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# Jenna PETERSEN

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR



## The Secrets of a Lady

THE JORDANS ➤ 1 ➤

# The Secrets of a Lady

## The Jordans: Book 1

Jenna Petersen

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# Prologue

1809

"Damn weddings, damn love and damn Griffin Berenger!"

Audrey Jordan wiped her eyes and straightened her dark green gown before she exited the dressing room and strode down the halls of Ashton Court.

For as long as she could remember, she had dreamed of being the lady of this household. The mistress of its servants, the benefactress to its lands.

And then there was Griffin...

Stepping out onto the terrace, Audrey scanned the crowd. As expected, when she found her brother, Noah, Griffin Berenger was at his side. He was so handsome in his formal clothes, his dark blond hair tousled by the gentle evening breeze, and a grin on his striking face. He was perfect, and he should have been hers. But now he never would be.

As if to accentuate that point, Lucinda Sutton... no, Audrey corrected herself. Lady Lucinda *Berenger* came and slid her arm through his. She lifted her positively perfect face so that Griffin could place a brief kiss on her full, pink lips.

"Oh, Griffin," Audrey whispered under her breath.

"There you are!"

At her mother's sharp voice, Audrey spun on her heel. Tabitha Jordan stood with her hands on her hips, one slippered foot tapping with impatience beneath the lacy edging of her gown.

"That is enough mooning over Viscount Berenger, Audrey!" Tabitha grasped her daughter's hand and half-dragged her down the steps into the garden. "This is his wedding day, you must accept that."

Audrey nodded mutely. How could she argue? But the closer they moved to the happy couple, the further her heart dropped into her stomach.

"Viscount and Lady Berenger," Tabitha gushed as she took the last few steps toward the couple. "Audrey wants to give you her congratulations."

Audrey found herself staring at the man she loved and his new wife. "I'm very... happy for you, Griffin. And for you, as well, Luci," she choked out. Her pride took a hard hit with each word.

She glanced at her brother for help. Noah nodded, his expression filled with compassion, and her discomfort eased a fraction. At least she knew she had one ally to rely upon.

Griffin smiled, though he was examining her face very closely. She hoped he wouldn't see her heart. That would be utterly humiliating.

"Thank you, Audrey," he finally answered.

Luci tossed a stray lock of pale hair from her shoulder. "Why Audrey, you look miserable for one who professes she's happy. Are you well?"

The smugness of her voice made Audrey sick, but she didn't respond. The woman despised her and the feeling was mutual. But it mattered very little now.

"My sister loves weddings, don't you, Audrey? She's such a romantic," Noah supplied as he took his sister's arm.

Tabitha nodded to the new couple. "We should leave you two to your other guests. Come along Audrey, Noah."

She led her two children away from the crush of the crowd who were moving in to congratulate Griffin and Luci. When they reached a table at the parameter of the garden, Tabitha turned to her daughter.

"Please don't think me cruel. I *do* realize how difficult this is for you, my love," she said gently. "But Griffin is now married to someone else. That is permanent. Pining for him is foolish."

"Yes, Mama." Audrey sighed.

Her mother was right, of course. But it didn't make the facts sting any less.

"I'm off to find your dear Father, children. Noah, I trust you'll watch over your sister?"

"Yes, Mother."

Before she vanished into the crowd, Tabitha called over her shoulder, "And Noah, don't forget you're

Earl of Lockhart. Please *try* to behave accordingly!"

As Noah snorted out a laugh, Audrey touched her brother's arm. "Whatever Mama says, you may go. You're Griffin's best friend, you should be celebrating with him."

Noah's smile was open and genuine. "Oh, Audrey, don't you know there's no one at this party I'd rather spend time with than my *beautiful, witty* sister?"

"Don't you ever forget that I'm 'awkwardly spoken'," she said, mimicking their mother.

Noah laughed and took his turn in copying Tabitha. "Well, your brother Noah is a unabashed rogue, Audrey Jordan. A disgrace to the title of Lockhart!"

She couldn't help a giggle.

"Truly," her brother said with rare seriousness. "Despite what you believe, you're a beautiful girl. And if you had a chance, I think you'd sparkle." Before Audrey could respond, Noah craned his neck over the crowd. "It appears Lord Ashton is about to toast the happy couple. I'll fetch you a glass of champagne."

She watched him disappear into the crowd. Despite anything her dear brother said about her positive qualities, Noah was everything she wasn't: bold, charming, and at ease in any situation he encountered.

Audrey leaned back in her chair as she remembered her disastrous debut the past spring. The only men who had expressed interest in her were the ones who came sniffing after her generous dowry. She kept them all at arm's length. She refused to marry someone who loved only her purse.

"Here you are, my lady." Noah reappeared to hand her a glass of champagne with a flourished bow.

"Thank you."

She eyed the drink with interest. She hadn't been allowed many chances to imbibe in spirits. Tonight she needed them.

Audrey drew in a short breath as Lord Ashton came up the marble stairway leading to the house and clapped his hands for order. Griffin resembled his father so much that looking at the older man was like using an oracle to see Griffin in twenty years.

"What a pleasure it is for my wife and me to see so many friends here to celebrate this most joyous occasion."

Any remaining chatter ceased at the rich baritone of Ashton's voice and all faces now turned to look at him.

Audrey did her best to concentrate on his words, but found herself looking out over the crowd toward Griffin. From the joy on his face, it was clear he was perfectly content, certain that the future held nothing but the best for him and his new bride. Audrey desperately wanted to be happy for him, but she had powerful doubts about the young woman he'd wed.

Lord Ashton raised his champagne flute. "To Viscount and Lady Berenger."

"To Viscount and Lady Berenger," the crowd repeated.

Audrey tried to lift her hand and join the rest, but her body felt too heavy. Instead, she downed her drink in one unladylike gulp.

Noah watched her with a raised eyebrow. "Careful, dear sister. Don't imbibe too quickly or you shall regret it tomorrow."

"I'm fine." She gave her brother a bright smile she hoped didn't look as false as it felt. "I promise you, dearest brother, I will overcome this silly dream I once had of a future with Griffin and be perfectly fine."

"I know you will." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, but couldn't hide the sympathy in his voice. "Now Grif is motioning for me to join them. Will you manage here on your own for a while?"

Giving a mechanical nod, she said, "Of course."

Her brother looked doubtful, but left with a frown.

Audrey glanced over to where he'd sat. His glass of champagne was still full except for one small sip. She gave a guilty glance around her, then slid her fingertips around the delicate stem of the crystal and downed his drink, as well. Already her pain was beginning to fade, washed away on a frothy sea of bubbly liquid. Who needed Griffin Berenger anyway? Not Audrey Jordan.

She wanted another drink. In all her eighteen years she had never wanted anything more. Standing slowly to steady her suddenly shaky legs, Audrey eased her way into the crowd.

As a footman passed by, she caught his jacket sleeve. He glanced down at her hand then gave her a look of surprise. "May I help you, my lady?"

"Yes," she said, trying hard not to sound as dizzy as she felt. "My father sent me to fetch him a drink. He'd like a glass of scotch."

"Scotch? Yes, my lady. I'll fetch it immediately." He disappeared into the crowd and Audrey stifled a nervous giggle.

Oh, she was doing something very wicked. If her mother discovered her, it would be the end of her. But she didn't care.

"Here you are, my lady," the young man said when he reappeared at her side.

She grabbed the tumbler from his tray and very nearly toppled it over. "That will be all."

As she watched the young man walk away, she slowly sidestepped toward a large bush at the foot of the marble staircase. Once safely hidden behind it, she looked at the drink in her hand. The brown liquid swirled when she moved.

With a deep breath, she downed the entire contents of the tumbler. For a brief moment she didn't feel the effects, but then hot fire roared down her throat before it wove through her chest into her stomach. Coughing, she dropped the tumbler into the grass and bent over to gasp for breath.

"I'll be right back darling, I promise you."

Audrey hiccupped. She had to be drunk, for she was hearing voices. Griffin's voice to be more specific, and he was calling her darling.

"Just don't be too long, there are many important people still to greet."

This time it was a female voice that answered. Lucinda. Audrey realized the couple was standing just on the other side of the bush where she was hidden. When she heard them kiss, she nearly retched. Then she saw the top of Griffin's head disappear up the stairs toward the house.

Audrey peeked around the edge of the hedge to watch Lucinda weave her way back into the crowd. Creeping around the bush, Audrey walked up the stairs into the Ashton house.

It was quiet as she shut the glass door behind her. She leaned back against the doorframe to take a few deep breaths. Her head spun, her vision was unclear and her stomach unsteady. Finally, she took a few steps forward, toward... what?

And then she knew. Griffin's office was just a few feet away. In the distance, she could hear him shuffling papers and humming some tune she couldn't place. Turning the corner, she looked inside.

Good Lord, how could a man be so handsome? He ran a hand through his hair, tousling it as he lifted up a book to look for something on his desk. He scanned over the piles of paperwork scattered without order on the cherry wood.

"Are you looking for something?" She stepped into the room with a small hiccup.

He looked up, obviously surprised by her sudden presence in his private room. But then his face softened with pleasure. "Audrey, you startled me. What are you doing here?"

She took another step closer and shrugged one shoulder. "A good question, to be sure, but one without a good answer. I simply found myself here."

His eyes flickered as he looked her up and down, taking in her slightly disheveled appearance.

"Audrey, have you been..." His voice dropped a level. "Drinking?"

Another hiccup escaped her lips before she could hold it back, completely belying the denial on the tip of her tongue. "Only a glass of champagne. To toast your happy day." The words tasted bitter.

He arched an eyebrow as he came around the desk and stood a few feet away from her. She could smell his skin, warm and musky. The scent filled her senses with the same potency as the alcohol she had consumed.

"Well, two glasses," she admitted as she braved another step closer.

"Robert!" Griffin called into the hallway as he continued to stare at her. "Come in here, please."

A young man appeared in the doorway almost instantly. "Yes, sir?"

"Will you fetch Lord Lockhart for me?"

"No, don't bring Noah into this," she pleaded with sudden panic gripping her. Noah would pity her for this and she hated that idea. "I don't want him to see me-"

"Shh, don't worry. This will be fine, Audrey," Griffin reassured her as he caught her shoulder gently.

The heat of his fingers burned through the silk of her gown. Closing her eyes, she swallowed back a groan. Why did he have to touch her? Didn't he know it made it all worse?



He yanked his hand away and cleared his throat uncomfortably before he leaned back against the desk edge. "Why *did* you come up here? Whatever you said a moment ago, you must have a reason."

"I wanted to tell you-I wanted to say-" She swallowed back the emotions that had begun to overwhelm her. "I've only ever wanted you to be happy. But Luci, Luci won't..."

He straightened up from the desk. "What about Luci?"

"She isn't what she seems, Griffin." Immediately she covered her mouth. What had she done? Ruined everything, that was what, for Griffin was now staring at her with the sharpness of a hawk.

"What do you mean?" he snapped. She turned away, but he placed a hand on her lower arm and held her steady. "What are you saying, Audrey?"

She shook her head. All she knew was that Lucinda Sutton... Lucinda *Berenger*... was a cruel, vindictive woman who managed to hide it very well behind a veneer of beauty and grace.

"Answer me," he repeated and now his voice was as sharp as his expression.

He was so close she could feel his breath against her cheek. And it would be so easy to just...

"I have always loved you, Griffin Berenger," she whispered before she rose to her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his.

He released against her, but didn't release her arm. In fact, he seemed too shocked to do anything, neither refuse her nor respond. But she didn't care. All she knew was that he tasted like mint, and his lips felt like heaven against her own. Then those lips moved and for a brief moment she thought he kissed her back. Before she could be sure, a sharp female voice pierced the silence of the room.

"What is going on in here?"

Griffin wrenched his mouth from hers with a stunned expression. He took a step toward the door where Lucinda now stood. Her normally pretty face was red and twisted with anger and hatred.

"Luci," he began, shaking his head as he nudged past Audrey with only a quick, guilty side-glance. "This isn't what it appears."

Luci barked out a disbelieving laugh. "So that little trollop wasn't just kissing you, Griffin?"

Audrey dipped her head in response, unable to look at either one of them. Had Griffin kissed her? Really kissed her? No, it had to be a trick of her drunken imagination.

"She is highly inebriated, Luci," he said with an edge to his voice. "She doesn't know what she's doing."

"Really?" Luci stormed into the room to plant herself directly in front of Audrey. "I don't believe that for a moment. You know *exactly* what you're doing, don't you?"

Audrey could hardly hear over the rush of blood in her ears and the pounding of her pulse in her veins.

"I'm sorry," she offered as stinging tears began to slide down her cheeks. And her words were true. What she had done was so very, very wrong. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't you even dare cry!" Luci screamed, slapping Audrey with enough force to send her stumbling back.

"Lucinda!" Griffin rushed forward to catch his wife's hand before she could repeat the action. "That's enough!"

He dragged Luci away and turned her to face him, but before he could say anything more, his wife yanked his head down to her and kissed him hard. Audrey bit back a loud sob as she turned her head away.

"Hey, hey! Don't call me up here, Grif, if you're going to be kissing your-" Noah laughed as he entered the room. He halted the moment he saw his sister and his smile fell. "Audrey?"

"Noah!"

She half-stumbled over and took his arm. Both her cheek and her pride stung. What an idiot she was!

"What happened?" he asked.

"She..." Griffin began.

"That little whore came in here and kissed *my* husband!" Luci interrupted.

"That's enough!" Audrey winced at her brother's sharp tone and the look of concern in his face when he turned toward her and tilted her chin up. He searched her face. "Is this true?"

"She's drunk, Noah," Griffin supplied softly, but his eyes met hers with a strange light.

Noah sighed deeply. "Thank you, Grif. I'll take her home." He guided her past Griffin and Luci to the office door. "I'm sorry about all this."

The fury in Luci's demeanor suddenly faded as she slipped from Griffin's embrace to approach Noah and Audrey. "No, it is I who should be sorry."

Glancing down at Luci's offered hand, Audrey blinked in confusion.

"After all," Luci continued, "You're no threat to me now." Opening her arms, she pulled Audrey into a tight embrace. Just as she released her, she whispered, "Never doubt that I *will* make you suffer for this."

Noah led her away Audrey she could react to Luci's threat. They moved through the hallways in silence. Audrey hardly saw anything around her anymore. She was numb, she was empty.

Noah found a quiet exit away from the crowd and got her to the place where the carriages were parked in waiting. He motioned to his driver and then turned toward her with a heavy sigh.

"Oh, Audrey, what were you thinking?"

Audrey shrugged one shoulder, determined to be strong. "I love him, Noah. I shall never love anyone but Griffin Berenger. Not as long as I live."



## ***Chapter One***

**May, 1814**

"He looks so sad. So alone," Audrey whispered as she looked down the high hill to the cemetery below. Griffin Berenger stood at the gate of a bleached stone crypt, his forehead resting against the metal barrier and his hands clenched the steel bars. She could feel his pain as tangibly as if it were her own.

"He is alone." Noah calmed his antsy horse with a gentle pat on his flank. "Now that Luci is dead."

Audrey she squinted into the sun to get a better look at Griffin. She hadn't expected the wash of emotion he inspired in her. It was a strange mixture of pity for herself and sorrow for him.

Why couldn't she just look at him with the cool, collected gaze of a woman unaffected? After all, she had struggled for years to gain control over her sometimes-wild feelings. Now all that training seemed to fall away, leaving her drained before she'd even spoken to the man she once believed she loved.

"He seems different," she murmured, more to herself than to her brother.

From the distance it was impossible to see his features clearly, but he seemed taller, broader than she remembered. And his hair had darkened a bit over time to a deep gold. But it was more than those physical things that made him appear changed. He held himself somewhere between fierce pride and utter defeat.

Noah shrugged. "Much has happened in five years. To both of you."

Sliding her gaze away from Griffin, Audrey turned to her brother. Noah was watching her.

"Perhaps this is a mistake." She looked away to hide her conflicted heart. "It's only been six months since she died."

"No." Noah shook his head. "I know him better than you do. This will be good for him, too, I promise you."

Shrugging one shoulder, she didn't answer. After seeing Griffin lost in his grief, she didn't know if he was ready to do anything, let alone the favor she and Noah were about to ask of him. To be fair, she wasn't certain *she* was ready, either.

Noah reached out to touch her hand lightly. "I shall talk to him and make all the arrangements. All you need do is come in afterward."

Audrey smiled at the comfort he offered. Her brother, of all people, had some understanding of what she was going through. "Yes, all I have to do."

All she had to do was go into the room once Noah had convinced Griffin to help them. Oh, and keep herself from fainting with nervousness, and remember to breathe, and speak, and make an effort to appear calm. Just because she'd never been able to do any of those things near Griffin before...

Rolling her eyes, Audrey watched her brother as he turned his horse toward the house. Though she hadn't seen Griffin in a long while, it had been even longer since she spoke to him. Since that fateful day in his study when she'd made such an idiot of herself.

"He probably doesn't even remember," she consoled herself quietly.

Noah glanced over his shoulder at her. "Did you say something?"

"Nothing at all," she lied as she guided her horse toward Bentley Square.

Just before they headed down the other side of the hill, she looked toward the cemetery one last time, but Griffin was gone.

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"My lord," Cotter said, knocking softly on Griffin's office door before he stepped inside.

"I thought I told you not to disturb me while I'm working."

Griffin looked up to glare at the man. With a sigh, he turned his attention to the papers on his desk. No matter how hard he tried to convince people otherwise, he knew the truth. He wasn't working. He hadn't worked for six months.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you have a visitor," the man answered, his tone unchanged even after Griffin's emotional response. Griffin supposed all the servants had grown accustomed to his outbursts. There had been so many since Luci's death.

"I don't wish to see anyone, tell the person to leave," he muttered with a wave of his hand.

"You don't want to see me?"

With a groan, Griffin glanced back up to see Noah Jordan leaning in the doorway. He couldn't turn his best friend away, no matter how much he wanted to be alone.

Cotter looked at him expectantly and his graying eyebrows arched just a fraction, as if he would be willing to toss the Earl out if required. Sizing up the difference between the two men, Griffin thought he'd like to see the butler try, but instead he nodded.

"Thank you, Cotter," Griffin sighed. "That will be all."

After the other man had gone, Noah pushed the door shut behind him. He hovered near the entryway for a moment, but when Griffin said nothing, he moved to sit across from him at his desk. Noah studied him intently, then shook his dark head.

"And a fine hello to you, too."

"I'm sorry." Griffin leaned over to shake his friend's hand. "I wasn't expecting guests. I'm not exactly prepared to be a good host."

Noah chuckled. "You never were great company to begin with."

Griffin couldn't help but respond with a grin, the first time he'd smiled in months. The expression felt odd and he relaxed his face into its regular somber expression.

Noah sighed as he leaned back in his chair. "I see you're still torturing yourself."

Griffin gripped his hands into fists in front of him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"On my way to the house, I saw you standing at Luci's grave," his friend said softly. "How many times must I tell you that her death wasn't your fault?"

The memories created by Noah's words gave Griffin a painful jab of sensation which he quickly shoved aside. Noah had been the first person to visit him after Luci's death. He'd tried desperately to convince Griffin that all would be well in time. His friend obviously still wanted him to believe that.

Griffin didn't.

He cleared his throat. "Why are you here?"

"Always so direct, my friend," Noah mused. "Exactly why you wouldn't make a good spy."

Relief washed over Griffin. For whatever reason, Noah had seen fit to give him a reprieve and didn't appear to be starting a long, drawn-out discussion about Griffin's dead wife. He rose to mix them both a drink in celebration.

"I never wanted to be a spy. That's the life you chose, my friend."

"Haven't you ever been the least bit interested in it, though?" Noah took the drink he offered with a nod of thanks.

Griffin sat back down and swirled the scotch he had poured for himself. Somewhere in the darkest recesses of his sensible heart, he supposed he *had* wondered about the secret, dangerous life his best friend lived.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm not here for personal reasons," Noah admitted.

"Are you arresting me?" Griffin leaned back in his chair.

"No." Noah laughed easily and Griffin envied him the ability. "But I do require your help in a case I'm working on."

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but the war is over and Napoleon is locked away in Corsica." Griffin set his drink on the desktop and laced his fingers together as he leaned forward. "What's this really all about?"

His friend gave him a slightly superior smile. "The war may be over, but that doesn't necessarily mean all is well. I'm about to tell you something that isn't public knowledge, and I must ask you to keep it a secret."

Wrinkling his brow, Griffin looked closely at his good friend. Over the years he'd become aware of Noah's job in the War Department, of his dangerous work on the Continent, but he had never been privy to any specific details. He'd never even thought to ask about them.

"You know you can trust me," he said. "After all, I've never breathed a word about your occupation to anyone."

Noah nodded. "I do know that. It's why I'm here. Do you remember late last month when Louis XVII came in to Town to celebrate the routing of Napoleon and his return to power?"

Blinking, Griffin tried to recall. He hadn't exactly been keeping up with the news lately. His breakfast copy of the *Morning Chronicle* sat untouched as often as it was read.

"I remember something about it."

Noah took a deep breath. "Few people know this, but someone tried to kill the Prince Regent and

Louis that day.”

Both Griffin’s eyebrow’s shot up in shock. “My God, I *should* keep up on the news more!”

His friend gave a slight smile. “The attempt wasn’t in the news. Our local agents diverted the attack, though we did lose one of our best men as a result. It has become very clear to my superiors and to the field agents that there is a serious plot afoot to assassinate the Prince.”

“How do you know this attack wasn’t just some unstable person who doesn’t like His Highness? Hell, half the country hates the man. By that theory, we’d all be suspects.”

Noah smiled. “I knew I could depend on you to ask the proper questions. The way the assassination plot was carried out was far too exacting for it to have been the random attack of a madman. We think we know who’s behind it...”

“Then arrest him, problem solved,” Griffin interrupted.

Noah ran a hand through his dark hair and Griffin saw a rare flash of frustration on his friend’s face. “I wish it were that easy. First, we don’t have enough evidence to be absolutely confident. Secondly, this man is not acting alone. Arresting him won’t ease the danger, only slow the plans of his group for a time. We need to find out more information before we move in to eliminate their entire crew.”

It was obvious Noah was building up to something. Griffin nudged him along with little subtlety. “This is all very interesting, my friend. But what does any of it have to do with me?”

Noah’s face twisted with what looked like dread. “Our target is the man whose London home is adjacent to yours.”

As shock rippled through him, Griffin thought of his two immediate neighbors. One was an elderly couple whose children were all married off and spread about the countryside. The other was...

“You aren’t telling me Douglas Ellison...” he burst out, his eyes widening.

“Is probably a traitor, and definitely a killer,” Noah confirmed with a sharp nod.

Griffin tried to remember an image to go along with his neighbor’s name. Ellison was what Griffin’s mother called *nouveau riche*, a man who had come into a large amount of money without the benefit of a title. He kept to himself, though Griffin had always thought him rather dandified when he chose to think of him at all.

“It’s hard to believe. Nearly impossible.”

“I’m sure it is,” Noah chuckled. “Most people don’t suspect their neighbor to be an assassin. He wouldn’t be a very good one if they did, would he?”

Griffin lifted his eyes to look at his friend in amazement. Noah was talking about murder and political intrigue with the same tone he would use to discuss a squash game!

“I’m still not certain why you need me.”

Noah’s seriousness returned. “With the Prince declaring a summer Jubilee and all the Royalty from the continent and military leaders coming to town, the War Department feels Ellison and his group will have the perfect opportunity to strike again and do a great deal of damage. We’re trying to prevent that attempt while gathering enough intelligence to arrest Ellison and his men.”

“And I come in...?” Griffin asked impatiently.

“I’m getting to that.” Noah said with a purse of his lips. “We’ve begun to infiltrate Ellison’s organization with a female agent. She offers Ellison a few opportunities if he marries her... respectability, money, etcetera... and he’s been courting her for a little more than a month. We need to go to London to allow this woman to be close to Ellison, all the while keeping her safe.”

“And since I live next door to the man...” Griffin began with a groan as his friend’s rationale became clear to him.

“I wondered if we might stay in your home, with you as our host,” Noah finished.

“Why don’t you stay in your own home?” Griffin asked. “Won’t that seem a bit suspicious?”

“I started renovating my London estate the moment I was told of this plan. My father is furious, but it isn’t as if the antiquated place didn’t need it.” Noah stood. “Griffin, I know this is asking much of you, especially so soon after Lucinda’s death. But I need your help.”

Damn his friend for knowing exactly what to say. Griffin rubbed his hand over his chin.

“How exactly will this plan work? If a woman stays with you and me, unattended in my home, her reputation will be ruined, and there goes Ellison’s respectability. Why wouldn’t he lose interest in her?”

"Her respectability won't be in jeopardy."

Griffin interrupted him with a snort. "How could a woman's reputation *not* be sullied by spending unescorted nights with a widower and the biggest rake in all of London?"

Noah's grin widened to an unbelievable length before he chuckled, "I think you need to meet my agent before you ask that question."

As if on cue, the door swung open and a young woman stepped inside. Her dark auburn hair was spun up into a loose chignon and she wore a pretty azure blue gown that accented the bright color of her eyes. The color that matched Noah's almost exactly. The eyes Griffin had stared into once and seen...

"I know you remember my sister," Noah said.

Griffin could hardly breathe as he stared. In front of him stood the woman who had haunted his dreams for the past five years. The woman he had tried so hard to forget.

Audrey Jordan.





## Chapter Two

“Audrey?”

She stared at Griffin without answer, caught up in how being so close to him still made her shiver. The look on his face was a cross between shock and horror, and her stomach tightened and twisted.

No, she wasn't going to do this. These reactions were just guttural, just her body giving the response she'd so long ago trained it to give. The emotions weren't real.

“Hello, my lord,” she whispered.

Griffin glared at Noah. “I heard that Audrey accompanied you on your travels, but I never believed you would be so irresponsible as to involve in this life. Your own flesh and blood? How could you be so idiotic?”

Audrey thought she saw her brother swallow back a laugh. For her part, she saw no humor in the situation. She wasn't an infant! Through hard work, she had proven herself to Lord Golding, the head of the War Department. She didn't need to prove anything to Griffin.

“I'm not a child, Viscount Berenger.” She was proud that ice hung from each pointed word. “And I am standing right here. If you're going to lecture anyone about my well-being, I suggest you lecture me. Or try to, at any rate.”

Griffin stopped mid-sentence to look at her, his eyes wide with shock. She couldn't bear to be under his close scrutiny and turned away.

“May we talk about the plan, please?” she murmured, carefully measuring her breaths in an effort to appear calm.

“There will be no plan I'm involved in.” Griffin's voice was dangerously low. “I will not be any part of putting you in harm's way.”

“My lord!” Audrey gasped. “You cannot mean that.”

If he didn't help them, she and Noah were in trouble. It could take weeks to procure another place to reside in London, perhaps even longer due to the Jubilee's start in June. By that time Douglas Ellison might slip through their fingers.

“No.” Griffin leaned back against his desk and gave his head a firm shake. “I refuse to help you.”

“This is about your country,” Audrey reasoned. “My involvement should mean very little to you in comparison to the consequences if you will not allow us to take up residence in your home.”

Griffin looked up at her, but this time the action was deliberate. Her breath shortened at the intensity of his stare.

“Yes, Audrey, you're probably right. My country *should* mean more to me than you do.”

He left his statement at that and her breath went from short to nonexistent. He couldn't be saying he cared for her. After all, he hadn't seen her since she was barely more than a girl. Even then, his last memory of her was an awkward one at best.

“Be reasonable,” Noah said, his voice calm. Her brother had always been able to control his reactions better than Audrey. She supposed that was why they'd made such a good team all these years. “Listen to what you're saying.”

“I know exactly what I'm saying.” Griffin spun to face his friend. “And I mean it.”

“Noah.” Audrey took a deep breath.

Despite his outward calm, she sensed her brother's anger coming to the surface and she didn't want it to bubble out. It would do no good for their mission, and even less good to a friendship he had valued for nearly three decades.

“Noah,” she repeated when her brother continued to glare at Griffin. “Why don't you go into the hallway for a moment? I'd like a moment alone with Viscount Berenger.”

“Audrey?” Noah touched her arm and said softly, “Are you certain that is wise?”

She loved her sibling for understanding how difficult it was for her to be in the same room with Griffin, let alone unaccompanied with him. Not because she loved him. No. Those feelings had been squelched long ago. But because his presence reminded her of the fool she had once been.

“I'll be fine.” She squeezed the hand her brother had laid on her arm.

Turning to give Griffin one last glance, Noah nodded. “Very well. I'll be just outside. Perhaps you'll be

able to talk some sense into my bull-headed friend.”

Griffin snorted loudly. “That, *Lord Lockhart*, is doubtful!”

Audrey shook her head as Noah slammed the door behind him. She would never understand men no matter how long she lived. How they could fight, even exchange blows from time to time, and still remain friends was beyond her comprehension.

She drew in a sharp breath as Griffin moved a fraction closer.

“It-” she stammered, caught off guard by the intensity that had returned to his dark stare. “I am so sorry about Luci.”

She winced as she said the words. They sounded false, even worse since she was trying to convince Griffin to help them. Yet, she *did* feel the pity she expressed, despite Luci’s hatred for her, and even the rumors and grief Griffin’s wife had caused. Losing someone so young, especially at a time that should have been joyful like the birth of a child, was heartbreaking.

“Thank you,” he choked out. He turned to look out the window behind him.

“I would have accompanied Noah to the funeral, but...” She stopped.

How could she explain to this grief-stricken man that his wife had once threatened to destroy her? Worse yet, had followed through on her threats with vigor.

“I understand,” he murmured. “You and Luci were never close. Thank you for your sympathy.”

He had distanced himself from her, from the subject. Now he was only repeating words he’d said a hundred times to a hundred other people. In his heart, he was no longer even in the same room as she.

She struggled to find words to bring him back. “We... we wouldn’t be in your way, I promise you. We would only stay in the house for proximity purposes.”

“That is not exactly true, is it?” Any suffering he’d felt the moment before was wiped from his face when he looked at her, leaving behind only irritation. “As your host, I would have some duties in this little charade, wouldn’t I?”

“No!” She took an involuntary step closer. “This is dangerous business, we would never let you come in harm’s way.”

With a low chuckle, Griffin took a long step in her direction, and she found herself just a few inches from him. Leaning down, he brought his face close to hers. “You will only put yourself in danger, eh?”

Audrey desperately tried to find her voice, but couldn’t. Not when Griffin’s body heat warmed her and the smell of his shaving soap left her all too aware of him. For a moment, she thought he’d say something else. Instead, he backed away to put more distance between them. The added space helped her find both a measure of calm and her voice.

“I assure you, I have been trained to deal with this kind of danger, my lord,” she said. “I can handle myself.”

Griffin glared at her. His tone was clipped when he spoke. “Fine, I shall assume you can. But I’ll still be expected to attend some of these functions with you, won’t I? What will there be, a few balls, perhaps a night at the theatre? I’ll be forced to attend, no matter that I wouldn’t have brought myself within a league of those events on my own accord, especially so soon after Luci’s death.”

His eyes clouded momentarily and sent an ache through Audrey.

“I admit, I hadn’t thought of those things.” This situation was rapidly slipping out of her control. “But Noah and I wouldn’t ask you this favor if we didn’t truly need your help.”

At that, the heat left Griffin’s eyes and his shoulders sagged. “I know.”

Inching closer, Audrey held out a trembling hand and placed it on Griffin’s arm. Through his jacket she felt the muscles contract, but he didn’t pull away. He simply stared at her hand as if he didn’t know what it was.

“Please.” She whispered the word, not for effect, but because she didn’t trust her voice not to break if she forced it louder. “I shall be safer in your home than I would be anywhere else in London. I beg of you, do this one thing for me.”

For a fraction of a second, he kept his focus on her hand, but then she found herself lost in a dark sea of brown when he met her gaze squarely.

“You’re so different,” he murmured, then shook his head as if he hadn’t meant to voice the words. Gently, he shrugged out of her grip. “Very well. I will make for London as soon as I am able. You and Noah

may follow in a few days.”

He accentuated his remark with a sigh that let Audrey know just how much he hated the idea. But hate it or not, she had won. She let out her breath in a relieved burst.

“Thank you. We’ll stay out of your way as much as we can, my lord.”

She turned to leave, but he caught her hand to stop her. His palm warmed her even through her gloves as he pulled her closer.

“You should call me Griffin. After all, we’re childhood friends, there’s no need for such formality between us.” His voice was gentle now that he’d surrendered to her request.

With a wince, Audrey slipped her hand from the protective circle of his and shook her head. “I’m no longer a child, my lord. Good day.”

With a nod, she hurried to the door and out in to the hallway, eager to escape before her conflicted feelings made her say or do something rash. Noah straightened up from his position leaning on the wall as she exited.

“He said yes,” she said with a smile.

“Perfect!” Her brother swept her up in a hug.

As she squeezed him back, her relief began to fade. Because of Griffin’s surrender, for the next few months she would be able to do her duty, but at what cost? Because if being in the same room with Griffin for only a few moments was difficult, she couldn’t imagine what it would be like to live under the same roof.

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Griffin settled into a chair beside the crackling fire and covered his face with his hands. What had he just done? No, he knew the answer to that question. He had opened Pandora’s Box and now it was too late to turn back.

“Audrey.”

Her name burned his lips as much as her kiss had five years before.

Uttering a quiet curse, he stood and walked to the window. Below, he watched Audrey and Noah ride down the long road that lead to the village. She grinned at something her brother said, then tossed a curl off her shoulder. Griffin’s whole body responded with an awareness that had been foreign for years.

The past quarter of an hour alone with her had been pure torment. He’d ached for... but no. He wouldn’t think of that.

He had never spoken about the way he felt for Audrey, not even to Noah. His best friend had only known about Luci’s transgressions, but he’d never imagined that thoughts of Audrey haunted Griffin’s dreams, made him look at every woman differently.

His wife may have betrayed him with her body, but he had done the same to her with his mind. Perhaps Luci had sensed that betrayal, perhaps it had pushed her into the arms of man after man while Griffin sat home longing for a woman he couldn’t have.

He hadn’t always thought of Audrey that way. For long, ignorant years he had thought of her as nothing more than the younger sister of his best friend. Her *tendre* for him had been evident, but he had never returned those feelings. After all, he had Luci and Luci was enough for any man.

Until his wedding day.

When Audrey had pressed her lips against his, she had stirred something inside him unlike anything he’d ever felt before. If Luci hadn’t come in and broken them apart, he probably would have swept Audrey up against him and kissed her until neither one of them could breathe or think.

How many times had he imagined doing just that since that day? With a groan, he rubbed his eyes. Probably a hundred. Maybe even more.

“Cotter!” he barked out as he mixed himself another drink.

His butler appeared in the doorway. “Yes, my lord?”

“Direct the staff to prepare my things. I shall be departing for London tomorrow.”

He downed the drink in one swig before he glanced over at the butler. As he expected, if the man was surprised by Griffin’s sudden order he displayed no indication of it.

“Of course, my lord,” the man said with a nod. “And may I say, I think a change of pace may be just the thing you need, my lord. The staff has been very concerned about you since Lady Berenger died.”

Griffin managed a smile at Cotter’s kindness. If his servants knew how he really felt they wouldn’t have

sympathy for him.

Here they thought he was still in mourning, pining for the wife he loved. In reality, he was often relieved no one had discovered she was cuckolding him with any man she could find above eighteen and below ninety. Eventually the talk would have begun, the whispers. But all that was over now.

The child Luci had been birthing when death had taken her was another story. He truly did mourn for the little life inside her, though he knew the baby boy wasn't his. A bastard was Luci's legacy to him.

"My lord?" Cotter asked, his tone concerned.

Glancing up, he nodded. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"I hope I haven't offended you, sir." The older man looked genuinely worried, and Griffin smiled to ease his mind.

"No, Cotter, you didn't," he said. "I appreciate the staff's kind concern for my well-being."

The butler bowed. "I shall begin the preparations for your departure immediately, my lord."

"Thank you."

"How long do you think you will be in Town?"

Griffin shut his eyes. How long would a major investigation last? The longer it took, the longer he'd be in Audrey's company.

"Perhaps all summer," he said with a barely perceptible shiver.

"Well, that's a good length of time to spend with friends, sir," Cotter said. "Good afternoon."

Friends. Could he be a friend to Audrey? There wasn't any other choice. He would keep his distance when he could, and be cordial when he was forced to be. It seemed the only way he would survive the next few months.

## ***Chapter Three***

Audrey peeked out the carriage window to take in the view. Over the past two hours, the green fields had given way to buildings. They were at the very edge of London now. The edge of her destiny, whatever that was. Audrey took in a calming breath. She could do this.

"Didn't like what you saw, love?" Hannah Pikard asked from her left, patting her arm with genuine friendliness.

Audrey grinned at her comrade. Hannah was older than she by only seven years, but often treated her like a mother would. They were close enough friends that Hannah seemed to see through any pretense Audrey tried to maintain. It was both a blessing and a curse.

"I have no quarrel with London, Hannah, you know that," she said with a laugh.

"Aye, but your face has grown paler with each passing mile. There's something in the city that has you spooked. I wonder if I can guess what it is?"

She winked as Audrey stuck out a playful tongue.

Noah looked up from his paperwork with a smile. "Don't tease her so, Hannah. She needs to concentrate on work now, and so do you."

"What is there to concentrate on?" Hannah laughed, the big, bawdy sound of it filling the coach. "All I have to do is mind my language and behave like a maid. My role isn't a difficult one, I assure you."

Audrey put an arm around Hannah and squeezed, glad she was on this assignment. She always felt safe with her friend. Perhaps it was because Hannah was one of the best agents in the War Department, or maybe it was because she had wicked aim when it came to throwing a knife. Whatever the reason, Audrey knew she could talk to Hannah openly about anything and never receive a shocked response. After all, the woman had been a prostitute before Noah had swept her off the street and into the government's employ.

"Audrey, you'll be pleased to know Ellison is enamored of you. He sent a letter before we left asking when we would arrive in London and if he could call on you." Noah held up a piece of paper with a nod. "So all the work we did in Avonblithe has apparently paid off."

All Audrey's playful feelings faded. "I'm pleased my ruse to gain his attention is working, but I wish I didn't have to be quite so close to Ellison."

"We won't let anything happen to you," Hannah reassured her. Lowering her voice, she added, "And I have a feeling your Viscount will be watching out for you, as well."

The blood drained from Audrey's face as she looked up to make sure Noah wasn't listening. Audrey's girlhood infatuation with Griffin had been the topic of many a conversation between the two friends.

"Somehow I doubt that," she whispered back. "He isn't very happy about this whole arrangement. I can't say I am, either."

"You're worried about living in the same house as the man you once loved?" Hannah's green eyes sparkled with teasing.

A blush warming her cheeks, Audrey nodded. "Or believed I loved."

"Do you remember our first meeting, Audrey?"

"Yes." Audrey thought of how scandalized she'd been when she realized her partner was a former lady of the evening.

Hannah smiled softly. "You were so frightened, so unsure of yourself. Do you feel that way now when you start a new case?"

"I do feel some nervousness, but more excitement," she admitted.

Hannah nodded. "And do you still think *I'm* nothing more than a lightskirt?"

Audrey squeezed her friend's hand. "Of course not! I love you like you were my own sister. I know you're so much more than circumstances forced you to be in your youth."

"That's right. You have changed, have you not?" Hannah pressed.

She shrugged. "Yes."

"Then don't fear Griffin Berenger. He's a man, not a legend. And you aren't that child who worshipped him anymore."

Audrey nodded as the truth of Hannah's words sank in. "I know that, my dear friend. But when I look at him, I can't help but feel like that girl who was so filled with love and sorrow all at once. My tongue gets tied and my stomach goes fluttery."

"Hmph." Hannah wrapped a ringlet of glossy brown hair around her fingertip absently. "Well, he *is* a handsome man. All of London is screaming for his return to Society, and no wonder."

"Yes, no wonder," Audrey murmured.

"Are you two finished talking about Griffin as if I weren't sitting right here?" Noah shut his file with a swish. "May we get back to business and forget about the giggling and nonsense?"

"And him the king of nonsense!" Hannah burst out with a saucy wink for Noah.

"Aye, but not when it's traitors we're dealing with, my dears," he said with laughter in his tone.

"My brother is right." Audrey shoved her worries about Griffin aside. "We do need to concentrate on matters at hand. What is our first step once we arrive in London?"

"We can't appear overly eager," Noah answered. "After all, you're offering Ellison all the advantages here. If you chase after him, he may become suspicious."

She let out a bitter laugh. "Don't forget, I'm a hopeless old maid with no prospect of a husband on the horizon. He may simply believe I'm eager for any offer."

Noah's face softened as he brushed the top of her hand with his fingertips. "You found Mother's letter, didn't you?"

Audrey bit her lower lip. She hadn't realized she'd quoted directly from her well-meaning mother's latest missive. The one her older brother had so kindly tried to hide from her.

"I wasn't snooping."

He laughed, but his eyes remained full of worry and the slightest hint of pity. Not much, but enough to sting Audrey's pride.

"Of course you were! It's in your nature, and a good thing, too." He frowned. "But I'm sorry you had to read that. You know Mother is only concerned for you."

Audrey sighed. "Yes, I do know that. She would have been happier if I'd married Squire Teetle when I had the chance and been done with it. She'll never forgive me for that." She pulled back the window curtain and glared out at the Thames as it rushed by. "But we're straying from the subject. I know my role, to distract our dear Mr. Ellison by whatever means necessary."

Both Noah and Hannah looked at her with wide eyes at that declaration.

"Within reason, of course. Remember, when we play these little spy games, I'm the perfect lady. I would never be expected to go too far." Audrey winked. "But the horrified looks on your faces were well worth the hideous image that popped into my head at the thought of doing anything more than taking Ellison's arm."

"You shouldn't tease about such things, Audrey," Noah admonished with a glower. "You never know when a dire situation might arise, and I doubt you would find it funny then."

Though the carriage was warm, Audrey shivered. She *had* to make jokes, at times it was the only way her situation didn't terrify her.

Noah paused as the carriage passed through the gates to Griffin's city estate just off St. James Street. "The rest of our discussion will have to wait."

Audrey nodded shakily. She was happy to be off the subject of their dangerous work, but uncertain if she was ready to face Griffin again.

As the footman helped her down, she looked up at the large house. She hadn't been here since she was a little girl. Anything had seemed possible then, as Noah, Audrey and Griffin had raced down the hallways. When she'd stumbled on the back staircase, Griffin had been the one to help her up. Her little heart had skipped a beat for her savior.

And now, at the ripe age of twenty-three, it skipped again as Audrey looked up to the doorway to see Griffin step outside to greet them. He was far too handsome for his own good. And she was far too aware of it for hers.

He smiled as they exited the carriage, but it seemed forced. "There you are. I was beginning to think you weren't coming after all."

"Good afternoon, my lord," Audrey said. He caught her gloved hand gently in his own to place a light kiss on top of the fabric. Though his lips barely grazed her, she felt the touch through her every fiber.

"Good afternoon, *Audrey*," he said with a playful wink as he stressed her given name.

She was stunned at the change in Griffin. Back at Bentley Square he'd seemed broken to the core by his wife's death. Here he was lightened, lifted, even if it was just a little, from the fog of pain.

The group stepped inside the foyer and waited as footmen appeared to take the luggage up to their respective suites. Hannah nodded knowingly to Audrey, then dutifully followed another servant up to begin unpacking her trunk.

"Audrey?" Griffin tilted his head to catch her attention.

"Hmm, I'm sorry. Just woolgathering," she said with a weak smile. "What were you saying, my lord?"

"I was asking if you two would like a bit of tea. I've had a tray put in the South Parlor. Unless you'd prefer to go upstairs and rest after your long journey?"

She nodded. "No, tea would be fine."

Griffin moved to take her arm, but Audrey took Noah's before their host could touch her. He frowned slightly but then motioned them down the hallway toward the sitting room.

As Audrey settled onto an ottoman in the parlor, she stared around her. The house hadn't changed much.

"Your parents used to come here quite often, didn't they?" she asked.

"Yes." Griffin grinned. "Although as Earl Father had a much grander house in the city, I believe he and my mother were nostalgic for the days when they first married and he held the title I now hold. They loved this place."

"So did I." Audrey sighed. "As we were coming up the drive, I was remembering all the times Noah and I came here and the havoc the three of us wreaked."

"You used to follow us around!" Noah said with a grin. "*We* wreaked the havoc."

"Well, I stand corrected," she said in a haughty tone before dissolving into a light laugh.

She glanced over to find Griffin staring at her again. When their eyes met he quickly broke the stare. She chided herself for wishing he'd held her gaze a moment more.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Yes, there were many happy times here. I had forgotten them over the past few years. It's good to have you both here to remind me."

Audrey wrinkled her brow as the sadness she had sensed in him before suddenly returned. She reached for a topic that was safe. For the moment, her mind was blank. The only subject she could think of was Luci Berenger. That was obviously the very last thing Griffin wanted to discuss.

Why did this place made him so unhappy? Luci and their unborn child had died at their country estate. But perhaps memories of the happy life they'd shared in London were too much for him to bear.

"I'm sorry to interrupt."

Audrey turned to find the butler standing at the door. He bowed smartly and said, "A Mr. Ellison has arrived. Should I allow him in, my lord?"

Griffin didn't answer, keeping his eyes fixed on Audrey for a moment more before his butler's words seemed to sink in. Finally, he nodded.

"Yes, Cotter, that would be fine. Show the gentleman in."

After the man was gone, Griffin turned to Audrey, his gaze intense. "I must state again that I have qualms about this whole arrangement."

Noah nodded. "Because of that, I thank you all the more for your help."

Griffin frowned, but before he could protest further, Ellison entered the room. The bitter stench of Macassar oil preceded him, nearly gagging Audrey before she smoothed the reaction from her face and rose.

"Mr. Ellison," she gushed, holding out a hand to the man. "What a pleasure it is to see you again."



In comparison to Griffin, Douglas Ellison looked small and weak. He was much shorter, only slightly taller than Audrey. His oily black hair was slick with the smelly hair tonic he used to put it into place. As always, his gray eyes, slid up and down her body greedily before he placed a kiss on her hand.

"Lady Audrey, I'm so glad you have arrived in London at last." He maintained his grip on her hand a fraction longer than was necessary.

She forced a smile as her stomach turned. She was accustomed to the sensation, as it was her general reaction anytime Ellison touched her. She turned her face and was surprised to see Griffin's eyes narrow. He looked ready to kill over Ellison's unwanted familiarity.

But that was ridiculous. Griffin only cared that Ellison was a blackguard and a traitor, not about anything else. When it came to her, there had never been anything else at all.

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Griffin hated Douglas Ellison with his dandified clothing, the starched collars that nearly touched his ears and his slick hair. He hated the way the man looked at Audrey as if she were already his property. But most of all, he hated that Audrey took his neighbor's arm with what looked like genuine pleasure, even though he knew it wasn't. She was no more than a practiced liar.

Just like Luci.

Running a hand through his hair, Griffin held back a groan of displeasure. Audrey was nothing like Luci. That he'd even considered the possibility made him seethe inside.

"Berenger?"

Griffin realized with a start that Ellison was daring to refer to him as if he were a familiar.

"Yes, Ellison, I apologize. What was that?"

Griffin ground his teeth. He wouldn't do anything to break Noah and Audrey's cover, even if he wanted to rise up and pummel Ellison into unconsciousness.

"I was saying how sorry I was to hear about your wife," Ellison repeated. "Pretty woman, Lucinda."

As he fought his desire to crush Ellison, Griffin caught Audrey's gaze. Her face was soft with concern, almost as if she understood his feelings. But how could she?

"*Lady Berenger* died too young," he choked out. "I thank you for your sympathy."

Ellison's face lit with the slightest of smirks. "You're welcome."

"Well," Noah said as he rose to his feet. "I'm certain you'd like a moment alone with Audrey since you two haven't seen each other for so long. Griffin, didn't you want to show me some sketches in your office?"

Griffin blinked in disbelief. Were they about to leave Audrey alone with this traitor, this *murderer*?

"I..." he stammered.

Noah came to his side and motioned for him to lead them from the room.

Griffin had no choice but to do so, but he threw one look over his shoulder at Audrey before he left. Not that she noticed. She had already turned her entire attention to the man sitting beside her. It was as if Griffin didn't exist. A fact that boiled his blood.

As he and Noah moved down the hallway, he snapped, "You're leaving her alone with him?"

"Calm down," Noah said. "The door is open. It's perfectly acceptable for them to have a moment or two alone."

"Do you have any idea what can happen in a moment or two?" Griffin asked through clenched teeth.

Noah rolled his eyes. "He's not daft. Ellison wouldn't dare try anything in this house with you and me just down the hall. And if Audrey cannot be alone with the man, she can't very well do her job."

Griffin understood his friend's reasoning, but he bloody well didn't have to like it. He opened the door to his study and slammed it behind them. He stalked over to mix Noah a drink. His friend arched an eyebrow at his emotional reaction before sinking into one of the plush leather chairs.

Griffin smashed the tumbler down on the side board. "Damn her job. She shouldn't have to sell herself like some kind of..."

"Hey!" Noah interrupted, half-rising from his chair to clench his fists. "Audrey is a good agent, but she isn't a whore. You would do well not to forget that in either my presence or hers."

Griffin barely held back a curse. Again, he'd been comparing Audrey to his late wife, but he had no right to do so.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"I don't care what you meant or didn't mean." Noah snatched the drink Griffin offered. "Why the hell does her work matter to you so much anyway?"

Griffin downed his drink in one swig. Did he have an answer for that question? Certainly not a satisfying one. "She's an old... friend. I don't want to see her hurt."

"Hmmm," Noah muttered. "Just be sure your 'protectiveness' isn't what ends up hurting her in the end, old man, or you'll have to deal with me. Because I fear *you* have more ability to harm her than Douglas Ellison could even fathom."

With that, Noah put his empty glass on Griffin's desk and strode out of the office. Griffin stared at his friend's retreating back. What could he have meant by that remark? There was no way Griffin could harm Audrey because it was plain she felt nothing for him anymore.

And that was all the better for both of them.

## ***Chapter Four***

Audrey shivered while she watched from Griffin's big picture window as Douglas Ellison strode toward his own townhouse just a few steps away. He walked like a man who had staked his claim on life.

She let the curtain drop and grimaced. Ellison believed he owned the world and would soon own her. Both thoughts were disturbing.

Not that Ellison had behaved in any untoward fashion when it came to her. At least, not yet. In Avonblithe he'd courted her respectably, and even though he'd sat too close to her for her own comfort a moment before, he hadn't touched her in a way that made it clear that he wished to ravish her. But by the desire that muddied his pale gray eyes to charcoal, she knew that was exactly what he wanted to do.

"Yuck," she muttered as she scrubbed a hand over her face.

"My curtains bother you so much?"

She spun around to find Griffin leaning against the doorway with a half-smile.

"Because if you hate them, I'll have them removed immediately." He straightened up to take two long strides into the room.

"The curtains are fine," she said, laughing though the sound was shrill. "Trust that nothing about you or your home would ever make me react that way."

"Then what is it that bothers you so much?"

"I was actually looking *out* the window." She turned away from the gaze that was far too intense for comfort. "Watching something unpleasant move away from me."

"Ellison," he said under his breath, his teasing tone suddenly deathly serious.

There was no use in lying. "Yes."

Pivoting to face him, she found he'd stepped even closer and was now mere inches from her.

Reaching out, he took her hand.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

Until that moment, he hadn't touched her bare skin. Gloves had always been a thin barrier of protection between them. But now the heat of his hand warmed hers, his palm rough beneath hers, and his grip strong, but gentle.

Struggling to maintain her calm, she said, "Because so much has been lost already. One agent is dead because of Ellison and his accomplices. He had a family and was a good man. If I do my duty perhaps I can prevent more pain and injury."

She slid away from him to put distance between them. She needed it.

"I know about pain and injury," he said. "But I know about risk, as well. Whatever you'll prevent... is it worth the price you're paying right now?"

She grimaced. Griffin was thinking of the little baby son he'd never know and the wife he loved so much. His loss was much greater than anything she could fathom.

She blinked back sudden tears. "Oh, Griffin. How I wish I could have prevented your pain. How I wish I could restore what you've lost in your child and your wife."

For a brief moment he looked away. When he turned back, Audrey was surprised to see no emotion in his dark eyes. He'd hardened his face just as expertly as any agent for the Crown would have done.

"You tried to prevent the pain I went through," he said softly. "Once you tried to warn me..." He shook his head as if he hadn't meant to voice those words. "But that doesn't matter now."

Audrey tilted her head. What he had planned to say before he censored himself?

"Griffin, you would have made a wonderful father," she whispered, compelled to comfort him, even as he withdrew into some dark place in his soul. A place where he didn't want her intrusion.

A strangled noise in his throat was Griffin's only answer before he turned his back and took several steps away from her. She ached to wrap her arms around him and hold him. Instead she cautiously followed and placed her hand on his arm.

At her touch, Griffin turned to look down at her. They were too close, he just inches away, her hand gripping the muscles of his lower arm. She didn't know what he would do, and it seemed neither did he. Finally, he reached out and placed his hand on top of hers.

"I suppose we'll never know that now, will we?" he choked out before he slipped away from her to pause at the door. "Luci made sure of it."

Audrey froze as she watched him stand there and battle with his emotions. What was going on? Something had apparently been amiss between Lucinda and Griffin before her death. Audrey wanted to ask about it, to have him take her into his confidence.

But that would be a mistake. She hadn't come to London to chase away Griffin's demons or even her own. She was there to catch a killer. It would be best to get back to that and forget her dreams.

"Griffin?"

"Yes?" Naked need darkened his face. It was almost as if he *wanted* her to ask about Luci. As if he wished to share his secrets.

"I... Don't forget the Covent Garden Opera is tomorrow." It was so hard to ignore the opportunity he'd given her to glimpse his soul. "Douglas Ellison will be accompanying us and sitting in your box."

For a moment he didn't move, just held her in a heated stare that made her feel like an animal in a cage. Then he sighed. "I remember, Audrey. I'll be ready."

He turned down the hallway and disappeared from sight. She heard his long, steady stride until he was far away and she was alone. It was only then she realized her hands trembled.

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Griffin stifled a groan as the footman pulled back the curtain on his opulent box and allowed him into the seating area of Covent Garden Opera House. The room was packed, brimming with the cream of Europe for this first public event of the Jubilee. The heat was already unbearable and the noise was worse.

What was he doing here? The last thing he needed or wanted was to be surrounded by the tittering, posing masses of the *ton*, all of whom wanted him to get over Lucinda's death and begin a search for a new wife. He had no desire to be reminded of their frivolity that was so much like Luci's.

But when the footman pulled back the curtain a second time, Griffin was reminded of exactly why he'd come.

Audrey.

She wore a gown that was dark as midnight and clung to her in a scandalous manner. It was the latest and most revealing fashion of the day, silk held together by a few ribbons and flowers.

But she didn't wear the gown for his pleasure. No, she wore it for Douglas Ellison, a blackguard and a traitor who didn't deserve to be in the same room as Audrey Jordan, let alone touch her hand, which he was doing at present as he guided her to her seat.

"Ah, a lovely box, Lord Berenger," Ellison said as he stepped forward to take in the view. Griffin didn't fail to notice how he stared in the direction of the Prince's box before he stepped back to face his host.

"Thank you, Ellison. I've always enjoyed the theatre," he ground out, trying to find any words that didn't cause a fistfight. What he wanted to do was pick the man up by his starched collars and deposit him over the box railing and into the crowd below.

"Well, we're happy you allowed us to share in your passion tonight."

Ellison interrupted Griffin's wandering mind by placing a long-fingered hand on Audrey's, effectively claiming her as his property. His use of the word 'we' gave Griffin a cold chill. Apparently he believed Audrey was his - permanently.

Ellison continued, "With all the excitement, it would have been impossible to get into the show otherwise. And this is one I wouldn't want to miss."

With a smile, he took his seat next to Audrey. Immediately she shifted her attention to the man, leaning over to have a more private conversation with him.

"You might try to smile a bit, old man," Noah whispered. "You look like you're attending a funeral, not a celebration."

"It *will* be Ellison's funeral if he doesn't take his hands off your sister," Griffin whispered back, wincing as Audrey let out a quiet laugh at something Ellison had said.

She shifted her focus back to him. For a moment he could do nothing but stare, taken aback once more by how lovely she was. Two bright blotches of color tinged her cheeks as she stammered a response to one of Ellison's questions.

She looked away from him with another, deeper blush and he was overwhelmed by a desire to pull her away from the man at her side. Before he could do something so foolhardy, the curtain to the Prince Regent's box was pulled back and His Royal Highness entered, followed by several of the visiting Crown Princes. All were dressed extravagantly, with the Prince's clothing clinging to his huge belly in a most unattractive fashion.

The crowd rose when His Royal Highness lifted his hand and the curtain went up. As the strains of "God Save the King" came from the orchestra below and the crowd joined in the singing, Griffin took another look at Audrey and Ellison. She had her face turned toward the Prince and her lilting voice was just distinguishable over the other masculine ones in the box. He'd never heard her sing before and smiled. Her voice fit her, soft and gentle, with just the right tone and pitch.

But when Ellison leaned forward, giving Griffin a clear view of the other man's face, his heart leapt to his throat and all pleasant thoughts fled his mind. Ellison glared as he clenched his fingers in a tight fist. He didn't sing, instead he craned his neck to see the others in the Royal box.

For the first time, Griffin saw the treachery in the thin man and the danger Audrey was in. Then Ellison leaned back and his face was hidden from view again behind Audrey's fan.

The crowd began to settle into their seats, their murmurings creating the din of background noise that would plague the remainder of the night, despite the actors on stage making a valiant effort to perform their trade.

As Griffin began to take his seat, he was distracted by the crowd noise increasing tenfold and several people rising again. With a great cheer, thunderous applause exploded in the theatre.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Audrey's shocked expression as she rose to her feet. Griffin followed her gaze and found himself looking at Princess Caroline, the Prince's very publicly estranged wife. Dressed all in black, the woman nodded to the crowd, then shot a pointed look toward her husband before she took her seat and settled in for the performance.

The prince waved to the crowd, bowing at the increased applause he apparently thought was for him. A loud hiss rose above the din. Griffin was sure Audrey jumped at the harsh sound before they all took their seats a second time and the opera began.

Though Griffin listened to the music, he couldn't help but watch Audrey instead of the scene being played out below. In the dim light of the box, he could see her face was pale and she and Noah exchanged a look. He couldn't blame them for being nervous. With the country so hostile toward His Royal Highness, their jobs were made all the harder... and more dangerous. Men like Ellison could easily take advantage of the unrest.

Griffin was surprised by how quickly the evening passed. Soon the final curtain had dropped and the crowd was on their feet, applauding the performance and preparing for the crush to reach their waiting carriages.

"It was a good show," Audrey said as Ellison helped her put her wrap over her shoulders. His hands lingered a moment too long on her creamy skin.

Griffin took a few steps toward Audrey to hold out his arm. He'd had all he could take. Now it was time

to end her job, at least for the night. Take her away from Ellison. From danger.

"Lady Audrey, as your host may I have the honor of escorting you to our carriage?" he asked.

"Berenger, that's a generous offer," Ellison interrupted with a thin-mouthed scowl. "But I wondered if Audrey might allow *me* to escort her back to your home. After all, it's on my way."

Griffin lowered his outstretched arm with a frown. Certainly Noah wouldn't allow such a thing! Yet, his friend didn't immediately decline Ellison's offer. Some kind of unspoken communication seemed to be passing between the siblings.

Finally, his best friend cleared his throat. "I don't know if that would be entirely appropriate, Ellison. My sister's reputation is at stake and for her to be unescorted..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Audrey interrupted with a light laugh. "Oh, Noah, you worry so! Hannah will be with me, so I won't be completely unescorted. It will only be a short ride, and you wouldn't do anything improper, would you Mr. Ellison?"

She smiled and Griffin felt sick. How could she pretend to care for Ellison when Griffin knew she hated him in every way? She lied about her feelings as if they meant nothing. Again, he thought of Luci and her practiced duplicity.

"Of course not, my lady," Ellison answered with a placating nod for Noah.

"Then I accept your offer." She gave Noah a quick glance, but pointedly refused to acknowledge Griffin. "I'll see you both at home, my lords."

With that, the pair was gone, exiting the box before either man could voice another opinion on the matter. Griffin took two steps forward, readying to follow them, when Noah grabbed his arm and wrenched him back.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Going after her!" Griffin pulled away. "What do you think *you're* doing letting her go with that murderer?"

Noah's mouth set in anger. "She's doing her job and Hannah will be with her."

"Hannah?" Griffin repeated. "Do you really expect a lady's maid will be able to fight off that villain if he were to strike?"

To his surprise, Noah let out a long laugh. "You don't know Hannah." He lowered his voice to whisper, "She works with us. She's more of a bodyguard than a lady's maid, though she does do a fantastic job with Audrey's hair, doesn't she?"

Griffin blinked as he tried to picture Audrey's maid. *That* tiny woman was a spy?

"Still," he stammered, trying to regain his composure. "I cannot believe you'd send your own sister to the wolves like that. The man could easily kill her... or worse." Raw fear gripped him at the thought.

The muscle in Noah's jaw rippled. "Griffin, you've been my best friend my entire life, so I'm giving you latitude. However, if you ever suggest that I don't value my sister's life above all else again, I'll call you out and we'll settle this matter."

For a moment the two men just stared at each other, the tension between them palpable. Griffin had never come close to exchanging blows with Noah in all the years they'd been friends. Now in the last month, they'd exchanged more than one set of heated words.

"I'm sorry, Noah," he finally said as he reached out a hand to his friend. "I shouldn't have implied anything of the sort."

With a grunt, Noah shook his offered hand. "Now we should be off. I'd like to be home before Audrey. If we take a few back streets I know, we should make it."

"Yes," Griffin said, following his friend out. "It's a good idea."

Moving into the crowd, he stifled a growl of frustration. Chasing through back streets to reach his home before Audrey arrived didn't begin to encompass the kind of protection he desired for her. Not when Douglas Ellison seemed intent on claiming her.

## ***Chapter Five***

Audrey peered out the carriage window to watch the sparkling lights of townhouses and small city estates pass by. Despite the late hour, many of the occupants of the stylish homes were still awake. Some were hosting balls, others arriving home from the opera she and her party had attended. Still others were plotting the assassination of the Prince Regent.

With a shiver, she glanced at Ellison. How she loathed being alone with him, pretending to care for him. But there was little choice. This was her duty, no matter how she... or Griffin... felt about it.

Ellison leaned closer to peek over her shoulder. The slight gesture was an invasion of her already compromised personal space.

"What do you find outside that intrigues you so much, my dear?"

"I was just thinking about the opera tonight," she lied with a practiced smile. "What a treat to see both the Prince and Princess there."

Ellison pulled away, and she took the opportunity to breathe again.

"Yes, His Royal Highness looked high and mighty as ever." Ellison shook his head.

Batting her eyes as if she didn't hear the venom dripping from his voice, she said, "Well, he is the next King of England."

"Perhaps," he answered with a thin smile. After a pause, he continued, "Did you see the expression on his face when he realized the crowd was applauding for *her* and not for him?"

Audrey took in a shallow breath as she glanced at Hannah. The other woman pretended to be staring out her window in disinterest, but Audrey could tell by the sparkle in her green eyes that she was digesting every word of the conversation for analysis later. Once more Audrey counted herself lucky that Hannah was her protector and partner.

"They both certainly looked nice in their finery," she said, returning to her game of silly miss.

He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. "No one was as beautiful as you were tonight, Audrey."

With a sly look in Hannah's direction, he moved closer. His body heat was stifling in the close confines of the carriage. Audrey swallowed hard.

Ellison continued, "I must admit I missed your company in the weeks we were apart. I'm very glad you decided to come to London. Though I do wish you had agreed to stay in my home... with your brother as escort, of course."

Her breath hitched in her throat, but Audrey managed to answer, "Viscount Berenger is an old friend of Noah's. With all his recent tragedy, my brother thought it would be best if we remain with him."

"Yes, Berenger." Ellison sniffed with disgust. "Never cared for the man. Anyone with as much power as his title and family name afford him should take advantage of it, not hide away like Berenger does. It is a waste of money and power."

Audrey smiled for the sake of her act, but she had to bite her tongue. Ellison's contempt for Griffin

brought out an odd protectiveness in her.

"Even if we aren't staying with you, I'm glad we're so close. We're certain to see a great deal more of you since we're neighbors," she said, barely maintaining the silly exterior she put on for her prey.

Douglas focused on her and Audrey suddenly wondered if she had miscalculated by agreeing to be alone with him. He seemed like he wanted devour her right there. If Hannah hadn't been sitting by, watching vigilantly, Audrey had no doubt he would do just that.

"Truly?" he murmured and inched even closer.

To her relief, the carriage pulled to a smooth stop in front of Griffin's door and she heard the footman climb down. When the door swung open, Douglas reached across, blocking her exit.

He half-turned to Hannah and snapped, "You may go."

Her friend's concern was plain, but no matter her misgivings, Audrey had to stay. Ellison was offering her an opportunity to gain his confidence, no matter how unpleasant the prospect was. This one small sacrifice could eventually result in the key to solving their case.

Her hands shaking, Audrey nodded to her maid. "You may step out, Hannah. I will be right behind you."

With a scowl, Hannah did as she was asked. The door shut behind her and Audrey caught her breath again as Ellison turned his attention back to her. She tried to slide away, though her position next to the carriage wall didn't offer her much maneuvering room.

"Mr. Ellison, I must tell you how entirely inappropriate this situation is. I shouldn't be unattended with you. Being with my maid alone is questionable enough."

She hoped her tone was sharp and disapproving. She couldn't be quite sure over the rush of blood in her ears.

Douglas smiled as he took her hand without bothering to ask her leave and pressed it against his lips. The damp of his mouth seeped through her thin glove.

"Audrey, you must know how deeply I'm beginning to care for you. I would like to kiss you."

Suddenly she felt very dizzy. The situation was spiraling out of hand with no real end in sight unless she chose to break her cover. "N-No, I don't think that would be wise..."

Before she could finish, Ellison gripped her upper arms and pulled her against his chest. His mouth came down on hers, hard and insistent against her lips. Audrey nearly gagged and by sheer will alone managed not to pull away, though she refused to return his kiss. She had to play the shocked innocent, but not let him know his touch made her physically ill.

Finally he pulled back. "That wasn't so horrible, was it?"

She put a mask of shock on her features.

"Of all the gall!" she burst out, mimicking the outrage she'd seen displayed so often in the women of the ton. It was often the perfect combination of flirtation and indignation. "Good evening, Mr. Ellison!"

With that, she shoved passed him and wrenched the carriage door open. Grasping at the footman's arm blindly, she found her feet firmly on the ground again and Hannah beside her.

Ellison opened the carriage window and leaned out. "Good evening, Audrey."

He grinned as the coach began toward his house next door and left the two women standing in Griffin's drive.

Hannah took her arm to guide her toward the house. "Why do you look so pale?"

Audrey couldn't move fast enough. Suddenly she wanted to be inside the house. To be safe and protected by her brother. By Griffin. She stumbled on the bottom step, but caught herself and kept moving.

"What is it?" Hannah repeated as they came through the door.

Audrey wiped her mouth with the back of her glove and ground out, "He kissed me."

Hannah drew back in surprise and her face paled a shade. "He kissed you? I knew I shouldn't have left you alone with that man!"

"Shh, keep your voice down!" Audrey ordered. Her words sounded shrill in the echoing foyer. "Do you want everyone to-?"

The door to the parlor flew open and Griffin appeared. He seemed bigger than she remembered, his broad shoulders filling the narrow door. He grasped the doorjamb with white-knuckled fingers.

"You allowed him to put his hands on you?" he asked, his tone low and angry.

"Oh, saints preserve us," Audrey muttered under her breath as even more blood drained from her face.



Why do we have to do this tonight?"

Griffin glared at her. "Go upstairs, Hannah."

Hannah shook her head firmly.

"Oh no, sir. I fell for that trick once tonight. I won't leave her with you. Not when you're so angry you look like you could break the wall with your fist." The Cockney accent Hannah had worked so hard to get rid of edged each word.

Audrey finally dared to look at Griffin. He did look like he could explode with fury, yet she felt no fear being in his company. If she knew one thing for certain, he would never hurt her. At least, not physically. No, it was the emotional turmoil she feared most.

And yet she couldn't deny what a draw he remained to her.

"Hannah," she whispered. "You may leave us. I'll be safe with Griffin."

Hannah turned to her. "Audrey..."

With a nod she hoped would reassure her friend, Audrey whispered, "*Please*."

Hannah hesitated, but with a glower for Griffin, finally turned to climb up the stairs.

"What were you—" he began.

"Shh." Audrey put a finger to her lips. "If I must discuss this with you, let's at least go into the parlor. There's no need to share our argument with the entire household."

With an unreadable expression, Griffin stepped aside and motioned for her to enter the room behind him. She felt his body heat at her back as he closed the door. He passed by her to lean on the mantel then stared at her expectantly. Like a predator stalking his prey, waiting for the moment to pounce.

And yet, that thought didn't frighten her. In fact, she had to admit that, as she lost herself in his eyes, she actually looked forward to this brief stolen moment in time. No matter the consequences.

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How he managed to keep his emotions in check, Griffin didn't know. As he clutched the mantel, he watched Audrey walk over to a chair by the fire and sink down as if she were exhausted. For a brief moment, his anger faded and he felt a strange longing to take her into his arms and comfort her. Then he thought of Douglas Ellison putting his mouth on hers and his anger returned with a vengeance.

"How could you allow that man touch you?" he choked out.

Audrey responded by raising her still-gloved hands to her eyes. When she dropped them, she didn't answer his question, but slowly began peeling the sheaths from her hands.

At the seemingly simple gesture, Griffin felt himself slipping under a seductive spell. One by one, she freed her fingers, then slid the glove from her hand to place it on the table beside her before repeating the action with the other.

"Fix me a drink," she ordered softly as she focused her attention away from him toward the fire.

Swallowing, Griffin did as he was told, happy for the chance to turn away from her before her unexpected effect over him became more than apparent.

Crossing over to the bar, he stared at the line of decanters. The last time Audrey had had a drink in his presence, he'd tasted the scotch on her lips. With a smile, he poured her a tumbler of his best. It wasn't a lady's drink, but he wondered if she would remember its significance.

Taking the glass he offered, she sipped it, then her midnight gaze flashed up to meet his briefly. She *did* remember.

"This is my job, Griffin," she whispered, her voice husky and broken as she dipped her head and broke their heated stare.

Shaking off the desire she ignited in him, Griffin frowned. "To trade your body for his secrets?"

She sucked in a sharp breath of air through her teeth. Without looking at him, she shrugged one shoulder. "Not to the very end. Just to a point."

"Well, if it's just to a point, that makes it all different, doesn't it?"

Clenching his fist, Griffin stalked away, his heart racing with powerful anger and disappointment. It was obvious she took no pleasure in this part of her affiliation with the War Department, but still, she did it.

The sound of her slamming her drink down on the table beside her made him turn. To his surprise, she was on her feet.

"Do you think I enjoy this?" She swallowed hard before continuing. "Do you think I *like* having that

blackguard's sticky hands on me or his disgusting taste on my lips?" She wiped her mouth to accentuate her words. "Why do you think I wanted a drink?"

Griffin froze, his gaze inexplicably drawn to her mouth. Her lips were full and pale pink, swollen from the way she'd been chewing on them in the past hour. They looked sweet. Irresistible.

"You wish to remove his taste from your lips?" he asked softly.

With a sigh that shuddered through her body, Audrey nodded.

"Yes." Her voice was much softer when she repeated it. "Yes."

Taking a few long strides across the room, he found himself directly in front of her. Her proximity warmed him as the lilac smell of her skin flared his nostrils. Slowly he slid his finger beneath her chin to lift her face toward his. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears in the glow of the lamplight.

"I've a better way to erase his taste."

It seemed like it took an age from the time he lowered his head to the moment his lips touched hers, but it was worth the wait. Her mouth was soft, softer than he'd remembered.

With a sigh of acquiescence, she leaned into him. He took her invitation by clasping her waist and drawing her even closer. She let out a little gasp when her breasts flattened against his chest, and he took the opportunity to gently probe her parted lips with the tip of his tongue.

Instantly she pulled back, her breath coming in short, bated gasps and her eyes dilated as she lifted them to meet his.

"Why did you...?" she trailed off and the uncertainty in her gaze was clear. Then she shook it away and leaned closer. "Never mind, I don't want to know why."

Pulling her back up against him, he kissed her again. This time it took no teasing for her to accept him. He reveled in her taste, the sweetness of her mixed with the bitter sharpness of the scotch. The kiss deepened until he could no longer determine where she ended and he began.

Finally, with a strangled groan, he pulled back. He had to or else he would do more than taste her lips.

"I have wanted to do that for five years," he admitted.

Her lips parted in surprise.

"Wh-what did you say?"

In an attempt to control his wild emotions, he looked away. "I think you heard me."

Crossing the room, he downed his own drink in one swig. Blood raced hot in his veins and the evidence of her power over his body grew. He swelled against the barrier of his trousers after just her kiss.

"Yes, I did hear you," she muttered. "Excuse me."

Her shoulders shaking, Audrey hurried from the room. Griffin heard her footsteps fleeing up the stairs and down the hallway.

With a low curse, he shook his head. For all his promises to only be a friend to Audrey Jordan, he'd certainly crossed a line tonight. Now he was certain to pay the cost of his foolhardy actions.

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Audrey hurried into her room and slammed the door behind her. It seemed an impossible task to draw air in to her aching lungs, no matter how she gasped and heaved.

Griffin Berenger had just kissed her. It was as if he had reached into her soul and drawn out in complete detail a scene from her girlish longings. Even more disconcerting was her response. She'd worked so hard to gain some level of control over her wild heart, but now she was spinning like she was a lovelorn girl again.

The door to the small room off her bedchamber opened and Hannah stepped inside.

"I don't know where your head was tonight," the older woman said, crossing the room where Audrey knew she'd begin taking down her hair and helping her out of her gown.

"Oh please, Hannah. I can't bear this now!" she interrupted. She pushed past her friend to sit down on the bed. "I'll undress myself tonight. Just leave me alone, I beg of you."

Audrey winced. Her harsh tone would do nothing to reduce Hannah's suspicions or concerns.

"What did Griffin Berenger do to you, love?" Hannah whispered, reaching out to slide her hand down Audrey's arm.

"He- Nothing Hannah," she denied with a blush.

Perhaps if she didn't speak the words out loud they could remain her little secret. Once she talked about it, the dream-like quality of the kiss would fade and she would have to face reality again.

"Just let me be by myself right now," she whispered.

A look that would have frightened the most hardened of criminals leapt to Hannah's normally sweet face. "If he did anything to you, I swear."

"No!" Audrey leapt to her feet and shook her head. "I liked it."

Hannah's cocked her head as if to ask Audrey to elaborate.

"He kissed me. Griffin kissed me, Hannah and I-" a small sob caught in her throat. "-I liked it."

Hannah sat down with a thump in Audrey's dressing table chair. "I knew from the moment I saw that man that he wanted you. I knew it."

Audrey let out a strangled groan. That couldn't be true. Griffin Berenger want *her*? Impossible! She'd spent years reminding herself of that cold, bitter fact. She'd shed too many tears over his lack of feeling toward her. And now that notion that had driven her away from England and into a life of secrets was crumbling around her.

"He *did* say he'd wanted to kiss me for five years," she murmured, more to herself than to Hannah as she touched her mouth. Her lips felt hot and swollen, aching to continue the soft torment Griffin had begun.

Hannah made a sound in the back of her throat that brought Audrey back to reality.

"Well, where does this leave us then?" her friend asked. "Because it's obvious you have feelings for the man, despite all your attempts to convince me, your brother and perhaps even yourself otherwise."

Audrey sank back down on the mattress. "Nothing has changed. *Nothing*."

"Ha!" Hannah barked out, pacing over to the bay window to lean against the glass while she stared at Audrey with an appraising glance. "What has all the moping and upset over the past five years been about then?"

Taking a deep breath, Audrey contemplated that question. At first she'd allowed herself to mourn the loss of her dreams about a future with Griffin. Then her life in the War Department had begun and she'd been able to forget that crush - sometimes. She always told herself her feelings for Griffin had been nothing more than a girlish *tendre*.

But in the parlor not half an hour before, her body had roared to life and her heart had lodged in her throat from the moment Griffin asked her to be alone with him.

With hot tears stinging her eyes, Audrey whispered, "I suppose I did a very good job convincing myself I didn't really love him. But-but I still do."

With a grin, Hannah burst out, "Hallelujah! She finally admits it!"

"What?"

Audrey had no idea why admitting she still loved Griffin would bring her friend so much pleasure. That fact could only put all of them in danger and bring her heartache.

Hannah's expression softened. "Oh Audrey, don't you think I've known that from the first moment I met you? You were just a girl then, with little experience and no confidence. But when you talked to me about the man you'd loved and lost, I could see that love was real. All your denials and explanations were meaningless."

"I never knew my heart was so plain," Audrey said with a shake of her head. "But this is nothing to celebrate. Loving Griffin will only make things more complicated. I must continue to pretend I care for Douglas Ellison. Even if I didn't have duty to consider, Griffin has never returned my feelings. There was desire in his touch tonight... but I can't believe there would suddenly be more."

Hannah let out a groan. "I told your brother this plan was a mistake."

Audrey had all but forgotten her brother. "Oh God, Noah. If he finds out, he'll kill Griffin!"

As if on cue, a soft knock sounded at her door.

"Audrey?" Noah whispered from outside. "It's me, let me in."

Twisting the fabric of her skirt into her hand, Audrey checked herself in the mirror. The last thing she wanted was for her brother to notice how disheveled she looked. That would only make him push and nag until he wrung her secrets from her.

"Hurry up, Audrey!" he murmured impatiently.

"I'm coming," she snapped back, throwing Hannah a warning frown before opening the door.

Noah breezed in with grin for her before he plopped down in her dressing table chair. She took one near the window and hoped for the best.

"Still in your full opera regalia, little sister? I would have thought you'd gotten more comfortable at least half an hour ago," he said as he fiddled with the objects on her dressing table.

"I was waylaid," she murmured with another glance toward Hannah. Her friend had folded her arms and was staring at her expectantly.

Noah put down the tiny bottle of cologne in his hand and leaned forward to look at her closer.

"Have you been... have you been crying, Audrey?" He rose to his feet in alarm.

The tears she'd been holding back began to flow again and contradicted her denial.

"Is it because he kissed you? I knew I shouldn't have left you alone with him." Noah ran a hand through his dark hair. "Bastard."

Audrey's heart lurched into her throat as her gaze flew from Noah to Hannah then back again. How did her brother already know about Griffin?

"No, Noah!" Audrey rose to her feet with shaking knees.

"Audrey!" Hannah snapped, but she ignored her friend.

"Don't blame him," she continued.

"Audrey," Hannah repeated as she stepped forward.

Audrey shook her head. If Noah already knew about her moment in the sitting room with Griffin then she would take responsibility. She didn't need Hannah's protection.

"I kissed him back. I know I'm an idiot, but I liked kissing him, Noah."

"Oh, Audrey," Hannah said softly as she sank back down on the bed and covered her eyes.

Her brother looked at her with confusion and disgust. "You *liked* kissing Ellison?"

Audrey froze. This was what Hannah had been trying to tell her. Noah knew about her kiss with *Ellison*, probably from Hannah's report just after their arrival... not Griffin.

"Douglas?" she whispered, wiping away tears. "I..."

"No," Noah snarled, his gaze clearing with recognition. "Hannah said you were talking with Griffin. You kissed Griffin?"

Spinning on his heel, her brother strode over to the door, nearly ripping it from the hinges. Audrey caught up with him at a run and grasped him by the arm with both hands.

"Stop, Noah!" she pleaded, kicking the door shut and shaking him. "He's your friend! Why is it you're more angry at your friend for kissing me than some traitor?"

Noah's answer was instant and heated, "Because you once loved, and judging from your face, still love my friend. I saw how deeply you were hurt by those feelings five years ago and by everything Luci did to you afterward."

"What Luci did wasn't his fault!" she insisted. "Good God, he doesn't even know about all that!"

Releasing his arm, she crossed over to the bed and leaned her forehead against the bedpost.

"Noah?" she whispered.

"Yes?" His voice just as soft. All the heat and anger was gone from his demeanor.

"Do you think I trade my body for secrets?"

When Griffin made that angry accusation in the drawing room, it had hurt her, for it was often what she feared she did.

"No!" Noah caught her in his arms to hug her tightly. "No. Don't ever let anyone tell you that. You're a good and decent woman. I've seen you hold up in the worst of circumstances. You should never walk with your head down in shame for what you've done for your country, Audrey."

With a small squeeze, she stepped from his embrace. "Thank you. You're a good brother."

Noah smiled at her. "Goodnight, Audrey."

"Goodnight," she said, watching him go back to the door and open it. "Oh, and Noah?"

"Yes?"

"Go to bed. Don't start a fight with Griffin tonight." She stared at him evenly. "Please, for me."

Noah seemed to contemplate her request before he nodded. "For you, Audrey. But don't believe for a moment that I'll forget. I owe my friend a very serious conversation. Very serious, indeed."

## Chapter Six

Griffin peeked around the corner into the dining room, but immediately pulled back with a grimace. Audrey was inside reading the *Morning Chronicle*. There was no way he could evade her now unless he avoided breakfast completely, and for some reason his stomach was begging for food. In fact, he hadn't been so ravenous in months.

It wasn't that he didn't want to see Audrey. On the contrary, he'd thought of her all night. And that was why he had to stay away. After their kiss, his friendship with Noah, Audrey's cover, and even his own sanity were all in jeopardy.

He had to treat this encounter as a test of his wavering control. One he had no choice but to pass. With a deep breath, he strolled into the room.

"Good morning, Audrey," he said, sitting down at the head of the table and giving her what he hoped was a nonchalant smile.

The paper rattled as she stiffened. "Go-good morning, my lord."

As she began the awkward task of refolding the paper, he took the opportunity to look at her more closely. Her eyes were a bit dull from lack of sleep and her face was an alluring shade of pale pink. Triumph surged through him. His kiss had affected her as much as him. Thoughts of it and her had plagued him, first causing sleeplessness and then restless, hot dreams that made him wake aching for her.

The swish of the paper brought him back to matters at hand. Audrey had succeeded in folding it, but it was mangled.

"What are you doing?" he asked with a cocked eyebrow.

She blinked in confusion. "Having breakfast."

His gaze drifted over to the plate in front of her. It contained a dry crust of toasted bread, with no evidence that anything else had ever been there.

"Dry toast and tea?" he queried, meeting her eyes with wry smile. "Is that any way to start the day?"

She frowned and the edge of challenge returned to her voice. "I wasn't hungry."

"Hmmm, I wonder why." He stirred cream into his own tea while he enjoyed the stunned look on her face. Whether it was a good idea or not, he loved to tease her. It made him feel light as he hadn't for years.

She cleared her throat and rose to her feet. With a swift nod, she held out the mess that had once been the *Chronicle*.

"I took the liberty of reading it first. I hope you don't mind. Good day."

Griffin leapt to his feet and caught her wrist gently. "Wait Audrey."

"What is it?" Her eyes trailed to the hand on her wrist as the slightest shiver moved through her.

"Why are you running?" With more reluctance than was healthy, he let her go. "We're friends, aren't we? Can't we simply break our fast together as friends do?"

A flash of something sad flickered deep in her eyes. "Yes, Griffin, we are... friends. And I suppose

there's no harm in sharing a meal."

With a stiff smile, he turned her chair out a fraction and allowed her to sit before returning to the head of the table.

"You should eat a proper breakfast anyway," he said.

A smirk turned up one corner of her lips. It astonished Griffin what one sly glance from her could do to him. It had never been this way before, not even with Luci. His wife had inspired desire from him early on, but that feeling hadn't consumed him. It hadn't made him lay awake in his bed wondering how he could find a chance to touch her.

Audrey did that.

She rolled her eyes as the maid placed a brimming plate of food before her. "Why all the concern about my eating habits?"

With a shake of his head that did nothing to clear his addled mind, Griffin answered, "How can you save the world from evil on an empty stomach?"

She stared at him in surprise, then began to chuckle. At first it was a small giggle, then it grew to a full-blown laugh. To his surprise, he found himself joining in. Though his laughter was untested, it felt wonderful.

"I don't think I would go so far as to say I'm saving the world from evil," she finally said as wiped her eyes to clear the tears of mirth that had jumped into them. "What we do isn't as romantic as all that."

"Hmm," Griffin murmured, taking a bite of eggs and chewing thoughtfully. "If it isn't romantic, then why do you do it? I could see last night you take no pleasure in it."

Audrey drew in a short breath and immediately shook her head. "No! If I gave you that impression, I apologize. Of course, there are some aspects of this occupation I don't like. But on the whole, I find it fascinating. If I hadn't taken Noah's offer to help him all those years ago, I never would have gone to the continent. I never would have met some incredibly interesting people."

"And a cad like Douglas Ellison never would have laid his dirty hands on you," Griffin added, doing his best to reign in his returning anger.

Audrey's nostrils flared just the slightest bit as she dropped her eyes to her plate. "Yes. But *you* wouldn't have either."

Griffin's fork slid from his hand and hit the edge of his plate with a loud clatter that made them both jump. He hadn't expected her to open that topic for discussion, but now that she had...

"I shouldn't have taken such liberties with you," he said softly, righting his fork. "I do apologize."

"Don't." She looked at him with eyes that had darkened to the deepest blue he'd ever seen. "Now we're even, I suppose. I kissed you in a moment of weakness and you kissed me."

He flashed back to both kisses. They had blurred in his mind until they were almost one sweet caress despite the years that separated them. "I suppose that's one way to look at it."

"In fact, what happened almost makes me feel better." The slight crack in her voice was the only indication she gave that the subject made her uncomfortable. "I didn't know it was possible for you to lose that careful control you present to the world. I thought I was the only one. But now I see anyone can do something... foolish."

He was torn between two options. He could follow her lead and brush off the kiss as a lack of judgment. Or he could make an enormous leap of faith and tell her it had meant more to him.

Suddenly an image of Luci leapt into his mind. Luci lying. Luci destroying his world. He never wanted to go through that again. Never.

"Yes, well foolish is the word for it," he choked out, taking a long sip of tea. "I'm glad we both feel that way. I allowed my concern for you to slip into..."

He wanted to say desire, but didn't.

"To slip into over-protectiveness?" Audrey examined the design on the lacy tablecloth intently. "And that lead to..."

"The kiss," he finished with a nod. "But I know you can take care of yourself. You have Noah to protect you if you need him, and Hannah. I won't make the same mistake again."

She dipped her head and nodded sadly, her look grave as she picked at the food on her plate. Instinctively, Griffin reached across to take her hand.

"I'm sorry."

He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze, as he wondered what exactly he was apologizing for. Perhaps for the kiss they'd shared the night before. Perhaps for the one they'd shared years ago. Or maybe because he *was* sorry. Sorry he couldn't... shouldn't take more.

For a brief moment when she looked up, he saw the volumes of emotion she felt, then she covered them with whatever skills she'd been taught as a spy.

"Please don't trouble yourself, Griffin." She placed her hand over his. "I'm no fragile dove."

"Excuse me," came a cold voice from the door.

Like guilty children, both of them snatched their hands away. Griffin glanced over to the doorway to see Noah staring at them. He looked angry, and Griffin had the sudden realization that his friend knew about the previous night's kiss. With a grimace, he stood up. Noah looked like he wanted to rip Griffin's heart out, so it was best to face him on more equal ground.

"Good morning." Griffin motioned to the chair to his right while he kept a close eye on his best friend. "I trust you slept well and..."

"Audrey, will you give my *friend* and me a moment alone?" Noah growled.

Audrey stood up to smooth her skirts as she looked from one man to the other. "Noah." Her tone was a warning and a plea all at once.

"Audrey," he answered, finally glancing at her pointedly.

She placed her hand on her brother's arm and squeezed. "This is ridiculous. Please, let's have our meal together without any problems."

Griffin saw volumes of unspoken communication pass between the siblings, then finally Audrey sighed in exasperation.

"You men! If you insist on destroying a lifelong friendship over a stupid..." Her gaze flitted to Griffin briefly. "... a stupid mistake, then what can I do about it?"

With a flounce of her skirt, Audrey left the room, slamming the great oak door behind her and leaving Griffin alone with a man who looked as though he wanted to eat him alive.

Clearing his throat, Griffin asked, "Is Audrey correct? Are you intent on destroying our lifelong friendship?"

"How can you ask *me* that?" Noah stepped closer. "*You* are the one destroying the bond between us, not I!"

Griffin had to work at maintaining his own cool in the face of his friend's ugly accusation. "And just how am I doing that?"

Noah's voice was dangerously low. "Audrey. I thought I made it clear just how easily you could hurt her!"

Griffin sat down at the table and stirred his tea while he tried to maintain his façade of calm. "My relationship with your sister has nothing to do with my friendship with you. She is a grown woman, long past the age of majority. If she chooses to spend her time in my company, then it's really none of your affair."

Noah's face darkened a shade and the vein in his forehead began to throb as he gripped the back of the carved dining room chair.

"Actually, it *is* my affair." His voice was harsh in the quiet room. "Not only am I responsible for her as her brother, but starting any relationship with you could hurt her cover with Ellison."

"Oh, yes," Griffin spat out, folding his arms. "I'd forgotten. You would much rather have your sister trading kisses with a turncoat in exchange for his secrets than with me."

Noah's eyes narrowed. "At least I know where the turncoat stands, Griffin. Where do you? Are you planning to court Audrey? Are you planning to take her as your wife, or is your bed her final destination?"

Stiffening at his friend's observant, if cold, comment Griffin slammed a fist down on the table. "I would never harm your sister. She means... *you* mean too much to me."

With a sigh, Noah sat down in Audrey's abandoned chair and stared at his friend intently.

"Perhaps you wouldn't intentionally hurt her, but you already are. If Ellison finds out you and she are carrying on some kind of... *affair* behind his back, he could turn on her. I don't give a damn about his blasted secrets if it means putting her life in eminent danger." His eyes darkened as he looked away. "I know you think I'm some kind of bastard for introducing her to this dangerous lifestyle, but you don't understand. She was nearly destroyed by the *ton* and my mother's constant pressure for her to marry. If I hadn't taken her away, Audrey might have been driven to drastic measures."

Griffin frowned. He had a sudden realization how little he knew about Audrey in the years they'd been apart. Before she'd disappeared with Noah, he'd tried to avoid all news of her in hopes he could forget what had happened between them. He'd even found out which parties she'd been invited to and made a concerted effort to decline his own invitations. Luci had been furious.

"I had no idea your sister was so unhappy," Griffin muttered.

"Mother found out about the unfortunate... incident on your wedding day." Noah scrubbed a hand over his face as if the memory physically pained him. "She insisted she would have Audrey married before the next Season ended, whether or not she liked it. She dragged my sister to every party and ball there was, but rumors had begun. There were a few whispers about my sister's virtue."

"Rumors?" A sickening sense of premonition hit Griffin in the pit of his stomach. "Who started these rumors?"

Noah flinched. "I think you already know who... and why."

Griffin closed his eyes. Yes, he did. When he married Luci, no one could have convinced him she was anything but lovely and kind. Now that he knew the truth about her... he could only imagine the revenge she had taken on Audrey for that drunken kiss.

"Luci. Damn Luci!" Griffin howled, rising to his feet to pace the room. "What did she say?"

"Leave it be, Griffin. It's done and Luci is gone. It matters little now." Noah shook his head.

"No." Griffin clenched his hands. "It matters to me. I want to know what she did."

After a brief hesitation, Noah sighed. "Apparently she swore to my sister that she would destroy her after she found you two together."

His friend's voice was curiously flat as he continued, "She followed through on that threat with enough venom to impress the meanest of witches. After the rumors began, no suitable man wanted her. She went home after her second season with her head lowered in shame and guilt in her heart because Virginia was coming out the next year and Audrey was afraid she would taint our younger sister's reputation, too."

"Your mother must have been furious." Griffin felt sick as he thought of all the pain Luci had brought to him and to those he cared for.

Noah gave a glum nod. "Of course. Mama cared a great deal for appearances then, so she arranged for my sister to marry some Squire. A nice enough chap, but not the thing for our Audrey. She was miserable."

Griffin could only imagine the ugly specifics of Luci's lies. Images of Audrey publicly humiliated tainted his mind. The pain was nearly unbearable.

"And that was why she went with you," he said softly.

Noah nodded. "I was leaving and thanks to some snooping she had guessed a connection to the War Department. She begged me to take her with me. I couldn't deny her when I saw how deep her misery was. I took her to meet our superior believing he would keep her from the field, but she proved herself so swiftly that she was granted her desire. I gained a powerful ally in my duty to my country that day. I would never tell her this, but I've never been so happy to have been proven wrong."

"And she escaped the life that would have been thrust upon her thanks to Luci. Thanks to me." Griffin scrubbed a hand over his face. He certainly understood a great deal more about Audrey now.

"Don't you see?" Noah asked. "As much as Audrey has changed, the fact is that you were her fantasy as a young girl. *You* were what she wanted. If you offer her that fantasy again now, then refuse to follow through, you'll hurt her all over again."

Griffin gave a noncommittal grunt because he couldn't think of anything to say. The idea of being Audrey's fantasy was an agreeable one. But *was* he ready to follow through on anything he started? That he didn't know.

"I'm deeply sorry my wife hurt your sister."

"You had nothing to do with that," Noah said with a snort. "Luci did what she wanted to do. You know that better than anyone."

The blood drained from Griffin's face. Both men were thinking of Luci's infidelity and lies.

Noah grimaced. "I'm sorry, Griffin. I shouldn't have gone so far. Luci is gone and we shouldn't speak ill of the dead, no matter what she might have done."

Griffin sat back down in his chair with a thud. Noah was the only person in the world who he'd ever



spoken to about Luci's cruelty. The only person he trusted with those secrets. But now he had betrayed his friend's trust by harming the person Noah loved most.

"I'm sorry, as well," he said. "I shouldn't have gone so far with your sister. She and I have already spoken about it, and I can promise you it will never happen again."

A sharp sting rushed through his body at that thought. Now that he had made that vow, the most Griffin could hope for was the gentle touch of Audrey's hand on his arm as she exited a carriage or passed him in a hallway.

Noah cocked his head to look at Griffin closely. "You suddenly look sick."

Griffin shook the thoughts from his head. "No, just drained, I suppose."

"Well, get as much rest as you can. You and I are going to the merchants' dinner in a few days. Since Audrey can't attend, we'll be responsible for keeping a close eye on Ellison." Noah took a bite of the food his sister had left untouched. "I'd like to close out this case as soon as possible. After recent events, I think it would be best for all involved."

Griffin nodded grimly. What Noah said was true, but that didn't lessen the sting that once this case was over, Audrey would be well and truly out of his life for good.

## ***Chapter Seven***

Audrey paced across the sitting room and glanced back and forth between Griffin and Noah. Both looked dapper in their evening clothes, though Griffin's good looks and his delicious scent made him all the more a draw. At least to her.

Stifling a sigh as she remembered her private vow to squelch her feelings for him, Audrey reached up to straighten Noah's cravat.

"Don't forget, I haven't told you a thing about Ellison's behavior in the carriage, so don't say anything to him about it. It will make him think I didn't mind his vile kiss no matter how coyly I acted at the time."

She couldn't hold back a shudder at the memory.

Noah jolted with dislike. "I know."

Audrey pursed her lips. She hated it when her brother took on that condescending tone. It wasn't her fault that the merchants dinner invitation didn't extend to women. She only wanted to be certain the men remembered their parts. Noah had never worked with Griffin, and that increased the danger level.

Her mind spun with good advice. "If you get a chance, try to get him talking about the Prince. If you allow him, Ellison might let something slip he wouldn't dare in front of me. He thinks I'm a silly woman who wouldn't understand his political opinions, but with you..."

"I know, Audrey." Noah gently removed her trembling hands from his now mangled cravat and turned to the mirror behind him. "Well, this is wrinkled beyond repair. I'll run upstairs and have my valet give me another. Hold the carriage for me, will you, Griffin?"

Griffin nodded wordlessly without looking up from the papers he was sorting.

With her brother and his watchful eyes out of the room, Audrey took a moment to examine Griffin. He really did look devastating in his eveningwear. He looked darker, more serious, though she wouldn't have thought that possible. She found herself happy that no other women would be at the event to admire how smashing he looked.

"Do you remember your role?" She wrung her hands reflexively and began to pace.

With a short sigh, he stacked the papers in his hand on the table. "Yes, Audrey."

"And you will be careful, won't you?" she asked. "This is your first time doing this kind of work. It's difficult not to get excited or try to behave differently, but remain calm and collected. Just pretend as if this were a normal event and-"

Griffin slowly crossed the room to step in her path. With a smile, he reached out to take both her cold hands. All her racing thoughts quieted as she stared up at him.

With tortuous slowness, he kissed each of her hands across the top of her fingers. His warm lips sent moist heat through her veins and turned her knees to water. It took all her willpower not to lean against him and beg him for more.

His voice was hoarse when he said, "Noah and I will be fine. As far as I'm concerned this *is* a normal

event. I shall observe those around me closely and listen more carefully. If Ellison gives me an opportunity to press him for information, I'll certainly take it. But you need to be calm, Audrey. Sitting in this state all night will only make you sick with worry."

Releasing one hand, he brushed back a stray strand of hair from her face. His thumb grazed her cheek and she closed her eyes for a brief moment. How in the world would she manage to relax now? One touch from Griffin Berenger made her heart throb and her whole body feel weightless and out of control. The very last thing he inspired in her was calm.

"I know," she stammered. "I only worry about you. And my brother, of course."

With a blink, Griffin's eyes cleared. He pulled away, but not before she saw the tension around his eyes and mouth.

"Try to find something to occupy your mind," he continued in a strained voice while he watched her in the mirror above the fireplace. "Talk to Hannah or read a book."

"Yes, Griffin," she whispered.

Their eyes met in the glass and again the discomfort appeared on his face. The awkward silence that filled the room was only broken when Noah returned with a fresh cravat around his neck.

"Ready then?"

"Be careful tonight," she whispered, leaning up to press a kiss on her brother's smooth-shaven cheek. In his ear, she murmured, "And take care of Griffin."

He nodded as he broke their embrace. "We're off then."

He motioned to Griffin to leave the room first. At the doorway, Griffin paused to look back at her for a moment. Then they were both gone, disappearing out the front door into the cool night air. Toward possible danger in a place where she wasn't allowed to follow.

The thought gave her a shiver as she sat down in one of the chairs by the fire and stared into the flames. It would be a long night, and now she had to find something to do to fill the long hours while the two men were gone.

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The clock in the hallway began to chime. Audrey looked up from her book to listen to the number. One, two, three... twelve. Midnight. With each hour Griffin and Noah were away, her anxiety increased.

With a small sigh, she turned back to the page in her novel, but quickly tossed it aside. She had been reading the same words over and over for two hours and *still* had no idea who the main characters in the story were. Even Hannah had tired of her constant pacing and retired to bed.

The house was far too quiet for Audrey's taste. The only sounds were the crackling fire and the tick of the clock in the hallway. With a groan of frustration, she rose to fix herself a sherry. She was just about to sit back down when she heard a soft sound from outside the window. She strained to hear it and was rewarded by the creak of wood and the crackle of feet against leaves or dry branches.

There was definitely an intruder outside.

Freezing instinctively, she sent a side-glance toward the glass. The glare of the lamps inside made it impossible for her to get a clear view, but anyone outside could see her movements with no hindrance.

As nonchalantly as she could, she set her tumbler down and strolled over to the fireplace. The poker would make a fine weapon if a trespasser were so bold as to enter the house. She clutched at it, prodding the fire absently as she continued to glance from time to time toward the window.

The noise came again, a scuffling then a creaking as whoever was outside began to work at the windowpane in an effort to open it. Her heart leapt to her throat and she faced the window head on. She raised the poker at her side, ready to swing if she needed to.

"Who's out there?" she snapped as the pane began to rise. There was no answer but a black-gloved hand wrapped around the frame. "Damn it, who are... Jean?"

Her poker hit the floor with a clatter as the man climbed inside and flashed her a quick grin. One she knew well, just as she knew his sparkling gray eyes and shaggy brown hair that was always a touch too long.

"Jean!"

"You are becoming too soft with all this London nonsense, Audrey. That was enough noise to send the entire house running!" he said, his French accent thick with laughter.

Audrey crossed the room to close the window behind him. "What are you doing here? I thought you

were trapped in Paris.”

“Non,” the man said with a frown, running his gloved hand through thick, dark hair. “Thank God for Lord Golding. When he heard of my plight he smuggled me out and brought me here.”

Emotions threatened to overwhelm her. Jean Beaumonte had been a friend and sometime partner while she and Noah worked undercover in France. He’d worked hard against Napoleon and suffered greatly for it. Identified after the war as a traitor, he’d been in grave danger. Seeing him standing before her with a crooked, sad smile on his handsome face was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

“My dear friend,” she finally choked out, motioning to one of the chairs by the fire.

As he sat down with a weary sigh, she closed the sitting room door and poured him a drink. Settling back into her seat, she looked at him closely. Since the last time they were together he’d lost weight and his eyes were rimmed dark from lack of sleep.

“What is going on, Jean? Shouldn’t you be hiding out somewhere until you can return to France?”

“That would be my greatest wish, but I am afraid I will never be able to return to my homeland.” His face fell as an unfathomable sadness filled his dark eyes. “I was in hiding until Lord Golding asked me to assist you and Noah with your investigation. I could not refuse when such good friends were the ones I would be aiding.”

Again she smiled, thinking of all the good times she, Noah and Hannah had spent with Jean over the years. “I feel better knowing you’re on our side, even if it can’t be in public. What are you doing?”

“I was to be on a search of Ellison’s house, but I was nearly caught by a servant so I didn’t find anything to implicate any others in his gang. I decided to see you. And here I am.” He finished with a swig of his drink.

“I’m glad, my friend. But I’m sorry you couldn’t find anything in Ellison’s residence,” she said with a soft sigh. “I’d hoped we could finish this assignment quickly. Even more so now that you’re in danger. You’ll find the English have as little love for you as the French, I’m afraid.”

With a frown, Jean nodded. “That is why it is good that I have a passable English accent. Don’t I?”

Audrey giggled at Jean’s attempt at a British accent and nodded. “It’s almost as good as Noah’s French accent.”

Jean’s face fell into a teasing scowl. “Your brother can capture none of the subtle nuances or beauty of my people’s speech. He sounds like he is strangling a cat!”

Audrey’s giggle turned to a full-bore belly laugh. Jean was right, when Noah was alone with them his French accent was deplorable. Only under the pressure of an assignment could he manage it properly.

“I won’t tell him you said that.” She glanced around, pretending she was checking for her brother. “Nor will I tell him I agree with you.”

Jean stared at her for a long moment, his eyes drifting over her face with affection. “Tell me again, why you will not marry me.”

Freezing, Audrey stood and paced away to the fireplace. In France, Jean had asked her to marry him several times, despite her gentle refusal each time.

“Oh Jean, you already know the reasons why,” she said as she plucked at her sleeve.

“Tell me again,” he ordered with a smile in his tone. “I cannot remember them.”

“Liar.” She laughed, despite how uncomfortable the conversation made her. “I won’t marry you because neither of us loves the other.”

“That is not true,” Jean insisted, standing up to come closer to her. “I care for you a great deal and respect you even more, which is better than most marriages. I find you attractive. What could be a better match than that?”

Audrey shook her head. “One of us or both of us would only end up hurt if we married. No, I won’t marry unless I love the man and he loves me equally. And that is not our relationship, Jean.”

She paused as an image of Griffin leapt to her mind. When she spoke again, her words were soft. “I know what it’s like to love someone who doesn’t love you in return. I couldn’t go through that again. Or be the one who caused such pain.”

Jean gave a theatrical sigh. “Alas, I feared your thoughts on that subject remained unchanged.”

“Jean.” She stepped closer and smiled up at him. “I *am* glad you’re here. I’m glad you’ll be helping us, even if we cannot work as closely together as we have in the past.”

He grinned in reply and she kissed him, first on one cheek, then the other.

The slam of the door beside them made them each leap back. Jean took a fighter's stance, while Audrey spun around to face their intruder.

Griffin stood framed in the doorway.

He looked furious, his eyes flashing and his face darkening redder with every moment that passed. She'd never seen him so angry, even when he'd overheard Ellison had kissed her in the carriage. Now he looked ready to kill.

"*This* is what you do to occupy your mind while you wait for your brother and me to return?" His voice was choked and tight.

She winced while she took a step forward and held out her hand to explain.

With a growl, he backed away and looked at her with eyes full of disgust. "Don't let me interrupt you. You and your lover are free to carry on, though I'd appreciate it if you took your little tryst upstairs. The servants could wander in at any time and I would be embarrassed for them to see such a display."

Turning on his heel, he stormed out of the room. Audrey opened her mouth to call out after him, but couldn't seem to make a sound as she watched him disappear from sight. For a long moment she simply stared at the empty doorway where he'd stood, then gathered her rapidly crumbling composure.

"I'm so sorry, Jean," she whispered as she turned back. "That was our host, Griffin Berenger. He's an old family friend and is helping us with this case. He doesn't understand..." She trailed off as a tear began to wind its way down her cheek to her chin.

Clucking his tongue, Jean pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her. She took it gladly. Wiping her eyes, she cursed herself for such a weak display in front of a man who had lost so much.

"I think he is more than a family friend, no?" Jean asked sympathetically. "Perhaps *this* man is the reason you have always said no when I asked you for your hand?"

"No," Audrey denied even as the sting of truth cut through her heart. "He can only ever be a family friend. He's made that abundantly clear to me."

Jean smiled, a bemused expression that made her suddenly feel young and inexperienced. "Dear, sweet Audrey. These are not the actions of a simple friend. That was a man who thinks something has been taken that should be his. But for now, dry your tears. I am not offended by his outburst."

"Well, I am!" She bunched the handkerchief into a ball as her embarrassment transformed turned to anger.

"Then go and tell him so," Jean said with a shrug. "See how he reacts and perhaps you will see that I am right. Either way, I must go. I have stayed too long and your friend has seen me."

Audrey nodded. "Would you like me to sneak you out the front?"

"No." Jean opened the window and climbed out on the ledge. "I will go the way I came. Good night, fair Audrey. *Adieu*."

"*Adieu*, my friend," she whispered as she shut the window.

With a harsh sigh, she turned to the doorway. It might take all her energy, but she and Griffin Berenger were going to have it out, once and for all.

## ***Chapter Eight***

Griffin downed a second drink and stared at the fire crackling in his bedroom. Rage and jealousy coursed through him and he hated himself for both. Once again he had been knocked from his orderly existence by a woman.

Audrey in the arms of another man was just too much to contemplate. It was bad enough with Ellison, but he could console himself with the knowledge that her relationship with his neighbor was only part of her job. But the man who had been holding her in Griffin's sitting room was something very different.

Something personal.

How many years ago had it been that he'd stumbled upon Luci and one of her paramours in that very same sitting room? Three? The memory still stung like it was yesterday.

He'd come home early from a meeting with one of his solicitors to be told his wife was entertaining in the sitting room. Though the servants had made a kind attempt to divert his attention, he'd gone in anyway, anxious to see Luci and speak to her about his day.

He had found her curled up on the settee in the lap of a young merchant. They'd broken their kiss the instant he entered, the young man apologizing as he tried to find the nearest exit. Griffin had let him escape with only a well-blackened eye and a promise never to return or tell stories.

His wife had watched it all with a bemused smile. She'd never risen in fear or tried to explain her actions. Even after the man was gone and Griffin towered over her, demanding an explanation, she had only laughed. She'd actually laughed.

*What I do is my business, Griffin.*

He'd been so shocked and horrified by her matter-of-fact attitude that he hadn't been able to say anything. It had been the beginning of the end of their marriage. The beginning of pain that had only grown as he uncovered more and more of her deceptions.

"Who do you think you are, speaking to me in such a fashion?"

Griffin turned, startled from his thoughts as Audrey barged into his bedroom uninvited and slammed the door behind her. Her eyes were full of passionate anger. Despite all his conflicted emotions, Griffin couldn't seem to control the curl of desire in the pit of his stomach.

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Griffin!" she continued without letting him answer her first question. "You have no idea who Jean is or why he was here. How dare you accuse me of trading my virtue twice in one week."

Recovering from his surprise, Griffin snapped, "Well, you must admit I have reason to think so. This is the *third* man you have kissed in a week. That I know of."

He wished he could take his cold words back the instant they were said. Especially when Audrey's face twisted in horror and her eyes filled with tears, which she blinked away.

Her anger erupted to the surface to wash away the hurt.

"Douglas Ellison kissed *me*. I wanted nothing to do with his vile touch, but I allowed it so he wouldn't become suspicious of my true motives. Trust that I will not put myself in a situation where he can repeat that action."

He had to admit Audrey was magnificent in her rage. Her eyes sparkled with azure fire, her skin glowed with a pink flush, and her breasts lifted up and down in an alluring fashion as she drew in harsh breaths of air between tirades.

"As for you..." Her voice lowered a fraction as a blush colored her cheeks. "What happened between us was a mutual... mistake. I thought we agreed upon that at breakfast. And you apologized to *me*, so don't you dare pretend that it was all my doing."

Griffin's heart sank with regret. It hadn't been fair to blame her for his astonishing lack of self-control. Still, he tried to remain focused.

"And what of this newest man, Audrey? Why were you exchanging kisses with him in my sitting room?"

Her nostrils flared slightly and for a moment she didn't answer, as if she were trying to rein in her emotions enough to find words.

"Jean Beaumonte is a friend to me, nothing more. I was simply saying goodbye to him in the fashion of his country, with two brief kisses, one on each cheek. I feel nothing for the man beyond a deep and very friendly affection, and powerful gratitude for all he has sacrificed for me and for our country." Her low, furious tone made him feel like a schoolboy who'd been put down by his governess.

He watched her pace over to the window to look down at the street below.

For the first time he realized what a position they were in. She was standing in his bedroom, just feet away from his bed, in fact. And they were arguing as passionately as he would have liked to be making love to her.

"This Beaumonte was a spy then?" he asked in an attempt to clear those thoughts from his mind.

"Yes." Her voice dropped another level, as if breaking visual contact with him allowed her a measure of calm. "Jean was our contact when Noah and I did business in France."

Griffin wrinkled his brow. "So he spied on his own country? The man is a traitor."

The way she spun on her heel told him he had crossed a very thin line into dangerous territory. "Is that what you think, Griffin? Well, if that is true, then Jean Beaumonte has already paid dearly for his 'crime'. He has no family left, no money. He's been revealed as a spy and is no longer welcome in his own country, yet ours is little better because he is a Frenchman visiting us directly after we conquered his emperor. He rescued me, and that's something I'll never forget, no matter what you say."

Griffin paused. Curiosity overwhelmed any remaining frustration in him, and he took a step closer, leaving only a foot of space between them. Audrey drew in a short breath at his movement, as if she were finally becoming aware of where they were, but she didn't move away from him.

"How did he save you?" he asked softly.

She held his gaze. "He rescued me from a man who wished to steal the virtue *you* think I give so freely."

Griffin closed his eyes with a soft groan. In his anger, he'd made an erroneous assumption about the woman before him.

"I'm so sorry." He opened his eyes to reach out to her hand. She allowed him to take it without resistance.

"You haven't truly known me for many years, Griffin Berenger," she whispered, rubbing her thumb across the sensitive webbing between his thumb and forefinger and sending a shock of awareness through his veins. "Please don't assume you do just because we've shared two kisses."

Griffin smiled down at her, unable to resist when the room was getting hotter and beginning to spin around them. Not when she was staring back up at him with eyes he longed to lose himself in.

"Three."

"Three?"

"Three kisses." He dipped his head to brush his lips against hers.

She made a soft sound of surprise at the back of her throat that quickly dissolved into a moan of pleasure. She wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kiss, teasing him with her darting tongue until he crushed her against his chest. He filled his senses with the way she felt, tasted, smelled, intent on imprinting her impression on him.

"I think," she gasped, breathless as he moved his lips from her mouth to the curve of her jaw and then the delicate skin of her throat. "You were jealous of Jean."

He lifted his eyes with a smile. "Jealous?" he repeated. "Perhaps a little."

Moving her toward the bed until her back came in contact with the wooden bedpost, he continued his assault on her mouth while he allowed his hands to explore. Starting with her shoulders, he slid trembling fingers down her sides, just grazing the curve of her breasts.

Ignoring her gasp of surprise, he trailed them down her waist to her hips. Once there, he grasped the smooth curve and pulled her up closer against him so she would be certain how much he wanted her.

A second gasp was Audrey's response as her thigh came in contact with something hard beneath Griffin's breeches. She knew from her conversations with Hannah that this was the proof of a man's desire. The feel of it startled, but also intrigued her.

Though her mother hadn't had 'the wedding night talk' with her, Audrey did have an idea about how the joining between a man and woman worked. She'd always considered the sex act to be a bit strange, but the way Griffin made her feel... If making love to him would leave her even a fraction as breathless and hot as she felt at the moment, perhaps it wasn't something she'd mind experiencing.

Griffin's hands came up to wrap around the bedpost behind her, trapping her in his embrace, though she felt no need to escape. In fact, she welcomed his touch. It was like living a dream.

With his arms up, she could see every line and contour of his chest straining against his white cotton shirt. He was broad, proportioned just right for his muscular shoulders and long legs. With trembling hands, she unlaced her fingers from behind his head and slowly repeated his earlier action, dragging the digits down his chest. The muscles bunched beneath her touch, tightening as his pupils dilated with desire.

"Oh, Griffin," she sighed, leaning up to kiss him again. But instead of returning her kiss, he suddenly stiffened, backing away from her a step as he shook his head.

"I'm going to stop now." His voice was gentle as he released the bedpost to take her hands in his.

"Why?" Confused tears stung her eyes as she realized she was to be rejected yet again.

"Because if I don't now, I won't be able to." He touched her cheek with the back of his hand.

She closed her eyes at the gentle caress, her desire flaming once more. "What if I don't want you to stop?"

His jagged breath made her eyes fly open and she watched as he took another step away.

"You think you don't now, but later you'd hate me. And I would hate myself."

She turned her head as the heat of desire turned to humiliation. "I understand."

Yes, she understood perfectly. All this kissing and desire was some kind of reaction to six months of loneliness. He didn't want her, he wanted a warm body in his bed. And when he thought of the consequences to that body being hers, he backed away.

"I don't think you do understand."

An awkward silence slammed between them like a steel door. Audrey fidgeted in her spot for a moment, trying to regain some of the confidence the past five years had given her. If only she could change the subject, perhaps she would remember how strong that time had made her.

"How did the dinner go then?" The slight tremor in her voice made her wince.

Ducking his head, Griffin shrugged one shoulder, evidence that he was as uncomfortable with their current situation as she was. "It went well enough. Ellison was his usual preening self, but he didn't reveal anything of use to your case."

"And where is Noah?" she asked as she slowly edged away from the bed toward the door. When she'd been angry, going into Griffin's room hadn't seemed like an outrageous thing to do. Once he started touching her, she hadn't cared where they were as long as he was holding her. But now, rejected and embarrassed, she realized just how compromised she was.

Still, she couldn't help but peer around the room, curious about Griffin's private life. The chamber was strangely sparse, the only ornate piece of furniture was the large four-poster bed facing the fire. The rest of the pieces were plain and small, almost as if they didn't fit in the enormous room. A door led off to her right and another to her left. One probably led to Griffin's sitting room or study and the other to Luci's bedroom.

With a shiver, Audrey turned her face down to stare at the wood flooring. The last thing she wanted to do was think of Luci's bed, Luci's room, Luci's life in this house.



"Noah went off to put a bit of pressure on a lovely widow who he thought might have some information,"

Griffin answered with a flash of a grin that brought her back to reality.

"Oh, good Lord," Audrey laughed as the tension eased out of her body at her brother's latest, predictable antics. "He never misses an opportunity, does he?"

Griffin frowned. "Did your brother often leave you alone on missions?"

She smiled sadly. "I suppose he did it often enough over the years. I expected it, for there were places only he could go. I always had Hannah to protect me and keep me company."

"Yes, but you must have been lonely just the same."

Griffin finally took her silent cues and opened the bedroom door to motion for her to step out. She followed his lead, leaving the masculine place where she'd nearly begged him to take her innocence and entering the bland hallway where they could both pretend nothing had happened between them. Though she should have felt relief, Audrey couldn't help but take a backwards glance at Griffin's room before allowing him to take her to the library down the hall.

"I suppose I was lonely from time to time. But I knew my role," she answered as she settled into a leather chair by the fire and watched Griffin pour himself a snifter of port.

When he offered her a glass, she nodded.

"What do you mean, you knew your role?" Griffin took the chair beside her as he handed her the glass.

Slowly she sipped the wine, letting its rich, heady flavor fill her senses as she contemplated the question.

"Everyone has a role to play in life," she began. "Right now you're playing Lord of the keep, are you not? The great Viscount Berenger, future Earl of Ashton? Once upon a time you dreamed of other roles. I remember privateer and war hero were two of your favorites."

Griffin gave her a half grin. "I'm surprised you remember those children's games."

"I remember everything."

He didn't answer, though his face tightened at her honest answer. For a moment she wished she could take the words back, but realized it would be pointless. Griffin obviously knew what a ninny she'd once been and what a silly girl she still was.

She struggled to continue her explanation. "A-at any rate, what Noah and I do is only an exaggerated playing of those roles. Noah plays the rake. He has enough power and money to influence those around him, but is allowed into the seedy underbelly of society if he chooses to play out his vices there." She grinned. "And I'm sorry to say he relishes the role."

Griffin laughed as the tension around his eyes bled away. "I imagine he does."

"I believe Hannah's role is the most interesting," she continued. "She isn't only my protector and maid, but her past allows her to do things most women would never dream of."

"Her past?" He cocked his head with interest while he sipped his port.

"Hannah was once..." she paused, searching for a genteel word for her maid's former profession. "She was a... well, prostitute is the best word for it."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Hannah?"

"You wouldn't know it to look at her now, would you?" Audrey said with a nod. "Noah found her God knows how and God knows where. I don't ask and they don't tell me. She left that life to join us. However, knowing the ins and outs of that world has come in handy to us many a time."

"What do you think of Hannah's former life?"

Griffin's question took her aback for a moment.

"Hannah frightened me when I first met her," she admitted with a blush. "I'd always been sheltered and taught that a woman who sold herself was the lowest person one could meet. But Hannah was so kind. I imagine her story was one of many young women. She was thrust into that life by circumstance. I cannot judge her when I was raised in a fancy house with everything I could ever desire. I never knew her kind of desperation."

She watched Griffin closely for his reaction. Most men of the *ton* saw prostitutes and mistresses as simply another way to relieve their male needs. They rarely looked on them as human beings. Many of the gentlemen she knew would have recoiled in horror if she'd implied that a woman in that position was worthy

or good.

He simply smiled at her.

"You've matured so much in five years." His voice grew bitter when he continued, "A woman with Hannah's past can be the most caring and decent woman, while one respected by society can be a haridan and a fraud."

At his harsh tone, Audrey leaned closer. The brief anger and betrayal that had clouded his eyes faded in an instant.

"So what is your role in the masquerade?" he asked as he cleared his throat.

"My role," she answered with a small sigh. "Is that of the lady. It's the most boring of the bunch."

He let out a short burst of laughter. "Why?"

"I wear the beautiful gowns and the elaborate hairstyles, but I cannot ever do anything dangerous. I'm simply there to listen and learn what I can from the gossip of the aristocracy. You'd be amazed what people will say when they've had a few drinks and enough turns around the dance floor to make their heads spin." She shrugged a shoulder. "No one feels they have to respect me, though. I'm only the bait for the traps my brother lays."

"Isn't it better that way?" he asked. Though his tone was nonchalant, she didn't miss the way his hands gripped his glass even tighter. "You're out of danger then."

She rolled her eyes. "I *am* capable of doing more. I can shoot, in fact Noah says I'm good with a pistol."

Griffin's nostrils flared and his face paled. "I'm sure you are, but the thought of you in the middle of a gun fight..."

He trailed off as he finished his drink in one gulp.

"Why do you assume I wouldn't come out the victor in such a situation?"

The one thing she longed for most was respect for her independence and capabilities. Though Noah allowed her into his world, he'd always kept her on the fringes. In fact, the case with Ellison was the closest she'd ever come to real danger. Now she desperately wanted Griffin, of all people, to recognize that she was competent enough to take care of herself.

His frown lengthened. "I'm sure you believe you could manage it, but..."

He stopped as he met her eyes, allowing her a glimpse of all the concern mirrored there. While it gave her a thrill that he cared enough for her to worry over her safety, she hated that he lumped her into a 'helpless female' category with everyone else.

"I could manage." Rising from the chair, she walked to the fireplace. As she turned, she crossed her arms in a challenging stance.

"Well, with that look of pure venom in your eyes, I have a tendency to believe you." He laughed as he stood up to come to her side. "Could we call a truce on this issue, Audrey?"

"I suppose," she conceded.

She was surprised when he reached out to take her hand. He drew it to his lips gently, burning the delicate skin on her fingers as if she'd put her hand in the fire. Why did he push her away only to draw her back to him half an hour later?

"I'm sorry," he said, as if he'd read her thoughts. His voice was husky as he released her. "I shouldn't keep doing that."

"Why do you?" Her voice trembled as she drew the hand he'd kissed up to her chest.

"I don't know." He backed away as he ran his fingers through his thick hair. "I keep telling myself I'm a fool for wanting you. That it can only lead to problems for us both, but then I get near you and..."

Trailing off, he uttered a soft curse. "I apologize again, Audrey. I shouldn't speak so freely about such things."

Her heart slammed against her rib cage. "Don't. I'd rather you be honest with me than to lie and treat me like some fragile dove."

A small smile lifted one corner of his lips. "I would never insult you by treating you as such. But I shouldn't send you mixed messages either."

She frowned. "What do you suggest?"

"Perhaps we should try to stay away from each other," he said with a quick sigh. "Though we'll be forced together at events, there is no reason why we should be alone."

"I see." She hoped her tone was noncommittal and didn't reflect her disappointment. "If that's what you want."

He took a few brisk steps toward the door. "It isn't what I want, Audrey. But I think it's what both of us need."

With that, he was gone, disappearing out the door. When she heard him enter his chamber, she covered her eyes with her hands. What had begun as such a glorious night had ended in bitter disappointment. Though she should have been familiar with such emotions, they hurt.

Taking her time, Audrey went to her own chamber. When Hannah appeared in the doorway from her room, Audrey smiled.

"I thought you were never coming to bed," Hannah grumbled, her eyes heavy from dozing.

"I needed to speak to Griffin about tonight." In the mirror, she saw her friend's eyebrows shoot up. "Don't fret. Nothing happened."

It was a partial lie, but there was no reason to go into the whole exchange. As Hannah came and helped her take down the rest of her hair, Audrey watched her in the mirror. The only person who could help her understand men was the woman she'd come to trust over the years. Not only did she have experience, but Audrey knew she would keep any secret as long as it didn't endanger their mission.

With a sigh, she said, "Hannah, I wanted to ask you a question."

"What is it, love?" the older woman asked, putting another hairpin between her lips as she worked Audrey's curls down over her shoulders.

"Well..." Heat rushed to her limbs. "I wanted to know exactly what pleases a man. What makes him want to go to bed with one woman over another? And what one can do to make him stay?"

Hannah coughed and sent pins flying across the room. "You're *certain* nothing happened between you and Lord Berenger, now?"

Audrey's face flushed darker, but she nodded nonetheless. "Nothing that I can't manage." She questioned if that statement was truthful. She certainly couldn't say she'd 'managed' anything tonight. "But he confuses me and I want to know why he behaves the way he does."

"Well, *that* is a whole other subject." Hannah laughed, sitting down on Audrey's dressing bench beside her. "I'll do my best to explain the mysteries between a man and a woman, but I'm not sure you'll like the answers."

An image of Griffin's mouth grinding against hers as their bodies moved together flashed into her mind. With a shiver she said, "I might just like the answers fine."

## Chapter Nine

Audrey gave Noah a quick glance. Her brother's normally handsome, smiling face was darkened with a deep frown, his brows furrowed until they almost hid his eyes. Though he hardly ever showed this darker side, Audrey knew full well what it meant. He was worried and considering forbidding her to continue with their plan. But that was impossible.

"You worry too much," she reassured him with a smile that was brighter than she felt. "What can he do to me in Griffin home?"

"More than I would like to imagine." Noah folded his arms with a grunt. "After all, Ellison virtually assaulted you in a carriage right outside my bloody window."

"Don't swear," she admonished with a quick grin.

Noah couldn't help but return the smile as he shook his head. "Don't take the man too lightly, Audrey. It's dangerous to underestimate your enemy."

She nodded, but barely heard his words of wisdom as she watched Ellison stroll from his home down the street. His stride was purposeful as he reached Griffin's door. Stepping back from the curtain so he wouldn't see her watching him, Audrey turned back to her brother.

"He's here."

"Well, at least wait until the maid announces him unless you want him convinced that you *liked* his wretched kiss." Noah scowled. "You never could wait for the proper moment before you acted."

"And you always wait too long," she countered with a brief pat on his arm as she passed by him. "That's why we work so well together."

Glancing in the mirror to check her hair one last time, Audrey saw she was rewarded by a grin from her sibling. She returned the smile as she pinched her cheeks and fluffed the curls around her face.

"So where is our host?" she asked, hoping her tone was unconcerned. "I haven't seen him for a few days."

It seemed Griffin was making good on his vow to stay away from her, for he hadn't even eaten with Audrey and Noah since the evening when he'd kissed her nearly senseless. An evening that had haunted her every moment since.

"I'm not sure," Noah said with a shrug. "He's been acting very strange of late. Perhaps it's returning to this house that makes him behave this way."

With a frown, Audrey turned from the mirror. "Why would this house make him act differently? I would think coming home would be a good influence on him."

Her brother's answering frown was deep and there was a long silence before he spoke again.

"This place doesn't hold only happy memories for Griffin. In fact, he might not have come here again if I hadn't asked him." He sighed. "Perhaps I did him a harm by forcing him back to London life."

"But Luci died in the country," Audrey said. "I would think anything that happened in London

couldn't compare to that blow."

"There are worse things than the death of a loved one, Audrey," he answered softly.

"Such as?"

She couldn't think of anything worse than losing a wife so young and under such tragic circumstances.

"Betrayal," her brother offered.

Before she could ask him to explain his cryptic remark, the door to the sitting room swung open and a maid appeared. Dropping a short curtsy for them, she said, "I beg your pardon, but Mr. Ellison is inquiring for you, Lady Audrey. He says he's expected."

Audrey covered her frustration with a smile. "Tell him I'll join him momentarily."

The maid nodded and left them alone again.

"Well, good luck. I'll be down to 'save' you in a short time," Noah said.

"My dear brother," she answered with a shake of her head. "When will you and Griffin Berenger and the rest of the world learn I don't need saving?"

With that, she turned on her heel and sailed out of the room with her head held high.

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"Audrey," Douglas Ellison said as he rose from his seat to hold out his hands to her. "I'm so glad you invited me this afternoon."

Holding back a grimace, Audrey put her hands into his and forced a smile to her face. "I haven't seen you since that night at the opera. I must admit I missed your most pleasant company."

"As I've missed yours." Ellison motioned to the place beside him on the ottoman.

Audrey hesitated, but then gave in to his request. She had to pick her battles if she was to defeat Douglas Ellison. No doubt he would be offended and suspicious if she avoided him physically. After all, he was supposed to be courting her.

God help her, she was supposed to behave as if she welcomed that courtship. Briefly closing her eyes, she tried to think of what made her body react with pleasure, not distaste. The only thing that came to mind was Griffin.

Griffin running his hands up and down her body. Holding her mouth captive with his own. Making her ache with longing from her head to her toes. And Griffin doing the things to her that Hannah had described a few days before. Interesting, titillating things that made her toes curl when she dared to think of them for more than a brief moment.

As she smoothed her skirts and nodded to the maid who poured their tea, Audrey tried to clear thoughts of Griffin from her head. He was only a distraction, a danger to the game of cat and mouse she was playing.

After the maid had gone, Douglas turned to her with gleaming gray eyes. "I must admit after our last encounter, I wondered if you would ever speak to me again."

"You mean because you were so forward?" She somehow managed to keep her tone light and flirtatious.

"Yes." He edged closer to her on the narrow couch and she just barely reined in her desire to move away an equal distance.

"I don't condone that kind of behavior in my suitors, but I do understand how one could get swept away in a moment. After all, we'd just experienced the romance of the opera." She nearly choked on her own insincerity.

"I'm glad you understand," Ellison replied with a sigh of relief. "It's difficult for a man of a certain age and disposition not to be driven to distraction by a beautiful woman such as you."

With a pause, she calculated her next move. She needed to say or do something that would encourage Ellison to trust her, but wouldn't give him the impression she wanted him to touch her again.

"Thank you, Douglas, er Mr. Ellison."

A thin smile turned up his lips. "Of course you must call me by my given name, Audrey. Our friendship has progressed to a point where that kind of familiarity might be expected."

Blushing, she shook her head and dropped her eyes. "Oh, Mr. Ellison, I'm not sure."

"If you're uncomfortable with calling me by my name in public, perhaps you'll only do so in private," he

offered with a light touch of his hand on hers. It was cold and slightly clammy, reminding Audrey of a fish at market.

"Hmmm." She pretended to ponder the inappropriate request. "Do you mean like a secret between us, Douglas?"

One corner of his lips bobbed up in triumph. "Yes, exactly."

She batted her eyes just a flutter and looked at him with a slow smile. "Very well. I trust you enough to share a secret with you. I hope you feel the same way about me."

"I do, Audrey." Now his voice was deathly serious and he leaned forward a fraction, his eyelids heavy with what she now recognized as desire.

With a shiver, she stood up. "Now, Douglas, I see that same gleam in your eye that was there the night of the opera. I hope you understand if I don't include passionate embraces as part of our relationship... at least not yet. A lady must protect her reputation, you know."

With a purse of his lips, he sank back against the ottoman. "Of course. Your reputation was part of what drew me to you."

"W-Well," she stammered. "I'm glad I meet with your approval then. And that you understand my position."

"Of course," he said with a smooth smile she didn't trust for even a moment. For the first time, she realized he would take what he wanted if it wouldn't be given freely. He was only biding his time to have her.

She shifted uncomfortably. "It has been more than quarter of an hour."

For once she was happy for the societal rules that said a man shouldn't call for very long. Despite not learning anything useful about Ellison, she wanted him far away from her.

One of his eyebrows arched at her not-so-delicate hint and his eyes hardened. "Are you counting the minutes so closely, Audrey?"

With a quick internal curse, she returned to her seat. "Of course not," she insisted. "But my brother and Lord Berenger may be. They're both very protective of me."

At that, Ellison straightened up and his nostrils flared. "Yes, I've noticed Lord Berenger's 'protective' nature toward you at the opera. Are you certain you can trust *him*, my dear?"

"Whatever do you mean?" She felt a ridiculous impulse to defend Griffin. "Lord Berenger poses no threat to me."

"I wonder. After all, the man should be coming out of mourning soon and here you are, right down the hallway from him." Ellison's eyes narrowed. "You would be easy enough prey."

Audrey gave an affronted frown. "Mr. Ellison, do you really think I would allow you to court me while I gave Lord Berenger some kind of liberties? Is *that* the kind of woman you take me for?"

Ellison shook his head. "No, of course not. As I said a moment ago, I have every faith in you. It is Berenger I don't trust."

She said nothing, but turned her face so she wouldn't reveal too much of the truth.

Ellison leaned closer. "Why don't you and your brother consider leaving this house and coming to stay with me at my estate? You could enjoy my hospitality without bearing any of Berenger's unwanted attentions."

Audrey barely held back a laugh of contempt. Little did the bastard know that it was his attentions that gave her nightmares.

"Douglas..."

"Consider it," he interrupted with an intense stare deep into her eyes. "Say you'll consider it and I will believe you don't wish Berenger to court you."

Her blood ran cold. Ellison was asking her to choose between the two men. If she didn't promise to mull over his dangerous offer, he would take it that she was picking Griffin.

"I will think about it," she stammered. "Though it will ultimately be up to my brother where we stay in London."

With a nod, he said, "I was hoping you would make the right decision. Now I should return to my work. Good afternoon, Audrey."

He grasped her hand and raised it to his lips, pressing an excessively wet kiss on her fingertips.

"Good afternoon," she repeated with a thin smile.

As soon as Ellison had departed the house, Griffin entered the sitting room in three long strides. "Why do you insist on putting yourself in danger?"

Audrey spun around from the mantel with wide, blue eyes.

"You startled me."

She placed a hand on her heart and drew his gaze to the soft curves of her body. The woman was a damned distraction, and the way she made him feel when she touched him could only bring him trouble in the end.

"What should startle you is the way Ellison is reeling you in like a fish on a hook." He waved his hand in the general direction of the blackguard's home. "Why don't you just strip down and wait for him in his bed, Audrey? Or better yet, load up a gun and let him fire away once he discovers you've been playing games with him?"

Her face darkened a shade, but he could see the hurt in her eyes as well as the anger at his sharp comment.

"Griffin," she whispered. "That's enough."

"I agree. That is enough. You just promised a murderer and a traitor that you would consider moving yourself into his home and out of the modicum of protection you enjoy in these walls."

"You were eavesdropping on my investigation?" she asked, her mouth dropping open in disbelief.

"No, I was passing by the door when you made your ridiculous vow." He tilted his head. "And you're avoiding the subject."

"There wasn't any choice." She let out a long sigh. "Ellison believes you're preying on my virtue. I told him I would *consider* moving to his home."

"And you see no harm in that?"

"It's a ruse to keep the man happy for the time being. A few words from Noah and it will all be avoided." She turned away, but not before Griffin saw how tired she looked.

He bit back a heated retort and sat down in the closest chair. He hated to make her look so sad and defeated, but she didn't seem to grasp the danger of what she was doing.

"You and your brother are so nonchalant about this operation," he said. "But I cannot watch you march into the lion's den with no armor, Audrey."

She turned slowly to face him, her skin pale. She took a small step in his direction. "What are you saying?"

"Obviously my thoughts on this subject won't be heeded, so I'm leaving tonight."

"O-Our cover..." Audrey said. "Our case..."

"Don't you see, I don't give a damn about your case any longer." Griffin wanted to grab her and shake some sense into her. Wanted to press his lips against hers and show her just how serious he was. "I *can't* watch you harm yourself."

"But if you go, we'll have no chance to catch Ellison. Not only that, but he might even guess that my relationship with him was all a ruse. I'll be in more danger then." Her hand stirred at her side as if she wanted to take his.

Griffin wished she would. He wanted her to choose him over her case. Not that he would know what to do if she did. He still had no future to offer her.

"I want to protect you."

"Help me protect our country and our Prince." Her body swayed in his direction before she snapped back. "And that will protect me. Together we can beat Ellison."

"Together."

His body relaxed at that thought. He pushed to his feet and moved toward her. She tracked his every step and her breath shortened when he reached her. Against his better judgment and all the promises he'd made, he brought his hand down to brush her cheek gently. Her skin was soft and smooth beneath his rough fingertips, like the finest satin.

Audrey gave a soft sigh, almost a whimper, and closed her eyes for a brief moment to lean into his hand.

"Audrey!"

Griffin turned to see Noah standing in the doorway, both hands on his hips and eyes dark with anger. Breaking away from her, Griffin stifled a groan at his own stupidity. Here he'd promised not to touch Audrey again and he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Noah." She took a few steps toward her brother, her face darkening and her eyes wide. "Please."

"I'd like to speak with you for a moment," Noah said, looking evenly at Griffin though he spoke to Audrey.

Griffin held the gaze without blinking, feeling part foolish he'd betrayed his friend, and part defiant. Audrey had a right to choose whom she wanted in her life, Noah be damned.

Throwing a quick glance over her shoulder, Audrey met his eyes and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

He smiled at her briefly, then watched her walk away after her brother. He wondered how he'd ever manage to let her leave permanently.

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"What the hell are you doing, Audrey?" Noah shut his door behind them and gave her an exasperated stare.

"Nothing," she said, though her emotions belied her statement. Her cheek still tingled where Griffin had touched her, and her heart throbbed when she thought of the tender look in his eyes.

"It can lead to nothing, of that I'm sure." Noah walked to his window to lean against the glass. He crossed his arms and looked at her expectantly. "At least tell me *why* you're doing this?"

Fidgeting against his pointed stare, she snapped, "I'm doing my job, Noah, nothing more. Well, my job and trying to stay out of Griffin's way just as he asked me."

"Ha!" Noah shook his head. "If anything you're settling yourself *into* Griffin's life, not removing yourself from it."

Her cheeks flamed. "How?"

Somehow she'd hoped her growing feelings for Griffin weren't as clear to everyone else as they were to her. She'd tried to avoid doing things that would draw attention to her heart, but sometimes they were inevitable. Like that moment in the drawing room. How was she to know Noah was watching?

"I see you studying Griffin. Whenever he comes into a room, you can't keep your eyes off him." Her brother arched an eyebrow.

Giving an exasperated sigh, she said nothing. There was no use trying to lie to her shrewd brother.

"When you talk to him, you touch his arm, you lean in close to him. I don't think you even realize you do it," he continued. "My God, you act like you might have a future with the man."

She winced at his harsh words, though she knew he meant well and was right in his assessment. Despite her better judgment, she was finding herself drawn into Griffin's existence each day.

"Do you really want to set yourself up for the kind of heartache you experienced five years ago? Griffin is attracted to you, he may even care for you, but after everything he's been through, he'll never be able to give you what you want. Or what you need." Noah's expression relaxed and he looked at her with the pure love of a concerned brother. "Do you want to go through that hurt again?"

"No," she whispered. "Of course not."

Noah straightened up and opened his arms. Though his words made her prickle with defensiveness, she walked into his embrace and allowed him to hug her.

"I adore you, Audrey. I don't want to see you in pain." His voice was muffled in her hair.

"I realize you mean well," she conceded. "But I'm handling this as best I can. Griffin and I have already promised to stay away from each other. Today was an unfortunate slip, but I'll be more careful in the future."

Noah sighed as he released her. "Audrey, if I thought for a moment you could have a real future with Griffin Berenger, I would bless your relationship. After all, the man is my best friend."

"But you don't think I could." Her tone was flat as she crossed back to the door and fiddled with the knob.

Noah shook his head. "Not because of you, Audrey. Grif has been through a lot in the past few years. I don't think he would allow himself to love you, and after everything you've been through you deserve nothing less than love."

Audrey sighed, turning the knob and opening the door. Before she left, she turned back.

"I've always wanted love, but perhaps it doesn't exist after all. Perhaps it's just a silly dream that no one



really realizes. And if that's true, then perhaps I've been fooling myself all along."

"Audrey..." Noah called after her, but she ignored him as she hurried down the hallway into her chamber. Hannah looked up from a book as she entered, but she dropped it at her friend's face.

"What is it?" She rose to her feet with wide eyes and an expectant frown.

"Nothing." Audrey fought back tears as she flopped onto a chair.

"It isn't nothing," Hannah said.

"It can be no more than nothing," Audrey snapped before she slammed her palm down on her dressing table and stared at herself in the mirror.

Most of the time when she gazed into the looking glass, Audrey still saw the little girl she'd once been. The awkward one who couldn't dance to save her life, whose hair never quite stayed in place, who had freckles where all the other girls had creamy skin. Sometimes, though, when she was honest with herself, she could see the changes that had come over her.

With the help of her brother and Hannah, she had transformed into a woman. And while she wouldn't go so far as to say she was a great beauty, she was pleasant enough to look at. Her red hair now took the complicated styles of the day, curling around her face in an almost attractive fashion.

She'd learned to dance from her brother, who'd taken the time and injury involved in teaching her the grace to glide across a floor rather than stampede. With the help of lemon juice and fantastic hats, her freckles had faded away.

With a bitter laugh, she turned away from her reflection. She had somehow become everything she had once wanted to be, but it still wasn't enough. The one man she had wanted for what seemed like her whole life still didn't want her. Or if he wanted her, he certainly didn't want to keep her.

Hannah touched her hand. "Please, tell me what's wrong."

"I already told you, it's nothing, Hannah," Audrey said as she moved away to stare out the window at Griffin's gardens and beyond over the city. "I just remembered that life isn't always fair, no matter how much you change."

## Chapter Ten

Griffin looked out the window of the carriage as it passed into Hyde Park. Over ten thousand troops milled about the park grounds, ready to begin the reenactment of the battle of Trafalgar on the Serpentine. Mixed in were thousands upon thousands of people of all rank and age, from the poorest peasant to the Prince Regent himself.

"This looks to be the perfect place to kill a King," he muttered.

Audrey glanced up from the papers in her hand and out the window, taking in what Griffin had already seen. "Yes." She glanced first at him then her brother and Hannah. "Or even a Prince or two."

Griffin smiled at her remark though the worry he had felt from the very beginning of this entire mess was growing daily. Not only was Audrey pursuing a dangerous traitor, but a man who Griffin was certain would accost her if he got the chance. That made Ellison more treacherous and put Audrey in even more peril. Even though the brother and sister team wanted to deny it, the fact that Ellison was pushing her to leave Griffin's house, to distance herself from any man who was a friend, was proof that the traitor was growing bolder. He felt he had a claim to protect in Audrey.

Noah pulled the curtain back from his window a fraction as the carriage stopped in a line of traffic. "There will be guns going off and explosions starting the moment the reenactment begins at eight. All manner of people will be running around with weaponry, be it working or not. We all must be on our guard."

Audrey nodded but her gaze was focused on Griffin. He shifted in his seat as her eyes drifted away. Since their encounter in the sitting room a few afternoons before, he'd been increasingly uncomfortable around her. It was becoming evident that being her friend was much more difficult than he'd thought. Especially when all he wanted to do was touch her, kiss her, make her his in every primal way he could.

"Oh, Lord," Audrey sighed as she covered her eyes.

"What is it?" Hannah craned her neck to see over Audrey's head and out the window.

She rolled her eyes in Griffin and Noah's direction. "Ellison. He's standing waiting by where all the carriages are parking now. I'm not going to get a moment's peace from that man."

"And that's exactly what we want, dear sister," Noah said with a chuckle. "So chin up, smile, and pretend you can't get enough of him."

Griffin stifled a laugh as Audrey gave her brother a withering glare. How he'd hate to be on the receiving end of such a look.

"It's so very simple for you to mock," she muttered. "You get the easy job every time. *I'm* the one who has to spend my time with disgusting latches."

Noah looked playfully affronted. "I've had to sacrifice my evenings for the job from time to time."

Griffin bit back a bark of laughter that made both siblings and Hannah turn to look at him in surprise. "You told me those 'sacrifices' have been most pleasant on the whole."

"That's right," Hannah chimed in with a shake of her dark curls. "You've never complained in all the

years I've known you."

Noah put a finger to his lips. "Hush you two, I'm trying to make Audrey feel better."

With a voice dripping with sarcasm, Audrey shook her head. "Thank you so very much, my *dearest* brother."

"I'm your only brother."

"Yes. Aren't I lucky?" Audrey said with a smile.

Noah laughed as the carriage stopped a second time. It rocked with the movement of the servants climbing down to aid their departure.

As Griffin watched, the Audrey he was so drawn to faded away. The laughter and playfulness that was such a part of her day-to-day existence vanished, replaced by a much more jaded, disinterested woman that the *ton* and Douglas Ellison could do nothing but adore. She was everything they worshiped, and everything Griffin shied away from. It was stunning how she slipped so easily into character.

Just like Luci.

Only instead of changing her personality for her own gain, Audrey did it for her country. Though it did little to improve his mood, at least Griffin could understand and respect her motives.

The carriage door swung open and the footman held out his arm. With a fleeting smile for both Griffin and her brother, Audrey took the man's assistance and stepped from the carriage. Her eyes crinkled as the bright, late afternoon sun hit her face even though her wide rimmed bonnet offered her some protection. Following behind was Hannah, who wasted no time in putting on the demure mask of a lady's maid.

As Griffin stepped to the packed down grass, he found himself immediately searching the throng of people for Douglas Ellison. If there was anything he had learned over the years, it was to keep his enemies close.

At his side, Audrey fanned herself, looking properly bored even while her blue eyes scanned the crowd with as much focus as his own. It seemed she, too, could only think of Ellison and what her next move would be to bring the man down.

"Lady Audrey!" came a voice from over the crowd.

With a muted sigh, she turned toward the source of the sound and smiled while she raised her hand to wave. "Mr. Ellison! We're over here!"

Nudging his way through a group of gentlemen, Ellison burst from the pack. He gave a broad grin, his gray eyes roving over Audrey in one possessive, lurid motion. It took every ounce of Griffin's strength not to grab the man and pummel him to a pulp. The desire was even more powerful than it had been the night of the opera. Since then Griffin had tasted Audrey's lips, felt her soft skin against his own. He was loath to share her, especially with a bastard like Douglas Ellison.

Ellison took both her hands in an inappropriate gesture of familiarity. "Audrey, how nice to see you once again. I've missed your company."

"Oh, Douglas," Audrey replied with a false giggle before her eyes slid to Griffin and her brother with counterfeit embarrassment. "I mean, *Mr. Ellison*... it's only been a few days since we last saw each other. Surely you couldn't have even noticed my absence in such a short period of time."

While Griffin seethed, Ellison lifted Audrey's gloved hand to his lips and smiled. "You'd be surprised."

Noah cleared his throat as he stepped forward. Griffin could see his friend took no more pleasure than he did in the way Ellison was manhandling Audrey. "Mr. Ellison."

Ellison released Noah's sister with reluctance and shook the other man's hand. "Lord Lockhart, good to see you. Fine weather, eh?"

"Yes," Noah replied in a dry tone.

Ellison's eyes went passed Noah to focus on Griffin. He wasn't surprised when the jovial friendliness on the man's face vanished. What did surprise him was that Ellison didn't display the general jealousy of a possessive man, but the specific hatred of Griffin. Yet he was certain he hadn't revealed any of his conflicted feelings for Audrey in front of Ellison.

Had he?

"Viscount Berenger." Ellison's tone was cold. "Good to see you here. Having Audrey and her brother in your home seems to be bringing you out of your shell of late. I don't think I've seen you at so many events in all the three years we've been neighbors."

Griffin forced himself to take a civil tone. "A good host mustn't neglect his guests. I admit this sort of thing isn't my forte, but Noah and Audrey were set on attending all the events of the Jubilee."

"You're putting on a good face," Ellison said. "But perhaps your visitors are too wearing on you so soon after your *dear* wife's untimely passing. Might you consider giving Audrey and Lord Lockhart up to my care?"

Every hair on the back of Griffin's neck stood up as he clenched his right hand into a tight fist. All he'd been able to think about during the past few days was Ellison and his offer... or threat... to take Audrey away from him.

"I assure you that having Noah and Audrey in my home is nothing but a pleasure," he managed to choke out with difficulty.

"Hmmm..." Ellison let his gaze slip over to Audrey. "A pleasure I'd love to be all mine."

Before Griffin could bite out a retort or punch the man in the face, he felt Noah grasp the back of his tailored jacket and twist the material in his hand to hold him in place.

"It's a generous offer, Ellison," Noah said with a forced smile. "But Audrey and I are quite comfortable where we are."

Griffin watched as Audrey pretended to be disappointed for Ellison's sake. God, how he hated her duplicity and the ease with which she lied. Even if it was for King and Country, he could hardly bear to watch it, or face the sour memories it stirred.

Griffin pulled from Noah's hold and straightened his coat. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to have a look around."

With that, he turned on his heel and stalked into the crowd, wishing he could dispose of Douglas Ellison right then and there. And hating that it was Audrey's safety which kept him from doing just that.

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Audrey watched Griffin disappear from view with a frown. How she wished she could follow him and offer him some kind of comfort. It troubled him that Ellison desired her. It troubled her, too, but the act was a necessary evil. If only Griffin understood... if only she could *make* him understand.

"Strange man, Berenger," Ellison said with a shrug. "Never have understood him."

"Lord Berenger is still in mourning," Audrey said softly, hoping her voice was free of the emotions she so strongly felt for Griffin. "It is natural for him to be so distant."

"Hmph." Ellison offered her his arm as Noah and Hannah followed close behind them. "It's been six months. He should be well past any sadness he may have felt at his wife's death. Especially considering her."

Behind them, Noah made a loud sound in the back of his throat. Both Audrey and Ellison turn to look at him. The expression in her brother's eyes was enough to make Audrey shiver. They were dilated with anger, dark as midnight. It was a look he rarely used, but it was effective.

"Mr. Ellison, please recall that my sister is an innocent lady and Griffin Berenger is a friend," he ground out, meeting Ellison's eyes and holding his gaze there.

Douglas looked away quickly, unable to match the intensity of her brother's stare. "Of course, Lord Lockhart. I apologize for my lack of thought."

Audrey had an urge to stomp her foot. For the past few weeks she heard innuendo about Griffin and Luci's marriage, but never gotten to the real truth. What was the secret that made Griffin so unhappy? Audrey had always assumed his marriage had been a harmonious one, but more and more she doubted that theory had been correct.

Ellison gave a smooth smile. "Your brother is correct and I apologize. We should speak of more pleasant topics. Such as today's events. Look over the crowd! There are our Prince and his guests now."

Audrey followed the sweeping motion of Ellison's hand and found herself looking into a raised box on the parameter of the park. Inside the Prince and several of his guests were chatting.

"I was under the impression you weren't overly fond of our esteemed monarch, Douglas," she whispered. "I'm surprised you show so much interest in him and his party today."

Ellison patted her hand as he let out a cold laugh. "You are observant, but how can one not be happy at an event such as this? It's bound to be the best show this city has seen in years."

Audrey's heart leapt in her throat and she tossed a glance back at her brother. From his position a few

steps behind them, Noah hadn't overheard their conversation, but had followed their stares to the Prince's box. Noah had a concerned frown on his face. Even Hannah held Audrey's stare for a long moment before dropping her gaze to the ground as was appropriate for the role she played.

"I hate to be rude," Noah said, stepping closer to the couple. "But I see an old friend, Lady Greene, across the lawn. I would be remiss if I didn't say hello to her. Will you entertain my sister for a moment, Ellison?"

The other man's eyes lit up at the chance he was being offered. "Of course, Lockhart."

"Thank you, I won't be long."

Audrey stifled a smile as her brother disappeared into the crowd. Lady Greene was a code term between the two of them. It meant Noah was off to find Lord Golding and give him a report on their situation. The fact he had decided to do so immediately made Audrey wonder if her brother felt the danger had escalated.

"Alone at last," Ellison said with a smile.

Audrey glanced in Hannah's direction. "Almost alone."

Though Ellison nodded as if he, too, were upset by the need for a chaperone, Audrey silently said a thank you for the societal norms that didn't allow her to be unaccompanied with the man beside her. She shuttered to think what he might attempt in a private setting.

As they walked through the park, Hannah forever trailing behind them at a respectable distance, Audrey looked around her. The grounds were packed with people of all rank and political disposition. Any one of them could be operating under Ellison. She searched desperately for a sign of his partners. Just one exchanged glance, one word out of place, and she could go to Noah with the evidence. But there was nothing and her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

The miniatures of the ships involved in the Battle of Trafalgar were already arranged on the river, ready for the reenactment that would surely entertain the drunken crowd. Of course once the true gaiety had begun, Audrey's job would be all the harder. As soon as the noisy festivities commenced, there would be confusion and Ellison or his men could easily make a move.

"Come my dear." Ellison gripped her arm a bit tighter as his gray eyes darkened. "Let's move closer, shall we?"

"Perhaps we should find a spot in the shade."

She pulled back against his grip. Suddenly she felt less protected by the crowd around them. Douglas looked positively gleeful and it was terrifying.

His grip gentled though he didn't release her. "We'll want to be close when the reenactment begins. The Prince has the best view on the field."

Though she searched for a reason to refuse, Audrey couldn't find one. Finally, she smiled. "Of course. We'll simply keep watch for my brother so he may join us later."

As she allowed Ellison to lead her toward the Prince and his party, she prayed Noah would find them and that they could put a stop to whatever the traitor had planned.

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"Where the hell have you been?"

Griffin turned from the barrel of ale he'd been standing beside to look at Noah. His friend gave a smile to soften the tone of his question.

"I could ask the same of you," Griffin replied.

"I had to take care of some business with Lord Golding and then I was looking for you." His friend's smile faded. "Grif, I understand your anger and your fear for Audrey's safety, but you must be more careful about how you behave around Ellison. Too many outbursts and the man might suspect something."

"He already suspects something." Griffin downed his ale with a grimace.

"What?" Noah asked. "I've heard nothing. What does he suspect?"

"Not what you think," Griffin hastened to say as he realized his friend thought he meant Ellison had guessed something about Audrey. "He thinks I'm a rival for your sister's affections. He doesn't feel the way he would with just any other man, but sees me as a true challenge. I don't know how he's come to this conclusion, but it was clear by the way he looked at me that he considers me an opponent."

Noah tilted his head to look at his friend in silence for a moment. "Are you?"

Griffin swallowed the remainder of his drink in one uncomfortable gulp. The brew stuck in his chest as he stared at his friend. "I beg your pardon?"

"Are you a rival for my sister's affection?" Noah repeated. His face revealed none of his emotions.

Griffin shut his eyes briefly, letting his senses be filled by the sounds and smells of the crowded park. He thought of Audrey and his entire body clenched with pleasure and pain and longing all at once.

"I would never hurt Audrey," he finally answered.

"That wasn't the question."

Griffin opened his eyes. He should have known Noah wouldn't be distracted by evasion. Unfortunately, he wasn't certain of his answer. He wanted Audrey. And wanted to protect her, but beyond that...

A great cheer from the crowd made both men look up. A group of soldiers passed through, their uniforms smart in the fading evening sun.

Noah looked at him again. "What I asked is if you're in any way serious about my sister. And don't tell me you're only interested in her friendship. I've seen the way you look at her and I know you two have exchanged at least one kiss. Those aren't the actions of a friend."

Dipping his head, Griffin examined the dusty ground beneath his feet where the grass had been smashed beyond repair.

"Noah, I don't know what to tell you about your sister and I. The fact is..."

Before he could finish his sentence, a loud bang came from behind the two. As both spun around, a large cheer went up from the gang of people around them.

"Is that the reenactment beginning?" Noah yelled over the din.

"It must be!" Griffin said in return. "It's close to eight. But that was awfully loud, wasn't it?"

"Very." The two men locked eyes and Griffin knew Noah was thinking the same thing he was. Where was Audrey and was she in danger?

"Let's go."

Griffin spun on his heel to hurry through the crowd. People automatically cleared out of his way, some calling out his name. How he managed to wave and smile at his old friends, he didn't know, but his hand came up naturally as he maneuvered through groups of people.

"I don't see her," Noah called out, straightening up so he could look over the crowd.

Another explosion rocked the park and several children screamed to his left. Griffin looked at them sharply. No one was hurt, in fact they seemed to be having a grand time.

"Damn it," he said with a shake his head. "Why in God's name did we leave her alone?"

Noah's response was a warning. "Griffin."

He ignored the warning. "Let's split up. You go north toward the refreshment area, I'll head toward the Prince's box. We'll meet back by that tree over there in ten minutes if neither of us has found her."

Griffin motioned to a tall elm tree a few feet away. Its branches were heavy with lads who had scrambled into the bows for a better view of the festivities.

"Very well," Noah said, "But watch yourself if you find them. Audrey is still doing a job, you know."

As Noah vanished into the milling crowd, Griffin sighed. "I know. How could I not?"

With a deep breath, he hurried toward the spot in the distance that was the Prince's box. Clamoring around people and half-empty crates of liquor in his pathway, Griffin scanned the crowd, looking for a glimpse of Audrey's yellow gown, or that ridiculous bonnet she wore with all the ribbons, or the flash of her auburn hair as she strolled around the park. But there was nothing, only thousands of people milling in a disorganized wave.

Just as he was about to give up and head back to the elm where he'd promise to meet Noah, Griffin saw what he'd been looking for. The crowd peeled back and Audrey stood on a slight knoll, her hand shading her eyes as she peered around the park. Her bonnet was somewhat crooked, cocked too far over one eye. Ellison was nowhere in sight, neither was Hannah.

With a soft sound of relief, Griffin hurried toward her, knocking against uniformed men and tipsy women in his urgent need to reach her, to touch her and make sure she was real and unharmed.

"Audrey!" he called out, but the noise around him muffled his voice.

She didn't seem to hear him as she continued to look around her with an expression of vexation on her face. With a scowl, she removed her bonnet and lowered her head to look at the messy knot in one of the

ribbons, just as an errant arrow whizzed by her skull.

## ***Chapter Eleven***

Audrey felt the arrow pass by her head rather than saw it. A great gush of wind lifted the tufts of curls around her face as the steel shot past, though when she raised her gloved hand, there was no blood on her cheek.

"Damn and blast," she muttered, surprised nearly being run through didn't cause her much upset. In fact, she felt rather exhilarated. The rush of her blood, her heart lodged in her throat, pounding out a staccato beat against her neck... fantastic!

Audrey scanned the crowd for where the arrow could have come from. There were several possibilities. To her right a group of men huddled together, one of them looking in her direction from time to time. On her other side, a lone gentleman shoved something under his coat. Even a group of young boys who looked distinctly guilty about something could have been to blame. Before she could find the culprit, two strong hands grabbed her arms and yanked her down from her little perch on the hill.

"Audrey!" Griffin said close to her ear. His voice was full of the fear she herself hadn't felt a moment before.

The sound of his voice and her sudden presence in his arms threw her off-guard. "Griffin?"

She turned toward him and was surprised at the look on his face. He still held one of her arms tightly, but he didn't move at all for a long moment, merely staring at her face as if he was afraid she would vanish if he moved or spoke.

"Griffin?" she repeated, her voice much softer this time.

The sound of her voice snapped him from whatever spell he was under, but instead of answering he turned on his heel and began dragging her across the park. Her bonnet flew out of her hands as she stumbled after him, barely maintaining her balance as he yanked her through the crowd toward the carriages.

"What are you doing?" she demanded with a quick glance around her.

The two of them were receiving strange looks from the crowd. The men had a knowing gleam in their eyes, while some of the women seemed scandalized.

"Stop it!" She practically had to run to keep up with him in the hopes it would look less like he was dragging her away. "Griffin, please!"

He ignored her, hauling her ever closer to the carriages a few hundred yards away. Like a man possessed, he guided her through the groups of people until he reached his coach. The driver looked down from the box in surprise. Audrey couldn't blame him. It should have been hours until their return.

"My lord?" The young man jumped down with a tilt of his head.

"Get us out of here," Griffin said through clenched teeth. "Now."

The man gave a smart bow. "Yes sir." Reaching up, he nudged the footman at the back of the carriage



none too gently. "Hey, you, open the door for his lordship."

"Never mind." Griffin yanked the door open himself and shoved Audrey inside. "Just take us home."

"It may take a while to get us out of this bottleneck, sir."

Griffin climbed in beside her and neatly blocked her attempt to escape with his body. Ignoring her glare, he snapped, "I don't care if it takes an eternity!"

With that, he slammed the door and slid the curtains shut, enveloping the two of them into dark, warm silence. The carriage tilted as the driver climbed back up to the top and the vehicle rocked into slow motion.

"Are you planning on explaining yourself, Griffin Berenger, or just dragging me back to your home like the puffed up, pompous..." she trailed off, trying to find the right word. "*Brute* that you are?"

He didn't answer, but turned his head away to stare at the curtain-darkened window.

"Griffin!" Her voice rose a notch as her frustration elevated. "You drag me away from my job, put my life, as well as my brother's life in danger and now you refuse to even speak to me? Of all the..."

She stopped as she took in his expression in the dim carriage. His face was pale, ashen almost in the fading light and his hands trembled even though he'd clenched them into fists in his lap.

"You look like you're going to be sick." She moved closer to him and tilted her head to look at his face. "What is it?"

"I thought..." he began, then swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "You almost died and there was nothing I could do, Audrey. I watched that arrow pass within inches of your head and I couldn't protect you."

With a sigh of relief, she relaxed against the carriage seat. It was only fear for her life that made him look so torn.

"I'm fine," she reassured him. "After the first explosion, Douglas went to investigate and Hannah saw an informant so she left to press him for more information. I believe the arrow was just a misfire, not aimed at me. My cover is fine, Griffin."

"Your cover?" He turned to look directly at her. His voice grew dangerously low in the gloom. "Damn your cover!"

Suddenly his arms wrapped around her and pulled her against his chest. Her breasts flattened against the broad expanse of his body and her bated breaths reflected back from his throat.

"I thought you might die. I couldn't lose you, not when I'd just found you again. Do you understand me?" His voice cracked as he gave her a gentle shake.

"Griffin," she whispered, pulling one arm free from his powerful grip to raise her hand to his face. He flinched as her palm cupped his cheek, but relaxed almost immediately with a throaty groan.

"Don't do this to me," he said, just before his lips came down on hers with consuming force.

Though words of protest sat on her tongue, Audrey couldn't seem to voice them. Any resistance she had left melted away and immediately she wrapped her arms around his neck to hold him closer. Close enough that she could feel his pounding heartbeat through his crisp linen shirt and dark jacket.

Opening her mouth, she reveled in his taste, the sensations that ripped through her when his tongue brushed hers, dipping inside the cavern of her mouth. All the reasons for them to stay away from each other faded as their kiss intensified. The carriage seemed to shrink, leaving little room for anything but the tangled heap of their two bodies straining to get ever closer.

Griffin's hand settled on her waist, then inched up to cup the swell of her breast. She moaned against his lips at the crackle of sensation that shot from his hand to every nerve of her body, arching nearer and praying this moment would never end.

Pulling back, she yanked her gloves off to toss the yellow silk on the carriage seat opposite them. She wanted nothing to separate them. Somehow her hands found the buttons of his shirt and she tore at them. She didn't even care when one popped away and clattered to the carriage floor to disappear under the seat. She wanted to feel his skin pressed against her, to wrap his warmth around her until they were one. It was the only way she'd ever be close enough.

Pulling the tails of his shirt free from his trousers, Audrey unfastened the last of the buttons and slid her hands into the opening. Griffin let out a long hiss as her fingertips raked across his naked torso, tangling in the wiry curls on his chest.

"Did I hurt you?" she whispered. Somehow she feared the moment would end if she spoke too loudly.

"No," he said, his own voice just as low.

He edged his hands up from her shoulders across his face and pulled her body for a long kiss. Shifting, she eased herself into his lap, holding fast to his chest as his fingers sent her auburn locks trailing out of her bun and down around her shoulders.

The carriage tilted as it moved slowly around a corner on the busy city streets, and Audrey found herself pushed even closer to Griffin. Her cloth-covered thigh brushed against his lower body with increasing pressure.

"I'm not going to be able to stop if we..." His dark eyes met hers and held them.

"I don't want you to stop," she answered as she feathered light kisses along his cheekbones and down his jaw line. "I can't help it."

"I should then." He wrapped his hands around her arms as if to push her away, but he couldn't quite do it. "Don't you see? If you can't stop this, I should. I'm the more experienced. I'm the one who should end this."

"But you can't." She grasped his wrists and slid his hands away from her arms and to her waist. She never let her eyes move from his. "You can't any more than I can."

"What are we doing Audrey?" he asked even as his hands stole to the tiny buttons at the back of her dress. One by one, he worked them open.

"Ending our ridiculous fight against fate," she said.

She took in a sharp breath as he peeled the yellow layers of her gown down to her waist and left her nearly revealed to him. Only her chemise separated them, and she could already feel his body heat burning through the thin sheath of cotton.

"Fate?" He lifted his eyes to meet hers again. She was lost in their depths for a long moment before she found the power to speak.

"Isn't that why we were brought back together after all these years apart?" she asked, pushing a stray lock of dark blond hair from his eyes. "Isn't that why neither one of us can stay away from each other despite all the good reasons why we should?"

Griffin took in a long, shuddering breath as he brought his mouth against the hollow of her throat and began a slow trail downward.

"I don't believe in fate." His words reverberated off the lacy edging of her chemise.

She couldn't answer as his hot mouth moved lower, clamping around the taut peak of her nipple and suckling there through the cloth.

"Then..." she gasped. "Then believe I want you. I need you."

"I believe that," he said, pausing in his sensual torture to look up. A grin flashed white teeth at her, then his mouth returned to its torment.

Closing her eyes, Audrey relaxed in his arms and let him hold her as he kissed and caressed her in ways she'd never imagined, despite Hannah's explanations. Cold words were nothing compared to the way Griffin swirled his tongue over her breast, pulling the tight bead of her nipple in and out of his mouth.

"God, you taste so sweet." He looped his fingers under one strap of her chemise and pulled the whole contraption down around her waist to bunch with her dress. "Better than I'd imagined."

A wash of pleasure worked through her not just at his mouth returning to her now naked flesh, but at his words. Griffin had imagined this, just as she had. He wanted her, not just any woman in his bed, but *her*.

Griffin stifled a moan as he trailed his hand down Audrey's body, reveling in how smooth and soft her skin was under his rough palm and in the way she arched up with innocent desire to meet his touch. When he found the hem of her skirt, he began inching the gown up, revealing smooth calves that tensed under his fingertips. Further up, he touched the garter of her silk stocking. In one smooth motion, he unfastened one, then the other.

Audrey's little gasp made him smile against her skin, though it was a reminder of her innocence. Despite his body's demands, he would go slowly with her, give her as much pleasure as he could.

Massaging his hands along the lines of her thighs, he pushed apart the opening of her thin, muslin drawers to touch the core of the desire he was kindling. As he expected, Audrey stiffened at this new invasion and struggled to sit up.

"I won't hurt you." He pressed a hot kiss against her mouth. When he leaned back he saw her wide eyes had drooped back to half-closed and her bated breaths slowed.

"I trust you," she said. "You only surprised me."

With a soft laugh, Griffin whispered, "You've many surprises in store for you, then."

A small smile turned up her lips as she wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled his mouth down to meet hers. The kiss they shared was gentle at first, then grew more heated as the half moons of her fingernails pressed into the planes of his back. Griffin groaned as his hand tightened around her thigh. With a little sigh, she relaxed and her legs fell open a fraction.

The movement gave Griffin enough room to return his fingers to her slick opening, first just teasing the outside so she would be accustomed to his touch, then plunging one finger inside where she tightened against him in surprise and pleasure.

"Is it supposed to feel like this?" she whispered as she rested her head against his shoulder.

"How does it feel?" He could scarcely breathe when she began to match the rhythm of his teasing fingertips with her hips.

"Hot..." she breathed. "Like there's pressure building..."

"Good?" He brushed his lips against hers very gently to let her hot breath warm his face.

With a little cry she arched against him as her muscles quivered in release. Then she relaxed and for a moment said nothing, just lay in his arms with her eyes closed. Slowly, she opened one eye and gazed up at him.

"Very good," she whispered. "But I know that wasn't all of it."

Griffin laughed despite the hard, insistent need throbbing between his legs. "Do you?"

She smiled as the slightest flush darkened her cheeks. "There are advantages of having a former lady of the evening as one's maid."

Audrey smiled as Griffin's eyes widened. There didn't seem to be any need to explain her comment further. He understood she knew about physical joining in theory, if not practice.

Sitting up, she shifting her position until she straddled his lap. Her body was still trembling from the powerful release he'd given her, but she sensed he could give her so much more.

He leaned up to kiss her. "This will be very painful if we start this way."

"I don't care." Resting her forehead against his, she measured her breaths until they matched his. "I want to do this."

"I think we should..." he began, but stopped with a throaty moan when Audrey let her hand move between them to touch the hot length of him. Even through his trousers she could feel the hard thrust of muscle.

As curious as she was excited, she began to work open the buttons, sliding each one free until he was splendidly revealed to her. With a nervous smile, she edged back and looked at the stiff thrust of muscle arching proudly before her. Audrey had never seen a naked man, but Griffin was a fine specimen to begin with. His erection stood at attention from the thatch of curly, dark blond hair between his thighs.

"It's beautiful," she said, reaching down to touch it. She was surprised how soft his skin was and how hot. Even more amazing was how he rose up to meet her with a soft groan. "You're beautiful."

It was true. Even disheveled, his white shirt cockeyed over his shoulders and his trousers open around his hips, every line of him was perfection. Like the statues she'd seen when she and her brother traveled on the continent. Somehow she'd always pictured them as gods, not close to what a real man would look like. But Griffin was hard as the granite they'd been carved in. Only better. Griffin was real.

Griffin was hers.

Slowly she slid her fingers over the head and down the shaft of his penis, mesmerized by his reaction. Closing his eyes, he tipped his head back and shivered. She realized his expression was very much like the way she must have looked when he'd pleased her with his hands.

The memory inflamed her body. Sliding forward, she carefully positioned herself before she lowered herself onto him. The sensation of their joining was strange, but not unpleasant.

"This will be better if we do it quickly," Griffin promised, then gripped her hips and tugged her down as he thrust upwards.

Audrey gasped at the sharp pain when he filled her completely. She shut her eyes to it and held his shoulders with all her strength.

"I'm sorry." He reached up to push the hair back from her face.

She moved a little. "No. It doesn't hurt anymore."

Though she felt tender, the pain was gone. Out of some kind of instinct, she began to move over him. The rhythm Griffin had begun with his hands earlier, she mimicked now. Back and forth, in and out until she felt herself coming to the edge of a precipice. But instead of fearing the fall, she craved it.

In an explosion of light and sensation, her body quivered with release and she held Griffin against her with a cry he muffled with his mouth. He moaned with her, spilling himself inside her as he pulled her closer, closer... until she wondered if it would be possible to melt into him and truly become one.

For what seemed like an eternity neither of them moved, though it must have been just a few moments. Finally, with a little sigh, Audrey moved away from him and sat back down on her side of the carriage seat.

"Thank you." She reached under her skirt to adjust her drooping stockings and rearrange her twisted and mangled under things.

Griffin wrinkled his brow as he refastened his trousers and smoothed his blond hair back into place. With a smile, she reached up and tucked an errant lock behind his ear.

He caught her hand in his to place a kiss across her fingertips. "Why thank you?"

"I never thought I would ever experience anything like that," she explained. "After all, I'm bordering on old maidenhood. And now I understand so much more than I did before."

"Here, turn around." He placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned closer.

She did as she was asked, marveling at how his warm hands on her bare skin managed to make her tingle all over again.

As he lifted her chemise back over her shoulders, then her hopelessly wrinkled dress and began refastening her buttons, he said, "First off, you're hardly an old maid."

She shivered as he placed a soft kiss at the base of her neck before turning her back to face him.

"I'm three and twenty. Do you know how old most of my friends were when they married?"

"How old?" he asked, though his tone was one of a man humoring her.

She gathering up her sweaty locks into her hands and began piling them up on her head, jabbing in the pins he offered her from the floor.

"Seventeen, perhaps eighteen," she said. "According to my mother, I am firmly on the shelf."

A frown creased his brow. "Your mother's opinion makes a great deal of difference to you, doesn't it?"

With a frown of her own, she dropped her head. "She disapproves of me. She always has."

Griffin smiled. "Always?"

She refused to return his smile. "Always."

With a sigh, she looked down at herself, still disheveled despite their best efforts to make her look presentable. Reaching over, she snatched up her gloves and shoved them back on.

"Who can blame her, really? I've given her enough ammunition. After all, I'm unmarried and I just lost my virtue to a man she's told me a hundred times will never love me."

The second the words were out of her mouth, Audrey clamped her half-gloved hand over her lips.

Lifting her eyes, she looked at him. He was frozen in his place, his eyes locked on her.

"Your mother told you that?" His voice was unreadable in the semi-darkness around them.

"I was a young girl," she explained, hoping her tone made it seem like her infatuation was unimportant now. "And she knew best, after all."

"What do you mean?" His voice was suddenly strained.

She watched him with intent, but still couldn't read his expression. "You married Luci, didn't you?"

He winced as he looked away, pulling the curtain back to allow the city lights to brighten the carriage a fraction. For a long time he didn't say anything.

"Luci was..."

Before he could finish, the carriage pulled to a smooth stop. The coach rocked as the footman and driver climbed down.

"We've arrived," she said, suddenly feeling awkward.

Though she'd just shared the most intimate of experiences with the man beside her, the thought of entering the blazing light of the house with him was a bit daunting. Surely people would look at both their mussed appearances and wonder what they'd been doing.

The door opened, but Griffin didn't move. Her own exit was still blocked by his body.

"Griffin?"

"You don't understand, Audrey."

He accentuated the comment with a sigh as he finally stepped out of the coach and into the cool night air. Instead of allowing the footman to help her out, he extended his own hand.

With hesitation, she took it. She was nearly shattered by the electricity that rushed through her when they touched. Somehow it surprised her she'd still feel such heat between them after they had purged their more animal instincts. From all she'd heard, the passion between two people often faded once they had been intimate. Noah certainly seemed to lose interest in his paramours soon enough.

Griffin led her up the walkway in silence but the moment they entered the house, he released her and walked down the hallway. Instinctively she followed him.

"I'm sorry if my actions interfered with your plan tonight," he said, his voice clipped as she came into the leather and cherry wood room he called his office. "But I felt I was protecting you. You may explain that to your brother if he's angry, or send him to me. I'll gladly tell him exactly why I couldn't stand to see you in danger one more moment."

"Griffin?" She tilted her head as she pushed the door shut. "Are you angry with me?"

"No," he said, but his voice was strained as he turned his back to her.

With hesitation, she added, "Are you sorry for what we did tonight?"

The answer was so important that she could barely hear it over the rushing of her blood in her ears. If he was sorry, she wasn't sure she could bear it.

Griffin paused with his hand on a crystal decanter at the bar beside his desk. "*I should say I'm sorry.*"

"But..."

Turning, he looked at her with a gaze that was both even and so heated that her knees went weak. "I wanted you then. God help me, I want you now. Wrong or not."

With a shiver, she moved a step closer. "I'm not sorry."

He poured the drink he'd been neglecting and downed it in one sip. "Wait until morning to say that."

With a tilt of her head, Audrey smiled. "I'll feel the same way tomorrow. I don't often change my mind."

The tension in Griffin's face left for a fleeting moment as he turned to smile at her. "I remember that about you."

"I told you Griffin." She stepped toward him and placed her hand on his face. The beginnings of stubble were rough on her palm and she longed her rub her cheek where her hand now lay. "What happened between us was fate. Don't blame yourself for that."

With a deep breath, Griffin covered her hand with his. "I'll order one of the maids to bring bathwater to your room. The ache will ease if you soak for a while. Now go."

Audrey took a step away with a broad smile. Even if Griffin didn't believe in fate, she did. Fate had brought her to him once, and she had no doubt fate had much more in store for them before this assignment was through.

## ***Chapter Twelve***

Audrey sat on the window seat in her chamber staring out at the London streets below. Carriages swarmed around corners and in and out of alleys as the cream of the *ton* made their way home from Hyde Park. With a sigh, she stepped away from the window and let the curtain fall to close out the scene from her view.

What had happened after Griffin had dragged her away? Had her brother and Hannah searched frantically for her? Had Ellison carried out some kind of plot?

There had been no news of an assassination, so she assumed Noah had done his job to keep Ellison and his men from following through on any kind of major plan. But that was only a guess, and there was so much at stake that she was wary of going by instinct alone.

Noah was probably furious, and after she gave her explanation... that Griffin had carried her back home like a ruffian... he'd be even angrier. And what about Douglas?

A man like Douglas Ellison probably wasn't used to being deserted by a woman, nor having his lady abducted. She only hoped she could repair all the damage done by Griffin's actions. And her own.

"It was worth it."

She sat down at her dressing table to brush her still damp locks of hair before lifting them into a simple bun at the nape of her neck.

Griffin was right, a warm bath had soothed the painful sting between her legs. Of course, now that the pain was forgotten, all she could concentrate on was the memory of the pleasure she had experienced in the carriage. Nothing she'd been told had prepared her for how wonderful making love had been. Especially making love to the man she had loved almost her entire life.

Outside, the sound of a carriage coming to a stop on the drive and the bustle of rushing servants caught her attention and pulled her away from her scandalous thoughts of Griffin's touch.

Finishing her hair, Audrey straightened the plain, gray gown she'd changed into after her bath and hurried downstairs. Even before she made it to the foyer she could hear Griffin, Noah and Hannah talking.

Arguing.

"And just why the hell did you take her home?" Noah shouted.

When she rounded the corner, she could see her brother's face was as angry as his voice.

Audrey stepped from the last stair. Before she could interrupt, Griffin answered, "An arrow whizzed by her head, Noah! She could have been killed! I did what I thought was right under the circumstances."

Her brother pursed his lips, though his cheeks paled a shade. "Why didn't you find me? We could have evaluated the situation and decided our best course of action. Do you know the kind of explaining I had to do with Ellison?"

Audrey rushed two steps forward. "Was Ellison very angry?"

Noah turned from Griffin to look at her with wide eyes. Without a word, he grabbed her into a fierce hug.

"Is this true, Audrey?" Hannah reached out to touch her arm as Noah released her. "Were you nearly get hit by an arrow at the reenactment?"

Casting a sidelong glance toward her brother, Audrey nodded. "I believe it was a misplaced shot by one of the revelers. I don't think I was its true target."

"But you can't be certain, can you?" Griffin's sharp tone forced her attention to him. The anger he held just beneath the surface was evident in his every movement.

"We've talked about this," she said, lowering her voice a notch to counteract the two men and their yelling. "I don't feel you should have hauled me away from my post."

Griffin took a step back as his face twisted. "But are you sorry?"

With a start, Audrey realized he was asking if she was sorry he'd made love to her in the carriage, just as she'd asked him earlier. Slowly, she shook her head.

"I am *not* sorry." She accentuated each word so he would understand her. "I'm sure you did what you felt was right at the time."

She turned to her confused brother and Hannah. "Noah, what did Ellison say?"

"He wanted to know where the hell you were." Noah shook his head. "Since I didn't know myself, it was hard to come up with a lie. I saw Griffin's carriage was gone when I made my initial sweep of the area, so I told the man you'd gotten faint and gone home."

Audrey nodded her head. "And he accepted that?"

"Reluctantly."

With a sigh of relief, Audrey covered her heart with both hands. "This may take some work on my part, but I'm sure I can convince him I didn't want to leave his side."

Griffin let out a small snort behind them. "Has it escaped all of you that Audrey was nearly killed tonight? How the hell can you send her back into the line of fire with that man?"

As Noah turned to look at his friend, Hannah met Audrey's eyes with a questioning stare. Doing her best to look innocent, Audrey quickly turned away. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to find out the intimacy she and Griffin had shared.

"How many times must I explain to you that my sister is a trained agent of the Crown?" Noah sounded like a schoolmaster lecturing a student. "I realize it's hard for you to look at her and see her as such. You probably still see her as the little girl who used to shadow us everywhere..."

"No," Griffin interrupted with a smile only she could interpret. "I certainly don't see her as that. I know she's a woman. But I'm not sure she can manage all you're asking her to do."

This time it was Audrey's turn to protest. "Now wait just a moment. You don't know anything about my ability to handle today's event or anything else that has to do with my job."

"I know you," he said softly. His intense stare made her keenly aware of how well he did know her. All of her. Each and every inch.

With a blush, she continued, "You know me, but not as a spy. Griffin, my brother and I asked you to help us by allowing us to use your estate here in London. We asked you to accompany us to the events of the celebration to deflect suspicion from us. But we never asked you to get so involved."

"You also never told me I would be forced to watch you curl up in the arms of a traitor. Or that I'd see you nearly killed." His voice elevated once more. "Did you?"

Audrey turned her face, feeling his biting words as if he'd slapped her. Despite everything they'd shared that day, he didn't understand her. Worse, he didn't respect her abilities. That stung worse than any of his previous rejections.

"I see there's no use in talking to you about this," she said as she turned away. "Noah, I'd like to speak to you a bit more about today and the mission. May we go somewhere private?"

Noah looked from Griffin to Audrey with a pinched face. "Yes, of course. Griffin, you and I will continue this discussion *later*."

Griffin didn't answer, but turned on his heel to stalk away. As he mounted the stairs and disappeared from sight, Audrey let out the air in her lungs as a sigh.

Hannah looked from brother to sister with an arched eyebrow. "Noah, since you've already debriefed me, I'll go upstairs. I can speak to Audrey when you two are through."

Audrey grasped her friend's hand with both her own. "Thank you. I appreciate all you've done."

With a squeeze of her hand, Hannah walked away. Audrey turned to her brother with as much of a smile as she could muster after her unpleasant exchange with Griffin.

"Shall we go to the sitting room?"

"Perfect." Her brother's eyes narrowed with questions, but he took her arm nonetheless and led her inside. When the door was closed and Audrey was settled into a chair by the dying fire, Noah looked at her.

"What really happened today?" he asked, his voice low as he prepared a sherry for Audrey and a glass of port for himself.

Every muscle in her body tensed as she looked up sharply at her brother. If he had sensed the tension between Griffin and her, she didn't believe he had guessed the true cause.

"It's complicated, Noah." She rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. How could she explain what she, herself, didn't understand? "Griffin is desperate to protect me. He doesn't think I'm equipped for this."

Sitting down in a chair beside her, Noah handed her a glass and took a sip of his own drink. "And are you?"

With a tilt of her head, Audrey glared at her brother. "Tell me Griffin's ramblings haven't made you forget the past five years. They haven't made you forget all my training or the fact that I *have* encountered dangerous situations before."

"Of course not," Noah said with a sigh. "But this is different. You've never had to play the pawn so fully before. And there's never been an outside force distracting you."

"Outside force?" She set her drink on the table between them.

"Don't play me for a fool," he said, looking down his nose at her with a half-smile. "I know Griffin distracts you. God knows you distract him."

Audrey contemplated that fact for a moment before dipping her head to break her brother's seeing stare. "Perhaps that's true, but I'm a professional. I'm fully aware that my duty to my country must take precedence over anything else."

Her brother leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Then explain today."

Her eyes widening, Audrey burst out, "Griffin dragged me out of the park practically kicking and screaming. I would have been if I didn't know it would focus even more attention on us than we were already attracting. What was I to do, put him in a death grip?"

Noah laughed. "That would have been interesting, but I see your point." He paused. "There was no permanent harm done. Tomorrow you and I will call on Douglas Ellison and you'll smooth things over. I'm sure he believes Griffin ravaged you in the carriage on the way home, but we'll make sure that notion is wiped from his mind."

Audrey choked on her drink. "Wh-Why would Ellison think that?" she finally managed to say between coughing.

"Ellison sees him as a rival. That was more than clear after his reaction at the re-enactment," Noah explained as he patted her on the back until she regained her breath.

She frowned. "Perhaps we can make that work to our advantage."

"How so?"

She laced her fingers together nervously. "After today, I'm certain that Ellison is on the verge of killing the Prince and causing all hell to break loose in this country. The infighting could weaken us to the point that France and any number of other enemies could attack."

"True." Noah leaned back in his chair. "Continue."

"Because of this, I believe it's more imperative than ever that I find out the identities of Ellison's allies so we can arrest them en masse and bring an end to this." She took a deep breath, unsure of how her brother would react to her next statement. "To do so, I need to get even closer to Ellison."

Noah straightened up. "Closer?"

"Yes. Right now we're courting, and I've made some inroads with him. But there's no way I'm going to find out anything else unless he trusts me completely." She paused. "I want to manipulate him into a proposal."

Noah shook his head before she'd even stopped speaking and set his half-empty drink on the table with a clink.

"No. There are limits to what I'll have you do. A man like Ellison will become increasingly demanding



the closer he gets to a woman. I won't have that monster touching you to seal some kind of marriage bargain."

She shivered. If her brother was having this strong of a reaction to her plans, what would Griffin think? He hated her being in the same room with Ellison, he would be livid when he found out she wanted the traitor to propose.

She touched her brother's hand. "I know you worry, but I *can* manage Douglas. Remember, I'm respectable." She paused, thinking of just how 'respectable' she had been in Griffin's carriage that day. "I-I can keep his advances to a minimum. Won't it be worth it if we can bring down his mob without any disturbance to the Prince or his party?"

"I don't like it." Noah frowned, but Audrey knew him well enough to know when he was breaking under her reasonable approach.

"Of course you don't. I don't either. But you're also clever enough to realize that this could be the only way. All our efforts since we arrived in London have left us with no more evidence than we had in Avonblithe. I'm the only one who can push this investigation forward." She looked at him with loving eyes. "You've given me so much by letting me work with you over the years. You gave me confidence and freedom. Allow me to return the favor by helping you catch this man."

Noah reached across to take both her hands in his and shook his head. "You gave yourself confidence and freedom. I only watched you transform in amazement. I don't like this plan, but you're right. It may be the best and quickest way to catch Ellison. I'll speak to Lord Golding tomorrow morning, but as far as I'm concerned, the answer is yes."

Audrey smiled with relief that Noah trusted her. Now if only she could convince Griffin to do the same. "Thank you."

Her brother stood. "I'll send a message to Golding tonight. Meanwhile, you should go talk to Hannah. She'll be a key ally in this plan."

She stood to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I will

"Goodnight," he said absently.

As Audrey hurried up the stairs toward her room, she hugged herself with glee. For the first time she was going to really get to participate in a job, not just be a lookout or diversion. She'd get a chance to prove herself to Lord Golding, to Noah, to Hannah and most of all to Griffin.

Griffin.

As she passed by his chamber door, she paused. After all they'd shared that day, how would he feel about her plan to become Ellison's fiancée? He'd probably be furious. But this was her job, and she had to do it. Griffin would just have to understand. Somehow she would make him understand.

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Audrey entered her chamber with a broad grin on her face as she looked around. "Hannah? You aren't already in bed, are you? I want to talk to you about our assignment."

"And just what are these?"

Spinning around, her smile fell. Hannah stood in the entryway to her adjoining room holding Audrey's blood spotted drawers from earlier in the day.

"H..." she stammered, cursing herself for her stupidity. Her mind had been so clouded with images of Griffin and worries about their plan she hadn't taken care of her soiled things.

Hannah dropped the pantalets and came across the room to take both Audrey's shoulders in her hands. "Please tell me you cut yourself."

"I cut myself?" Audrey repeated, but the words came out as a timid question rather than a solid fact.

Hannah held her gaze for a long moment, then sighed. "When did it happen? In the carriage or here?"

"Cutting myself?" Audrey asked, her voice suddenly very small. She couldn't seem to make it stronger.

With a tilt of her head, her friend said, "No. When did you give yourself to Griffin Berenger?"

The blood rushed to Audrey's face in a hot wave. Her cheeks tingled and head throbbed. The room was suddenly spinning, moving further and further away from her.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She trembled as she turned from Hannah's arms. At the window, cold air was reflected from the glass, but it wasn't enough to calm her.

"Hmph," Hannah grunted. "I used to lay on my back for a living, missy. You think I don't know the sight of virgin's blood when I see it?"

Audrey drew in a short breath at her friend's blunt words, then spun around. The other woman had her hands on her hips, one foot tapping from under the hem of her plain gown. She looked every inch a schoolmarm who couldn't be fooled. Truth was Audrey's only remaining option.

With a hard swallow, she said, "Hannah, you and I have been through very much together, haven't we?"

"Yes," Hannah's tone was wary.

"You've been my... my best friend."

Hannah's green eyes filled with tears at those words. "And you've been mine."

"Then promise me you won't tell Noah what you know." She grimaced and quickly corrected herself. "What you *suspect*."

"You think I'd tell the man? Are you daft, girl? He'd rip Griffin Berenger apart and then where would we be! No, I won't tell your brother. What is said about this will stay between us." Her face softened as she reached out a hand. When Audrey took it, she whispered, "I promise you, Audrey."

"Today in the carriage on the way home from the reenactment." Audrey dipped her head while heat darkened her cheeks. "That was where... *it* came about."

Hannah dropped down into a nearby chair with a thud. "Oh, Lordy. Well, it was bound to happen."

She cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

Her friend's answer was a little burst of laughter. "The way you two eye each other, I would have wagered it would have happened much sooner."

Audrey eyes widened. "That's absolutely scandalous."

"Well, I wasn't the one losing my virtue in a carriage, now was I?" Hannah asked with a twinkle in her eye. "Don't hold back now, how was it?"

"It was..." Audrey paused, searching for the right word. "It was amazing. Is it wrong to feel that way? I know some of my married friends describe it as awkward and as a duty, but I didn't feel that way at all. I felt alive."

A sad smile lifted the corners of Hannah's mouth. "It isn't wrong to feel like that, love. In fact, it's more right than the way those prudes describe it."

"Is that how it was for you?" she asked softly.

Her friend's face went a shade paler, and a sadness came into her eyes that made Audrey want to weep. She'd never seen Hannah as fragile as she looked at that moment.

"No, Audrey. It most definitely was not like that for me." There was an awkward pause. "But what will you do now?"

"Do?" Somehow she really hadn't thought that far into the future. "I don't suppose I'll *do* anything. Griffin doesn't love me, and now that he's had me, his desire is likely out of his system, just as Noah's desire always fades once he's had a woman. I'll continue on with our plans. In fact, my brother just gave me permission to entice Douglas Ellison further. I'm going to try to get him to propose to me."

Hannah's eyes went wide. "Even after you shared another man's bed? How will Lord Berenger feel about that?"

Audrey shrugged one shoulder. How could she explain to her friend that she was ripped apart inside with the knowledge that Griffin would be furious? She wanted to enjoy the memory of what they'd shared, but now it was tainted with the knowledge of what she would soon be forced to do.

"Griffin will have no say in the matter. I may have been his for a short while this evening, but I am not his in reality."

"You really don't understand men, do you?" Hannah asked with a short shake of her head.

The laughter in her friend's tone left Audrey feeling affronted. "What do you mean? I've followed Noah around for years, and played the distraction for dozens of men we were investigating."

"Apparently you've learning nothing during that time. Griffin Berenger thought he had a right to comment

on your life *before* you shared yourself with him completely. His interference will only worsen now. When a man loves a woman, he'll do anything to protect her." She stood and smiled at Audrey.

"It's a very good thing he doesn't love me then, isn't it?" Audrey snapped back, though her heart gave a queer shiver.

"*Mon Dieu*," Hannah sighed as she walked across the room to her door. "You and Lord Berenger certainly share one trait."

Audrey tilted her head with a snide, "And what is that?"

"You're both stubborn as the devil himself," she said, shutting her door with a firm snap.

"Stubborn as the devil," Audrey muttered under her breath as she flopped into a chair and stared at herself in the mirror. "That shows how much you know Hannah Pikard."

But in the recesses of her heart, she acknowledged the truth. Stubbornness was one of her worst traits. It had driven her from her parents' home and into a life of spying. It had forced her to love a man for half a decade, despite the fact he could never love her in return.

Yet Hannah said he did. Griffin, love her? For so long Audrey had believed that was impossible. Now she had to wonder if she'd been wrong all along. And if she believed he could and he let her down, would she be able to recover from the heartache that rejection would cause?

## ***Chapter Thirteen***

Griffin balled his hand into a fist and stared at his white knuckles in the fading light of the fire. A half-finished drink sat at his side, untouched for at least an hour. He had no idea why he was still awake. The only excuse he had was that sleep would bring him no peace. If his waking moments were so consumed with Audrey, his dreams were possessed by her. Caught in a web of sleep, he would relive their passionate joining over and over, only to wake alone, frustrated and wanting her more than ever.

"Just as I am right now," he muttered as he downed the last swig of stale sherry with a grimace.

No, frustrated didn't even begin to encompass how he felt. After they made love, he'd felt so guilty about stealing Audrey's innocence that he'd been driven to send her away. Somehow he'd expected her to return to him with accusations and recriminations when the glow had worn off.

But she hadn't.

Instead, she'd faced off with him in his very own foyer as if nothing had changed. She refused to see reason. She wouldn't admit that she was in more danger than she knew. Her duties and his desire for her put her in equal peril, yet instead of avoiding them, she sought both out, with a blind belief that she would somehow be safe.

Despite all that, Griffin still had the most overpowering urge to kick in her chamber door and ravish her all night. He wanted to make love to her as she deserved. Not in some confined carriage, but in his bed, spread out across his sheets as he taught her all the different ways she could give and receive pleasure.

"Damn, damn, damn!" He slammed his glass down on the table beside him.

"Griffin?"

He stood and turned at the soft voice from the doorway to see Audrey staring at him. She was still in the plain gown she'd worn earlier that evening. While the simple cut and drab color would have made any other woman look dowdy, she looked alive. Her cheeks were rosy with warm color and her eyes darker than he'd ever imagined they could be. She shoved the curls that framed her face behind her ear while she chewed nervously on her lower lip.

He frowned as he realized Audrey had witnessed his outburst. "I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

"Yes." Her face darkened to an even more appealing pink. "I was having trouble sleeping myself. I didn't think you'd mind if I went to your library and borrowed the most boring book you have."

He laughed. "Well, all my father's old coaching books are still in the West library if you'd like. If I recall you always said they were boring."

"I can't believe you remember that," she said with a chuckle as she took what seemed to be an involuntary step toward him.

He stiffened when he caught a whiff of her scent. Soft and floral, perhaps roses. What he would do to see her in a bath of rose petals. They were still in season, perhaps if he made a few requests...

With a gruff shake of his head, he said, "I remember more than you imagine I do."

"We had good times here." She looked around the room. "When I was a girl, I believed this was an enchanted house. I was so very happy when I was here and I was certain that must be the work of fairies."

He frowned, motioning for her to enter his office and sit beside his dying fire. "Were you not happy elsewhere?"

She sat down in one of the leather seats beside him and shrugged one shoulder. "At times I was very happy. And at others I wasn't. As I got older I realized what my mother expected of me, and that I could never fulfill those expectations."

Griffin's heart ached at the small quiver in her voice. Though her face was calm and free from any indication that the subject was a painful one, her eyes and tone told a different story.

"Noah has told me a bit of what you experienced in your second season in London." He narrowed his eyes. What would be her reaction to his prying?

She stiffened, turning her face toward the fire so he could only see her in profile. "Did he?"

"Yes, but I'd like to know more about it. Noah said there were rumors..."

"Rumors," she interrupted, her voice suddenly shrill as she gripped the armrest with a steel fist. "Yes, there were some rumors. You know how people can get, especially in London. They want a story and when they cannot find a real one, they create one."

"It was more than that, Audrey." He ran his fingertips across her white knuckles. Immediately she relaxed her hand, and sent him a quick glance. "I know Luci started those rumors."

A little strangled cry escaped her throat as surged to her feet and rushed across the room to the fireplace. For a long time she didn't move or speak, just stared into the flames, her trembling back toward him. More than anything he wanted to rise and go to her, to hold her and tell her how sorry he was for anything she'd gone through by his late wife's hand. Instead, he stayed where he was. He feared touching her would only make her feel worse.

"I wish Noah hadn't told you that," she finally murmured, her voice breathless.

Griffin squeezed his eyes shut. He understood that sentiment perfectly. He had always tried to keep his pains and embarrassments private, as well.

"I'm glad he did."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "How much more do you know?"

Arching an eyebrow, he stood slowly. "That you left London in some small level of disgrace. What more is there?"

A tiny shiver wracked her body, but she didn't turn.

"Audrey?" He moved toward her to take her shoulders and forced her to face him. At the tears glimmering on her cheeks, he frowned. "What more is there?"

Her chin dropped. "Nothing."

"It's clearly not nothing."

She shook her head. "Please don't make me tell you."

Taking care to move slowly, Griffin drew her against his chest and held her there, reveling in the way she fit so perfectly in his embrace. "I need to know."

There was only silence for a moment as the woman in his arms struggled with the words. Griffin could tell she fought against revealing the truth. She wanted to protect him, didn't want him to feel guilty for Luci's ruinous slander. As if he couldn't. If only he hadn't been so obsessed with Audrey, or if Luci hadn't been so hateful, perhaps he could have prevented Audrey's pain.

"Luci... she arranged to have a man attack me. He caught me on a balcony and kissed me. He hurt me. But the way he held me, it looked like I was kissing him, pinning *him* against the veranda wall." Her low whisper forced him to strain to hear her words. "When my mother and Luci came outside and found us there, Luci said it proved what a wanton I was."

Griffin closed his eyes as white-hot hatred raced through his veins. He longed to break something, to wrap his hands around Luci's lily-white neck and squeeze.

"Go on," he choked out with as much control as he could muster. He didn't want Audrey to think his anger or disgust was aimed at her.

"Luci told my mother that if she took me home immediately and never brought me back for another Season that the story wouldn't get out. What was Mama to do? Your wife held all the cards. So, my mother

agreed and we went home.”

A small sob escaped her lips as her fists came around his back and she held him closer to her.

Closing his eyes, Griffin held back a snarl of displeasure. “I never knew Lucinda would go so far.”

“I did.” Pushing back from his chest, she wiped her eyes. “I knew from the moment she told me she would have her revenge that she wouldn’t rest until I was destroyed. Even though I had no chance to be with you, she refused to see me happy. So she took away any chance I had to marry well and sent me home in disgrace.”

She pulled away, leaving Griffin empty in her wake.

“When did she vow to get you?”

“The day I... kissed you,” she said with a blush as she fiddled with the little clock on the mantel.

“Your wedding day.”

“Damn her.” He turned away so she wouldn’t see his furious face. One by one, he clenched his fingers back into a fist. “Damn her to hell for all the pain she caused.”

Audrey shook her head as she spun on her heel to face him. Her face was free of any of the malice he, himself, felt.

“No, don’t say that. My troubles with her shouldn’t color your memories. You shared five years with her, and the baby who died with her would have been a gift. Don’t damn her now, try to remember how happy you were with her then.”

Shutting his eyes, Griffin tried to do as she asked and remember a happier time with Luci. To his surprise, he couldn’t. Not even their wedding day, when his focus had shifted to Audrey’s kiss.

His courtship with Luci had been swift and proper, and now it seemed like a dream. No, his memories of Lucinda were only of the grief she’d caused him.

He remembered his wife’s laughter when he’d discovered her infidelity. Her wickedly phrased threats and promises to ruin his reputation and his family name. Her smile when she told him she was pregnant with another man’s baby, and that there was nothing he could do about it.

“Griffin?”

He opened his eyes to find Audrey had come closer to him, holding out her hand to touch his arm.

“What is it?” she whispered. “You look so angry.”

“I’ll tell you,” he promised. He took the hand she held out to him to raise it to his lips. Her presence calmed his rage. “But not tonight. Tonight I want you to tell me why you ran away from the marriage your parents arranged for you *after* my wife spoiled your chances in London.”

Her face fell. “My brother *has* been talking.”

Leading her back to her chair, he sat down beside her. “Does that bother you? Does it bother you that I know so much about your past?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “It troubles me that I know so little about yours, especially when there are so many innuendos. But if you say you’ll tell me another night, I trust you.”

A thrill passed through Griffin at those words. Audrey trusted him. Despite everything Luci had done to her and despite his own barbarian ways of protecting her.

Her sigh brought his focus back to her face. She stared at the floor as she plucked at the hem of her sleeve. Her voice was almost a whisper when she said, “When we returned to the country, my mother was very upset. She was determined to marry me off before my problems could hurt my sister Ginny and her chances to wed well. She and my father made an arrangement with Squire Jonas Teetle.”

“Jonas Teetle?” Griffin repeated, trying to put a face to the name Audrey had said. When he did, he winced. “Wait, Tepid Teetle?”

“The very one.” She sighed again. “Pale as snow, weak as lukewarm tea, Jonas Teetle. He needed a wife, preferably one with a fortune and a prestigious bloodline. According to my parents, *I* needed a husband without a hint of scandal... or personality... to him. In their eyes, we were the perfect match.”

She said it with such little feeling that Griffin had to chuckle. “You make it sound like heaven.”

After a surprised pause, Audrey joined him in the laughter. “Oh, heaven on earth.” The sarcasm dripped from her every word.

“So what happened to destroy your little utopia?”

She smiled. “By that time, Noah had returned from an assignment with a mild injury. He could see how

miserable I was. To keep my mind off my troubles, I asked me to help him. It started off with my filing papers, then more. By the time he'd healed and was ready to return to fieldwork, I was aching to escape with him. So I did."

She finished her story with a little shrug, as if she'd said something perfectly commonplace.

"You know, you didn't take up gardening, Audrey," Griffin said with a shake of his head. "You behave as if this is normal."

"To me it's become normal," she explained. "My mother was furious at first, but then Ginny came out with great success and she began to see that losing me was really for the best."

Again, Griffin winced at the pain in her voice. "Have you spoken to her since you left?"

She was quiet for a long, charged moment. "No. We have exchanged a few letters, but I never see her."

Her tone left no opening for questions and Griffin took her hint and didn't ask. She'd already given him a hefty glance into her past, more than he ever would have asked for.

"Audrey." He cocooned her hand between both of his, surprised at how small and delicate her fingers were.

She pulled back half-heartedly. "I should go to bed now, it's very late."

"Come to my bed," he burst out.

Though it wasn't a smooth request, that didn't change the fact that it was what he wanted more than anything. He watched as Audrey's face paled a shade, then colored to a deep red.

"I shouldn't," she stammered though she swayed just a little in his direction.

Frowning, he let her hand go. "Have the past few hours changed your view? Are you sorry now for what happened between us?"

"No!" Her tone was emphatic enough to be believed without hesitation. "But I can't join you tonight."

"Why?"

"Hannah already suspects something has happened between us."

He tilted his head to examine her expression more closely. From the embarrassment in Audrey's eyes, he had no doubt Hannah more than suspected something had happened. She knew.

"Don't worry," she reassured him with a light touch on his upper arm. "She won't breathe a word. I already have her promise."

Griffin let out a sigh of relief at her reassurance. The last thing he wanted was for Noah to confront him about his indiscretion. His relationship with the other man was already strained of late. Of course, that didn't stop Griffin from asking Audrey to come to his bed. Somehow his desire to have her with him was stronger than his need to protect his lifelong friendship with her brother.

Refusing to ponder that troubling thought further, he smiled. "It's difficult to keep secrets amongst spies."

"Or friends," she corrected as she released his arm.

"Then when will you come to me again? Tomorrow?"

He couldn't believe he was practically begging her to come to his bed, but didn't stop. He needed her, now more than ever. Just one taste wasn't enough to satisfy him. He wanted more.

Her face darkened a shade and Griffin felt as if she had erected a wall between them. Why? Why would she shut him out now?

She turned away. "Tomorrow evening Wellington will be presented to Queen Charlotte. We'll all be at the ball until late."

"Then come to my room after everyone has retired for the evening." He took a step closer in the hopes she'd open herself to him again. "Please, Audrey."

Her eyes lifted to his face at the plea, softening in the dim light of the fire. He could see how much she wanted to acquiesce, but something stopped her.

Her eyes met his in an intense stare. "Perhaps you won't want me tomorrow. So much can change within a few hours."

"What can change?" he asked, confused and a little hurt at her resistance. "The way you feel for me? Will you no longer want *me* tomorrow?"

She drew back as if the thought were a completely foreign one. "Griffin, I've wanted you for more than five years. For a lifetime, it seems. One more night will change nothing about how I feel for you. But

circumstances..."

"If how I feel won't change and how you feel won't change, everything else is inconsequential," he interrupted, reaching out to run his fingertip along her cheekbone.

She shut her eyes and shivered, but she didn't answer. As the moments ticked by on the clock on the mantle, Griffin wondered if she *would* answer.

"Yes," she finally breathed. "If you still want me after the celebration tomorrow, I *will* come to you."

Leaning down, he felt his own hot breath reflected back from her smooth lips. "Good."

She lifted her mouth to meet his kiss with no hesitation. As his lips claimed hers, he felt none of the desperation that had been present in the carriage. There he'd believed if he didn't have her, he might never get another chance. Now he knew she would be his again. So he took his time exploring her lips. When she sighed and drooped against him in surrender, he pulled away. With a promise for tomorrow made, he didn't want to risk pushing her too far tonight.

"Until tomorrow," he whispered.

She blinked twice, then gave a shaky nod before leaving the room. He was pleased to note her step was much more unsteady than it had been when she entered.

"Tomorrow," he repeated, this time with a smile he couldn't suppress.



## ***Chapter Fourteen***

"What do you have there?" Noah asked as he stepped into the sitting room.

Raising his head a fraction, Griffin gave his friend a quick glance then returned to the letter in his hand.

The handwriting was the small, soft swirl of his mother and the paper smelled faintly of her cologne water.

"It's from my mother, asking me about your visit," he explained. "My parents are very interested in why you and Audrey are staying here."

Noah poured himself a cup of tea with a frown. "What have you told them?"

"Only what everyone else knows," Griffin replied. "That your estate is under renovation and that you wished to stay in London during the festivities."

Noah slanted him a hooded look. "And you think they doubt that explanation?"

"I don't know." Griffin sighed. "It's hard to tell with them. Mother seems to be asking me questions without actually asking them. She knows I wanted nothing to do with London society so soon after Luci's death."

His friend gave him an apologetic glance. "I'm aware of what a hell these past few months have been for you. I never would have brought you into this mess if it weren't absolutely necessary."

Griffin refolded the letter and stuffed it in his pocket. "But you still would have taken the case. Audrey would still be the bait for your trap."

Noah set his cup down on its saucer with a clatter. "Griffin..."

He rolled his eyes. "I know, I know. You've explained it to me several times."

Noah paused for a moment and examined Griffin with a particularly close stare. "You care for her a great deal."

He took a long sip of tea with what he hoped was nonchalant detachment. "For whom?"

Noah arched an eyebrow with a half-smile. "For Audrey. How long have you cared for her so much?"

"I care for Audrey as any good friend would. And I've been her friend for nearly her whole life, haven't I?"

"No, it's more than that," Noah said with a shake of his dark head. "This is more than friendship. More than even lust."

"You shouldn't speak of such things."

Griffin found himself unwilling to discuss his relationship with Audrey, even with his best friend. Especially with his best friend. After all, it couldn't be proper to tell her own brother that he was obsessed with thoughts of Audrey. That each time she left the room, especially with Douglas Ellison, he was tormented.

"Then what should I speak of?" Noah asked in exasperation. "Very well, Wellington's presentation to the Queen. Would that be a benign enough topic for you? Will you call Douglas Ellison out, or allow my sister to

perform her duty?"

Griffin gave an answering shrug. "She'll be in a crowded room with the Queen's guard and both of us standing by. I won't be happy about it, but I won't interfere."

"Good. This will all be over soon enough." Noah sat down and folded his arms. "And then you can return to your normal life with both our apologies and thanks."

Griffin frowned at the thought of what his life would be like when Audrey and Noah's case was over. Audrey would be gone, out of his life as if she'd never lived in his home or made love to him.

And what if there was a child? He hadn't given much thought to it at the time, but he'd taken no precautions to keep Audrey from having his baby. Right now his son or daughter could be growing within her. If she left, she could easily hide the truth from him in order to continue her life as a spy.

"What's wrong?"

Griffin started at the intrusion into his thoughts. "Wrong?"

His friend's concerned frown lengthened with displeasure. "You look sick. What is it?"

"Nothing." He wasn't ready to talk about any of his thoughts with Noah. How could he? "I was just thinking about some choices I've made. And choices I have yet to make."

Noah looked less than convinced, but stood up with a shrug. "I should go get ready for the presentation and ball. I'd suggest you do the same."

Waving his friend off, Griffin rubbed his eyes. "I'll be right behind you."

Noah hesitated, then shook his head and left the room without any more comment. With a sigh of relief, Griffin crossed to the window and opened it. Outside the air was warm and still, heavy with humidity as the clouds gathered in the distance.

As the breeze ruffled his hair, Griffin continued to ponder his relationship with Audrey. He'd been wrong to take her innocence with no promise of a future. Yet he couldn't seem to help himself when she was near. He needed to touch her, to be with her. And not just because he wanted her in his bed, but because he'd grown accustomed to her presence in his life. The thought of her leaving was troubling.

"I suppose I could marry her," he muttered with a laugh at the thought.

At Luci's grave, he'd sworn time and again not to marry a second time. In the months since her death, though, the anger behind that bitter promise had faded, and the reality of his position had returned. He would be forced to marry someday, if only to continue his bloodline. But he'd never thought he would consider marriage so soon. Or marry a woman he desired and cared for so deeply.

That was the difficulty. He cared for Audrey, but did he love her? Was he even ready for love after everything Luci had put him through? At the moment, he wasn't sure. What he *was* sure of was that Audrey would be true to him.

Suddenly the sarcastic joke he'd made to himself seemed less amusing. Marrying Audrey was the proper thing to do after what had transpired between them. It was also beginning to seem like the right thing to do for his future.

With a shake of his head, Griffin crossed the room and began to ascend the stairway. He still needed to prepare for the ball and the thoughts spinning in his head were just too much. Tonight he would speak to Audrey, and he was certain she would see the logic in his newly developing plans.

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With a quick turn of her ankle and a flip of her spring green skirt, Audrey stepped from the carriage. She gave Noah a small smile as she took his arm, then they made their way up the long walkway to Buckingham House where the Queen was to receive Wellington.

The house was the Queen's main residence. It was utterly enchanting, even to Audrey who normally didn't pay much attention to the estates of the rich and powerful. She'd learned over time that the beauty of a building said nothing about the goodness of the inhabitants. But Buckingham House was hard not to admire.

Greek-style pillars embossed with leafing at the top and bottom supported the square building. Carriages filled the circular drive and a line of people entered the door at the top of the short stairway. Light from the windows streamed out, highlighting the many outside buildings that housed servants, horses and vehicles.

Griffin stepped down from the carriage behind her and gazed around him. "It's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

Despite the clouds.”

Audrey had to wonder at the sly smile he sent in her direction. He'd been behaving strangely all night, tossing her looks and saying cryptic things. She couldn't believe it all had to do with her promise to come to him that night.

A strange flutter went through her at the thought. In the carriage, their lovemaking had been spontaneous and animal. Tonight, there would be time for savoring each moment.

“Are you coming, or...?” Noah's voice forced her wandering thoughts back to the present.

She started when she realized she had stopped dead still in a haze. “I apologize, I was woolgathering.”

This was far too dangerous a situation to be sidetracked by thoughts of Griffin. She tossed one fleeting glance over her shoulder at the man and gave a little shiver. No matter how pleasant daydreams of him were, she had to concentrate on her mission.

The doors to Buckingham House opened and their group stepped inside the foyer. Already it was crowded with people milling about as they waited to be announced by the tailored footman at the entrance to the main throne room. Noah sighed as he released her arm and turned back to Griffin.

“Any way to move us up in line for the announcement, you think?” he asked.

Griffin shrugged one shoulder. “I doubt it. There are so many people of rank here, mine wouldn't be all that impressive in comparison.”

“Hmmm.” Noah scanned the crowd, his blue eyes jumping from one party of invitees to the next until finally they settled and he gave a little smile. “Well, well, well.”

“What is it?” Audrey peeked over her shoulder at the group Noah was looking at. When she saw who it was, she gave a little grumble of exasperation. Noah was staring at one of the most beautiful and scandalous widows in the *ton*. Lady Charlton wore a red dress, her abundant cleavage spilling over the top as she leaned forward and laughed at something one of her many male companions had said.

“I must go say hello.” Noah straightened his cravat. “Griffin, you won't mind keeping Audrey company, will you?”

Before Griffin could get out the entire word “no”, Noah was gone.

“How is it that he even gets any work done?”

Audrey folded her arms in displeasure before realizing they wrinkled her gown and returned them to her sides.

“I think he does it to watch you get so affronted,” Griffin said with a wide grin. “I'm certainly enjoying it.”

“He never takes anything seriously,” Audrey complained, though she knew in her heart that she could trust her brother with her life.

“And gets away with it brilliantly.” Griffin motioned to the crowd. “Look how they peel away when he approaches her.”

Griffin was right. As Noah arrived at Lady Charlton's side, the other men around her backed away. Even though they were scowling, they recognized Noah's power and his superiority at the little game of love they played at.

“Well,” she grumbled as she turned away. “I just hope he remembers what we're here for tonight while he's wooing his widow.”

“He will.”

Audrey looked at him with wide eyes at his absolute certainty.

“He always does, doesn't he?” With a grin, Griffin offered her the crook of his arm as another couple was announced and they moved closer to the footman.

Audrey shrugged one shoulder and tried to ignore the smell of spices and heat coming from Griffin. Even as she grew frustrated at her brother for his distraction, she had to admit she was no better. Just the touch of Griffin's hand was enough to send her heart into endless flutters and make the blood rush to her cheeks like some silly schoolgirl.

She grasped desperately for some kind of control over her emotions. “Noah... Noah tells me you've received a letter from your Mother.”

With a grim purse of his lips, Griffin nodded. “Yes, she asked about you.”

“Really?” Audrey was surprised. She'd never really thought her presence amounted much to anyone. “I

haven't seen your parents in years. Are they well?"

She took a calming breath as they moved into a conversation that seemed safe enough.

"Very well." He nodded. "Both are getting on in years, but you wouldn't know it. Mother is as beautiful as ever and father is strong as a horse. It may be my own sons that inherit from him rather than me."

"I'm glad they're doing so well." Her mind drifted to the two people they discussed. Lady Ashton had always been very kind to her. As a young woman, the lady's compassion had made her wish all the more that she would become her mother-in-law.

Griffin gave her an intense look. "After the events of this evening, I would like to talk to you in private."

"About your Mother?" she asked, shaking herself back to the present.

"No." He smiled. "About other things."

She dropped her voice to a mere whisper as she glanced around her to be sure no one was listening to their conversation. "I already told you I would come to you tonight."

"Yes, you did." His tone was suddenly strained as he quickly turned away and looked off into the crowd.

"Oh, look, we're the next to be announced." Relief at the interruption relaxed her. The room had become far too confined and hot. "Do you see Noah anywhere?"

Griffin used his superior height to scan the crowd. "No. He must be escorting Lady Charlton. I'm sure we'll find him inside the throne room."

Leaning over, he whispered something to the footman, then they stepped inside.

"Viscount Berenger and Lady Audrey Jordan," the man announced as the crowd turned to watch the two of them enter.

Audrey felt the scrutiny of the people around them as Griffin led her forward to the seats where they would watch the presentation. The women all looked jealous, while the men seemed relieved. It wasn't often a man stayed in mourning for his wife as long as Griffin had. Audrey supposed he made the other widowers look bad for marrying again or taking on new mistresses within weeks of their wives' deaths.

"You're quite the catch, aren't you?" she teased. "All the women look like they want to scratch my eyes out for being on your arm."

Griffin helped her settle into a chair, then took his place beside her. "Or perhaps they are jealous because you are the most beautiful creature in the room."

The pleasure from his comment warmed her from the root of her hair all the way down to the tips of her toes. The fact that Griffin found her beautiful was still a shocking one. When Audrey pictured herself, it was still as the gangly young girl who'd nearly tripped over her own feet to get close to the man at her side.

"You're a flatterer," she said, trying to look as if the comment hadn't affected her so much.

"I tell the truth." His tone didn't return her teasing. Turning in his chair, he looked at her straight on, forcing her eyes to meet his. "You are beautiful. And there's no one in this room I would rather be with than you."

As he moved to sit properly in his chair again, Audrey turned her face away. Being around Griffin was confusing. Part of her was thrilled with his attentiveness and caring toward her. The other knew their association would come to an end and leave her yearning all the more for him.

"There's Ellison," Griffin whispered into her ear.

She spun around to look in the direction he was indicating and found herself locking eyes with Douglas Ellison. For the first time since she'd been introduced to him three months before, the man looked furious. He was staring at Griffin with a deadly glare. Audrey recognized what Noah had told her was true. Ellison thought of Griffin as a competitor for her affections.

Her first reaction was terror. Griffin was in far more danger now than she'd suspected, for Ellison would do whatever it took to get what he wanted.

Then, slowly, the fear dulled, leaving her with the realization that this was exactly the situation she needed. If she was to manipulate Ellison into a proposal to bring her closer to him and to his secrets, using Griffin might just work.

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"It was a lovely ceremony, don't you think?" Lady Charlton leaned closer to Noah with a breathy sigh as she twirled a strand of blonde hair around her finger.

"Lovely," Audrey's tone was flat as she arched an eyebrow at her brother and rolled her eyes.

Griffin nearly laughed as her brother flashed her a grin in return and looked down at Lady Charlton with a smile. "You always find the right words to describe such an event. Always eloquent."

The woman dissolved into girlish giggles that grated on Griffin's ears, but he nodded in polite agreement. Noah was awful, the way he teased his sister.

"What a happy foursome we make."

Griffin stiffened as he turned, for he already knew who he would find behind them. Douglas Ellison. Noah beamed as he straightened up a bit. "Ellison, where were you? My sister had begun to droop without your presence."

Audrey smiled as if nothing could be truer, sending a shot of possessive anger through Griffin.

Ellison gave Griffin a pointed, irritated glare. "Somehow I doubt that. She and Lord Berenger looked very cozy when they came into throne room."

Audrey stepped forward to touch Ellison's arm. "You must have been mistaken. Noah here had become... involved..." She shot another glare at her brother. "With Lady Charlton. Lord Berenger was simply kind enough to escort me in his stead. I was looking for you all over. You cannot imagine my pleasure when I saw you across the room."

Griffin clenched his teeth as Ellison's stern face began to soften at her lies. The man truly believed Audrey cared for him, that she was his to claim. The thought was a sickening one.

"Then I wish you'd seen me earlier so we could have been seated together. I haven't seen you since your unfortunate disappearance at the Trafalgar reenactment." Again, he sent a cold glare in Griffin's direction.

Audrey smiled as she took Ellison's arm and leaned a fraction closer to him. "Yes, I do apologize about that unfortunate incident. As I explained in my note, I began to feel a bit ill. Lord Berenger was merely being overprotective of me by taking me home."

She slanted a quick glance in Griffin's direction and he saw a brief apology appear in her eyes.

"Is that what happened?" Lady Charlton asked with a blank giggle. "Some people have been gossiping about it."

Griffin clenched his teeth as Audrey's face paled just a fraction before she smoothed away the anxiety. "Well, you know how it is, Lady Charlton. People will make up a story if they can't find a real one, won't they?"

Griffin couldn't help but stifle a smile as Lady Charlton's dim expression suddenly became aware. Of course she was thinking of the rumors that had circulated after her latest husband's death. Some of the crueler gossips even called her the Very Merry Widow.

"Yes, that's very true, Lady Audrey," the blonde woman said, blinking a few times as her cheeks reddened.

Noah arched an eyebrow at his sister. "Well, I see the dancing has begun. Perhaps you would do me the honor, Lady Charlton?"

"Of course." The young woman smiled as if there had never been a problem.

"Idiotic woman," Ellison growled as the pair disappeared into the crowd only to reappear on the dance floor a moment later.

"She's only repeating gossip," Audrey said with a small sigh. "As the *ton* is known to do."

Griffin noticed the slight waver at the corner of her lips and wondered if she was thinking of the rumors five years ago. The rumors his wife had created. It stoked his anger even further, and his resolve to do the right thing when it came to Audrey and her future.

Ellison nodded with a triumphant grin in Griffin's direction. "I would love a dance with you. We could continue our discussion... in *private*."

"Of course," she said with a smile even Griffin would have taken as sincere. "If you'll excuse us, Lord Berenger."

He gave a quick nod, unable to speak for fear he'd say things he would later regret. Her assignment was dangerous enough without him adding his choice comments about the safety of spending time with blackguards and traitors.

As they moved out onto the dance floor, he scowled. It was even harder to watch Audrey in the arms of

a madman now that he'd held her in his own. He didn't want Ellison to have any claim on her, real or imagined.

Holding back a colorful curse, Griffin headed across the ballroom to the back where the porters were handing out champagne. It wasn't exactly a strong brew, but it would do to take the edge of the rage boiling in his chest. He took two glasses and skulked to the back of the room. The last thing he wanted was to be noticed by the straining Mamas and hauled out to dance by a string of tittering, foolish girls.

Just as he reached the back corner of the room, he heard a laugh. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary in a crowd, but the sound froze him mid-stride. As he slowly turned to face the noise, his mouth came open in shock. There, not ten feet away from him, was his mother.

## ***Chapter Fifteen***

Griffin didn't remember walking across the room, but found himself at his mother's elbow nonetheless.

"Mother?" he asked, interrupting her conversation. The women she was with moved away with smiles and brief greetings for him.

"Griffin!" She turned to give him a quick hug and a kiss on his cheek. "There you are!"

He prayed his voice would have some level of calm to it when he spoke. "What are you doing here?"

Her face fell as she moved out of his arms to look him up and down carefully. Her brown eyes narrowed in concern, but she continued to smile as she said, "After I wrote you, your father and I began talking. I hated to miss all the celebrations, and we wanted to see you. So we came."

He took her arm to lead her away from the bulk of the crowd. "I wish you'd told me, Mother, so I could have greeted you."

"What's wrong?" She leaned closer to give them some level of privacy. "You seem out of sorts."

With a deep breath, he smiled at her. She could know nothing about what was really happening or why he was so stunned at her presence. "Nothing. I'm just surprised."

His mother pursed her lips and gave an unsure, "Hmmm. Well, that windbag Lord Eldergray caught your father and dragged him into political discussion, so you may not see him for quite some time. But I'm so pleased to see you."

"As I am to see you," he replied with a much more genuine smile, for the sentiment was true.

It had been a long while since he'd seen his mother. After Luci's death he'd hidden away, refusing all invitations from his parents or any other family members. His mother's letters had become increasingly concerned over the months, but he always answered them as if she'd asked no questions about his health and well-being.

"Your letter said Noah and Audrey Jordan were staying with you during the celebrations." She rose to her tiptoes to see over the crowd. "Are they here tonight?"

Griffin's mind sliced to Audrey on the arm of Douglas Ellison. The image gave him a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Yes, somewhere."

"I haven't seen Audrey in so long... or Noah." She arched an eyebrow and gave her son a sly look. "Tabitha Jordan has been so upset since Audrey left to see the world under only her brother's watchful eye. Has she told you much about her travels?"

Griffin twisted his mouth and gave his mother an appraising stare. Of course she would be curious about Audrey. His mother had always liked her, and had probably been as shocked about her scandalous disappearance as her own mother had been.

"Not much. I believe the travel has done her good, though," he said. "You'll see when we find her."

"Well, let's do just that, shall we?" his mother asked, practically dragging him across the floor in hopes of finding his houseguests.

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Audrey nodded at something Douglas Ellison said while she smiled at her brother. Thankfully, Noah had broken company with his widow and returned to her side to chat with her and the man they hunted. So far their discussions hadn't born fruit. Douglas insisted on discussion about the weather and continued to harp on Audrey's leaving the reenactment early. Despite her explanations and reassurances, he seemed to suspect that more was behind her exit than she was saying.

Thank God he didn't know how true that was. As he droned on endlessly in the background, Audrey's mind briefly went to the moments in the carriage with Griffin. His hands on her, his mouth...

"Audrey Jordan!"

Pivoting at a female voice calling her name from a few feet away, Audrey stared in disbelief as Lady Penelope Ashton, Griffin's mother, came toward her with open arms. Griffin was a few feet behind, and it appeared he was being dragged by his mother.

"Lady Ashton?" Audrey said, phrasing her name in a form of a stunned question as the other woman embraced her and placed a kiss on each of her cheeks.

"Yes, my dear. Oh you do look well, just as Griffin said you did," she gushed, placing a gloved hand on Audrey's face as she beamed at her.

Audrey nodded, her head spinning. Here she was, staring at the mother of the man she had just been fantasizing about. The man who she'd promised to come to for untold intimacies in just a few hours. Glancing over at Griffin, his heated stare told her he was thinking the same thing. With a little shiver, she watched Lady Ashton move to her brother's side.

"And Noah! Or should I say Lord Lockhart? It's hard for me to see you as anything more than a dirty-faced little boy getting into all kinds of trouble, my son in tow!"

Noah stood gape-mouthed for a moment before he stepped forward. Taking her hand, he placed a kiss on the top and grinned. "Lady Ashton, what a pleasure it is to see you. You look as beautiful now as you ever did."

"You flatterer!" She tapped his hand with her fan and smiled. "You haven't changed at all in the years since I saw you last, only gotten better at playing the rake."

Griffin stepped forward to take his mother's arm. "Mother, you may remember Mr. Ellison. He's my neighbor and a friend of Lord Lockhart's and Lady Audrey's."

"Lady Ashton," Ellison said with a low bow. "What a pleasant surprise, Berenger hadn't mentioned you were in London."

"I'm afraid I surprised him." Lady Ashton nodded to Ellison. "His father and I came to London on a whim."

Noah nodded, but Audrey could see the concern in her brother's blue eyes. They were working under conditions they had never encountered on assignments on the continent. There they only had to watch out for each other. Here they had family and friends who could easily interfere in their business, as Lord and Lady Ashton had done. Every time people they loved came into contact with Ellison, they put themselves in unknown danger. It was a terrifying thought.

Ellison gave each woman a thin smile. "Perhaps I could fetch you ladies a bit of punch?"

Lady Ashton nodded. "Oh that would be lovely, Mr. Ellison. I'm certainly parched by the heat in this overcrowded room, and Audrey looks a bit warm, herself."

"Very good." Turning, Ellison gave Audrey a long look. "I shall return as quickly as possible."

"Do," Audrey choked out, shocked but still desperate to continue her game with Ellison. During the dance they'd shared he'd been much more attentive with her, and she knew his jealousy might drive him closer to her yet.

Griffin nodded to the two women as Ellison disappeared into the crowd. "Will you two excuse Noah and I, as well? I wanted to speak to him about a matter of some importance."

"Go then, I'd like a moment with Audrey anyway," Lady Ashton said with a warm smile in Audrey's direction.



Griffin returned her smile, then motioned for Noah to follow him. Audrey watched them go with the knowledge that her brother was probably about to get an earful from the angry Viscount. She winced at the ramifications for their future friendship, then turned to Lady Ashton with a falsely bright smile.

"I am so happy to see you, my lady," she said. "It has been far too long."

Audrey was thankful she only had to force her facial expression, not the emotion in her response. She was glad to see Lady Ashton. The woman was one of the kindest people she'd ever known. Seeing her now brought back memories of a happier time.

"Yes, you haven't graced our home since..." The other woman paused as she placed a finger on her lips. Suddenly her face softened with memory. "Why, it must be since Griffin's wedding. You shouldn't have stayed away so long."

Audrey nodded with a weak smile, though she felt no pleasure at Lady Ashton's reminder of Griffin's marriage. The only emotions accompanying that memory were pain and humiliation.

Lady Ashton continued without waiting for her answer. "I must say you've changed so much. Your time on the continent has done you good."

Audrey blushed. "Thank you, my lady. My brother is an interesting travel companion, and I've seen many wonderful things while abroad."

An arched eyebrow was her companion's reply. "Not many got to see *those things* with the war going on, did they?"

As the blood drained from her face, Audrey searched for an answer to her companion's subtle innuendo. "Well, some of my brother's business concerns—"

"You don't have to explain to me." Lady Ashton nodded. "It isn't of any import. Just—just be careful, will you?"

Nodding, Audrey wondered how much Lady Ashton knew. Her eyes were full of concern.

"I'm always careful." Audrey touched the other woman's arm to give it a gentle squeeze.

Lady Ashton turned her head away quickly, wiping her eyes before turning back with a dazzling smile. "I'm pleased at how well Griffin looks. After Luci's death, we were quite worried about him."

Her companion's face fell as sorrow and a touch of anger filled it.

"I imagine it's difficult to lose the love of one's life," Audrey said softly as she looked over the crowd.

In the distance she saw Griffin and Noah deep in conversation. Griffin looked handsome in his dark evening clothes. His dark blond hair curled around his forehead and he held himself like a Roman god.

"Or any spouse." Lady Ashton sighed.

Wrinkling her brow, Audrey turned to face the woman beside her. Was Griffin's own mother now implying that he hadn't been happy in his marriage to Luci?

With a shake of her head, Lady Ashton looked into Audrey's eyes. "I wonder if it is your presence... and your brother's, of course... that has made him look so much better?"

Audrey actually backed up a step in shock. "I'm sure having his best friend by his side helps Griffin enormously. And time tends to heal, as well."

"I think it's more than that," Lady Ashton said with a gentle smile.

"There you are!"

Both women turned to see Griffin's father crossing the room with a grin on his face. Audrey was stunned, as always, at how much Griffin looked like the older Earl.

"Charles," Lady Ashton said, holding out her hand to her husband with a smile. "You finally broke away from Eldergray, did you?"

"It took an age!" the other man laughed. "Dear God, he can talk the ear off a mouse."

"You remember Audrey Jordan, don't you, my dear?" Lady Ashton motioned to Audrey with a small grin.

His face lit up as he took Audrey's hand. "Of course. Good evening, Lady Audrey. It is good to see you again after so long."

"My lord," she said as she smiled at the man.

He turned to his wife with a wink. "Tabitha, would you like a dance? They're playing the waltz and I'd like to prove the older generation can perform these new steps with the best of the young ones."

"I'd love to. Audrey, if you'll excuse us."

She smiled as she watched the two enter the dance floor to begin the twists and turns that were the waltz. After so many years together, it was obvious they remained very much in love. A twinge of envy made her turn away, though she was shocked by it. How could she be jealous of a couple that had been together for over thirty years? It was ridiculous.

With a sigh she looked out over the ballroom again. Couples were paired off all around her, huddled in corners, flirting from across the room with fans and winks or spinning across the dance floor in each other's arms to the strains of the waltz.

The rest of the unpaired masses were in groups. Tittering girls years younger than she stared at the other women with admiration or scorn, and the men with interest or desire. The dandies and the rakes had even moved in together for talk of sport and women. Everyone belonged somewhere.

Everyone but her.

The life she'd chosen with Noah had put her firmly on the outside of this gay little world, just as she had been when she'd run from it in disgrace years before. This time the *ton* liked her, wanted to be near her, but that was only because of the mask she wore. Without Hannah's hairstyles and her lavish wardrobe, she had nothing in common with the people around her.

Overwhelmed by her thoughts, she suddenly needed a moment alone. Gathering up her skirt into her fist, she fled around the parameter of the dance floor and through the veranda doors. The air outside greeted her with a breath of freshness, cooling her heated brow and making her feel less stifled and uncomfortable.

What was wrong with her? She had a job to do, yet she was mooning about on the veranda, looking out on the massive garden while she felt sorry for herself. She had no reason to be so maudlin. To be so... lonely. But she was.

And tired.

Tired to running from country to country. Tired of being alone every night. And tired of knowing men wanted to be near her only for the inheritance she could give, and that she only wanted to be near them for the secrets they could share. Her entire life was a fraud.

"Audrey?"

Turning slowly, she faced the voice and gave a soft smile. What she wanted stood feet away from her, outlined in the light of the ballroom. She wanted Griffin Berenger, still. Always. Forever.

"Audrey?" he repeated as he shut the door behind him softly and took a few steps toward her. "What's wrong? Did my mother say something to upset you?"

She motioned to the other side of the veranda where fewer people stood. "No. Your mother was a dream, as always. I just felt... felt..."

"Stifled in there?" He held out a glass of champagne.

She accepted with a smile and a nod, happy he'd voiced what she felt. "Yes, exactly."

He leaned lazily against the low stone wall to look out across the maze of gardens below them.

"I've always felt the same way." A frown darkened his face. "Luci lived for these events, but I was happy to stay away. I still cringe at being surrounded by all these people."

"That must have been very frustrating for you."

She moved a bit closer to him. Her hand stirred at her side as the breeze blew his dark blond hair into his eyes, but he brushed it aside before she could touch him.

"Yes. I went with her, of course. At first, at least," he added with a frown.

Audrey took a deep breath. This was her chance to ask all the questions she had wanted to about Luci. About the rumors and innuendos that crackled in the air whenever anyone spoke about her.

"Please tell me more about..." she began, watching through foggy eyes as he moved a fraction closer to her. She could almost feel his heat, and could definitely smell the spicy scent of his skin.

"Here we are again."

Griffin moved first, turning to face Douglas Ellison as she jumped a foot away.

"Ellison," he said with a false smile.

"This is becoming a habit, isn't it?" Ellison asked, his tone colder than an icehouse as he looked past Griffin to her. "My interrupting the two of you."

She stepped forward and held out both her hands. "Douglas, you misunderstand my friendship with

Lord Berenger. Please don't allow your jealousy..."

"I would like a moment alone with Lady Audrey if you don't mind, Berenger." The thin man glared at Griffin as if daring him to refuse.

Griffin opened his mouth to speak and Audrey's heart lodged in her throat. If he said anything to imply she wasn't safe with Ellison, it could tip the man off to what she really was.

For a long moment, Griffin said and did nothing, just stared at her. Then he bowed to Ellison and said, "As you wish."

Turning on his heel, he strode back into the ballroom, his gate clipped and purposeful. Audrey could guess he was planning to find Noah and felt a bit safer with the knowledge.

Focusing on matters at hand, she moved closer to the man who had interrupted her moment with Griffin. Looking up into his gray eyes, she felt nothing but contempt, but refused to let him sense her distaste.

"Your jealousy is quite sweet, but misplaced."

"Really, Audrey?" Ellison's anger was evident in everything about him, from his cold tone of voice to the way he held himself. "If that's true than why do I catch you looking so deeply into his eyes? Why do I find him watching your every move whenever you're in a room with him?"

Torn between stoking Ellison's jealousy and keeping Griffin safe, Audrey pondered what she should say. Finally she shook her head with a sadness she didn't feel.

"Lord Berenger is an old friend," she explained, biting her lip before continuing. "He's gone through a terrible trial, losing his wife, and I want to comfort him. Perhaps *he* has misconstrued that friendship, but I tell you, you have nothing to fear."

Ellison took in a shallow breath as he stepped closer, invading her personal space and making her uncomfortably warm. "Why is that?"

She swallowed hard, then looked up into his eyes with what she hoped was an adoring stare. "Douglas, you must know there is only one man who has captured my heart this Season."

Well, at least it was the truth. If Ellison believed she was talking about him, so be it. Only she had to know Griffin Berenger was the one she loved, and would always love.

"If that's true, prove it to me," he whispered, putting his arm around her waist with the slowness of a snake encompassing around its victim. "Kiss me as I kissed you in the carriage."

"I..." she stammered, unsure if she could press her mouth against his one more time. "I have my reputation to think of."

"Nonsense." He inched her ever closer to him with tiny tugs on her waist. "You and I have been courting publicly. And this is a private area where no one is watching. Besides, Audrey, it isn't as if you haven't been caught in such a situation before."

She froze at those words. He couldn't be referring to what had happened to her on a similar veranda all those years ago. There had been general rumors about her thanks to Luci, but no one had ever known about the man on the veranda except for her mother and Griffin's wife. Luci had, at least, kept that promise.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't think I know about your past?" he asked, his lips moving closer to her ear. "I must be careful who I associate with as I move my way up in Society. I had you investigated by certain people in my employ. But don't worry, Audrey."

Her skin felt like a thousand spiders were crawling on it, their tiny tentacles tickling her and raising the hairs on the back of her neck.

"Kiss me," he whispered. "And I'll believe that you care for only me."

"And if I refuse?"

Her lip trembled even as she tried to remain playful and teasing like a lover would be.

"Then I'll have to take it that Griffin Berenger is a threat to me." His lips brushed her ear. "I don't like threats."

Everything around Audrey suddenly slowed down to a snail's pace. Douglas's lips moved, but she didn't hear anything more than that he would consider Griffin a threat. Griffin was in danger. Real danger. And all because of her and the feelings she couldn't seem to hide. Without thinking, without breathing, she turned her mouth to Ellison's and kissed him.

His lips were cold, cooler than she'd remembered them when he'd forced them on her in the carriage weeks before. But his hands were like steel as they wrapped around her shoulders and drew her closer. His fingers bit into her skin, burning her through the thin silk of her gown. How she kept herself from gagging, she couldn't say, but when she drew back, dipping her head in a show of modesty, she barely resisted the urge to spit.

"Is that proof enough for you that you're the one I care for?" She hoped he took her breathless voice as desire and not fear and loathing.

"Very much so." He raised her gloved hand to his lips and placed a wet kiss there. His mouth made a mark on the silk, and she knew she'd been branded.

"Audrey? Audrey?" Noah's voice came from the veranda doorway.

"I'm here!" she called out, trying to keep the break from her voice as she willed her brother to hurry.

He whipped around the corner of the veranda, then skidded to a slower speed as he gave the couple a suspicious look. "What's going on here?"

She met her brother's eyes with desperation. "Nothing Noah. We were just looking at the moon."

"Yes." Ellison released her hand at long last to bow his head at her brother. "I've enjoyed it immensely. But perhaps I should go back inside. It's getting late and I have many people to speak with before I depart."

"Goodnight Douglas," she whispered with a shaky smile.

"Good evening Audrey," he whispered back. He locked eyes with her before nodding again to her brother. "Lord Lockhart."

Once he had gone, the veranda door safely shut behind him, Audrey drooped against the wall. Noah hurried to her side to take her arm as he whispered, "What happened?"

"I did it," she said, hoping she wouldn't break down into tears as she stared at the circular ring of spit that marred her glove. The outline of Ellison's lips.

"Did what?" he asked, his tone cautionary. "What did you do?"

"I convinced him I belong to him."

She buried her face in her brother's shoulder. With every ounce of strength and training, she held back the tears that threatened to break her down. There would be time later to sob. For now, she still had a role to play. A blasted duty.

## ***Chapter Sixteen***

Griffin hated when he didn't know what was happening around him. It reminded him of the long nights he'd waited for Luci to return from her parties, guessing what she'd been doing, but never certain. The same was now true with Audrey.

She had come back into the ballroom pale and shaky, holding her brother's arm as if he were all that kept her upright. Griffin had wanted to run to her, to take her in his arms and kiss her until the look of terror left her face. But he couldn't. He couldn't because that would harm her beloved cover, and it would shame her in front of the *ton*.

Now though, as they raced back to his home in his carriage, he expected some kind of explanation. But Noah and Audrey were silent except for the worried glances they traded. Looks that locked him out of their world with no chance of entry.

"Will your mother and father come to visit tomorrow?" Audrey's dull voice broke the silence in the carriage.

"Probably," he said with a shrug. He hadn't given much thought to his parents since Audrey had been trapped alone with Ellison. "They don't intend to stay in the city long. Mother says London is stifling after the Season is over. Much too hot for her in the summer."

She sighed. "I often feel the same way. Cities all over the world are like that. Too hot and too crowded."

Griffin winced as the laughing young lady he cared for so much turned to a woman jaded by too many missions and too many cities.

"But you like many of those places, too, Audrey," her brother reminded her gently. "You always tell me they each have their own unique charm."

Audrey was silent as she looked at the lights of the city. Her only movement was a slight correction of balance as they turned onto Griffin's street. The carriage stopped and the footman opened the door, offering her his hand as she stepped out.

"You had a long evening." Noah stepped out and patted her hand before he slipped it into the crook of his elbow. "You need to rest."

"Noah, you don't have to tuck me in," she said. "You have someplace to go, don't you?"

Motioning with her head back toward the carriage, she smiled, but the expression was almost emotionless.

Her brother's eyes crinkled with concern. "I can take a moment to escort you into the house."

"I'll escort her." Griffin held out his hand to Audrey. "You go and take care of whatever it is you need to do to end this madness."

Noah hesitated for a moment, then nodded as he swung back into the rig. After conferring with the driver, they were off again, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

Audrey watched the coach go for a moment, then turned to look up at Griffin. Her smile was shy, not the

of a woman who knew him, or had touched the way she had just one day before. She looked younger, more vulnerable.

"Come inside." He took her arm and led her into the house, but instead of releasing her go at the foot of the stairs, he kept going up until he passed her room and entered his own.

At his doorway, she pulled back with a blush. "Griffin!"

"Come inside and talk to me. It's private here and no one has to know." He pushed the door shut behind him.

"Well..." her tone was unsure, but she didn't flee his room. She did shrug from his arms, though, pacing nervously to the window in the sitting area of his chamber. He could feel how distracted and conflicted she was.

"Do you want to tell me what happened once I left the terrace?"

"You don't want to know." She dropped her chin to stare at the wooden planks in the floor below. "But do you think you could just..."

He drew in a breath at her hesitation as he took a long step in her direction. "Just what?"

Her eyes came up slowly and met his. "Do you think you could hold me for a moment?"

He didn't answer, but opened his arms and drew her into his embrace, holding her against his chest as she took shuddering breath after shuddering breath. She wasn't crying, merely hugging him as tightly as her arms could manage. As if she feared he might vanish if she lessened her grip even a fraction.

"Audrey," he whispered into her hair, breathing in the subtle fragrance of lilacs and lemons. "Please talk to me. Allow me to help you in some way."

Turning her chin up, she looked at him. Her face was full of desire as well as other emotions. It was enough to make his entire body clench in reaction.

"You can't help me," she whispered even as she lifted her lips toward him.

"Why?" he asked, lowering his own.

He never heard her answer because their mouths met and for a long time he hardly remembered to breathe, let alone speak.

Their lips crushed against each other, tasting, touching with fervor, as if this could be the last time they kissed. Of course, with the case escalating and nearing its end, it might be. The thought drove him to deepen the kiss, until she whimpered against his mouth in a wordless plea for more.

Her fingers trailed up and down the path of his spine to awaken the nerves there until his entire body tingled with desire. He'd never had such a powerful reaction to a woman's touch.

Her elaborate gown bunched under his hands as he slid them down her sides to her waist and clutched her hips. Eagerly, she tilted them up, touching his pelvis and following his animal movements.

Somehow he guided them through the open door into his bedroom, moving back to the bed until her thighs knocked against the mattress edge. There he paused to look at her.

Her hair had fallen from the intricate pile on her head, loosening into curls that fell like fire around her shoulders and across her chest. With one trembling hand, Griffin caught a long strand, rubbing it between his fingers before grasping the nape of her neck and pulling her to him for another kiss.

Sighing against his lips, she began unbuttoning his shirt. Her fingertips brushed through the wiry hair on his chest and caused him to utter a low groan of pleasure.

Audrey's eyes came up at the soft sound and she smiled. If she knew nothing else, Griffin wanted her. And she wanted him. Perhaps that wasn't enough for a lifetime, but it was enough for this night.

Finally she got all the tiny buttons unfastened and slipped the shirt from his shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor. Then she stared at him.

In the carriage when they'd made love before she hadn't felt the full impact of his body. He was as beautiful as she'd always imagined. Like a Greek god, he was broad through the shoulders, his muscles toned beneath her fingertips as she drug them down the length of his chest, stopping just short of where his wiry chest hair disappeared into his trousers.

Catching her hand in his, Griffin lifted it to his lips and placed a warm kiss inside her wrist. Before she had time to react, he wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his lips down to hers again. His mouth teased her, tempting her to melt against him as he drug his lips down to her throat.

Meanwhile, he pushed her dress up further and further, past her calves and up around her hips as his

hands smoothed along her stockings, dipping in to grip the back of her knees and caress the smooth skin on her thighs.

Though she should have felt exposed and shy, she didn't. In fact, she felt more alive than she had in a long time. All her fears about the mission and Douglas Ellison melted away as she arched against Griffin's chest and surrendered to his desires.

He lowered her to the mattress, supporting her with one hand as he wrapped one of her long legs around his back with the other. She could feel the hard thrust of his erection even through the confining layers of cloth that separating them. She sighed with anticipation as she shifted closer. In just one day she'd gone from a shy virgin to a wanton who practically begged this man to thrust inside of her.

He seemed to understand her silent plea, for he began working at her clothing in earnest, unclipping her stockings and peeling them off one by one, then wrenching the buttons on her dress open. The silken gown slid off easily, followed by the rest of her under things.

Unlike the first time, now she was completely naked before him. In the carriage she'd been mostly clothed as they groped and tore their way through their first time making love. But now the pace was much slower and conventional.

She was surprised she wasn't embarrassed to feel his eyes roving over her from her head to her toes. In fact, she welcomed the gaze, reveling in the fact that he stood motionless, reverent before dropping to his knees beside her on the mattress.

Silent only because he could find no words to describe the emotions pouring through him, Griffin reached out to touch her. His fingertips glided across the delicate curve of her collarbone, and into the valley between her breasts. Perfect breasts in his mind, just the right size to fill his hands.

He cupped each one in his palms and smiled when Audrey gasped with surprise, then arched up against him. Her nipples were already hard, but he bent to take one into his mouth regardless. He'd not had the time to explore her body fully the day before, but tonight he had all the time in the world and intended to take it.

He swirled his tongue around the sensitive skin of her areola, then suckled the hard bead at the tip of her breast. It hardened even further as she moaned and writhed beneath him. He moved to the other breast and sucked until she groaned, "Please. Please."

He understood what she needed, and pulled away for the brief moment it took to remove his trousers, then laid back down. This time, he spread her legs to lie between them, nudging the damp slit between her legs with the tip of his manhood as he kissed her deeply. When they broke the kiss, he slid fully into her.

She braced for the shot of pain she'd experienced the previous day, but when none came she looked up at him in wonder and pleasure.

"It only hurts the first time," he whispered with a smile, before beginning to move slowly within her.

His body screamed at him to go faster, harder, but he ignored its needs, concentrating instead on the reactions she gave. When she came close to the brink, he eased his movements, hoping to prolong her enjoyment as much as possible. Finally, she shut her eyes and bit her lip with a groan of pleasure, contracting under him as she shivered with the force of her release. He followed close behind, grasping her closer as he cried out her name, then withdrew to spend himself on the sheets beside her.

Flopping down on the bed, Griffin gathered her into his arms and kissed her forehead while he took deep breaths. In his entire life, he'd never felt as fulfilled after lovemaking as he did at that moment.

"That was lovely." Stretching her arm over his chest, she gave a contented sigh. "Much easier on a bed."

Griffin laughed. "Well, adventure is all well and good, but there *is* something to be said for a soft bed."

"Yes." Her voice became distant. "I'm beginning to appreciate that more and more."

Arching an eyebrow, Griffin shifted to look her directly in the face and saw a trace of sadness in her eyes. The look troubled him.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No!" She glanced up at him with a shake of her head. "Far from it. I thought I made that abundantly clear."

He smiled, but said, "You looked... sad somehow."

"Oh."

Pulling from his arms, Audrey sat up and looked around the room, refusing to meet his eyes when she spoke again. "I hate having to go back to reality now that I've been in this dream world, that's all."

Standing, she groped around on the ground until she found her chemise. Griffin watched as she slipped it over her head, loving the way the fabric moved over her skin.

As she went to work on her stockings, he said, "Then don't go back. Stay here with me tonight."

Her eyes flew to his face at his request, surprise evident by the way her lips parted. "You know I can't do that."

Standing, he walked over to her, not bothering to cover himself as she'd done. He liked how her eyes dilated with desire, moving over his body in one swift motion before she forced them back to his face.

"Why?" he whispered. "Just don't go."

She frowned. "*I must*. My brother will return soon. We wouldn't want him to find us this way, would we?"

He shrugged one shoulder as he watched her hook her stocking with one hand. "I don't care."

With a bark of disbelieving laughter, she straightened back up. "You will after my brother pistol whips you. When he calls you out and makes you..."

She trailed off and a blush colored her cheeks as she turned away to find her dress.

"Makes me what?" Griffin asked softly, turning her around to fasten the buttons of the gown.

She pulled away from him as soon as her gown was closed and ran her fingers through her tangled hair with a distracted sigh. "Never mind."

Griffin knew full well what she meant was that Noah would force him to marry Audrey. After all, he'd made love to her not once, but twice. The honorable thing to do would be to make her his wife. It wasn't the first time the notion had sprung into his mind, and each time it seemed like the best course of action. Certainly better than letting her slip from his life into the night.

His heart had begun to beat faster somewhere between the time he'd gotten up from the bed and now, and all he could hear was the blood rushing in his veins. It had been a long time since he'd been so out of sorts, but he steeled himself to his task as he yanked his trousers over his hips and buttoned the first two buttons.

"There's something important we must discuss," he said, clearing his throat. "About what happened tonight."

With a sigh, she paced away from the bed, throwing one last glance at the tangled mess of his bedclothes before hurrying back into the relative safety of his dressing room.

"About what happened at the ball?" she asked, though he knew she was only trying to avoid the subject. "I realize you must be very angry. And your parents are in danger, so you must be worried, as well. But I assure you—"

"No," he interrupted.

He followed her into the sitting room and neatly cut off her retreat by stepping in front of her to block the door. "You know very well that wasn't it at all. This isn't about anyone but you and me."

"Oh." Her answer came out as no more than a squeak. Her eyes were lit up with anticipation, as well as remnants of desire.

"All I could think about last night and today was what happened between us yesterday afternoon." Reaching out, he took her hand. "What I knew would happen again tonight."

"It's been on my mind, as well." Her cheeks became a charming shade of pale pink at her confession.

"But..." He drew in a deep breath before continuing. "I shouldn't have let things go so far between us."

Her eyes flew to his face once more as her skin darkened further. "Oh."

"But I did, and now I must do what's right."

He cleared his throat a second time. Somehow this entire undertaking was proving more difficult than he'd imagined it would be. Especially when Audrey looked at him with hurt in her eyes.

"You don't have to make anything right," she said. "I'm an adult and I made a choice. If there are consequences of that action, I must be the one to deal with them. I certainly don't need anyone to save me from my own decisions."

He frowned at the way she held herself, on guard and ready for attack.



"I was the more experienced between the two of us," he reasoned. "I should have maintained control. Lord knows I tried to..."

A small smile turned up one corner of her lips. "It wasn't as if I was entirely swept away. I knew what I was doing."

Again, he frowned. He hadn't expected her to reason with him, though perhaps he should have. If Audrey could do one thing, it was reason her way into and out of any situation.

Ignoring her statement, he said, "We know we're compatible in many ways. I respect your intelligence and wit. We have a friendship I value immensely. All these things can make a marriage a great success."

Her lips parted further and her eyes widened.

"I realize this is sudden," he hastened to add. "But it is what I must do to make up for my... lapse in gentlemanly behavior."

For a long moment, she said nothing and stared down at her trembling fingers as she twisted her wrinkled skirt in her hand. "Is that all?"

"What?"

"Are you through?" she repeated without lifting her eyes.

"Yes." He paused. "You realize I'm asking you to be my wife, don't you?"

"I'm aware of that fact." She turned to pace away from him to his window. Her shoulders trembled as she looked down at the street below, silent again for a long time.

Finally, she turned to face him with ashen skin. "No."

As he drew back, shock raced through him. "No?"

"I won't marry you." She shook her head. "I can't believe I'm saying it myself."

His pride stung. "Then why are you?"

Pursing her lips, she said, "I will not marry for anything less than love. And I don't mean love from one person alone. Both the parties must feel the same level of regard for one another."

Griffin laughed bitterly. "That fantasy doesn't exist. One person always feels more emotion than the other. We have friendship, esteem and passion. That's more than most in the *ton*."

"It isn't enough for me, Griffin," she whispered. "So the answer is no."

Faint anger stirred in his chest at her utter refusal, even in the face of his reasoning. "I can force your hand, you know. I can make sure Noah finds out what happened between us in the carriage and tonight. After he beats me within an inch of my life, he'll force a union between us."

At that, her face paled until it was nearly ghostly white, but her hands clenched into trembling fists. "My Mother and Father tried to compel me into a marriage once. I ran. Force my hand, and I'll do the same now."

For the first time, Griffin realized just how serious she was. Audrey wasn't playing coy or blurting out an answer without thought. Whether or not her ideas were valid, she was ready to bolt if he tried to make her follow his order.

As her face began to regain some of its color, she spoke again. This time her tone was much gentler.

"Passion will fade, and we'll be left with what? A nice friendship? Cordial strangers who share a name?" She shrugged. "I don't want a man who still loves and mourns his first wife."

This time it was Griffin's turn to stiffen in reaction to her words. The reminder of Luci made his blood chill and his head begin to throb. There it was, one more thing his former wife could take from him. Had taken from him for years.

Audrey.

Choking out a laugh, he said, "Mourn for Luci? I can barely keep myself from cursing her to everyone who offers me condolences."

Drawing in a sharp breath at Griffin's sudden outburst, Audrey stumbled away from him.

And Griffin realized the time had come to finally tell her the truth. Even if it changed the way she felt about him forever.

## Chapter Seventeen

"Oh yes, that horrifies you, doesn't it?" Griffin asked with a shake his head. "As well it should. One shouldn't speak ill of the dead, especially one's wife, and yet I hate her. I despise her with every fiber in my being."

Audrey stepped closer and blinked back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. They weren't for the anger in Griffin's voice, but the anguish in his eyes.

"What you see in me isn't horror. This is just the first time I've heard this from your own lips. Others have implied you weren't happy, but I didn't know if that was idle gossip. I know how the *ton* can be, finding reasons to malign when there are none."

Closing his eyes, Griffin lifted his head to face the ceiling high above. From his pained expression, it was clear his emotions tormented him. She had never felt such sharp waves of pain emanating from a person before.

"No," he whispered. "They weren't gossiping. It's the truth."

Sucking in a short breath, she finally dared to touch him, very gently, on the top of his hand. His eyes flew to where her fingers rested, but he didn't flinch away. For that she was glad. Somehow she needed to touch him, to comfort him while he told her the truth he'd kept hidden for so long.

"Was it always that way? From the beginning?"

He shook his head. "Not from the beginning. When I married her, I believed I cared for her and that she cared for me. After you kissed me, I couldn't stop thinking of you, but I convinced myself time would change that."

Resisting the urge to stagger away again, Audrey stared at him. He'd spent the years thinking of *her*? She couldn't believe that was true.

"Of me?"

"That's right." His voice was strangely distant as he reached out to draw his palm across her cheek. She shivered at the heat of his hands on her skin. "I had to force myself not to think of you. I did everything I could... riding, gambling and socializing with Luci and our friends. During the day, I could control my thoughts. But the nights... I couldn't stop the dreams that haunted me."

Audrey bit her lip and dipped her head, her breath coming in shallow little gulps as she digested what he'd revealed. A shudder rippled through her. All these years Griffin had been obsessed with her while she'd been yearning for him.

"Why did you think of *me*?" She didn't dare to look up at him for fear he'd see how much his words affected her.

"Don't you know?" He slipped a finger beneath her chin to force her to tilt her face toward him. "When you kissed me all those years ago, you woke something in me. Perhaps it was a desire I'd always felt for you, but suppressed because we were so young or because you're Noah's sister. But once I realized my

desire, I couldn't stop it. I couldn't keep from wanting you."

The breath she drew in was ragged, more like a little cry than a breath at all. Her head was spinning with the words he said to her. Obsession, desire, a need to be with her. They were concepts she'd never dared to think of before. That Griffin would want and need her as much as she'd always wanted and needed him.

"But what happened with... Luci?" she asked, barely choking out the question as she tried to remain focused and rein in her out of control emotions. It was nearly impossible.

He dropped his hand back down to his side with a small sigh, as if her question brought him back to an unpleasant reality he didn't want to face.

"Things began to change between us."

"How?" Her voice cracked.

"Though I tried to keep my feelings for you a secret, Luci was jealous of everyone around us. Even her friends became targets of her suspicion. She grew more and more distant from me and the acquaintances she'd had all her life. She took up with new people, people I didn't care for. She'd go out and not come home until very late, well past a reasonable hour. Even at events we attended together, she would slip away for hours at a time."

Audrey frowned as a sense of premonition filled her. Yet Luci couldn't have been untrue! How could someone be married to Griffin Berenger and not be satisfied with only him? After just two nights with him, she knew for a fact that she could be more than satisfied with him for the rest of her life.

Taking a deep breath, he moved away and returned to his seat. "I encouraged her to start a family. I thought becoming a mother would settle her down, that we'd be brought closer. I believed that with children we would become a real family. No more anger or fights between us. No more late hours and lies."

Closing his eyes, Griffin drew in a long breath, as if it pained him to say what he said next. "She laughed."

"Laughed?"

Stricken by Luci's viciousness, Audrey crossed the room to sit down on the chair beside his and cover his hand with her own. Luci's betrayal had devastated Griffin, and she hadn't even cared. So he'd suffered. Greatly.

He lowered his voice to a dangerously quiet level. "She told me I would never be entirely certain if any child she carried was my own. She told me there was nothing I could do about it unless I wanted to bring shame upon myself and my family."

Tears stung her eyes before Audrey managed to blink them away. This wasn't her pain, it wasn't her story to cry about. Griffin looked up when she was silent.

"I'm so sorry, so very sorry, Griffin."

The words weren't enough. She felt stupid saying them to him. He'd been hurt. Hurt more than she could even imagine. Saying she was sorry was little more than putting a tiny bandage on a gaping wound.

"Don't be," There was a harshness to his voice, though she didn't feel it was necessarily directed at her. "You were right. You told me on my wedding day I would be unhappy and I was."

"Oh, Griffin." This time she couldn't control the tears that began to run down her face. "I never wanted you to be unhappy. I never wished for it! I hope you know that. I wanted you to find peace and love in your marriage."

He caught one of her tears on the tip of his finger and wiped it from her cheek. "I know. You were always kind. Even if you believed I wouldn't be happy, you would have hoped for it regardless."

There was a long pause, but finally he seemed to gather his resolve and spoke again. "After that, our marriage disintegrated entirely. We never shared a meal. We never spoke unless it was forced by a societal or family obligation. We didn't share a bed. So when she told me she was carrying a child, I knew for certain the babe couldn't be mine."

Audrey's hand came up to cover her mouth as she bit back another cry of shock and anguish. What the man beside her had gone through during their years apart. While she had spun around foreign ballrooms in fancy gowns, thinking she was alone, Griffin had truly been isolated. He'd had no one to turn at the lowest point of his life.

"How horrible," she gasped.

He shrugged one shoulder. "Still, I was surprised by how deeply I mourned for her baby when Luci died."

Audrey smiled sadly. Not many men in the *ton* would have felt the same way. In a world where bloodlines ruled, Griffin Berenger cared more for a child's lost life than his true parentage. His compassion reminded Audrey how much she loved him.

"You're an amazing man, Griffin Berenger. A true original," she said softly, leaning forward to place a gentle kiss on his warm cheek.

He turned his face to catch her lips with his own and for a moment they only held each other. When they parted, he leaned his head against the back of the chair and stared at her evenly.

"Are you going to ask me the obvious question?"

"What is the obvious question?" She smiled sadly.

It was a smile he didn't return. "Don't you want to know if I killed her?"

Audrey parted her lips in surprise then instantly shook her head. "No! I already know the answer. You wouldn't, couldn't do that. Whatever Luci's faults, she was your wife. You took your vows seriously, even if she didn't."

Griffin gave a sigh of relief and a weak smile returned to his face. "I'm glad you know that without asking. Some of my family members and close friends who knew of Luci's indiscretions did ask me."

She drew back. "Not Noah?"

"No. Not Noah. Never Noah," he admitted. "Luci died of complications from an early birth of her child. Much too early, I'm afraid. I did all I could to save her and the baby, but the doctor said there was no chance for either of them."

"Griffin," she said softly. "What can I do?"

Now he turned his eyes on her with intensity. "Do as I ask and marry me. You've been in my head for years. And you would be faithful to me. I know that."

Audrey looked into his eyes, but instead of seeing love there, she saw desperation. He so needed her to say yes, but not because he loved her. He wanted her to save him in a way. To give back to him some of what Luci had stolen all those years ago.

Slowly, she pulled away to stand up. Pacing over to the window, she caught her breath as she looked down into the busy street below.

"You can't marry someone for safety, Griffin," she said softly. She heard him rise, but continued without allowing him to respond. "You've been burned by Luci's deceptions, but controlling me, taking me from my work... marrying me isn't the way to regain your equilibrium."

"That isn't what I'm trying to do!" His tone was suddenly angry.

When she turned it was to see him staring at her with a red face, his nostrils flared and his hands trembling at his sides. His pain and anger moved her, but she had no choice but to stand her ground.

"Yes, Griffin, it is what you want to do, whether you realize it or not. You want to use me as sanctuary..."

This time he did interrupt her, motioning toward the bedroom. "You think what just happened between us in my bed was a plea for sanctuary? That was passion, darling, pure and simple. We have all the ingredients for a good marriage. Why won't you let go of your ridiculous denials?"

"We have all the ingredients but one, Griffin. Love." She fought back the tears that closed her throat and stung her eyes. "And for me, that's the most important ingredient. You're afraid for my life. You want to draw me away from dangerous things. Those are sweet and noble reasons, but they'll never erase your past, or mine. They won't change the duty I've sworn to perform."

He crossed over to her in a long step. "Damn it, Audrey!"

Instead of letting him touch her, she skirted away, fearing if he did she'd give in to his demands. She was right on the edge of doing just that already.

Here he was, offering her everything she'd once dreamed of, but now it wasn't enough. Perhaps five years ago it would have been, but not now. She had changed too much to accept anything less from him than everything in his heart.

"This is hard enough for me," she pleaded, moving toward the door. "But I can't marry you. Good night."

With that, she fled into the hallway, closing the door behind her then hurrying to her own room where she shut and locked her door. There was no need to risk Griffin bursting in to continue their argument. Her mind

was made up. No matter how much it hurt her to do, she couldn't marry him. Now if only she could convince her heart.

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"Lord Berenger?"

Griffin looked up to see Cotter standing in the morning room door with a smile on his usually stoic face.

"Yes, Cotter, what is it?"

It took all his control to maintain his temper. The last thing he wanted were interruptions when his head was pounding from a hangover and his eyes were blurred from lack of sleep.

"You have two visitors, my lord."

"Lord and Lady Ashton?" he asked weakly.

He'd almost forgotten his parents were even in London after the shock of Audrey turning down his proposal of marriage.

"Yes, my Lord. Shall I send them in?"

He ran a hand through his hair and nodded. "Of course. Have tea sent in and freshen up the buffet, as well."

Cotter bowed low. "As you wish, my lord."

Moments later, the door opened again and Cotter motioned for Griffin's parents to enter. His mother's hand was laced through his father's elbow and the two were laughing at something they'd been talking about outside. They looked as happy as they'd ever been and Griffin's heart clenched with pain. He had only ever wanted to find what his parents had shared. He'd hoped to have it with Lucinda, but he *knew* he could achieve it with Audrey.

But Audrey wouldn't have him, no matter what he said.

"Good morning, Griffin..." his mother began, then stopped dead in her tracks as she finally looked directly at her son.

He winced as her sharp eyes moved up and down him in one swift motion before settling on his face. He could see her concern and her questions without her saying a word to him of either one.

"Mother."

"I hope you don't mind this unannounced arrival," his father said. "But we're leaving town today. We only came at the Queen's invitation. With your sister so late in her confinement, Penelope wants to be close to her."

"Of course I welcome you here, Father, but I understand," Griffin insisted, finally forced himself to move toward them. He shook his father's hand and embraced his mother before motioning them to join him at the table.

"Where are Audrey and Noah this morning?" his mother asked as she settled into her seat.

Griffin stared into his tea absently. Noah hadn't come back until very late the night before and was still abed for all Griffin knew. Audrey had not come down yet.

"I've no idea..." he began, but was interrupted when the door to the morning room opened and the brother and sister appeared.

"Here we are." Audrey laughed though there was a strain in her voice. "How lovely it is to break our fast with you and Lord Ashton."

Griffin stared at the pair in amazement. Noah looked as if he'd gone to sleep at ten, not three in morning. Not even a shadow darkened his blue eyes. As for Audrey, her smile was as warm and friendly as if nothing had happened between them the night before. As if she hadn't made love with him, then turned down his offer to be his wife. He did note she avoided even a glance in his direction, though.

"Ah, the Jordans!" Lord Ashton said with a smile. "Our time together last night was far too brief. I'm pleased we'll get to spend a bit of time with you before we quit London this afternoon."

"You're leaving?" Noah's tone was surprised but his eyes were glad.

Griffin couldn't blame his friend for his relief. Noah had heard more than an earful at the ball about endangering Griffin's parents.

Noah continued to speak as he snapped a napkin onto his lap. "We'll have to make the best of the hours we have then. What about a walk in Hyde Park, straightaway?"

"Sounds fine. The weather is tolerable," Griffin's father replied.

"I'm feeling a bit off-color," Griffin said with a glare toward his friend. The last thing he wanted to do was stroll around the park with Audrey and his parents, pretending she hadn't kissed or touched him. "I believe I'll stay here and out of the heat."

His mother looked at him out of the corner of her brown eyes. With a smooth smile, she said, "I'll remain with Griffin. Why don't the three of you go ahead?"

Lord Ashton shrugged, looking at Audrey and Noah with a grin. "Shall we?"

After a flurry of finding hats and arranging carriages, the three departed. Griffin turned from the front door to find his mother staring at him with an intensity in her brown eyes he rarely saw.

"Come back to the morning room," she said gently. "A bit of food will help settle your stomach and take away the headache too much alcohol has left behind."

Griffin opened his mouth to protest her accusation, but she only arched an eyebrow with a smile, challenging him to deny the truth. He chose not to do so and instead took her arm and returned to the room as she'd asked.

She sat while he took a few muffins from the buffet and a small pile of eggs.

"What puts you in such a state, Griffin?" she asked when he returned to the head of the table. "Or have I already guessed the reason?"

With a frown, Griffin took a bite of his muffin. "Since I don't know your guess, I couldn't tell you if it's correct or not. And I never said anything was bothering me beyond a slight pain of the head."

"But you weren't drinking at the ball last night," she reasoned. "So that leads me to believe that you drank here. Alone. One who drinks alone makes liquor a partner in his troubles. What are yours?"

Griffin pursed his lips. As if his mother could ever understand.

"Audrey?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

He jolted at her correct guess. Were his feelings so plain to the world? His mother knew, Noah... even Douglas Ellison suspected.

"Why would you say that?" he asked, determined to close the discussion.

"It's in your eyes when you look at her. And in her eyes when someone says your name," she said with a soft smile. "I would be more than pleased at the match, but I see it brings neither of you happiness. So what's keeping you from each other?"

Griffin rubbed his eyes and tried a sarcastic laugh. It came out more as a sigh. "Mother, you're an incurable romantic. Did it ever occur to you that love is not for everyone?"

"Don't judge love on a bad experience with Luci," she said with an angry frown. "Don't shut out love because of fear."

He rose to slam his empty plate back on the buffet. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"You've been afraid for months!" his mother argued, rising out of her seat to face him. "You hide at Bentley Square, torturing yourself over a child..." she dropped her voice. "Who wasn't even your own. And now you have love right in front of you and refuse to take the happiness you're offered. A happiness others long for but never get the chance to find."

Griffin shook his head, stunned by how much his mother had guessed. "You speak of what you do not know. I no longer wish to have this discussion with you."

He turned to leave, to walk out on his mother for the first time in his life. Her soft hand on his sleeve held him back.

"Griffin." The heat was gone from her voice. "Please. I'm sorry to pry, and perhaps you're right. Perhaps I don't know. But think about what I've said. Don't discard something that could change your life for the better."

He sighed and took his mother's hands in his. She didn't understand. She *couldn't* understand the torture in his heart when it came to Audrey.

"Your counsel is always one I take with much consideration. But right now I'd much rather walk in the gardens and talk about happier subjects. Will you join me?"

Her eyes softened as she nodded and took his arm, but he didn't fail to notice the troubled expression that lingered as well.

## Chapter Eighteen

Audrey glanced at the man beside her with a grimace she could only hope resembled a smile. Lord knew the last thing she needed was for Douglas Ellison to suspect her disgust for him was growing by the moment.

He motioned to the tea set on the side table between them. "I'd like a drop more tea, my dear. Do you remember how I like it?"

Her nostrils flaring slightly, she gave him the most sweet and tender look she could muster. "Why with a drop of cream and two lumps of sugar, of course."

"Exactly." His fingers stroked the top of her hand. "It pleases me that you remember."

"How could I forget?"

Her thoughts returned to how she'd taken copious notes on all of Ellison's habits, memorizing them over the months she and Noah had been investigating the man.

She knew when he rose in the mornings, what he ate at meals, where he bought the expensive jackets and dandified shirts he wore to court her... the only thing she *didn't* know was who the hell he worked with.

There were rumors he possessed a list with the names of his main associates and monetary backers, but no spy had found it yet. Even Jean, who she knew to be an exemplary, meticulous searcher, had come up empty handed on the one occasion he'd managed to get into the Ellison Mansion. With guards and high fences, the place was a stronghold.

"My dear," Ellison's voice ripped her from her reverie. "Your hands are shaking. Are you quite well?"

"What?" Audrey set the teapot back on the service with a clatter. "Yes, fine. I'm sorry, my mind was wandering."

"Hmmm." He took her cold hands in his own. "How I'd like to know where it went so I could bring it back to us."

With an inward smirk, she wagered he *would* like to know her innermost thoughts. If he realized how much she despised him, how his touch sickened her every time she was forced to endure it, he would recoil from her. And if he knew her main purpose in life was to bring him and his allies to their knees, he would want her dead.

She drew her hands away with a modest blush. "It's back to us now."

One of the most amazing results of this act she was playing was that she no longer hated the norms of Society. As a girl she'd never quite grasped the rules and regulations that had governed courtship, but now she thanked the heavens for them nearly every day. Her blushing denials of Ellison's advances were easily explained. She didn't dislike him, no... she only wanted to maintain her dignity and morality.

"Very good." His smile turned to a frown as she poured him his tea. "Because there is an important subject I wish to discuss with you."

Two lumps of sugar fell from her spoon into his cup. She wished they were rat poison. "Really? And what is that, Douglas?"

"The ball at Burlington House," he explained, nodding as he slipped the cup from her hand. His long, cold fingers rested on her skin for a fraction too long.

"Tomorrow, in honor of Wellington?" she asked, as if there were any other. Thousands of people had been invited, and if even half arrived it would be a jammed event indeed. It was all she and Noah had been able to talk about.

"Yes." His voice had taken on the angry edge it always possessed when the subject of the Prince or his allies came up. "For *Wellington*."

"What about it?" A shiver wracked her at the look of hatred in his eyes.

At the fête at Buckingham House a few days before, Audrey had watched as the handsome Wellington had been welcomed by the Queen, herself. She'd marveled at how cool and collected the man seemed, moving with a grace that reflected his skills not only in society, but in battle. The thought of Ellison attempting to do something to him was maddening.

"I would greatly like to be your companion that night." Ellison's eyes cleared to refocus on her. "I don't want your brother to squire you away. And I certainly don't want Berenger to monopolize all your time. The kiss we shared a few nights ago proves to me that we are more to each other than just good friends. If that is true, than I want the rest of Society to begin to see it, too."

Audrey pretended to contemplate what he was asking of her. A whole night at Ellison's side, only leaving to dance with the appropriate gentlemen, but always returning to him and his vile cold hands on her skin. A night like that would certainly prove to Douglas, and to Society, that he had staked his claim on her heart. If only she could stomach it. Not that she had a choice.

"I'm not certain," she said softly. "You would have to ask my brother's permission before I could do such a thing. After all, he's my guardian during our travels."

"I'm not asking you for permission," he said, his tone suddenly peevish. "I'm asking if you want to spend an evening with me."

She jumped at the anger in his voice. "Oh. Well, in that case, yes."

Another smile leapt to her lips. Her cheeks hurt from all the ridiculous grinning she'd been forced to do lately.

"Good." He rose to give her a short bow. "Then I shall do what you suggested and find your brother now."

She stood up to escort him to the drawing room door with a nod of her head. "Very good. Then I look forward to tomorrow."

"With all your heart?" he asked, leaning a fraction closer.

Audrey didn't know if she could bear one more odious kiss from the man. Instead, she lifted her hand and let it rest on his cheek. Unlike Griffin, Ellison's skin was smooth as silk, and rather unpleasant to the touch.

"With... all my heart," she ground out.

With a smile, Douglas left the room. Closing the door behind her, Audrey allowed a shudder to wrack her from head to toe.

Sitting down in a chair, she covered her eyes with her hands. All these years she had tried to convince Noah that she was suited to more than just being a distraction in a ballroom, or picking up the gossip that often lead to the truth of a case. She'd pleaded with him to allow her more freedom and leeway in the cases they pursued.

Well, she had her wish now, for better or for worse. Ellison was taken in by her act, of that she was certain. But just how far would she have to go to convince him to give her his trust?

A sudden image of Griffin pressing her down into the bed as he ran his hands over her skin leapt into her mind.

"Not that far," she whispered as her stomach churned.

Since she'd turned down his proposal, Griffin had been avoiding her. When he passed her in the corridors, he didn't stop, but simply nodded a greeting as if they were strangers. The distance between them hurt, but if it kept him safe then it was something she was willing to endure.



Still, at night she awoke with the sheets tangled around her, aching for his touch. And in the morning when she looked across the breakfast table to watch him read his paper, she wanted to scream that she had changed her mind. That she wanted to be his wife more than she'd ever wanted anything, even if he didn't love her.

Yet she didn't do that. Instead, she choked down her tea while she prayed her assignment would come to an end soon. The longer she stayed in Griffin's house, the harder it became to think about ever leaving.

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The carriage moved along the busy London streets, turning corners and stopping to allow other vehicles to move from time to time. Audrey sat across from her brother, watching him look over the latest report from Golding about their job and their prey. Next to her Griffin sat stiffly in his evening clothes in an effort not to let his body touch hers.

Stifling a sigh, she followed his example and hedged away from him. While she could tell herself it was just to respect his space, she knew it was also because she wasn't sure how she would react if his thigh brushed hers. She knew the contact would send a shot of heat and awareness through her. A longing she could do nothing about.

Why couldn't the carriage move faster? The last thing she wanted to do was sit beside a man who had barely acknowledged her existence for three days. Things between them could never be the same. How that knowledge pained her. She couldn't believe he'd never kiss her again, hold her again. But asking him to do those things even just one more time wouldn't be fair to either one of them.

Noah tilted his head as he looked from her to Griffin. With an elaborate sigh, he rolled his eyes, then folded his papers, ripping them neatly in half. He'd burn them as soon as he had a free moment and a nearby fireplace. She was sure she heard him mutter something about "ridiculous". When she dared to glance at Griffin from the corner of her eye, she saw he'd stiffened and was staring at his friend with mutiny in his eyes.

"This... this ball is important," she stammered, trying to find words to fill the distance between them. "We shall all have to be on high alert at all times."

"Yes," Noah agreed. "Especially since Ellison has insisted he escorts you for the whole of the evening."

"Well, at least I get the carriage ride free of him."

She willed herself not to look at Griffin. Hannah had passed along that he'd been furious when he heard Audrey would be spending the entire evening at Ellison's side. She was surprised he hadn't confronted her directly yet. She'd waited for him to come to her room or corner her somewhere. In fact, she'd even put on her best nightgown.

But he hadn't come.

Noah arched an eyebrow at his silent friend. "What do you think, Griffin? Will we be able to keep watch on her all night without being noticed?"

Griffin slowly turned his face toward his friend, then glanced at Audrey from the corner of his eye. His gaze didn't linger, but flitted over her like she meant nothing to him.

"I daresay Audrey can take care of herself. That's what you two have been trying to convince me for weeks, isn't it?" He turned back to the window.

Noah leaned back a fraction. "You're saying you're out of the plan?"

"Yes." He let out a long sigh. "I'm out. I'm not trained for this sort of espionage, am I? And my family has been put in enough danger as it is. You may continue to use my house for your headquarters, of course, and if my staff or I can assist you, we shall do our best. But as for the detail work..."

Griffin paused to stare at her directly. "I'm not needed."

Audrey winced. With everything in her she wanted to throw herself into his arms and tell him how desperately he was needed, wanted and loved. But there was no point to that. He was angry, but he would get past it. For now, him staying out of her way was a blessing. Later she could comprehend what that meant for the two of them.

"Whatever you say." Noah's voice was suddenly quiet and strangely gentle. It was almost as if he didn't want to cause any more damage. "I'm sure you know what's best for you."

"Yes," Audrey whispered. "You've been very..."

She struggled for a word. She wanted to say tender or loving, but knew that wouldn't ease the tension

between them.

"You've been wonderful as a spy-in-training," she finally said. "But it's probably best to leave the rest of the mission up to me. Er, us."

Turning his head, Griffin met her eyes, the chocolate brown pools drawing her in. She felt herself lean a little closer, then straightened back up instead. She couldn't be weak.

The carriage came to a stop and a footman opened the door. Noah stepped out first, then held out his hand to help her down. Griffin sat very still for a moment.

"Perhaps I won't come in." Griffin refused to lift his eyes to meet Audrey's or Noah's.

"What?" Noah blinked his blue eyes in disbelief. "What are you talking about? This is the biggest event of the year!"

"Yes," Griffin growled, lifting his eyes suddenly. In the light of the lamps, Audrey noticed how bloodshot they were. "And I'm not up for it tonight. You don't need me. Go and do your jobs. You can surely think of some kind of excuse, can't you?"

Noah opened his mouth as if to protest, but something in Griffin's demeanor made Audrey leap in front of her brother to stop him.

"Yes, Griffin," she said softly, praying he would see her understanding her eyes. "These past few weeks have been trying for us all, most of all for you, as you aren't accustomed to this lifestyle. Go home and try to rest."

"See here..." Noah began, but Audrey lifted her hand to cut him off.

"We'll make your excuses," she promised, nodding as Griffin tapped on the carriage wall and disappeared back down the street.

"What did you just do?" Noah turned her toward him. "Won't it seem strange when our host doesn't accompany us?"

With a shrug of one shoulder, Audrey took her brother's arm and began dragging him toward Burlington's House's open double doors. The circular courtyard brimmed with people and animals as coach after coach passed in and out of the wide gateway.

"It doesn't matter, Noah. It will ease Douglas's mind not to have Griffin here. And didn't you see his face?" She shivered as she remembered it, so empty and cold. Not at all like the man she knew and loved. He almost seemed... defeated. "He's having a difficult time with... with all of this."

Noah frowned, but took her lead and continued to move toward the crowd in the foyer. "I suppose and yet I feel like I'm being locked out of something very important."

Audrey shrugged. She knew how her brother felt. After all, tonight she had been locked out of Griffin's life. This time, for good.

## ***Chapter Nineteen***

"I must say, I'm glad your host decided to stay home," Douglas Ellison said, as he spun Audrey around the crowded dance floor. "I do get tired of having to anticipate his interruptions all evening."

"Grif..." She could only pray Douglas hadn't heard that slip. "*Lord Berenger* is harmless."

She bit back a bark of laughter as the comment left her lips. Griffin was anything but harmless. He was like a lion stalking through his territory and clearing out any interlopers. If Douglas Ellison couldn't see that himself, he was a greater fool than she had ever imagined.

Ellison seemed to consider her comment for a moment, then shrugged one shoulder. "You *are* here with me, aren't you?"

"Exactly." She gave him a flirtatious look she only now understood the full power of. Before she made love with Griffin she hadn't really grasped the control her femininity could hold over a man. She'd never understood the long stares from men, the way they leaned closer when a woman talked. Now she did and was forced to use those wiles on Douglas Ellison. A disgusting thought to say the least.

She shook off her private musings to refocus on matters at hand. "We should talk about more pleasant things. Have you seen the Prince yet this evening?"

Ellison's gray eyes suddenly glittered with emotion. His thin smile turned to a frown.

"Of course. Who can help but look at him as soon as he enters the room? Surrounded by people, dressed like a peacock on parade. The man is a buffoon."

"Hmmm." She hoped to sound noncommittal as well as encouraging. "I suppose he does stand out. His guards alone make him a spectacle."

She smiled as she caught a glimpse of one of the guards. She and Noah had worked so hard to make sure the Prince and his guests had a large duty to protect them. The Prince had argued, but eventually had caved in to Lord Golding's convincing words.

"Guards?" Ellison scoffed. "As if they make any difference."

"What do you mean?"

She slowly turned back to Ellison. His face was unreadable, stoic. Yet the way he'd made his statement, so certain, made her heart lodge in her throat. It was almost as if he already had a plan.

"If someone really wants to assassinate a leader," Ellison said with a cool smile. "A few guards won't stop him. Nothing will."

Audrey shivered despite the heat of the crowded ballroom. What she saw in Ellison's eyes was so angry, so full of hatred that she could hardly bear to look at it.

"You sound very sure of that," she managed to stammer out. "I wonder, though, why so many people seem to hate His Royal Highness?"

Douglas's eyes refocused on her as he gave her a condescending grin. Again she was happy most men assumed women didn't understand politics. It gave her the upper hand with Ellison. After all, there was

no harm giving away secrets to a person she didn't believe could do anything with them.

"Aside from his stupidity and his propensity to cling to the opinions of others like the weakling he is, many people were invested heavily in the war with France. And with Napoleon."

Drawing back slightly, Audrey observed Ellison's face. He was entirely focused on the paunchy man across the room, his gray eyes boring into him with an intensity that was as frightening as it was unwavering.

She batted her eyelashes in a pretend show of naivety. "I didn't know anyone could profit from a war."

Again, he glanced back at her. "Well, people buy and sell commissions in the Army and Navy every day. And there are more nefarious businesses, as well. Those who trade arms and secrets with the enemy."

She found herself holding her breath and had to force herself to draw in air. Was he about to admit he was a traitor?

"You sound as if you know this from personal experience."

She chose her words with great care. The last thing she wanted to do was frighten him away from the subject now that they were getting to the meat of the issue. Close to the whole reason she was in London in the first place.

His pompous smile fell. "I don't know if I'd go that far. I do have... *associates* who might have some dealings such as those."

"Really?" She tamped down her eagerness to demand a list of names. "I find it difficult to believe I might live and walk amongst men involved in such dangerous business."

Arching an eyebrow, he gave her an appraising stare. With a quick breath, she decided to take a chance and press further.

"It's a bit... thrilling," she added, watching his pupils dilate with what she now knew to be desire. Her stomach lurched in response but she managed to keep the nausea at bay and give him a stunning smile. The opportunity to hear him say even one contact's name was worth any price.

"Truly?" His voice was full of sudden admiration. "You find it to be thrilling?"

She bowed her head with a forced blush. "There is a certain adventure to it all."

His smiled widened. "I never thought you had it in you, Audrey. I must say, this is a side to you I'd never imagined, but I quite like it."

"I'd never dare tell anyone I felt that way." Drawing a deep breath, she leaned forward. "Unless I truly trusted them." She dropped her voice. "But my feelings about our Regent aren't exactly tender, either."

She was pleased when Ellison's eyes narrowed as he glanced around the room. "There are too many people here to discuss this," he whispered. "If you were overheard you could be called a traitor and hung for treason. But would you accompany me to the gardens?"

"Of course." She was breathless not because of the deep feelings she had for the man beside her, but because she felt so close to the secrets she needed to unveil.

As Douglas led her through the crowd on the floor and the parameter, Audrey scanned the room for her brother. She wanted to catch Noah's eye so he'd know she was leaving so her brother could follow at a safe distance to hear whatever Ellison said. And save her if the man became dangerous in any way.

But Douglas seemed determined to be alone with her as soon as possible. His grip on her arm tightened and he nearly knocked down several old women in his hurry to get through the veranda doors. Audrey hardly had a chance to look at half the room, let alone find and signal to her brother.

The thought was troubling, but she couldn't refuse now that she'd gone so far. Besides, she had handled Douglas and his advances before.

"There's no hurry, is there?" She pulled back against his arm. "We've all night to talk."

He slowed his pace with a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry, my dear. I get carried away sometimes by your beauty."

"Thank you," she ground out.

At the beginning of the garden pathway oriental style lamps were lit, sticking up from large stakes thrust into the soft earth. It was a practical way to illuminate the trail, while giving respect to the Prince's love for all things Asian.

The garden was scattered with groups of people and pairs of couples, looking at the moon, admiring the well-tended lawns and hedges, or simply staring into each other's eyes as they enjoyed a rare stolen moment alone. From time to time peals of laughter echoed around them.

Audrey wasn't afraid. After all, Ellison would never try anything untoward with her in front of such a large group of people. His need for social acceptance would rein in whatever lust he felt.

But as they walked further and further from the house, into darker and darker territory on the massive lawn, her anxiety grew. Soon the voice of the other couples faded away, leaving behind only the occasional squeak of crickets.

"Douglas, do we really need to stray so far from the house?"

His grin was a quick and sinister one, flashed only for a moment before he continued on toward what looked like an abandoned gazebo on the far end of the garden.

"If we're to discuss treachery and danger, we must do it in darkness and out of the public eye, don't you think?" he asked. "After all, it was you who said you wouldn't want anyone to know you found that life a little thrilling."

"I suppose." Her shoulders were trembling despite her shawl and the warmth of the summer night. "But I wouldn't want anyone to walk in on us and have the wrong impression. We both have reputations, you know."

She hoped her reference to his place in the world would remind him to be careful, but he gave her another menacing smile instead.

"You needn't worry about that. No one will walk in on anything. They're too busy admiring the wealth they find at the top of the path." He lowered his voice as he continued, "It takes a different kind of person to go beyond the beginning of the road, don't you think? Someone with the adventurous spirit you seem so enamored with."

They'd reached the gazebo now and he helped her up the stairs. It truly was abandoned, unpainted and left to rot probably since the newer, larger building had been built closer to the house.

"I don't know that I'm *enamored* with adventure," she said. In fact she felt a strong dislike for it coming on, despite her years of spying. "I simply thought it was interesting, that's all."

"Don't." Ellison motioned to a bench where they both sat. Audrey tried to put a decent amount of distance between them, but Ellison had put her near the edge of the bench, giving her little room to maneuver unless she wanted to fall off the seat.

"Don't?" she repeated, actually willing her teeth not to chatter with nervousness.

"Don't back away from what you said earlier." As he spoke, he reached out for her hand. Even though she wore gloves, Audrey imagined she could feel the damp coldness of his fingertips seeping through the fabric. "You said you were thrilled by the prospect of underhanded dealing and trading with the enemy."

"It must be a fascinating world."

Fascinating? No. Over the years she had seen the underbelly of society in England and on the continent. Though many of the crooks put on a pretty face, their lives were lived in fear. Fear of being captured, fear of being killed. Their families were in constant danger. Danger they often didn't recognize until it was too late. Those were desperate men, just as the man beside her was desperate. His eyes had the wild look to them she'd seen too often before.

"It is a fascinating world," he murmured, his face moving ever closer to hers.

She inched away just as subtly. "How do you know?"

His smile was slow and sardonic. "Never mind. It's best for the women and children to be kept out of the details of one's business. But if you want danger, or a hint of it at least, I can give you that."

Audrey blinked. What she wanted was for her brother to come save her. She wanted Griffin's arms around her, holding her tight and reassuring her he'd never let her come to harm, not under his roof. She wanted this evening and this case to be over.

"I'm sure you can." She laughed as if all that was transpiring between them was no more than a jest. "But aren't there others?"

"Of course," he said, but his tone was suddenly impatient.

In response, she rose to her feet to pace closer to the stairway of the gazebo. She wondered if anyone would hear her cry out so far away from the house.

"Who?" Finger by finger, she clenched and unclenched her hands behind her back. "I'm so interested to see which of my acquaintances are behind some kind of ploy."

One of his thin eyebrows arched up. "And why is that? Why are you so interested in my associates?"

She froze as her heart lodged in her throat to prevent her answer. The world felt as if it had slowed to half time, spinning around her in distant motion. Like she was under water. Her cover was about to be blown if she didn't find the right words. Right now.

"I..."

His eyes lit up as he stood to come closer to her. Closer. Closer.

"I believe I just realized why. You've asked about my associates..." he paused, reaching out to cup her cheek. For a brief moment, she wondered if he was going to strangle her and leave her body in the gazebo to be found by servants the next day.

Then he leaned closer. "Because you're afraid of how you feel for me."

The air left her lungs in a whoosh as Douglas Ellison's hand locked on her waist, while the one on her face pulled her closer for a kiss. He was rough, forceful in the way he ground his lips against hers.

"No!" With all her might, she pushed against his unyielding chest. For such a thin man, he was stronger than he looked. "Stop!"

Damn her cover. She didn't care if he found out she was a spy. She wanted to get away, away from his breath in her mouth and his hands gripping her arms, bruising her.

"Don't fight this Audrey," he murmured. She squirmed in disgust when he dipped his tongue into her ear. "I promise to make you my wife, so what happens here makes no difference."

"Stop," she insisted, but this time her voice felt much weaker.

Despite her training and the strength she'd acquired over the years, her body seemed to be shutting down. Refusing to fight against a man who was much too strong.

Her mind went back to the night long ago when another man had pinned her arms the way they were pinned now, had kissed her the way Douglas kissed her now. That night they'd been interrupted by her mother's shrill voice. She had been saved, ironically, by Luci's blackmail.

Tonight, no salvation would come. She could scream all she wanted, but no one would hear. Noah hadn't seen her leave, so he wouldn't know where to look for her even if he did notice she was gone too long. And Griffin, who seemed to sense any time she was in trouble, wasn't there to save her.

In the past, she'd been able to fight Douglas because he would never go too far. There were too many chances to be caught. Now there were none and all the fighting in the world wouldn't stop him.

And with that realization, she went limp.

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"Why the hell are we stopping?"

Griffin wrenched the carriage window open and immediately saw the reason. A wagon carrying barrels of ale had flipped over on one the narrow streets and the gutters were now filled with the sweet alcohol. Several men from the local pubs had come out and were taking their spirits directly from the drains.

Griffin pulled his head back in with a shiver as he tried not to contemplate what else rolled in those gutters. He snapped the curtains shut.

"No wonder disease is rampant in this city."

The carriage was quiet except for the calls of his driver to the driver of the cart. Occasionally he heard the whoops of the drunken men. But it was quiet enough that his mind could wander away from his current location.

Where it took him was dangerous. It wandered, as always, to Audrey.

Audrey curled up in his arms, her red hair spread over his chest and her warmth filling him. Audrey dancing with him, smiling up at him with eyes shining as she laughed.

Or worse, Audrey in Douglas Ellison's arms, dancing with *him*, her eyes shining even though it was a ruse. But Ellison was dangerous and bold. Whether or not Noah and Audrey would admit it, she was in danger each time she got near the man.

Growling in his throat, Griffin attempted to think of something else. Anything else.

And failed.

For whatever reason, the image of Audrey in Ellison's arms remained in his mind, torturing and tormenting him to the point of frustration. She was alone with the man at this very moment.

"Ridiculous," he muttered to himself. "Noah wouldn't let her go anywhere with Ellison without an escort."

And yet... Noah had lost track of his sister more than once, allowing his faith in her ability to do her job

overshadowed his instincts about her safety. The incident in the park a week before had been proof of that. Audrey also had a troubling tendency to put her assignment over her security. Even if Noah was able to keep an eye on her, she would undoubtedly give him the slip if she thought his watchful stare interfered with her plans.

A nagging dread troubled Griffin and the restlessness in his heart grew. He looked out the window again. The wagon was nearly cleared away from the road.

"Henson!" he called out to the driver.

The burly man appeared at his window in moments, shaking his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, m'lord. I'm tryin' me best to move this crowd, but they was half drunk to begin with. I promise you..."

He raised his hand to interrupt the man. "It isn't that. I want you to take me back to Burlington House."

"Back, sir?" the other man repeated in confusion.

"Yes," Griffin said. "I left behind something of great value there."

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Griffin elbowed his way through the crowd at Burlington House, ignoring the outraged gasps of the women and glares of the men. All that mattered now was Audrey. He had to find her.

The place was so crowded he'd been unsuccessful so far. Hell, he couldn't even find Noah, and at half a head above the rest of the throng, usually he was simple to find.

"Damn it." He moved past the musicians in one corner, hidden behind an exotic screen. He peeked behind, but didn't see Audrey or her brother.

"Griffin?"

He turned to see Noah coming toward him and relief flooded him. "Thank God. Where's Audrey?"

"What are you doing here?" Noah asked with a worried frown. "I thought you went home."

"Where is she?" he repeated, not in the mood for his friend's laissez-faire attitude. The feeling of dread about Audrey was growing in his stomach.

"I haven't seen her for a bit, but this place is crowded. Besides, I've been catching up on some work. Why?" Noah set his champagne flute on a tray as a servant passed by.

"I have a bad feeling. We need to find her. Now!" Griffin straightened up to scan the room again.

Noah wrinkled his brow. "A feeling?"

Griffin turned back to his friend to grasp the lapels on his jacket. "Don't argue with me, help me find her."

"Hey, hey!" Noah said as he pulled away and glanced around them. "I'll help you. Let's split up. I'll take the party since I already know where I *haven't* seen her. You take the grounds. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Griffin called over his shoulder as he moved back into the crowd.

His head spun as he slammed the veranda doors open and the cool air hit him with a shock. There were couples swarming all around the terrace, escaping the tight, uncomfortable pressure of the ballroom with its many guests. He hurried from group to group, scanning each face, but didn't see Audrey among any of them. At first he walked to keep from drawing attention to himself, but eventually he abandoned that completely and broke into a full bore run as he hurried down the steps. The people around him stared at his utter lack of propriety.

"Audrey?" he called out, looking around him in gazebos and beside hedgerows. "Audrey, where are you?"

There was no answer. By now his heart was throbbing, aching with fear. Why the hell hadn't he stayed?

Further and further down the path he went, moving from bright lights into deeper and deeper darkness. Up ahead he saw a little, closed-in gazebo and raced toward it.

"Please Audrey," he whispered to himself. "Please..."

"Please!"

He heard a weak cry that mirrored his own and raced forward. It was Audrey's voice, begging for mercy.

Rounding to the front of the building, he bounded up the stairs three at a time, then skidded to a halt. Douglas Ellison had her pinned against the back wall of the gazebo. Her arms were flat against the wall, held by one of the stronger man's hands. His other hand cupped her breast while he nuzzled her neck. The

moonlight sparkled off the tears on her face, though her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Stop," she whispered.

"Hush," Ellison said against her neck. "You'll like it well enough once you cease your struggles."

With a roar so primal it startled even him, Griffin leapt forward and wrenched Douglas off her.

Ellison flew backwards, hitting one of the benches with a thud. Griffin didn't allow him to regain his breath, but lifted him with one arm and slammed a fist into his nose. Blood spurted onto Ellison's cheek and Griffin's knuckles as the injured man howled.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Ellison asked, yanking himself from Griffin's grip as he stumbled away. He put his fists up like a pugilist, but Griffin saw the fear sparkle in his gray eyes.

Griffin repositioned himself so that he blocked Audrey from Ellison's view. "I came back for something. And I'm glad I did. Now get out!"

"You have no right..." Ellison began, his voice wavering.

"And neither do you. How dare you compromise her?" he interrupted with a roar. "Get out!"

The other man hesitated a fraction, then bowed to Audrey. "I'm sorry, my dear. I will call on you later to make amends for my overzealous behavior."

She didn't answer and Ellison left, clutching his bleeding nose as he hobbled up the pathway.

Griffin spun around to look at Audrey for the first time since he'd come in. Her blue eyes were wide and her face pale, making her look very innocent in the moonlight streaming through the gazebo.

"Audrey?" Griffin reached out his hand.

She stared at him, her chin lifted in defiance and her jaw set. But then the tears began to slide down her cheeks and her bottom lip trembled wildly.

He caught her in his arms.

"Shhh," he whispered. "It's over now. He's gone. I'll never let him near you again."

She pushed away from his chest to look up into his face. "Don't you see? It isn't over at all. I still have a job to finish. Even you realize that or you would have simply pummeled him to a pulp right here."

Griffin wrinkled his brow, but had to admit she was right. His instinct had told him to beat Ellison into unconsciousness for what he'd done. But another, more rational part of him had held back, knowing that destroying the man would only prove more difficult for Audrey and Noah.

"You don't mean to tell me you'll finish this case?" He wiped away her tears. "After what he just did?"

A little shiver wracked her, but Audrey nodded. "I must. If we bring in another agent it will look suspicious. She'll never get enough information before it's too late."

Smoothing her skirt, Audrey began to fix her hair. "Douglas will come to me tomorrow. He'll apologize, say his emotions got the best of him. I'll accept. I'll even imply that I..."

Her hands faltered and her voice broke.

"I'll even imply that I approved of his advances."

Griffin made a sound of disgust in his throat, but said nothing.

"We'll continue on as we did before, and I'll find the information we're looking for." She sighed. "He was so close to giving me a name tonight. So close and then he..."

"He tried to rape you," Griffin snapped, speaking plainly to shock her with the truth.

"But he didn't." Her retort held just as much heat. Then her face and voice softened. "You came."

The fear he'd tamped down earlier in the evening erupted. It returned two fold as he realized what he had barely averted. The image of Audrey broken and defiled was too much for him.

"Audrey, I was... I was..."

"I know." She lifted two trembling fingers to his lips. "When I saw you, I knew everything would be all right. You wouldn't let anyone hurt me."

Griffin shut his eyes as he pondered how much Audrey had already *been* hurt because of him. First it had been Luci and her cruelty. Then he had hurt her, himself, making love to her with no promises he would take care of her. Even his proposal of marriage had hurt her. She wanted love, an emotion he was sure no longer lived in his heart.

His thoughts were shattered when he felt the gentle sweep of Audrey's lips against his. His eyes flew open and he looked down at her. Her face was upturned, her eyes locked with his. Slowly, her hands wrapped around his forearms, steadying herself as she leaned up again.



This time he took her kiss with no hesitation, driving his tongue between her lips and tasting her like a man deprived of drink and food for far too long. Her sigh was followed by the total relaxation of her body in his arms. Her surrender was as sweet as her giving mouth.

After a long moment, he pulled away. "Anyone could see us here, then where will you be?"

For a moment she didn't seem to understand him, just blinked at him with a satisfied smile on her face. Finally, she shook her head.

"Yes, of course. I don't know what I was thinking," she murmured. "Do I... look all right? Not like I was..."

"Nearly ravished... er, twice?" he supplied, eliciting a weak smile from her swollen lips. "No. In fact, no one will even notice as long as we're careful how we re-enter the throng."

With a forced smile, he held out his arm for her and she took it after a moment's hesitation. The electricity crackled between them even at this slight touch. As they exited the gazebo and made their way back up the pathway to the main garden, Griffin stole a glance her way. Though her eyes were clouded with remnants of her earlier fear, she was more beautiful than ever. And Griffin was reminded, more than ever, how much he didn't want to lose her.

Except the only thing that would make her stay, was the one thing he couldn't give her.

## ***Chapter Twenty***

Even before she closed her chamber door, Audrey dug her fingers into her hair and began wrenching out the pins. She felt dirty, as if Ellison's cold fingers were still on her skin. Even Griffin hadn't been able to completely erase the ugly feeling that seemed to exist all the way down to her bones.

"Hannah?" she called out into the dimly lit room, raising the lamp light on her dressing table as she sat down to remove the last of the pins from her hair.

"Home already, are you?" Hannah bustled into the room as she closed the book in her hand with a smile. "I didn't expect you back for hours yet."

"Douglas had to leave the party early," Audrey explained with a grim frown. "So there wasn't any use in staying past a decent hour. Noah is still there."

As she came around behind Audrey, Hannah grabbed the brush from her dressing table. "Ellison left the party early? Why on earth did he do that?"

Audrey closed her eyes, enjoying the smooth motion of the brush moving through her hair. "That's divine, Hannah," she sighed, before opening her eyes. "Ellison left early on account that I believe Griffin may have broken his nose."

"What?" The brush hit the ground with a clatter, pulling several strands of Audrey's hair out with it.

She rubbed her scalp as Hannah stooped to pick up the brush and stared at her in disbelief.

"Well, he did attack me."

Hannah grasped Audrey's shoulders and turned her around. "Ellison attacked you? Are you injured?"

"No." She gave Hannah's arm a gentle touch of reassurance. When the look of alarm had faded from her companion's face, she continued. "He only frightened me nearly to death. And made me feel distinctly greasy."

"I'll have the maids prepare a bath for you right away." Hannah pursed her lips as she went to the door to ring the bell.

"That would be heavenly," Audrey said. "Though you may have to burn this dress. I doubt I'll ever feel a desire to wear it again."

Hannah nodded her agreement as she opened the door. The maid outside listened to her directions then disappeared.

"Now then." In a few short steps, Hannah was back at her side and had returned to her brushstrokes. "Tell me all about it."

"I was so close, Hannah!" With a sigh of exasperation, Audrey hugged herself. "I know he was about to tell me a name or two. And then he had to get himself all... all... aroused..." She blushed at the thought, then shook her head. "And he ruined it all. Everything happened so quickly. One moment we were exchanging confidences and the next he was on top of me in an abandoned gazebo."

"And the next Griffin Berenger was pulling him off and pummeling him within an inch of his life," Hannah finished for her with a soft smile.

She took a quick glance at Hannah's face in the mirror. "Something like that. Griffin showed remarkable restraint, considering. He could have easily killed Douglas and with just cause."

"I'm surprised he didn't, after what's gone on between you these last few days." Hannah brought the back of the brush down on the crown of Audrey's head with a gentle tap.

With a glare at her friend, Audrey said, "That's over now."

"You keep saying that."

Audrey shook her head. "This time it's true."

With a tilt of her head, Hannah set the brush down. "You look sad."

"I am a little sad," she admitted, too tired emotionally and physically to pretend she wasn't hurt. "I suppose I'm realizing all I'm giving up by turning down Griffin's proposal of marriage."

"He proposed to you?" Hannah screeched and Audrey's brush bounced off the floor a second time.

Lifting her hands to cover her ears, Audrey turned to her friend with a scowl. "You needn't bring the whole house down. He did, a few days ago."

"And you turned him down, even though you've been in love with the man for more than five years?" Hannah dropped down on a chair by the window with thump. Her mouth was partly open as she stared at Audrey. Her green eyes demanded an explanation, but it wasn't one Audrey was sure she could give.

"It would be a marriage for the wrong reasons. 'Companionship', as Griffin put it, and desire aren't love."

Her friend's eyes grew even wider with disbelief. "They're certainly the seeds of such an emotion. And it's better than most marriages. You care for him and he for you. That much is obvious from the way the man charges like a bull every time Douglas Ellison comes near you."

"But it isn't *love*," Audrey repeated, stubborn in her refusal to hear anything else. The last thing she needed were more regrets about Griffin. "If I wanted to marry for quiet companionship I'd have married Squire Teetle when my parents asked me to."

Hannah began to laugh, a rich throaty sound. But Audrey saw no humor in her current situation and sat staring evenly at her friend.

"And what is so funny?"

Wiping her eyes, Hannah said, "I don't think you'd ever have quiet companionship with Griffin. You should know that much by now."

With her ire rising, Audrey straightened in her chair and put on her best haughty frown. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Well, I know you've spent at least one evening in his bed since you gave him your virtue in the carriage," Hannah replied with an arched eyebrow and a pointed look.

An embarrassed blush replaced Audrey's haughtiness. Tearing her eyes away from her friend's face, she said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

An unladylike snort of laughter escaped Hannah's throat. "I've known you a good many years, Audrey Jordan, don't you forget that. You and Griffin have made love more than once and *you* can't stop thinking about it. The reality is, it troubles you to be so out of control of your feelings and actions."

The blood that had made her face so hot now drained away from her cheeks as Audrey lifted her face to Hannah's again. There was no use denying the facts to her hawk-eyed friend.

"Does Noah know?"

"No. But it's affecting his friendship with Griffin nonetheless."

Audrey sighed as she closed her eyes with a nod. That much was obvious. In all the years the two men had known each other, Audrey had never seen them exchange more than a few playful jabs. Until this case. Until her. Since she'd come into the picture, they'd had several heated arguments and nearly come to blows.

She covered her eyes with one hand. "They're strained when they're together now. It's all my fault. Noah is angry that Griffin continues to interfere with our case. Griffin is angry that Noah doesn't keep me out of this or protect me like some china figurine. What a mess."

Hannah was silent for a while, neither denying nor verifying that the tension between Noah and Griffin

was Audrey's fault. "What will you do then, Audrey?"

Shrugging one shoulder, she uncovered her face and rose to her feet. She paced across the room, stopping at the fireplace to take the poker from its position beside the mantel. Stoking the fire with its tip, she said, "I need to get away from here as soon as possible. I need to end this case."

"Why?"

"Because if I stay," Audrey's voice faltered. "If I stay I may forget all the good reasons I have to turn down Griffin's proposal. I may find it harder than I already do to resist him."

"And why is that such a bad thing?"

Audrey sighed, her eyes returning to the burning embers. "Because I've loved him for so long, I couldn't bear it if he didn't love me in return. It would be too hard to look at him with all the love in my heart and see him looking back at me with only friendship in his eyes."

Hannah rose and crossed the room to place an arm over her friend's shoulders. "Oh, lovey."

They were interrupted by the knock of the chambermaids, who came in with a tub and gallons of steaming water for Audrey's bath. Once they'd gone, she undressed and sank beneath the waves behind a screen. On the other side she heard Hannah bustling around the room, picking up her clothing and tidying up.

"Hannah?" She squeezed the sponge in her hand and lathered it with soap.

"Yes?"

"I think it's time I pay a visit to Douglas Ellison's house," she called out, her mind spinning on the possibilities.

From the other side of the screen, she was sure she heard Hannah utter a quiet curse, then she poked her head around the edge of the barrier.

"You cannot be serious." She shook her dark head. "You told me the man attacked you. Surely you don't mean to continue pursuing him."

"What choice do I have? It's the only way we'll get the information we need. I'll have the perfect excuse. My host tried to kill Ellison tonight, I'll tell him I don't want him to be in danger by visiting Griffin's house."

"Whatever do you think you have to gain by walking into this man's den?"

With a frown of disapproval, her friend disappeared back into the main room.

Audrey hesitated a fraction. "Perhaps I'll have better luck than Jean did in finding the list of associates."

Silence was her only answer. Audrey could practically hear Hannah contemplating the notion. Finally, sure steps guided her friend back to Audrey's side of the screen. Hannah's face was stern as she looked her friend in the eye.

"Do you *really* think you could discover his secrets?"

"After tonight?" Audrey nodded. "Absolutely."

"And you feel it's worth the risk you'll be taking?"

She contemplated that question for a long moment. "Griffin is completely out of control. The longer we play this game with Ellison, the worse it's going to get. He could get himself killed if he continues on as he was tonight. Or at least destroy our cover. I'm afraid if I don't go to Ellison's and find out the truth in the next few days, I won't get another chance. After everything I've gone through with the man, I couldn't bear to have him slip through our fingers."

Hannah pursed her lips. Finally she gave a resigned sigh. "Very well, missy. But if you're going to Ellison's tomorrow, *I'm* going with you."

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Griffin sat in Douglas Ellison's sitting room rubbing his knuckles. They were still bruised from his well-placed punch the night before, but hitting the man had been worth any pain that followed. Griffin's only regret was that his fears for Audrey's cover had kept him from doing more damage to the traitor.

Still, he didn't understand why he'd been summoned to the house next door to his own. The footman had brought the request that morning, just about the time Griffin was having his early cup of tea and Noah was stumbling home from a night of work and play. After much deliberation and argument, Griffin had convinced Noah he should take the invitation.

Now he sat in the drawing room of a man he despised, surrounded by an Oriental theme that almost

made him laugh. After all of Ellison's hatred for Prinny, he had something in common with him. Both men favored the rich fabrics and designs influenced by what the spice traders brought back from the Orient.

Tapping his foot impatiently, Griffin checked his pocket watch. He'd now been waiting for over a quarter of an hour. Though this was just a tactic to irritate him, Griffin couldn't help but feel it had succeeded. He wasn't a man accustomed to delay.

Just as he was about to get up and leave, the double doors to the sitting room opened and Douglas Ellison stepped inside. Griffin was pleased to see the man's nose was bruised and painful looking. He kept himself from grinning with pride. Barely.

With a yawn, he stood.

"Ellison," he said, using the practiced cold and distant voice of a displeased aristocrat.

"Berenger." The other man shut the door behind him with a smug smile. He, too, would have sounded cold if his voice hadn't been so nasal due to the injury to his face. "Thank you for coming. May I offer you a drink?"

Griffin returned to his seat. "No. It's a bit early for me. Though I'd understand why you'd need one, you look a fright."

"Yes." Ellison's eyes narrowed before he turned to the bar behind him. "Some animal attacked me last night."

Griffin watched as Douglas poured his drink with trembling shoulders and took a long sip. Finally, he sat down across from Griffin with a hard stare. For a moment the room was silent as the two men sized each other up. Finally, Griffin broke the silence with another yawn.

"Not that I don't enjoy spending time with a neighbor," he said, leaning his elbows forward on his knees. "But I wonder why you've invited me here today of all days."

The smug smile returned to Ellison's cold lips. "I think you know."

Griffin shook his head. "I've no idea, I assure you. It isn't as if we're friends, and we've seen far more than enough of each other lately for both our tastes."

"Yes." Ellison's eyes lit up as he set his drink on the table beside him. "But never in private. What I have to say to you cannot be said in public."

Griffin's body lurched to attention, but he forced himself to maintain a bored exterior. "You've piqued my curiosity now. Whatever could you have to say to me that cannot be said in polite society?"

Ellison's smile widened, though he winced with pain at the motion. Leaning back, he curled his hands around the arms of the chair, clutching them with enough force to whiten his knuckles.

"I brought you here to tell you that Audrey Jordan belongs to me."

Griffin's blood turned to ice in his veins. His initial reaction was to get up and finish the job he'd begun the night before, but then he calmed himself. Remembering that self-control wasn't only noble, but intelligent, he took a deep breath.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me." Ellison's voice was little more than a growl. "She's mine."

"Well, I would wager she'd have something to say about that, considering how hard she was fighting against you last night."

Ellison waved a dismissive hand. "An innocent will always resist advances the first time. It's in her nature and societal training to do so. Before I was finished with her, she would have been begging me for more."

Griffin held back a howl of rage as every muscle in his body tensed. The thought of Ellison hovering over Audrey made him reel with fury.

Ellison ignored his guest's reaction and continued, "For the past few weeks I have observed you watching her. You drag her off every time I get near. You've interfered with my plans more than once."

Griffin blinked to clear his eyes, thanking his father silently for the calm he'd taught him. "Audrey is my best friend's sister and is under my protection while she lives in my home."

Ellison laughed, an unpleasant, grating sound. "Oh it's much more than that. You want her." Now he was leering, taunting Griffin. "You want to peel off all her layers and feel her writhe beneath you."

"Enough," Griffin breathed, surprised he hadn't yet broken the chair with the force of his grip.

"No worries, friend," Ellison chuckled. With a smug smile, he leaned back. "I understand completely. I

feel the same way, but there is a difference. I *need* Audrey. And after all her troubles in the past, she needs me to need her."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why the rumors surrounding her a few years ago," Ellison explained with a smile. "They weren't enough to truly ruin her reputation, but she's past the flower of her youth so most men won't look at her. I'm willing to overlook those flaws, to make her my wife. There's much to be gained from a wife with a fortune *and* a mild reputation. Not so much as your Lucinda had, of course..."

"Why you..." Griffin flipped his chair over as he stood.

Before he could continue, the door opened and the butler stepped in. Though his eyebrows came up at the sight of Griffin's overturned chair and Ellison's raised fists, he made no mention of them.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ellison, Lady Audrey is here to see you. Shall I tell her you're in?"

Ellison's eyes widened with his smile as he laughed at Griffin. "You see, Berenger? She comes to *me*. Send her in, Kendrick."

Griffin swallowed hard, thrown by this latest development. His rage was still just under the surface, fed by the fact that Audrey continued to put herself in danger. Even after last night's near-tragic events she insisted on pressing forward.

"You look sick, Berenger."

"Sick is a good word for one of us." With a bang, he righted his chair just as the door opened again and Audrey and Hannah entered.

At first, her eyes were only for Ellison.

"Oh Douglas, it's worse than I thought. Does it hurt very much?" she gushed, taking a step and holding out her hand, then drawing it back as if she'd thought better of it.

"Not much." Douglas smiled as he motioned to Griffin. "And how pleased Lord Berenger and I are to see you."

Audrey's face fell as she turned to see Griffin standing beside his chair, clenching his fists at his sides. Her blue eyes widened, flashing a variety of emotions before she blocked them out with a false smile.

"L-Lord Berenger," she stammered as she slanted a worried look over her shoulder at Hannah. "I didn't realize you were here."

"No," he said, his voice cold as he began to understand her visit. Instead of playing it safe, keeping the hell away, she once again charged ahead. Damn her and damn this mission she seemed so bloody focused on finishing. At the risk of her body and her life. "I expect you didn't."

## ***Chapter Twenty-One***

Audrey shivered as Griffin looked at her, then through her as if she didn't exist at all. The fury in his cold eyes was tangible, burning despite his icy exterior. Whatever had been happening in that room before she entered wasn't a pleasant chat about boxing or racing.

She'd seen that look in Griffin's eyes before. He was furious with Ellison, but also with her for coming here so soon after she'd been attacked. If only she'd known he'd be there, she would have waited to pay her call. Now his presence put her entire plan in jeopardy.

To her surprise, Griffin bowed stiffly first to her than to Ellison. "I can see I'm intruding so I will bid you both farewell."

"Good day, Berenger," Ellison said with a nod. "And don't forget what I said."

Griffin paused at the doorway to look over his shoulder in disgust at Ellison. "No, I don't think I shall be able to."

When the door had shut behind him, Audrey took a step toward Ellison, though her body was screaming at her to run after Griffin.

"You two weren't arguing about what happened..." She paused with a blush she didn't have to force. "About what happened last night."

"It isn't important, my dear."

Ellison motioned to the chair Griffin had vacated. She took it, trying to ignore the warmth that still radiated from the cushion where Griffin's body had been.

"It is very important to me if Lord Berenger was threatening you because of a misunderstanding caused by me," she said as she leaned forward. God help her if she didn't look earnest. "He didn't harm you, did he?"

"Of course not," Douglas scoffed with a roll of his eyes. "There's little a man like that can do to harm me. A broken nose is secondary to what I can do in return."

Drawing in a sharp little breath, Audrey glanced at Hannah. Though the maid kept her eyes down, Audrey could see that she, too, had registered Douglas's threat.

"I don't want you two to fight over me."

Ellison let out a laugh. "Of course you do. *All* women want men to fight over them."

Holding back a barbed comment, Audrey smiled without answer. There was no use getting into a debate on the feminine mind with a man who didn't believe she had one to begin with.

"Let's not talk of your friend any longer," Ellison said with a smile of his own. "I'm surprised to see you here after last night. I planned to call and apologize to you this afternoon."

Audrey swallowed past the bile that kept her from saying what she'd practiced. "I feared you might encounter trouble with Lord Berenger if you called at his home today, so I came here instead. I owe you an apology, as well."

Ellison's eyebrow went up and he leaned back. "Really?"

Sinking her teeth into her lower lip, she looked around her as if she were ashamed and whispered, "You frightened me with your forwardness, but... but I liked it in a way, too."

His face darkened as he glanced at Hannah then back to her. "Did you?"

"Yes. You've been such a kind friend to me and I repaid that kindness by allowing someone to harm you, then running away from you."

The tears gathering in her eyes were painfully real, and though Douglas might think they were for his ordeal the night before, they most certainly were not.

He angled closer. "I would like to be much more than a mere friend to you. After last night, you'd be a fool not to realize that. But if you'll allow me a private moment, I'll tell you what I mean."

"Hannah..."

"Ma'am," Hannah's voice was sharp. "That wouldn't be proper."

"Just for a moment, Hannah." Audrey gave her friend a hard, pointed look.

Hannah took in a breath to say more, but didn't. Her position didn't allow her to scold Audrey, at least not in front of Ellison. Later, Audrey knew she'd hear plenty. With a grumble, her 'maid' left the room.

"When we're married, we'll hire a better attendant for you," Ellison muttered with a glare at the door. "One who doesn't hover around like a mother hen and have the gall to correct you."

Audrey's head spun. "Married?"

With a smile that would have been gentle if she hadn't seen the predatory gleam in his eyes, Douglas took both her hands. "This wasn't the way I had envisioned asking you, but I want you to be my wife."

Audrey had the strangest urge to giggle. Not five years before she had longed for a proposal of marriage. Now she didn't want any and had received two within the span of a few days, plus one from Jean who was only partly serious.

Douglas filled her hesitation by saying, "We would be the perfect match, Audrey. You bring your money and your family name to the relationship and I could take care of you as no other man could."

Audrey fought to hold back a plethora of retorts to that statement.

"I'm not sure," she finally replied.

At that, Douglas rose up from the chair to look down at her. His gray eyes were cold as steel and his manner had changed completely. Instead of being the attentive man he always played while with her, she saw the monster he could become toward anyone who crossed him.

"You spend time with me, you encourage my attentions, but then deny me when I make an honorable offer to you?" His tone was a combination of disgust and outrage. "It makes me wonder what you are doing with me. Are you a tease as the rumors said all those years ago?"

Audrey froze at this second mention of the past she'd always thought was a secret. Douglas had to have done much investigation to find out about it. The thought terrified her.

Standing, she shook her head. Backtracking was her only escape route.

"*Because* of my past, I'm very shy of men. The things that were said of me then were vicious rumors told by vindictive people." Audrey dipped her head in mock subservience. "Please don't take my hesitation as a refusal or a game. I do... care for you."

"Then be my wife."

This time it wasn't a question, but an order. Audrey glanced up at him, wondering why he was so adamant about the issue. Was his organization running out of money, so he needed her dowry? Or were his plans to assassinate the Prince coming to fruition and he wanted her to be his if he was forced to flee the country?

The possibilities spun through her head. It wasn't as if she would truly have to marry Douglas Ellison. Noah and she would unmask and arrest him long before any wedding. In the next few days she hoped to bring the man to justice. But being his fiancée offered her the opportunity to move closer to him, while it would push Griffin further away from her and from danger.

"Yes, Douglas, I will."

He flashed a grin before he grabbed her upper arms and pulled her against his chest in a tight embrace. Audrey thanked her stars he didn't kiss her. The thought of his lips on hers made her already queasy stomach even sicker.



Leaning back, she looked up at him with what she hoped was an adoring stare. "If it's not too forward, perhaps you could give me a tour of your home, since I will soon be living here."

If she obtained nothing else from this despicable ruse, at least she would get some recognizance. What Jean and the other agents couldn't find, Audrey prayed Douglas would show her. And that she would recognize it.

"Of course, what a charming idea," Douglas said, taking her arm to lead her into the hallway. Hannah's dark head came up immediately as the door opened, but when she saw Douglas and Audrey were together, she dropped her stare and silently obeyed Audrey's quiet order to follow behind.

The tour was tedious. Douglas seemed more interested in telling her about a family history she knew instinctively was a fabrication than in showing her anything of interest. From room to room they went, looking at portraits and talking about silver closets and dining rooms. In each room, Audrey ohed and ahed in the hopes he'd take her interest as sincere and perhaps reveal something she could actually use.

She was beginning to despair when they passed by a closed door on the way to Ellison's study.

"What's that room?"

"Hmmm?" he muttered, turning back. His eyes narrowed, but he gave her an appraising glance. "Perhaps you *would* be interested in my collection since you find forbidden lifestyles so thrilling."

Pulling out a key on a special ring, Ellison unlocked and opened the door, then stepped aside to let her lead the way. When Hannah tried to follow, he moved in front of her with a distinct shake of his head. Though her friend scowled, she backed into the hall.

The chamber could only be described as a war room. There were suits of armor standing guard on either side of the door. Weapons of all kinds hung from the walls, from pistols to bayonets to spears. There were even uniforms, some dirty and bloodstained, as if they hadn't been cleaned since the occupant had been run through.

With a shiver, Audrey asked, "What is this?"

"It's my tribute to the ancient art of war." Ellison's voice was suddenly distant as he looked around the room with a smile. "Everything important in this world is decided by war, Audrey. It is to be respected and revered."

"Even if it brings death and destruction?" she asked quietly.

He looked at her evenly. "You'll see what profit one can acquire from a war. In time, you'll appreciate it as much as I do."

Audrey turned away before Ellison could see the look of disgust on her face. Bending down, she looked at the artifacts in glass casings. Most were gruesome, but not of any use to her. Finally, she reached the massive dark maple desk in the back of the room.

She turned back in surprise. "Do you work here?"

He smiled. "Special occasions and special jobs deserve a special room."

Audrey's heart actually moved, she was sure of it. First it dropped to the pit of her stomach, then up to her throat where it kept her from making a sound, even a peep. In her bones, in her blood, in her heart she knew that this was the place she and her fellow spies had been looking for. This was the room where Ellison hid all his secrets.

"Well it's very nice," she said. "Though a bit intimidating."

Ellison's face broke into an ugly grin, as if he took pride in any form of intimidation.

Where did he keep his list of associates, or any proof of what he was doing? Her eyes flew to the desk. In the drawers, or perhaps a secret compartment? A large picture of a particularly horrific battle scene hung on the wall. Did he have a safe behind it? Or perhaps evidence was hidden in the liquor cabinet. The window seat. Within the books on the bookshelves.

Just as she was about to turn away, a small red box on the desk caught her eye. It was Oriental in design, with an elaborate green and gold dragon on one side. Something about it drew her closer, and she reached out to run her fingertip across the top.

"This is lovely."

"Yes." Suddenly he was standing right beside her. Just the proximity of his body made her cold. "Isn't it?"

"How does it open?" she asked as she turned it over in her hand. There didn't appear to be a lock on it

or even a lid for that matter.

"There's a special key." With a frown, Douglas took the box away from her. "This box is ancient, and it keeps the secrets of the past well."

Audrey smiled, but this time didn't have to force the expression. This was it. She had found what they had been looking for. Taking one last glance at the box, she took Ellison's waiting arm.

As they left the room and he locked the door, he said, "I want to start our life together off properly. I want to ask your father for your hand in marriage."

Audrey balked. This wasn't something she had anticipated. Her father had been ill for quite some time, and she and Noah didn't have time to wait for Ellison to visit him, allow her father to size him up, then return to London. If he did that it would be too late.

"My father is very sick," Audrey explained. "Which is why I travel with my brother. He's my protector in my father's stead. You could ask him for my hand."

Ellison hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. "Very well. And that makes it all the easier. We shall walk there now."

Throwing a glance over her shoulder to the wide-eyed Hannah, Audrey followed Ellison back downstairs to get her shawl.

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"You're completely missing the point, Noah!" Griffin slammed his drink down on the table and the flower arrangement shivered with the impact. "She went to Ellison's house without notifying either of us, the very day after the man nearly ravished her. She has no regard for her own safety."

Noah wrinkled his brow. "I understand perfectly, Griffin, there is no need to shout. I'm upset Audrey and Hannah did this on their own accord, as well. Especially considering last night's events."

His friend sighed as he rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Still, Griffin, I do see the value in what she's doing. She wants to put Ellison at ease, to make him believe he can trust her."

"So you don't have a problem with her running off and putting herself in further danger?" Griffin asked with an exasperated sigh as he flopped into a chair. "Of course, you don't. Apparently, I'm the only person who sees how outrageous this whole situation is."

"Here we go again..." Noah began, but before he could finish the door to the study opened and a footman stepped in.

"I beg your pardon, my lords, but Lady Audrey has returned and..."

"Well, send her and her *maid* in here," Griffin snapped as he turned on his heel to face the door. "I have a few things to say to her."

"Yes, my lord, but she isn't alone."

Noah uncovered his eyes and straightened up in his chair. "Who is she with?"

"With Mr. Ellison," the footman said. "They say they'd like to speak with Lord Lockhart."

Noah stared at the servant and then shot a hooded glance toward Griffin.

"Wonderful," Griffin muttered. He sat back down and smoothed his jacket. "Send them in."

In a few moments, the door opened and Ellison strolled in with Audrey on his arm as if she were a prize he'd won. His eyes lit up when he saw Griffin was in the room, and he grinned at his foe with glee.

Noah's face hardened. "Good day, Ellison. And Audrey, I wish you'd let someone know you were going for a stroll this morning."

He gave his sister a dark look, but to Griffin's surprise she refused to meet either man's eyes.

Ellison moved his arm to wrap it around Audrey's slender shoulders. "I'm sorry if you worried about your sister. But I assure you she was quite safe with me. In fact, I have an important matter to discuss with you."

Audrey's eyes lifted slowly. Glancing first at Griffin, she touched Douglas's arm. "Douglas, this is a private, family matter. Perhaps Lord Berenger..."

"No, no, no," Ellison interrupted as he met Griffin's eyes evenly. "I'm sure Lord Berenger will want to hear this news."

Audrey's gaze came back to Griffin. She seemed to be pleading with him to step out of the room, but he looked away as if he hadn't understood her stare. There was no way he could leave now.

Noah folded his arms. "What is it that you need to discuss?"

"I'd really rather talk with your father, but Audrey tells me his illness would prevent that, and that you

stand in his stead as Audrey's guardian." Ellison gave Noah a half-smile.

"True. What of it, Ellison?" Noah's eyes narrowed.

The other man took a deep breath and his wicked gaze slipped back to Griffin. "I am here to ask for your sister's hand in marriage."

Griffin did his best to control his reaction to the stunning words coming from Ellison's mouth. Though he wanted to leap up from the chair and wrench Audrey away from the blackguard at her side, he somehow remained seated, staring up at his enemy with what he hoped was an unaffected expression.

Beside him, Noah drew back. Griffin could tell he, too, was struggling with the proper reaction to this news.

Finally, his friend spoke, "I see. Is this what you desire, Audrey?"

Griffin held his breath as he waited for her to answer in the negative. Surely this game had gone too far if Audrey was willing to become *engaged* to the evil man at her side.

She turned her head to look from the corner of her eye. Her face was pale, but determined as she said, "Yes."

And at that moment, Griffin's entire world screeched to a halt. He couldn't believe what he'd heard. Audrey couldn't have... *wouldn't* have... agreed to this farce. Not after she'd turned down his proposal earlier in the week. This was lunacy!

A long pause engulfed the room. Finally Noah broke it.

"Very well." He rose and walked over to the couple. "Ellison, I don't like what went on between my sister and you last night, but I see you're trying to amend it by taking her hand. Congratulations."

Noah held out his hand and the other man took it, shaking it even as Noah glared in warning at Griffin over his shoulder. Ellison turned to Griffin with a triumphant smile as he dragged Audrey over to stand before him. With dancing gray eyes, he held out his hand.

"I hope I have your congratulations, as well, Lord Berenger," Ellison said with a sneer. "Since you are such a *good* friend to the family."

Slowly, Griffin rose, taking his time so Ellison would get the full effect of his superior height. He was pleased when just a touch of fear lit up in the other man's eyes. With great effort, he extended his hand to Douglas and ground out, "Of course, Ellison. My heartiest congratulations to you both."

"Thank you," Audrey whispered without meeting his gaze.

"Well—" Noah's voice seemed very distant to Griffin. "—you and I have much to talk about then, Douglas. Perhaps you'll come for a walk with me in the garden so we may speak privately about your future with my sister."

Ellison nodded. "Yes." Turning back to Audrey, he smiled. "I shall see you later, my love."

Lifting her hand, he kissed it, then left the room. Immediately, Audrey's face fell and she shivered as if she'd been holding the shiver in for hours.

Hannah glanced from one to the other, then patted Audrey's hand. "I'll let you have a moment."

When she'd left and closed the door, Audrey turned to him with a miserable face. "Griffin—"

"Don't." He wasn't sure he could take any explanations from her at the moment.

"Please, let me tell you why."

"I know why." He turned to the bar and poured himself the strongest drink he could stand. "You want to solve your precious case. You want to be done with it and out of my life as soon as possible."

Her mouth parted a fraction at his blunt appraisal of the situation. "It isn't as harsh as it sounds," she said as she crossed to his side. "I *do* want to finish this case, but it isn't to get away from you. At least, not the way you think..."

"Well, I feel much better." He downed the strong brew in one gulp. It burned his throat and warmed him, but it didn't help him block out the tangled emotions that tormented him. "How far will you go with this ruse?"

Her chin came out in indignation. "What do you mean?"

"By the haughty look on your face, I'd say you know exactly what I mean. Will you actually marry him if you cannot defeat him in a day or month? Will you climb into his bed and..."

Her hand came up like a flash and the slap contained all the force of her small body. When he turned his stinging face back to her, her hand was over her mouth and her eyes were full of tears.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Slowly, he placed one hand on each of her shoulders. "No, you shouldn't have. You shouldn't have done so many things since this entire fiasco began."

Slowly he lowered his lips to hers, claiming her mouth with tenderness despite his growing anger.

"You shouldn't have come to my house," he whispered against her lips. "You shouldn't have asked for my help."

Now he moved his mouth to her throat, darting his tongue out to taste the flavor of her earlobe.

"You shouldn't have allowed me to kiss you. You shouldn't have made love with me. Because you are mine now. You're mine and I refuse to share you." He drew back from her and slipped a finger beneath her chin, lifting her face up toward his gently. "I don't care if it's for King or country, Audrey. I won't share you."

Her answer was a little sob and sigh all at once as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers. There was no teasing or tenderness about this kiss, just pure animal possession, ripping his defenses down even as he felt hers come down as well.

There was something bittersweet about the way their bodies moved together, as if they were saying goodbye while they touched. Griffin supposed they were in a way. Audrey had made the choice of her case over him. There didn't seem to be a way to fight that.

So he simply surrendered, sitting down on the ottoman and dragging her on his lap. She squirmed closer to him, relaxing in his arms as his hands roved and their tongues tangled. His fingers grazed the smooth skin of her inner elbow, his tongue lapping at the curve of her neck. Meanwhile, she touched him in return, rocking against him as she smoothed her hands down his jacket and across his chest.

"Audrey." He loved the way her name reflected back on his own breath. "Audrey, please..."

With a little startled cry, she lurched off him, nearly knocking herself onto her behind on the floor in her hurry to get away.

"No." She smoothed her dress, wiping the wrinkles away as if it would help her forget. "This isn't right, not for either of us."

His face set in stone as he stared up at her.

"And throwing yourself headlong into danger is better than being with me? Is *that* what's right?"

Releasing her breath in a sharp gasp, Audrey backed away from him. "You don't understand, Griffin, you don't understand at all. Douglas Ellison may be a danger to my body, but you..." she paused, her face softening as she looked down at him. "You are a danger to my heart. And I'm no longer sure which one I fear most."

With that, she hurried from the room.

And his whole world crashed around him.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Two***

"Congratulations to you both. A good match, to be sure."

Audrey nodded blindly at the blustery man before her as he shook Douglas Ellison's hand. Though it hadn't been officially announced, people had been crowding around them all evening, saying congratulations and giving good wishes for their engagement. She had to wonder how Douglas had spread the word out so swiftly.

There had been cattiness in the crowd. Things about old maids and money, and Audrey marrying "below her class". Audrey ignored them. What did she care what people thought about her plans? This was only a false engagement after all.

What she did care about was Griffin. Since three days before when she'd hurried out of his arms, he'd said less than two words to her.

"Damn Wellington."

Audrey lurched to attention at her fiancé's harsh words. Turning her head, she saw the decorated General coming across the room. People cleared in his wake, the women tittered behind their fans and even some of the men looked like they would swoon. The new Duke bore himself well, and the people recognized it.

"I'm sorry, darling what did you say?" she asked, fanning herself as she stole a glance at Ellison's face.

"Nothing, Audrey," he snapped, then softened his demeanor. "It's a bit warm in this overcrowded room."

"Yes, Carlton House is overflowing, isn't it?"

She looked around her. The house was a showplace, and no expense had been spared in this, one of the last fêtes of the summer. Soon the *ton* would settle down and go back to their country estates where they usually spent the hottest part of the season. And if Audrey was lucky, she would leave with them... but Douglas Ellison would never again depart London.

But only if Jean retrieved to the box she had discovered during her "tour". All of them knew that was their best chance at catching the traitor himself. It could be their last.

"Excuse me."

Both Audrey and Douglas turned to look at Griffin, who had come over so quietly through the buzzing crowd neither had seen him approach. Audrey dropped her eyes so she wouldn't reveal her feelings to Ellison. He watched her like a hawk where Griffin was concerned.

"Berenger." Ellison's voice was flat and emotionless. "Haven't seen you all night. Of course, Audrey and I have been quite popular, surrounded by well-wishers, you know. I don't suppose you're one of them?"

Audrey winced at the malicious way Ellison taunted Griffin, but there was nothing she could say that wouldn't reveal the truth about her feelings.

Griffin stared straight at her. "Of course. The only thing I've ever wanted is to see Audrey happy with a man she cares for. And cares for her in return."

Audrey refused to look up, refused to meet the brown eyes she knew would pull her in where she might never return.

"And she has found that." Ellison smiled.

"I wondered if I might have a dance with your..." Griffin paused and clenched his teeth. "*Fiancée*."

Ellison smirked, but released his hold on Audrey. "Just be certain you bring her back."

Before Audrey could say anything, Griffin had her arm and was guiding her through the crowd to the dance floor. The orchestra had just begun a waltz and Griffin pulled her close. Though he kept a respectable distance between them, Audrey still felt too hot in such proximity to him. Like she'd melt if he breathed on her.

His passion and his anger were apparent in the way he moved and held her. Close but hard, his hands like vices.

"I..." she stammered. "I'm sorry. If it makes you feel better, this is difficult for me, too."

He sneered. "Oh, yes. I feel much better."

"What would you have me do, Griffin?" she snapped, somehow keeping a mask of civility on her face while she tried to concentrate on the steps.

He twirled her to her left, and smiled at her. Like her, he kept a calm façade while his grip on her tightened.

"I find it flabbergasting that you'll pledge to marry a man who could kill you, yet you deny me." He accentuated his barb with a smile, as if he'd said something utterly charming.

Drawing in a sharp breath through her nose, she tried to maintain the thin grasp on her control. "You're being unfair. You know this is a farce until I get the information I need. With you it would be a real lifetime."

"And that is still distasteful to you."

She shook her head at his flat statement. "Griffin."

"Watching you pretend to care for him is..." He trailed off as if it were indescribable.

"I know," she interjected gently. "But if Jean can obtain the information we need tonight, all this will be over."

Griffin said something else, but Audrey didn't hear it. At that moment, a man pushed through the crowd to Ellison's side. He was a burly fellow who Audrey recognized as Douglas's driver. He spoke in Ellison's ear for a moment, then her false fiancé's eyes widened and he said something back. When his face came fully into view, he looked angry. His pale skin had darkened to an ugly red.

Her steps faltered as she watched the two men. Why did Ellison look ready to kill?

"Audrey?" Griffin asked as he tried to catch her eye. "What is it?"

The orchestra played the final strains of the song and Audrey pulled from his arms. "Good evening, Lord Berenger. Thank you for the dance."

Though Griffin said her name again, Audrey kept walking away from him and back to Douglas's side. Later she would explain why, but for the moment, getting to the villain before her was much more important.

Ellison beamed at her, though the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I felt like you were gone for an age."

"Yes," she murmured, trying not to show how much she hated his insincerity. "I saw your driver approach you. You seemed upset about what he told you. Is anything amiss?"

"You're very observant," he said in a noncommittal tone.

Audrey smiled. "It isn't every day that a giant, burly driver in work boots clomps through a ballroom. He was hard to miss."

Ellison's eyes widened at that comment, as if he hadn't even thought about the impropriety of the situation. "I suppose you're right, my dear. I shall have to speak to Gregoire about that." The anger in his voice was taut and just below the surface.

Audrey briefly wondered if she'd just caused Gregoire injury, but pressed on at any rate. Her smile became sweet as sugar. "And then there's the fact that I am now your fiancée. I would be a sad wife indeed if I didn't notice your moods. It must have been important for him to intrude on such an event and risk your wrath."

Douglas's mouth turned down in a grim line. "It was. I don't want you to be alarmed, my dear, but

someone attempted to break into my home this evening.”

Audrey’s stomach turned. Jean...

“My God, Douglas,” she stammered, surprised at how calm her voice remained even while her insides were quivering with fear. “That’s terrible.”

“Yes. Luckily my guards shot the man.”

“Oh!” The little outburst left her lips before she could control it. Ellison arched an eyebrow.

“You seem very upset by this, Audrey. Are you quite well?”

She used all her power to focus. “Yes. I’ve never handled violence well.” She hesitated. “Was the man... killed?”

Ellison’s eyebrow arched a second time. “I wouldn’t know. I didn’t think to inquire about the condition of the animal who broke in to my home, only if all my valuables were intact.”

Audrey nodded, but her movements were jerky. “Well, it’s a relief the man was stopped. I hope no great damage was caused.”

Douglas tilted his head to look at her through narrowed eyes. “I’m sure no permanent damage.”

“Perhaps I should find my brother. I’ve neglected him all night and would like to dance with him before it gets too late and the party comes to an end.”

“Of course.” One corner of Douglas’s mouth came up in a half smile. “Family is very important.”

Swallowing back her own fear, Audrey brushed her fingertips across Ellison’s hand. “I hope you’ll save a final waltz for me.”

His eyes widened at her touch and the sultry innuendo she’d forced into her voice. “I certainly shall.”

“Thank you.”

Her hands shook as she crossed the room, blind to the people around her. All she could think about was Jean with his crooked smile and laughing eyes. Why it had only been a few weeks before when he’d slipped into Griffin’s house and surprised her. Now he was hurt, perhaps dead.

She kept moving, but covered her mouth to keep a wail from escaping. Finally she saw Noah standing beside a table covered with punch bowls and fruit. Griffin was with him.

“Noah.” Her voice was hoarse. “Noah.”

Her brother turned from his friend, and catching sight of her pale face and worried eyes set down his drink at once.

“What is it?”

Griffin stiffened. “Did that bastard put his hands on you again?”

“No.” She grasped Noah’s coat with both hands and looked up into her brother’s handsome face.

“It isn’t me. It’s Jean.”

“Your friend?” Griffin asked. “And you might want to smile, Ellison is watching.”

Somehow she forced a broad smile onto her face and Noah laughed as if she had been telling an amusing story.

“He’s been shot. Ellison’s guards caught him at the house and they...” she choked on the words, but quickly composed herself. “They shot him. He may be dead, I don’t know.”

Noah never allowed his false smile to leave his face even as his eyes dulled and his skin paled.

“My God. Not Jean.”

“Dance with me,” Audrey said, “Because Ellison expects it. Griffin, I promise I will fill you in on what we speak about later.”

Slowly, she turned her eyes to him and found a surprised look on his face.

“You don’t need to share the details with me,” he said with firm assurance. “After all, this is your case.”

This time it was Audrey who was surprised. Though Griffin was worried about her, he had finally respected her position. She felt the strongest urge to give that respect back to him.

“But you’re involved in it now.” she said softly. “So you have a right to know what’s happening.”

Griffin nodded. “Very well.”

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“Thank God this evening is over.” Audrey stepped into the foyer and allowed the footman to take her

wrap. When the young man had gone, she looked at Griffin anxiously. "Do you think Noah is home yet?"

Griffin looked at her with an understanding smile. He'd been impressed with her skill that night. After their dance, Noah had gone to find Lord Golding and had disappeared soon after. Audrey had been forced to return to Ellison's side and pretend to be the doting fiancée for the remainder of the evening, all while she worried about her friend and his life. Though she'd hidden it well with smiles and laughter, Griffin had seen the terror in her eyes. God help her if Ellison had seen the same.

"If he is, he's likely in my study," he said as he offered her a steadying arm. How he wished he could comfort her, but during this time he could do nothing. Only when she knew Jean was alive and unharmed would she relax. Until then, he was helpless.

The study was empty when they entered and Audrey sighed.

"This isn't right." She sat down with a thump and rubbed her eyes. "If the news were good, Noah would have come directly to us. Poor Jean, my dear friend..."

"Stop that!" Griffin poured her a strong drink to calm her nerves. "We know nothing. I've seen you work long enough to know you're a good spy. And a good spy makes no assumptions. Perhaps Jean is fine, and is simply being debriefed. Perhaps he came away with the evidence you needed and Noah and Lord Golding are making their arrests right now."

Audrey lifted her face to look at him. Her doubts and fears were clear. "I... suppose that's possible."

"Now drink this." He offered her a tumbler of brandy. "It will calm you down while we wait."

Taking the drink, Audrey set it on the table beside her and stood. Almost shyly she moved toward him, holding back a bit, then stepping forward. When she'd reached his side, she slipped her arms around him and held him close to her.

"I'm so glad you're here, Griffin."

His surprise gave way and he held her, breathing in the sweet, lilac scent of her hair and skin as her warm body pressed against him. Though he desired her at that moment, he wanted to take care of her more. He wanted to reassure her and be a beacon for her in her fear.

The sound of the door opening behind them made them both jump back and turn like thieves. Noah stood in the door. He looked tired and pale.

"Noah!" Audrey cried, running over to her brother's side. "Please tell me what's happening."

Griffin frowned at his friend's unreadable face and stepped closer in case Audrey fainted at any bad news. Noah took his sister's shoulders in his hands to hold her steady.

"Jean isn't dead. But he's been badly hurt."

"No!" Audrey cried. "May I see him?"

Noah shook his head. "I'm afraid that would be too dangerous. Golding has taken him to a secure location, but it's probably being watched. I had to sneak in and out myself to avoid being observed. Apparently Jean was caught in a compromising position and Ellison has increased his guard tenfold."

"But will Jean live?" Her bottom lip trembled.

Noah cupped her chin. "I... I'm not sure. You know I can't lie to you. But he's strong."

She shook out of her brother's embrace as she swiped at tears. "He saved our lives. And we can do nothing for him."

"Except catch the villain responsible for his injuries," Noah said.

"I'll fetch Hannah," Griffin murmured, desperate in his need to help in some way.

"Thank you," Audrey murmured.

She watched him leave the room, knowing he wanted to help her, to do something to aid them in their mission. She loved him all the more for it.

"Listen to me," her brother said as she sat down and gulped a sip of her drink. "We may not be able to get the list of Ellison's associates after all. We may have to settle for Douglas alone."

Audrey's heart sank. "No!"

"I know what you're feeling." Noah ran a hand through his hair. "But Douglas suspects someone is watching him, aware of his tricks, now more than ever. It's too risky to send in another agent to search the home. Golding feels it will be best for all of us to simply arrest the man and work on his associates later."

Slamming her drink down, Audrey cried, "And let Jean have been shot in vain? And let all the scheming and risks we took have been for nothing? No. I won't settle for that."



Her brother took her drink and downed what remained in one sip. "What do you propose we do then?"

"Let me go in."

Noah choked. "I must not have heard you correctly."

She pursed her lips. "You heard me fine. Now that we're engaged, I'll have freer access in Ellison's home. If I'm caught, I will be more able to explain my presence. Besides, I know exactly where the box is kept. It makes perfect sense to let me go. I can be in and out before he suspects a thing."

"No." Though her brother often joked and pretended not to take the assignments they were on with the seriousness they required, Audrey knew that tone. It was the one he used when he refused to bend. "What you are proposing is far too dangerous."

Audrey shook her head as she steeled herself for the fight to come. "There isn't any choice, Noah. If we're on the verge of being discovered, then our time is short. All of this work and sacrifice can't be for naught. We need to finish this case. I need to do this."

"Get away from Griffin, you mean?" Noah asked with a cock his head.

Rising, Audrey turned away from him. She hadn't the strength to argue the point with her brother. Especially when he was right.

"I won't allow it," her brother said softly.

"You can't stop me, Noah." She pivoted to face him and met his eyes. "And if you won't help me, I'll do it myself."

As she turned to leave the room, Noah caught her arm. "Audrey, please don't let your need to run from your feelings cloud your judgment."

"I won't. You're going to have to trust me on that." She leveled her gaze on him, doubts replaced by determination. "I'll fetch the box at the next opportunity."

## ***Chapter Twenty-Three***

The opportunity for Audrey to slip away and retrieve the box was almost impossible to find. Noah was right that Ellison had closed ranks and was busily building up his defenses against another attempt on his business. The next few days she hardly saw the man, let alone had the opportunity to search his home.

However, on this night, the last in the Jubilee Celebration, she had finally acquired a promise from Ellison that they would spend time together. It was the anniversary of Hanoverian Rule and that, coupled with the Reenactment of the Battle of the Nile in St. James Park, meant London was buzzing with anticipation and excitement.

Audrey put down her brush and turned from her dressing table to look at Hannah. Her “maid” lay on the bed, twirling a ribbon round and round in her hand.

“Will you help me with the back of this gown?”

Audrey stood to motion to the elaborate dress she wore. The bodice was high, fastened in front with a deep purple ribbon. The dress itself was a paler violet with delicate brocading along the skirt. The buttons in the back were tiny and Audrey never could have reached them by herself.

Hannah stood and walked over to her slowly. Without a word, she turned her friend and slid each button into the buttonhole. Audrey felt like she’d been waiting for ages when Hannah finally said she was finished.

“Tell me what it is,” Audrey said with a sigh.

Hannah went back to her seat on the bed, but not before throwing her friend a withering stare. “What what is?”

“Why you’re acting so strangely. I know you aren’t really a maid, but you’ve always helped me get ready. Today you’ve avoided me and when you do help you take forever!” Audrey shook her head. “Have I done something to offend you?”

“No.” Hannah arched one well-defined eyebrow. “Unless you count excluding me from whatever plan is in your head.”

Audrey drew back. She hadn’t known she was so obvious to her friend.

“I don’t expect you to help me. Noah doesn’t approve of my going on my own, and I’m sure Lord Golding would have an apoplexy if he knew. I haven’t said anything because I don’t want you to be put in an awkward position.”

Hannah laughed. “Like the one I’d be in if you suddenly disappeared?”

Audrey put a finger to her lips. “You won’t be blamed for that. Everyone knows how willful I can be.”

Her friend nodded with a grin before saying, “Well, out with it, my girl. What are we doing tonight?”

Audrey bit her lip, still uncertain if she wanted to bring Hannah into her plan. Finally she said, “Ellison and I are having a party in two days to officially announce our engagement, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I thought I’d go to his home this afternoon to oversee some arrangements. Once I have all his staff

busily following my orders, I'll sneak into that war room of his and retrieve the box." Excitement coursed through her as she continued. "I'll excuse myself to go home and change for tonight's events, then turn the evidence over to my brother. Case solved."

She grinned, but Hannah only looked at her with concern. "And what if the supposed list isn't in the box? What if it doesn't exist at all?"

Audrey clenched her teeth. That was something she'd often thought of herself. "Then we'll have to settle for Ellison alone. But I must try this one last thing before we surrender. So, will you help me?"

Hannah smiled at her. "Of course. Noah and Lord Golding may not approve, but you're my friend. Where you go, I follow. Besides, it would be suspicious if a young lady came to a gentleman's house without her escort. Shall I arrange for a note to be taken next door?"

Audrey smiled and fished a folded sheet of paper from her pocket. "I've already written it."

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"I must say, I was surprised to receive your message, Audrey," Ellison said as he met her in the foyer to place a kiss on her gloved hand.

"Why, Douglas?" She nodded to Hannah as her friend entered and took her thin shawl from her shoulders.

"Our party is in two days, and with the excitement tonight I didn't think you'd want to attend to such mundane duties. Especially when my staff is capable of putting together a lovely event."

"Oh, Douglas." She managed a laugh as she touched his arm. "How little you understand of women. This will be my first event as your future wife. I want it to go well in order to set a high standard for the future. My duties here won't take me long." Her companion shrugged his thin shoulders. "Very well. I've arranged my staff in the sitting room. You may address them there. I shall retire to my study while you do your work."

"Very well, my dear," she said, waving him away.

As she and Hannah followed a chambermaid to the sitting room, they exchanged glances. Audrey heard her friend's silent plea to be careful as if she had voiced it. With a nod, she introduced herself to the servants and began giving them orders.

It didn't take long for all the people in the room to hurry off to check on orders, begin decorating, or whatever other odd job Audrey had given them. It had taken her and Hannah an hour to list all the ridiculous things they could send people off to do. Finally, only a burly footman was left in the room.

"Now, you..." Audrey smiled at him even though the fact that he'd hardly blinked the entire time she'd been in the room made her nervous. "You seem like a strong lad. Why don't you go help one of the chambermaids with the decorating?"

"No ma'am," the young man said with a shake of his head. Audrey was surprised he could turn his head at all, given how broad his neck was.

She pursed her lips in annoyance. "Why not?"

"I was told by Mr. Ellison to assist *you*, my lady," the boy explained. "I'm not to leave your side in case you need a helping hand."

"My, how... *thoughtful* of Douglas," she muttered with a roll of her eyes. "But you needn't worry about that. I have Hannah here to assist me if I need anyone. You may run along."

"I'm sorry, my lady." The man gave a shrug of his beefy shoulders. "But I have my orders."

Hannah smiled and sidled a bit closer to the young man. Though the footman hadn't looked Audrey directly in the eyes, he allowed himself a good, long stare at Hannah's curvaceous figure.

"Will you help *me* then?" Hannah asked with a sultry smile. "After all, that would still be following the intent of your master's orders."

The man's eyes flickered as he glanced down at her friend. "I don't know..."

Before he could argue any further, Hannah had him by the elbow and was leading him from the room. Audrey laughed as she heard Hannah say something about big strong arms. But her laughter was short-lived as she hurried from the room and up the stairs. She had no idea how much time she'd have, and raced to the "war" room where she'd seen the special box the day before.

The door was locked, but she'd suspected it would be. Pulling a lock pick from her hair, she began to work diligently on the door. It was one skill Noah had taught her well, telling her it never hurt to be able to get in... or out of a locked room.

Finally, with a little click, the door opened and she slipped inside. She pushed the door mostly shut behind her, but was careful not to close it all the way in case she couldn't get out. The room was dark due to the long, black curtains being shut, but Audrey managed to reach the desk. She lit a candle and bent over, glancing at the papers in piles all around her. Though she was reasonably sure what she was looking for was in the locked box, she hated to leave any evidence behind due to sloppy work.

Most of the papers were invoices and notes. Things her brother could use later as evidence, but not anything she needed to gather now. Finally, she turned to the box, glittering up red in the glow of the candlelight.

With a suppressed squeal of delight, she wrapped her fingers around the metal and slipped it into her pocket. As she turned to leave, she heard the sound of flint and a second light came up from the corner of the room.

"You were quicker than I thought you'd be."

Audrey drew in three shallow breaths as Douglas Ellison rose from a dark corner behind one of the suits of armor and lit a cigar. Before the flame in his hand went out, she saw him puff out a circle of smoke.

"Douglas!" Her voice was falsely light and friendly, as if the man hadn't just caught her red handed. "I didn't see you there."

Her hands had begun to shake and the candle in her fist bobbed up and down, sending wild, flickering light around the room. Everything in her screamed at her to get out, but there didn't seem to be a way with Douglas standing right beside the door, his cold eyes focused entirely on her.

"I realize that," he said with a thin smile as he walked steadily closer. "If you'd seen me there, you wouldn't have been so foolish as to steal my property."

"I haven't stolen an-anything," she stammered. The room temperature seemed to drop as he got nearer. "I merely stumbled into the wrong room."

"Stumbled into the wrong room. Picked through my papers." He looked down at her. "Took my property. All by chance, eh?"

Audrey glanced at the door behind him. There was no way she'd reach it unless... Her gaze moved to the candle in her hand. Unless it was dark and Ellison couldn't see her.

With a deep breath she blew the candle out, then dropped it on the ground as she gathered up her skirts and sprinted passed Douglas toward the direction of the door. She heard him swear behind her, but kept going, running as she blindly reached out her hand for the doorknob. Instead, her foot caught on something solid and she sprawled across the floor in a painful crash. Her face collided with the wallboard and stars exploded in front of her eyes.

Despite the pain in her cheek and the blood she felt trickling from the corner of her lip, she scrambled up and clawed for the doorknob. Her hands slid along the wallpapered wall, until she hit something solid. Something warm.

And a hand wrapped around her wrist like vice.

Light suddenly streamed into the room as the curtains flew open with a swish. When her eyes adjusted, she saw the burly footman stood before her, holding her arm. Behind her, Ellison stood by the curtain pull with folded arms and a frown.

"Tsk, tsk, Audrey." He came toward her in slow, steady strides. "I've come to expect a bit more grace from you over the months."

"Let go of me, you oaf," she yelled, pulling against the other man.

"No, I'm afraid Quentin here won't let you go." Ellison finally reached them. His hand came out and he grasped her face, pitching her cheeks until her mouth made an o. "And neither will I. Now..." He reached into her pocket to withdraw the oriental box. "I'll just take this."

"Douglas, this is all a misunderstanding." Her voice squeaked and she hated herself for showing such weakness. "I merely..."

Before she could finish, Ellison struck her across the face with the back of his hand, knocking the wind out of her. The blow would have made her stumble had Quentin not been holding her so tightly.

"Shut up. You think I don't know who you are? *What* you are? You *and* your brother?" Ellison snarled. "At first, I admit I was taken in. You offered me everything I needed. Beauty. A name. Money. But a few nights ago I began to suspect something was amiss."

She tested her jaw. It didn't seem like it was broken, but it certainly hurt. "What are you talking about?"

"Just a short time after I showed you this room." He motioned around him, then held up the metal box in his hands. "And this box, a spy broke into my home and tried to steal it. When I told you about the incident, I admit you covered your reaction well. But I saw it when I said my guards shot an intruder... it all began to add up."

"I don't like death," Audrey explained, damning herself for not practicing more self-control at the party. Once again, her wild emotions had betrayed her. "You assume too much about me from that one fact."

"Yes, but after the ball I saw you in Griffin Berenger's arms, allowing him to console you." Ellison leaned so close that she could feel his breath on her skin. "And the pieces all fit together perfectly."

"Saw Griffin comfort me?" she asked, wrinkling her brow. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Through his study window," Ellison said with a sneer. "I saw you put your arms around him like the whore you really are."

The blood drained from her cheeks, but with all her strength she forced herself to continue the ruse. "You saw nothing. He and I are friends, nothing more. You've let your jealousy get the better of you and it's muddled your senses, but..."

"Enough!" Ellison roared as he slammed his fist against the desk.

Audrey jumped at his rage, then squared her shoulders. There was obviously no use denying her role to Ellison any longer. He knew everything and her explanations only served to anger him further.

She narrowed her eyes. "What you do to me now is irrelevant. If you've done wrong, you'll be caught. The Crown has too many good men after blackguards like you."

"Yes, but I can conclude my business and take down a few of those 'good men' before I'm caught. And if the some of those agents... like your brother... are busy looking for you and your 'maid', it will afford the perfect opportunity to slip out of the country." A thin smile spread Ellison's lips. "Now, take her away, Quentin. Put her with the other one."

The bigger man grunted and turned to haul her from the room.

"Oh, and Quentin?" Ellison said. "Make sure you remove the lock pick in her hair."

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The room was very dark and very small. Audrey stumbled in and reached the opposite wall in just a few short steps. The door slammed behind her and she pivoted to beat on it with her fist.

"Let me out of here!" Quentin laughed from the other side. The noise faded away as he walked down the hall. "Big oaf!" she called out, leaning her back against the door and folding her arms.

"This is quite a pickle, eh?" came a familiar voice from the corner of the room.

"Hannah!" Audrey felt her way around the perimeter of the closet until she reached her friend. When she felt her friend's arm, she latched her hand on and squeezed.

"Ouch!" Hannah breathed, yanking her arm away but not before Audrey felt how limp and cold it was.

Audrey flinched before she hugged Hannah gently. "What happened?"

"Quentin turned out to be less of gentleman than he appeared." Her friend laughed, though the sound was painful. "When I wouldn't go with him quietly, he broke my arm."

Audrey's eyes filled with tears at the pain in her friend's voice. "Hannah!"

"And what about you? You're bleeding."

"How on earth can you tell that?" She drew back as her eyes began to adjust to the dim room. Only the light from beneath the doorway gave them any illumination.

"When you hugged me," Hannah explained, sinking down to a sitting position on the floor as if she were very tired. "I felt something wet and sticky on my cheek. Since I know you aren't exactly a drooler, I guessed it was blood. Did Ellison do something to you?"

Audrey shrugged as she took a place beside her friend. "A bit of Ellison, but mostly I did it too myself trying to run in the dark. He caught me in the office just as I took the evidence. I was so excited about getting the paperwork, I completely forgot all the important things one must do when one is spying."

Hannah drew in a sharp breath through her teeth as she shifted position. "Like checking the corners in a room?"

"Exactly." Leaning down, Audrey found the hem of her dress.

"Well, you always were bad at that," Hannah teased. As Audrey ripped a strip of fabric from her gown,

Hannah barked, "What are you doing?"

"Making a sling for your arm," Audrey said. "Then I'm going to figure a way out of here. It's still an hour before Ellison and I are supposed to leave for the final fête of the Jubilee. It will be even longer before Noah and Griffin notice we're missing unless I get out of here now and let them know the danger."

Hannah sighed with resignation. "It's too bad. I always liked that dress, too."

"So did I," Audrey said as she wrapped the fabric around her friend's neck, then slowly slid her bad arm through the makeshift sling. "But I like you more. Is the pain very bad?"

"Pretty bad," Hannah admitted. "He did some kind of strange twist when he broke it. I swore more than I did in all my years on the streets of London."

"He must have enjoyed that." Audrey gave a nervous laugh as she looked around them for a way out. But there was nothing she could use to free them.

Things were looking very grim indeed.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Four***

When the closet door opened an hour later to send bright light showering in on the two women, Audrey still had no plan. It was difficult to come up with a way to fight an enemy with no idea what that enemy was preparing to do.

Ellison took two steps inside the little room and grabbed Audrey's hair in one steely fist. Before she could fight, he yanked her to her feet and dragged her into the hallway. Pain shot to the roots of her hair and she yelped.

"Now, my little vixen, you're coming with me. You'll want to see what I have in store tonight."

"Let me go," she said through clenched teeth as she wrapped her hands around his wrists to lessen the painful tug on her roots.

"As for your friend." He motioned to Hannah. "Quentin, once we've departed... kill her."

"No!" Audrey screamed even as Ellison dragged her down the hallway toward the stairs. "Hannah!" But there was no response.

"Help me!" Audrey yelled as they passed through the hallways. Chambermaids and footmen ducked their heads as she passed by, going about their work as if Audrey didn't exist... as if they weren't watching her being taken to her death with every step.

"You see," Ellison said as he dragged her down the stairs. She slipped and stumbled her way after him, banging her shins against the floor and her elbows against the hand railing. "When I hire servants, I choose ones who are loyal to me."

She pulled back against him. "Or too cowardly to stop you!"

"One way or the other," he said with a chuckle and a shrug. "They won't rush to your aid, or assist your friend."

Tears of horror filled Audrey's eyes. Hannah was going to die, and probably her, too.

Ellison took her out a side door and they stood in a narrow alleyway, away from the street where neighbors and friends might see her plight. Just as they reached the curb, a carriage pulled up in front on them and Gregoire, the burly driver from the ball a few nights before, stepped down from the box up top. Audrey noticed the man had an enormous black eye and was missing a few teeth since she'd last seen him. Remembering Douglas's promise to 'talk' with Gregoire about his improper behavior that night, Audrey shivered.

The man opened the door with a nod for his employer.

Ellison released her hair. "Step inside, Audrey."

"You think I would be so foolish as to get into that carriage on my own?" She folded her arms and glared from one man to the other.

She was strongly considering running. Griffin's house was so close she could get there in just a few moments, but the glimmer of a pistol butt in Gregoire's belt made her stop. A shot at such close range could

easily kill her, then she'd have no chance of escape.

Ellison laughed. "On the contrary, Audrey, it is because I feel you aren't stupid that I ask you to enter the coach on your own. If you force Gregoire or I to help you, you may not like how it's done." His smile fell and eyes narrowed. "Now get in. You're slowing the operation."

Clenching her teeth, Audrey quickly pondered her options. Running was out of the question. Gregoire now had his hand on the pistol grip, she'd never escape before he pulled it out and fired. The last thing she wanted was to be bound or injured in a struggle to stay out of Ellison's carriage.

Her only option was to play along and pray she had an opportunity for escape before it was too late. For her, for her brother, for the Prince Regent and especially for Griffin.

"Fine," she ground out, lifting the torn hem of her skirt and gripping the door for support.

Just as she got one leg inside, there was a loud crack from the house. Audrey's knees went weak and the blood drained from her face. It was a gunshot.

"Hannah," she whispered.

"One less problem for me to worry about. Now in." Ellison lost his patience and shoved her inside the vehicle.

Audrey sprawled on the dirty carriage floor, only catching herself with a hand on the low seat. Tossing Ellison a glare, she stumbled up to the seat and sat down. When he'd settled himself in beside her, the vehicle began to move rocking toward the street, then turning toward St. James Park.

She turned on her companion with her full rage. "Why don't you just kill me?"

With a growl, he produced a small pistol from his coat pocket and jabbed it in her face. She could smell the smokiness of the barrel that told her it had been fired recently and recoiled on instinct.

"Don't tempt me."

Then his temper was gone as fast as it had surfaced and he lowered the barrel from in front of her eyes. "I won't kill you... yet... because you could still be of some use to me. You made a fool of me Audrey Jordan. You betrayed me. And you, your brother and Griffin Berenger will all pay for that, just as your friend Hannah has already paid."

Audrey steeled herself. She wouldn't give Ellison the satisfaction of her emotions. If she could get out of this mess, she would take a long time to mourn the loss of the best friend she'd ever known.

Ellison smiled calmly as he looked out the window to the street. "In just an hour's time, Lord Berenger will get a knock on his door. When it is answered, Hannah's body will be laying on the stairs, along with a note from me. It will take them some time to decipher my message. Just long enough to set my trap."

Audrey drew back in horror. "You're a monster."

His thin lips pulled back from his teeth. "Probably. And this is one monster you should fear. Not many people get to look their killer in the face, Audrey. Enjoy the knowledge of your fate."

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Even in the study Griffin and Noah heard the pounding on the door.

"What on earth is that?" Griffin asked.

"Sounds like the front door, but if it is, it certainly isn't a respectable guest. Who knocks like that?" Noah crossed over to the door to open it. He stepped into the hall with Griffin close behind.

They watched as the annoyed butler sprinted to the door and wrenched it open.

"My God." Noah hurried forward.

Griffin craned his neck to see around his friend and what he saw made his blood run cold. Hannah lay in a heap on the front step.

In two steps, he was kneeling beside the woman. "Is she injured?"

The two men exchanged a glance of horror as they both barked out, "Where's Audrey?"

Noah slowly rolled the woman over and she opened her green eyes. "Hello Noah," she said with a weak smile. "Do you think you could pry this gun out of my hands? Ever since I used it to kill that bloke who tried to murder me, I've been too frightened to let it go. Now I don't seem to be able to."

Griffin's eyes immediately went to her small hands. Sure enough, a pistol was clutched in the grip of her left hand, while her right arm hung useless at her side, held up only by a crude sling made from... from a strip of fabric from the beautiful amethyst gown Audrey had been wearing earlier in the day.

"Bring her inside!" he ordered as Noah pulled the weapon from the woman's hand and gave it to a



chambermaid who looked at them as though she was ready to swoon at any moment. "You, get some hot water and some bandages," he barked to the nearest person. "You, fetch a doctor!"

Following Noah into the parlor, Griffin helped his friend lay the weak woman across the settee. His heart was racing as he wondered where Audrey was, though he already knew the answer. Ellison. Ellison had her. The only question was, was she in worse shape than Hannah?

Noah pushed a few sweaty strands of hair from Hannah's face. "Tell me what happened."

She told the story quickly, all the way up until Ellison's order to kill her.

"How did you manage to escape?" Griffin nodded to the girl who'd brought them bandages. He handed them to Noah, who removed the sling made from Audrey's hemline. When he handed the torn fabric to Griffin, the two men locked eyes. Then Noah turned away, his face ashen.

"I still had one good arm and two legs," Hannah chuckled. "The poor boy never saw it coming from a woman. I'm afraid he wouldn't listen to reason once I had the gun away from him, so I had no choice but to shoot him."

Griffin couldn't help but smile at the bravery of the woman lying before him. Though it was obvious she was in great pain, she'd fought like a wildcat and come out the victor.

"I realize you're hurting and you just want to give in and sleep," Noah said gently. "But I need to know one thing. Where is Audrey? Is she hurt?"

Hannah's eyes began to glaze over. "He hit her."

Griffin winced, hating that the woman he cared for had been hurt. Helplessness was the worst feeling in the world.

"But is she hurt beyond that?" Noah pressed. "Try to remember."

There was a long pause as Hannah seemed to search for words. "He took her away. I could hear her telling him where he could go the whole way down the hall." Hannah smiled. "One of the men said something about St. James Park."

Noah jumped to his feet. "Very good, Hannah."

Turning to Griffin, he said, "I need to go find Lord Golding and let him know of the situation. We've lost a great deal of time as it is, but we can still assemble a few men and save my sister. You stay here and make sure Hannah is treated by the doctor."

"Like hell!" Griffin shook his head. "Either I'm going with you or I'm going to that park. I'm not going to stand here while the woman I..."

He trailed off and turned away from Noah.

Noah arched an eyebrow. "The woman you what?"

"Never mind. The point is, I'm going to help her." Griffin's head reeled from new emotions and fear for Audrey's safety.

Noah put his hands on his hips. "If you were going to say the woman you love, I must say two things. One, it's about time you realized this. Two, your feelings are all the more reason for you to stay here. Rushing in with too much emotion could put Audrey in more danger. Leave this to the men who were trained for it."

"No! I—"

Noah scowled. "You're wasting time. Don't argue with me."

His friend hurried from the room with no further discussion. Griffin glanced down at Hannah, who had slipped into a pain-induced unconsciousness.

"Fine, my friend," he muttered as he heard the front door slam and Noah calling for his horse in the courtyard. "I won't argue. But I never agreed, either."

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Audrey had never seen St. James Park so crowded. Thousands of people milled around her, but no one seemed to notice her torn gown or disheveled hair. She'd long ago given up calling for help when she realized most of the crowd thought she was a light skirt paying her vowels with the money she made from drunken revelers.

"Stop pulling, will you?" she snapped. "You'll rip my arm out of the socket."

Ellison turned to glare at her. "Where you're going, it won't make a damn bit of difference."

His malicious tone frightened her into silence, but she noticed he didn't pull her nearly as hard as he

had been moments before. They weaved in and out of the crowd, going always forward, but toward what she couldn't tell. She was just too short to see over the throng.

Finally they ascended a small hill in the middle of the park and she caught a glimpse of their destination through the trees, a giant, gas-lit pagoda that graced the center of the park. The yellow and black shrine sat on the bridge over the canal where rowboats had already begun the reenactment of the Battle of the Nile. The cheers of the crowd were deafening as they drew nearer, near enough that she could see the pagoda's blue trim in the moonlight.

Ellison opened up a small door at the base of the structure and shoved her inside with little fanfare. "In we go."

"What are we doing here?" she asked, looking around her as Ellison pulled the door behind them. The pagoda was enormous with a winding stairway that lead to the top high above.

"Well, *you* are dying," he explained with a chuckle as he hurried her to the stairs and urged her up with a series of jabs with his pistol. "And *I* am about to kill the Prince."

"From this distance?" She looked out of the small windows in the structure as they wound their way up floor after floor. "You don't even have a rifle."

"No," he admitted. "But I'll give the signal that the games are to begin. Then my men will do the rest."

Audrey's stomach lurched. If it was too late for her, she swore she'd keep Ellison from doing any more harm than he already had. She whirled on him with venom in her eyes.

"Why? You're a successful businessman with some level of acceptance in the *ton*. Why are you plotting to kill the Prince Regent? What will you obtain from all of this?"

"I wondered when you'd ask me why." He placed a hand on her shoulder to push her down to a sitting position on the top floor of the pagoda.

She followed his painful order with a glare, but didn't fight back. Now wasn't the right time, though it was close. If she could get him talk until he was distracted, she could strike.

"It's complicated, my dear," he said, as he glanced down on the revelers below while he continued to keep an eye on her. "You wouldn't understand all of it. You were raised in privilege. You never wanted for anything. But I had to raise myself up in the world. My mother was a common whore," he accentuated the word with a hiss. "My father her 'protector' until she told him she was carrying a child. Whatever protection he'd given her departed with him. I swore I would never depend on anyone as long as I lived. I stole to get where I am, I sold my soul."

Audrey wrinkled her brow. "But what does that have to do with our future king?"

He scowled. "The war with France brought me my fortune. It began with the simple buying and selling of commissions in the army. Then I realized there was more that could be done. I ventured into shipping, loading up boats and charging the military to transport them, then hijacking the shipments myself and calling it the dangers of the sea and war. I then sold the materials to the other side. There's more profit to be made than you realize."

She shook her head in disgust. The man was so driven by money that it sickened her.

"When the war ended in April, most of my wealth was cut off. I still had legitimate businesses, of course, but none brought in the cash I desired. I made contact with a group of men who are trying to bring Napoleon back to power. They agreed to give me an enormous sum of money to assassinate the Prince." He shrugged one shoulder. "I can't lose. The nation will go back to war, which is profitable to me, and I receive the bonus this group has offered me."

Audrey drew in a sharp breath. "So all this..." She waved her hand around the empty building. "The plots, the murder? It's all for money?"

"Not you." He crouched down to touch her face. She moved away, but he grasped her cheeks and held her in place. "What was happening with you was all too real. You offered me position and money, but I also wanted you. But you've ruined it all now."

With a sigh of disgust, he thrust her face from his hand and strode over to the window again.

"You won't get away with this," she said. "Even if you can kill the Prince, there will be a manhunt for you. You won't be able to get out of London fast enough."

"Except that one of my ships waits for me even as we speak," he murmured, still looking away from her though she sensed he was concentrating on her very closely. "There will be so much turmoil after the Prince

is dead that I'll have plenty of time to escape. I'll be in France before anyone realizes what has happened. And then there will be so much infighting over who should rule the country that I'll be a mere spot in the distance."

Audrey frowned at the truth in his words. Princess Caroline and her daughter Charlotte would pick fights with the Dukes. Everyone would rush to marry and produce the next heirs to the throne. The country would be in turmoil.

"All I need to do is shut off the gas and the plan will be set into motion."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"The pagoda can be seen from all over the park. The second it goes dark, my men will strike," he said with a smile as he strolled over to the covered flame in the middle of the room. The fire was large enough to hide the gas source beneath.

As he bent to cut off the source, Audrey leapt to her feet and charged him with a guttural yell.

"Not unless you kill me first!" she screamed as she threw herself onto the man's back.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Five***

Griffin spun around in a circle looking for Audrey. It was impossible with the people all around him surging up to block his view. With the throng screaming out at every volley and boom of the battle reenactment in the canal, he couldn't even try to listen for her voice if she was calling out. His frustration was at a peak, for he knew with each moment he couldn't find Audrey she was in greater danger.

Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of the glowing pagoda on the bridge in the center of the canal. That would be the perfect place to survey the entire park for Ellison and Audrey. At least it would give him a better vantage point than he had from the ground.

Using elbows and sometimes a few well-aimed boot toes, Griffin made his way through the crowd. They were a good-natured bunch due to all the alcohol they had consumed during the festivities. Most laughed when he pushed them aside. He was happy for that. The last thing he needed was a fight, as much as he wanted to hit something.

Finally he stood at the bottom of the pagoda. It rushed up high above his head, as tall as, and even taller than most buildings in London. He was surprised the small door on the West side was cracked open, he'd been sure he'd have to break it down to enter.

Thankful for this one piece of good luck, he stepped in. The interior consisted of a wide staircase that spiraled toward the top. Because the enormous building was so empty, every noise echoed around him. As he started to climb the first few stairs, he thought he heard a sound. Freezing, he listened.

"No!" came a scream from above.

Audrey!

He almost shouted her name before he realized he had the upper hand. If Audrey and Ellison were fighting then the villain wouldn't hear him approach.

He climbed the stairs as quickly and quietly as he could. Griffin damned each of the seven stories as he climbed ever higher. Finally he reached the landing that supported the gas lighting structure in the center.

"Get off me, you bitch!" Ellison yelled from within. "Stop your biting!"

Then there was a smack and a thud. With a curse, Griffin burst into the room to see Audrey on the floor. Despite a bruised cheek and bleeding lip, she was struggling to her feet to charge at her captor again, while Ellison desperately fiddled with the pagoda's gas lighting.

"Audrey!" he called out as he hurried toward her.

"Griffin!" Her voice was a mixture of relief and shock. When he took a step in her direction she held up both hands as if to ward him off and said, "No, not me, him! If he snuffs out the light they'll assassinate the Prince."

Griffin pivoted on one heel and immediately switched his focus to Ellison. He charged toward the other man and took great satisfaction when he knocked him from his feet. With a grunt, he flipped the man over and punched him squarely in the face. Ah, that's what he'd been waiting to do for weeks.

"There will be no holding back, Ellison," he growled as the man blinked up at him in surprise. "I should have finished this the night of the ball."

"He's got a gun, Griffin!" Audrey pulled herself to her feet and took a step toward them.

Griffin turned his head in her direction. Her warning still rung in the barren room around them as he felt the cold steel of a gun barrel press into his neck.

"I should blow your head off right now," Ellison said. He sneered as he wiped the line of blood from his face. "I'd take great pleasure in that."

"Griffin," Audrey whispered, her blue eyes filling with tears.

He was going to die and hadn't even told Audrey he loved her. That he wanted to be with her for the rest of his life.

"I'll be fine. If he was going to shoot me, he'd have done it already," he taunted, hopeful he would draw enough attention away from Audrey that she could escape to find Noah.

But instead of edging toward the stairway, Audrey stood just where she was, watching the two men square off with horror in her eyes.

Ellison chuckled. "Don't be so sure. I still may. In fact, I probably will. But timing is everything, isn't it?"

Griffin joined in with the laughter in hopes it would appease Ellison. The other man began to bend sideways to turn off the gas supply to the light. Just as his hand touched the lamp switch, Audrey let out a scream. Griffin took advantage of Ellison's distraction to throw another punch that dropped Douglas to the ground. The gun spun out of his reach, clattering as it bounced down the stairs.

As Ellison fell back, his foot caught on the lamp edge, flipping the fire on its side and catching Ellison's pant leg on fire at the same time. He let out a blood-curdling scream and tried to beat out the flames. As he thrashed and yelled, Audrey covered her ears in the corner.

"Put him out!" she screamed. "Put him out!"

"I'm trying," Griffin grunted, trying to turn over the burning man. His flailing made it difficult.

"Hold still." He pounded out the fire that had burned Ellison's legs so badly.

The flames were quickly spreading across the floor toward the stairs. "This whole place is going to go up."

Griffin stared down at Ellison. The man was badly burned and had lost consciousness from the pain. As much as he wanted to leave him behind, Griffin couldn't. He turned to Audrey as he scooped the limp Ellison over his shoulder.

"Go! I'll carry him down after you,"

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, then ran, hurrying down the stairs as the fast-burning fire trailed after them, devouring the dry wood, paper and chemicals that made up the pagoda.

"Be careful," she warned, "The stairs are starting to buckle under my weight."

"Just keep moving, sweetheart."

Griffin tossed a glance at the limp man in his arms. If the stairs were having trouble with Audrey, how would they handle two full-grown men?

Blocking out the thought, he hurried down behind her, coming ever closer to the bottom. They were only about two stories up now, but the fire was blazing hot above them. With each step the stairs creaked and moaned under his feet. Audrey had gotten ahead of him and stepped off the last stair. Turning, she glanced up at him.

"Get out!" he said, "Get out before you..."

He never finished the sentence. At that moment, the stairway gave way under his feet, sending him crashing downward in a pile of rubble and fire.

Audrey's scream seemed very far away from him as he hit the ground hard. His breath was knocked from his lungs as a hail of wood and embers covered him.

When he'd finally regained his breath, he called out weakly, "Just go. I can make it out myself."

Of course, she didn't listen. Both annoyance and relief surged through him as she picked her way into the flaming rubble. Tears streamed down her grimy face as she ran to his side.

"Are you trapped?" She pulled dusty beam fragments from him.

"No." He coughed and his lungs ached with inhaled dust and smoke. He took her proffered hand and rose to his feet. The second he tried to put weight on his right leg, pain shot from his ankle to his knee.

He glanced down at Ellison. The other man's body had broken Griffin's fall and he now lay still and twisted in the rubble around them. Dead.

"Go Audrey, there's no way you can support me."

"That's what you think." In completely unladylike fashion, she sniffed and wiped her nose on her forearm. "Lean on my shoulders and let's move."

He slanted a glance at the teetering pagoda above them. "Audrey."

"Don't argue, *move!*" she barked with the angry efficiency of a general.

He did as she asked, leaning his weight on her as they moved toward the door. Arches of pain ripped through him with each step, but they continued on, closer and closer to freedom.

Finally, Audrey gave the door a kick. It flew open, allowing a burst of fresh air to hit their faces. Outside the people around the pagoda cheered, apparently thinking its blaze was part of the evening's entertainment. But as Audrey and Griffin appeared from the smoke, Griffin heard some of the closer voices turn from screams of delight to gasps of horror.

"Ey! 'Ere's peoples in there!" said one voice. "Come on boys, we'll give the little lady a hand."

Suddenly three men were lifting him, none too gently, onto their shoulders. He heard Audrey's weak calls of thanks and her telling the men that no one was left in the pagoda alive that she knew of. Then he was being set on soft grass as someone ran to fetch a doctor.

He looked up to see the starry night sky blocked by Audrey's sooty, beautiful face.

"You were so strong." His voice cracked from emotion and the smoke he'd inhaled. "I take back everything I said about you being ill-prepared for this. You can protect my country any time."

She smiled, but the tears she'd pushed away to save him now returned. "I hope you mean that."

"I do," he said with a cough as the pain overtook him, taking him down a path toward darkness.

"And Audrey?"

She took his hand. "Yes, my love?"

"You look like an angel."

He slipped into unconsciousness, but not before he heard her make a sound, though he wasn't sure if it was a laugh or a sob.

## ***Chapter Twenty Six***

Griffin opened his eyes to find himself in his own bed. With a start, he sat straight up, then groaned as his head began to throb.

"Easy there," said a familiar feminine voice. "Needn't try to do everything all at once. You've had quite an adventure."

Squinting as his blurry eyes cleared, Griffin looked in the direction the voice had come from. "Audrey?"

No it wasn't Audrey's. Her voice had a richer tone, more of the sound of laughter in it.

"No, it's Hannah, Lord Berenger," said the woman with a laugh. "But you needn't worry, Audrey is fine. The doctor and Lord Golding never would have allowed her to travel if she weren't."

"Travel?"

Griffin eased up onto one elbow and finally looked at the woman with comprehension. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face, revealing a nasty bruise next her eye that was already healing from black to purple. Her arm was secured in a real sling now, and though she favored it, her movements were sure and swift.

"Left two days ago, by my guess." Hannah said. Her sharp, green eyes watched his face carefully to judge his reaction. "Though not before she was reassured you would fully recover."

Griffin flopped back on the bed in disbelief. "I was asleep for two days?"

"After we brought you back here and the doctor set your leg, he gave you a mighty amount of drugs to sooth you. After all, you were thrashing about and screaming for Audrey so much you near killed yourself."

Griffin blushed, an unfamiliar feeling that was entirely unpleasant. He didn't like being so exposed to this woman who he hardly knew.

"And why didn't you go with your friend?" he asked.

"I wanted to, but she said she needed to go home. And she thought three days in a coach wouldn't be good for my arm," Hannah said with a shrug. "In truth, I think she wanted to make sure someone was here to take care of you."

"And Noah?"

"Should be back any moment," Hannah said. "He's just finishing up with his paperwork."

"I'm here now," Noah said, coming in the door with a smile for his friend. "Glad to see you awake, Grif. I told that doctor not to knock you out forever, just give me a break from your complaining."

Griffin couldn't muster a smile, not after finding out that Audrey had left without even saying goodbye to him. Instead, he shifted on his pillows.

"How did the case turn out?" he asked. It was an awkward question when what he really wanted to know

hung between them. Still, he wasn't sure he was ready to talk about Audrey with an audience.

Noah smirked. "Very well. Though Ellison didn't live to see trial, we did manage to squeeze the names of the associates out of his staff and glean some information from his files. The Department has made several arrests in the past few days."

Griffin arched an eyebrow. "What about your precious list?"

Noah nodded. "It was in the box, just as Audrey said it was. When Ellison took her, he put the thing in his pocket. It survived the fire far better than he did and served out the final evidence against several key players in the plot. We've been making arrests most of the past two days."

"So this is over," Griffin sighed. He should have felt relief, but he didn't.

"In more ways than one, at least for me. I'm retired."

"What?" Griffin sat up too quickly again and paid the price of a throbbing head.

"You heard me. Lord Golding felt Audrey and I were too revealed during this case. He relieved us both from duty with thanks and hearty bonuses. I suppose I'm just an Earl again. Damn boring job, I must say."

His friend gave Hannah a side look and the woman nodded in understanding. "I'll leave you two. I'm glad you're recovering, my lord."

Griffin nodded to the woman then turned his attention back to Noah as the door closed. "I suppose everything will go back to normal then."

"I suppose so." Noah looked at him evenly. There was an awkward pause before he spoke again. "How long do you plan to be such an ass?"

"What are you talking about?"

"How long before you ask me about Audrey?" Exasperation was heavy in Noah's tone.

"What about her?" Griffin turned his face away so Noah wouldn't see his tormented emotions. "She left."

"Yes. Mother found out about the whole bloody business and wrote Audrey a long letter. The first in a long time. Audrey went home to patch things up, but she left a message for you."

"For me?" Griffin asked, hoping he sounded uncaring even though his whole body came to attention. "What is it?"

Noah frowned. "She said it was better for her to leave things as they were, without a big scene where you pretended to love her. I tried to make her wait, but she was bent on going. But then, I can't tell her what she needs to hear, so nothing I said would have made a difference."

Griffin covered his eyes with his forearm. "And what does she need to hear?"

"You know what she needs to hear." Noah stood up with a screech of his chair. Wincing, Griffin lowered his arm to look at his best friend. "If you don't care for my sister, then leave her be. Let her move on with her life now that she's rebuilding with our family. But if you love her, Griffin..." he trailed off, clenching his teeth.

"I know what I need to do."

His tone sounded angry even though he didn't feel anger. He felt anticipation as he threw the covers off his legs and staggered to his feet. Pain shot through his lower body when he put weight on his injury, but he ignored it as he hobbled to his armoire. Where the hell was his damned valet when he needed him?

Noah jumped to his feet to put a steadying arm on Griffin's shoulder. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm taking your bloody advice." He gripped the edge of the armoire.

Noah smirked. "I haven't even given it yet."

Griffin rolled his eyes. "Let me guess. It has something do with telling me to stop being a coward. To go to her and make up for everything?"

"Hmmm..." Noah nodded with a grin. "That pretty well covers it."

Griffin returned his smile. "I'm going to need help."

"You've got mine." Noah frowned. "But it doesn't include dressing you. I draw a line somewhere."

With his heart feeling lighter than it had in ages, Griffin laughed. "First, we need a plan. Aren't half-assed plans your department?"

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Audrey threw open the shutters on her windows and breathed in the scent of the country air. Fall was beginning to make the breeze a bit cooler, but the soft warmth still hung beneath it. It had been two weeks since she left London. Though she had received letters from Hannah and from Noah, Griffin had sent no



word. She heard he was improving, but there was nothing else to give her a hint about his feelings for her.

What did she expect? It wasn't as if she'd asked Griffin to write to her. And she'd specifically told Noah not to force the man to come to her unless he wanted to.

Which he obviously didn't.

Turning from the visions of changing leaves and warm sun outside, she folded her arms in disgust. She thought she'd been a ninny the last time she'd broken ties with Griffin Berenger, but this time was much worse. Though she didn't feel the pangs of youthful grief, she did feel a solid ache inside her. This time she'd experienced first hand what Griffin could offer her, and had been forced to turn it down.

What would have happened if she had accepted his proposal?

No, she couldn't think of that now, it was only torture to her already broken heart.

After the excitement of the past few months, her home seemed calm and subdued. Because her father had been ill, he liked quiet evenings at home. While she enjoyed being reunited with her parents, she sometimes longed for the thrill of a case.

Her time with her mother had been especially good. Though Tabitha had been disapproving of the life she'd lead at first, nearly losing her first-born daughter seemed to put things into perspective for her. She'd even apologized for nearly forcing Audrey into a marriage she didn't want.

With a sigh, Audrey sat down on one of the chairs in her chamber's salon. Her mother had gone calling and her father was taking his daily afternoon nap. Even the servants had seemingly disappeared after several strange looks for her all morning. Audrey had the odd feeling she was being left out of some kind of joke. People had stopped talking when she entered rooms all day.

She was finally putting thoughts of Griffin out of her mind and becoming engrossed in the story she read when a soft cough at her door made her look up. Instead of a servant, as she'd expected, Griffin himself stood there, leaning against the doorjamb with his arms folded across his broad chest.

"What..." she stammered, blinking twice to make sure her imagination hadn't taken her completely away. Before she could say anything more, he hobbled across the room to take her hands. His touch was so warm and gentle that she knew she wasn't dreaming.

With one pull, she was on her feet, then in his arms. His mouth swept down and molded against hers. Damp heat rushed through her body with the touch she'd dreamed about but hadn't experienced for what seemed like a lifetime. Surrendering completely, Audrey returned his kiss, tasting every hollow of his mouth and pulling him closer and closer to her.

Finally, her rational mind returned, bringing with it all the reasons she'd left Griffin in London.

"No." She pulled away from him reluctantly. "This isn't what I want."

A slow, seductive smile was his answer. "Really? Then why are you taking off my shirt?"

With two surprised blinks, Audrey looked down. Sure enough, she'd unfastened half of his buttons and pulled his shirt partly off his broad shoulders. Letting go of him, she pushed out of his arms.

"The reasons we can't be together remain the same," she managed to say shakily, praying he'd put his shirt back on before she looked at him. The sight of his half naked body was just too distracting.

"No they aren't. The reasons are gone. I love you, Audrey."

His words rushed through her, striking her heart like an arrow. As much as she wanted to give in to what he offered her, she wasn't certain it was real.

She sighed. "This is why I left London, Griffin. I didn't want a scene like this where you tell me you love me just because you think you *should* marry me. It's just too cruel."

"I'm not cruel." He limped around to stand in front of her. Reaching out, he took her trembling hand in his and raised it to his lips. The caress was butterfly gentle, but made her knees go weak. "I'm truthful. These past two weeks away from you have been hell, but I came as soon as I could."

"I'm sorry you wasted your time then." She turned away so he wouldn't feel her tremble.

"I love you," he repeated, seemingly undaunted by her refusals and rebukes.

She could hear her breath rasping in and out of her lungs in the long silence that followed his second profession of love. But she didn't answer, and he didn't speak. At least, not at first.

"Audrey?" he finally said when the silence had filled the room for many moments.

"Don't..." She cursed herself for the tears that had collected in her eyes. "Don't say you love me unless you really mean it."

He grasped her shoulders to turn her toward him. His hand cupped her chin, lifting her face to look into his. "I mean it. I think I've loved you for years. Probably even before that day you kissed me. I love to watch your mind spin on a problem. I love the way you offer me comfort. I love the way you touch me. I love everything about you, even the things I haven't learned yet. I was a fool not to see it before, but if you'll allow me I'll spend the rest of my life making up for it. I love you."

Her tears were flowing freely now, running down her cheeks to drip off her chin, but she did nothing to ebb their flow as she stared in utter joy at Griffin's face. Finally she saw there what she'd searched for so long.

"You do love me," she said, reaching up to run her hand across his rough cheek.

"Forever," he whispered. "So say you'll marry me."

She hesitated as joy filled her entire body. This time she felt no fear, no need to deny him what he asked.

"If you say no..."

She shook her head. "Yes."

With a shout, Griffin swept her into his arms and kissed her.

"Er, may we come in?"

Audrey pulled away as Griffin hurriedly buttoned his shirt. Both Griffin's family and her own were gathered in the doorway. Her brother was there and Hannah, too in the back of the crowd, with a huge "I told you so" grin on her face.

Audrey motioned them in as she wiped away tears.

"Oh," Griffin's mother said with a snuffle. "She said yes this time."

Blood rushed to her cheeks and she didn't care. "Yes." It was the only word she could think to say and she wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

Noah wiped a playful hand across his brow. "Thank God. I didn't want to have to resort to Plan B."

"What was Plan B?" Audrey asked as she slipped an arm around Griffin's waist and smiled up at him.

"Well, er..." he stammered. "It involved the impropriety of a young man being alone with a young woman in her bedroom..."

Audrey's eyes grew wide. "You were going to force me to..."

"Marry the man you love?" her mother interrupted with a beam. "Absolutely."

"Well..." Audrey looked from face to face with a scowl that quickly faded into a smile. "I couldn't be happier."

Griffin let out his breath in relief and kissed her once more. "Neither could I."

Take a Sneak Peek at the second book in the Jordans series, *The Temptation of a Gentleman* (October 2011):

## ***Chapter One***



# London, 1815

"Get your mind out of the game and into the parlor, Woodbury," Noah Jordan admonished himself as he paced the sitting room of the Ives family.

He groaned. Impossible. He had been trying to focus on the impending arrival of the woman he was courting, but his errant thoughts kept drifting to the letter in his pocket.

He fingered the parchment restlessly before he took a seat near the fire, but he didn't need to withdraw the envelope to know each and every word that was written inside. They were imprinted on his brain. His former employer, Lord Golding wanted him back in the field. To play the spy just one last time.

It was an opportunity Noah had immediately grasped. After being removed from active duty one year before, he'd been increasingly consumed by ennui. Duty required he participate in the boring practices of the *ton*. One of which was finding a proper wife. Just the thought made him grimace. Courting was boring as hell. He shuttered to think what marriage would be like. Night after night with the same woman, only escaping to play a hand of cards or discreetly visit a mistress.

He groaned inwardly.

He forced his frown into an awkward smile when the door opened and Lady Charlotte Ives entered. As always, she was the epitome of grace and classic beauty. Every golden lock was in place and her gown matched the blue of her eyes to perfection.

Despite all that, she did very little to make his blood burn.

He rose to place a perfunctory kiss on her perfumed hand. "Good afternoon, Lady Charlotte."

"Good afternoon, Lord Woodbury," she replied as she took her place on the settee.

He flinched at the sound of his father's title coming from her lips. Despite the old man's death six months before, Woodbury still seemed to belong to him. Noah had always been more comfortable with the title Lockhart. But those carefree days were over. Now *he* was the Marquis of Woodbury and he had to behave, and marry, accordingly.

"I do hope there is nothing amiss with you." Charlotte's smooth voice jerked him from his musings. "When you asked to meet with me you seemed quite urgent. Is everything well with your family?"

"Yes." He took the tea she offered him with a nod. "My family is quite well, thank you for asking. Audrey and her husband are here in London for the summer. My mother is still adjusting to life alone, but she has her charitable work in Woodbury. And Ginny and her husband are on their estate in Northern York."

Charlotte smiled at the quick recounting of Noah's ever changing family, though it seemed to him that her expression was a little less than interested.

"I'm glad to hear they are all so well. But I still wonder about your need to meet with me today." She folded her hands in her lap.

"I wanted to inform you that I shall be leaving London for a short time. I have business to attend to in my shire."

She tilted her head but he couldn't read her expression. "How long will you be gone, my lord?"

"Not very long. Perhaps a month." He leaned forward to stare into her eyes and hoped, not for the first time, that he would see something within their depths that captured him.

Nothing.

He leaned back with a small sigh. "When I return, I will be making an appointment with your father. Then I'd like to speak to you about a matter of great importance."

A blush tinged her pale cheeks pink. It was clear they both knew the subject of which he spoke.

"I look forward to that discussion then, my lord."

"As do I." He hoped he sounded sincere. This assignment would mark the end of his previous life. When he'd done his duty for Lord Golding he would settle into his life as Marquis. One that included a new wife.

He smiled and was surprised when she didn't return it, but instead seemed distant. "Is there something troubling you about my news?"

She snapped her gaze back to his immediately. "I have no right to question your decisions."

He arched an eyebrow. "But I value your opinion. Over the past few months I've come to rely on your

counsel. Tell me what it is that worries you."

She stood and wrung her hands. "My lord, for the past few months you have courted me in every way that is proper and decent. And I have looked forward to your presence in the ballroom and in this drawing room. But..."

He frowned at her hesitation. Here Charlotte was about to say the only thing that had ever interested him and she paused. "But?"

"You do have a reputation, my lord, that is hard to ignore," she finished, almost apologetically. "And I wouldn't like to look the fool in front of my friends or society."

His frown deepened. Of course Charlotte knew of his reputation, who didn't? He'd never made it any secret that he enjoyed the entertainments of London, from horses to drink to beautiful women. Enjoyments made more accessible by his life as a secret agent.

"I would never make you look a fool," he said. "Have I behaved in some way that has done so?"

"No, at least not yet. But I wonder if this trip to your shire is really a way to... to finish off your days as a rake and a bachelor."

He leaned back in surprise. He hadn't thought Charlotte would even have such observant thoughts in her pretty head, let alone dare to voice them.

"My dear Lady Charlotte..." Standing, he dared to lean over and touch her hand. "You believe I'm off to carouse in the country as a last-ditch celebration of my bachelorhood?"

She delicately pulled her hand away. "Perhaps. My lord, I am not as naïve as I may appear. I realize after you marry... whomever you marry... you will have your dalliances. But they will be private, not something that would shame your wife. But a public display when it is well-known you seek my attentions could lead to embarrassment. And I do fear that is what you seek while you travel."

He smiled his reassurance. "I am going to Woodbury to take care of some business for a friend, a man who has helped me in more ways than I can ever repay. I assure you my visit is not to sow any wild oats."

At least not the kind she meant. Instead, he was sowing the wild oats of adventure. He could only hope one last turn as an unofficial spy would help him shake his for excitement from his blood so he could be a good Lord and Master to his estate and family.

"And what if I hear otherwise, my lord?" Her voice was suddenly very soft.

"You won't," he guaranteed. "My days as a rake are over, and my days as a respectable Marquis have begun."

She nodded slowly. "I hope that is so, my lord."

Then her directness faltered and she dipped her head again to return to the subservient miss who he'd courted over the past few months. "And now our allotted visit has passed. I wish you good fortune on your trip to Woodbury and a swift return to London."

"Charlotte, if you wish I could stay and we could talk more about this." Somehow he hoped she would say yes and perhaps hold his interest.

Instead, she crinkled her eyes as if confused by such a request. "And why would I wish such an improper thing?"

It was clear she truly didn't want him to remain. With a sigh, he bowed deeply and wished her a good day.

The moment he was back in his carriage and speeding toward his London estate, he dismissed Charlotte from his thoughts. Already his mind spun on the mission ahead of him. A simple one really.

One of his tenants had been married to a much younger woman who was the only daughter of an associate of the head of the War Department. The woman had died under strange circumstances, and her father wished to know if she'd been murdered. Though it wasn't a matter of national security, Lord Golding had taken an interest in helping his friend and called on Noah. He was the natural choice of investigator. He could return to Woodbury and ask questions without raising suspicions.

As Noah swung down from the carriage and strode into his house to make the final preparations for his departure, the last wisps of concern over Charlotte Ives and the prison of marriage faded from his mind.

For now he was totally focused on solving a murder.

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