetics of our home."

Leah shuddered. Not because she hated the message she saw in Botticelli's masterpiece, that women must be kept within male-dominated spheres rather than being allowed the freedom to find their own paths through life, but because Mr. Fortescue's gaze lingered on her throat . . . and shoulders . . . and . . .

Leah angled away from him. She pressed her palms together, prayer-like, in her lap. "Actually, now that I'm comfortable that Father will soon recover, I fear all I can think of is Miss Talbot. What she must be going through and what I can do to help her. To find her."

Father frowned.

Mr. Fortescue carefully, briefly touched her hand. "It does you credit, my dear Miss Crauford, to have such concern for your friend. Indeed, she is fortunate to have you."

"Of course we're all concerned for Miss Talbot," Father said. His voice sounded rough with exhaustion. "But I'm sure, daughter, you also see that while this is a distressing situation, we must trust the proper authorities to handle it. A gentlewoman cannot go racing about the countryside." He patted her arm. "I nearly lost you yesterday, my dear girl. Can you blame a father for wanting to secure your future? To know you'll be safe and

well-cared for?" His eyes, shadowed with bruises, held a desperation she'd never seen before.

No, I can't blame him. But at the same time, Leah imagined Susanna sitting hunched in the corner of a dark room, repeatedly whispering the words, "Help me."

Leah cringed. "You may be right, Father. And I have tried—" *A little.* "—to consider these simple, day-to-day concerns, but it's no use. All I can think about is Susanna."

Father's frown deepened.

Mr. Fortescue peered at Leah over the top of his glasses. "Your daughter has a point there, Crauford. We can't expect one of such goodness and sympathy to think of her own happiness under these circumstances." Once again, he straightened his cravat. "I'll tell you what I will do. I have an acquaintance among the Bow Street Runners. Though their numbers are few, they are known for their effectiveness in such matters. I will write to him directly and engage additional searchers of my own—discreet men who know how to handle delicate situations."

Leah's thoughts tripped. She blinked. "Sir! That is . . . kind of you. Thank you."

"You see, Leah?" Father said. "Mr. Fortescue understands the gravity of this circumstance."

"Indeed." Mr. Fortescue's voice softened. "Miss Talbot's situation is most concerning. But I hope, Miss Crauford, that once Miss Talbot is safely restored to us, you will be able to give me a favorable answer."

Leah regarded him. A glint of kindness—or was it daring?—burned in his eyes, and his voice hadn't lilted upward at the end. Nor did his word "hope" hold any sense of the uncertainty she'd noticed in his behavior at the masquerade ball. Something had changed. Indeed, he had not asked a question. He'd offered a bargain.

Father smiled at Mr. Fortescue, and Mr. Fortescue gave him a slight nod.

"What a kind and, may I add, generous offer," Father said. "Surely, daughter, you can see how fortunate you are that such a fine man seeks your hand in marriage."

So, that was the change. Father. Which meant . . . Leah cringed inwardly even as her understanding expanded . . . which meant Father had offered

him some form of assurance. Why, oh, why had he done that? Yes, she likely would marry Mr. Fortescue in the end, but she wasn't ready. Not yet. Not while every time she thought of doing so, all her senses ached.

"What do you say to Mr. Fortescue's offer?" Father pressed.

Leah laced her fingers together to still their trembling and forced a watery smile. "Thank you for your kindness, sir. I am grateful for anything that helps bring Miss Talbot home."

Father narrowed his gaze, and Leah swallowed again. At the same time, an image of William's beloved smiling face flashed in front of her. The thickness in her throat turned hot. William's love was always and forever beyond her reach. She'd made peace with that truth, hadn't she? Yet at that moment, looking at Mr. Fortescue, all she could think was, *How can I dedicate my life to a man I don't love?*

"Daughter?"

Leah blinked from her reverie. "Please excuse me. While you are hiring those men, Mr. Fortescue, I will contact my friend Miss Pemberton."

"Whatever for?" Father adjusted the blanket covering his lap. "Miss Pemberton, I'm certain, is busy with her coming nuptials."

"She is, but I've never done anything like this before, and she might have ideas that could help me hunt for Susanna. You remember, don't you, Father, how she helped find and rescue her missing nephew?" *Even though she, at first, was also forced to remain at home.*

"Do not be ridiculous. You, a woman, will not be hunting for Miss Talbot on your own. The roads are dangerous enough, as we now know firsthand. No, my precious girl, Mr. Fortescue's connections and the magistrate's men will handle the search properly."

Something twisted next to Leah's heart at the vulnerability she saw in his face.

"I've failed you in so many ways since your mother died," he continued. "Failed to provide the large fortune you deserve, failed to maintain our position in society, failed even to protect you from those villains yesterday. But this—" He gestured to Mr. Fortescue. "This I can do right. Mr. Fortescue's plan is as it should be. He will hire men to look for your friend, and you will wait until they have done so. You understand, don't you?"

Leah's vision swam. Oh, she understood. Every tremor in his hands, every shadow of fear in his eyes spoke of his terror of losing her, of failing her again. But how could she explain that in trying to secure her future, he was condemning her to a life void of love? But then, many have said that affection can grow with time, haven't they? Perhaps her life wouldn't be empty or loveless.

After all, Mr. Fortescue's smile seemed warmer somehow.

"Of course she understands, Crauford," Mr. Fortescue said. "She's as intelligent as she is lovely." He held her gaze. "And I'm sure Miss Talbot would be honored to stand up with us once she's safely home. That would please you, wouldn't it, my dear?"

Leah glanced at the doorway, then back at Father. His bruised face softened, and the sight of his injuries scratched her throat. *Do not give him more pain.* Finally, she nodded.

Mr. Fortescue's lips quirked upward slightly, his expression bright with what seemed to be triumph, and she lowered her gaze. "Yes, Mr. Fortescue," she whispered. "That will please me."

Chapter 5

LEAH WIPED THE SWEAT from the back of her neck with her handkerchief and stood from her writing desk. Another day had passed, and still no news of Susanna. True, Mr. Fortescue's men and Bow Street were looking for her, but they were obviously failing.

Somehow, some way, I must convince Father to let me hunt for her as well.

She paced to the window. The midafternoon sunlight cast so much heat across the flower gardens, it seemed the roses' pink petals had opened simply to cool themselves. And the sparkles on the distant lake, which usually calmed her, appeared more like boilings than glimmerings. Which was appropriate, she assumed, for glimmerings felt like hope, and right then, hope felt impossibly far away, boiling just beyond her grasp.

She groaned. How much longer would it be until she heard from her friend, Miss Rani Pemberton? The hours were ticking by. Surely Rani understood Leah's—and especially Susanna's—need for haste.

Leah returned to her writing desk. She removed her leather-bound diary from the drawer. Last night, she had written in it all she knew about Susanna's abduction. Perhaps if she reread her entry, some new clue would present itself.

She opened the cover. A folded piece of yellowed paper slipped out from the back page.

She caught her breath. Why had the childhood contract fallen out now? She'd nearly forgotten it was even there.

She picked it up and opened it. The careful, somewhat pretentious penmanship of fifteen-year-old William brought an unbidden smile to her lips. He had been so serious that summer day, insisting they do everything properly as he practiced his legal studies.

Marriage Contract, it read in elaborate script at the top. *Between Mr. William Talbot and Miss Leah Crauford*. Below, William had penned the most formal language his young mind could conjure, declaring them bound in matrimony just as Romeo had wed his Juliet—though hopefully with a happier ending, he'd quipped at the time.

Leah's cheeks warmed at the memory of that day. She, barely six years old, had worn a crown of daisies, playing the fair Juliet to his Romeo in the garden. Susanna had stood as witness, barely containing her giggles as William insisted on proper legal terminology. Even their parents had played along, Leah's father and William's mother adding their signatures with indulgent smiles.

To her young heart, that contract had been everything. To William, merely an exercise in legal documentation.

Leah traced her forefinger over her childish signature at the bottom, the letters wobbly and uncertain compared to William's confident hand.

She laughed softly, bitterly. There she was, eighteen years later, still keeping her copy safe in her diary while he probably didn't remember he'd written it, much less their playacting.

She tucked the contract back inside her diary and flipped open to the long, rectangular card she used as a bookmark. Several neatly scrawled words filled its center. Words that were almost as dear to her as those written in the Bible.

"Women, like men, are duty bound to form and follow their own paths."—Mrs. Margaret Winthrop

Leah tapped the edge of the card against the book.

Margaret Winthrop was her grandmother on her mother's side. She had been a rather renowned bluestocking. But more importantly, she had encouraged Leah to become the person she wished to become, no matter what path convention demanded she take.

"Well," Leah whispered, "right now my path is to find Susanna, regardless of what anyone thinks of my methods." *And*, she frowned, *to becoming Mrs. Fortescue*.

A single, familiar knock struck her door.

“Come in, Jane.”

Jane, Leah’s lady’s maid, stepped inside. “Miss Pemberton is here to see you, miss.”

Finally! “Please show her into the drawing room.”

“Yes, miss.”

Jane left, and Leah slid the card and diary back inside her desk drawer. She then smoothed the front of her dress and went downstairs. She stepped into the drawing room.

Her good friend, Miss Rani Pemberton, a slight, black-haired young lady of Anglo-Indian descent, sat next to a plainly dressed young woman Leah assumed was her lady’s maid. They’d chosen the same couch Father had occupied yesterday when they’d conversed with Mr. Fortescue.

“I’m so sorry, dearest,” Rani said, rising to greet her. “I came as soon as I could get away.”

Leah clasped her friend’s hands. “Thank you for coming. You cannot know how grateful I am to see you.”

“I believe I can guess.”

The two settled onto the couch.

“Now,” Rani said. “Tell me everything.”

“I hardly know where to begin.”

“Start with what you know.” Rani removed her gloves. “Sometimes speaking our fears aloud helps us see them more clearly.”

Leah nodded, twisting her handkerchief in her lap. “Two evenings ago, Father and I were traveling home from the Colbornes’ masquerade ball when—” Her throat tightened at the memory of that terrible night.

“Take your time, dearest.”

“We were set upon by highwaymen in Hounslow Heath. But they weren’t ordinary brigands. They targeted us specifically.” Leah rose, too agitated to remain seated, and paced to the window. The afternoon sun had shifted, casting long shadows across the garden. “They said little, but it seemed they knew who we were.”

“You believe they had intimate knowledge of your party’s movements?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps.”

“Have you considered—?”

Another knock at the door interrupted Leah's speculation. Jane appeared, her expression anxious. "Begging your pardon, miss, but Sir William Talbot has just arrived. He seems quite insistent to see you."

Leah's heart lurched. William, Susanna's brother, was here? She glanced at Rani, who watched her, tilting her head.

"Why are you nervous?" Rani asked. "You expected him, didn't you? I thought you knew the Talbot family well."

"I do. What I mean to say is I'm not nervous."

Rani arched an eyebrow. "You're not? Well, I suppose you know best."

Leah frowned and smoothed her skirt. Rani always read her emotions much too well. "How do I look?"

"As lovely as ever. Shall I leave?"

"No. Please stay. Your counsel may prove invaluable." Leah took a steadying breath. "Show Sir William in, Jane."

Jane left, and Leah forced herself to remain still.

"Sir William," Rani whispered. "S. W. Those are the initials of your secret love, aren't they?"

"Hush! Sir William is only a friend."

Rani laughed lightly. "Of course." The moments between Jane's departure and William's arrival seemed to stretch endlessly, though every nerve in Leah's body hummed with awareness of William. Of the young man whose features were as familiar to her as the palm of her own hand.

At last, William's tall figure filled the doorway. His thick blond hair was wind-mussed from its usual careful arrangement, and travel creases lined his jacket's sleeves. He didn't seem to notice those things, though. Instead, his gaze immediately caught Leah's, and for a moment, the three years since their last meeting disappeared. Leah's heart stumbled in her chest.

"Little Leah," William said.

The familiar childhood name settled over her like an outgrown dress from seasons past. At twenty-four, she was hardly the girl who had once raced him through Maplewood's gardens, hardly the child who had dreamed he might someday love her. But no. Best not to let her mind wander that path.

"William." His name came out softer than she'd intended. "I'm so glad you came."

He strode toward her. Deep lines circled his topaz-blue eyes, and the heat from his nearness brushed her skin. "Forgive me for not arriving sooner. Part of the road was washed out from the last rain. Is there more news of Susanna?"

"Not that I've heard. Several men are searching for her, though."

"Bow Street men?"

"Yes. And others."

Rani stepped to Leah's side.

"Oh!" Leah said. "Forgive me. Miss Pemberton, this is Sir William Talbot. Sir William, this is Miss Rani Pemberton."

William bowed to her, and Rani curtsied in response. She then turned to Leah. "I'm glad to see that Sir William is here to help you, for I certainly didn't find my nephew on my own. Nor should you try such a thing. Now, tell me the rest of what you know. You, Miss Talbot, and your father were attacked on Hounslow Heath . . ."

Leah bit the inside of her lower lip, glanced at William, and continued with her account. She related the events from that night—the sudden attack, the terrifying moments when rough hands had grabbed her, Susanna's screams. She likewise told them of the men Mr. Fortescue had hired to search for Susanna, though Leah omitted the bargain she'd struck with her suitor. No need to share that particular detail now.

As she listened, Rani maintained her usual composed demeanor. But William . . . sometimes the blood drained from his face at a particularly frightening detail, and at other times it surged back as his jaw clenched and unclenched. Throughout the entirety, his gaze never left Leah's face. Worse, his love for his sister was so raw, so evident in his expression that Leah's own heart leaped in response.

"Merciful heavens, Leah." William clasped her hands. "Were you hurt? Are you truly all right?"

The concern in his voice wrapped around her like a warm shawl, and for a tiny moment, she let herself savor it. "I am well. A few scratches and bruises is all. Nothing to concern yourself over."

"And your father?"

"He's still nursing his injuries, but he's improving."

Rani pressed Leah's forearm. "I'm so sorry, dear. The ordeal must have been terrible."

"It was. It is." William's long, warm fingers pressed hers with kind familiarity, and her cheeks heated. *Don't blush.*

Her cheeks must not have obeyed, for William, watching her, suddenly widened his eyes and released her.

Leah swallowed and continued. "The hardest part of this is knowing that Susanna is still out there and in trouble. Please, Miss Pemberton. My father is refusing to let me look for her, but—what can I do?"

"You mean, what can *I* do," William said. "Your father is right. You, Leah, must stay here where it's safe. If you go out there and end up hurt or lost . . ."

She shook her head.

William lifted his hand, stopping her refusal. "Don't forget that those ruffians also tried to kidnap you. And if you start looking for her, and something likewise happens to you, what good will it do any of us? We'll then have two people to rescue rather than one."

Leah lifted her chin. "You wouldn't say that to your mother."

"Yes, I would."

"Well then, she wouldn't obey you."

"She would if she saw that it was the right thing to do."

Leah grimaced. Lady Talbot did, in many cases, follow her own path. But she also lived by a fierce sense of what was right. It was that sense that had allowed Leah and Father to remain friends with her family after Sir Talbot had died.

"That's the crux of it," Leah said. "Don't you see? Staying home doesn't feel like the right thing for *me* to do. Surely you understand . . ." She glanced at Rani and back to William. "I can't abide sitting here, twiddling my thumbs and doing nothing while Susanna is in danger. She's my friend."

"And I am her brother."

"I'm not discounting that. But think of it. Who else can help her as well as I can? As you said, I was there. I, better than anyone, know something of what she faces."

William stiffened. He fisted and released his hands.

Rani edged herself between Leah and William. "There now. Disagreements won't get us anywhere. I know this is difficult for you, Leah, and I'm sorry you are going through it. I felt like I'd been banished to hell when I couldn't help the men look for my nephew. To make it worse, I felt responsible for his loss. However . . ." She peered straight at William. ". . . it is that experience that tells me Leah must do something to help. If she doesn't, she will go mad. And she will blame herself if, in the end, something untoward happens to your sister."

"Nothing untoward will happen," William growled.

Leah glared at the painted floor cloth. Its gray, marble-like veins meandered across the floor like the paths Father insisted would lead them to greater affluence and status. But her grandmother's words from the card in her diary whispered differently. *Women, like men, are duty bound to form and follow their own paths.*

At last, Leah drew back her shoulders, angled away from William, and looked straight at Rani. "What should I do first?"

"What should *I* do first?" William repeated, his voice tight.

"You must convince your father that more minds set to a project are better than a few," she answered Leah. She then looked at William. "Don't you agree?"

William didn't answer.

"I understand your concerns, William," Leah said. "Truly, I do. But please believe me when I say I won't sit idly by. I can't."

Another long, staring-at-one-another moment passed.

Finally, William's stance slumped. "Very well. I won't fight you on this as long as you promise to stay with me. As I intimated, I won't be able to give my full attention to finding Susanna if I also have to worry about you. Will you promise me that?"

Leah's senses bounced. *Stay* with William? Of course she'd promise to stay with him. For all eternity, if he'd ask it of her. "Does that mean you'll convince Father to allow it?"

"I do not imagine he'll refuse me."

Leah grinned. "Well then, William, I'd be pleased to accompany you. Thank you."

He harrumphed and turned to Rani. "Now that's settled, what do *you* suggest we do first?"

"As for that, all I can tell you is what I did in my own case. Do you have a likeness of Miss Talbot?"

"I do." William retrieved a folded paper from his vest's pocket and handed it to her.

At the same time, Leah stepped closer to Rani. Together, they peered down at the hand-drawn image. It was well-sketched, simple, and so much like Susanna that emotion filled Leah's eyes. Her throat tightened.

"My sister-in-law, Mrs. Anne de Bourgh Talbot," William added, "drew this for me a few weeks ago. It was meant to be a gift for my sister. Her birthday is coming soon. She'll be twenty-two." He frowned so deeply that Leah instinctively reached out to take his hand. To comfort him and tell him they'd soon find Susanna and everything would be all right. And yet, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't form the words. What if they didn't find her?

We have to.

She lowered her hand and whispered to William, "It's a beautiful likeness."

"It's perfect," Rani said. "Now find someone to make copies of it. You can then spread those likenesses to everyone who's searching for Miss Talbot. The pictures will help them—and you—question those who don't know her." She handed it back to William.

"Who made the likenesses you used when you searched for your nephew?" he asked.

"Miss Teresa Fletcher. She's a friend of mine. Actually, we both traced them."

"Could you trace likenesses for us too?" William asked. "I'm afraid I'm useless at drawing. Leah is too. So—"

Leah glared at him. His expression was stoic. Perhaps even critical. But at the same time, an all-too-familiar glint filled his eyes. He was teasing her. Of course he was, yet she couldn't fault him for what he'd said. It was true. Leah could write an acceptable poem in a manner of minutes, but fortune would have to sit on her shoulder if she needed to draw anything more detailed than a box.

“So, if you can do that for us,” William continued, “Leah and I can spend our time hunting for my sister.”

Again, a point close to Leah’s heart bounced. *Our* time. *We’ll* be working together to find Susanna—if only it was for a pleasant reason. She dragged her gaze from William and focused on Rani. “I think five, maybe six copies would be enough.”

“Very well. I’ll trace about a dozen of them. Meanwhile, I suggest you two contact Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont.” Rani removed a small, folded card from her reticule and handed it to Leah. “This is the Harcourts’ address. They have a strong proclivity toward solving mysteries, so I took the liberty of mentioning Miss Talbot’s abduction to them. I hope you don’t mind, but I thought they were the best people to advise you. That is, if both you and they wish it.”

Leah studied the card. “Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont? I am acquainted with them. They were at the ball. They’re also the people who helped us return to Briarwood Hall after we were attacked.”

“They are?” Rani asked. “I wonder why they didn’t say anything about that to me.”

William jolted. “That is rather coincidental, is it not? That they were both at the ball, and they found you in Hounslow Heath? From my experience, coincidences aren’t good things. What if they were actually involved with the attack? What if they know where my sister is?”

Leah grimaced. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“That’s highly unlikely,” Rani said. “And coincidence or not, the truth is, the Harcourts often work with Bow Street. They would be great allies if, as I said, they agreed to help you look for Miss Talbot.”

Leah looked at William. “Miss Pemberton’s right. The more help we can get, the better.”

“Agreed,” William said. “Very well, the first thing we’ll do is visit the Harcourts.”

“And Miss Beaumont,” Rani added.

William motioned Leah toward the door. “Shall we?”

Leah’s senses leaped. This was really happening. She and William would be working together. Side by side. “I first need to get leave from Father.”

“Of course. Take me to him, and I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Perfect,” Leah said. But it was more than perfect. It was a wish come true. But as she hurried to the staircase that would take her to Father’s office, an unbidden image of Susanna, cold and lost and crying, again filled her mind. Somewhere out there, her dear friend was waiting, perhaps praying, for rescue, and they still had no idea where she was.

Chapter 6

WILLIAM JUMPED OUT OF the Craufords' barouche, turned back to the open door, and held his hand out to Leah. She placed her gloved hand in his. It was late afternoon, not even close to sunset, yet the sun's rays seemingly pinked her cheeks and brightened her eyes.

His own cheeks warmed. *Hmph. That's odd. I hadn't thought I was fevered. Hopefully I'm not catching a cold.*

He swallowed, drew back his shoulders, and helped Leah down the carriage steps. When she reached the ground, she gave him a slight smile. It was the same expression she'd always given him when he'd helped her from a carriage, nothing more and nothing less, yet something about that smile seemed different. Softer, even. And prettier? To be sure, Leah's complexion was smoother than it had been when she was a child, and her demeanor was more self-assured, like she no longer wished to hide in a closet or under a table. But Leah, pretty?

"Thank you," she said.

William frowned. *Yes, she's pretty, but she's only Little Leah.* His younger sister's playmate. The child who romped through his memories as surely as his sister's image did, yet when he tried to think of her as another sister, something inside him rebelled.

He shrugged. It was probably because the protective instinct he felt for her was different from the steady, brotherly affection he felt for Susanna.

He likewise helped Jane, Leah's lady's maid who was acting as their chaperone, from the carriage, and the three strode up the walk toward Harcourt Manor. William moved as quickly as gentlemanly behavior permitted, yet the nearer they drew to the large portico, the slower Leah stepped.

"What is it?" William asked her. "You seem hesitant all of a sudden. If you'd like, return to the carriage, and I'll speak with the Harcourts."

"It's not that at all. I'm anxious to talk to them. It is only that this place . . . the tall, stately walls . . . those dark-petalled flowers next to the door . . . all of it reminds me of Briarwood Hall. Of the masquerade ball and how Susanna and I spent so much of the night avoiding Mr. Fortescue. At the time, all that hiding among so many people had seemed a kind of game to her, but now . . ." Leah pressed her hands against her cheeks and shook her head. "She must be so frightened. So alone. Oh, William, we have to find her."

William's stomach turned over. "I'm worried about her too, but trust me. We *will* find her."

She clenched her reticule. "Of course."

He swallowed, and the two, with Jane behind them, started up the portico's steps.

"I do trust you, William," Leah said. "I always have. But this . . . I can't help worrying that finding Susanna could be beyond either of our abilities."

"Where are those doubts coming from? Only moments ago, you affirmed that we wouldn't give up until we found her."

"I know. And it is what I hope for—believe—but sometimes . . ."

He shook his head. "Sometimes fear gets the best of all of us, Leah. The trick is not to let it sit with us for too long." A sudden odd shiver shot down his spine, and he glanced over his shoulder. Were they being watched?

"Is something wrong?" Leah asked.

"Just paranoia, I believe. My senses seem to be out of sorts this afternoon."

"So are mine."

William, Leah, and Jane approached the door.

The door opened. A man wearing a long, dark coat stepped out. He placed his tall, cylindrical hat on his head. Ahh. A constable. Another man in an impeccably pressed tailcoat and matching vest stood behind him. He must be the Harcourts' butler.

"Excuse me," the constable said.

William and Leah gave the constable passageway between them. The constable nodded to William and continued on down the stairs.

William handed his calling card to the butler. "We are here to see Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont."

"Of course." The butler motioned for them to join him in the entry hall. "Wait here, please."

Soon thereafter, a young man with mussed auburn hair stepped into the entry hall. He, likely Mr. Harcourt, appeared closer to Leah's age than to William's. A woman with reddish-blond hair and a dimple in her left cheek entered with him. She, presumably Miss Beaumont, looked to be a few years older than Mr. Harcourt, betrayed by slight creases at the corners of her eyes. From William's experience, such an age difference between companions was unusual, but according to Miss Pemberton, Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont shared a strong connection.

William studied them. Though Miss Beaumont didn't hold Mr. Harcourt's arm, they walked close enough that their shoulders frequently touched. Most noticeable of all, happiness beamed from their expressions. Were they courting? Perhaps engaged?

"Ah," Mr. Harcourt said. "Miss Beaumont and I have been waiting for you."

Miss Beaumont nodded to Leah. "It is good to see you again, my dear, though I wish it was under better circumstances."

"I wish that as well," Leah said.

"This way, please." Mr. Harcourt turned to his butler. "It's time for tea. Please show Miss Crauford's lady's maid to the drawing room and send one of the servants to see to her needs."

Leah, likely as surprised by Mr. Harcourt's request as William was, since it was not teatime, furrowed her brow, but she, like William, said nothing. Instead, Leah took Miss Beaumont's offered arm, and the three followed Mr. Harcourt through the hall and around to the parlor at the back of the building.

"I hope you don't mind me leaving your lady's maid behind," Mr. Harcourt said to Leah when she crossed in front of him. "It is simply that when it comes to investigations, we prefer secrecy."

"I understand," Leah said.

She did? Hadn't she recently told him that the more people who knew the details of Susanna's kidnapping, the better?

"You're wise to accept Mr. Harcourt's opinion so readily," Miss Beaumont said to Leah. "I admit that such secrecy did worry me at first, but I soon found that Mr. Harcourt was right." She softened her voice and peered up at him. "He is always right."

Mr. Harcourt cleared his throat, straightened his cravat, and again motioned for them to follow him farther into the parlor. The four crossed beneath a large chandelier that hung in the center of the room and continued toward a small square table near the fireplace on the back wall. Four chairs surrounded the table. Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont sat at the head and foot of it, and Leah and William sat in the other chairs across from one another. Miss Beaumont then opened a black leather-bound notebook that sat on the table in front of her. A portion of a folded piece of paper poked out of the top of it like a bookmark.

"An orikata?" Leah asked. "I haven't seen that shape before. What animal is it?"

Miss Beaumont glanced at Mr. Harcourt, who gave her a slight shake of his head, and she pressed her lips into a half smile. "In truth, the figure is rather rare. Perhaps we'll tell you about it sometime."

Mr. Harcourt arched an eyebrow in obvious surprise, but he quickly lowered it again when Miss Beaumont, holding his gaze, smirked a little and opened the book beyond the orikata to a blank page.

William studied their hosts. What communication had just flowed between them? It was certainly none of his business. It might even be particularly personal. And yet, William couldn't quite make himself stop watching their too-placid expressions. Miss Beaumont had told Leah she might one day tell her about the orikata. If she did, would it explain their secretiveness?

Miss Beaumont picked up the sharpened pencil that lay between the notebook's blank pages. "Miss Rani Pemberton told us the two of you intend to search for Miss Talbot, but that you need some guidance."

"That's correct." William sat taller. "I'll do whatever it takes to find my sister."

"So will I," Leah said.

Miss Beaumont formed a firm yet crooked smile. "That is commendable of both of you, and. Mr. Harcourt and I fully understand your desire to find the girl. But considering the dangers, are you certain you should do that? Surely you can hire men to help the authorities hunt for her."

"That is being done," Leah said.

"Are you suggesting we hire you?" William asked.

"No. Not us."

William jolted at Mr. Harcourt's vehemence. At the same time, Miss Beaumont briefly touched Mr. Harcourt's arm.

Mr. Harcourt's posture relaxed.

"Forgive me," Miss Beaumont said to William. "I'm afraid I wasn't clear. The Harcourts help solve crimes, but they never do so for money. It's merely a family talent they wish to share with others when it's needed."

William finger-tapped the tabletop. "If what you say is true, why won't you investigate with us?"

"Simply because we're deep into another important case," Mr. Harcourt said.

"But we are happy to advise you," Miss Beaumont quickly added.

William lifted his chin. "More important than rescuing my kidnapped sister?"

"William," Leah whispered. "We're not the only crime victims in London."

"It is all right," Miss Beaumont said to Leah. "Sir Talbot is simply and most understandably worried about his sister." She turned back to William. "I know this is difficult for you, sir, but yes, our case is an important one. My father was murdered, and we are hunting the man who did it."

William gaped at her. *Murdered?*

"You don't have to give them an explanation," Mr. Harcourt said to Miss Beaumont.

"I know I don't,, but I want them to have it. I know something of what they're feeling."

"Pardon me," William cut in. "I didn't realize . . . but . . ." He shifted his position. "It's certainly true that murder is worse than kidnapping. And I

don't mean to imply it isn't. However, forgive me if I offend you, but at least in a kidnapping, there is still hope for rescue."

"True," Miss Beaumont said. "But in murder, and in all crimes, the longer it takes to find the villain, the less chance there is of catching him."

"And stopping him from murdering again," Leah said under her breath. "We understand. It's just that we're worried about Miss Talbot."

The anguish in Leah's voice matched the fear churning in William's own chest. Though she was only Susanna's friend, her devotion ran as deep as any sister's might—perhaps deeper than his own, if he were honest. After all, Leah had shared more of Susanna's confidences these past months than he had done.

The thought unsettled him. When had Leah become so essential to both of them? She wasn't his blood sister, yet at that moment, he felt himself as protective of her as he was of Susanna. Different, certainly, but no less fierce.

"In any case," Miss Beaumont continued, "you can be sure we're not leaving you to your own devices. We will help and guide you as much as we can."

"That is good of you," Leah said. "Thank you."

William swallowed. "Yes, thank you."

"Now that's settled," Leah continued, "what is the first thing we should do?"

"Visit the scene of the crime," Mr. Harcourt, Miss Beaumont, and William said at the same time.

The three glanced at one another.

William's arm bumped Leah's elbow. He quickly scooted back from her. "Forgive me," he said, hoping she couldn't see his embarrassment. How had his chair moved so close to hers during their conversation?

Leah nodded in response to his apology. "You already knew our first step? Investigate the scene?"

William shrugged.

"Clearly," Mr. Harcourt said, "you have experience in crime solving."

"A little, I suppose," William said. "My mother has a remarkable eye for detail and often helps resolve local mysteries. I've had the fortune of assisting her, though with nothing as serious as this."

"A few years ago," Leah said, "Sir Talbot had been in Brighton. He'd been instrumental in helping his mother, his brother, and his now sister-in-law, Mrs. Anne de Bourgh Talbot, investigate a murder mystery."

"I'd hardly call it instrumental," William muttered.

"That's how your mother described it." Leah's gaze sank into William's, and a tiny something close to his heart tripped. It settled him, too, somewhat the way his mother's presence settled him when he returned home after a difficult day. Yet that settling was also different. With Mother, it seemed peace dumped into the top of his head and wove through his body. With Leah, it was more like her understanding wrapped itself around him like a gentle hug.

"Trust yourself," Leah replied.

Trust yourself. William's late father had often said that to him when he was a lad. William had thought little about it then, for life, as he saw it, was meant to be a romp in the park. But after his father had died and his responsibilities had shifted to William's shoulders, he thought of those words often. Sometimes, they felt encouraging. Other times, they felt overwhelming. But always, he cherished them as a link to his father's love.

William smiled a little.

"I do wonder, though," Leah continued more loudly, "if going back to where Susanna was kidnapped might actually be pointless for us, since I was already there."

"You weren't there when Miss Talbot was actually taken," Mr. Harcourt said.

"True," Leah said.

Miss Beaumont straightened, drew back her shoulders, and took the pencil from the notebook. "Recording what you learn is another important first step."

"Of course," Leah said.

"So, let's begin there," Miss Beaumont continued. "When Mr. Harcourt and I found you on the road in Hounslow Heath, you were running from the men who attacked you, your father, and Miss Talbot while you were on your way home from the Colborne's masquerade ball. You also eventually informed us that the highwaymen wore bags over their heads, and your driver was killed."

"Later," Mr. Harcourt added, "we learned they left your father, your carriage, and your belongings behind. That tells us the ruffians' motive in attacking you wasn't theft."

"Actually, they did take some of our belongings." Leah recounted how she and Susannah had offered the men their jewels in exchange for their safety, but the highwaymen had discounted their plea and merely taken the jewels.

Miss Beaumont recorded that information in her notebook.

William, though he already knew much of it, again cringed in anger over the highwaymen's vicious treatment of them. But then Leah added one detail he hadn't heard before. Apparently, the highwaymen had spoken very little during the ordeal. William's thoughts jumped. Did that then mean that Leah or Susanna or both ladies knew their attackers, and the villains were trying to avoid recognition?

Leah finished recounting the attack.

"Thank you, my dear," Miss Beaumont said. "I understand it's not easy to talk about such things, but you may be gratified to know you've remembered more details than many victims do."

William raised his eyebrows. "I've never known Miss Crauford not to be deeply aware of her surroundings. As children, she always found me when we played hide-and-seek."

Leah smirked. "The grass lay differently where he'd run over it. That's all."

William chuckled.

Mr. Harcourt offered a tentative smile. "Miss Pemberton didn't tell us the two of you knew each other as children, but I'm glad to know it. Such investigations can be rather taxing, especially when they require one to associate with individuals outside one's usual society."

"Is that how it is with you and Miss Beaumont?" Leah asked. "Long-time friends?"

"In truth, we haven't known each other long, but as far as I'm concerned, the length of time hasn't been important."

Miss Beaumont's cheeks pinked prettily. "For me, either. All that matters is that we understand one another."

Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont held each other's gazes. There certainly was an attachment between them.

Miss Beaumont turned back to William. "But enough of that. The two of you are here for our help."

"We are."

"What is your opinion?" she asked Mr. Harcourt. "The same steps we're taking in our investigation?"

"That is an excellent idea." Mr. Harcourt, pursing his lips, rubbed his chin. "What Miss Beaumont is suggesting is that the two of you investigate what you know. That you go to where you believe your suspect could be."

Leah frowned. She looked just as disappointed as William felt.

"That might make sense in your case," William said, "but we don't know anything definitive about our suspects."

"You know where the attack took place."

Leah gave a tiny, tight nod. "I hadn't thought there was any point in going back there. Was I wrong?"

"One often learns a great deal from studying a crime scene," Mr. Harcourt said.

"Mother often said that too." William rubbed the back of his neck. If he'd paid more attention to his mother's crime solving, would he have already found and rescued Susanna?

"That may be," Leah said, "but returning to the beginning feels like we're dragging our feet. How long can Susanna last while we do that?"

Miss Beaumont rested her hand on top of Leah's. "Take heart, dear. Your next visit to Hounslow Heath will be much different than it was that night. As an investigator, you won't be the victim. You'll be the hunter."

"Hunter' seems too powerful of a word for what I am," Leah said. "All I want is to find and rescue Miss Talbot."

"And hunt down the vermin who kidnapped her," William said.

"If only the crime scene was closer so we could go there tonight," Leah said. "It seems like every time I turn around, an obstacle stops my—I mean, our, investigation."

In this case, that obstacle is you, William thought. If he hadn't promised Leah's father he'd return her before dark, he'd have insisted that they go to the crime scene now, no matter how late at night it was.

"The hunting may stop," Mr. Harcourt said, "but the thinking must not."

"Of course." William bit back his irritation. "Don't worry, Miss Crauford. We'll leave for Hounslow Heath first thing in the morning."

"As early as possible," Leah said. "And this time . . ." She glanced at Miss Beaumont. ". . . I'll see it with new eyes."

William nodded and drew back his shoulders. *Hold on, Susanna. We're coming.*

Chapter 7

AT FIRST, LEAH'S FATHER protested when William arrived at Glenhaven Hall at eight o'clock the next morning. It was much too early in the day for a young man to call on an honorable young lady. But when William assured him that Leah would be home in time for dinner, Father's irritation dissipated. Leah had initially thought that was due to Father's esteem for William and the Talbot family, but she'd been wrong. The reason was Mr. Fortescue was joining Father and her for dinner. He'd set the event for five o'clock, Father had told her, so they would have ample time to visit. That was true as far as it went, but Leah knew Father chose the early hour to save on the cost of lamps and candles, also preferring the sun's natural light.

William helped Leah into her family's barouche, and Leah settled into the seat back. She sighed. If only Father had likewise invited William to join them for dinner. With him there, they'd not only have lively conversation, but they'd also avoid discussing her future marriage to Mr. Fortescue. But Father hadn't done that. Instead, when she was about to suggest he invite William, Father announced that Leah and William could utilize their barouche. He then summoned the driver and told him the two could go wherever they wished as long as they were home by three o'clock. Father then glanced at William, a bit guiltily, it seemed to Leah, and took his leave of them. He needed to rest his injuries, he said.

William, good man that he was, acted as if he hadn't even noticed Father's faux pas in excluding him. Indeed, sitting across from Leah in the barouche, he said very little to her for the entire hour it took them to get to Hounslow Heath. Not that William was unsociable or in any way appeared displeased. It was simply the way it had always been between the two of them, that they could sit silently and comfortably in each other's company.

Even so, whenever Leah accidentally caught his gaze, she quickly turned away from him, peered out the barouche's window, and hoped to heaven that the foolish embarrassment warming her cheeks wasn't also coloring them red. And that she'd remember the exact stand of trees where the highwaymen had attacked them.

"There." Leah leaned closer to the window. "That's the place."

William knocked on the carriage roof. The carriage stopped, and after climbing out, he turned and helped Leah down the step. Jane, her lady's maid, stayed in the barouche.

Leah, bracing her emotions, took a deep breath. The gnarled oak trees lined the bend in the road. Sunlight streamed through the twisting, leafy branches with such glowing warmth, they seemed like siblings welcoming them home. Even a skylark's song drifted through the soft, undulating air as if all was right and peaceful in the world.

A whining screech pierced the air.

"What was that?"

"Probably a rabbit caught by a fox or something," William said.

"Oh. Yes. Of course. For a moment, I thought it sounded like Susanna. When her captor had carried her toward his horse."

William scowled, and Leah ran her hands up and down her arms. She glanced back at the carriage. It was the same barouche she and Susanna had been using during the attack. The horses, their tails now swishing back and forth contentedly, had stamped their hooves and whinnied out at the black night, mirroring Father's pained cries before the ruffians knocked him unconscious.

Leah's hands turned cold, and her heartbeat raced. *They almost killed him.*

William, standing beside her, tightened and released his fists. "Take your time, Leah. I know this is hard."

Leah squeezed his hand. He jolted, and she winced. What was she thinking? She couldn't just take a young man's hand like that, which was exactly the point—she hadn't been thinking.

They sidled away from one another. Leah, praying for the heat to leave her cheeks, closed her eyes and lifted her face toward the sky. She inhaled.

Again, the horses whinnied through her memories, but this time Susanna's screams overpowered them. "*Leah, run!*"

Leah couldn't run. She could only push against the man who held her fast. She'd tried to remove the bag covering his head to reveal who he was, and she'd kicked him repeatedly. But no matter how hard she fought, she couldn't escape his grip.

Tears flooded Leah's eyes, and she blinked them away.

William clasped her elbow, ducked a little, and gazed into her eyes. "Were we wrong to come here?"

Wrong to—? Leah blinked. Was he asking for her opinion? And not just about her own actions, but about his as well? To be sure, she had described the place to him well enough that he could have found and investigated the scene on his own, but he hadn't. He'd accompanied her, and now he was asking for her opinion. Gentle warmth lilted through her. William. The kind, fun-loving, considerate man she'd forever love. But in the next moment, the feeling cooled.

She loved William, but she'd marry Mr. Fortescue.

Would Mr. Fortescue ever consult her about anything other than household matters?

"Leah?" William asked.

"Oh. Forgive me—I was woolgathering. Yes, I believe we were right to come here. It's only that there are so many frightful memories here. Some that I'd rather forget. But I shouldn't, should I? At least not until after we find Susanna."

"You're likely right. But there may be an easier way." He tapped his forefinger against his lips. "I expect you brought your notebook with you. Since you are a writer."

"Yes, it's in my reticule. But I don't know that anyone would call me a writer."

"I do. I've never known anyone who could turn a phrase as well as you."

Leah's cheeks warmed. "It's good of you to try to make me feel better, William, but please don't flatter me. I'm too worried about Susanna to bear your teasing now."

"I'm not teasing you. I'm glad you write as well as you do. You'll make the clue-keeping easy for us."

Leah studied him. No smile. No jovial glints in his eyes. He was serious. "Very well. Thank you for the compliment."

He arched an eyebrow, and Leah removed her notebook and a pencil from her reticule.

"Do you want to go back in the carriage? It might be easier for you to write what you can remember about that night while sitting."

"I'd rather stay out here where the air's cooler."

"And where your memories are stronger, I suspect."

"Yes. We can move to the shade, though."

They went to the stand of trees and stepped into the shadows. It wasn't where she'd initially hidden from her attacker, but the underbrush was so much like it that she closed her eyes and pressed her palm against her newly pounding heart.

"You've recalled something," William said.

"I have. I doubt it's worth recording, though." Her fingers shook, and she dropped the pencil.

William picked it up. "Let me help you. Give me your notebook."

"I thought you wanted me to write."

"I do. And I'm sure you eventually will. But not now." He held his hand out to her. "Tell me whatever you remember, and I'll write it for you. Deal?"

Leah studied him. William might be a tease, but he was also always kind. "Deal." She sighed and handed him her notebook. "Thank you."

He straightened his spine. "Now, tell me what you just remembered."

She did so, and he recorded it. However, as she reached the end of that memory, another one crashed over her. She shivered.

"Tell me," William said.

"There are so many things. All of them a jumble." She shook her head. "I don't know where to start."

"Why don't you start with what you remember of the highwaymen? Describe their appearances. I know they wore bags over their heads, but what about their body structures? Their heights?"

Leah, thinking hard, pictured when her captor had grabbed her and she'd tried and failed to pull the bag from his head. "My attacker was about six inches taller than me. Similar to your height."

William wrote a few words.

"And I scratched the back of his neck," Leah added. "Actually, underline that. Maybe, if anyone finds him, he'll still have that scratch."

William didn't just underline it—he circled it. "Now, body size. Were the men broad or slender?"

"Broad. And muscular. Susanna's attacker scooped her up and draped her over his horse as if she were nothing more than a sack of wheat. And yet one of the times my attacker forced me against his person—"

"*One* of the times?"

Leah swallowed. "When he was holding me against him, I noticed a curious softness about his midsection. Not corpulence, mind you, but something more akin to stuffed cloth. I suspected he had padded his attire to better conceal his identity."

"He forced you against him," William said between his teeth. "When I get my hands on those men . . ."

"I know. And I understand. If I were a man, I'd . . . well, I don't know what I'd do, but for myself, I feel fortunate that I escaped."

"I wish Susanna had been fortunate as well."

"And yet . . ." Leah drew her brows into a deep, thoughtful furrow. Why had she escaped while Susanna hadn't? Was it merely luck that her captor lost his grip? Luck again that he hadn't found her, even though she hid so closely, she feared he'd hear her breathe? How much luck could one person have?

"And yet?" William prompted.

"Do you think he could have let me get away? On purpose?"

"Why would he do that? He must know you'd report them to the authorities."

Leah's stomach knotted. She stared down the road they'd just traveled. What had the criminals' motives been? Kidnapping usually involved money. For that reason, both the constables and the thief takers had encouraged Leah and her father to keep a close watch on the post. It was possible that their attackers would demand money in exchange for Susanna's safety, but no letters of any sort had come. Which meant . . . what? That money wasn't their motive?

The constables also suggested that the ruffians might have planned to marry her and Susanna and thereby acquire their doweries. True, Susanna's dowery of twenty thousand pounds was much greater than Leah's three thousand, but three thousand pounds was not a pittance. Indeed, a man who was so down on his luck that he'd resort to thievery wouldn't just let that amount run away.

Or would he?

Leah strode back toward the carriage.

William followed her.

The trees, the undergrowth, and the purple heather seemingly crowded around her, smothering her with heavy, sharp memories. Men yanking her and Susanna from the carriage, restraining them as they fought, taking their necklace and ring without any noticeable pleasure—Leah's thoughts widened. What if money wasn't their motive at all?

William stepped up behind her. "What are you remembering?"

She turned, and he, studying her, gave her a friendly, somewhat apologetic shrug.

"Do you recall how you suggested the reason the kidnappers didn't say much was because their voices might give them away?" she asked.

"I do."

"I'd thought you'd meant that perhaps their voices were odd in some way. Extra-high or deep or something that would make them stand out. But now I'm wondering if—"

"—it was because they were familiar," William and Leah said at the same time.

They both smiled a little.

William tilted his head. "*Have* you recognized them?"

"Not exactly, but I have begun to wonder . . . I didn't tell you much about the ball Susanna and I attended earlier that evening, did I?"

"No. Why?"

"S-Susanna and I met two young men that night who showed us particular attention. It was a masquerade ball, and they, like the majority of the guests, wore costumes. But unlike everyone else, their masks covered most of their faces. Susanna and I had no idea who they were. At the time, that not-knowing was rather intriguing. But now . . ." Leah exhaled a long, sad

breath of air. "They never told us their names, either, though they knew who we were."

"What do you mean, the fellows showed the two of you particular attention?"

Leah strode to the back end of the carriage, peered farther down the road, and swished her foot through the dirt over the multiple hoofprints. "It's unfortunate that we can't tell anything about our attackers from these. I told you they arrived on horseback, didn't I?"

William paused, pencil hovering over the page. "Yes, but don't change the subject. Tell me more about those gentlemen who were dancing attendance on you before the attack."

The word "gentlemen" came out clipped, almost bitter, and Leah's heart skipped. Was he jealous? She studied his sedate profile and sighed. Of course he wasn't jealous. What she'd heard in his voice was likely mere frustration at the investigation, and perhaps even at her. And yet . . . *if only he was jealous on my behalf.*

"The young men didn't dance with us twice or do anything else that showed us too particular attention," Leah continued, "but a couple of times, I wondered if that was exactly what they'd intended to do. Indeed, they seemed to follow us around, as if they didn't want to be out of our company. But then, I could have misread their actions. They might have been coincidences."

"Mother says coincidences are merely excuses that hide reality."

"If that's true in this case, then . . ." Leah closed her eyes and shook her head. "When I think now of how gratified Susanna and I had been by those men's attentions, I cringe."

"Cringe? Why? Were the men appalling in some way? Or unkempt?"

"No. Everything about them, except their secrecy, was impeccable. But what if they were the men who attacked us? What if they followed us from the ball?" Leah winced. "What if I had been too familiar with the details of our lives when I spoke with them, and those men didn't need to follow us because they knew where we'd be? In truth, I didn't hear anyone behind our carriage until the kidnappers attacked us."

William stiffened. His cheeks moved in and out as if he were biting them. Was he angry?

Leah rolled her eyes and flicked at a fly. Of course he was angry. Someone had kidnapped his sister.

"Is our next step to speak with the Colbornes?"

"Perhaps." He frowned. "Unless . . . is there anything else you want me to write down?"

"Not that I can think of. But do you think there's time to drive out to Briarwood Hall?"

William took his watch from his waistcoat pocket. "It's nearly noon. And with the travel time to and from Briarwood Hall, and the questioning . . . No, there isn't time today. Not for both of us, that is. But if I went on my own—"

"Please don't."

He raised an eyebrow.

"It's only that I think it would be better if I was with you. I attended the ball. I know how things were that night and can ask better questions."

"Ah yes, because I'm completely hopeless at questioning people about balls."

"That's not what I mean!"

He grinned. "I suppose I should confess that I've never actually seen a ballroom. Is it that large space where people move about in patterns?"

Leah sighed in exasperation. *He's teasing me.* "You know what I mean, William. I'm simply familiar with many of the details. That might help us get better answers."

"So, you're saying I need you?" The playful glint in his eyes made her pulse skip. She opened her mouth to say something—anything—but what could she say to that question?

"Or is there another reason you don't wish to return home just yet?" He smirked. "You're not afraid of dinner with your father, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous." But at the same time, an image of Mr. Fortescue wiping crumbs from his chin dropped in front of her thoughts, and she frowned. "Father's the least of my worries."

William's smile faded. "He's the least of mine too. At least until we find Susanna." He gave her a small nod. "Tomorrow, then."

"Yes."

He motioned for her to follow him back to the barouche's door and helped her inside. As before, she sat on the back-facing seat across from Jane, but William, rather than sitting across from her, sat beside her.

Beside her.

Leah pursed her lips, clasped her hands in her lap, and pretended lightning wasn't pulsing through her fingers.

She held them that way the entire trip back to her home in Glenhaven Hall.

Chapter 8

IT WAS A LITTLE after nine thirty the next morning when Leah, William, and Leah's lady's maid, strode from the barouche and toward Briarwood Hall. As they walked, Leah scanned the grand estate. It was daylight, so lanterns didn't flicker from every window, but its grand stone staircase and its ornate wooden doors seemed as welcoming as they had the night of the masquerade.

"I'm thankful the Colbornes were willing to meet with us so early," Leah said. "I don't think I could have waited until a more respectable hour."

"I'm sure they understand the gravity of our situation." William patted her hand, which rested on his bent arm, and a thrill shot through her. Surely one day she'd stop feeling these stirrings. One far-in-the-future day, when he'd married another. *Another*. Bile rose in her throat, and she shoved it back down. *Pretend indifference*, she told herself. *Focus on finding Susanna*.

After they reached the front entrance, the butler showed them inside.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll tell the Colbornes you've arrived."

"Thank you," William said.

When the butler left them, Leah crossed and uncrossed her arms.

"You needn't worry," William told her. "I'm sure Sir Colborne is a gentleman. He'll wish to help us."

"Of course." Leah frowned over the word "gentleman," as her memory of the kidnappers flashed in front of her. Of how they, on horseback, had attacked their carriage. In general, only men from the upper classes could afford to ride horseback. And surely, the Colbornes had invited only ladies and gentlemen to the ball, which meant the two who'd flirted with them and left on horseback were from the upper class and therefore prided themselves on being gentlemen. However, any man who'd kidnap a young

woman was certainly not a gentleman. Did that mean that their theory was incorrect, that those two men were not the kidnappers?

The butler returned. "Sir Colborne will see you in his office. Come with me."

Leah, William, and Jane followed him, and soon after, he introduced them to Sir Colborne and left.

Sir Colborne stood in front of his desk. He wore a navy-blue morning coat, matching breeches, and a simple gray waistcoat that gave him a perfectly polished yet subdued appearance.

His gaze stricken, he nodded to Leah and strode toward them. He shook William's hand. "I cannot tell you how grieved I am for your predicament, sir. Please believe me, if I'd had any notion of what dangers lay ahead for your sister and the Craufords, I'd have insisted they stay the night."

"You needn't trouble yourself, sir," Leah said. "We wouldn't have stayed if you had asked us. Father was tired and wanted to get home."

"Well then," Sir Colborne replied, "I should have insisted that several of my groomsmen accompany you."

"I'm sure you would have if you'd known," William said. "Hindsight can be a rather formidable foe."

Sir Colborne offered William a lopsided frown and turned his attention to Leah. "And you, my dear girl, how are you? No lasting injuries, I hope?"

"Only a few small bumps and bruises. Nothing that worries me."

"And your father? Is he healing well from his injuries?"

"His head still has a rather large bruise, and he sleeps a lot, but yes, he is healing."

"I'm glad to hear it." Sir Colborne glanced between William and Leah. "Now, what can I do for the two of you?"

"As I'm sure you have ascertained," William said, "Miss Crauford and I are searching for my sister."

Sir Colborne nodded. He glanced at Leah and back to William. "I understand your concern, sir, and your efforts. But the lady? Isn't this something better left to the constables?"

"The constables are working on it," Leah said, "but they have many other cases."

"True. But surely . . ."

"Surely," William repeated, "we can't just sit and let the villains get away."

"Neither of us can do so," Leah added.

"And as Miss Crauford has frequently told me," William continued, "the more sets of eyes looking into a matter, the better."

Sir Colborne held William's gaze. Finally, he gave a commiserative nod. "Of course. How can I help you?"

William nodded to Leah, and she took in a deep breath. "The night of the ball, two young men paid Susanna and me particular attention. Both wore feathered hats, bulky cloaks, and eye masks. I regret to say we weren't formally introduced, but we had, of course, asked them for their identities." She swallowed. "But they kept their names to themselves. It was a flirtation, we'd thought, and we were enjoying the mystery of it. But now, after everything that has happened, their actions seem a bit suspicious. Could you tell us who those men were?"

Sir Colborne furrowed his brows into a deep line. "I don't recall anyone with that description. Wait here a few moments. My wife is indisposed this morning, but if she is awake, I'll ask her if she remembers the men."

"Thank you," William said.

Sir Colborne motioned for Leah and William to sit in the two cushioned seats next to his desk and left the room.

When he returned. He handed Leah two sheets of paper. "I'm afraid my wife doesn't remember the men you described, but she suggested I show you the guest list."

Leah scanned the names. "I know most of these people, and I remember seeing them at the ball. None of them wore feathered hats."

"Hmm." William said.

"What are you thinking?" Leah asked him.

"Only . . . Sir Colborne, is it possible that the two men Miss Crauford referred to hadn't been officially invited?"

Leah sat taller. *Of course. Interlopers.*

"I have heard of such things happening," Sir Colborne said, "but never in this community, and certainly not in my home. Why, my wife and I spent most of the evening at the front doors. No one could have passed by us unawares."

“What about the servants’ entrance?” Leah asked. “Or even through a window?”

“Absolutely not. My staff maintains the strictest vigilance during such events. Every entrance is watched.” Sir Colborne stood taller. “And I personally oversee all security arrangements for our gatherings.”

“We merely wondered—” William began.

“I understand your concern,” Sir Colborne cut in, “but I can assure you that no uninvited guests could have possibly entered my home that evening. The Colborne masquerades are known throughout the county for their exclusivity and propriety.” He took the guest list from Leah, which she held out him. “Every person who attended was personally known by my wife and myself.”

“Might a servant have allowed someone you didn’t know into the ball?” Leah asked.

Sir Colborne’s nostrils flared. “Impossible. The Colborne household staff is beyond reproach. We employ only the most trustworthy individuals, thoroughly investigated before hiring.” He set the list on his desk “No, the unfortunate incident that befell your party on the road home could not have had anything to do with our gathering or our guests. Perhaps you should look elsewhere for your answers.”

“I understand your feelings, sir,” William said. “I trust my servants in much the same way, but forgive me for asking. Have you specifically inquired of them if they saw or heard anything untoward that night?”

“Certainly not.”

“What about their loyalties to one another?” Leah added. “Might any of them hold back information because they didn’t want to see another servant reprimanded if someone had unwittingly made a mistake, like leaving a window open?”

Sir Colborne drew his brows together. “I’m hard-pressed to believe it.”

“But it is possible?” Leah asked.

“I suppose it is. There’s nothing that says discretion belongs only to me and my wife.”

Discretion. Had Leah and Susanna shown discretion? They’d been taught to do so, especially in the company of young men or with people they didn’t know well, yet she and Susanna had been so caught up in the

frivolity of the masquerade ball—no. There was more to it than that. Leah had also been so disconcerted over having to marry Mr. Fortescue, and simultaneously wishing to spend what might very well be her last night of freedom with a sense of, well, *freedom*, that she hadn't been discreet with their personal information. She had told her dance partner that Susanna was staying with her, that her aging father was their only real chaperone at the ball, and that—a lump filled her throat—her home was Glenhaven Hall in Ferndale.

I was a fool. What was more, even if those men weren't the ones who'd attacked them and kidnapped Susanna, Leah's revelations had opened her and her friend up to a number of indelicacies.

"We don't wish to be impolite," Leah said to Sir Colborne. "It is only that we have so few clues, and we'd hoped for . . . for hope."

"Of course. In truth, the longer I speak with the two of you, the more I realize that I'd do the same things you are if I was in your situation." He looked back at William. "If you'd be so kind as to wait here again, I will go and see what I can learn from the servants. That should at least put your minds at ease."

"Thank you," Leah said.

Once again, Sir Colborne left the room, and Leah glanced at Jane, who remained near the door. William, however, slid his chair closer to Leah and lowered his voice.

"You've had a new thought about all of this, haven't you?"

Leah cringed inwardly. William was growing too good at reading her, and if she wasn't careful, he'd recognize her feelings for him and—and what? Run from their friendship? From her?

"Won't you tell me what it is?" William urged.

Leah shook her head. *Mask your feelings.*

"Why?" he said. "Come now, Little Leah. It can't be that bad. You used to tell me everything. Remember?"

She lowered her eyes at the familiar term. *Little Leah.* Warmth flooded around her shoulders like a thick, welcoming blanket. It was true. Little Leah always had shared her feelings with him—the feelings that weren't too close to her heart, that was.

At length, she said, "Very well." Then, haltingly, she told him what she'd said to the costumed man. William listened. More than that, he gave her the still, focused, affectionate look that had lived inside her since he'd first given it to her years ago. When they, as children, had been on an outing in the hills with their parents.

William, at fifteen years old, practically grown up in Leah's eyes, had just teased her about how her mouth was so wide that if she kept smiling, flies would enter and build a home. She'd stomped her foot and yelled at him, her six-year-old temper flaring. Father had told her to be quiet. William, laughing that older-boy laugh that always made her feel small, had then raced out ahead of the rest of them.

"Try to keep up, little one!" he'd yelled over his shoulder.

Leah, still angry over his comment and determined to prove she wasn't a baby, chased after him on her shorter legs. The path weaved back and forth through so many trees that it wasn't long before she could no longer see Susanna or their parents behind her. Nor could she see William's tall figure in front of her.

"William," she called out.

Nothing.

"William," she yelled again.

This time, she heard a quick, frantic call. "Leah!"

"William? Where are you?"

No answer came, but dread dropped through her. "William!"

"Leah . . ."

Leah ran toward his voice, stumbling over roots. Within moments, she reached the edge of the mountain that overlooked the ocean. Just below it, William lay sprawled across the steep incline only inches above the drop-off. He, gritting his teeth, clung to a tree root.

"Help!" Leah screamed to their parents. She dropped to her knees and reached down to him.

"No," William said. "You're too small." His body slid downward.

"You're going to fall," Leah said. "Take my hand."

"I'm too heavy." He slid again. "All right. But not until you support yourself."

"How?"

“A boulder? A hole in the ground. Anything.”

Leah turned. Finally, she found a sturdy rock jutting from the ground a short distance from her. She hooked her small feet behind it, pressed her body flat against the earth, and edged herself over the side as far as she dared, reaching down to him. “There. Now take my hand.”

He, still holding onto the root with one hand, grabbed her hand with the other.

“Help,” she yelled again.

His grip tightened.

Just then, Father, Lady Talbot, and Susanna arrived. Lady Talbot grabbed Leah’s feet, and Susanna held on to Lady Talbot. Father lowered himself next to Leah and reached down to William. Together, the four of them pulled William to safety.

William, breathing hard, knelt next to Leah and squeezed her hand. “Thank you, brave girl,” he whispered.

After that, he’d walked beside her back to Seawind House rather than running ahead, and no one ever said anything more about it, not even the two of them. That day had been the first time Leah had felt that peculiar flutter in her chest that her grown-up self later recognized as the beginning of love.

“It’s all right,” William said when Leah finished telling him all she’d revealed to the costumed man.

Leah wrung her hands in front of her. By all rights, William should have reprimanded her for her foolishness, but in hearing him merely say, “It’s all right,” her heart simultaneously wrenched and melted. How could she possibly marry Mr. Fortescue when the full of her heart belonged to William? And yet, how could she not marry Mr. Fortescue? William cared for her, but only as a sister, which meant that relationship would never change. At least, if she did marry Mr. Fortescue, she would still have William’s friendship.

That is good enough. It has to be.

Sir Colborne returned. He glanced at Jane and approached Leah and William. “You were right. One of the groomsmen remembered seeing the men you described. He cared for their horses while they attended the ball.”

Leah caught her breath. The night of the kidnapping, it had been too dark for her to see much of the kidnappers' horses, but she had noted that both were well-muscled and had a rich, deep brown color. "Did the stablemen describe the horses?"

"They said they were Thoroughbreds. Blood bays."

"Which means the two men we danced with that night were gentlemen," Leah said.

"Likely so," William said. "What do you remember of the kidnappers' horses? Were they also blood bays?"

"From what I saw of them, their coats looked brown, but their manes and legs were ink-dark."

"That sounds like blood bays," William said.

The two regarded one another.

"Again, a coincidence," William added.

"Or clue." Leah removed the notebook from her reticule, set it on the desk beside the guest list, and flipped to a blank page. She copied the first name and address.

William peered over her shoulder. "Ah. Question the other guests. An excellent idea."

"And the servants, if it is all right with you, Sir Colborne?" Leah asked.

"I don't know why you'd wish to. I just spoke with them."

"Yes," William said, "Thank you for that courtesy. But we do have other questions, which we don't wish to bother you with. We promise we won't keep your servants long from their duties."

Sir Colborne inhaled and stood taller. "Of course. Take whatever time you need."

"Thank you, sir."

Leah gave William a soft smile and turned her attention back to her copying of the guest list. She hadn't told William why she'd wanted to question the Colbornes' servants, but that didn't matter. Neither of them could deny that they understood one another. Sometimes even better than she and Susanna did.

Some people belong together. . . .

Those words had stayed with Leah ever since she'd heard Lady Talbot say them at the wedding of Mr. Owen Talbot and Miss Anne de Bourgh.

“You stopped writing,” William said under his breath. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Just woolgathering. Forgive me. I’ll hurry.”

Leah blinked out of her reverie and continued copying the list, but inside, her thoughts churned.

Some people belong together, she thought again. Yet some people who did belong together didn’t know it.

And wound up married to someone else.

Chapter 9

WILLIAM LEANED BACK AGAINST the morning room's cushioned chair. "This is taking much too long."

"I agree with you," Leah said, "but we are doing all we can."

"Are we?"

"Are we not?"

"Oh, I suppose we are, yet it feels like we are doing nothing."

The Agars' butler had shown them into this sunlit room to wait, explaining that Mrs. Agar was engaged with other visitors. Leah settled at a small table, spreading out her notes, while Jane took up her usual position near the door.

Leah crossed two more names off the Colbornes' copied guest list. Their questioning of those particular attendees had revealed nothing useful, which should have been encouraging. Each eliminated suspect brought them closer to the truth. Yet the longer William studied the lengthy column of remaining names, the more his head ached. So many hours of questioning ahead, and no guarantee they'd find anything but blind alleys.

"While we wait," Leah said, "we might as well review what we know." She traced her gloved finger down one page, slowly moving from one name to the next.

She stopped. "William, look at this."

William leaned forward, his shoulder nearly touching Leah's as they both studied the notebook.

"Mrs. Kensington mentioned seeing a man in a harlequin costume at ten o'clock near the south door," Leah said. "And here—" She flipped to another page. "—Lady Penrose spotted the same costumed man by the north door at half-past ten."

William narrowed his gaze. "That's odd. "Are there other sightings of the harlequin?"

Leah flipped through her notes. She pointed out two other mentions. "A footman saw him at eleven, near the garden entrance. And here, thirty minutes later, Sir Colborne noted him by the main doors."

"The timing..." William pulled Leah's notebook closer and scrutinized her entries. "Each sighting is exactly thirty minutes apart. Like clockwork." His skin prickled. "Do you remember the ballroom well enough to sketch its layout?"

"I believe so." Leah turned to a fresh page and drew a rough diagram. She marked each of the four specified doorways with small x's, along with the times of each sighting.

Finally, she sat back in her seat, and William traced the harlequin's path from one marked location to the next.

"Oh." Leah widened her eyes. "Do you see that?"

William sat taller. "I do indeed. He's moving to the right in a perfect circle. And look—" He pointed to Susanna's dance card, which Leah had slipped in the notebook after recovering it from her father's barouche. "Each of these times corresponds to when Susanna changed partners."

"When she'd be most visible," Leah murmured. She marked Susanna's approximate positions on the diagram. "From each of these doors, the harlequin would have had a clear view of her movements."

"And yours, I daresay."

Leah swallowed, and when she spoke, her voice shook a little. "Susanna and I were never far apart. Could he have been watching her—er, us—the entire time?"

William scrutinized the x's, especially their proximities to where Susanna and Leah would have been, and a chill trembled through him. "I can't say for certain, but it is a possibility."

"If that possibility was the case, and if that harlequin was one of our attackers, he might have been planning the entire ordeal even then."

"Perhaps."

A knock struck the door. Jane straightened in her chair, and the butler stepped into the room.

"Mrs. Agar will see you now," he announced. "Follow me to the drawing room."

William helped Leah gather her notes, his hand brushing hers as they both reached for the same paper. She didn't seem to notice the contact, but his heart skipped a beat. Devil take it—when had Little Leah's smile become so intriguing?

The butler showed them into the drawing room and motioned them to where Mrs. Agar sat with three other guests—Mr. Harcourt, Miss Beaumont, and the same constable who'd been with them yesterday. Mrs. Agar's complexion was quite pale, and she sat with perfect posture, as if the weight of propriety rested upon her shoulders.

"What are those three doing here?" Leah whispered.

William shrugged, pasted on a smile, and stepped forward. Mrs. Agar motioned them to take the cushioned seats at her right. "Please, do sit. Though I must say, I hadn't expected quite so many visitors this morning."

William, hovering his hand near the small of Leah's back, guided her to her seat. William then claimed the empty chair next to Leah, and Jane took a solitary chair near the door.

Mrs. Agar pressed her lips together briefly before speaking. "Allow me to introduce you to the others. Mr. Harcourt, Miss Beaumont, and Constable Dunn, this is Sir William Talbot and Miss Leah Crauford."

"Thank you," Mr. Harcourt said, "but we are acquainted."

Mrs. Agar blinked and frowned. "Oh, my! I suppose that after today, I should be surprised at nothing. Especially considering the two of you, Sir Talbot and Miss Crauford, have called on me almost at the same time as I'd asked these people to help me. One hopes the neighborhood won't find it all too . . ." She glanced toward the window. ". . . intriguing."

Not simply intriguing, William thought, *it's coincidental*. But then, perhaps the five of them, all detectives of sorts, being there at the same time was a natural circumstance rather than a coincidence.

Mrs. Agar looked at Miss Beaumont, who gave her an encouraging nod, and continued with, "You see, I'm in a bit of a predicament this morning. Last night, someone stole three silver platters from the butler's pantry."

"A theft?" William peered between the three of them. It made perfect sense that the constable was there to investigate such a crime, but why the

Harcourts? They said they were heavily involved in a murder case. Too heavily, in fact, to help with his sister's abduction.

Mr. Harcourt must have recognized William's consternation because he quickly explained, "Constable Dunn called upon us because he noticed similarities between this theft and the case we are working on."

"Similarities?" Leah asked Miss Beaumont. "I hadn't thought your case was about theft."

William crossed his arms. "Nor had I."

"It isn't," Miss Beaumont said. "Not specifically. But thefts, especially among the gentry, do seem to be related to our investigation."

"Whisper, if you please," Mrs. Agar said. "The walls have ears."

"Of course," Miss Beaumont said, lowering her voice.

Mr. Harcourt, Miss Beaumont, and Constable Dunn glanced at one another.

Mrs. Agar angled toward William. "Now, how can I help you and Miss Crauford?"

"It's about the Colbornes' masquerade ball," William said. "We understand you were there."

"I was."

William looked at Leah. "Would you like to speak first?"

"I'd be happy to." Leah gave William a soft smile, and William's breath tripped. How had he never before noticed the steady—no, magnetic—warmth in her chestnut brown eyes?

"At the Colbornes' masquerade," Leah continued, "there were two gentlemen who paid me and my friend Miss Talbot particular attention." She then described the men's Elizabethan costumes in such an animated way that a point close to William's chest burned. Now what? Did he have an upset stomach? He hadn't suffered from even the slightest amount of indigestion since he'd eaten more cake than was good for him when he was a child, but what else could it be?

He swallowed and tugged his thoughts back to the situation at hand. *Susanna needs my full attention.*

"Do you remember seeing those men?" Leah concluded.

Similar to the other guests they'd interviewed, Mrs. Agar replied with, "Forgive me, I don't."

“Did you notice anything at all untoward that night?” William pressed. “From anyone?”

She started to shake her head but then froze.

“What is it?” Leah asked.

Mrs. Agar drew her brows into a deep furrow, looked toward the door, and pressed her hand against her chest. “I hadn’t thought much about it at the time, and it hardly seems worth mentioning now, but I did see something that wasn’t quite what I would have expected.”

“Oh?” Miss Beaumont asked. “What was it?”

“Merely that there were a few moments when a man dressed as a harlequin . . . did any of you see him?”

Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont shook their heads, but William briefly lifted his eyebrows at Leah. She, like him, obviously remembered their previous conversation about the harlequin, because she gave him a slight nod and turned back to Mrs. Agar.

“I think I remember something about him,” Leah said to her. “What did you notice?”

The lady flicked her hand. “Only that he seemed, well, changeable. Most times, while he was out on the dance floor or conversing with guests near the refreshment table, he appeared spirited, just as a harlequin would be. But there was one instant when he stood alone with his arms folded in front of him, his demeanor stiff. He also glared a great deal, staring, as it were, at the dancers. Then, he didn’t behave like a harlequin at all.” Mrs. Agar smiled a little. “I remember telling Mr. Agar that the once-jolly fellow must have been jilted.”

William rubbed his jaw. Her report clashed with what William and Leah had surmised. If the harlequin had truly been planning Susanna’s abduction, why would he first play his part so perfectly—all nimble movement and theatrical gestures—only to later stand still and brooding? Yet the meaningful look that passed between Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont suggested they’d heard something significant. Was it, perhaps, a detail that connected to their own investigation?

“Did you notice anything else about the man?” Constable Dunn asked Mrs. Agar. “Did you and your husband speak with him?”

"We didn't. In truth, I don't think I saw him again the rest of the evening. As I said, the event hardly seems important. Mildly untoward is all."

Leah wrote something in her notebook.

"Forgive my interruption," Miss Beaumont said to Mrs. Agar, "but could you describe anything else about the harlequin? Other than he wore a mask?"

"Hmmm." Mrs. Agar's gaze blurred as if she was looking inward. "He wore a triangular hat, and it had a feather. The costume itself was made in the harlequin's diamond pattern—all in dark green and black. And his mask—yes, I remember now—his mask was black as well."

"What about the man himself?" Mr. Harcourt, his voice tight, leaned toward her. "Was he tall? Short? Corpulent? Slender?"

"As I mentioned, I didn't see him often. But I do believe he was short. Shorter and slighter than the other men I saw him speaking to. He wasn't much taller than any of the women, either."

Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont again exchanged meaningful looks. "Short and slight," Mr. Harcourt murmured.

"Yes."

A long, silent moment passed.

At length, Miss Beaumont, followed by Mr. Harcourt, stood. Leah and William did too. They thanked Mrs. Agar for her help and made their farewells.

Once they were out of earshot of the house, Mr. Harcourt said, "A moment, Constable. Has your investigation turned up any trace of Livingston?"

"None yet." Constable Dunn gave William and Leah a questioning glance before continuing. "Though I suspect the man may be from another county."

"What makes you think so?" Miss Beaumont asked.

"Unfortunately, I have nothing concrete to tell you. As I said, it's only a suspicion based on the fact that we haven't found any trace of him."

Mr. Harcourt frowned. "Well, as always, keep us informed of any new developments." He inclined his head, and the officer took his leave of them.

The remaining four ambled down the walk that led to their waiting carriages.

Miss Beaumont wrung her hands. "The harlequin couldn't be Livingston—I mean, Slade—could it?" she asked Mr. Harcourt.

"Forgive me if I'm out of place in asking this," William said, "but who is Livingston? Or Slade, for that matter?"

"Livingston?" Leah said. "That name sounds familiar."

"It should," Mr. Harcourt said, his tone grim. "It was in all the newspapers last April. Livingston was the man who killed Mrs. Montgomery, the preacher's wife."

"I did hear of that," Leah said. "You knew the lady?"

Miss Beaumont nodded. "We were acquainted. But more importantly—"

Mr. Harcourt raised his eyebrows in obvious surprise. He glanced back and forth between William, Leah, and Miss Beaumont. "Under the circumstances, are you certain you wish to say more, Miss Beaumont?"

"Who is certain about anything? But I do believe they've proven themselves trustworthy enough to know more." Miss Beaumont faced Leah, and the four stopped walking. "Livingston, alias Slade, also killed my father. He, among others, is the man we're hunting for."

"Is Livingston—your father's murderer, to be precise—the real reason you're here?" William looked between them. "And not Mrs. Agar's theft?"

"Yes. And no." Miss Beaumont glanced at Mr. Harcourt, who gave her a reassuring nod. "Remember the orikata we spoke of during our first meeting?" she continued.

"Yes," Leah said.

"Does the orikata have something to do with Livingston?" William asked.

"It does." Mr. Harcourt clasped his hands behind him.

"We believe it's a symbol of some sort," Miss Beaumont added. "The shape is of a chameleon, and a criminal society leaves them behind in place of objects they steal."

William shifted back a step. "A *criminal* society?"

Miss Beaumont nodded. "They're mostly thieves, from what we can tell."

"Why would they leave an orikata behind?" William asked. "It seems foolish that a criminal would want to announce his guilt for all to see."

"If we knew the answer to that," Miss Beaumont replied, "we might know the answer to a lot of other questions."

"And Livingston?" Leah asked.

"He belongs to that society. They call him Slade."

"A secret society, a chameleon orikata, and a murderer," Leah said. "How very odd."

"Yes," William said, "but also intriguing."

"Your mother would love to be involved in this," Leah said.

"She would, but I'm glad she is not."

"Your mother?" Mr. Harcourt asked him. "What would she want with any of this?"

"My mother has a penchant for solving crimes," William said.

"And she is quite proficient at doing so," Leah added.

"She is?" Mr. Harcourt tilted his head. "If that's true, why isn't she helping you search for your sister?"

"I'm sure you understand . . . my mother's not as spry as she once was. But you can be sure she is doing what she can from Brighton."

"Of course," Mr. Harcourt said. "Forgive me if I have offended you. That wasn't my intent. In truth, my parents can't do as much as they once did either." He pursed his lips, drew his brows together, and studied William. "Actually, I wager your mother would get along well with my parents. Perhaps we should ask her to come to London—"

"No," William snapped. "My sister's kidnapping and now a murder? I didn't say as much before, but the fact that we four are here at the same time . . . What I mean to say is, if these two cases are indeed connected, I will not bring my mother here to face such a scenario."

Leah lightly touched his arm, and when she spoke, her voice was like a calm summer morning. "Of course not, William. I'm sure we all agree that these cases are too dangerous."

The others nodded—albeit Mr. Harcourt did so a bit hesitantly—but William's throat constricted over the word "dangerous." His sister was already in danger. That was torture enough. But Leah, who, along with his sister, had been attacked, was also working with him, hunting for the kidnappers. Were there murderers among them? Hidden, as it were, like the harlequin behind his mask? Or the thieves behind the orikatas?

Those thoughts scraped through William's suddenly tight throat.

"Perhaps you should withdr—" The suggestion died on his tongue. How could he ask Leah to withdraw? Not only would she refuse, but the thought of continuing this investigation without her steady presence made his stomach twist. No. He would keep her at his side. At least that way, he could keep watch over her—or so he told himself.

Chapter 10

THE SUN HUNG LOW in the heavens as William, his shoulders heavy with fatigue, surrendered his horse to the stable hand and made his way to the front of the Liongate Inn. He had parted from Leah not half an hour prior, their plans for the morrow's interrogations set, yet thoughts of her still interrupted his determination to find Susanna. The steady wisdom in Leah's gaze . . . the gentle curve of her mouth . . . the elegant poise with which she carried herself . . .

William stiffened. *Get hold of yourself, man!*

He pushed open the inn's door and crossed into the candlelit interior. A tall, rather commanding fellow stood in front of the counter across from the stout middle-aged innkeeper.

William strode in behind the tall man. Hopefully, the innkeeper wouldn't have any qualms about providing William with his breakfast at sunrise. William had arranged to collect Leah at eight o'clock the next morning, and he did not intend to miss his meal or his appointment with her.

The front door creaked open.

William turned.

A wiry, weathered-looking man in a brown riding suit walked straight past William and handed the innkeeper a letter. The innkeeper peered down at the address.

"Sir William Talbot?" he asked the man. "He's just there."

The courier retrieved the letter from the man and handed it to William.

William studied it. Who would send him a letter here? As far as he knew, his mother, Leah, and the others he was working with on this case were the only ones who knew he was in London.

He opened it.

My dearest William,

William gaped. The only person who'd ever addressed him as "dearest William" in her letters was Susanna.

William scanned to Susanna's name at the end of the missive. *That is her signature.*

He began to read.

Please do not render yourself uneasy any longer. I know the way that I "disappeared" may have been disconcerting to you and my poor Leah, but I assure you, I am well. There is also no reason for either of you or Mother to be concerned for my welfare. You see, my dearest William, I am married!

William clutched the missive, his knuckles bleaching white.

I am excessively fond of my husband, and I am as anxious to promote his happiness as he is to promote mine. Truly, dear brother, my husband and I are meant to be together, and one day I hope all of us will see each other as family. I understand that may be difficult at first, considering this sudden news, but he is of such a noble character that I am sure you will eventually learn to think of him as your brother.

My husband and I are touring America for our honeymoon, and we will not be back for two months. In that time, I hope you will be able to settle your thoughts on my situation and make the arrangements needed to have my dowry transferred to him once we return.

All my love,

Susanna

William again scrutinized the signature then analyzed the handwriting in the entire letter. Susanna had indeed written it, yet some of the wording, such as “anxious to promote his happiness” and “dowry transferred,” seemed different from the rest of it. Had someone given her the words to copy?

He peered closer at the unsteady, even occasionally wobbly script. Had she been trembling?

William swore. Wherever Susanna was or whoever she was with had forced her to write this letter. He was sure of it. But were the words true? Was Susanna indeed married?

For such a thing to have been arranged, she would have had to go to Gretna Green in Scotland, where such marriages could take place. But that was, at the quickest, a three-day’s ride from London. So, even if the fiend had taken her to Gretna Green immediately, and if he had somehow coerced her into taking the vows, she could not have done so any longer than two days ago. Less than five days had passed since her kidnapping.

William crumpled the letter. At the same time, the words, “Father’s will,” shot through him. So did William’s memory of the provisions Father had included in it about Susanna’s dowry—no one could touch it until she was six and twenty. She was barely two and twenty now.

“Who sent this?” William asked the courier.

“I’m not privy to that information, sir.”

“Who, then, assigned you to deliver it? Perhaps he’ll know the sender or have a record of it.”

The courier gave him the name of the post office where he worked as well as his manager’s name. William then paid the post, but when the courier turned to leave, William said, “Wait.” Then, to the innkeeper, he yelled, “Paper and ink.”

While the innkeeper hurried to gather the materials, William's mind raced through what needed to be done. He had to get to Gretna Green, but first—

The innkeeper set the supplies on the counter before him. William swiftly wrote an urgent message to his mother requesting copies of his father's will and any marriage documents to be sent to the Kings Head in Stamford two days hence. He then sealed the letter, addressed it to his mother in Brighton, and thrust it at the waiting courier, along with payment and extra coin for haste. "Express," he said. "This cannot wait."

"Yes, sir." The courier left.

William, casting aside his plans for the morning, followed. He had to leave for Gretna Green now to find out if this infernal marriage had occurred. And if it had—he cursed softly—he had to learn if anyone had seen where they'd gone. The sooner he located Susanna, the better chance he'd have of getting any possible marriage annulled.

But just as he reached for the door handle, a new thought dropped on top of him. This note had come directly to him, at this inn, here in London. That meant that whoever had sent it knew where he was. Were Susanna's kidnappers—or perhaps others who were in on the nefarious deed—actually following him? And what about Leah? If they were watching him, they certainly knew that he and Leah were working together.

An ache burned at the base of William's gut, and he widened his eyes. What if Susanna's kidnappers hadn't actually gone to Gretna Green? What if this missive was also a hoax, and the reason they knew William's location wasn't because they were following him so much as they were following Leah? Or what if one of the rogues had taken Susanna to Gretna Green and the other was still following Leah?

William flung the door open and stormed from the inn. No matter his feelings, he had to warn her. Had to convince her to stay away from this danger.

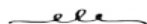
"I know I just left you," he said to the groomsman when he reached the stables, "but I must leave again. Immediately. Get me a fresh horse. As fast as you have."

"Yes, sir!"

"And when I bring her back, I'll need a post chaise to take me to Gretna Green."

"You can count on it, sir."

Soon after, William urged the horse out of the stable yard and charged into the night to Glenhaven Hall.



By the time William reached Leah's home, stars twinkled the sky, and only a slit of moonlight lit the road. No groomsmen met him on the drive that led up to the manor, which wasn't surprising, since no one expected him, and only a few candles shone from two of the manor's second-floor windows. Was one of those windows Leah's bedchamber? Was she sleeping? Would his knock wake her?

A ribbon of guilt knotted inside him at that thought, but it couldn't be helped. He had to tell her that night.

He clomped up the staircase to the entrance and knocked on the door. Mrs. Winters, the Crauford's housekeeper, opened it. Most of her hair was pulled back in a thick bun, but several loose strands hung limply along her cheeks. Moisture spotted her apron as if she'd quickly wiped her hands on it.

"Sir Talbot!"

"I must speak with Miss Crauford," William said.

"I'm sorry, sir, but she's retired for the evening. I suggest you call tomorrow."

"Tomorrow will be too late. Please—I won't leave until I've spoken with her."

The woman frowned, and William planted his stance.

Finally, Mrs. Winters frowned. "Very well. I'll ask the lady if she will see you."

She left to the back of the hall, and William stepped inside the entry.

Moments later, Mrs. Winters returned. "Miss Crauford will see you in the parlor."

William followed her to the appointed room. There, Mrs. Winters lit the candles in the wall sconces close to a circle of covered chairs, and by the time she'd finished, Leah arrived. She wore a white housedress over her nightdress, and her hair hung long and loose down to her waist.

Despite the reason for his sudden call, William smiled a little. He hadn't seen Leah in such undress since their late-night antics and story tellings when they were children.

"What's happened?" Leah asked.

William handed her the letter. "It's from Susanna."

Leah gaped at him then read the message. "This can't be real. It must mean something else."

"What else could it mean? The fiend has either forced Susanna to write that dreadful letter or to marry him, or both."

Moisture filled Leah's eyes. "Oh, poor Susanna! What do we do now?"

"The only thing we can do. I must go—"

"—to Gretna Green."

Their gazes locked. The candlelight, made brighter by the tears filling Leah's eyes, flickered across her irises, and William tightened his jaw. The last time she'd shown him such emotion had been at his father's funeral, when all William's world had shattered into a million bits.

William closed his eyes over that memory. *Think only of Susanna.* She was the one in trouble right now, but unlike his father, she was not dead. *I must save Susanna.*

"Gretna Green is a long way from here," Leah said.

"Yes, but if Susanna actually married the man, there will be a record of it there with the fiend's name."

"Of course." Leah clasped his forearm, and a shiver rushed through him.

Despite his best efforts, his voice turned husky. "I wish I didn't have to leave you like this. Susanna's note found me, which means her abductors know where I am." He swallowed. "I now fear even more than I'd feared before that one or both of them may be following you."

An unfamiliar shadow flashed through her eyes. "You needn't worry about me. I will be safe enough interviewing the rest of the people on our list."

"No. Your father was right. It's time for you to stay out of this."

"My father was not right."

William, scowling, folded his arms in front of him.

"What has gotten into you?" Leah asked. "You know I will not stop hunting for Susanna."

"I did know it, but I had to try. At least promise me that you will not do so alone."

"O-of course. I'll ask Jane."

"No. Ask Miss Beaumont. Mr. Harcourt too, if the need arises. I know they have their own case, but they've been so accommodating that under the circumstances, I believe they will help you."

"All right. I will ask them." Leah turned to the housekeeper, who had been hovering discreetly near the door. "Mrs. Winters, would you please fetch several of the likenesses from my room? We'll need them for the investigation."

The housekeeper bobbed a curtsy. "Right away, miss."

"And if they can't help you," William continued as Mrs. Winters hurried away, "then ask Miss Pemberton. Surely she would aid you if needed."

Leah gave a slight nod. Again, the two stared at one another.

"Please forgive me," William said. "I know leaving you like this must make you think as poorly of me as I think of myself, but I assure you—"

"How can you even think such a thing? My feelings for you are as they ever have been. This conversation alone proves that no one can match your dedication to Susanna or your concern for me. You, Sir William Talbot, are the best friend—other than Susanna—I've ever known."

Heat rose from his chest and bathed his cheeks. Heaven help him, was he blushing? He backed farther into the shadows and ran his hand over his mouth. "You are too kind."

"It isn't kindness," Leah said. "It's truth."

She looked up at him then, her eyes bright with something he couldn't name. The grandfather clock's steady ticking filled the space between them, marking seconds that stretched far longer than they should.

Mrs. Winters returned with an envelope, and Leah pressed it into William's hand. "Several likenesses of Susanna. Miss Pemberton sent them just this evening."

“Perfect timing. With these, I can show her likeness at every posting inn between here and Scotland if I wish it. . . . I will find her.”

“I know you will,” she whispered. Her gaze held his, and for reasons he couldn’t quite name, William couldn’t look away.

Chapter 11

THE ENTRY HALL OF Miss Ashburn's Academy of Elegance had remained unchanged since Leah's student days. The scent of beeswax and lavender oil still mingled with the ever-present aroma of paper and ink from nearby classrooms. The room's classically austere ceiling still soared above dark wood wainscoting, and a pair of tall, latticed windows flanked the heavy oak door.

Leah settled onto the wooden bench beneath one of the windows. She drummed her fingers against the names of the masquerade ball attendees written in her open notebook. Each scratched-out possibility seemed to mock her efforts. She and Miss Beaumont had spent countless hours interviewing them, and for what? Nothing but whispers and shadows.

She exhaled her frustration and returned the book to her reticule.

Miss Beaumont touched her arm. "That's the fourth time you've checked your notes. Did something catch your eye?"

"I thought I'd found a connection." Leah straightened her spine. "Mr. Browning and those two men who'd flirted with us all wore feathered hats, but Mr. Browning's was just a simple tricorne. The others had those elaborate plumes."

"Don't lose heart, my dear. You are doing exactly as you should—keeping a close watch on everything and everyone, especially those we investigate."

"At least, I am trying to do so."

"You are, aren't you?" Miss Beaumont murmured, her gaze intent.

Leah tilted her head and gave her a curious look. Though Miss Beaumont was her mentor in solving mysteries, she was near enough to Leah's own age that Leah typically thought of her more as a friend than an instructor—except in moments such as this.

"You study me most intently, Miss Beaumont," Leah said.

Miss Beaumont shook her head as if waking from a reverie. "Forgive me, my dear. The point I was trying to make is that every detail, no matter how small, can lead to larger truths."

The housekeeper appeared at the top of the stairs. "Miss Ashburn will see you now."

Leah and Miss Beaumont climbed the green carpeted staircase and walked down the familiar mahogany hallway to Miss Ashburn's office. During her years at the academy, Leah had spent many happy hours in that office. In the beginning, Leah had tried to limit her visits, even when she wished for the lady's comforting guidance, because she didn't want to make a nuisance of herself. But a few weeks before Leah graduated, Miss Ashburn confessed that she'd always appreciated Leah calling on her. Miss Ashburn, whose own family had died in recent years, was alone in the world, and Leah's regard and admiration for her had helped to ease that emptiness in her life.

"Come see me whenever the fancy takes you," Miss Ashburn had told Leah that last day.

Despite that assurance, Leah's throat tightened as they approached the office. It was one thing to pay a cordial visit to an old friend and quite another to question her about a crime.

The housekeeper knocked on Miss Ashburn's office door and opened it. "Miss Leah Crauford and Miss Marianne Beaumont," she announced.

Bright sunlight streamed through the tall windows, illuminating two neat bookcases and a chaotic landscape of books, newspapers, and correspondence scattered across the heavy desk. Miss Ashburn, sitting behind that desk, lowered her quizzing glass and stood.

Leah instinctively smoothed the sides of her dress and lifted her chin. Her former teacher's once-dark hair, now threaded with gray, was pulled back in a bun softer than Leah ever remembered seeing it. However, her olive-green dress and her ever-expectant posture were just as crisp and sharp as they had ever been.

"Miss Crauford, my dear," Miss Ashburn said. "I'm glad you've come. The few moments we had together at the Colbornes' ball weren't nearly enough to get properly reacquainted."

"I agree. I only wish this visit could be under better circumstances."

Miss Ashburn motioned them toward the straight-backed chairs in front of her desk. "Is it about Miss Talbot?"

"It is." Leah and Miss Beaumont took their seats. Leah opened her reticule, removed her notebook, and flipped to a blank page. "We're investigating a possible connection between Miss Talbot's disappearance and the Colbornes' ball."

"Indeed?" Miss Ashburn set her clasped hands on the desk. "I heard what happened to the two of you. Such rough treatment of my dearest pupils." She shook her head. "Still, I'm happy to help, though I might as well tell you, I doubt I have anything important to share."

Miss Beaumont, next to Leah, caught her breath and stiffened.

Leah raised her eyebrows. "Miss Beaumont? Are you well?"

She blinked. "Forgive me. Yes, I am well. It is only . . ." She tapped the open *Morning Chronicle* newspaper, which lay sideways on the desk in front of her. At the top, bold letters announced:

BURGLARY AT LORD GRANT'S LONDON RESIDENCE

"Miss Ashburn," Miss Beaumont continued, "might I have this news page?"

Miss Ashburn frowned. "Whatever for?"

"I'm acquainted with Lord Grant's family, and I hadn't heard about this theft. I should like to offer them my sympathies."

"Of course." Miss Ashburn waved her hand. "I've finished with it. Such a shame about his family heirloom."

"Thank you."

Miss Beaumont folded the paper and tucked it inside her reticule. Did she really know the Grants, or was that theft in some way connected to her other investigation?

Miss Beaumont nodded to Leah, and taking her hint, Leah turned her attention back to Miss Ashburn.

"About the ball, did you notice—"

Miss Ashburn raised her hand, and Leah's words stopped in her throat. Even now, that gesture made her feel like a flustered first-year student.

"My dear, you're rushing. Calm yourself and try again."

Leah nodded and took a deep breath.

"There now," Miss Ashburn said. "What exactly do you wish to know?"

Confound it. Why am I sitting so tall and straight? I'm not a frightened schoolgirl. Leah moistened her lips and spoke slower. "At the ball, did you happen to notice two men in Elizabethan costumes?"

"Romeo and Duke Orsino?" Sunlight glinted off Miss Ashburn's quizzing glasses, momentarily flashing in Leah's eyes. "Two of Shakespeare's most romantic heroes? I'm afraid I only caught glimpses of them. The ballroom was quite crowded that evening."

Leah arched her eyebrow. Romeo and Duke Orsino? Her memory of them suddenly sat in front of her. That was exactly right. Why hadn't she herself recognized what characters their costumes represented?

Because I was too flattered by them and too concerned with hiding from Mr. Fortescue.

Miss Ashburn folded her hands on the table in front of her. "I surely wish I had seen more of them," she continued. "And perhaps even danced with them. Why, even at my age, I suspect if either of them had offered me such an honor, I would have swooned." She straightened a stack of papers on her desk and gave Leah a quick smile. "Though naturally, I would have recovered my composure with perfect grace."

"Naturally." Leah smiled back and wrote the characters' personas in her notebook. Admittedly, Leah had spoken with both men and even danced with Gray Eyes—Duke Orsino, she guessed—but she hadn't swooned once. However, neither of them had been William.

"Did anything else about that night stand out to you?" Miss Beaumont asked. "Anything unusual?"

"Not that I can recall." Miss Ashburn paused. "Though I did notice something rather odd about the servants that evening."

The servants again. Leah and William had already spoken with Mr. Colborne's servants and had learned nothing more than he had told them about the blood bays. In fact, every other question Leah and Miss Beaumont asked Miss Ashburn after that drew answers similar to those they'd

received from several others—vague responses and remembered fragments that led nowhere. It was all a waste of—

Wait.

The flowers on the side table. White roses and orchids, arranged with mathematical precision. They must have come from a hothouse, yet who would pay to put flowers in Miss Ashburn's office? A suitor, perhaps?

Leah dismissed that thought almost as soon as it struck her. Miss Ashburn had frequently said that she was a spinster on purpose. She didn't want to marry, which was why she had created a school as a means to provide for herself. But if not a suitor, then who?

Leah studied the way the roses created perfect triangles with the orchids, how the leaves curved just so, how they—"Those flowers . . ." Leah said just as Miss Beaumont suggested they end their interview.

"Lovely, aren't they?" Miss Ashburn said. "Mrs. Whiting brought them yesterday. She's such a dear friend."

"Mrs. Whiting?" Miss Beaumont said.

Finally, the pieces clicked. "Mrs. Whiting arranged the flowers at the Colbornes' ball, didn't she?" A figure in gray silk, moving between the ballrooms like a shadow among the flowers and bright costumes, trickled through Leah's memory. "As I recall, Mrs. Whiting was at the ball all evening."

"I believe you are right," Miss Ashburn said. "She might have noticed something that could help your investigation."

"Perhaps she did." Leah stood.

Miss Beaumont followed suit, and soon after, the two took their leave and left Miss Ashburn's office.

As they walked down the corridor, Leah peered over her shoulder, making certain they were alone, and whispered, "Miss Beaumont, that news page you requested, the one about the thefts. Do you truly know the Grants, or did you think it might help you with your own investigation?"

Miss Beaumont glanced at Leah out of the corner of her eye and withdrew the folded paper from her reticule. Pausing at the top of the staircase, she opened it and pointed to an artist's rendering of the crime scene at Lord Grant's residence. "Do you see it? There, in the corner of the illustration?"

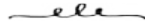
Leah leaned closer. A variety of scattered objects were depicted in the drawing, but a small shape lying in the corner of the page caught her eye. It appeared to be an intricately folded piece of paper. "Is that a chameleon orikata?"

"I can't say for sure, but the more I look at it, I can't believe it's anything else."

"An orikata," Leah repeated. "If only it could talk."

Miss Beaumont traced her fingers along the edge of the newspaper. Finally, she said, "I believe you're becoming a rather good detective, my dear."

Leah started to ask her what she meant by that, but Miss Beaumont shook her head, obviously dismissing any further comments, and they headed down the staircase.



Mrs. Whiting's housekeeper led Leah and Miss Beaumont through a vast marble-floored hallway and out to rose gardens that overflowed with prized varieties from York to Lancaster to delicate Chinese tea roses. The mixture of heavy perfumes hung in the air with the cloying sweetness of a wealthy matron's embrace—beautiful yet somehow suffocating, as if luxury itself could hide malevolent intent. Leah shook her head at her gothic imaginings about the woman. She knew very little of this lady's true character.

When they reached the garden's heart, Mrs. Whiting, apparently too occupied with her creative pursuits to receive them indoors properly, picked a pristine white rose, placed it in her basket, and without looking up, motioned them forward with her free hand. She wore a full-length apron over her pale-blue dress, and the wide brim of her fashionable straw hat obscured her expression.

The housekeeper left Leah and Miss Beaumont with her employer.

"Thank you for seeing us," Leah ventured. "I hope we're not interrupting anything too pressing."

"It is pressing, and you are interrupting, but my housekeeper insists that your matter takes precedence. Ask your questions quickly so I may return to my arranging."

"Of course." Leah opened her notebook. "First, as I'm sure you already know, before Miss Talbot was kidnapped, we were at the Colbornes' ball. Since then, we've been looking into the possibility that there was a connection between that ball and our attack."

"Yes, yes." Mrs. Whiting glanced at the rosebush next to her. "Continue."

"Do you happen to remember anything odd about that night? Anything at all?"

"Odd?" Mrs. Whiting's severe expression softened as she drew her brows together. "I found the entire evening quite heavenly. That was due in part—I hope it's not vain to say so—to my flower arrangements. Did you notice? They bloomed most prolifically from every corner of the ballroom."

"Yes, they were beautiful, but about our investigation . . ." Leah pressed. "Do you remember anything else? What about the dancing itself? Did you enjoy any of the sets?"

"Oh, I did. Surprisingly many. Most times, as I'm sure you understand, such frivolities remain with the young people. But that night, I only sat out one set, and that was because I was feeling a bit weak. I hadn't eaten for several hours, so I made my way to the refreshment table." She moistened her lips. "But now, come to think of it, there was something odd about the refreshments themselves. Well, not necessarily the refreshments, but the dishes. Mrs. Colborne is usually so particular about every little detail, yet there were about ten plates that didn't match the others. I assumed there was a legitimate reason for the oversight, and I thought nothing more of it. But as you've asked about oddities, well, that was rather odd to me."

Leah gave Miss Beaumont a questioning glance. Did she think Leah should pursue more information about the plates?

In response, Miss Beaumont rolled her eyes, and Leah, hoping she understood her hint, determined to shift her attention to the ball's guests. "I wonder if—"

"But I don't expect the dish service is the kind of information you're looking for, is it?" Mrs. Whiting continued. "It's not as if the matching plates were stolen and replaced with less-valuable ones." She smiled at her apparent joke.

However, Leah gaped at her. Why would she think of something as being stolen when such a thing hadn't been mentioned previously? *Hmm.*

Leah wrote "stolen plates?" in her notebook in case they might somehow be important, and tried again. "There were two particular men at the Colbornes' ball we are trying to locate. They were dressed as two of Shakespeare's characters. One was Romeo, and the other was Duke Orsino. Did you see either or both of them?"

Mrs. Whiting's cheeks pinked. "I did. I . . . I found them quite fascinating."

"What do you remember about them?"

"Only that they were handsome. And young. At least, they seemed much younger than myself."

"You must have thought their attentions were rather gratifying," Miss Beaumont added.

"I'm afraid I did. I fear I may have actually behaved as a silly schoolgirl."

"Come now," Miss Beaumont said. "Surely an esteemed lady such as yourself couldn't have acted too foolishly."

Mrs. Whiting pressed her palm against her chest. "I hope you're right."

"I do wonder, though," Miss Beaumont continued, "if you danced with either of them."

"I did. With both of them. They were particularly charming, especially Duke Orsino. He joined me at the refreshment table. I remember that I was just about to ask a man who was dressed as a harlequin about his beautiful costume when Duke Orsino suddenly stood before me."

The dreaminess that entered Mrs. Whiting's eyes made Leah wince—it was the same expression Susanna had worn when she'd last spoken with Romeo.

"Did Duke Orsino, by chance, have gray eyes?" Leah asked.

"He did."

Ah, I guessed it right. Gray Eyes and Duke Orsino are the same man.
"It sounds as though you spent more time with that man than I did,"

Leah said. "I didn't even learn his name. Did you? And what about the harlequin? Did you, perhaps, learn his name? Many have mentioned those men, but no one knew their identities."

Mrs. Whiting hunched her shoulders, crossed her arms in front of her, and after a moment, lowered her hands back at her sides. At the same time, something flickered in her eyes. "I'm afraid not—from any of them. Duke Orsino did, however, give me the most delightful endearment." Her hand fluttered to her throat like a besotted debutante rather than the composed widow she'd first presented. "I promised I wouldn't repeat it."

Miss Beaumont pursed her lips. "An endearment? Rather forward for a first meeting, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, but he made it seem so . . . natural. He also spoke of arranging—" Mrs. Whiting closed her mouth.

Leah and Miss Beaumont exchanged meaningful glances. The pattern was becoming clearer: wealthy, unmarried women, carefully selected and methodically charmed.

"Mrs. Whiting," Leah said carefully, "we have reason to believe those men—Orsino and Romeo—may have nefarious motives. They charmed both Miss Talbot and myself that night. And while we aren't yet certain, our investigation is pointing us to suspect that they are Miss Talbot's kidnappers."

Mrs. Whiting dropped her basket, scattering roses across the gravel. Her face drained of color, and she pressed her hand over her mouth. She immediately afterward fled the garden.

Leah watched her retreat and turned to Miss Beaumont. "Those men are systematically targeting women, aren't they? The ball, the masks, the false names and endearments—it's all designed to prey on those of means."

"I believe you are right. Miss Crauford."

Chapter 12

WILLIAM'S MUSCLES SCREAMED AS he climbed back into his hired post chaise, the leather document case Barton and Perry had delivered clutched in his hands. They'd been waiting at the Kings Head when he'd arrived, both men exhausted but reliable as always. Thank heaven Mother had been able to arrange everything so quickly.

He settled the case across his lap and angled it toward the chaise's lantern. Sleep pulled at him after three days of hard riding, but he couldn't rest. Not with Susanna's future depending on these papers.

The first document was Father's will. He scanned down the page until—there. “. . . no portion of Miss Susanna Talbot's dowry shall be accessible to any man, including her future husband, until she has reached the age of six and twenty years and entered into a proper marriage with all due settlements . . .”

William pressed his lips together, forcing a grim smile. This will would thwart any villain seeking Susanna's fortune—she was, after all, only two-and-twenty. But might Father have placed other safeguards in these documents as well?

He thumbed through the additional pages: marriage settlements of relatives, contracts, letters of intent—William froze. Beneath the stack of legal papers lay a single yellowed document, its edges worn soft with age. The youthful scrawl, his attempt at proper legal script, was unpolished but as correct as he'd been able to make it.

Memories crashed over him. Fifteen years old, home from Winchester for the summer holidays, and determined to practice his legal studies. Leah had been visiting with her father. Six years old, all wide eyes and flying dark braids, she'd been utterly earnest about playing Romeo and Juliet in the garden.

"We must make it proper," he'd declared, pulling out his finest paper. "A betrothal contract similar to the ones I'm studying."

Leah had bounced on her toes, her eyes sparkling. "Like a real one?"

"As much as I can make it." Heavens, he'd been so proud of his legal knowledge. "We need witnesses."

Susanna, barely four, had clapped her hands. "Me! Me! I want to sign!"

Their parents had watched from the garden bench, his mother hiding her smile behind her fan. Susanna's nurse had guided his sister's tiny hand to form her name in careful letters. Leah's father had added his signature with a flourish, declaring it "most official indeed."

William scrutinized the contract—his pompous attempt at proper legal writing, along with every clear signature.

The post chaise hit a rut, jarring him from the memory, but still he studied the paper. He traced his forefinger over the faded ink, and with each exact line and lilting swoop, something shifted deep in his chest. Over the last few days, he'd thought his new feelings for Leah had sprung from their shared worry for Susanna. But now . . . his frequent, unexpected noticings of her beauty, the way his senses rebelled whenever he thought of her as his sister, and his increased desire to protect her from danger while simultaneously wishing for her companionship. This contract, this childhood playacting . . .

His breath caught as the truth pounded through him.

I love Leah.

He ran his hand through his hair.

Why had he never before recognized how perfect she was for him? How much he counted on her steadying, wise influence? Worse, what was he supposed to do with that knowledge now?

Nothing. Right now, he must focus only on finding Susanna. And when that was finished—he jabbed the contract—he'd officially ask for Leah's affections.

The carriage slowed and stopped.

William shook himself from his reverie and leaned toward the window. A sleepy-looking keeper collected the required toll for crossing into Scotland from William's driver, opened the gate, and motioned them through.

"We've been told there's a blacksmith in Gretna who performs marriages," his driver called to the keeper, "After we get there, how do we find him?"

"First building on your left once you reach the village proper. Can't miss it. Usually keeps a lamp burning in the window for just such arrivals."

The keeper turned away, and the driver urged the horses forward. William leaned closer to the window. Drumming his fingers against his thigh, he strained to see through the murky night. Occasionally, the carriage lamps lit up the hedgerows and stone walls along the curved road, indicating they'd soon reach their destination, and his impatience surged. But it wasn't until he spotted a welcoming glow that he took a complete breath—the promised lamp.

At last, the carriage wheels crunched to a halt before the modest stone building, its rough-hewn walls blackened with age. William stepped down into air heavy with coal-smoke and iron. He scanned both lengths of the night-shadowed street. Seeing no one, he instructed his driver to wait, then strode toward the entrance where a lopsided wooden sign proclaimed in white-painted lettering, "Marriages performed here." No light shone from the two small windows, though the lingering mineral scents of quenched metal suggested the smith had been at his forge not long ago.

A tinge of guilt at having to wake the man niggled through him, but William shoved it aside. Every passing moment was another fearful, perhaps even painful, moment for Susanna. He could not wait.

He angled away from the entrance, and walking along a narrow dirt path, he made his way to where he hoped he'd find the blacksmith's living quarters beside or behind the shop.

About half a minute later, he found the home. A lit lantern hung on an iron hook next to the door.

William stepped onto the slightly raised threshold and knocked.

No one answered. Nothing sounded, either, so he knocked again.

At last, muted voices, followed by the creak of floorboards, came from the other side.

The door swung open. A broad-shouldered, gray-haired man in worn wool trousers and a hastily tucked linen shirt shone a lit candle toward

William. "Whit brings ye to my door at this hour?" he said in a thick Scottish brogue.

"Pardon me," William said. "My name is Sir William Talbot. I have reason to believe that my sister, Miss Susanna Talbot, may have been married in this area in the last few days, and I wondered if it might have been here."

"'Tis possible. I've joined more than a few couples these past days."

"Would you please check your records and see if my sister was one of them?"

"Whit would make me do that? Folks who come here want their business kept quiet. And as you don't have a young lady you wish to marry with you, I must ask you to come back in the mornin'."

"I understand the inconvenience," William said, "and under normal circumstances, I wouldn't wish to trouble you, but I'm afraid this isn't a normal circumstance. The young lady I speak of—my sister—if she was indeed married, was most certainly coerced into it." He removed his picture of her from his waistcoat and handed it to him.

The man held the picture closer to the candlelight. He arched an eyebrow, glanced up at William, and looked back to the picture. Finally, he frowned. "Come with me. I'll check my ledger."

He returned the picture to William and guided William to the front entrance of the shop. From there, he led William past the anvil—likely where countless runaway couples had pledged their vows in hasty ceremonies—and proceeded to a sturdy wooden desk a few feet beyond it. A large leather ledger sat on top of it. The man, holding his candle above it, opened the ledger to a bookmarked page. Then, grumbling to himself, he slowly ran his forefinger down the long list of names until he reached the second-to-last date. "Here. Miss Susanna Talbot. That is the lady you seek, isn't it?"

"Yes!" William peered closer at the writing.

This Day, Mr. Evan Thatcher, Bachelor, and Miss Susanna Talbot, Spinster, were joined in marriage by declaration according to the laws of Scotland.

Evan Thatcher. Distaste burned through William, but he pushed it aside and scanned down the page to the names of the witnesses. He didn't recognize either one. "So, they *were* married." The words felt like poison on his tongue.

"Aye. I'm sorry it troubles ye. Sometimes, laddie, love finds its way, and a quick marriage is the only path. But I'll tell ye this—many a hasty wedding turns out the sweetest."

"That may be true in some cases," William said, "but it is not the truth here. Tell me, do you remember them?" He again reached for his picture of Susanna, but the man flicked his hand, indicating he didn't need to see it.

"I remember her. Och, a bonnie lass with the sweetest curl at her temple. Not easy to forget."

"Did she appear happy?"

The man peered beyond him as if he was looking at something that only he could see. After a moment, he shook his head. "She was crying—but happy tears, mind. Smiling wide as the morning. But thinking on it now, my good wife, who stood as witness, did say the lady's voice was tight. Like the words were being squeezed out. I told her I didn't see it that way, that she must be seeing what wasn't, but . . ."

As the man described Susanna's tears, William's thoughts flew unbidden to Leah. How would she react to this news? He could almost see her expression—the way her eyes would soften with concern, how she'd reach for his arm in that unconscious way of hers that always sent warmth spreading through his chest. He shook himself. *Focus on Susanna.* Yet even now, miles from Ferndale, Leah's presence seemed to hover at the edges of his thoughts like a persistent ghost.

The man cocked his head to the side. "I hope the lassie's well."

William dragged his attention back to him. "She has to be." He bit the inside of his cheek and glared at the marriage record until he'd regained control of his voice. "Do you know where this man and my sister went after the marriage?"

The man shook his head. "I were near sleeping, truth be told. Like you, he came rapping at my door near midnight. I'd had long working hours in the shop the past week." He added that last comment as if it explained

everything. "And all I wanted was giving him his license and sending them on their way."

"What about which direction they went? Did you see that?"

He studied the doorway, rubbing his jaw. "As I said, I were half asleep, but I didn't notice anything different from the horses' clomps than usual. If I were to guess, they were probably heading south like most folks do."

William jolted. London was south of there. If Susanna and her kidnapper had returned to London, that would explain how the kidnapper had discovered where to send Susanna's letter. And yet, they couldn't possibly have traveled to Gretna Green and all the way back to London in the time that had passed since the kidnapping.

"You're certain they went south?" William asked, his voice tight.

"Aye. I canna swear on me mother's grave, but that'd be my reckoning."

William stiffened. Every inch of him wanted to race back to London. But what if the blacksmith was wrong? What if that Thatcher scoundrel and Susanna had actually gone deeper into Scotland?

"Is there anyone around here I could hire to search for them farther north?" William asked. "On the off chance that they did go that way?"

The man blinked, glanced about the room, and ran his hand over the top of his head. "Bide here. My son's atween work, and I'm certain he'd be keen on such a task."

The man hurried from the room and soon after returned with a tousled youth, bleary-eyed from interrupted slumber. William assessed the lad. He couldn't have been more than thirteen, but there was an alert intelligence behind his drowsiness and a straightforward set to his shoulders. The boy's direct gaze reminded William of his own trusted valet at that age. With Susanna already missing for so many days, William could hardly be particular about his informant's age. He would have to follow his instincts.

"I'll pay you a shilling now," William said, "and sixpence more for each credible piece of information about my sister. Report to me at the Liongate Inn in Ferndale whether you've word of my sister or not." He slid a folded direction card across the table.

"Yes, sir!"

Finished with that, William returned to his carriage, and his driver headed them back toward London.

“Evan Thatcher.” The name escaped William’s lips like a curse. “I don’t know who you are, but rest assured, sir, you shall rue the day you crossed my path.” He curled his fingers into fists. Three more grueling days of hard riding stretched between him and Ferndale, each hour an eternity when Susanna’s safety hung in the balance.

He needed to get back to the investigation, back to Leah.

His heart stumbled. *Leah*. He could no longer deny the truth: his need to return went beyond finding Susanna.

He brushed his fingers against the childhood betrothal contract now tucked safely in his waistcoat pocket. He’d placed it there without examining why, but now he understood. Having this piece of their shared past so close made him feel she was somehow with him, lending him her strength.

But how could he tell her of his feelings? In the midst of Susanna’s crisis, would a declaration of love seem terribly ill-timed? Yet even as he closed his eyes, trying to focus on his missing sister, it was Leah’s face that appeared in his mind, clear as sunrise. The way she’d stood beside him through this investigation, her quiet strength, her brilliant mind. Heaven help him! He loved every part of her.

William pressed his fingers to his temples and took a long, determined breath. First, they must find Susanna. Then, somehow, he would find the right moment to tell Leah that their childhood playacting at romance had become a cherished reality.

Chapter 13

LEAH MADE ONE LAST circuit of the Baldwin Estate's well-appointed bedchamber, the hem of her nightdress whispering against the floor. Miss Beaumont—Marianne now, after so many shared confidences—lived in this grand home with her venerable aunt. Marianne had arranged for Leah to stay the night that they might get an earlier start in the morning, which was all well and good, if Leah could actually sleep.

She again focused on Rani's letter, which lay on the writing desk. Her friend's warning burned fresh in Leah's mind.

Be watchful of everyone. Those we believe we know well can wear masks of perfect deception.

Leah lifted her teacup. Had it only been this morning when she'd opened that letter? More importantly, was every bit of progress they'd made actually tainted with falsehood?

Since William's departure for Gretna Green six days ago, she and Marianne had interviewed nearly everyone from the Colbornes' guest list. Each conversation had seemed mildly productive, and each person had been appropriately concerned about Susanna.

Leah paused, remembering Rani's words, and furrowed her brow. Or had one or more of the interviewees' appropriate concerns actually been dishonest?

Without thinking, Leah clinked her cup on the mahogany occasional table harder than she'd intended, and the wall sconce's candlelight glimmered in response. Shivers raced down her spine, and she hugged her arms around herself. The flickers were nothing more than simple, everyday

images. They weren't omens, nor were they warnings. Still, she couldn't shake the thought that omens or warnings were exactly what they were.

"Don't borrow trouble," William's voice said inside her mind.

Leah closed her eyes and clenched her fists. That was all well and good for him to say, but wasn't he the one who'd told her to take care of herself? That she could be in danger?

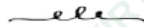
"It certainly was him," Leah muttered.

She crossed the Turkish carpet toward the clothespress, opened it, and peered into its depths. The borrowed lady's maid had neatly hung her day dress there. At least one thing was as it should be. Besides, in danger or not, Leah was safe enough in this place tonight. What was more, William would soon return. He'd know how to make sense of all this.

Leah yawned, and one by one, she snuffed out the candles. She climbed into bed. The ornate counterpane scratched against her chin as she tugged it upward, and she groaned. It was nothing like her simple, soft coverlet at home.

"It will do for one night," she said.

But even as she closed her eyes, Rani's warning nagged at her. Who among their acquaintances could possibly be wearing a mask of perfect deception?



Someone screamed.

Leah sat up, her heart pounding. She peered into the darkness around her. Where was she? Who had screamed?

Another yell. It was a young woman's voice.

Leah blinked. She was at Miss Beaumont's aunt's house. *Marianne!* Had something happened to her?

Leah jumped out of bed, grabbed her wrapper, and drew it around her. But before she took hold of the doorknob, she heard another voice. No. *Voices.* Marianne's and whose? It couldn't be Marianne's sister, Amy, who was away on an extended trip with one of her friends. And it certainly wasn't Marianne's aunt, who was old and feeble and kept to her room.

Indeed, Marianne had said her aunt would likely sleep beyond the time when Mr. Harcourt came for them in the morning.

But if neither of them, who? Yet even as Leah thought those words, realization dawned. The extra voice had to be Marianne's lady's maid. After all, it was her duty to attend to any and all of her mistress's needs, no matter how inconvenient they might be, even in the middle of the night.

A lady's maid. That had to be the other voice.

Leah exhaled her pent-up breath and stepped into the hallway slipperless. She focused on the voices, which were softer, and hurried to Marianne's room. A small stream of light seeped out from beneath her door.

The voices rose again. No, not mere voices. It was an interrogation. Through the heavy oak, she caught fragments: "—tell me what you know—" and Marianne's muffled protests. Leah recognized Marianne's voice right off, but the other was—*a man's*?

Leah slapped her palm against the base of her throat. Impossible. No gentleman would dare breach the sanctuary of a lady's private chamber at this hour. Even male servants knew better than to enter a lady's bedchamber, remaining instead in the corridor should their aid be required. And Mr. Harcourt, though he clearly harbored tender feelings for the lady—Leah's cheeks warmed at the scandalous thought of him being in Marianne's room—had departed hours ago, which could only mean that man was not welcome. And his demanding questions, coupled with Marianne's frightened tone, suggested something far worse than mere impropriety.

Leah, catching her breath as memories of the men attacking her and Susanna flashed through her mind, seized the statue from the occasional table. It, a bronze shepherdess, was no taller than her hand, but it had a satisfying weight. Squeezing the makeshift weapon, Leah turned the doorknob.

Glass crashed. Metal too.

Leah eased open the door. A single wall sconce cast a dim glow across the sprawling chamber, its light barely reaching the massive four-poster that dominated the far wall several feet away from Leah. There lay Marianne, or rather, the tangle of white that was Marianne's night rail against her

grandmother's rose damask counterpane. Her shoulders were wrenched at an odd angle, and a soiled cloth protruded from her mouth.

Then Leah saw him.

The stranger's black coat melted into the shadows, but his stance burned itself into her mind—the careful balance of a fencing master, the predatory stillness of a fox in a henhouse. Candlelight glinted off the blade in his hand, pointing at Marianne's exposed throat. His back was to Leah, and he remained motionless, likely intent on his prey or unaware of Leah's entrance. Or both.

But Marianne, her eyes bright with unshed tears, did see her. A tiny shake of her head, a warning.

Leah pressed her finger to her lips.

Marianne swallowed hard and looked back at her attacker.

"You couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" The man's voice was low, lethal.

Marianne squirmed away from him.

Leah tightened her grip on the statue.

"You're just like your father," he continued. "Had you both not meddled where you didn't belong, Onyx wouldn't have sent me to end you."

Onyx? The strange name meant nothing to Leah, but the threat in the man's voice told her what he didn't say. This was Marianne's father's murderer—the man Marianne was hunting.

Leah inched forward.

The man lifted his knife. "Remember, my dear. You've given me no other choice."

"No!" Leah raised the bronze shepherdess high above her head and charged forward.

The intruder whirled. His gaze met Leah's, and her heart thundered against her ribs. *Stop. He's too strong. He has a knife.*

Marianne yelled through her gag, shattering Leah's fears, and instinct took over. Leah swung down. The man's arm shot up, and the impact juddered through her hands and up her arms. The crack of bone nauseated her, but she couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop.

He stumbled back, tripping on the carpet, and she swung again. This time, she caught him above his temple. Warm droplets spattered her cheek.

The man's knees buckled, but curse him, he staggered only briefly before regaining his balance. He pointed the knife at Leah. "Don't be a fool, Miss Crauford. Get back."

How does he know who I am? Leah again swung the statue, but he caught her wrist, twisting until she cried out. The statue slipped from her hand and thudded on the floor. He shoved her backward, and she stumbled against the wall, grunting as the impact forced the air from her lungs.

He pointed the knife at her. "As I said, *foolish girl*."

Marianne, once more hollering into her gag, scrambled off the bed and kicked the back of the assailant's knees. He staggered, cursing, and Leah dove past him for the fallen statue. She grabbed its base before he could right himself. She held it over her shoulder, preparing to strike.

"Now who's the fool?" she said.

He spun toward her. "You are if you think you're going to find her first." He lunged.

Leah swung sideways. The statue struck his face with a sickening crack.

He reeled backward. Blood trickled from his mouth onto his cravat.

Leah, still clenching the statue, backstepped.

Glaring, he lunged toward her again.

She feinted left—just as William had once shown her—and struck his arm. He dropped the knife. He bent to pick it up, but before he reached it, Leah brought the statue down hard on his head. He crumpled at her feet.

Leah stood over him, watching him, making certain he didn't move. Then she felt the inside of his wrist. It pulsed. "Thank the heavens. He still lives."

Marianne, breathing hard, moved in beside her.

Leah gave her a quick hug. "And thank the heavens you live too. Let's untie that rope. We'll use it on him."

Leah untied the rope that bound her friend's hands. Then, after Marianne removed the gag from between her teeth and shoved it in his mouth, Leah rolled him onto his front. She yanked his hands behind his back and secured them with the rope.

"We had better tie him more securely than that." Marianne snatched her wrapper from the bedpost and pulled it around her shoulders. "Keep watch over him. I'll be right back with more rope."

She left the room, and Leah picked up the knife that lay next to the man. Holding it with her left hand, she glanced between him and the bed. Heaven help her if he woke before Marianne returned. A lady wielding a knife would hardly prove much defense against his brutish strength, but perhaps she could delay him. Working swiftly, she piled the comforter and pillows on top of him—not enough to smother him, but sufficient to slow his progress should consciousness return too soon.

Marianne, along with one of her footmen, returned a few minutes later with lengths of rope. She nodded at the pillows. “Good idea. Now go ahead and bind his feet. George, secure him to the bedpost.” She then knelt next to their attacker and checked the knots securing his wrists.

Finished, they stood and regarded their handiwork.

The man grunted.

“He’s waking,” Leah said.

“We had better send for the authorities.” Marianne took a notepad and pencil from her writing desk, wrote a quick note, and handed it to the footman. “See that this gets to Mr. Harcourt.”

“At once, miss. I’ll send Stanley to stand guard while I deliver the message.”

“Thank you.”

He left, and Marianne looked back at Leah. “Now all we have to do is keep this man in our control until Mr. Harcourt comes with the constable.”

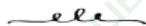
The ruffian glared up at them. He squirmed against his bindings.

Marianne scowled. “Fight all you want, Livingston—or shall I call you Slade? You’ll change your tune once the constable takes you to Newgate.”

Livingston stilled, but his eyes glinted. Something in his expression made Leah’s skin prickle with unease. For a man facing Newgate Prison, he appeared remarkably untroubled.

Marianne secured her wrapper around her and dragged a chair from her writing desk. She placed it a few feet in front of the prisoner and sat with her arms folded. “Now we wait.”

Leah joined her with the only other chair in the room, and together, they watched their captive.



When Mr. Harcourt arrived with Constable Dunn and another officer Leah didn't recognize, morning light streamed through the windows. Below stairs, servants prepared breakfast while above, the nurse tended to Marianne's aunt, who had slept peacefully through the entire ordeal.

Leah ran her hands up and down her still-cold arms. *I wish I could have slept through it, and yet, for Marianne's sake, I'm glad I was awakened.*

Livingston, lying on the floor and squirming against his binds, yelled through his gag. And George, who'd stood guard since sending Miss Beaumont's message with another footman, straightened at the sound of approaching footsteps. Someone knocked on the door. After ascertaining who it was, he opened it.

Mr. Harcourt, followed by Constable Dunn and another officer, entered. Mr. Harcourt strode straight to Marianne. He clasped her hands, pulling her to her feet. "Thank Providence you're safe."

Marianne nodded to Leah. "I fear I wouldn't have been if Miss Crauford hadn't been here."

"Well then, Miss Crauford, I'm indebted to you." Mr. Harcourt's words were for Leah, but his gaze never left Marianne's face.

Feeling like an intruder upon an intimate moment, Leah turned her attention to Constable Dunn and the other officer, who'd just hauled Livingston to his feet. "Thank you for coming," she said. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you."

"Yes," Marianne added. "That man you just apprehended is Mr. Livingston, alias Slade."

Constable Dunn gave Marianne a curt nod and handed Livingston over to the other constable. "And I, like Mr. Harcourt, am grateful you two ladies are safe. This man has evaded justice for far too long."

"Like other men we know."

Constable Dunn frowned and nodded at Leah. "I suppose you're speaking of your friend's kidnappers." He then glanced at Livingston, who glowered back at him.

"They're exactly who I'm speaking of," Leah said.

Marianne squeezed and released Mr. Harcourt's hands and moved to Leah's side. She gave her a quick hug. "Don't lose heart, dear. None of us will give up until your friend is found."

Warmth spread through Leah's chest at Marianne's gesture, but at the same time, her mouth turned dry. Why was it that Leah was blessed with such a solid lifeline of hope and help while Susanna had no choice but to remain out there alone and in danger?

The constables lifted Livingston between them, though oddly, Dunn's grip seemed rather loose. That was likely why when Livingston squirmed and thrashed so hard against his binds, he kicked Constable Dunn in the gut.

In response, Constable Dunn backhanded him. "Get a hold of yourself, man."

Livingston glared at Constable Dunn, who glared back at him, seemingly daring him to fight him until at last, Livingston scowled, and the two officers hauled the villain from the room.

Leah exhaled her pent-up breath.

Mr. Harcourt checked his pocket watch. "Well, ladies, there are only a few more hours until our prearranged meeting time." He studied the two of them. "It has been such a long and difficult night for you—for all of us—that I suggest we postpone our investigations until noon."

"If we do that," Leah said, "we will lose valuable time. I suggest we leave sooner rather than later."

"I understand your concern," Mr. Harcourt said. "Indeed, it does you credit. But I daresay the two of you can barely keep your eyes open. I know I can't." He yawned.

"You're right," Marianne said. "I am weary. But truth be told, I'm not sure I can sleep. Finally . . . finally, Livingston is caught. Finally, my father can rest in peace."

"Finally, you and Miss Crauford can also rest," Mr. Harcourt said. "Come now. It has been a job well done, but I would hate to overlook a clue simply because we were too tired to notice it."

Leah frowned and walked to the window. She peered toward the sun, which had fully risen above the horizon, and turned back to Mr. Harcourt. "May I suggest we postpone our investigation until eleven?"

Mr. Harcourt tilted his head, studied Leah a moment, and looked at Marianne. "Do you agree with eleven o'clock?"

"I do," Marianne said.

Something about Marianne's "I do" affected Mr. Harcourt because a soft rosy color suddenly bathed his cheeks. He swallowed. "Done. Now that is settled, I will take my leave."

"No," Marianne said. "You'll lose half that time travelling back to Harcourt Manor. Stay here. George can set you up in the other guest room." A slight tease crept into her voice. "Indeed, sir, I daresay you look wearier than either Miss Crauford or I do."

Mr. Harcourt, watching Marianne, drew his brows into a tight furrow. "I would not wish to impose—" He glanced toward the door where George stood. "Though, if your aunt's presence in the house permits such an arrangement, and if George might bring me some tea, I confess the prospect has merit."

"Done," Marianne said, gently mimicking Mr. Harcourt's earlier response.

He smiled a little, and Leah, once more feeling like an intruder in their mutual affection, lowered her gaze.

Marianne put Mr. Harcourt into George's care, and Leah returned to her bed chamber. Despite her fear that she would not be able to keep her eyes closed for any real length of time, the moment she climbed into bed and lay on her pillow, she fell asleep.

Pounding clamored on the front door.

Leah opened her eyes. Now what? Late-morning light seeped through the slits in her window curtains, and the clock on her dressing table said it was a few minutes before nine thirty.

More pounding, followed by footsteps hurrying down the hall outside Leah's door.

Leah climbed out of bed and again threw on her wrapper. Surely every night at Baldwin Estate wasn't as troubling as this one had been.

Marianne's maid rushed into Leah's chamber. "Begging your pardon, miss, but Mr. Harcourt asks that you and Miss Beaumont join him in the morning room immediately. There's news about the prisoner."

Leah shook her head. *What news could there be already?* She followed the maid into the hallway and downstairs, where she found Marianne similarly attired. Leah took Marianne's arm, and the two went to the morning room.

Mr. Harcourt, his coat hastily draped over his rumpled evening clothes, stood by the fireplace. Both Constable Dunn—his uniform mud-splattered—and George stood near him.

"What has happened?" Marianne pulled her wrapper around her.

Constable Dunn removed his hat. "I deeply regret to inform you, miss, that Livingston has escaped."

"What?" Leah exclaimed.

"Escaped?" The color drained from Marianne's face.

Leah, still holding Marianne's arm, hugged it tighter. *She has supported me. I will support her.*

"How was that possible?" Mr. Harcourt demanded. "Such incompetence is inexcusable."

"He was violent from the start, as you saw yourselves." Constable Dunn rubbed at where Livingston had kicked him. "Used that same aggressive behavior to overwhelm us during transport. He disappeared into the darkness almost before we knew what was happening."

Marianne pressed her fingers to her lips. "Then he's still out there. Still free to attack—"

"Several men are searching for him," Constable Dunn said. "We'll find him."

"He will not harm you again, Miss Beaumont," Mr. Harcourt said. "I promise you that."

Chapter 14

WILLIAM'S BOOTS, CAKED WITH the dust of three hundred miles, fell silent on the carpeted floor as he followed the housekeeper into the Craufords' drawing room. He squeezed the childhood betrothal contract in his waistcoat pocket, and his shoulders screamed with the movement, punishment for being jolted about in that confounded post chaise. Four hours' rest here and another couple there had done little to ease the bone-deep exhaustion.

But none of that mattered compared to the horror that had awaited him in Gretna Green—Susanna, his beloved sister, now trapped in marriage to that contemptible scoundrel.

Bile rose in William's throat. Heaven help him, if he imagined that blackguard's hands on her one more time . . .

Yet even as rage and despair clawed at him, his heart lurched at an entirely different thought. Leah.

These past three days had left no doubt. Their childhood play at romance had become his deepest truth, and in mere moments he would see her again. His senses ached for him to reveal his feelings.

But he couldn't allow that. Not now while both he and Leah needed to focus on finding Susanna. Resistance was his only proper course.

And yet, when he again saw Leah's dear face and gazed into her mesmerizing eyes, how could he possibly mask his love for her?

He set his jaw. *I will do this.*

Somehow.

"Sir William Talbot," the housekeeper announced.

Mr. Crauford's copy of *The Times* rustled as he carefully lowered it. "William, my dear fellow!" The older gentleman's familiar face creased with genuine appreciation as he gingerly rose from his chair. "Mercy,

you look absolutely done up. Tell me your trip to Scotland wasn't all for naught."

William scanned the drawing room. No Leah. Disappointment stabbed his core. Again, he touched the contract in his pocket and sank into the offered wing chair. "I wish I could say otherwise, sir. Though I had rather hoped to share my findings with Miss Crauford. Might I impose upon you to send for her?"

Mr. Crauford tugged the hem of his coat's sleeve. "I fear my daughter isn't home. She spent last evening with Miss Beaumont so they could get an earlier start to their hunt for your sister. I expect that pleases you, though I do wish she hadn't done it."

William released his oddly pent-up breath and frowned. *She isn't here.*

Mr. Crauford, watching him, likewise frowned, settling carefully back in his chair. "Forgive me. That was callous. I know you're concerned for your sister, as is Leah—and so am I—but I can't help fearing Leah is spending too much of herself searching for her. Leah has her own future to consider, and the constables are more capable of finding your sister than she is." He regarded William. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Mr. Fortescue has been most patient."

Something twisted in William's chest at the implication he heard in the man's voice. Who was— "Mr. Fortescue?"

"Indeed." Mr. Crauford folded his arms. A slight grimace crossed his features. "I'm sure you see my predicament. Yes, this business with your sister is important, but so is Leah's future. She must turn more of her attention to her marriage."

The twist froze. *Marriage?* Leah had never said anything to him about—"Is she betrothed?" William nearly choked on the words. He pressed the childhood contract in his pocket as if it could somehow prevent this nightmare.

"Not yet, but the arrangements are nearly settled."

"Soon?"

Mr. Crauford shrugged. He winced, too. "As soon as I can convince her to focus on her own life."

William gaped at the man. Leah. To be married to another. Well, she was not entirely betrothed, but if her father was correct, she soon would be.

William would have to congratulate her, and yet the thought of doing so stomped on his heart almost as horrifyingly as the realization that Susanna had been forced to marry her kidnapper. They weren't exactly the same situations, and yet . . . if Leah had been happy about marrying Mr. Fortescue, wouldn't she have said something about it to him? They had spent several hours together of late, and he'd thought . . . he'd believed . . .

Mr. Crauford lowered his arms to his sides and leaned forward, moving with the stiffness of a man still healing. "I truly am sorry for your family, my boy. We all are. But life goes on, and a father must think of his daughter's well-being."

William forced himself to nod, though his mind raced. Not only had Leah never mentioned her impending marriage, but she had also shown none of the joy he'd typically witnessed in happily engaged ladies' expressions.

He studied Mr. Crauford's narrowed gaze. Could Leah, like Susanna, be facing an unwanted, perhaps even a forced union?

Irritation warmed William's blood. Mr. Crauford, who had long called William's late father his friend, surely knew the pain such forced marriages brought. Had he forgotten how Father had rescued Mother from just such an arrangement? Yet there Mr. Crauford sat, dismissing Susanna's plight while forcing his own daughter into an unwanted match.

If it *was* unwanted to her.

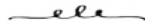
The words nearly burst from him then—his feelings for Leah, their childhood bond, his ability to provide for her just as well as any Mr. Fortescue. But looking at Mr. Crauford's battered face, at the way he held himself so carefully in his chair, William swallowed the declaration. After what the man had suffered, after the fear he must feel for his daughter's security, this wasn't the moment to speak. Besides, what if Leah did wish to marry Mr. Fortescue?

For the next several minutes, Mr. Crauford heralded Mr. Fortescue's qualities, and William listened to him for as long as he could bear. But at last, William took his leave, citing his intent to call on Leah and Miss Beaumont, and returned to the posting inn, where he arranged for a fresh post chaise.

With that finally settled, he again climbed into the enclosed carriage, sat on the leather seat, and peered through the window. How could Mr. Crauford, and perhaps even Leah, consider such a man as Mr. Fortescue as Leah's future husband? True, the man could provide her with wealth and a comfortable home. And from what Mr. Crauford said, he wasn't vicious. In fact, he was simply an honorable man who wished for an heir. But Leah, while reserved in many ways, had a creative and passionate heart. She needed a man who could provide her with more than simple stability. A man who recognized her for the incredible woman she was rather than only for her ability to provide him with a family.

William pulled out the childhood contract. He studied their young signatures written so perfectly side by side as if they belonged that way. He had to tell her. Soon. Before Mr. Fortescue's "patience" ran out and before Mr. Crauford's fears for his daughter's security pushed him to force the match.

I can't lose her.



It was nearly noon when the butler led William down Miss Beaumont's—or rather, her aunt's—well-lit jonquil-colored hallway to the large, elegant drawing room. His boots clicked across the tile, each step marking precious time lost. *I'm doing nothing to save Susanna or to stop Leah's impending marriage to Mr. Fortescue.*

But the moment William stepped through the doorway, his personal concerns fled. Leah, Miss Beaumont, and Mr. Harcourt sat huddled at a table near the fireplace, their poses suggesting secrecy rather than casual conversation, and the air settled around them like the silence of a crypt.

Mr. Harcourt, seeing William, stood. His cravat was slightly askew, and tension lined his mouth. He strode forward, extending his hand. His grip, when they shook, was almost painful. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

The strain in his voice chilled William. He again looked at Leah. The usual sparkle had disappeared from her dark eyes, replaced by shadows that spoke of a sleepless night. Her face, typically touched with a becoming

pink, had paled to ivory, and dark smudges beneath her eyes betrayed her exhaustion. Her fingers worried the reticule in her lap.

William's heart clenched. If only he could take her hands in his and confess everything. But not here, not with such apparently unsettling news awaiting.

"What has happened?" The words scraped from William's throat.

Mr. Harcourt gestured to the empty chair situated obliquely from Leah. Was it William's imagination, or had the man positioned himself rather protectively near Miss Beaumont's chair?

"Please do the honors," Mr. Harcourt said to her, his tone gentle.

"Of course." Miss Beaumont's normally confident voice wavered slightly. She squared her shoulders and began her tale of the night's events.

With each word, William inched farther forward in his chair. He squeezed the mahogany armrests when Miss Beaumont recounted waking to Livingston, threatening her with a knife. William's cravat seemingly strangled him when she then described how Leah had crept into the room and confronted the man. But his thoughts stumbled when Miss Beaumont finally reported that the villain had informed them that someone called Onyx had ordered their deaths—both hers and her father's—for meddling in affairs that didn't concern them.

"What affairs?" William rasped. "What—other than my sister's kidnapping—is going on here?"

"That is what Miss Beaumont and I have been trying to figure out for some time now," Mr. Harcourt said.

"Forgive us," Miss Beaumont said. "We had no idea that our investigation would in any way cross with yours."

"If we'd known it," Mr. Harcourt continued, "we never would have agreed to help you. Your case is critical, but ours is deadly." Mr. Harcourt's voice carried a dangerous edge, but William barely heard him. He only saw Leah's trembling hands resting on the table's polished surface.

Without thinking, he touched the back of one of them. Her skin felt cold beneath his fingertips. "Are you well, Leah?"

"I am."

William exhaled in relief. "And you, Miss Beaumont? You both appear remarkably composed after such a harrowing ordeal."

"Thank you for your concern," Miss Beaumont said, "but I assure you, Miss Crauford and I are well."

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances," Mr. Harcourt said.

"What do you mean, sir?" William peered between the three of them. "Something more is wrong, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Mr. Harcourt answered. "As Miss Beaumont said, the ladies apprehended Livingston and handed him over to the constables, but somehow, on the way to Newgate, he escaped."

"What?" William sat up taller. "That villain is free to attack the ladies again?"

"He won't get a chance," Mr. Harcourt said.

The two men assessed one another.

At last, William turned his attention back to Leah and Miss Beaumont. "How do you suppose he got away?"

"That's what we were trying to ascertain when you arrived," Miss Beaumont said.

"The constables had bound him quite thoroughly when they left with him," Leah added, "but somehow he broke free of them."

William held Leah's gaze for a moment and looked back at Mr. Harcourt. "What have you determined so far?"

"Only that someone must have helped him," Mr. Harcourt replied. "An accomplice, maybe, who followed the prison cart. Or a hireling."

Miss Beaumont straightened in her chair. "Of course. A hireling. Like an urchin. With the streets as crowded as they are, anyone—even a child—could have crept close to the wagon and distracted the constables. No one would have given a second thought to a child."

Leah groaned. "Which is probably why he'd use a child. An adult accomplice would be hard enough to locate, but an urchin would be ten times worse."

"That might not be entirely true," Mr. Harcourt said. "I know a couple of young fellows who live in the rookery. I'll ask them to see what they can find out."

"Good idea," Miss Beaumont said.

He smiled a little and gave the lady a slight nod.

“What about the villain himself?” William asked. “Could he have had any instruments—like a pick or file—concealed on his person? Something he could use to break out of the handcuffs?”

“No,” Leah said. “That was one of my first thoughts too, but the constables searched him well before hauling him away. And anyway, Constable Dunn also sat with him inside the cart. The man couldn’t possibly have broken out of the handcuffs without being seen.”

“Perhaps not,” Mr. Harcourt said. “But somehow he did just that and got away, though that part’s not all that difficult to imagine. Constable Dunn is neither large nor sturdy. Livingston could have pushed him aside and jumped out of the cart with little trouble.”

William scowled. “Why do the authorities hire such weak men to be constables?”

The others shifted in their seats and glanced at one another.

William lowered his fist. “Forgive my outburst.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Leah said. “We’re upset about the situation too.” She thrummed her fingers across her chair’s armrest, betraying her own agitation.

“This line of thought isn’t getting us anywhere,” Miss Beaumont said. “Not for our case or for yours. Why don’t you tell us, Sir Talbot, about your trip to Gretna Green. What did you learn?”

William frowned. “Only more upsetting news. My worst nightmare for my sister has come true. She *is* married.”

“No.” Leah clamped her hand over her mouth.

“What was the blackguard’s name?” Mr. Harcourt said.

William pulled a folded paper from his waistcoat and flicked it in front of him. “Mr. Evan Thatcher,” he sneered. “Much too common to stand out.”

Mr. Harcourt took the paper, read it, and handed it back to him. “Perhaps he’s not from London.”

“Or at least, not from the upper class,” Miss Beaumont suggested.

“Mr. Evan Thatcher,” Leah said. “It has a rather unique sound to it. I wonder . . . might it be a fictional name?”

William blinked. “You mean fraud?” A shadow flickered through his mind. He’d known a fraudster once, years ago, but that man’s name had

been Simon. "If it is fraud, it will make it easier—and hopefully faster—to have the marriage annulled."

"Good," Leah blurted. "What then should be our next course of action? Ought we bring these discoveries before Constable Dunn?"

"And trust the man who lost Livingston?" Mr. Harcourt said. "I think not."

William groaned. He slipped the marriage record back into his waistcoat. "I'm a fool. I wanted to hurry things along, so this morning . . . unfortunately, I've already left Thatcher's name at the constables' office."

"Let's hope your information doesn't get lost," Mr. Harcourt muttered.

Miss Beaumont briefly touched the back of Mr. Harcourt's hand. "Come now, sir. That seems rather cynical, don't you think?"

"A cynicism based on many years of dealing with the police's incompetence. I should not have relied on them. I should have come and collected Livingston myself."

"You're taking blame where none is warranted." Miss Beaumont spoke evenly, calmly, as if she was trying to soothe Mr. Harcourt's nerves, and the man's posture relaxed. "You did exactly what you should have done," she added.

"Quite right," Leah said. "We've had a setback, to be sure, but we mustn't let it stop our investigations. I know I'm not giving up my search for Miss Talbot."

William nodded to her. "Nor am I."

Leah's gaze at him suddenly warmed, and William's heartbeat quickened, but in the next moment, she turned away from him. "What's our next step?" she asked Miss Beaumont.

"Continue where we left off, I suppose. With the Colbornes' guest list."

"How many people do you still have to investigate?" William asked.

"Two," Leah said. "No, three, but . . ." She tilted her head, and her gaze drifted to the middle distance.

William leaned toward her. "You've thought of something, haven't you?"

She peered from one to the other of them and moistened her lips. "Perhaps, but I'm not certain. There is one thing that keeps coming to my mind, though."

"What is it?" Mr. Harcourt asked.

Leah closed her eyes. Her lower lip trembled. Until that moment, she had displayed remarkable composure regarding Livingston's attack. Was the full import of the incident only now sinking in?

"Last evening's events must have been quite harrowing," William said gently. "You must know how much I wish I could have prevented it."

"As do I," Mr. Harcourt said.

"No," Leah said, her voice barely stirring the taut air. "It's about when Susanna and I were attacked."

William jolted upright.

"What are you remembering?" Miss Beaumont asked.

"As I said, I'm not certain." Leah's throat worked as she swallowed. "I'm not even sure it's a memory. It's just . . ." She drew a steadying breath. "Sometimes I wonder how it was that I escaped the ruffians while Miss Talbot didn't? Do you think they might have intentionally let me go?"

William's chest constricted at the thought of Leah and Susanna in those villains' hands, but somehow he kept his voice steady. "That doesn't make sense. Their motives must have been money, and as I recall, your dowry is not insubstantial."

"Perhaps you're right." Leah frowned, and hugging herself, ran her hands up and down her arms.

William's protective instincts jumped to attention, and he stood. "Forgive me. You must be cold." The words tumbled out before he could master himself. "What can we get to see to your comfort? A blanket, perhaps? Or, Miss Beaumont, I know it's not time for tea, but it might be—"

"No, no." Leah's lips trembled like candlelight in a draft. "Thank you, but I am quite well."

"Are you certain?"

"I am. Thank you for your concern, but I'm not cold. A bit distressed is all. Please. Sit."

William studied her a moment. Satisfied her lips no longer trembled, he again took his seat. "Very well."

Miss Beaumont squeezed Leah's forearm. "What has distressed you, dear?"

Leah pressed her hand against her upper chest, her fingers catching on the delicate lace at her collar. "Forgive me. I truly didn't think of this until a moment ago, but . . ." Her gaze met William's. "I watched out the window as the constables struggled to get Livingston into the back of the prison cart. As they grappled with him, Livingston pulled Constable Dunn's collar askew."

William held her gaze, drawn by the growing certainty in her voice.

"There were scratches on the back of Constable Dunn's neck. Large ones. Red enough that I could see them, even at that distance."

Leah cupped both her cheeks. "The night Susanna was taken, I fought the man who grabbed me. I did everything I could to get away—kicked him, struck him. And I . . ." Her voice caught, and William scowled. "And I scratched the back of his neck. Deeply."

The air thickened. Both Miss Beaumont and Mr. Harcourt shifted forward in their seats, and William gripped his chair's armrests.

"What are you saying?" The words scraped from William's throat even as pieces of the puzzle rearranged themselves with horrible clarity. "You think Constable Dunn is . . . Scratches aren't enough to suspect—"

"His voice, too," Leah cut in louder. "The man who attacked me didn't say much, but his words were garbled. No, rough. Especially when he was angry. Constable Dunn's voice sounded like that when he was shoving the man into the cart." She wound the strings of her reticule. "I didn't connect those facts until now. And the constable's height . . ." She turned to Miss Beaumont. "Have you noticed that Constable Dunn stoops a little when he speaks to ladies? I'd thought that maybe we made him nervous. But when he was fighting with Livingston—"

"He stood at his full height," Miss Beaumont finished.

"He was the same height as the man who tried to kidnap me."

The revelation dropped between them like a stone into still water, and the sunlight that had warmed the room moments ago now seemed harsh, exposing too much truth at once.

"If Constable Dunn is one of the kidnappers," Mr. Harcourt ventured, "and I'm not saying that he is, but if he is, that does explain why he's been so interested in our investigation despite his other cases. Every detail we've shared . . ."

"Has gone straight to the criminals," William said between his teeth. "But why such a deception, considering we could eventually uncover their ruse? As we may have just done?"

"Because the longer they could keep us in the dark, the more opportunities they'd have to glean information," Miss Beaumont said.

"What information would they want from us? If Constable Dunn is one of the ruffians, all he'd want to know is that we aren't on his trail."

"True enough," Mr. Harcourt said.

"Unless that's not all they need to know." Leah's voice barely touched the air.

"What do you mean?" William forced himself to stay in his seat.

"I hardly know." Leah's gaze turned inward, that familiar, lovely crease appearing between her brows—the one William had come to associate with her most brilliant insights.

The others also watched her.

She grimaced a little and took a deep breath. "Last night, Livingston said something odd. He said I was a fool if I thought I'd find her first. I didn't know what he was talking about at the time, but now . . . he said *her*."

The implication hung between them like suspended crystal, catching light from every angle.

William's heart pounded against his ribs. "Are you suggesting they've lost track of my sister?"

"I am." Leah's voice grew stronger. "Maybe. Perhaps."

"That would explain Constable Dunn's interest in us," Miss Beaumont said.

"Hovering interest." Mr. Harcourt growled. "And always with questions about where we plan to look next. He's been using us to narrow his search."

"If he is indeed one of the fiends who attacked us," Leah said.

"And ultimately helped Livingston escape," Mr. Harcourt said.

"Might our two cases be more than just mildly connected?" Miss Beaumont asked.

The four regarded one another. The echo of her words faded into a suffocating stillness.

"Perhaps they are and perhaps they aren't," Miss Beaumont said at last, "but in either case, I wager Miss Crauford is right about Constable Dunn."

"Which means—" William jumped to his feet. He paced to the window and back. "My sister might have actually got away from them, just as you did, Miss Crauford. She may yet be concealed somewhere in London."

"If she is, we need to find her before they do." Leah punctuated her words with a gentle tap on the tabletop. "Which requires that we think differently than we did before. Maybe that way, we can mislead them from our true plans."

"Well done," Miss Beaumont said softly. She nodded at Leah and glanced at Mr. Harcourt, who raised an eyebrow. "What I mean to say," Miss Beaumont continued, "is that Miss Crauford has made a very good suggestion. Perhaps, rather than considering where Miss Talbot would likely go—which they are probably also doing—we should examine where she would not go and thereby misdirect them."

Leah widened her eyes as if coming to a realization and wagged her forefinger in front of her. "Right before the highwaymen attacked our carriage, Miss Talbot and I were talking about how we used to play hide-and-seek in Brighton and how everyone else always struggled to find me. What if Miss Talbot is doing what I did? What if she, knowing she's being chased, went where ruffians would never think she would go?"

"That is . . . ingenious." William, picturing his squeamish sister, furrowed his brows. "But even if she did do that, she would still need that haven to be someplace where she felt safe."

Leah nodded. "Let's try to think as Miss Talbot would." She removed her notebook and pencil from her reticule, which had rested in her lap. "Now then, Sir Talbot, if your sister escaped and knew the villains were chasing her, knew she dared not seek refuge with us—"

"Or was a great distance away from either of you," Miss Beaumont inserted.

"Where else would she trust her safety?"

William returned to his seat. "It's difficult to say. To be sure, she lived here in London for a few years, but I expect she spent most of her time at the finishing school." He rubbed the back of his neck. "A church or a convent, perhaps?"

Leah pursed her lips. "That is a good suggestion. There's a church not far from the academy. Miss Talbot, like myself, was very familiar with it. So, if as Miss Beaumont pointed out, Miss Talbot could get to that church, I could see her hiding there." She wrote that information in her notebook.

"What about the academy itself?" William asked. "She might run there to hide."

"We can rule that out," Miss Beaumont said. "The headmistress was one of the Colbornes' guests for the masquerade ball, and Miss Crauford and I already visited the place. Miss Talbot wasn't there."

"Besides," Leah added, "I suspect that is one of the first places the ruffians would look for her."

"Indeed." William pressed his lips into a flat line and drummed his fingers against his knee. "The ball . . . What about a seamstress? Or even a modiste? No doubt, my sister had several fashionable dresses made for her here in London."

"Of course," Leah said. "That would make perfect sense. Miss Talbot loved fashion."

"Which modiste did she patronize?" Mr. Harcourt asked. "Anyone in particular?"

"To my recollection, she frequented two establishments," Leah said, "but the more fashionable shop, owned by Madame Delacroix, has private rooms above stairs where they house the seamstresses. And—" Leah paused. "Miss Talbot often remarked on how pleased she was with the lady, especially over her discretion in not repeating any of the gossip she might accidentally tell her."

Hope trickled through William, and he inhaled a deep, relieving breath. "Might Madame Delacroix offer my sister sanctuary without sending us word?"

"I believe she would," Leah said.

"For a fee, no doubt," Miss Beaumont added.

All turned to her.

Miss Beaumont glanced between the three of them. "Forgive me. I misspoke. While I have heard of Madame Delacroix, I don't know her personally."

"Perhaps not," Leah said, "yet what you assume is likely correct. From my experience, the woman does prize wealth and consequence. But she also prizes her clientele. I think she would take Miss Talbot in, no questions asked, because she'd believe herself not only to be protecting Miss Talbot's welfare, but also her own financial interests."

William slapped the table top. "Madame Delacroix it is."

Leah added the lady's name to her notebook and looked up. "The church, Madame Delacroix's . . . any other suggestions where the constables wouldn't already think to look?"

"Perhaps it isn't likely for a lady of Miss Talbot's position," Mr. Harcourt said, "but might she have found an outbuilding of some sort and is now hiding entirely on her own?"

William shook his head. "My sister would despise such a place. Even as a child, she hated dirt. Especially bugs."

"True," Leah said, "but Miss Talbot is also strong and resourceful. A woman who can outwit her captors isn't likely to succumb to whatever fate throws at her next. She would do whatever was necessary to survive."

"Exactly," Mr. Harcourt added. "The human spirit is stronger than many believe."

Leah gave a slight nod, and Miss Beaumont lightly touched Mr. Harcourt's forearm, which rested on the table in front of him. "As you well know," she said.

The man didn't answer her, but William caught the softening in Mr. Harcourt's expression as he gazed at Miss Beaumont. *The man is as besotted with Miss Beaumont as I am with Leah.*

William's thoughts stilled. Around him, life continued its ever-moving pace—the chime of a nearby clock marking the quarter hour, afternoon light casting patterns across the elegant furnishings, jasmine scent drifting from the fresh flowers. But within him, everything had altered. His instant thought of Leah had seemingly sprung from nowhere, yet the truth of it felt as familiar as an old friend. *I love Leah*, he again repeated inside his mind.

"Anywhere else we should investigate?" Leah prompted again.

William didn't yet trust his voice, so he shook his head.

"Well then," Miss Beaumont said, "let's continue on with what we have. Since there are still a few of the Colbornes' guests we haven't yet spoken with, Mr. Harcourt and I will interview them. Sir Talbot, you and Miss Crauford take the church and Madame Delacroix's shop."

"Divide and conquer," William said.

"Exactly," Mr. Harcourt said.

Leah and Miss Beaumont retired to prepare for their outings, while Mr. Harcourt went to apprise Miss Beaumont's aunt of their plans. Left alone in the drawing room, William paced, twice pulling out the paper to reread the name of Susanna's blackguard husband before stuffing it back in his pocket. But Mr. Crauford's stubborn insistence about Leah's future hovered over the whole of it.

William scowled. What claim did he have on Leah's affections beyond their playacting in their youth?

Nothing official.

But surely their years of friendship counted for something, didn't they? Enough to cast aside his scruples and confess his feelings now despite the current danger? And before Fortescue's patience with Leah ran out?

They had to.

Chapter 15

LEAH'S SKIRTS RUSTLED AGAINST the leather as she and Miss Beaumont's maid settled onto the forward-facing seat while William took his place across from them. It was already nearly two o'clock, which meant they'd only have time to visit Madame Delacroix, but at least it was a start.

Their carriage moved forward, but the clatter of wheels and clip of hooves approached from behind, followed by a man's shout. "Ho, there!"

Muffled voices between the driver and someone else carried on above. Leah pressed closer to the window, straining to hear.

A familiar voice.

Leah's stomach plummeted. *Surely that isn't—!*

The door yanked open. Afternoon light flooded the dim interior. It was their driver. "Excuse me, sir, ladies, but this gentleman wishes to speak with Miss Crauford."

William, beside her, tensed. "What the deuce for?"

A gentleman with graying temples and the quiet dignity of a scholar appeared in the doorway, blocking the light. "Because I am her—"

"Father!" Leah leaned forward on the seat. "What are you doing here? Has something happened?"

"I believe I'm the one who should be asking you that question." Father stepped in front of the driver, favoring his left side. "Miss Beaumont's aunt had the goodness to send me a message about your ordeal last night and about the dangers you still face, and I have come to bring you home. I understand your concern for your friend, Leah, but I will not allow you to continue to put yourself in danger."

"But Father—"

He held his open hand out to her, and her face warmed with embarrassment. Father had a right—a responsibility, even—to protect her, but

couldn't he see that she was no longer a child in need of his constant reprimands?

She glanced over at William. He frowned at her, but he also gave her a slight understanding nod.

She exhaled and took Father's hand. He helped her from the post chaise. William climbed out behind her.

"I have always admired your good sense, daughter," Father said when she stood next to him, "which is why I'm disappointed that the missive didn't come from you." He glanced behind her at William. "Worse, as you were leaving with Sir Talbot, who was not, I assume, returning you home, it appears you had no intention of informing me at all about last night's ordeal."

"I would have told you everything once I returned home."

"You mean, when it was too late for me to stop you from continuing your investigation."

"It's not that at all," Leah said. "It's only that we've been so busy that we—"

"Come along, daughter. It's time you return to your comfortable and *safe* home."

Leah lowered her gaze to her trembling hands and drew in a measured breath, just as Father had taught her to do during stressful moments. Still, the bitter taste of his command lingered. What he meant was she must abandon her search, forsake every romantic dream that felt like life to her, and fulfill her duty to Mr. Fortescue.

"Forgive me, sir." William reached for Leah's arm, hesitated, and lowered his hand. He curled his fingers into a tight fist at his side. "You're right that we should have informed you of last night's events. However, as you can see, Miss Crauford is unharmed. You needn't worry, for Mr. Harcourt and I will ensure the ladies' protection while we search for Susanna."

Leah's heart skipped a beat at the quiet intensity threading through his words, at the way his gaze dwelt on her face a moment too long before returning to Father. If she didn't know better, for that tiny moment she'd have thought he felt more than friendship for her.

Foolish heart. She mustn't read meaning into empty gestures.

"I'm glad to hear you have some sense to you, sir," Father replied, "but it isn't enough. I, as Leah's father, cannot allow her to continue with such dangerous activities."

"I understand your concern," William said, "but we're talking about my sister's life. Leah's help is critical, and her investigative skills are impeccable."

The heat from Leah's embarrassment over Father's comments still lingered in her cheeks, but William's praise burned them even hotter. Did he truly think that highly of her?

"As I said," Father replied, "I am sorry for you and your family's situation, but I am sure you also understand mine. Come, Leah."

Leah made herself take her father's arm. She peered up at William. "You will keep me informed, won't you?"

"I will. And when you are able to return—"

Leah gave a quick shake of her head, cutting him off, and he furrowed his brows. Hadn't he understood that Father would likely not permit her to help him further?

She turned back to Father. "I will of course go with you, but may I have a moment to speak with William first? I have information he needs."

Father frowned, released her, and headed toward his barouche. When he was out of earshot, Leah sidled closer to William and whispered, "I'm sorry. Keep interviewing the people on our list, and I'll try to change Father's mind."

"Do you think you can?"

Father, standing next to his carriage, glanced at Leah and William and checked his pocket watch.

"I don't know," Leah said. "I fear I've run out his patience. But if I can't convince him to let me investigate more—" She swallowed the emotion building in her throat. "Please know I will celebrate from a distance when you find Susanna."

"From a distance? Your father's house isn't that far away."

But Mr. Fortescue's is. If I've married him by that time. She lowered her head. "Of course. And anyway, you'll find her soon." *Please, God.*

"I pray you're right." William lifted her chin with his forefinger and held her gaze. "Leah? Are you well?"

Tingles raced from his fingertip down her throat and around her heart. If only this moment could stand still and she could continue looking into his eyes, swimming in the emotions that swirled through her.

She swallowed, and he dropped his hand.

"I'm well," she said. "I'm only—" *I don't want to marry Mr. Fortescue.* "Unhappy."

William's jaw muscles worked in and out. "Why?"

Leah shook her head. "You needn't worry. I'll be fine."

"Leah," Father called from the carriage.

Leah lifted her forefinger, indicating she needed another minute, and looked back at William.

"You'll be fine." Her lips trembled, but somehow she steadied her voice. "Susanna will be fine. We'll all be fine."

"Of course."

She managed a quick smile, sank into a curtsy, and turned before her composure cracked.

"Leah." William's touch on her elbow was feather light, yet it halted her as surely as an iron grip might have done.

"Yes?"

He withdrew his hand, but the warmth lingered. "Do what you can to convince your father to let you return, and I'll move forward as best I can." His words fell to a whisper. "However, if I don't hear from you soon, don't be surprised if I appear at your door."

Emotion fluttered through Leah's chest. How like a scene from a romantic novel—the determined gentleman demanding entrance to see his beloved. The notion was ridiculous, of course. William's concern stemmed purely from long-time friendship and their shared mission to find Susanna. Still, Leah allowed herself a single, all-encompassing moment to savor the warmth of her imagination.

She tilted her head, studying his face, searching for any hint that he might share her fanciful thoughts. But no—his expression held only gravity and something that made her heart ache with a desire to comfort him. "Try not to worry, my friend. We have good leads. We'll find Susanna."

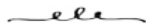
William straightened. He swallowed—his throat working against his cravat—and stepped back. They were quick, simple movements, but

something about them felt as if a solid, forever-closed curtain dropped between them.

Leah furrowed her brows. "What is it? Did I say something wrong?"

"Not at all. You were very . . . correct." He took another step back. "Thank you, Leah." He whirled and headed to his carriage.

"You're welcome, William," Leah whispered.



The barouche's wheels clattered against the cobblestones, each turn seemingly taking her farther from both Susanna and William. What had happened in those final moments? Why had William withdrawn from her? All she'd told him was not to worry. That they would find Susanna. They were simple, encouraging words. Nothing that should have upset him.

She and Father traveled a half hour in silence.

At last, Father said in the gentle tone he'd always used when she was upset as a child, "You need not look so glum." He shifted in his seat, pressing his hand against his side, and Leah slumped. The tight lines around his mouth and the careful way he held himself indicated the beating he'd taken still pained him. And here she was, adding to his worries, making him travel all this way because she'd been too stubborn to stay safely at home.

"You've had your chance to look for your friend. Indeed, no one could think otherwise. Not even Susanna." He leaned forward, wincing slightly, and took her hand. "I'm sorry, my dear, but as your father, I must take a stand. When I received that missive about the attack . . ." His voice cracked. "Leah, I've already lost your mother. I cannot—will not—lose you too."

Leah's throat tightened at the raw emotion in his voice. "Oh, Father." She squeezed his hand. "I'm being careful. Truly, I am."

"Are you?" He gestured to the discoloration on the back of her hand. "That bruise suggests otherwise." His fingers trembled slightly as he released her. "It is time you focus on your own safety and future."

"How do you suppose I can relegate my time to sitting in drawing rooms and making polite conversations, all the while knowing Susanna's been forced into marriage? She's in even greater danger now than when they first took her."

Father, watching Leah from his seat across from her, arched an eyebrow. "You consider marriage a danger? Is that what this investigation of yours is really about? Avoiding marriage to Mr. Fortescue?"

"Father!" Leah drew back as if he struck her. "That's hardly fair. I've done everything you've asked of me."

"You haven't married Mr. Fortescue."

Leah clenched her reticule and turned away from him. She gazed, unseeing, out the window. "No, but I have encouraged him."

"Somewhat. But that's no longer enough. He has been waiting, most patiently, I might add, but it's time for you to embrace your future and accept him."

Leah closed her eyes. She pressed her lips into a tight line and inhaled a long, full breath. She held back her shout. "I don't love him, and he doesn't love me."

"Love is highly overrated, Leah." Father's voice softened, and something in his expression made her heart ache. "Your mother and I married for love, and those years were the happiest of my life. But when she died . . ." He swallowed hard. "I failed to secure our future. Failed to provide for you as I should have. Mr. Fortescue is a good man. A patient man. And as you must allow, an attentive man."

Leah glimpsed the shame in his eyes, the slight tremor in his hands as he smoothed his coat. How many nights had he lain awake, worrying about their family's future? About *her* future?

"He has even acted against his own desires for marriage and hired men to aid you with your investigation merely because he wanted to be of service to you." Father's voice strengthened with conviction. "He has not said as much, but as his friend, I have seen the depth of his feelings for you. In truth, the man hardly knows what to do with himself, and I fear that struggle will not end until you finally agree to be his wife."

Nausea roiled through her. Still, she wound the drawstring of her reticule around her wrist. She wanted so desperately to ease the burden she saw weighing on her father's shoulders. If only doing so didn't require sacrificing her heart.

Father sighed. "I've already said this, but it's worth repeating. Mr. Fortescue is a good man. By marrying him, your needs will be met."

And your debts will be paid.

If Leah had read those words in a novel, she'd have thought them bitter. But she didn't feel bitter. She only felt sad that Father had found himself in such circumstances. At least, as Father occasionally reminded her, God had sent them Mr. Fortescue, and through the union of their families, would provide them with a way out of their financial difficulties. Marriage to Mr. Fortescue was a good thing.

Leah wished she could believe that. She truly wanted to be a blessing to her father. Yet how could she marry Mr. Fortescue? She loved William.

Leah shifted in her seat and repeated her father's words inside her mind.

Mr. Fortescue is a blessing to our family.

And to me?

William's face—that flash of something like pain before he'd shuttered his expression and stepped away—jumped in front of her thoughts, and her chest tightened. “Women, like men, are duty bound to form and follow their own paths,” her grandmother's voice said inside her mind. *But what if that person cannot have what they desire?*

Leah frowned and lowered her eyes. Occasionally, she peered out at the passing landscape—sometimes buildings, sometimes countryside—and other times she glanced at Father, who'd fallen asleep. Her own bold words about women's autonomy rang hollow now. But as William's image kept intruding upon her thoughts, she fell back on the bitter wisdom she'd learned: desires, however fierce, must sometimes be abandoned.

Nearly three hours later, the carriage stopped. Leah stretched out her back, and Father opened his eyes. He winced as he straightened. “We must be home.”

Home. Where she would remain while William searched alone. The thought brought back their parting with confused clarity—how his eyes had seemingly glazed with pain just after she'd said, “Try not to worry, my friend.”

Her breath hitched. *Friend*. Was that the word that had upset him? Did he no longer consider her his friend now that she'd abandoned him, leaving him to search for Susanna on his own?

Dear Father in Heaven, she silently prayed, *please let that not be the case.*

The carriage wobbled as the coachmen climbed down from his perch. Leah lifted her chin. Father straightened. Their driver opened the door. Father, after climbing out, turned and helped her out, but before she'd climbed down the second step, she froze. She looked beyond Father toward their front portico. A gentleman, facing them with his hands properly placed behind his back, stood next to the door. Mr. Fortescue.

Chapter 16

“FATHER!” HEAT BURNED LEAH’S senses even as cold dropped through her core. “Don’t tell me you brought Mr. Fortescue here already.”

“Very well, I won’t tell you.”

“But after last night, and Susanna’s still missing . . . I’m not at all ready to meet with the man.”

“Calm yourself, dear. You look lovely.”

Leah clutched her reticule. Of course, she, as her father’s only daughter, was much like a commodity he should use to the betterment of himself and their family. It was her duty. But surely that didn’t mean he couldn’t also listen to her. Not only to her words, but also to what those words truly meant. After all, that was what William did.

She smoothed her hand down her skirt and clenched her fist.

Besides, she did not look lovely. Shortly before Father had collected her from Baldwin Estate and thereby William’s company, Leah had assessed herself in the hallway mirror. Shadow-stained rings rimmed her eyes, and her dark hair, hanging lifeless in its pins, held nothing of its usual gleam. What was more, after such a long, wearisome carriage ride with Father, her entire countenance must now appear even more dull and defeated.

“Come now, daughter.” Father motioned for her to walk with him to their portico, and Leah pressed her lips into a tight line. Might her dowdiness be a good thing? Could it possibly work to her favor and dissuade Mr. Fortescue’s attentions?

Don’t think that way. Father’s freedom from debt will make us both happy. Almost.

She, frowning, let Father lead her down the pathway, but she released his arm when they were only a few steps away from the portico. "Truly, Father, this is most unkind. You should have at least warned me this was coming."

"You did know it was coming. Perhaps not at this moment, but you knew." He cleared his throat. "Settle yourself, my dear. I have been careful in my choice, and I'm certain Mr. Fortescue will make you a good husband. This is an advantageous match."

Fie! She certainly wouldn't call a union with Mr. Fortescue an advantageous match—not for herself that was—but it certainly wasn't an evil one. *He is a gentleman. His attention to me is unfailingly solicitous. I must not discount his interest in me nor his ability to rescue our family.*

Leah took in a deep breath, stood taller, and drew back her shoulders. "I will be ready when the time comes."

Father smiled a little and murmured, "Good girl."

When she and Father reached the three cement steps that led up to their portico, Mr. Fortescue moved toward them. At the same time, he pulled his arms out from behind his back and held out a large bouquet of flowers. "For you, my dear Miss Crauford."

Leah stiffened. The bouquet consisted of summer roses and sweet peas tied together with a simple white ribbon. Mr. Fortescue had once asked her what her favorite flower was because he wished to lavish it upon her. She'd replied that she especially loved two particular flowers—roses and sweet peas. He'd smiled and said he knew all the best places to purchase roses, since his late wife had also loved them. Indeed, he'd surrounded her with them, and he would do the same for Leah.

Then Leah had smiled and nodded, acknowledging his assurances, but inside, she'd bristled. It was a kindness, to be sure, but it wasn't specifically for her. It was instead wrapped in memories of his first wife. Leah would sleep in his first wife's bedchamber, tend his first wife's gardens, and now receive his first wife's favorite flowers. Even the heir she was meant to provide would, she knew, have been better received from his beloved first wife's womb. *I'm not very important to him.*

And yet . . . Leah's fingers trembled as she traced the delicate sweet pea blossoms. These weren't his late wife's favorites at all. These were hers. How different they were from the wildflowers William used to gather for

her and Susanna during their childhood rambles, presenting them with exaggerated bows that would send them all into fits of laughter. Those simple blooms had meant more to her than all of Mr. Fortescue's carefully cultivated roses ever could. Still, William had never thought to ask which flowers she loved best, but Mr. Fortescue had asked.

Realization settled in her chest like a warm stone.

Mr. Fortescue listened to me. And remembered.

Leah took the bouquet from him and lifted the blooms to her nose, breathing in their fragrance. "Thank you. They're lovely."

"They certainly are," Father said. "But this is not the good man's only gift. Go ahead, sir. Don't keep my daughter waiting."

Leah, shaking her head, inched back from them. "I don't need another gift."

"I disagree," Mr. Fortescue said. "I want nothing more than to shower you with them. But in this case, I fear it is only a gift of words." His eyes suddenly bright, he glanced down the length of her and sidestepped. "After you." He motioned them toward the door.

Father guided Leah past Mr. Fortescue and through the front door, with Mr. Fortescue following behind them. The housekeeper met them in the entry hall. Father instructed her to put Leah's flowers in water and to bring them to the drawing room. He then led Leah and Mr. Fortescue to the drawing room, where Father handed Leah onto the upholstered couch—the same one where he had recuperated after their attack. The two men then took their seats in the matching armchairs across from her. They smiled, watching her.

Leah shifted in her seat, clasping her hands in her lap. Both men gazed at her expectantly, and she lowered her gaze. What had Mr. Fortescue meant by having "a gift of words?"

"You did know it was coming," Father's voice said inside her mind.

No, please don't let Mr. Fortescue propose now.

"My gift to you, dear Miss Crauford," Mr. Fortescue said, "is information. About your friend."

Leah exhaled a long breath of relief and sat taller in her seat. "Oh! That's wonderful." She removed her notebook and pencil from her reticule and opened to an empty page. "What is it?"

Mr. Fortescue, holding her gaze, removed a folded piece of paper from his waistcoat pocket and held it out to her. His finger brushed hers when she took it from him, and she swallowed.

"My hired man informed me," he continued, "that a woman of Miss Talbot's description, a woman he very much believes was the lady, was seen in the company of two gentlemen in a small community outside of Richmond."

Leah smiled and sat up taller. She was with *two* gentlemen? Not alone, as she and the others had begun to suspect? "Do you know when?"

"They didn't say. But it couldn't have been many days ago."

Leah set her notebook and pencil on the couch next to her and opened the missive. She scanned the quickly scrawled words. "I must get this information to Sir Talbot immediately." She shifted forward in her seat.

"There's no need for you to get up, my dear," Father said. "I'll send a servant. Ahh . . . here's the housekeeper. Mrs. Winters, please have the manservant deliver Miss Crauford's missive to Sir William Talbot."

"Yes, sir." Mrs. Winters set the vase containing Mr. Fortescue's flowers on the end table next to the door.

Leah, after sliding back in her seat, removed a sheet of paper from her notebook and wrote a message to William. She addressed it to Liongate Inn, his current residence, and handed it to Mrs. Winters.

"When you finish with that," Father said to Mrs. Winters, "I believe we could do with some tea and biscuits."

She nodded and left the room.

Leah turned her attention back to the men in front of her. Their stares at her grew so intent that Leah lowered her head. She fiddled with her reticule.

Finally, Father said, "Forgive our housekeeper, Mr. Fortescue. Mrs. Winters is usually much more prompt."

"You needn't concern yourself on that front. Indeed, I fear my heart is in need of greater nourishment than my stomach."

Leah looked up. She flinched backward as chills of understanding shot through her. *No*.

Father didn't even glance at Leah. "What can I do to relieve your suffering, sir?"

Mr. Fortescue ran his hands down his pant legs. "I wonder if it would be possible for me to speak with Miss Crauford alone for a few minutes."

Cold draped the room, and dread wrapped its icy tendrils around Leah's shoulders. "Certainly there can be no reason for us to be alone."

"Your modesty does you credit, my dear," Father said, "but I am sure you can see that Mr. Fortescue has every reason to speak with you alone." He stood. "Well then, sir, I will inform Mrs. Winters that you must not be disturbed." He gave Leah a brief, sidelong glance and left the room.

Again, Leah shifted in her seat. What could she do? How could she escape? She'd always known this day would come, yet she'd hoped that somehow it would miraculously be years in the future. So many years, in fact, that Mr. Fortescue would likely die before they ever formed an arrangement of marriage.

A sliver of guilt jabbed at Leah's heart for the unkind thought. Was she not the same girl who had once scolded a young William for mocking his aged neighbor for walking so slowly? "We must be kind to everyone," she had declared with all the wisdom of her eight years. Now here she sat, harboring equally unkind thoughts about an older gentleman who had shown her nothing but interest and consideration.

She squeezed her skirts as the weight of her secret pressed against her chest. Would it not be more honorable to confess her attachment to William before accepting Mr. Fortescue's suit? The very thought made her throat constrict. Such a confession would not only dash her father's hopes, but might also sever the delicate thread of friendship that existed between their family and the Talbots. Worse, how could she face Susanna—when they found her—or especially her brother, knowing she had revealed feelings for William that were never meant to see the light of day?

"My dear Miss Crauford," Mr. Fortescue said.

Leah lifted her eyes to the man in front of her. His intent, somewhat watery gaze back at her seemingly burned her cheeks.

"You must know why I've asked to speak with you," he continued.

Leah's mouth soured. She gave him a slight nod.

"Though I do hope I chose the timing correctly." He leaned a few inches toward her and lowered his voice. "I know how important your friend is to you, so I told you what I'd learned about Miss Talbot first."

Leah swallowed, but at the same time, her thoughts tripped. He had put Leah's concern for Susanna's safety before his own desires. "That was truly kind of you, sir."

He smiled a little, and the late-afternoon sun streaming through the windows softened his weathered features. "I know there is a span in our ages—"

Almost a hundred years.

"—and I know I am not the sort of husband a young lady dreams of, but I believe I could be a good husband to you."

His words pierced a chord of truth in Leah's chest. She had dreamed of a different husband—one with laughing eyes and sun-brightened hair—but William would never see her as more than his sister's friend. He would never look at Leah with even an ounce of the same affection and desire that flowed from Mr. Fortescue's expression.

Honor demanded that she either decline Mr. Fortescue's offer or accept it with her whole heart. There could be no middle ground, no half measures in marriage. Yet there she sat, preparing to pledge her life to one man while her heart beat steadily for another.

And yet, if she confessed all to Mr. Fortescue, what then?

The memory of Father's drawn face and stooped posture when he'd spoken of their debts flashed in front of her. Of the regret that bristled through his voice when he'd told her of Mr. Fortescue's agreement to pay those debts as part of their marriage contract.

Leah bit her lower lip to stop it from quivering. Perhaps this was God's way of helping her move beyond her childish infatuation. After all, few women who'd passed through as many seasons as she had married for love, though hopefully, they had eventually learned to love their husbands. Yet even as Leah formed those thoughts, her heart whispered that William was different, that no amount of time would fade his image from her mind.

"But your father assures me," Mr. Fortescue continued, "that you are sensible enough to appreciate a marriage built on mutual respect rather than romantic passion." Sudden gentleness filled his eyes. "Though I do hope love, and even passion, will develop in time."

Leah swallowed hard over the word “passion.” And love? It hardly seemed possible. “You are most generous, sir. The men you’ve hired to search for Miss Talbot—”

“I would do more than that to prove myself worthy of you.” He leaned even closer, though he still maintained a respectful distance. “I promise you, Miss Crauford, that as my wife, you would have every resource at your disposal to help find your friend.”

Leah pressed her palm against her chest as if it might somehow slow her heart’s sudden pounding. This was Mr. Fortescue, the man her father assured her was honorable, kind, and worthy of her love. Yet she had judged him merely by his irritating mannerisms, his age, and his . . . everything that wasn’t William. Had she truly been so completely blind to the man’s good qualities? So unwilling to see him because he wasn’t her beloved William? Was she, in fact, a fool?

After all, marriage and motherhood—weren’t they her proper spheres? The places where she, as a woman, would find her greatest happiness in life? That was what their pastor had taught for as long as Leah could remember. Yet at the same time, her late grandmother, a dedicated bluestocking, would have encouraged her to follow her heart.

Her heart! With every current beat, it sang a different name. William. Only William. True, William didn’t love her in return, but her heart belonged to him. How could she possibly make this commitment to Mr. Fortescue when so much of William beat through her blood?

Mr. Fortescue sat up taller. “More than that, I offer you security, comfort, and a chance to help your family. Your father’s debts would be paid as part of our marriage settlement.”

The pounding in Leah’s heart simultaneously tightened and swelled. She brushed her hand over her lips. No matter how much she wished it wasn’t so, the answer to her prayers for rescuing Susanna, helping Father, and providing for her future security was all wrapped inside one man. Mr. Fortescue.

“I won’t pretend, my dear,” he continued, his voice softening. “You know my greatest wish is for an heir to my estate. My late wife—” His chin trembled. “We were never blessed with children. But you are young and healthy. You could give me what I most desire, and in return, I will

cherish you. Give you a position in society worthy of your gentle nature. And perhaps . . . perhaps in time, you might find contentment in my arms. As my wife."

She lifted her gaze to his. Something hot in his expression cringed through her, but she quickly squashed it. This was no monster, no villain. Just a lonely man who wanted what any gentleman of property wanted—an heir to carry on his name and legacy. And in return for those treasures, he offered her the answers to all her prayers—except for the impossible one. Perhaps this was what love truly meant: helping those she cared for, even if it meant sacrificing her own heart.

Leah swallowed, steadied her voice, and again peered into his eyes. *I have no other choice.* "Mr. Fortescue, I would be honored to accept your proposal."

The words of acceptance felt both true and false on her tongue. True because she felt honored by his regard, and false because she knew she could never give him her whole heart. But she could give him respect, loyalty, and, as he hoped, children. Perhaps that would be enough.

What if, years hence, when she had borne Mr. Fortescue's children and managed his household, she still found herself thinking of William? Would that not make her the worst sort of wife? She imagined future family gatherings, watching William bounce her children—Mr. Fortescue's children—on his knee, still as warm and brotherly as ever while she guarded her heart's secret. The weight of such pretense stretched before her like an endless road.

Mr. Fortescue opened his mouth as if to reply and closed it again. At last, he smiled. "You've made me very happy, my dear." He reached for her hand, his touch gentle. "I promise that you will not regret this decision."

He pressed his lips to her knuckles, and Leah closed her eyes, commanding the tears that threatened there not to fall. Perhaps, in time, duty and gratitude would grow into something stronger, something that might finally quiet the stubborn whispers of her heart.

Mr. Fortescue is a good man, she thought. *All will be well.*

Chapter 17

LEAH'S URGENT MISSIVE ABOUT Susanna burned in William's pocket, but the hours since he'd last heard her voice felt like an eternity in hell.

William shifted his weight on the creaking floorboard, studying his reflection in the hall mirror. Had anxiety left those visible marks on his countenance? He straightened his cravat—the precise knot Leah had once complimented—and rehearsed again the words he'd spent half the night perfecting.

He fought the urge to demand immediate entrance to Mr. Crauford's study. Ten thirty—perhaps too early for a morning call, but he'd warned Leah yesterday that he wouldn't wait long. Not with Susanna still missing, and not with Mr. Fortescue's intentions hanging over them like a storm cloud. Today, somehow, William would find the right moment to tell her of his feelings.

The housekeeper had disappeared up the stairs ages ago, leaving him to count the scratches on the coat rack while his mind churned with possibilities. Was Mr. Crauford deliberately making him wait? Had he somehow sensed William's intentions toward his daughter? Surely the mysterious visitor in his study couldn't warrant more consideration than the fate of a missing young lady.

But no matter. Nothing would deter him today. With each passing hour, the trail to Susanna grew colder, and Leah's sharp mind and connections had already proven invaluable to the search. Her father's disapproval aside, William had to convince him to allow her assistance once more—his sister's life might depend upon it.

Somewhere above him, a door opened and closed. He stiffened upright, his neck muscles tight. What was taking so long? Leah had never hesitated to receive him before.

Unless . . . perhaps she no longer wished to help him.

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to dismiss the thought. That couldn't be the reason. She had sent him that missive about Susanna's sighting. What was more, she knew as well as he did that every passing hour stretched the possibility of finding Susanna safe and well. They couldn't afford to waste time on social niceties, and yet there he stood, waiting in this narrow hall like any common morning caller, his heart thundering with far more than concern for his sister.

Another door clicked shut upstairs. William jerked his gaze toward the ceiling, straining to hear footsteps, voices, anything that might indicate progress.

Nothing sounded.

William gripped his hat. How long could Mr. Crauford's business meeting possibly last?

Again, William paced to the door. He stared at the ceramic dish of calling cards on the small oak table next to it. How many of them bore Mr. Fortescue's name?

"Sir Talbot?"

William whirled at the housekeeper's voice.

"Miss Crauford is waiting for you in the drawing room."

At last. William drew back his shoulders and followed the woman.

"Sir Talbot," she announced from the doorway. She stepped to the side, allowing him passage.

William's breath hitched at the site of Leah perched on the edge of the upholstered couch at the far side of the room. Something about her posture—the slight forward tilt of her shoulders and the way she held herself as if preparing to rise—spoke of uncertainty. But it was the bounce of late-morning sunlight off her dark hair that most caught his attention. The way a tendril that had escaped her usually neat coiffure brushed her cheek just below those deep, alluring eyes.

He swallowed. "Leah, are you well?"

Leah nodded a little and lowered her gaze to her lap. Her fingers trembled as she traced the edge of a leather-bound book. It looked new. Was it Byron's latest? Leah loved poetry, but she usually avoided Byron's intensely romantic themes. Something that glinted—jewelry?—also sat on her lap.

He glanced at the housekeeper, who still stood in the doorway, and drew toward Leah. Leah placed the items on the small table before her and again lifted her gaze to him. Her cheeks looked as if she'd stood next to a fire for too long, and though she didn't smile, her eyes sparkled. Were they tears?

"William," she said.

William's heart tripped at the emotion in her voice, and he swallowed.

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. "I didn't expect—that is, I'm pleased to see you."

"I received your note about Susanna being seen south of Richmond. I needed to thank you, and . . ." He hesitated, struck by the softness of her expression. "I had hoped to speak with your father."

"Oh?" She straightened, clearly trying to compose herself, and motioned him to the chair directly across from her. "You may wait with me until he's available."

"Thank you." William sat. "I went to the area you indicated to me. It was, as you said, a short distance away from the finishing school. I spoke with several townspeople there, but . . . well—I simply cannot continue this investigation without you. I hoped to convince your father to change his mind and allow you to help me. You know the area much better than I do."

"Actually . . ." Her voice brightened, but her lips quivered. "I've just learned more details about the information I sent you yesterday. Mr. Vivian, the owner of Vivian's Shoe Shop, is the man who reported seeing her near his place of business."

"And?" William leaned toward her, knowing his proximity would discomfit her, yet unable to resist the slight tease.

The color in her cheeks grew redder. "And that's good news. You now have an exact location. Susanna and I never entered the place, but we often passed it on our way to . . . well, nowhere of consequence." She winced a little and angled away from him. Her movement wafted her faint-though-familiar lavender scent over him.

“William, I—”

Footsteps and voices sounded outside the drawing room. William turned, and the housekeeper, who'd remained next to the door, opened it. Mr. Crauford, followed by an older gentleman, entered. William straightened.

“Ah, Sir Talbot.” Mr. Crauford, grinning, strode forward. “Forgive me for not receiving you earlier. We were occupied in rather important business. In fact, we have wonderful news.” He held out his hand, motioning to the other gentleman. “My daughter has accepted Mr. Fortescue’s proposal of marriage.”

Ice hit William’s core. His vision tilted as he glanced at Leah, her cheeks still red from his earlier tease. How could this be happening? He’d only just recognized the feelings of his heart, and already he was too late. His father’s words echoed in his mind—William was too fond of laughter, too quick to discount his responsibilities in favor of simply being William. No wonder Leah chose someone solid like Mr. Fortescue.

William blinked, emptied all feeling from his expression, and turned to Leah. “My congratulations.”

She gave him a soft, uneven smile.

Mr. Fortescue moved to Leah’s side. He clasped her elbow and glanced down at the items on the table. “Ah, my dear, the brooch. I would dearly love to see you wear it.”

William’s breath stopped. Realization sickened through him. The book and jewelry had come from Mr. Fortescue.

Leah pressed her palm against her chest. “Of course. I would like nothing more, but . . .” Her voice trembled, and she swallowed. “What I mean to say is Sir Talbot is here about his sister. He says he needs my help, given my knowledge of the area where your informant told you she was last seen.”

“Out of the question,” Mr. Crauford said.

Mr. Fortescue held up his hand, stopping him, and Mr. Crauford closed his mouth.

“My dear,” Mr. Fortescue asked Leah, “what would you prefer?”

Leah looked at her father, glanced at William, and at last faced Mr. Fortescue. “To find Susanna. I mean, Miss Talbot.”

"I know you have been much preoccupied with your friend." Mr. Fortescue again glanced at his gifts on the table. "But given the arrangements you must now set your mind to, are you certain that's your wish?"

Leah offered a slight nod. "I know it's highly irregular, but I fear she's all I can think about."

"Well, then." Mr. Fortescue slurped a little and straightened. "My dear Miss Crauford, if your greatest wish at the moment is to help find your friend, I would be honored to facilitate it."

Leah blinked. "Truly, sir?"

"Indeed. You are—or soon will be—my wife, and I want your happiness." He gave her a soft smile and turned to William. "I suggest my barouche."

Of course he does. That is the sensible solution to pleasing Leah and thwarting me. "Thank you, sir, but there is no need. My post chaise is waiting outside."

"I offer you my barouche," Mr. Fortescue continued, "because I shall first accompany you to my estate, where Sally can join you as chaperone." He turned back to Leah. "Sally is one of my housemaids, but she's shown herself quite capable and dependable over the past years. I believe she will make an excellent lady's maid for Mrs. Fortescue once we are married."

Leah's cheeks colored again when the man emphasized the words "Mrs." and "married," and William's insides contorted. *Pretend friendship. Only friendship.*

Mr. Fortescue, holding Leah's gaze, removed his watch from his waistcoat pocket and unclipped the dark blue silk ribbon attached to it. He then lifted Leah's right hand and tied the ribbon around her wrist. "You are wise not to wear the brooch on such an outing, but I do hope this will remind you of my deep affection for you."

"That is very kind of you, sir."

"It is not mere kindness, my dear."

He didn't add the words, "It is love," but they screamed through William's senses anyway. *You can't love her, and she can't love you. She's mine.* "That is most generous of you," William blurted.

The two turned to him, and William added, "To offer your barouche, I mean."

“Indeed it is,” Mr. Crauford said.

Mr. Fortescue smiled. “Very well, it’s settled.” Then, turning back to Leah, he said, “My dear, shall I send for the carriage now?”

“Yes, thank you.” Leah’s voice barely sounded, but it tingled through William. “I only need my pelisse and bonnet.”

“Of course.” Mr. Fortescue squeezed her elbow and finally released her. He turned to Mr. Crauford. “With your permission, sir? I know I should have asked you first, but I assure you, they will be properly chaperoned.”

“There is no need to apologize to me,” Mr. Crauford said. “As Leah will soon be your wife, I have no qualms in handing her into your care.”

Mr. Fortescue nodded.

Leah, after excusing herself, moved to the door. Each of her quiet steps carried her farther from William and further from the future he’d begun to imagine. If only he hadn’t waited to claim it.

The three men went to the window. Mr. Crauford and Mr. Fortescue spoke amiably together of the fine weather and how the flowers outside the church would surely please Leah on their wedding day, but every time William opened his mouth to respond, his words soured. Mr. Fortescue and Leah’s wedding day. How could he endure it?

He wouldn’t have to. He’d make sure he was well away from London when that day came. And until then . . .

William closed his eyes. He compressed his lips into a tight, determined line.

Until then, he would focus solely on finding Susanna. He would lock away thoughts of Leah’s warm, dark eyes and shield himself from the comfort of her smile. He would remember that she was Mr. Fortescue’s betrothed, and he would maintain the distance that truth demanded. The coming hours of searching together would be torture enough without allowing his heart free rein.

He squared his shoulders.

I have lost my chance with Leah, but I will not lose Susanna.

Chapter 18

TWO TEDIOUS HOURS HAD passed since William and Leah had left Leah's house—time William spent first instructing his groom to meet them at Mr. Fortescue's before dark, and then riding with Mr. Fortescue to his estate, where they collected Sally, his choice of their chaperone. Now, once again settled in the man's well-appointed barouche, William pressed himself against the seat back. He inhaled deeply, but the afternoon's warmth stifled rather than soothed him. He had even slid the glass panels open to catch what breeze he could, yet still the carriage's intimate confines seemed to draw ever closer, like walls in a maze with no escape.

William, sitting opposite Leah and Sally, dragged his gaze away from the dark blue ribbon at Leah's wrist—Mr. Fortescue's makeshift token. The man had tied it there so possessively that each time William glanced at it, which was far too often, the hollowness in his chest at knowing she was forever lost to him pinched. And the way Leah kept worrying that handkerchief didn't help matters. Did she regret agreeing to help William search for Susanna, now that she had wedding concerns to attend to?

He clamped his hair at the back of his neck and glared out the window. *Focus only on finding Susanna.*

"The shoe shop," he said, breaking the thick silence. "Is it far?"

Leah adjusted her pelisse. "Not terribly far. We should be there soon."

Again, William dragged his gaze from that infernal ribbon, folded his arms in front of him, and emptied his expression. *Think nothing. Feel nothing.*

He likely failed in that effort, though, for more than once, Leah gave him a curious sidelong glance. But otherwise, they rode in silence until they at last stopped in front of Vivian's Shoe Shop. William alighted first, then turned to Leah. He helped her down the stairs and released her—too

quickly, perhaps, for she stumbled. He reached to steady her, but Sally, Leah's future lady's maid, caught her first. Of course she did. *I'm always too late.*

William held back his scowl and whirled away from them and toward the main thoroughfare. He surveyed the gravelly road, where local trade continued despite the advancing afternoon. Leah moved in beside him, her skirt whispering against his leg. She likewise peered first toward the milliner's establishment, then in the direction of the bakery.

"Susanna must be close by," William said.

"I hope you are right."

"I am. I feel it." He crossed his arms as if doing so somehow verified his claim, and a ghost of a smile touched Leah's lips.

"I've always appreciated your perpetual optimism, William. Have I ever told you that?"

He paused. "What? You have thought that?"

"How can you doubt it? No matter what terrible thing might be happening around us, Susanna and I always knew we could count on you to see the bright, shining side of things. We knew you would lift our spirits, though if memory serves, that sanguine nature of yours also led you into countless scrapes."

"I suppose they did."

"And helped you out of them, too."

It hasn't helped me today.

She, smiling wider, peered up into his eyes, and his heart leaped. For a tiny spell-like moment, it was as if nothing had changed between them. That she was still free to love whom she wished to love. *To love me.*

Leah touched that ribbon at her wrist.

Spell broken.

William cleared his throat, stood taller, and motioned toward Vivian's Shoe Shop. The large bow window displayed an artful arrangement of ladies' walking boots and dancing slippers, and the late-afternoon sun cast long shadows across the brass-trimmed gas lamps that flanked the entry door.

William offered Leah his arm. "Let's see what we can find out from Mr. Vivian, shall we?"

"Yes, of course. Yet . . ." Leah caught William's sleeve, slowing him, and nodded toward the side of the building. "Let's go in at the servants' entrance. If anyone else saw Susanna or knows anything, we'll likely get more of it from a shop worker."

"Still meddling in all the servants' secrets, are you?"

"I don't meddle. I question."

William pursed his lips to keep from chuckling.

"And anyway," Leah continued, "I might be younger than you, but I've lived long enough to learn that the best information rarely comes through the front door." She flashed him a quick smile, released his sleeve, and turned toward the alley.

That smile, so achingly familiar, was now tinged with something new. Reservation? Wariness? And the way she'd dropped his sleeve as if she'd suddenly remembered herself. Remembered she belonged to another.

William's chest constricted.

They, with Sally following at a proper distance, found the back entrance easily enough. As they approached, the door swung open, and a woman emerged. She had graying dark hair and pockmarked cheeks, and she carried a crate of scraps and broken shoes, likely for a rag-and-bone man to collect.

"Martha?" Leah asked.

The woman shielded her eyes against the late-afternoon sun. "Miss Crauford? Is that really you?"

Leah's stance relaxed.

"You know this lady?" William whispered to Leah.

She nodded and stepped forward. "It is me, though I hardly expected to find you here, so far from the school."

"My sister's husband owns this establishment. He was kind enough to offer me employment when I left service there." Martha set her crate down on the cobbled walk beside the building. "But what brings you to this quarter of town now, Miss Crauford? Unless . . ." She furrowed her brows. "Now that I think on it, I saw a young lady last week who put me in mind of your school days. You and Miss Talbot were always a pair then. Yes, I do think it was Miss Talbot I glimpsed."

William stood taller. "You saw Miss Talbot? When, exactly? Where?"

Martha furrowed her brows. "That is, I thought it was her. Waved to her, I did, but she turned away quick like. Had two gentlemen with her, proper ones by their dress. Made me think perhaps she didn't want to acknowledge me."

William tightened his jaw. *Two* men? And not just her supposed husband? And what about their surmising that Susanna had escaped and was now alone? Had they been wrong about all of it? Or was this woman wrong, and the lady she saw wasn't Susanna?

Leah, biting her lower lip, gave him a slight nod. She'd had those same thoughts, which meant what?

Dark possibilities crept into his mind, and he shoved them aside. *Do not borrow trouble.*

He focused on Martha. "You said you saw Miss Talbot and the two men last week. Which direction did they go?"

"Toward the coaching inn, just past the milliner's." Martha pointed down the street.

William calculated the distance. A coaching inn meant they might have taken a public conveyance or hired a private one. Perhaps someone there would know where they had gone.

Leah removed her notebook from her reticule and quickly wrote several words. "Martha," she said, "the men with her. Did they seem to be . . . threatening her? Was Susanna distressed in any way?"

"Tis difficult to say with certainty, miss. She walked between them, proper-like, staring straight in front of her." Martha fussed with her apron strings, her voice growing softer. "In my days at the school, Miss Talbot ever had a kind word and a gentle smile for even the lowest scullery maid. But that day—" She swallowed. "It was like she no longer considered me worth noticing."

Leah wrote more in her notebook, and William scrutinized the woman. She was certainly not wealthy. Nor was she attractive, but in spite of those things, Susanna would never commit such a breach of Christian charity to anyone, including a former servant. She possessed too kind a heart for such casual cruelty. Maybe that indicated the woman wasn't Susanna. But then . . . he tightened his jaw. Perhaps Leah had been right, and the men had in some way forced her compliance.

“What’s all this?” A man’s voice carried from inside the shop.

William turned to the front entry just as a broad-shouldered figure in a leather apron emerged. “Martha, I thought I heard you out h—” The man broke off, studying their group.

“Oh!” Martha ran her hands down her thick linen apron. “Forgive me, brother. I left you in a lurch, didn’t I?”

“No harm done.” He glanced between them. “Begging your pardon, sir, madam, but from what I heard, it sounded like you were asking after a particular young lady. Miss Talbot, I believe, is the name you said.”

“Indeed.” William stepped toward him and shook his hand. “Mr. Vivian, I expect?”

He nodded.

“Miss Talbot is my sister,” William continued. “I understand that you, like this lady here, have seen her.”

“Aye, and not just seen her. Had others asking after her too.” Mr. Vivian ran his hand down his cheek. “It’s been weighing heavy on my mind these past days, and when I heard the three of you talking, I knew I needed to report it.”

William jolted. “What others?”

“People asking after her. First it was two men, several days back.”

“What do you remember of them?” Leah asked.

“Not much.” He glanced at Martha. “Short fellows, both of them. And they kept their faces hidden under their hats, but one had a pronounced stoop, and the other wore a distinctive green waistcoat.”

Leah wrote in her notebook.

Martha drew her brows together. “That’s just how it was with the two I saw walking with Miss Talbot.”

The shopkeeper, pressing his lips into a straight line, nodded. “They came here five days ago and asked if I’d seen a young lady of her description. Said she was their ward who’d wandered off. I was busy with customers, didn’t think much of it at the time, and as it sounded as if the lady was in trouble . . .” He shifted uncomfortably. “I told them all I knew, though I doubted it was much help. Like Martha, I’d seen them walking down the street with the lady, only it was the day after Martha saw them.”

Leah—his dear, ever-thinking Leah—looked up from her notebook. “So, Martha saw the three of them seven days ago. You, sir, saw them six days ago. And five days ago, the two men asked you about Miss Talbot.”

“That’s it exactly. Three days after that—that be two days ago now—another man came asking. He was a different sort altogether. Plain-looking, but carried himself like someone official. Asked more pointed questions about the lady. I told him what I remembered, which wasn’t anything more than I’d told the first two men. I figured he likely knew them, but soon as I mentioned them, his questions came faster. That’s what made me think perhaps something wasn’t right. It’s what’s been bothering me.”

“Did any of them give you their names?” Leah asked.

He scratched his chin. “It seems one of them might have, but I can’t recall what it was.”

“Might it have been Evan Thatcher?”

“Hmm. No. The only Thatcher I know has a reputation for seducing women, but that was years ago. He’s in his nineties now.”

“Sounds like Thatcher and crime are synonymous,” William muttered. Then, louder, he said, “Did you tell that third man anything more than you’ve told us?”

“No, but that’s just it.” The shopkeeper lowered his voice. “Last night, riding home late, I passed someone on the road past Kendall’s farm. Empty stretch, that. Lonely. Could have sworn it was the same lady, though it was growing dark.”

“*Last* night?”

“You mean the lady was alone?” Leah said. “On the road in the dark?”

“Aye. I called out to her, but she ran off. Didn’t see anything of her after that. Thought maybe I’d imagined her. But it’s been troubling me ever since, especially after what that official-seeming fellow said. Made me think I better mention what I might have seen to the constables—”

“No!” William said.

Leah gave William a sharp—or perhaps it was merely a startled—look at his vehemence, and he lowered his tone. “That is, please don’t involve the constables just yet.”

Leah stepped forward. “Could you tell us exactly how to get to where you thought you saw her?”

"Aye, miss, though it be a fair distance from here. Even by carriage."

"Never mind that." William held his hand out to Leah, mouthed "note-book," and after she gave it to him, he handed it to the man. "Please write the directions here."

Mr. Vivian again ran his hand over his mouth. "Of course, yes."

Soon after, William gave the shopkeeper's instructions to their driver and the three climbed into Mr. Fortescue's carriage.

"It's getting dark." Leah peered out the window and back at William. "Too dark."

Cold dropped on his core. To that moment, she'd seemed as anxious to find Susanna as he was, but now . . . "You're concerned about what Mr. Fortescue will think."

"No." Leah lowered her gaze. "Well, yes."

"Mr. Fortescue did insist we return before nightfall, sir," Sally put in.

William pressed his lips into a tight, flat line. "I'm well aware of that. That's also when I told my driver to meet us there. But we can't miss this chance to find Susanna."

Leah lifted her head. "Of course not." Her eyes looked glassy. Were those tears?

William growled a little. "Forgive my outburst, ladies. I'm only worried about my sister."

Leah's posture relaxed a bit. "I know. So am I."

"And you needn't concern yourselves." William softened his voice. "The place Mr. Vivian spoke of is on our way back to—" He swallowed and looked away from her. "Your betrothed."

"If the shopkeeper did see Susanna, she is likely long gone from there by now anyway," Leah put in.

"Agreed, but we have to look. In case something is there." William tried to keep his sadness from his words, but when Leah then furrowed her brows, studying him, he angled away from her. He peered through the window at the passing landscape until the carriage again stopped, this time on an empty road next to a copse of trees. They climbed out of the barouche, scanned the forested grasslands, and at last walked several dozen feet away from the horses.

Please, God, if Susanna was here, help us find something that will let us know it. Even a hairpin or a scrap of cloth will do.

They circled the area. They tromped over the underbrush and peered round fallen trees.

Leah, frowning, placed her hands on her hips. "Nothing," she said. "Always nothing."

"Take heart, my—" William sidled next to her. "—Leah. *Nothing* only means we are one step closer to finding *something*,"

"I suppose . . . William? Do you see that cottage out there?"

"I do. It's likely the farm Mr. Vivian mentioned. I believe Kendall was their name."

Leah placed her hands on her hips and gazed out toward the farmhouse. "We should go talk with them. If Susanna was out here, they might have seen something of her."

"True." William lifted his head to the shadowed sky. "But I don't see any lights. They've likely retired for the night."

"Let's try it anyway. We can question them and be gone in mere minutes."

"Very well." He helped her back into the carriage, and they made their way to the farmhouse. There, no one answered his knocks.

"Let's try again tomorrow," Leah said.

"Good plan."

The two headed back to the carriage. As they walked, William's heart convulsed. This night—this precious time with Leah—was ending. Worst of all, Leah would soon be back under Mr. Fortescue's care. He, not William, would then ensure her return to her father.

"First thing, all right?" William added. The empty politeness of the words turned sour on his tongue, but somehow he maintained the proper, sedate inflection.

"First thing," she repeated.

Chapter 19

MR. FORTESCUE'S BAROUCHE CAME to a halt where the dirt track met the London road. Leah steadied herself against the window frame, avoiding William's beloved visage—er, concerned glance—and studied the Kendalls' dwelling ahead, about a quarter mile from what Leah could tell. The weathered brick and climbing roses painted a picture of domestic contentment, the sort Mr. Fortescue had suggested she might find in their upcoming marriage.

"The road looks rather rough this morning," William helped her from the carriage. "Shall we walk up?"

Leah nodded, clasped the silk ribbon at her wrist—Mr. Fortescue's gift from only yesterday—and twisted it again and again. Already it had begun to fray where she'd worried it through the endless night.

Stay calm, she told herself. I'm marrying a good man. All will be well.

She released the ribbon, and with Sally following dutifully behind, she walked beside William along the rutted path that led to the simple farmhouse. Modest outbuildings, well-ordered rows of vegetables, and a small cherry orchard where the last of the season's dark fruit dotted the branches were in their proper places.

Unlike her heart.

A woman emerged from the door as they approached. Despite her flour-dusted apron and rounded, motherly figure, something in her bearing suggested steel. She narrowed her gaze and placed her hands on her hips.

"Good morning to you," she said, her tone cordial but measured. "What brings such fine folks to our humble farm?"

"You must be Mrs. Kendall," William said.

The lady glanced in the distance beyond them and nodded.

William made their introductions, explaining their search for his sister and of the report placing Susanna in the area mere days earlier. At the same time, Leah withdrew the portrait miniature from her reticule. Its gilt frame caught the morning light as she handed it to Mrs. Kendall. "This likeness was painted this past spring."

Mrs. Kendall studied it. "Sorry, but I haven't seen her." She returned the likeness to Leah and straightened. "My son is out working. Won't be back for an hour yet. You're welcome to wait, though I doubt he's seen the young lady either. He tells me everything important, especially about strangers passing through." Again, she peered into the distance behind them. "Not that we see many out here. Except on market day, of course."

Leah looked over her shoulder, following the woman's glance, and saw only a wagon moving along the distant road.

"When is market day?" William asked.

Leah turned back to them.

"Thursdays," the woman said, "so as not to interfere with Richmond's Saturday market."

Leah's pulse quickened. She glanced at William and found him already looking at her, that familiar light of understanding in his eyes. How easily they still read each other's thoughts. "Today's Thursday," Leah said.

"Aye," Mrs. Kendall replied. "Brings quite a crowd from the surrounding farms. That's what you should do. Go to Millvale. Perhaps someone at the market will have seen your young lady. And come to think of it, there's the Millvale coaching inn. Right on the London road, it is. Strangers in and out of there all the time. Talk with the innkeeper. He knows everyone's business."

"Those are good suggestions," William said. "Thank you for your help."

She pursed her lips, nodded, and stepped back through her doorway. "I wish you success in your search."

"Thank you," William said.

"You are most kind," Leah said at the same time.

Leah and William's gazes met, held for a moment, and they turned away.

Leah, William, and Sally returned to the waiting barouche. Leah settled onto the seat, arranging her skirts, and William helped Sally up, instructed

Mr. Fortescue's driver to take them to Millvale, and joined them inside the carriage.

His knee bumped Leah's when he sat on the seat across from her, but Leah pretended she didn't notice. She simply wrapped the ribbon around her wrist. The wretched thing was supposed to bring her comfort in knowing her future was settled, even if her search for Susanna only brought more disappointment. At least, that was what she'd told herself when she'd tied it around her wrist that morning. But instead, it ever reminded her of the thickening wall that grew up between her and the man who would never see her as anything more than his sister's friend and Mr. Fortescue's wife.

Unfortunately, that is what he should think now.

The weight of that truth pressed against her chest during their silent journey to Millvale, making even the gentle sway of the carriage feel oppressive. She welcomed the distraction when the quiet countryside finally gave way to town. Carts and wagons crowded the main street, and shoppers threaded between stalls overflowing with produce and household goods. The noise, the jostle of bodies, the chaos of commerce—anything to escape her thoughts of William sitting mere inches away.

William leaned forward. "Where do you suggest we begin?"

Leah drew a steadying breath and nodded toward a tidy establishment whose bow window displayed several fashionable bonnets. "The milliner's shop. Twice, Susanna and I had our bonnets trimmed there when we were at school." She touched the ribbon at her wrist, remembering how Susanna had loved selecting new ribbons for her bonnets. "The proprietress, Mrs. Jennings, always seemed to know everything about everyone in town, if you know what I mean."

"She had a loose tongue," William said.

"Yes. What's more, her shop sits at the crossroads. I wager that if anyone saw Susanna in Millvale recently—either as a lone woman or with those two men—she'll know it."

"The milliner's shop it is," William said.

The shop bell tinkled as they entered. Inside, the usual scents of starch and silk mingled with the warmth of too many bodies in too small a space. Half a dozen ladies crowded around the counter where Mrs. Jennings held up various ribbons and flowers for their inspection. Several more examined

the bonnets displayed on wooden heads along the walls, and a cluster of young women giggled over the latest London fashion plates near the window.

William glanced at Leah, then at Sally, who stood behind them. "I believe we'll learn more if we separate."

"Good plan." Leah nodded toward Mrs. Jennings. "I'll talk with her—she'll remember me from school days. Why don't you speak with that group by the door? They appear to be local farmers' wives. With all the strangers passing through, they might have noticed if there was anything unusual."

William looked at the women then back at Leah. "That is well thought out. My mother was right. I can always count on your good sense."

Something inside Leah bounced, and she smiled. "She said that?"

"Of course. She thinks very highly of you."

Leah blinked. "I had not thought . . . Thank you, William, for telling me." She then lifted her chin, preparing herself for the lighthearted tease that always followed his compliments, but he simply held her gaze for a long moment, shrugged, and strode away.

What had prompted that oddity, kind though it was?

No answers came to her as she watched him . . . er, stared at him until he reached the women.

Leah shook aside her confusion, motioned for Sally to follow her, and made her way to the counter where Mrs. Jennings still spoke with a group of young ladies.

A quarter of an hour later, Leah and William reconvened outside the shop.

"Mrs. Jennings remembers Susanna well," Leah reported, "but she hasn't seen her since we attended school. She did mention that last week, two well-dressed gentlemen asked her what she considered to be very peculiar questions about young ladies traveling alone. I wrote Mrs. Jennings' information in my notebook, but I doubt any of it connects to Susanna. It doesn't fit with the information Martha and Mr. Vivian gave us."

"I didn't learn much either," William said. "The farmers' wives were more interested in questioning me about my own circumstances than answering my inquiries about Susanna."

Leah smiled a little. "On behalf of their daughters, I assume. You *are* an eligible bachelor."

William tightened his jaw the way he'd done countless times during their youth when he'd struggled to maintain his composure over one scrap or another. "Whatever their reasons, I did not appreciate their queries."

Leah arched an eyebrow and dropped her smile. Obviously, he wasn't in the mood for banter. That must have been the reason why he hadn't teased her earlier. Not that she blamed him. They were not on a lighthearted quest. Indeed, Susanna had been missing for so long that despite Leah's optimistic words, she struggled to keep her hopes up. Maybe that was all William was doing too, clinging to hope.

"Though one of the women did mention seeing a fine carriage heading toward London three days ago," William added.

A lone dog sitting next to the business entrance growled at what seemed to be nothing in particular, but William glanced behind them and turned back to Leah.

"Let's move somewhere more private." He took Leah's arm, led her to the closest alley, and continued with his report. "That woman thought there was a blonde young lady inside that carriage, though she couldn't be certain."

Leah frowned. "That doesn't align with what we've already learned either."

"I know." William ran a hand through his hair. "All we've uncovered are more unpromising clues."

Leah clenched her reticule in front of her, and William placed his hands on his hips. Together, they looked down both sides of the street.

"Which direction should we try next?" William asked.

"We could split up again, each taking a different direction."

"Not this time. I won't risk losing track of you."

Leah huffed a little. "As I've told you before, I'm not a child."

"You aren't, but we must not forget that you are in danger. What is more, I vowed to you, your father, and even Mr. Fortescue that I would not leave you on your own again until after we have found Susanna."

"I wouldn't be on my own. Sally's with me."

"I made a vow," he repeated.

Leah sighed. "Very well. We'll do it your way." She, frowning, again scrutinized the street. She motioned toward the bakery. "There are more people that direction."

"Good choice." He held his arm out to her. "Shall we?"

She wrapped her hand around the crook of his arm and glanced up at him. He wasn't looking at her, so she dared study him. How the light glistened off his hair, and how his Grecian profile seemed even more perfect in this light and at this very moment than it ever had. If only they could continue on like this, as companions, forever.

Leah and William, with Sally close behind them, strode toward the bakery. A buxom woman in a practical wool dress stood near the entrance. Leah showed her the miniature of Susanna, and William asked if she recognized her.

"Heavens, no," she said. "You say she's been kidnapped? How dreadful. I wish I could help you, but I don't recognize her. If something that extraordinary had occurred in Millvale, surely I would have heard about it by now."

William thanked her, and the woman started away from them, but Leah's thoughts chased after her.

"One more question," Leah said. "You say you would have heard if something extraordinary had occurred. But surely there are smaller oddities—things that might not be town gossip but are still unusual. Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary in the last week or so?"

The woman furrowed her brow as if searching her memory, and at last shook her head. "I recall nothing of consequence."

Leah thanked her for her time, and she and William took their leave, proceeding down the gravel path.

"That was rather cleverly done," William said as they walked. "Did you notice how your final question gave her pause? We might want to phrase it that way with all our interviews, mentioning that oddities do happen here. The longer people consider their answer, the more details they may reveal."

Sudden warmth wrapped around Leah's shoulders and seeped into her heart. *That was rather cleverly done.* Leah had heard the rest of what William had said, but those words sat above the others like a shining beacon. Once again, William had paid her a compliment without following

it with a jest. A compliment that showed he'd not only listened to her, but he also thought well of her.

Though not well enough to love me.

She stiffened, cast aside the ache in her heart, which she must somehow squelch before she married Mr. Fortescue, and continued on at William's side. They questioned each person they came to. No one recognized Susanna, but a grocer did remember something curious.

"Mind, it's not my place to wonder . . ." The grocer hitched up his apron, squinting after the heavy-set man wearing a straw hat and sitting in the driver seat of a retreating wagon with its red-brown painted hub. "But young Reuben there just bought several pounds of gooseberries. They are in season, but why would he want them? Seeing as neither he nor his mother likes them?"

Leah glanced askance at William, and he shrugged.

"And Reuben was quiet as a church mouse the whole time, too," the grocer added. "Didn't even pause to rest his leg."

"That's unusual for him?" William asked.

The grocer nodded. "Ever since that fever in his youth, he's been one to make the best of things. Usually can't get him to stop chattering about one topic or another. But today?" He shook his head. "Not what you're looking for, I expect?"

"Not at all," William said. "We appreciate anything you can tell us."

Leah wrote the man's information in her notebook. "Any other peculiarities in town?"

The grocer scratched the top of his head. "Well, I wouldn't call it a peculiarity, but the blacksmith's been working well past dark. I expect that's because he's marrying soon. Trying to get ahead of his workload and all that."

Leah added this detail to her notebook before she and William took their leave. Once they were back on the main thoroughfare, she sighed.

"It's not a lot to go on," she said. "Maybe Mrs. Kendall's information wasn't as helpful as we'd hoped."

"Let's not give up yet. My mother often says that the longer a person searches for the truth, the more likely they are to uncover it."

"I've never known your mother to be wrong about such things," Leah said.

William turned to her then. His gaze fixed on her face—no, on her eyes—and she found herself unable to draw a proper breath.

"What is it?" Her words came out barely above a whisper. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Never." He settled his hand over hers where it rested on his arm. "You've simply reminded me that I've never known my mother to be wrong about anything."

"Indeed," she somehow managed to say.

His gaze lingered, and heat crept steadily up her cheeks. *Foolish girl! There's no call to blush. William is my friend, nothing more.* She pressed her lips into a tight purse. *I'm betrothed to Mr. Fortescue.*

William smiled and motioned farther down the walk. "Shall we?"

Leah swallowed, nodded, and strode beside him. Sally, maintaining a proper distance, followed.

Over the next hours, they interviewed a collection of villagers: an elderly grandmother chasing her wayward grandsons, the churchwarden, the baker's wife, a milliner and her apprentice, and even the busy blacksmith who barely took time to answer their questions, much less look up from his forge. Leah recorded their statements in her notebook, but before they'd finished their interviews, she'd crossed off each one as a possible source of information.

By late afternoon, Leah's feet ached in her half boots, and more than once, William wiped the perspiration from his brow with his handkerchief.

Leah paused and exhaled a long, slow sigh.

"You must be tired," William said. "Let's return to the carriage and rest for a few minutes, shall we?"

"We can't. Not yet. It's getting late enough that some of the market traders are packing up."

"True, but we have already spoken with most of them. Come. We won't stop for too long."

William patted her hand and drew her forward, but Leah shook her head. "Forgive me. It's only . . . I can't rid myself of the feeling that we're

missing something. Something that's right in front of us. Something we need to . . ." She widened her eyes.

"What is it?"

"I hardly know." Leah removed her notebook from her reticule and scanned down her earlier entries. The church . . . the milliner . . . the blacksmith . . . the grocer . . . Leah's thoughts tripped. She peered up at William. "We never questioned the farmer who the grocer mentioned had acted strangely."

William jerked his head back. "You're right. Let's return to the grocer and learn where we can locate that farmer."

A few minutes later, they found the grocer sweeping his doorstep while his stockboy carried crates of their outside items inside. He, unlike the equally busy blacksmith, paused what he was doing and provided directions. "Follow the road to where it turns off."

"That's Kendall's farm, isn't it?" William asked.

"Aye. Reuben Kendall. There's an outbuilding just beyond the main house. Reuben spends much of his time there, or so his mother has told me. Expect that's where you'll find him."

"I hope we do find him," Leah said to William as they left the shop. "I seem prone to missing things of late."

"I disagree." William's voice was even softer than Leah's grumble had been.

"How can you say that? I fully missed the fact that Reuben was a Kendall."

"We both missed it because no one told us. He must be the son Mrs. Kendall spoke of."

"You're probably right, which means there's likely no point in going out there again. Mrs. Kendall already said she hadn't seen Susanna, and that her son hadn't either."

"Not as far as she knows. What's more, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he keeps some information to himself. I know I don't tell my mother everything. Do you tell your father everything?"

Leah gave him a small, tight smile. "I don't."

"There you have it. In truth, I wager Reuben has seen a great many oddities that his mother isn't aware of. I believe this will be a very productive interview."

"I hope so," Leah said, but her stomach turned over. She loved William's positivity, but sometimes it seemed like a childish bubble of hope that would one day burst. Was that day today? Would, after all this investigating, this hunting for Susanna merely crash them into another closed door?

They reached the end of the walk. William cupped her elbow, and together they returned to Mr. Fortescue's carriage.

Chapter 20

THE DAY'S FRUITLESS INQUIRIES weighed heavily in Leah's notebook as she and William rolled once more along the familiar route out of town toward the Kendalls' farm. This time, she recorded details she hadn't noticed before: three outbuildings scattered across the fields, a dilapidated cottage, and two dense groves of trees. If Susanna had been out there a short time ago, any of them might have provided her with a suitable hiding place.

So suitable that she still hid there?

Leah scanned harder through the carriage's window across every large-enough nook, but seeing nothing promising, she settled back into her seat and simply watched the landscape flicker by.

"There's the Kendalls' farmhouse," she said at last, spotting the roofline through the trees. It was about a quarter of a mile off the main thoroughfare. "And that small outbuilding beyond. That must be what the grocer was speaking of."

William knocked on the carriage roof. The wagon drew to a halt, and William opened the door.

"Isn't that the farmer's conveyance?" Leah motioned to a wagon with a red-brown wheel partially hidden by a bend in the dirt road leading to the house. "The one the grocer pointed out in the village?"

William studied the wagon, then glanced back at the carriage. "The track is rough, but it's not so far that we couldn't walk. It would give us time to discuss our approach before we arrive."

"I agree. The walk will do us good." She turned to Sally. Her face was pale, and she pressed her fingers against her temples. "Are you unwell?"

"I fear the afternoon heat and all this jolting about has made me rather peaked. But please don't concern yourself. A brief walk will surely set me right."

The misery in her eyes belied her brave words. "Perhaps you'd prefer to wait here in the shade?" Leah caught William's understanding glance. "We shan't be long."

"Indeed, miss." Sally's posture slumped, though she clearly struggled to maintain her proper demeanor. "If you wouldn't think it too great an imposition . . ."

"Not at all," William said. "The driver can keep you company, and you'll have a clear view of us and the house from here. We'll return directly."

Sally briefly closed her eyes, exhaled, and sank back against the seat. "Thank you."

William handed Leah down from the carriage, and the two walked in companionable silence, the top layer of the packed earth crunching beneath their feet.

At last, they crested a small hill and once again looked down upon the Kendall cottage. It was nestled among several ancient oaks.

"The house looks just as quiet as it did last night," Leah said, pausing to catch her breath from their climb. "I hope we won't be interrupting anything important."

"Agreed," William said.

They continued on, but after only a few steps, he clasped Leah's arm, stopping her. "That's rather odd, don't you think?"

"What are you speaking of?"

"Kendall there." William pointed through the leaves to the small cottage. Kendall, still in his straw hat, emerged from the front door.

"A farmer carrying a tray?" Leah asked. "What's odd about that?"

William tapped his forefinger to his lips. "Follow me," he whispered. "Let's watch the man a minute." He tugged her off the rutted path and into a nearby stand of trees.

Leah's skirt caught on several brambles. She huffed in exasperation, worked the cloth free, and put her hands on her hips. "I doubt we need to be so clandestine. We're not doing anything wrong."

"Indeed." William grinned. "But sneaking around is a lot more fun than just standing on the road. Don't you agree?"

"*Fun?* William! This is no time for your games. We're trying to find Susanna."

"I know. I'm sorry. With your hair all mussed and your scowl as you released your dress from the brambles, well, I couldn't resist teasing you."

Leah rolled her eyes, suppressed her smile, and shook her head. "Come on. Let's go talk to Kendall." She stepped back toward the path.

"No, wait," William said. "I was serious about him acting oddly."

Leah peered through the branches toward the cottage. "As I said, what's odd about a farmer carrying a tray?"

"Not simply because he's carrying a tray, but because—I can't tell for certain, but if I had to guess, I'd bet that bowl on top of it contains those gooseberries he purchased earlier. The ones the grocer said Kendall and his mother don't like."

William watched Leah as if he expected her to draw some meaning from his statement, and Leah frowned. "What's odd in that? Food is food when one's hungry."

William exhaled a long, slow breath. "He's also carrying a water pitcher balanced precariously next to the bowl. And despite his pronounced limp, he's walking rather quickly."

"The poor man appears quite burdened by his load," Leah whispered. "Shouldn't we offer him our assistance rather than spying on him?"

"Perhaps, but not yet. Let's watch him a moment longer . . . There! See that? He keeps checking over his shoulder. It's like he's hiding something. Or fears someone's watching him."

"Perhaps he saw us walking down the road and wonders where we went."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Though, if it makes you feel better, I see your point. A man doesn't act so furtively unless he's hiding something."

"Or someone," William said quietly.

Leah turned to him, her eyes widening as the pieces fell into place. Food he wouldn't eat. Water. Secretive behavior. "You think he's hiding someone? But who would—" Understanding crashed over her. "Your sister?"

He gave a slight nod, pressed his forefinger to his lips, indicating for her to stay quiet, and motioned to the farmer. The man strode across the front yard and disappeared around the corner of the cottage.

"Now what?" Leah asked.

"Stay close."

William stepped out from the cover of the trees, and Leah likewise ducked and followed him. Staying low, they raced through the underbrush the rest of the way down the hill and scrambled toward a similar cluster of trees. That copse was about forty feet away from the side of the farmhouse where they'd last seen Kendall. It was also positioned well enough that they could observe the cottage's back property while still hiding within the branches.

"I don't see Kendall anywhere," Leah whispered, catching her breath.

"I suspect he's inside that outbuilding," William motioned to a large shack-like structure a short distance behind the cottage. "I wish there was a way we could inspect it."

"I think we can. I'm not certain, but look there at the back of the building. That might be the edge of a window. See it? If we're careful, we might be able to peek inside it without anyone noticing us. William?"

William, rather than answering her, crouched low and peered through the branches. He motioned for Leah to move in next to him. Leah did so.

"Hear that?" William whispered. "Someone's opening the door."

Leah clutched William's elbow. She looked around him and through the tree branches to where he'd indicated.

Kendall, no longer carrying the crate and pitcher, exited the shack. He limped to what they could see of the wood pile that leaned against the building's opposite wall and collected a folded wool blanket that lay on top of it. He then glanced over both his shoulders, limped back to the outbuilding, and again hurried through the front door.

Leah leaned forward, listening, but they were too far away to hear whether or not he locked the door.

William grabbed her arm and pointed toward the small casement window. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Someone just pushed open that window."

"It's probably hot in there. Kendall likely—"

"It wasn't Kendall. He hadn't even closed the door behind him yet." He held Leah's gaze. "It was a woman."

"What?" Leah's heart pounded so hard, it felt like it would jump out of her chest. "Are you certain?"

"Blonde hair, loose like Susanna always wears hers." William's voice tightened. "And the way she moved—a quick tilt of her head like I've seen Susanna do a thousand times at breakfast." He swallowed. "It was only a moment, but I could swear . . ."

"You think it was her?" Leah hardly dared hope.

"I can't be certain at this distance, but . . ." He shoved his fingers through the sides of his hair. "It's hard to imagine that a man with such a physical weakness could be one of Susanna's kidnappers, and yet, if she is in there . . ."

"Kendall isn't one of the kidnappers," Leah said. "His body size—everything about him—is all wrong."

"Then why does he keep her inside that building, if Susanna is indeed who I saw in there?"

"Maybe . . ." Leah hugged her arms across her middle. "Maybe he knows men are searching for her. Perhaps he means to use that information to demand payment from her family—or from the kidnappers themselves—for her safe return."

William scowled. "I hope you're wrong. A ransom is only slightly better than a forced marriage to get her dowry."

"I agree, but think about it. A farmer with his condition, supporting himself and his mother. If he realized who Susanna was, what she might be worth to someone . . ." She trailed off, but the implication hung between them. "He may see this as a way out of his circumstances."

"All the more reason to act quickly. If he decides to contact the kidnappers, or if word of her location spreads—I have to get her out. Now. Before he makes his move."

"*We* have to get her out, you mean. You can't do this alone."

"I mean it, Leah. Stay here." William frowned and scooped up a rock that was twice as large as his hand. "I'll take care of Kendall."

"I don't doubt you're stronger than him, William. Better in every way, in fact. But such a plan . . . It's utterly reckless."

William gaped at her. He opened his mouth as if he was about to say something, but he seemingly changed his mind because he closed it again and continued to stare at her like he was—what? Confused? Surprised at her vehemence?

Well, whatever the case, she'd deal with it later. Right then, she put her hands on her hips and looked him straight in the eye. "What's *our* plan?"

His expression darkened. "My plan, not yours. It won't do me any good to have to worry about you as well as Susanna."

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm not a child."

"That's not what I meant." In one quick movement, William grabbed both her shoulders, pulled her toward him, and with his face close to hers, looked hard into her eyes. "I'm well aware that you're not a child."

Leah blinked. He was so close . . . their gazes so locked . . . their breaths pulsing in and out in such a mingle of emotion that Leah could do nothing more than stare back at him. Slowly, almost carefully, his face lowered to hers, and for a heady, dreamy, this-couldn't-be-happening moment, she thought he would pull her upward to his lips and—

This is madness. His sister, the investigation . . . he's merely caught up in the moment. What's more, I'm promised to Mr. Fortescue.

She stepped back from him.

William pressed his lips into a tight line. "Forgive me if I treated you . . . less than you are."

Leah told herself to breathe, but her lungs didn't obey her. "I—there is nothing to forgive. You're under duress. It's easy to make mistakes." The word "mistakes" tasted bitter on her tongue even as she forced herself to say it. Because that's what this was, a mistake and nothing more.

"Mistakes," he repeated. "Yes." An emotion she didn't recognize swam in his eyes, and spots of color tinged his cheeks.

"Trust me to help," she whispered. "Two sets of eyes, two sets of hands. That way, we'll have a better chance of getting her out safely. If it is her."

William's grip on Leah's shoulders gentled, and his expression—something like resignation mixed with a deepness she couldn't quite name—shifted. He swallowed, released her, and lowered his arms to his

sides. "Very well. Stay here—just for a moment. I'll wait outside the door until Kendall leaves again. Then—" He made a swift, decisive motion. "I'll knock him unconscious, and we'll slip inside together. We'll get Susanna out before he comes to." He narrowed his gaze. "But if we do this, you must promise to be careful."

"As long as you promise the same thing."

He gave a slight nod, and they both turned their attentions back to the outbuilding. William balanced the rock in his hand and drew back his shoulders. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Together they stepped out from the trees.

Chapter 21

METAL CLINKED, AND THE doorknob turned.

William pulled Leah back within the cover of the trees. "Wait here," he whispered close to her ear. "I need him clear of the door."

She nodded.

The door opened.

William, holding the rock raised and ready, rushed to the outbuilding. He positioned himself just beyond the doorway next to the woodpile.

Reuben limped out, carrying an empty food tray. He reached to close the door behind him, but someone stepped into the entry and grabbed his wrist. A woman.

William's heart stopped.

But just as he'd worried he'd been wrong but still hoped, she wasn't just any woman. She had long, blonde hair, and the wayward curl that always sprang free at her temple was now matted with dirt and sweat.

Susanna.

Leah sprinted out from the cover of the trees, even as rage exploded through William. He roared and lurched toward Reuben.

Reuben's eyes went wide. He pushed Susanna backward into the darkness, whirled to face William, and threw the empty tray at him.

William ducked, barely breaking stride.

Reuben bolted inside, shoving the door toward its frame, but William blocked it with his shoulder.

Leah reached William's side. She added her weight to his, and together, they pushed until the door flew open.

Reuben staggered backward into the gloom.

William stormed inside with Leah close behind him. He squinted into the shadowy space. The storage shed was about twice as wide as his arms spread, though it ran deep enough that the weak light from the tiny window near the roof barely reached the back wall. Dusty implements hung from rough-hewn beams, and several large grain bins crowded one wall, forcing a narrow path between stacked crates and barrels. In that confined space, Reuben's hulking figure pushed up from the packed-earth floor, not six feet from where William stood.

William moved protectively in front of Leah, his boots scuffing against scattered straw. "Susanna!"

Reuben grabbed a shovel. He lunged toward him. William pushed Leah clear and wrenched the weapon from the farmer's hands. He raised it over his head.

"Stop!"

William froze at the sound of his sister's voice. "Susanna?" he called again. "Where are you?"

She stepped out from behind the leftmost bin, and William's chest tightened at her appearance. Her once-elegant costume gown hung in tatters, smeared with dirt and splashes of what looked like blood. Her usually immaculate blonde hair hung in tangles past her waist with bits of straw caught in the snarls. Dirt streaked her face, yet she lifted her chin with her familiar, unbreakable determination.

William exhaled in relief. Darkness enveloped the room, yet it seemed that the brilliance of noon day flooded through the window.

"It's all right, Reuben," Susanna said, her voice hoarse. "This is my brother."

Reuben blinked, hesitated, and closed the door. The darkness deepened, and for a moment, no one moved.

At last, Leah cried, "Susanna?"

Susanna glanced at her but rushed into William's arms. William pulled her against his chest, hugging her to him. She sobbed, her wet tears flowing down her cheeks and moistening his shirt. He ran his hand down the length of her tousled hair.

"Hush now," he said, "I'm here. You are safe." He repeated that last sentence over and over again, comforting her and reassuring himself. Finally, he set her slightly away from him.

"How did you find me?" Susanna asked. "And Leah, you're here. You're safe. When you ran off—" New tears filled her eyes, and her lips quivered. "I didn't know what had happened to you."

The two embraced.

"I'm fine," Leah said. "Truly fine, now that we've found you."

"But how did you do it?" Susanna repeated.

"There will be time to answer that later," William said. "For now, tell us why you're here. Where are your kidnappers?"

"I—I escaped."

"Of course you did. You always were a fighter." It was his common jest to her, but she didn't even smile.

"I did fight," she said. "From the moment Mr. Thatcher grabbed me, I fought. I fought so many times that twice I fell off the horse after he'd flung me onto it—even though he held me in front of him. The last time I fought, he told me to desist or die."

The blood in William's veins simultaneously froze and burned at the thought of that man's hands on his sister, and his fingernails bit into his palms. "When I get hold of that villain, he will be the one who'll face that threat."

Leah clasped his arm, but said nothing. His muscles eased at her touch.

"I didn't want to die," Susanna continued, "so I stopped fighting. After that, he took me to Gretna Green."

"Where you married him," Leah said. "You had no other choice."

"He wanted my dowry."

William kicked the earth. "Which I suppose is why you sent me that infernal note, insisting you were *happily* married."

"He forced me to write it minutes after the ceremony." Susanna's voice quavered. "Things were better after that, though. His shoves weren't quite so violent, and his grip . . ." She rubbed her wrists. "Let's say his careless arrogance after the marriage was what allowed me to escape."

William forced himself to relax his jaw, but it didn't ease the weight in his chest.

Susanna lowered her head a moment then lifted it again. "After their business in Richmond, Mr. Dunkirk, Mr. Thatcher, and I travelled in a hired carriage. Eventually, Mr. Dunkirk left us at a posting house to arrange some matter of his—I never learned what—and Mr. Thatcher forced me to continue with him alone in the gig he'd hired there. He made me drive while he sat beside me with his pistol. But when exhaustion finally overtook him and his head began to nod, I waited until we reached a forested part of the road. Then I jumped down and ran. I ran as far away from the carriage as I could, hiding within trees or even in ditches—anywhere that wasn't out in the open.

"I suspect the horse veered or stopped soon after that, for minutes later, Mr. Thatcher returned. He was slowly driving back up the road and scanning his surroundings. Somehow, I eluded him until Reuben—I mean, Mr. Kendall—found me. I pled my story to him, hoping I could trust him, and I'm so thankful I did. He brought me here. Then, after Mr. Kendall learned in town that Thatcher was still looking for me, we determined I would hide here with him until we figured out what to do. I haven't been here long, but he has been taking care of me."

William shook Reuben's calloused hand. "It appears I owe you a great debt of gratitude."

"There's no debt owed, sir." Reuben's rough voice softened with the gentle lilt of Yorkshire. "Any honest man would've done the same. Miss Susanna's shown more courage than most men I know."

"Nevertheless," William said, "you will be handsomely rewarded."

Leah gripped William's arm, her fingers digging into his sleeve. "Constable Dunn," she whispered. "*Dunn*. Could he be Mr. *Dunkirk*?"

William caught his breath as the connection crystallized, but before he could analyze it, Susanna asked, "You can get the marriage annulled for me, can't you? Like it was with Mother?"

"We will make certain of it, but . . ." He hesitated. "Did he hurt you in any vulgar way?"

"No—" Her lips trembled. "—thankfully."

No more questions, he told himself. *Now she needs rest and comfort.*

He helped Susanna into the lone wooden chair.

Leah stepped next to her. She clasped her hands tightly together and glanced back and forth between them and the door, as if she was anxious about . . . what?

William likewise looked at the door, but seeing and hearing nothing, he turned his attention back to his sister.

Reuben removed his jacket and wrapped it around Susanna's shoulders.

"Thank you," Susanna said, "but I can get the blanket."

Reuben shrugged, and William groaned. "Forgive me, sister. I should have thought to do that."

The door creaked.

William whirled.

Mrs. Kendall stumbled inside, her face tear-streaked. "I'm so sorry," she whispered to Reuben. "They threatened—"

"Quiet!" Two uniformed constables stormed in behind her. They brandished pistols rather than regulation truncheons.

How did they find us? William thought.

The villains shoved Mrs. Kendall. She tripped but caught herself against one of the grain bins.

"Mother!" Reuben started forward.

One of the constables swung his pistol toward him. "Stay where you are."

William stiffened. He knew that voice. One of the constables was, as Leah had guessed, Dunn. But the other was—"Thatcher! What are you doing here?" Simon Thatcher had been William's neighbor when he was a boy.

"Now comes the reckoning." Thatcher's teeth gleamed in the shadows.

William curled his hands into fists. "If anyone needs a reckoning, it's you."

"They're the kidnappers," Leah, behind him, dug her fingers into his arm. "Same physiques, same rough voices, and same . . ." She motioned to Constable Dunn. ". . . *gray* eyes. How did I not see it before?"

"We both didn't see," William said as the truth crashed over him. How could he, a man who'd helped his mother unravel several mysteries, have been blind to so many obvious signs? Constable Dunn's incompetent loss of Livingston. Mrs. Kendall's nervous glances past them during question-

ing. And most of all, the name Thatcher. It was synonymous with a scandal from William's past that he'd discounted much too quickly.

He shoved his hand through his hair. *Fool.*

Even worse, while he and Leah had been carefully tracking Susanna, Dunn and the man he knew as Simon Thatcher—not Evan Thatcher, as written in the marriage record—had been tracking them. “We led them straight here,” he snarled.

Dunn pulled a length of rope from his coat pocket and roughly bound Mrs. Kendall to one of the support posts behind the grain sacks. At the same time, William stepped in front of Susanna like a shield. Reuben moved in front of Leah.

“It’s over,” William said. “You’re found out. Drop your weapons.”

Constable Dunn laughed. “You can’t be serious, sir.” His voice distorted the word “sir” as if it was an insult. “We have all the power here, not you.”

“What do you mean, *we*?” Leah asked. “You, as a constable, may have some authority, but that man—”

“Is *Constable* Thatcher,” Constable Dunn said. “I wouldn’t get on his bad side if I were you. His power is greater than mine.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” William snapped.

Leah’s face paled. “Is he Onyx?”

Both Constable Dunn and Thatcher—William would never see him as a constable—grinned and rolled their eyes.

“You think I am Onyx?” Thatcher said. “I’m honored.”

“No, he’s not Onyx,” Constable Dunn said, “but he knows how to get what he wants at the jail. Free prisoners or keep them captive—it’s up to him.”

William scowled. “Thatcher? You can’t be serious.”

“You’d be surprised what I can do, Talbot.” Thatcher, still pointing his gun at them, lunged. He reached past William for Susanna, but William shoved him backward. Thatcher stumbled, righted himself, and brandished his pistol. “You have no right to stand between me and my wife.”

“She is not your wife,” William said.

“I have a license that proves otherwise.”

“With the name of *Evan* Thatcher, not *Simon*.”

“Evan Thatcher *is* my name.” He smiled. “Didn’t you know? Simon is my second name.”

William gaped at him. In all the years he’d known him, how had he never heard that fact? “Regardless, that license will do nothing but prove your guilt. Leave now or face the consequences.”

“Rather high-handed,” Constable Dunn sneered, “considering you hold no authority here.” He wagged his pistol at Mrs. Kendall.

“And you’ll soon hold no authority anywhere,” William said, “once we report your illegal dealings. Including your role in Livingston’s escape from custody.”

“You figured that out, did you?” Constable Dunn flashed a smile. “I’m not worried about that. As I suspect Miss Crauford has already surmised, Onyx will make the needed arrangements.”

“We must, however, thank you for leading us to my wife,” Thatcher said.

“Quit calling her that. My sister doesn’t belong to you, and she never will.”

“She already does.” Thatcher’s voice dropped. “Done deal.”

Once again, William narrowed his gaze. Those very words had passed between them years ago at University, though under markedly different circumstances. Back then, they had been best friends. Like brothers. But everything changed during their final year when William discovered Thatcher had been forging his father’s signature on bank drafts to cover gambling debts. In response, William did what his parents had always taught him to do—he followed the evidence where it led. At first, he’d tried to reason with Thatcher and offered to help him find another way. But Thatcher had laughed it off, claiming he had everything under control. When looking in Thatcher’s desk for a Latin text, William discovered three more forged drafts. He knew he could no longer ignore his friend’s crimes. He’d reported it to both the school authorities and his father.

The scandal had been devastating. Thatcher was expelled mere months before graduation, his reputation in tatters. But the legal consequences proved far worse. William’s father, both as magistrate and as someone known for his unfailing sense of justice, pursued the matter rigorously despite Thatcher’s pleas for mercy. “It was the only honorable thing to do,” he’d said. The resulting legal fees, combined with the scandal’s social

fallout, ultimately destroyed the Thatcher family. Thatcher's father died soon after—some said from the shame of it all—and his mother and sisters descended into genteel poverty.

"And this time," Thatcher continued, breaking through William's thoughts, "with your sister bound at my side, you will be the one to watch your family suffer."

"This is about revenge?"

"Justice!" Thatcher's voice dripped acid. "Even a disgraced man can forge himself a fresh reputation."

William gaped at him. His chest constricted. All these years, he'd imagined Simon living in obscurity while somehow paying his debts to society, not wielding power in a corrupt system. "You used forged documents to become a constable?"

"I used whatever I had to. And now I have more influence in that jail than your father ever had in his magistrate's court. I determine who stays imprisoned and who walks free. Just as I'll decide the ladies' fates." He leveled his pistol past William and toward both Susanna and Leah. "And you shall know what it feels like to see your family's future destroyed."

William's blood froze. He pictured Susanna's defiant expression and Leah's frightened, though equally defiant, eyes. Heaven help him. Two women he loved, two lives hanging on the whims of a desperate, resentful man.

"Miss Crauford isn't a member of my family."

"No, but you care about her, and—"

William swallowed. He'd been so careful, so controlled, yet Thatcher had read him like an open ledger.

"—that caring sealed her fate." Thatcher's smile oozed like grease. "My only regret is that Dunn didn't get her dowry too. It might not have been as large as your sister's, but we'd have made it work. And you, Talbot, would not have been able to do anything about it."

"He's mad," Leah whispered.

"It won't happen." William held his arms wide. Reuben did too. Together they formed a human barrier in front of the ladies.

"This is your last warning," William continued. "Come no closer."

"Or you'll what?" Constable Dunn said.

Smooth wood pressed into his left palm—the hand nearest Leah. The wood was round, like a handle. The handle of . . . He widened his eyes as understanding dawned. She'd just handed him the shovel.

William clutched the implement. He swung it over his shoulder and struck. The blade crashed against Constable Dunn's shoulder, sending him sprawling backward with a satisfying grunt.

Thatcher aimed his pistol at William's head. "Surrender that shovel or die."

A grain bin close to Mrs. Kendall crashed onto its side, followed by the rushing sound of spilling grain. A cloud of gray haze billowed around them.

William doubled over, coughing.

Thatcher pushed past him and reached for Leah.

Leah stepped out of Thatcher's reach, and Reuben seized a length of firewood. He struck Thatcher's extended arm. Thatcher yelped and dropped his pistol. He drew back his other arm as if to strike Reuben.

William, his breath finally controlled, banged the shovel's blade against the side of Thatcher's head. Thatcher's eyes rolled backward, and he crumpled to the floor. William discarded the shovel, dropped to his knees, and yanked Thatcher's arms behind his back. Reuben retrieved a length of rope from a nearby barrel and passed it to William, who secured the knots.

"Watch out!" Susanna's cry pierced the air.

William spun.

Constable Dunn, back on his feet and only a few feet from William, held the abandoned shovel high above his head like an executioner's ax. William threw himself sideways, narrowly avoiding the blade. Before Dunn could recover, Reuben lunged forward with a pitchfork. The constable's eyes went wide, and he jerked backward. Reuben reversed his grip, slamming the wooden handle against Dunn's forearm. The shovel clattered to the floor with a hollow clang.

Constable Dunn dove for it, but a blur of muslin and lace crashed into him.

William's breath stopped. Leah and Susanna! "Stay back!" The words tore from his throat even as the ladies knocked Dunn off balance.

The constable staggered. He fell hard on his backside, sending up another choking cloud of grain dust. He tried to sit up, but Reuben pinned him with the pitchfork's handle across his chest.

"Ladies, please—" William started forward, but Susanna and Leah were already on Dunn's sprawled arms, their skirts bunched around their knees. Leah's sharp elbow caught Dunn's jaw. Susanna pounded his shoulders, his chest, and his face.

"Stop!" William reached for his sister, but Reuben caught his arm.

"Let them have this moment," Reuben said. "After what that man did . . ."

Dunn bucked and kicked, trying to throw them off. Leah let out a sound between a growl and a sob and likewise pummeled him, doubling Susanna's efforts.

Leah slapped his face. "That's for attacking us and kidnapping Susanna."

"And that's for what you planned to do to me," Susanna added, punching him in both eyes.

William grabbed another length of rope from where they'd left it after securing Thatcher. "Ladies, enough. Let us finish this."

Leah and Susanna stopped. Sniffling, they brushed the tears from their faces and crawled off Constable Dunn's arms.

William and Reuben bound the struggling constable's hands behind his back.

"Well done, ladies." Reuben, breathing hard, rushed to his mother. He worked at the knots behind her back. "Are you hurt?"

"Just my pride," Mrs. Kendall said as the ropes fell away. "Though I'll not soon forget the fear of them threatening you."

Reuben pulled her into an embrace.

"How did the grain bin topple over?" William asked. "It likely saved us all."

Mrs. Kendall managed a wan smile over her son's shoulder. "I'd hoped it would distract them at least."

"You?" Reuben asked.

She nodded.

"A woman's intuition," William said under his breath.

Reuben hugged his mother tighter and turned to Leah and Susanna. "Remind me never to get on the wrong side of either of you."

"Most certainly." William, smiling a little, met Leah's eyes. "I dare say even Bonaparte's army would think twice about facing such formidable opponents."

At length, the dust settled, and William rose and surveyed the scene. Their efforts had paid off—both men lay securely bound—Thatcher still dazed from the blow to his head, Dunn now properly restrained. Leah, clasping her hands prayer-like in front of her, watched William with such fierce pride that his heart lurched painfully in his chest. He inched toward her, aching to take her hands in his, to kiss her soundly, thanking her for all she had done to rescue Susanna.

No. He couldn't kiss her. She belonged to another man.

He wrenched his gaze from her lips and looked at Susanna, who stood only a few feet away from him. Tears filled his sister's eyes, and emotion burned the back of his throat. He extended his arm. "Sister."

Once again, Susanna stepped into his embrace. At least this was an affection he was free to express.

"Stop, you fiends!"

Chapter 22

WILLIAM RELEASED SUSANNA AND whirled toward the doorway. Two begrimed figures stood silhouetted against the failing daylight. Their faces were blackened with coal dust, and their clothing was that of common laborers, yet something in their bearing—

The man glanced about the room and then focused on William. He smiled.

“Mr. Harcourt!” William exclaimed.

“Miss Beaumont,” Leah said simultaneously.

Mr. Kendall stepped forward, his eyes narrowed, his expression wary. “You know these folks, Sir Talbot?”

“We do. You can trust them.”

Miss Beaumont walked toward the bound men and knelt next to Thatcher. Dunn, a few feet away, glared at her, but she merely dabbed her handkerchief to the bleeding gash on the side of Thatcher’s head.

“Leave it,” Thatcher moaned, turning his face away from her.

Miss Beaumont pressed her lips into a tight frown and rose from her examination. She returned to Mr. Harcourt’s side.

“How are they?” Mr. Harcourt asked her.

“They’ll both have impressive bruises, but nothing serious, as far as I can tell. Thatcher appears confused, and his eyes don’t quite focus properly. He keeps squinting against the light coming through the open door, too. Still, they’re perfectly fit to face justice.”

“Good!” Susanna said.

“My thoughts exactly,” Mr. Harcourt said.

“How did you two get here?” Leah asked.

“We’ve been tracking these two constables for days,” Mr. Harcourt replied. “When we first heard of Thatcher’s story about him planning a

sudden marriage to a wealthy heiress, we thought it seemed suspect. Especially after we learned of three similar cases involving watchmen in different counties, all ending with missing brides and depleted fortunes. Not long after that, we found him conspiring with Constable Dunn, and, well, let's just say we'd hoped our masquerade would keep us inconspicuous enough that we could rescue you." Mr. Harcourt wiped the coal dust from his sleeve. "But I see you've managed quite impressively on your own."

"Indeed." Miss Beaumont's eyes twinkled. "Between Miss Talbot's resourceful escape and Miss Crauford's determined pursuit of justice, I'd say you, Sir Talbot, have been blessed with remarkably capable allies."

Leah's cheeks pinked prettily, and William's breath caught at the sight of her. The color in her face, the light in her eyes—she'd never looked more beautiful. Or more unattainable. He lowered his head, not trusting himself to look at her a moment longer. Proper gentlemen did not covet other men's fiancées. They especially did not notice how becoming they looked when they blushed, or how brave they'd been in the face of danger, or how their presence made every room brighter, or—

He clenched his jaw, holding back the words he yearned to say to her, and returned to Susanna's side. Somehow, he kept his voice sedate. "You are absolutely right, Miss Beaumont. All that's left is for us to deliver these villains to their fates."

"That, at least, is how we can be of use." Mr. Harcourt again brushed his upper sleeve, seemingly accentuating his words. "My barouche is waiting outside with my driver and a trusted servant. We can transport these villains directly to Mr. Worsley—one of the few magistrates we still trust."

"Good folk indeed," Mr. Kendall said with obvious relief. "I'd been wondering how we'd manage getting these rogues to the proper authorities. I could take them in the back of my wagon, of course, but it's not very private. The entire village would raise the alarm at the sight." He rubbed his weak arm and shifted his weight to his stronger leg. "Not that I mind the attention . . . much."

"Your arrival is most advantageous," Leah said. "I've also worried how we'd manage the transport. Without your barouche, we would have needed to ride as security behind Mr. Kendall's wagon." She swallowed. "Which is a problem, because we must return Mr. Fortescue's before nightfall."

William frowned at the relief in her voice. Was she really so eager to return to *him*?

Of course she is. They're betrothed.

"My own carriage is also waiting at Mr. Fortescue's house," William said.

"Very good," Mr. Harcourt said. "Then it's settled. Miss Crauford, you and Miss Talbot need think no more of this trouble. You'll return to Mr. Fortescue's with Sir William—"

"—and his servant, who acted as our chaperone," Leah added.

Mr. Harcourt nodded. "And Mr. . . ." He looked at Mr. Kendall.

"Kendall," the man supplied.

"Mr. Kendall and I will escort the prisoners in the wagon. Miss Beaumont and our chaperone will follow behind."

William edged away from Leah only to find Miss Beaumont studying him.

"You've managed this situation admirably, Sir Talbot," she said.

A trickle of heat crept up William's neck and across his face and shoulders. "The credit belongs to Miss Crauford, to Mr. Kendall and his mother, and most definitely to my sister."

"Don't let him fool you," Susanna said. "I know enough of William and Leah's determination to know none of you would have found me without them."

Leah turned to her, and their eyes met with a silent understanding he'd noticed several times over the years but had never understood.

"Well," Mr. Harcourt said, "I say it's time we deliver these men to justice without delay."

William lifted his hand above his head as if holding a wine glass in a toast. "Here, here."

He glanced at Susanna. She stood tall, with her hands clasped in front of her, displaying a sense of calmness that said everything in her world was just as it should be, but her face was still whiter than he preferred. Once, he'd have teased her out of her melancholy, but noting how she stood well away from Thatcher and kept her gaze fully rooted on William or Leah, he decided against it. Teasing, when one's feelings were fragile, would more likely shatter than heal them.

"After I return to my carriage," William said, "Susanna and I will join you at the magistrate's."

"A sensible plan," Miss Beaumont said. "It will give your sister time to compose herself before giving her statement."

After the prisoners were secured in Mr. Kendall's wagon, William helped Susanna and Leah into Mr. Fortescue's carriage, where Sally waited. The poor girl had dutifully maintained her post throughout their ordeal in the outbuilding, no doubt worried for her young charge even though knowing she must obey orders and remain with the vehicle.

"Mr. Fortescue will ensure Miss Crauford's safe return home," Sally told him.

"No doubt." William, ignoring what felt like rocks tumbling inside him, took his seat next to her. They set off.

The journey to Leah's home in Ferndale wouldn't take more than half an hour, and every turn of the wheels carried him closer to the moment he dreaded most. Soon, he'd hand Leah into Mr. Fortescue's care. Soon, another man would have the right to appreciate the luminous fairness of her skin, to witness the fire in her eyes when she championed a cause, and to hear her laughter ring out across a room.

All will then be right and proper, he told himself, but the words rang hollow. How could something right feel so utterly wrong?

He forced his gaze away from Leah, who was peering out the window closest to her. The sunlight caught her dark curls, and his fingers ached with the desire to—No. He faced his own window and watched the landscape blur past them.

His chest constricted. *I may not be able to claim the woman I love. But at least I'll have the satisfaction of seeing those villains face justice.*

Yet what justice was there in a world where wealth and circumstance decreed who married whom?

If only there was some way—*any* way—to change what seemed as fixed as the stars themselves.

Chapter 23

LEAH, HOLDING MR. FORTESCUE'S arm, followed the wedding party from the church to the Barringtons' Cavendish Square townhouse. The private garden behind the elegant residence had been transformed for the reception, with the spacious grounds arranged in exquisite grandeur befitting the union of one of London's wealthiest families with a worthy bride.

Rani and Mr. Barrington's wedding cake stood resplendent among several other desserts beneath an open-air pavilion of ivory silk. The cake's white icing caught the late-afternoon sunlight that dappled through the old London plane trees overhead. A gentle breeze carried the scent of June roses from the nearby garden beds, making the draperies flutter around the confection, adorned with delicate fresh flowers and trailing ivy leaves. But it was Rani's wedding dress that commanded every eye in the garden gathering. The finest India muslin and Brussels lace caught the golden light, the seed pearls at the empire waist glinting like dewdrops while the whitework embroidery along the modest train swept gracefully over the manicured lawn.

"It was a lovely wedding," Mr. Fortescue said to Leah, leading her to one of the small tables arranged on the grass. He handed her a slice of cake, and she caught the mingled fragrances of cardamom and cinnamon rising from its dark crumb, studded with pistachios and golden raisins from the East Indies. "Though I daresay," he continued, glancing at the garlands of flowers swaying in the summer breeze, "ours will be even grander. As long, of course, as you wish it to be so. And that it takes place before the end of the summer."

Leah took a small bite. Yesterday, shortly after she and William had rescued Susanna, Father had cornered Leah in his study. His fingers had

drummed against his desk—never a good sign—and he'd insisted that now she'd accepted Mr. Fortescue, she must no longer delay her wedding plans. "Miss Talbot is safe," Father had said, "there can be no other reason for you to put it off."

The truth of his words had dropped on top of Leah's heart. Susanna was safe. William would forever feel nothing deeper for Leah than brotherly affection, and she at four and twenty had within her power to save her father from financial ruin through this advantageous match.

I have no other choice, she'd told herself for perhaps the thousandth time.

At length, she'd drawn back her shoulders and given Father leave to inform Mr. Fortescue that she would accept an early wedding date.

Mr. Fortescue's thin-lipped smile pulled her thoughts back to the present. He, holding her gaze, took a bite of his cake. He seemingly held it on his tongue as if savoring it, then swallowed. "This is delicious, but my cook has no equal. She will make our wedding cake. I would not think of assigning anyone else to the task."

"I'm sure you are right."

"About the cake? Or our wedding date for the end of summer?"

"Both." The word lay bitter and hollow on her tongue, like medicine taken out of obligation rather than healing need.

Mr. Fortescue's face lit up, his cheeks flushing pink as he studied her. The intensity in his gaze squeezed the air from her lungs.

No. Please don't come closer.

But he did. He seized her hand and pressed his lips to her glove. *Think of his generosity, his gentlemanly manners, his unfailing propriety—everything a sensible woman could want.* Yet with each needle-sharp prickle racing across her skin, her heart squeezed harder in her chest, a caged bird battering against the bars of duty.

"Thank you, my dear," Mr. Fortescue said.

Leah lowered her eyes and curved her lips into what she hoped resembled a smile. *I can do this. I must do this. All will be well.*

"Pardon me, miss."

Leah turned to the footman who had come up beside her, and Mr. Fortescue stepped closer to her other side. He rested his hand in the middle of her back.

The tiny needles pricked hotter.

"Yes?" she managed to say to the footman.

"I've been asked to see that you receive this missive." He handed Leah a tiny folded piece of paper and left.

Mr. Fortescue, pressing the length of his side against her, peered down at the missive. "Who the devil is that from?"

"I can hardly say." Leah sidled away from Mr. Fortescue and unfolded the note. She angled the paper into the nearest shadow, shielding the writing from the sun's glare so she could more easily see the words. She glanced down at the signature, skimmed over the first sentences, and finally read:

Please meet with me and Mr. Harcourt beneath the large oak tree as soon as you can make yourself free.

"Well?" Mr. Fortescue asked.

"It's from Miss Beaumont. She wishes to speak with me." Leah peered toward the large oak tree. There, beneath its rustling golden leaves, Miss Beaumont and Mr. Harcourt waited on the stone bench.

When Leah had first noticed them at Rani's wedding, she'd been puzzled. While Rani had known them well enough to suggest they help hunt for Susanna, neither had seemed particularly intimate with either the Pembertons or the Barringtons. But Mr. Fortescue had later explained that Mr. Harcourt's mother, Lady Harcourt, had been a dear friend to Rani's late mother, making their inclusion among the guests both proper and touching.

Leah pressed Mr. Fortescue's bent forearm. "You don't mind, do you?"

He frowned. "I suppose I will need to get used to your modern ways, won't I?" He patted her hand. "Go ahead, my dear. I will take your absence as a chance to speak with your father. But please do not be too long. It has already been such a taxing day, and I'm feeling a bit fatigued."

"Of course. Take care of yourself, and I will return as soon as I am able."

She excused herself from Mr. Fortescue, and the two parted ways.

Just as Leah reached the oak tree, a shadow fell across the grass beside her, and she looked up. William. Her senses hummed with awareness of

his proximity, and she clasped her skirts, trying and failing to steady her nerves.

He joined their small group.

“Thank you both for coming and meeting with us on such short notice,” Marianne said.

Mr. Harcourt shook William’s hand. “We know this is rather untoward, and we hope we are not being presumptuous in asking you to meet with us here and in such a clandestine manner, but we didn’t know when or even if we would have another chance to speak with the two of you.”

“This is fine,” William said. “You are right in thinking you might not have had another chance to meet with us. For my part, I will soon be returning Susanna to Brighton, where she can recover before I spend the majority of my time working to annul that devil of a marriage.”

Leah’s throat tightened at his pronouncement. Back to Brighton. Nearly a hundred miles away. And then to the courts.

She fought the hollow ache spreading beneath her ribs. She had known, of course, that he and Susanna would leave, but hearing him speak of it with such ease felt as final as a death toll. After everything they’d shared these past days—the investigation, the rescue, those random moments when his eyes had held hers a breath too long—how could it all end with nothing more than a polite farewell at a wedding?

“That is what we feared,” Mr. Harcourt replied.

Marianne clasped Leah’s hand. “As for you, my dear, I understand congratulations are in order.”

“Congratulations?” Leah glanced at William. Had he also heard the news?

He said nothing, but his face paled slightly.

“On your upcoming marriage to Mr. Fortescue,” Marianne clarified. “I understand it will be soon.”

Leah forced a slight smile. “It will be. Thank you.”

William stiffened and gave her a slight bow. “My sister and I also offer our congratulations.”

Why did his voice sound so tight? Strangled, even?

“Thank you,” she said.

William swallowed and turned to Mr. Harcourt. "Well? Miss Crauford and I are here. What do you want with us?"

"Of course." Mr. Harcourt straightened his cravat. "Miss Beaumont and I asked the two of you to meet with us, because we have a proposition for you. We expect this will come as a surprise, but while you know that we have had experience solving crimes, what you do not know is we, along with my parents, have formed a crime-solving society."

Leah furrowed her brows. "Crime-solving society? Such as the Alamire Club on Stafford Street?"

"Yes and no," Mr. Harcourt said. "The men there enjoy discussing conundrums, but they do not actively solve them. We solve them." He paused, his gaze moving between Leah and William. "Your success in finding Miss Talbot has proven most illuminating. Miss Beaumont and I have watched with great interest as you conducted your investigation. Your methodical approach, keen insights, and unfailing composure under pressure have convinced us of your suitability. Therefore, we ask you to join us. To help us study out mysteries and hunt the criminals who commit them."

Leah shivered over the word "criminals." At the same time, a slight smile twitched the corner of William's lips. Why was he amused?

And then she knew. William's expression mirrored his mother's barely contained excitement when she was presented with a particularly fascinating mystery. In the past, William had acted as if helping his mother solve mysteries was more a duty than an intrigue. But now . . . had Leah been wrong in that assumption?

"You may take a few days to think about it, if you'd like," Marianne added.

Leah blinked. "Forgive me. I was just so surprised. But no, I don't need to think about it. I would be happy to join your society."

Marianne lightly squeezed Leah's forearm. "I had hoped that would be the case. But with your upcoming marriage and such, are you certain your betrothed won't mind?"

"I am. Mr. Fortescue has assured me that in marrying him, I will be free to follow any pursuits that interest me, including solving mysteries."

"He said that?" William asked.

“He did.”

“You think you’ll be happy, then?”

Leah forced a tight, thin smile. “I do.”

William glanced upward and ran his hand through his hair.

“And you, Sir Talbot?” Mr. Harcourt asked.

William glanced at Leah before answering. “I’m grateful for your trust in me, sir, but I fear I cannot. I have business of my own in Brighton.”

His words chopped off a piece of Leah’s suddenly foolish hope that she might somehow have a legitimate reason to work with him again, and her posture slumped.

“We feared that would be the case,” Marianne said.

Mr. Harcourt shook William’s hand. “But we will not give up on you just yet. Another opportunity for you to join our society might present itself.”

William gave a slight nod and stepped backward.

Leah’s throat constricted. Soon, William would turn and walk out of her life. No more shared investigations, no more moments when his teasing made her forget herself, no more of that particular way he had of making her feel both completely at ease and utterly undone. *Say something. Anything. Just keep him there another moment.*

“You refer to yourselves as a society?” she blurted to Marianne. “What do you call yourselves? Names mean so much.” As she’d hoped, William paused. His gaze settled upon Leah, and her senses clung to his attention. “Or so I’ve always thought.”

“The Relentless Society,” Marianne said.

“Relentless.” Leah held the word on her tongue. “I like it. It’s quite poetic.”

“It fits us, at any rate. We never give up.” Mr. Harcourt glanced at the two of them. “Are there any other questions we can answer for you?”

“Only one,” Leah said. “When can I learn more?”

“We’ll be in touch soon.” Marianne smiled a little and took Mr. Harcourt’s offered arm.

Leah, watching them walk away, edged next to William, who still stood there. She shouldn’t have done it. Indeed, if someone was watching her, they’d say she was highly improper for speaking so intimately with a man

who wasn't her betrothed. But Leah couldn't make herself refrain from doing so.

She took in a deep breath, hugged her arms in front of her, and lowered her voice. "As this is farewell, I want to tell you that I . . ." She couldn't say "I love you." She was marrying another man, after all. "I will always hold a special place in my heart for you." William's eyes widened at her declaration, and she quickly added, "For all you've helped me with in finding Susanna."

"I had very little to do with any of it. Always bungling about. At any rate, I'm the one who owes you gratitude."

"You have always thought much too meanly of yourself, William. No, don't shake your head at me. I'm serious when I say, you, Sir William Talbot, are incredible, and everyone knows it."

His stare at her widened, and she swallowed. Was he angry? Confused?

"Well, that was all I wanted to say," she concluded. "Give Susanna my love." It was the best farewell she could muster.

He didn't move, so she lowered her eyelids. *Leave. No, don't leave. Oh, how can I bear this?*

"Leah." His voice was so soft that she strained to hear it.

"Yes?"

"You cannot marry Mr. Fortescue. You don't love him."

Leah pressed her palm against her breast bone. "Why would you tease me like that? It's so unkind."

"I'm not teasing you."

"Of course you are. You know as well as I do that love isn't the most important matter in these circumstances."

"It should be." He narrowed his gaze. "You agree with me, don't you?"

"It—is a good match."

"A good match? He's as old as your father."

"His character, not his age, is the important factor. He is an honorable man. I—I have as good a chance for a comfortable life with him as with anyone."

"Are those your words or your father's?"

Leah closed her eyes, willed away her building nausea—*I can do this*—and opened them again. “Yes, Father encouraged me, but it is my decision. I am marrying Mr. Fortescue.”

William rubbed the back of his neck. “When?”

“At summer’s end.”

He glared up at the sky.

Leah studied his profile, memorized the way the sunlight glistened off his hair, and at last curtsied. “Farewell, William.”

“If this is indeed *farewell*, then let us shake hands.”

Leah gaped down at his outstretched hand. Never had she taken a man’s hand in such an open, even intimate, manner before. It simply wasn’t done. And yet, what could it harm? She was, after all, wearing gloves.

“Surely you are not afraid to shake hands with me,” William whispered. “It is a mere formality, a sign of agreement between associates. You are my associate, are you not?”

“I had thought I was more to you than an associate.”

“And so you are.” Something in his gaze deepened. “Which means we can certainly shake hands.” He stretched and relaxed his fingers.

“Very well.” She placed her gloved hand in his, and he squeezed it. Not too hard, but firmly, as if it belonged there. Warmth spread across her shoulders and up her neck into her cheeks. “Farewell, William.”

William didn’t release her. His expression shifted into something she couldn’t quite read, and her chest tightened.

“Don’t marry him,” William said. “I cannot watch you pledge yourself to another man when—” His chest rose on a shaking breath. “Marry me.”

The world stopped. Leah’s thoughts scattered like startled birds. Surely she’d misheard. Her dear friend, her beloved William, couldn’t possibly mean . . . “What?”

“Marry me instead of Mr. Fortescue.”

“But—” She blinked as understanding dawned. “That is kind of you, William, but there is no need for you to give up your future to rescue me. I am . . . I will be . . . fine.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me out of kindness, Leah.”

“Then why—?”

“I want you to marry me because I love you.”

The words struck her like summer lightning in a cloudless sky—brilliant, stunning, impossible. Her chest constricted even as her heart soared. William loved her? She shook her head. This couldn't be real.

His expression fell. "You don't believe me?"

"No." How could she? When she'd spent years watching him, loving him, certain he saw her as nothing more than a sister-friend?

William inched toward her, and Leah glanced over both her shoulders. Was anyone, especially Father or Mr. Fortescue, watching them? She slid her hand from William's and stepped back.

William lowered his voice further. "I assure you, my dear Leah, that I am in earnest. I love you as a man loves a woman, and not as a brother loves a sister. I wish to marry you. And if an oath is required, I swear it."

She searched his dear face. She saw nothing of friendly obligation or brotherly affection. Only the raw emotions she sensed in herself—desire, tenderness, love.

He didn't move, but something in his gaze made him seem as if he'd stepped closer to her. "Do you think it possible that you could learn to love me?"

Sudden tears filled Leah's eyes. After so many years of hiding her feelings, of watching him from a distance, of convincing herself to accept a marriage without love . . . There was nothing she could do to stop the tears, so she didn't. She merely lowered her hands to her sides and inched toward him, drawn by a lifetime of longing. "Dearest William, I have loved you for as long as I can remember."

"What?" He blinked at her, his expression incredulous.

Joy bubbled up inside her. It threatened to burst forth in wild laughter even as despair crushed her heart. "Oh, William." The words escaped past the fingers she pressed to her lips. How many times had she dreamed of William saying those words? "Why did you wait so long to tell me? Nothing in this world would make me happier than to marry you, but you know I cannot. I've given my word to Mr. Fortescue. Father has announced the betrothal. The contracts are signed. Mr. Fortescue has already paid Father's debts."

"I realize I was a fool, but I didn't recognize my true feelings for you until it was too late. But I promise you, Leah, we'll find a way through this."

Once again, William grabbed her hand, his grip tight, his warmth seeping through her glove, anchoring her when she felt she might shatter. Blood thundered in her ears.

He stepped closer. "There must be some legal recourse, some way to—"

"William, please." Again, Leah glanced about her. Mr. Fortescue stood watching them, his face unreadable, but even from this distance, the weight of his stare prickled across her skin like a thousand fiery ants. "We mustn't discuss this."

"This isn't over. Tonight, search your father's law books while I consult an Oxford friend who still owes me for those endless nights of Greek translations. He's a local solicitor, and the finest legal mind I know. With all three of us searching, we'll find a precedent for breaking this betrothal."

Hope trembled through her. "And if we don't? Or Father doesn't agree?"

He frowned. "We'll cross that road if it comes."

Leah swallowed.

"And tomorrow morning," William continued, "I'll call on Mr. Fortescue."

"Mr. Fortescue will be with Father tomorrow morning at our home."

"Very well." His gaze held hers with fierce tenderness. "Then I'll call on all of you. Trust me, Leah."

Her heart leaped. "I have always trusted you, William." But was this truly possible?

"Women, like men, are duty bound to form and follow their own paths," her grandmother's voice said inside her mind. *Please let that be true.*

"I mean it, Leah," William pressed. "Whatever happens, we'll face it together."

Together. The word sounded as deep and powerful as faith, but could faith—even faith shared between two hearts—break the chains of contract and custom?

Chapter 24

LEAH COULD SCARCELY FOCUS on Mrs. Winters' offering of tea and toast in the drawing room when she and Father returned from Rani and Mr. Barrington's wedding. Nor could Leah keep her hands from trembling. No matter how still she sat or how hard she focused on her surroundings, William's words—"There must be precedent for breaking a betrothal"—thrummed through her every sense.

Leah closed her eyes. *Dear God, please, if it's possible, help us find some way forward.*

Father's voice broke through her reverie. "I suppose we shouldn't expect Sir William or his sister at the wedding. Now that the young lady's been found, they'll be returning to Brighton."

Leah opened her mouth, about to say, "There will be no wedding with Mr. Fortescue," and closed it again. She couldn't say those words. Not yet when they weren't true, but she should say something. Anything.

No other words came. She gulped a sip of her tea.

Father, reclining on the couch, relaxing his injured leg, narrowed his gaze at her. "Don't you agree?"

Somehow, Leah nodded.

"Hmm." Father watched her a moment longer, then took a bite of his toast.

Leah managed another sip of tea. At last, she dabbed her napkin to her lips and placed her dishes on the side table next to her chair. "Please excuse me, Father. It has been a rather taxing day."

"Very well. You're excused. With all you still need to do before your wedding, you don't want to waste your strength."

"Thank you." Leah stood, drew back her shoulders in her most poised demeanor, and paced with even, unhurried steps from the drawing room.

Then, once Father could no longer see her, she hurried down the hall to his library.

She eased the heavy door closed behind her and faced the shelves where Father kept his prized legal volumes. The four leather-bound tomes of Blackstone's Commentaries sat prominently in the center, their gilt lettering catching the late-afternoon light. Like William and his father before him, Father had studied these essential texts, considering such knowledge vital to a gentleman's education and the proper management of his affairs. In years past, Father had also occasionally spoken of perhaps one day serving as a magistrate like William's father had done—a position that would have suited Father's passion for law and justice—but that dream had never materialized.

Leah, scanning each title, strode past the treatises on property law to Blackstone's first volume, "Rights of Persons." With her heart pounding in her throat, she lifted the book from the shelf and headed to Father's mahogany desk. She paused. What had she been thinking? She couldn't risk him finding her there. What if he questioned her sudden interest in marriage law?

Wincing, she tucked the heavy book under her arm, gathered Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act and a volume of recent court reports, and made her way upstairs to her bedchamber.

At her own writing desk, she angled Blackstone's Commentaries toward the waning afternoon light that filtered through the window behind her. She then flipped through the pages to Chapter 15, "Of Husband and Wife," and searched each densely printed paragraph about marriage contracts and proper consent.

Nothing.

She reached for the court reports, though her heart had already begun to sink. Case after case confirmed what she dreaded—marriage settlements made by adults with proper legal authority were binding. Breach of contract carried severe financial penalties and social disgrace.

She did, however, come across a passage buried in a section about contracts made by minors. The text noted that agreements made by persons under the age of majority were generally voidable, particularly those entered into without proper understanding of their consequences. Yet it also

mentioned that courts sometimes considered the capacity of minors to form true intent to contract. Considered. Nothing more. Just considered.

Still, her pulse quickened. It wasn't a precedent that could break her engagement—she understood that much about the law. But it did suggest that childhood agreements were viewed differently than adult contracts. Perhaps . . .

Leah tugged open her desk drawer and removed her diary. She extracted the folded yellowed paper tucked between its pages and spread it wide on the desk in front of her.

There, in William's youthful but careful script, lay her copy of the marriage contract William had created for them when she was six and he fifteen. William had mimicked the formal language he'd learned about at school. Susanna and her governess, as witnesses, had signed it, and William had even convinced their parents to feign authorizing it with their signatures. All of them had laughed at the children's game, even Leah. But inside Leah's young heart, it hadn't felt like a game. Not entirely, that was.

Leah spread the legal text beside the childhood contract. She traced the faded ink of William's signature with her fingertip. True, it couldn't override her formal engagement to Mr. Fortescue. The law was quite clear about that. But might it convince a reasonable man to at least consider her feelings?

She sat back in her chair and pressed the bases of her palms against her temples. "I'm sorry, William," she whispered. She hadn't found the legal solution she'd hoped for, but maybe, perhaps, he had.

Chapter 25

FATHER HAD JUST WELCOMED Mr. Fortescue into the drawing room when a crisp knock struck their front door. Soon after, Mrs. Winters announced, "Sir William Talbot is here. He wishes to speak with you, Mr. Crauford, and you as well, miss."

"Why the devil is he here?" Father asked Leah.

"I . . . cannot say."

"I hope nothing more has happened to his sister," Mr. Fortescue said. "Their family has already faced more misfortune than most."

"Indeed," Father muttered. Then louder, he said to Mrs. Winters, "Show him in."

She nodded and left the room. Father shifted from his reclining position on the couch and set both feet on the floor in front of him.

William entered soon after. Leah, sitting in an armchair that faced away from the door, looked over her shoulder at William. His gaze clung to hers, then moved quickly to Father. Leah glanced at Mr. Fortescue, who sat next to her, and likewise turned back to Father.

"Sir William," Father said amiably. Indeed, if Leah hadn't known the true state of his feelings, she'd have thought he was pleased to see him. "What can I do for you? All is well with your family, I hope?"

"Thank you, sir," William said. "My family is well."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"But yesterday," William continued, "as I watched your carriage drive away from the Barrington wedding, I realized I had unfinished business with you and your daughter. With Mr. Fortescue as well."

Father, leaning on his cane, stood. "Business? What sort of business could you have with the three of us?"

Mr. Fortescue stood too. He helped Leah to her feet, placed her hand on his bent arm, and covered it with his hand, holding it there. "If this is indeed a business matter," he said to William, "perhaps Miss Crauford would be more comfortable leaving us for a time."

"No. Miss Crauford must stay. She holds a great part in this business."

Leah's heart leaped at the timbre of William's voice. It was louder, firmer, charged with something raw and urgent the way it had been when he'd confessed his love for her and said they'd face this obstacle together. *We are one.*

"This is highly untoward." Father's challenge sliced through Leah's reverie—his ire stronger than she'd heard it in years—and she winced. *Redirect their conversation.*

She straightened her spine, slid her hand out from Mr. Fortescue's grip, and stepped forward. "Father, Sir William and I do have business with you and Mr. Fortescue, but before we get into that, you both deserve the truth."

Mr. Fortescue edged closer to Leah. He, narrowing his gaze at her, clasped and released her elbow. "And what truth would that be, my dear?"

"The truth that says I cannot marry you."

Mr. Fortescue's expression stilled.

Father, behind her, coughed. "Daughter! Have you lost your senses?"

"Actually, I've found them." Leah swallowed. "You've shown me great kindness, Mr. Fortescue, and I'm grateful to you for it. But I cannot marry one man while knowing my heart belongs to another."

William's sharp intake of breath sent a jolt through Leah's body. Her pulse hammered against her throat, and her knees trembled. If only she could turn to him and search his beloved face for what that breath meant, but she instead gripped her hands together and focused on Mr. Fortescue. "I do not wish to cause you pain, sir, but please, I beg you. Release me from our betrothal."

"You . . ." Mr. Fortescue slurped. He tightened his jaw. He glared at William, but he spoke to Leah. "You wish to break our engagement? May I ask in favor of whom?"

William stepped beside Leah. "In favor of me, sir."

"Forgive us," Leah whispered.

Mr. Fortescue's expression shifted from surprise to something deeper—something like disappointment mixed with hurt. "I see. And how long has this attachment existed?"

Thick silence stretched between them.

At length, William said, "I know the trouble this causes both you and Mr. Crauford, and I am willing to help alleviate it in any way I can, but—"

"The contracts are signed and valid," Mr. Fortescue interrupted, though his tone remained measured. "I have already settled your family's debts, Crauford. Plans have been made."

"We realize that," William said, "but I hope we might find some accommodation." He turned to Father. "I have spoken with a solicitor, and I am fully prepared to address the financial obligations."

"The financial matters are already resolved," Mr. Fortescue said. "What concerns me more is the timing of this revelation. Not long ago, Miss Crauford, you accepted my proposal with what appeared to be sincere consent. What has changed so dramatically in such a short time?"

Everything, she thought. "I learned that my true feelings, which I believed were unrequited, were returned," she said aloud.

Mr. Fortescue studied her. "So, you secretly carried this attachment while accepting my suit?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"I had hoped," he said slowly, "when I offered for you, that in time affection might grow between us. I believed we could build a comfortable, respectable life together." His voice grew quieter. "I had hoped for an heir."

Leah's chest tightened over the sadness in his words.

"Sir," William said, "surely you would not wish to force a young lady into marriage against her wishes."

Mr. Fortescue's expression hardened. "Force? I have forced nothing. Miss Crauford entered our arrangement willingly, with her father's blessing. I have been nothing but honorable in my intentions."

"Of course you have," Leah said quickly. "You've been everything that is kind and proper. But . . ."

In one quick movement, she withdrew the folded paper from her pocket and held out the yellowed document to him. "Sir, I know this cannot

change our legal arrangement, but I hoped . . . I hoped you might believe me when I say this is not a whim. I secretly gave my heart to him years ago.”

Mr. Fortescue frowned as he took the paper. “What is this?”

“A betrothal contract Sir William and I made as children. Our parents signed it, thinking it was charming. But for me, it was never entirely play-acting. I kept it all these years because . . . well, it represented my truest feelings.”

Mr. Fortescue unfolded the document, and William, glancing back and forth between Leah and the contract, leaned toward it. Father, also examining it, drew his brows together. Both men’s mouths fell slightly open.

Mr. Fortescue read, his expression growing more troubled as the seconds ticked by. “A betrothal contract between you and Sir William, witnessed and signed when you were very young indeed.”

“Yes,” Leah said. “I was six.”

“And you’ve kept this all these years?”

“In my diary. I know it has no legal standing against our current arrangement, but I hoped it might at least prove to you that I have cared for him for as long as I can remember.”

“As a brother,” Father cut in. “Nothing more.”

Leah shook her head. “More than as a brother. A husband.”

William’s gaze found hers, and understanding pulled between them. Her breath caught. Father harrumphed.

Mr. Fortescue set the paper down on the nearby end table, and Leah turned her attention back to him. His face reflected a complex mix of emotions. “This is . . . most unexpected, Miss Crauford.”

“I understand your disappointment,” William said. “The situation is awkward for all of us. But surely we can resolve this as gentlemen, with consideration for everyone’s well-being.”

“Can we?” Mr. Fortescue’s voice sharpened. “Sir William, you have just asked me to step aside from a formal engagement, to give up my plans for the future, to allow my reputation to suffer the speculation that will inevitably follow.” He turned to Leah. “And you, my dear, are asking me to publicly acknowledge that you accepted my suit while harboring deep feelings for another man.”

Leah flinched at the accuracy of his words. "Forgive me, sir. I never meant to deceive you."

"Perhaps not intentionally, but the effect is the same." He stood and moved to the window, looking out for a moment before turning back to them. "Do you understand what this request means for me? I am not a young man. At my age, opportunities for marriage—for the possibility of an heir—are limited. More importantly, if word spreads that my intended bride preferred another, it suggests that I am either a poor judge of character or an inadequate suitor."

"No one would think that," Leah protested.

"Wouldn't they? Society loves nothing more than gossip about broken engagements and transferred affections. My reputation, carefully maintained over decades, could be severely damaged."

Father cleared his throat. "Surely we can manage this discreetly."

"How do you propose to explain a broken engagement between Miss Crauford and myself, followed immediately by her betrothal to Sir William? The timing alone will invite speculation."

William stepped forward. "What would you require to make this situation manageable for all parties?"

Mr. Fortescue, frowning, watched him. At last, he said, "Very well, Sir William. I will release Miss Crauford from her obligation to me in exchange for full compensation of the debts I have settled, plus a substantial additional sum to acknowledge the inconvenience and potential damage to my standing. Let us say three times the original amount."

Leah's senses lurched. "That's . . . that's six thousand pounds."

"At minimum," Mr. Fortescue said coolly. "Second, a carefully orchestrated public resolution that preserves everyone's reputation. I will not be portrayed as a rejected suitor. Rather, I must appear as a magnanimous gentleman who discovered the prior attachment and graciously stepped aside."

"That seems reasonable," Father said slowly.

"Third," Mr. Fortescue continued, "Miss Crauford will write a formal letter expressing her gratitude for my understanding and explicitly stating that I have been an honorable and generous intended husband. This letter

will be shared with key members of society to ensure the narrative is properly established.”

Leah swallowed hard. The demand was humiliating, but not unreasonable.

“And finally, you will both attend a dinner party I shall host, where I will publicly announce my decision to release Miss Crauford from our engagement. Sir William, you will acknowledge my generosity in this matter, and I will bestow my blessing upon your union. The Ton will see me as the gracious benefactor of true love rather than the spurned suitor.”

The manipulation in his plan was subtle, but effective. He would emerge with his reputation enhanced, while theirs would be entirely dependent on his goodwill.

“The financial terms are . . . substantial,” William said, his voice strained.

“The inconvenience to me is considerable,” Mr. Fortescue replied. “I had made specific plans for my future. Those plans now lie in ruins. The compensation should reflect that reality.”

William was quiet for a moment, his jaw working as he stared at the floor. When he looked up, his expression was resolute, but taut. “It would require adjustments to my holdings, but it can be managed.”

Leah’s heart ached at the careful way he spoke and the cost in his eyes. What would the specifics for acquiring such a sum mean for his estate? “William,” she whispered, “the sacrifice is too great.”

“That is for me to determine,” William said.

Mr. Fortescue gave them a weak smile. “Please understand that I take no pleasure in these terms, but I will not be made to appear foolish or inadequate by actions taken without my consultation. If you wish to conduct this matter with any civility, you must acknowledge the considerable cost to my reputation.”

“We understand,” William said. “And we accept your terms.”

Father covered his mouth with his hand and gave Leah and William a sidelong glance. “When shall we begin the new arrangements?”

“Immediately,” Mr. Fortescue said. “The longer we delay, the more opportunity for speculation and gossip.” He turned to Leah, his expression gentler now. “My dear, I hope you understand that this is not vindic-

tiveness on my part. I genuinely wish you well. But I cannot allow my reputation to be damaged by this situation.”

Leah pressed her lips into an almost smile. “I do understand. And I am truly sorry for the difficulties this has caused you.”

“I believe you are.” He picked up the childhood contract again, studying it with what might have been wistful sadness. “This is quite touching, actually. That you kept such a thing all these years speaks to a constancy of heart that is admirable.” He set it down gently. “I hope Sir William appreciates the depth of devotion he has inspired.”

William moved closer to Leah, his hand brushing hers. “More than he deserves,” he said softly.

“Perhaps. But then, love rarely follows the rules of what we deserve, does it?” Mr. Fortescue straightened his shoulders. “Very well, Mr. Crauford. Shall we discuss the practical arrangements? The sooner we resolve this matter properly, the better for all concerned.”

“Agreed,” Father said

“Mr. Crauford,” William said, “if I may, I would like a word with Miss Crauford in private.”

Father gave his consent, and he and Mr. Fortescue left the drawing room. William turned back to Leah.

Leah clasped her hands in front of her and blinked back the moisture in her eyes. “Oh, William. You’ve given up so much for—”

He strode toward her and clasped her hands. “For you,” he said, inching closer. “And truth be told, I would give up even more if it was required to win your affection.” He lifted her hands and moved closer. His warm breath wisped across her face. “Leah, you know who I am, all my foibles and foolishness. Despite it all, will you marry me?”

Leah blinked. “After everything that has happened . . . with Father and Mr. Fortescue . . . how could you even question my answer? Yes, William, I will marry you.”

All at once, his lips touched hers. So gently she thought she’d imagined it. But no—this was real. William was kissing her. His mouth brushed against hers, tentative at first, yet hopeful. Sparks thrummed through her entire body, and when she responded, his hesitation vanished. His kiss

deepened, urgent with all the longing she'd kept buried in her heart, and Leah couldn't help but grin against his mouth.

William pulled back, though their foreheads still touched. "Is my kiss so amusing?"

"I suppose it is," Leah said, giddy with the knowledge that she could tease him this way now and no one would think less of her for it. Not even William.

"In what way?"

"In the way that says I cannot believe this is happening."

A smile tugged at his lips. "Well, believe it, dearest Leah. I love you. *You*." She again touched his face, relishing the moment.

"How soon can we marry?" William asked. "Keep in mind, I will not accept any time near as long as that earlier contract of ours."

Leah's laugh caught on a happy sob. "You didn't even remember it, did you?"

"Actually . . ." He reached inside his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a crisp, though slightly yellowed piece of paper. He opened it and held it out to her. "It's my copy of that contract."

Emotion filled Leah's eyes. "You did remember it."

"Not until recently. I came across it soon after I realized my true feelings for you. I suppose you could say that keeping it close to me made me feel as if you were close too. It gave me hope." He kissed her forehead, the tears coursing down her cheeks, her lips. "How long?" he rasped.

Leah pressed her hand against his chest, feeling his heart race beneath her palm even as her pulse likewise leaped. "You'll have to speak with Father about that," she somehow managed to say, "though I suspect that under the circumstances, you're in a strong position to negotiate."

"Clever woman." He caught her hand and kissed her fingers. "A month. Just long enough for the banns to be properly read."

Happy warmth spread through her. She smiled, and holding his gaze, again lifted onto her toes and kissed his mouth. "It's settled, then," she whispered. "A month."

Epilogue

SIR WILLIAM TALBOT BALANCED a breakfast tray in one hand while tucking two letters into his coat pocket. Dawn's light had barely touched the horizon as he eased open the bedchamber door.

"You needn't be so quiet, husband." Leah, sitting up against the bed pillows, smoothed the comforter over her lap.

"Ah, so my lady wife is awake." He crossed to her side, setting the tray carefully in front of her. "I wouldn't wish to disturb the upcoming mistress of Seawind House. Though I'm afraid you'll have to make due with this London town house for a while."

Red colored her cheeks, and she whispered, "Seawind House. Our home in Brighton."

He brushed his thumb over her right cheek. "Still shy about your new position? Even after three weeks of marriage?"

"Not shy." She caught his hand, pressing it to her face. "Wonderstruck. Sometimes I fear I'll wake to find it all a dream—that I'm not truly your wife."

He lifted her chin with his forefinger and kissed her lips. "Then I must continue proving otherwise." He kissed her again, longer this time, then pulled slightly away. He held her gaze. "I've brought you another reminder of my devotion." He drew a letter from his pocket, its seal still warm.

Her eyes sparkled. "William! You've written me a love letter every morning since our wedding day."

"And I shall continue until you tire of them."

"Never." She pressed it to her chest, closed her eyes for a long moment, and at length broke the seal.

My dearest, dearest, dearest . . . William thought as she read those same words, ran her long, slender fingers over the following sentences, and at last, pressed the letter to her lips. Kissing it, she smiled into his eyes.

He, unable to stop himself, removed the tray with her uneaten breakfast, pulled her against him, and kissed her soundly for another full minute.

"There's another missive too," he said, breathing heavily. "It came just moments ago. From Harcourt Manor. It seems our friends have news that cannot wait, though they did honor your request to leave us in peace until after our wedding trip."

"Barely." She laughed, then sobered. "I do hope Mr. Harcourt doesn't wait too long to secure his own happiness. Miss Beaumont's heart is his, but other gentlemen have begun to notice her worth."

William frowned. "Indeed. I know too well the perils of hesitation." He lifted her hand to his lips. "Thank the heavens I came to my senses in time."

"I pray those same words every night."

William swallowed the thick lump that suddenly filled his throat, and Leah opened the letter.

"Read it aloud, if you please," William said. "The courier said it was urgent."

"And you didn't open it then?"

"I suppose I should have, but I confess I had my own urgent business." He again brushed her cheek, just as he had when he'd first entered the room, and her blush deepened. "Red becomes you, my love."

She cleared her throat, seemed about to say, "please don't tease me," then apparently changed her mind. Which was just as well. If teasing her brought out that lovely color in her cheeks, he'd tease her more. Had she realized that? Was that the reason she hadn't said anything?

Probably.

She moistened her lips and read the missive aloud.

Dear Sir and Lady Talbot,

Mr. Harcourt and I have acquired information we must share with you. We know you have not been home long, but please, if at all possible, may we call on you this afternoon at two o'clock? I know this seems soon to you, but Mr. Harcourt and I have been waiting for your help for a week, so it is not soon for us.

Please send a servant with your reply.

My greatest regards,

Miss Beaumont

"How shall we respond?" William asked.

Leah rose. "We tell them yes, of course. We are members of the Relentless Society, after all." She smiled up at him, her eyes filled with such profound love that the sight of them stole his breath. "Though I must say," she continued, "that while I nearly lost everything I held dear—especially you—your relentless pursuit of me helped me find everything my heart desired. Relentlessness is the key to success."

William drew her into his arms. "I knew you were a poet, my love, but a philosopher as well? Each day you reveal new depths to your character."

Leah tightened her grip around his waist. "And each day I learn more about how much I love you."



At two o'clock sharp, Leah settled onto the drawing room settee of their rented London townhouse. Though Seawind House awaited them in Brighton, they would remain in town until justice was served—both for

the attack she and Susanna had endured, and for Susanna's subsequent forced marriage at Gretna Green to one of their assailants.

The butler opened the door, and William stood from his nearby chair.

"Mr. Harcourt and Miss Beaumont," the butler said.

Their visitors entered. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, catching the glint in Marianne's eyes and the deep blue of her walking dress. Mr. Harcourt, restraining a smile, brushed dust from his sleeve. Their news, whatever it was, must be quite exciting.

Leah cast William a knowing glance. Had Mr. Harcourt finally proposed?

Marianne pulled a small leather notebook from her reticule. "Sir William and Lady Talbot, you simply must hear what we've discovered."

"We're quite anxious to do so," William said.

Leah poured tea into each of the four cups, but as she passed Marianne's to her, Marianne said, "Do you recall when you mentioned you wished orikatas could talk?"

Leah blinked, scanning her memory, and at last remembered their visit with Miss Ashburn. "I do."

Marianne smiled a little, took a sip of her tea, and at last leaned forward, close enough that Leah could see the tiny ink stains on her fingers. "I'm sure you'll hardly believe it, but your words triggered something in me. To that date, we'd only opened a few of the orikatas, but realizing we've collected nearly a dozen more since then, Mr. Harcourt and I decided to examine them more thoroughly."

Marianne nodded to Mr. Harcourt, who produced two carefully preserved paper creatures from his coat pocket. The crisp folds created shapes Leah had never seen before—the chameleons?—but despite their delicate appearance, there was something unsettling about them.

"Miss Beaumont made the most remarkable discovery," Mr. Harcourt said, his voice warm with pride. "Show them, my dear."

Marianne, her fingers trembling, unfolded the orikatas. Tiny script covered their insides. "It's not easy to see, but eventually we figured it out. It's a list. A code of sorts. Look here. The same thing is written in both orikatas."

William leaned forward in his chair. "What does it mean?" The confusion in his voice matched her own bewilderment.

"Classifications of the chameleons," Mr. Harcourt said, "related to how many were left behind at each theft scene, and what that number indicates. From what we can ascertain, it appears that the crime ring is searching for a significant historical treasure, and the number of chameleons they leave behind represents to someone—who, we don't know—if they discovered something important, perhaps a clue, to its whereabouts."

Leah's imagination whirled. "Then the chameleons are not calling cards per se, but more like secret messages?"

"That's what we think exactly," Mr. Harcourt said.

William's eyes gleamed at Leah with what could only be excitement. And who could blame him? Secrets and treasures naturally built intrigue.

"But why hide such information in the paper creatures?" Leah asked. "And why write out the code where it could be found by, well, you? It seems needlessly complicated."

"Perhaps," William said, holding back a smile, "our mysterious friends simply couldn't resist adding their artistic flourishes to these clever little orikatas."

His quip drew appreciative nods from their guests, though Marianne also leaned forward. "We've developed a theory. We wonder if there might be someone within the criminal organization itself—a person who wants to help either us or the authorities uncover the scheme, but must also maintain their cover."

"A spy?" Leah straightened, her mind racing ahead. "But surely if they wanted to help, they could provide names or more direct information."

"That's just it," Mr. Harcourt replied. "After some thought, we've determined that our mysterious ally—if we indeed have one—may not know the identities of the principal players. Perhaps this coding system is all they know."

William swept his hand through the air. "That is genius. Everyone has seen the orikatas at crime scenes, examining them only as the criminal's mark. Few, if anyone, would think to unfold them and look inside. It's the perfect masquerade for the criminals."

"And now for us too," Leah added.

"Precisely," Marianne said. "If we are right, these paper creatures have been telling us all along whether or not the criminals had found anything of significance, and yet we never knew it."

"This is remarkable," Leah said. "Thank you for sharing your discovery with us."

"Of course," Marianne replied. "You are members of the Relentless Society, after all."

"Exactly," Mr. Harcourt added. "And once you're more settled with your affairs, we hope you'll be able to help us with our case."

"You can count on us," William said.

After a bit more casual discussion, Miss Beaumont and Mr. Harcourt took their leave.

Alone once again, William, from behind Leah, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against his chest. His breath tickled her ear. "Well, my love, it seems our life together will never be dull."

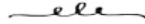
Leah leaned into his embrace, savoring his warmth, his strength. "I never thought it would be." She then turned in his arms and faced him. "Though I do wish Mr. Harcourt would speak his heart soon. No woman's patience is endless. Not even Miss Beaumont's."

William brushed his lips across Leah's temple, sending a familiar shiver down her spine. "That may be true, but sometimes we men need time to recognize our greatest treasures." He hugged her tighter. "But as you've taught me, with relentless determination, I might add, love always finds its way."

Leah closed her eyes. She breathed in the comforting scent of bay rum and fresh linen that always clung to William's coat. Yes, love did find its way, even through mysteries, danger, and even paper creatures bearing secret messages.

And she wouldn't change a single moment of it.

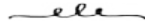
Read more about William Talbot in *Finding Anne de Bourgh*. It is a historical mystery romance based on characters from Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*.



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Did you enjoy *A Murderous Masquerade*? If so, consider leaving a review wherever this book is sold. It only takes a few minutes, I would really appreciate it, and it helps readers find books they might like. Thanks!

Acknowledgements

Every writing project brings its own bag of difficulties, but there are wonderful people who always help me through them. Thank you to fellow authors and members of my critique group Becki Clayson and Renae Mackley—both have influenced this book's creation at some point between the brainstorming stage, the first draft, and the final critiques. Thank you.

Additionally, thank you to Tristi Pinkston, whose editing skills, storytelling talents, and dedicated work have lifted my scribblings into the story I hoped it would be.

Finally—but which could also be firstly—thank you to my dear husband and family. I love writing, but it wouldn't be nearly as joyful—or even possible—without them.

About Ronda Gibb Hinrichsen



Award-winning author Ronda Gibb Hinrichsen lives between the beautiful Rocky Mountains and the Great Salt Lake, where she regularly sees eagles, hawks, owls, and ducks. Lots of ducks. She has had dozens of fiction and nonfiction published in magazines, and she is the author of mystery romance and fantasy novels. She also writes children's fantasy under the pen name of R.K. Grant. Ronda loves reading, writing, and music, though not necessarily in that order, and she enjoys traveling with her husband throughout the world in search of fascinating stories and settings. She loves hearing from readers, and you can contact her at ronda@rondahinrichsen.com.

To learn more about Ronda, visit her website at rondagibbhinrichsen.com. You can also connect with her on Facebook , Bookbub , and Instagram.

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