

Chapter 1

“Aagrrh!” A cracking lurch had come from the coach’s depths, and Rosellen wondered who had screamed and then realized it was she. The public coach swayed sharply to the right, and she saw Mr. Delgado fight to keep his weight from barreling into her. He’d caught the interior strap, but he couldn’t stop the “whipping” effect of the quartet being thrown against each other, and she considered whether this was the moment the gypsy fortuneteller had predicted. *A man associated with the letter J shall be your destiny. See the hook in your lifeline? He will save you from Death’s grip and claim you as his own. With him, you shall know adventure and passion and love.* The coach rocked back and forth, and the sound of wood exploded in the air.

“Grummp!” Rosellen slammed into the coach’s side as the carriage tipped and skidded along the graveled ditch. The four occupants, a tangled mass of arms and legs, clung to any finger hold for safety. Finally, the carriage skidded to a halt, but the noise hadn’t lessened. Rosellen could hear the driver cursing and at a distance the cacophony of injured animal, but inside the coach, grunts and groans and sighs drowned out those less immediate concerns.

“Are you injured, Miss Warren?” Mr. Delgado asked as he lifted himself from her.

Rosellen shoved her bonnet from her face. “I’m not certain,” she groaned.

“Let me see to getting us out of here,” he said, his voice still a bit shaky. Slowly, he disengaged himself from their fellow travelers. Sensing the unsavoriness of their coach mates, Delgado had guarded their interactions, and Rosellen had been thankful for the man’s company. From the moment she’d boarded the coach in Northumberland, he’d protected her. They’d kept each other company, even sharing their evening meals the previous two evenings. Rosellen had recognized the man’s interest in her, but she’d given him no encouragement. She wanted to be no man’s wife, at least, not yet. Rosellen wanted to see London and to experience life before she resigned herself to the mundane. Besides the meager allowance her brother had bestowed upon her to rid himself of his responsibility for her well being, her father had left Rosellen a small dowry, and she’d thought to spend part of it. She’d determined that if she could save five hundred pounds that she could claim a respectable husband, maybe even one such as Mr. Delgado. And his Christian name was *Jasper*; she knew because she’d asked him that question over last evening’s supper. *Jasper* started with the letter *J*. Was this Death’s grip? Had he actually saved her? Looking at the gentleman’s face as he tended to the crisis in which they’d found themselves, Rosellen couldn’t imagine the word *passion* associated with the man. Even now, he methodically conducted the “rescue.”

Reaching above him for the coach’s door, Delgado strong-armed the bent wood. Loosening the latch, he shoved upward on the door, like a root cellar’s hatch, sending it backwards. Then he used his arms to lift himself through the hole.

The driver appeared in the opening; he caught Delgado’s coat and lugged the man to safety. Rosellen heard the driver ask, “Anyone hurt?”

“Don’t know,” Delgado grunted. He turned immediately to reach into the opening for her. “Come, Miss Warren.” He extended his hand to her.

Rosellen pushed the older man’s head from her chest. She suspected that the heavily bearded ex-soldier had enjoyed resting against her. “Move!” she ordered, giving the man an elbow jab. In a coughing fit, he reared up, and Rosellen scooted free.

“You men look away,” Delgado warned from above as Rosellen reached for his hand. “Or deal with me when you get out of there.” Again, the man had protected her, and she found the idea pleasurable in a feminine twist of her mind.

Rosellen smiled up at him. "Thank you," she murmured.

Dutifully, the other two coach occupants turned their heads as Delgado caught her hand and lifted Rosellen from the coach's interior. When he could secure her, the man placed her hands on the carriage's side. "Hold on," he ordered, and then unceremoniously lifted her lower body through the opening. Thankful for his rescue, Rosellen ignored his grasp on her waist and hips. "Take her," Delgado ordered the driver.

"I have you, Miss." The man lifted her to the ground.

As Delgado and the driver turned their attentions to the other two travelers, Rosellen tested her legs. The energy coursing through her but a few moments earlier had suddenly waned, and she found herself swaying in place. The blackness rushed in, but Rosellen fought through it. Placing a hand to her forehead, she tried to clear her vision. One of the horses lay on its side, no longer stirring. One hobbled free of its harness; it favored its right front leg. They snorted, and puffs of breath hung heavily in the air. "Oh Lord, now what?" she wondered aloud.

The soldier stepped beside her. "Damn mess!" he observed, but Rosellen walked purposely away from him. She was unaccustomed to rough language, and Rosellen had already begun her own analysis of the situation. They'd lost their transportation, and the sky had turned black with approaching clouds.

"How far?" she called to the driver. "How far to the next village or inn?"

Delgado and the driver lifted the last man, a boy, really, no more than sixteen or seventeen, from the overturned coach. Rosellen had overheard him telling one of the stable hands at the last stop that he was to live with a distant cousin. When the cousin died, the boy would inherit. The young man had appeared none too happy with his prospects. Rosellen repeated the question as the men climbed down to stand before her. "How far to safety?"

The driver removed his wide-brimmed hat and raked his fingers through his hair. "Six to seven miles. Not much out this way. A few farms."

"Look at the sky," Rosellen gestured. "The heavens will open on us soon."

"Can everyone walk?" Delgado took charge. They all nodded their agreement. "Then I suggest that we take what we can carry from the coach and set out before we become drenched."

The driver climbed on the coach's top and loosened the straps holding what little luggage they had carried. Both anticipating an extended stay when they'd reached their destinations, Rosellen and the boy had trunks. The soldier hefted a worn bag loaded with his worldly possessions. Delgado secured his smaller portmanteau. "Which way?" Delgado said as he handed Rosellen his smaller bag and hefted her trunk.

"You cannot," she protested, but the sound of an approaching carriage brought them up short.

The driver and footman in scarlet livery guided the coach, not much larger than a landau, to a stop. "Thank goodness," Delgado murmured.

"What is it, Jackson?" A silver-headed lady of fashion stuck her head out the window. "My!" she gasped. "I hope everyone is well."

"We are, Ma'am." Delgado led the men in the obligatory bow. "A few bumps and bruises are all."

The footman opened the lady's carriage door. "How might we be of service?" she asked as she stepped to the ground.

Recognizing the livery, Rosellen flinched. She certainly wanted nothing to do with the likes of the Eggleston family. However, she curtsied appropriately when the woman turned an eye on her.

The lady assayed the scene with an aristocratic eye. "My carriage is small so I'll be unable to take more than one with me." She gestured to Rosellen. "I suppose it should be the young lady."

"Yes, Ma'am." Delgado extended a hand to Rosellen. "This is Miss Warren."

"Thank you, Ma'am, for your hospitality, but I can walk," Rosellen began, but Delgado interrupted.

"It's too dangerous, Miss Warren. I insist that you accept Her Ladyship's kind offer." He took Rosellen's ungloved hand and led her toward the coach. He braced the older woman's return to the carriage and then Rosellen's. "Thank you, my Lady."

Rosellen blurted out before he closed the door. "But what of my belongings?"

The older woman motioned to the footman. "Secure Miss Warren's trunk to my coach."

"Yes, my Lady."

"I will sit all the way to one side," Rosellen declared. "We can put Mr. Delgado's portmanteau and Mr. Jones's bag and the mail bag beside me on the seat. See. I take very little room. And if we could put the boy's trunk on top, you could walk faster. Maybe even ride the two remaining horses." Rosellen ignored the woman's raised eyebrow.

Delgado flushed. "Her Ladyship may have other plans, Miss Warren."

The woman chuckled lightly. "Heaven forbid that I should interfere with such a thorough strategy." With a flick of her wrist, she motioned for her footman to follow Rosellen's suggestions. "The additional weight shall slow our progress, but we'll inform the Blue Boar's proprietor of your peril. At least, your belongings shall arrive dry."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Delgado bowed again and helped the footman with the additional bags. After securing everything as needed, he returned to the coach's open door. "Miss Warren, I'll see you at the inn. Your Ladyship, we thank you for your generous condescension."

Rosellen nodded, and then the coach rolled away into the waiting storm.

The woman raptly eyed Rosellen for several minutes. "Would you care to place one of the bags on my seat?"

Rosellen didn't raise her eyes. "Your Ladyship has been very kind; I wouldn't think of importuning you further." She pulled Delgado's bag closer.

A long silence ensued. "I know your name is Miss Warren," the woman said softly. "Yet, you're not curious regarding mine."

Heat flamed Rosellen's face. "I recognized your livery."

Amusement danced across the woman's countenance. "Then tell me my name," she ordered.

"You're part of the Eggleston family. The coach bears the emblem of the Earl of Eggleston."

The woman sat forward. "And you have a dislike for the Eggleston name?"

Rosellen looked away from the woman's intensity. "It's one to which I'd prefer not to be indebted."

The woman sighed in exasperation. "I see." Silence again. "I'm Henrietta Epperly, *formerly* the Countess of Eggleston."

"Formerly?" Rosellen forgot to stifle her words.

Rosellen's curiosity didn't seem to faze the woman. "When a lady reaches a certain age, she maintains her husband's title, but she loses her position in Society to the next generation. I've lost my husband and my son Nathan. My grandson Nathaniel holds the title." Silence

returned. “Is there a particular issue with the Eggleston name of which I should be aware? Especially, as you’re sharing my equipage.”

Rosellen bit her bottom lip. Debating on what to say, she finally decided on honesty. “My late maternal grandfather was one of your husband’s employees. He was the steward on the Hampshire property at one time.”

“And his name?” the countess demanded.

“Ellis Newsome, Ma’am.” Silence. “My grandfather never spoke of the earl’s countess,” Rosellen conceded.

The countess considered what the girl said. “How long ago?”

Rosellen screwed up her face in remembrance. “I suppose it was nearly thirty years ago.”

“I fear my memory isn’t what it once was,” the lady admitted. “I’d like to think I held influence over my husband, but we kept traditional roles. I was betrothed to Norman at birth. I never knew him before we were married. I was raised as a lady, a woman who assumed the duties of the estate’s mistress—of the household. I never dealt with the land or the staff. That was Norman’s domain.” Silence. “As it appears that your family’s objection dwells with a man long passed, it seems that you and I should make our own decisions. Do you hold an objection to my presence, Miss Warren?”

Rosellen blushed thoroughly. “No, Ma’am. You were a God sent angel of mercy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” the woman teased. “*Angelic* isn’t a word normally associated with me.”

“I would say it foreign in describing me, Your Ladyship. I’m far from having hoydenish ways, but my brother offers more colorful adjectives regarding some of my choices,” Rosellen admitted.

Lady Eggleston barked out a laugh. “Good. I feared you one of those prim and proper moralists.” The countess adjusted her gloves. “Are you to London, Miss Warren? Do you plan to take a position in our capital?”

“As I travel alone and by public coach, it’s obvious that I’m not to London for the Season.” A bit of sarcasm laced her words. “I simply wanted to see some of the world before agreeing to a life of doldrums. Although I’ve a small allowance, I mean to take a position as a lady’s companion or to work in the shops. I’ve some talent as a seamstress. My brother doesn’t object to my coming to town; he’s happy not having me spend the rest of my days under his roof.”

“I recognized Mr. Delgado’s interest in your welfare,” the countess noted.

Rosellen blushed. “It was unforgivable to allow the gentleman to offer his protection, but a woman alone is an easy target. Mr. Delgado kept an eye on my safety.”

The countess smiled knowingly. “Men prefer to think that we women cannot see to our own needs. As you traveled many miles together, I don’t blame you for accepting Delgado’s attentions under the right circumstances.” Silence. “Perhaps you’d agree to dine with me, Miss Warren. I’m a bit lonely, and it would politely crush any notions Mr. Delgado has formed about you.”

Rosellen considered the countess’s advice. Even though she’d meant nothing by her actions, it was terribly wrong of her to mislead Mr. Delgado. “I’d be honored, Your Ladyship.” Silence. “I apologize for my earlier terseness,” she added quickly.

“You had your reasons,” the countess conceded. “If you care to share Mr. Newsome’s story, I’d gladly listen. Perhaps, my grandson might make his own form of amends. If you choose to keep your confidences, I’ll understand.”

Rosellen sat straighter. "If you'll agree, Your Ladyship, it seems preferable for our meeting to be between two strangers, rather than what might've happened some eight and twenty years ago."

The countess nodded. "We'll blaze our own trails." The sound of raindrops hitting the carriage interrupted their thoughts. "We should arrive at the inn in a few minutes. It'll be none too soon."

Rosellen said nothing else—just stared at the slanted rain. She thought of the men struggling in the storm. If they'd ridden the two uninjured horses, they'd have to do so without saddles. It would be a miserable ride, but her taking the bags in Lady Eggleston's coach had saved the men from some obstacles. She congratulated herself for her forethought while chastising herself for allowing Mr. Delgado to place a claim to her. Yet, as she considered her foolishness, Rosellen remembered the gentleman's kindness. "Possibly, I'll seek the man's attentions again after my London adventure," she told herself. Delgado had told her where he lived, and the man would make as good a husband as any.

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"I don't care what my wife wants," Nathaniel Epperly, Earl of Eggleston, growled. "She cannot see our son unless she's willing to give up her very substantial allowance." Epperly sat in his solicitor's office. "You know, Dalton, that she just does this as revenge for being labeled as an adulteress. Well, I'll not have it. Charlotte can still move among the *ton*—still keep her alliances—still flaunt her lover; but she'll have to do so without my son."

Isaac Dalton sympathized. He'd known the earl since their days at the university. Although the *ton* buzzed with speculation, Epperly had dared anyone to question his son's paternity. In most arranged marriages, a woman remained true to her husband, at least, until she'd delivered an heir and a spare. However, Charlotte Epperly had thrown her parents' arrangement in the earl's face by coming to their wedding bed without her virginity. "I'll convey your wishes to Lady Eggleston, my Lord."

"See that you do, Dalton. I'd prefer not to be in London; yet, my grandmother has decided to come to town for part of the Season. Her Ladyship's health is not what it used to be. I intend to keep an eye on her. Tell Charlotte I'll avoid the major events and her company as much as possible."

"Certainly, Lord Eggleston."

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"Miss Warren." Mr. Delgado cornered her on the inn's stairs.

Rosellen turned to the sound of her name. "Mr. Delgado." She smiled brightly at him and dropped a curtsy. "I'm pleased to see that you and the others successfully weathered the storm."

"We couldn't have done so without Her Ladyship's efforts on our behalf. It was a precipitous idea—your suggestion of sending the baggage in Her Ladyship's coach." He stood close but made no attempt to touch her. "Would you care to share your meal, Miss Warren? I've enjoyed our last two evenings."

Rosellen felt guilty. "I must beg off. The countess has requested that I join her in the private dining room. As Her Ladyship has offered a great kindness, I couldn't refuse."

The gentleman frowned, but he said, "It's a great honor; yet, I'll feel your withdrawal, Miss Warren."

"Might you see me to the private room, Sir?" she suggested.

Delgado nodded his head in affirmation before placing Rosellen on his arm. Reaching the room, he brought the back of Rosellen's hand to his lips. "Enjoy your evening."

“Ah, Miss Warren. Right on time.” With a flick of her wrist, the countess sent the innkeeper scurrying for their meals. “I hope you’ve no objection to my ordering for us.”

Rosellen curtsied and took the seat to which Lady Eggleston gestured. “Of course not, Your Ladyship.”

Confidence hid in the countess’s countenance. “Mr. Delgado was kind enough to see you to our room.”

“I suspect the gentleman had waited for my appearance.” Rosellen smiled mischievously.

Lady Eggleston agreed immediately. “Mr. Delgado’s loss is my gain. I plan to learn more of you, Miss Warren.” The countess sipped her tea. “Might I start with your Christian name?”

Rosellen paused awkwardly, wondering exactly what to tell Her Ladyship. Revealing her name might open her grandfather’s story for review. “My family calls me Rose.”

The innkeeper brought their meals, and for a few minutes, they remained quiet. “I’ve been thinking, Miss Warren, that you don’t possess much of a plan when it comes to this *adventure* of yours. Do you even know where to seek rooms in London? Or where to find employment? Do you have relatives or protectors in town?”

Rosellen blushed profusely. “I must seem very naïve.”

The countess smiled. “A bit.” Silence. “It’s not my purpose to chastise you. However, *naïve* is an appropriate term. I suspect that something happened at home, which has been the impetus for this event.” Lady Eggleston waited for a reaction, but when none came, she continued. “As you’re alone, I’m concerned.”

“I appreciate Your Ladyship’s interest, but I’ll find my way. I chose to see London because it’s as far from Northumberland as I can imagine.”

“Many green girls get lost in London,” the elder woman observed. “I cannot conceive that your brother readily agreed to your leaving.”

Rosellen bit back her retort. She didn’t wish to explain her home situation to anyone. “James is aware of my leaving but not of my destination.”

They ate in silence. Finally, with a deep sigh, the countess began again, “I’m to stay at Leigh Hall in Mayfair. I should’ve remained in South York, but I wanted to experience Society once more before I died.”

Rosellen’s head snapped up in surprise. “Oh, no, Your Ladyship!” She automatically reached for the woman’s hand.

The countess patted the back of Rosellen’s hand. “You’ve a kind heart. I noted that about you immediately. Your demanding that I transport the men’s luggage freed them to meet their dilemma. You possess a quick mind, Miss Warren.”

“Surely, there’s something your family might do for your well being,” Rosellen declared. She thought it ridiculous to have an earl’s fortune and not to move the heavens to save someone.

“Age is a mighty foe,” the countess countered. They sat in companionable silence. Eventually, Lady Eggleston said, “While I freshened my clothing for supper, an idea emerged. What say you to becoming *my* companion for a few months? You spoke of seeking such employment.”

Rosellen gasped, “Oh, Your Ladyship! That’s most kind, but I spoke with conceit. I know nothing of Society. I wouldn’t make an admirable lady’s companion for a woman of your stature.”

“Nonsense.” The countess’s hand grasped Rosellen’s, and although the woman’s grip was surprisingly strong for her age, Rosellen noticed the gnarled knuckles. “I don’t need a

professional lady's companion. I need someone with spunk—someone with adventure in her bones. That describes you, Miss Warren. You possess perfectly acceptable manners.”

“I possess country manners, Ma'am,” Rosellen countered. “My brother, as my father before him, is a country squire. I've had but limited association with the aristocracy.”

“You're associating with the aristocracy at this very minute,” the countess said with some amusement. “At my age, I shan't be out and about the city nightly, but a mix of soirees or the theatre or a musicale would suffice. And, of course, there's shopping on Bond Street, as well as the museums. I just want to feel alive before I die.”

Rosellen clasped the misshapen hand in hers. “Your Ladyship should have a proper lady's companion. I would be mortified if my behavior embarrassed you. It would be a terrible way to repay your kindness.”

“Yet, I hold no qualms about offering you the position, Miss Warren. Just examine my offer. You'd be housed in my grandson's Mayfair townhome rather than a simple boarding house. You'd enjoy the hospitality of the current earl. As my companion, you'd be accepted into London's finest homes . . . spending time with our country's best families. Such connections could only serve to improve your chances for a proper marriage . . . maybe a baronet or someone with a knighthood.”

“But I own nothing of quality, especially for such activities, Ma'am.”

The countess smiled knowingly. “You have previously expressed some skill with a needle and thread,” she said. “And you've a small allowance of your own. Without paying for your own upkeep, you'd have additional funds available. Besides, Nathaniel shall see that you're properly dressed. My grandson knows his responsibility to his family.”

Rosellen took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Might I think on it this evening, Ma'am? It's a generous offer and is very tempting, but I worry over my being able to serve you properly.”

Lady Eggleston nodded her agreement. “I'll do you one better, Miss Warren. I propose that you travel to London under my protection. That gives you another five days to make a decision. During that time we may decide if we'll do well together or not. If you decide to make your own way, I can, at least, point you toward respectable housing.”

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Nathaniel entered White's for his evening meal. He'd ordered Leigh Hall opened for the Season, and he'd anticipated every thing in place by tomorrow. Yet, this evening, he'd chosen not to have his meal at his home, therefore, allowing his staff time to finish their duties. Personally, he could do without town life forever. Town was where his wife Charlotte Middleton Epperly held court. Nathaniel would prefer to avoid a resurgence of the rumors. The rumor of how Charlotte had cuckolded him paramount among the others.

“Eggleston.” Someone called his name, and Nathaniel turned to find Viscount Lynch. “What brings you to town during the Season?” The viscount motioned Nathaniel to his table. “Join me. Did you plan to dine tonight?”

Nathaniel liked Lynch as well as he did anyone. He preferred people not so high in the instep; therefore, he tended to be a bit of a loner. “My grandmother requested time in town, and as the countess is a persuasive woman, I reluctantly agreed. I don't anticipate being in London for the height of the activities.” Epperly accepted the chair at Lynch's table and ordered his meal. “Does the viscountess join you in London, Lynch?”

“Her Ladyship is sponsoring one of her younger sisters, but as Lady Lynch is with child, I don't expect to finish the Season in London.” Lynch motioned for another drink.

“That is your third child if I’m not mistaken,” Nathaniel remarked. Despite not having known Charlotte Middleton prior to their marriage, he’d gone into the arrangement with hopes of some compatibility existing between them. But on his wedding night, while he’d tried to be gentle with his supposedly virginal bride, she’d berated him for his lack of skill. A few weeks short of her forty weeks gestation period, Lady Eggleston had presented him with a son. Within a fortnight, she’d returned to London, leaving Nathaniel and the child behind. *So much for marital felicity. So much for a spare.*

Lynch smiled broadly. “Lady Lynch prefers a large family, and I’ve no objection to meeting her preferences. I’m quite content with the idea.”

Nathaniel schooled his expression. He’d never know such satisfaction. “Then I’m pleased for you, Lynch.” Nathaniel quickly changed the subject, discussing some of the more controversial legislation being proposed before Parliament. It was as much as he could expect—an evening of companionable male company and then home to bed.

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Rosellen had made her farewells to Mr. Delgado over breakfast. “It’s considerate of Lady Eggleston to offer you passage to London,” the man conceded.

“It is. Her Ladyship shows me a great consideration.” Rosellen paused briefly. “As have you, Mr. Delgado. I can never repay your compassion.”

“You’re aware, Miss Warren, that I’d happily continue in that role,” Delgado declared.

Rosellen smiled to temper her words. “Yet, it’s unladylike for me to continue to accept your protection. We’re not related, Sir.”

Delgado nodded his understanding. “Then I’ll bid you farewell, Miss Warren. If you’re ever in need of my services, you know where I might be found.”

Rosellen folded the paper upon which he’d written his directions. “I do, Sir. Farewell, Mr. Delgado.”

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“It’s your call, Ma’am.” They’d traveled together for three days without incident, and Rosellen had become quite attached to the quick-witted countess. The countess, Rosellen had discovered, was fiercely loyal to her family and friends—a trait that Rosellen truly envied, and sometimes the older woman spoke Rosellen’s inner thoughts about life and love and of being a woman. At first, she’d mistakenly thought Lady Eggleston obsessed with her own self-importance. Yet, instead of being unapproachable, the countess unfailingly placed others before herself. Rosellen recognized that fact most clearly on the evening they’d spent at the King’s Table along the North Road.

“I beg your pardon, Your Ladyship.” The innkeeper Mr. Burrows bowed dramatically. “Would you consider allowing three gentlemen to share the room, Ma’am?”

Lady Eggleston tilted her head as if considering Mr. Burrows suggestion. “Who might the gentlemen be?” she asked nonchalantly.

Burrows bowed again. “Viscount Harcourt and Baron Craddock. The third gentleman is the viscount’s associate, a Mr. Douglas, Ma’am.”

The countess paused again, and Rosellen took note of the way the woman purposely held the man suspended in anticipation. She thought she could never command anyone’s attention so thoroughly. But Rosellen noted something else in the countess’s expression: a look of puzzlement. Finally, Countess Henrietta said, “I’m familiar with the viscount’s mother. I suppose it wouldn’t be an imposition to share the room.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” The innkeeper bowed a third time and hustled away to retrieve the gentlemen. Within minutes, the two ladies shared their private room with three very attractive gentlemen. And although she had thirty years on each man, Rosellen marveled at how the countess kept the men engaged with her quick repartee.

“You should lay the foundation of a connection, especially with Mr. Douglas,” the countess whispered to Rosellen.

Rosellen blushed prettily. “I couldn’t, Ma’am.”

“Why not? They’re merely men. I’d say they each put their pants on in the same manner; but then as their valet’s dress them, I could be in error.” The countess’s eyes danced with mischief.

Rosellen turned a deeper shade of red. “Ma’am, please don’t make me laugh.” Rosellen took a deep breath and set her mouth in a tight line.

“Why ever not?” the older woman whispered a bit louder.

Rosellen burst with glee, and then she snorted. “That’s why,” she hissed, burying her face in her hands.

The older woman laughed heartily. “You’re precious, my Dear.”

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Near midnight, Nathaniel entered The Crystal House, one of London’s most famous brothels. He’d patronized the establishment for several years, long before his marriage to Lady Charlotte. In fact, his father had brought him to the high-class house of sin so Nathaniel might lose his own virginity with an experienced woman. A man of habit, Nathaniel had never thought of keeping a mistress. When he needed a woman, he called on one of Madame Desdemona’s girls. They were discrete and very good at what they did.

“Ah, Lord Eggleston. So good of you to honor us with your presence, my Lord.” Madame Desdemona glided forward to greet him. “Do you have a preference this evening, Your Lordship?” She latched onto Nathaniel’s arm and motioned for a footman to bring him a drink.

Nathaniel glanced about the room. He’d watched as several of the girls not already engaged gave him of taste of their wares. Discreetly, they bent or stretched where he could admire a long leg or where a breast could momentarily escape their thin gowns. “Maybe Lena,” he said, making eye contact with one of the two women he favored among Desdemona’s girls. “Of course, that is if Lena wouldn’t mind my company.”

Desdemona snapped her fingers, and Lena slipped from the room. “Lena will be thrilled for your attentions, my Lord. I believe you know the way, Lord Eggleston.” She led him across the room to the door leading to the private quarters. “Let me know if you require anything else,” she said as she sent Nathaniel into the house’s inner sanctum.

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“Excuse me, Lady Eggleston,” Viscount Harcourt bowed to the countess. “I know it’s a bit unusual, but the baron wondered if either of you ladies might wish to join us in a friendly hand of cards?”

The countess sent a wary glance toward the other table before eyeing Rosellen. “I’m not much of a card player, but perhaps Rose might partake? What say you, my Dear? Do you have any inclination to play a few hands with the gentlemen?”

Rosellen tried to hide her “fear” of encountering titled gentlemen. “I’ve played previously.”

“Excellent,” the viscount exclaimed. “I’ll have the innkeeper clear the tables.”

When he walked away, the countess caught Rosellen's arm. "Do you have any skill with fish? Are you good enough to beat a man at his own game? I'd love to see Baron Craddock brought down a notch or two."

Innocently, Rosellen smiled broadly. "Not at whist, but at loo or games of chance, I excel." She whispered, "I possess this uncanny ability to remember every card played. It always drove my brother James a bit crazy."

The countess took on a conspiratorial tone. "I'll stake you. If what you say is true, the viscount can help finance your modiste bill for the Season. What say you, Rose? Tell me that you'll let me be a part of your London adventure. Let an old woman enjoy Society's edgier side again. We'll set the *ton* on its head."

"You really want this, Your Ladyship? You want my company?"

Lady Eggleston laughed lightly. "Why would you think otherwise?" The men pulled their smaller table over to join with the ladies. When they were all settled, the countess made the official introductions. "Gentlemen, this is my distant cousin, Mrs. Warren." Rosellen's eyebrow rose in question, but a slight shake of the countess's head told her to stifle her words. "Rose has agreed to shadow an old woman through part of the Season. She's a widow: Her late husband lost his life at Salamanca. My cousin followed the drum, and so she's used to playing cards with men." Rosellen fought the urge to snort again; the countess created an elaborate story. "Of course, my Rose is a lady, and we'll not tolerate any familiarity. I'll stay by her side to assure your correctness."

"As you're on friendly terms with my mother," the viscount joked, "I'll be on my best behavior, Ma'am."

Mr. Douglas took up the cards. "As we are without fish or chips, we'll use paper and then settle up at the end."

* * *

Two hours later, Rosellen was up some fifty pounds. The men eyed her suspiciously, but Rosellen simply smiled at them. The baron insinuated, "You've had a remarkable streak of luck, Mrs. Warren. Now your arbitrary distribution continues into this game of chance. If you were a man and could palm a card in your cuffs, I might question your ability."

"Yet, as I am a woman with bare arms and no gloves, you've no choice," Rosellen retorted, not liking the man's attitude. "However, you must consider, Sir, if I might not be equally as talented with a sword." She rearranged the cards in her hands.

"The lady has you there, Craddock," Douglas remarked as he discarded two cards and drew two replacements.

The round progressed until it was only Rosellen and Craddock left. "It's your call, Ma'am."

"I raise you ten." Rosellen held her cards close.

Craddock eyed her suspiciously. "You cannot hold such good cards," he accused.

"Then make your wager," Rosellen said calmly. She could feel all eyes on her, but, remarkably, she found herself enjoying the stares.

Craddock called, and Rosellen smiled. He laid out his cards on the table. "Two pairs. Jacks high," he announced and began to reach for the center pile of notes, but the countess's fan rapped across his wrist.

"Let Rose play out her hand," she warned.

Rosellen began to gently place the cards face up on the table. She began with the queen of hearts, and her first thought was that maybe that was a good sign: lucky in cards and lucky in love. Then she laid down each of the others.

“Ten of diamonds,” the countess announced.

Douglas called the next one. “Ten of spades.”

“Ten of hearts,” the viscount breathed.

Rosellen said triumphantly. “Ten of clubs.”

Chapter 2

“You’ll save us a dance,” the viscount bowed over Rosellen’s hand. “You are a mighty opponent, Mrs. Warren. If we keep you dancing, you’ll not shame us in the card rooms.” He laughed good-naturedly. “We’ll welcome your presence, Ma’am.”

Rosellen curtsied. “Thank you for your kindness, Your Lordship.”

“Ignore Craddock,” he whispered close to her ear. “He’s often a sore loser.”

“My girl shall do well, shall she not, Harcourt?” the countess demanded.

The viscount bowed. “She will, Countess. Have a safe journey, and give our regards to your grandson. Until London, Ladies.” With those words, he made his exit.

Rosellen caught the countess’s hand. “Can you believe what just happened?”

“I can. Besides giving Baron Craddock a good set down, you captured the interest of eligible gentlemen by being nothing more than Rose Warren.” Lady Eggleston’s eyes danced with delight. “And I crafted a story where if you experience an awkward moment, the *ton* shall look the other way. You’ve never associated with Society because you followed the drum.”

“But how will others know?” Rosellen’s expression displayed her innocence.

The countess laughed heartily. “Oh, don’t let men fool you, my Dear. They’re true gossips. I guarantee that Harcourt and Douglas will tell their family how Craddock lost his money and his temper at the hands of Lady Eggleston’s pretty cousin. By the time we make our first appearance half the *ton* shall know of you.”

Rosellen saw the woman to her room. “Thank you, Ma’am, for giving me a delicious memory.”

“We will create more in the near future,” the woman promised. “We’ll sleep in. London is less than eight hours, and we’ll arrive at Leigh Hall for supper.”

“Until the morning, Your Ladyship.”

* * *

“Miss Warren!” A sharp pounding roused Rosellen from a deep sleep. “Miss Warren!” While wrapping her best robe over her nightgown, she stumbled toward the sound. Rosellen jerked the door open to find the countess’s maid on the other side.

“What is it, Margaret?”

“Her Ladyship, Miss. It’s a bad attack. Please come.”

Rosellen pushed the maid aside and rushed through the darkened hall. The countess’s door remained ajar, and Rosellen burst through the opening. To her horror, Lady Eggleston clutched at her chest. “Oh, Ma’am!” Rosellen materialized at the woman’s side. “Do you have medication?”

“Her Ladyship hasn’t seen the doctor for some time,” the maid informed Rosellen from somewhere behind her.

Rosellen turned on her. “I need for you to help Her Ladyship to a seated position. I’ll return momentarily.” Then she was running again. Barefoot down the stairs. Straight for the inn’s kitchen. She slammed the door against the wall to find the innkeeper’s wife bent over a cold fire, striking a flint to set it aflame. “Mrs. Burrows, I need help. The countess is ill.”

“What kin I do?” The woman wiped her hands upon her apron.

“I need strong coffee or tea. The stronger the better. Do you have any left from last evening?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“I also need some strong herbs. Ginger. Clove of garlic. Something hot or stimulating, such as cumin.”

“Here, Miss.” The woman shoved several oddly shaped jars into Rosellen’s hands. “You take those. I’ll bring the coffee.”

Rosellen grabbed a spoon from the butcher-block table and turned on her heels. “Do not reheat the coffee. Just bring it!” she was running again. “Time. Please God. Be in time,” she prayed aloud as she bolted up the stairs. The heavy-set Mrs. Burrows lumbered behind her.

“I’m here, Ma’am.” Rosellen knocked everything but the candle from the bedside table. She sat on the bed’s edge. “I’ll protect you,” she told the countess. “Pour Her Ladyship some water,” she barked over her shoulder at the maid. “Listen to me, Ma’am.” She forced the woman’s chin upward so she could speak the truth to her new friend’s eyes. “I’m going to ask you to swallow several foul-tasting herbs followed by a sip of water. They shall release the pressure. Do you understand?” The countess nodded slightly. “We’ll begin with the garlic. Mrs. Burrows has mashed a bit of it to make it easier to swallow.” Rosellen gave the countess a spoon of the crushed garlic, a bit of ginger, and then several spoonfuls of the bitter-tasting cold coffee.

“What’s this?” Rosellen asked as she accepted another jar from the proprietess.

“Cayenne. Mr. Burrows loves a pinch in his stew. He learnt of it when serving in the East. It burns the throat. Be careful, Miss.”

Rosellen took a deep breath. “Just a pinch then.” She gave Lady Eggleston just a tip of a damp spoon dipped into the powder, but even that brought tears to the countess’s eyes. Rosellen followed the spice’s heat with more coffee. She held the cup to the elder woman’s lips. “I have you, Ma’am. I’ll let nothing harm you,” she promised.

As the countess labored breathing eased, Rosellen allowed the woman’s head to rest against the pillow.

“Better, Ma’am?”

Lady Eggleston nodded. “Thank you,” she rasped.

“Rest, my Lady.” Rosellen insisted. “I’ll sit with you.” The countess wearily closed her eyes, and Rosellen gave thanks to see the woman’s countenance relax. “Margaret, why do you not dress and then give Mrs. Burrows a hand. I’m certain our hostess must be terribly behind after helping us.”

“Yes, Miss.” The maid disappeared behind the screen.

Rosellen took the inn mistress’s hand in hers. “How might I thank you?”

“It be nothing, Miss.”

While the maid remained in Lady Eggleston’s room, Rosellen returned to her own to change into a more practical gown. Before returning to the countess’s room, she composed a note to Viscount Harcourt and slid it under his door. Therefore, the gentleman lightly tapped on Her Ladyship’s door an hour later. Leaving the countess sleeping soundly, Rosellen stepped into the hallway.

“Does Lady Eggleston still suffer?” he asked politely.

“Her Ladyship had no medication with her,” Rosellen confided. “I’ve given her some herbal remedies, but she needs a trained physician. I cannot leave her. I was hoping that you might spare a servant to ride to Leigh Hall. Lord Eggleston must be informed. The countess requires a larger traveling coach if we’re to move her.”

The viscount captured Rosellen’s hand in his. “I’ll go myself. Epperly and I are associates in Parliament. He shouldn’t hear of this from a servant.”

“Bless you, Sir. I’ve never been to London. Even if I thought that Her Ladyship could spare me, I’d have no means of finding the earl.”

“I’ll see to it. Tend to the countess. I’d wish someone as astute as you to care for my own mother.”

* * *

Nathaniel had stayed with Lena longer than usual. With his grandmother’s arrival later in the day, he didn’t expect to be able to sneak off to The Crystal House any time soon. He rode his favorite horse leisurely through the mid-morning London streets. Lena had satisfied him repeatedly, and Nathaniel languidly sat astride the animal, letting the reins remain slack. However, the chaos awaiting him on his doorstep changed his mood. “What goes on here?” he demanded as he slid from the saddle.

Viscount Harcourt turned to meet him. Evidently, the viscount and Nathaniel’s butler had argued over his whereabouts. “Epperly, thank God.” The viscount caught Nathaniel’s arm and directed him away from the waiting servants. “I came searching for you. It’s your grandmother. Her Ladyship has taken ill. She’s at an inn some fifty miles north. At the King’s Table. They’re seeing to her needs, but the countess has no medication with her.”

“Damn!” Nathaniel growled. “Do you know her condition?”

“Her Ladyship has been given some herbs. She was resting when I took my leave.”

Nathaniel started away. “Thank you, Harcourt.” He remounted. “I must be to Her Ladyship’s personal physician and then ride north.”

“Mrs. Warren suggested that you send your larger coach to bring the countess to London.” Harcourt trailed Eggleston to the waiting mount.

Nathaniel nodded his agreement. “Would you tell Mr. Spadling to order the coach and to send a change of clothing for me?” Nathaniel turned the horse in a tight circle. “I must hurry.”

“Certainly,” Harcourt called as the earl rode away.

It was only after he’d interrupted an examination the physician conducted at his Brook Street office and was on the road again that Nathaniel asked himself, “Who in the hell is Mrs. Warren?”

* * *

“Where’s my grandmother?” Nathaniel demanded.

Luckily, Her Ladyship’s maid had waited for him in the lobby. He thought to berate her for not attending to her mistress, but he had no time for foolish servants. “This way, my Lord.” Margaret led him through the common room and up the stairs.

When the maid held the door for him, he beheld only his grandmother’s fragile form on the bed. In anxiety, he rushed to her side, completely oblivious to the nondescript woman seated on the bed’s edge. “I’m here, Gram,” he whispered hoarsely as he caressed her cheek. “It’s Nathaniel, Gram.”

The woman’s eyes flitted open and then closed again, but she gave him the hint of a smile. Nathaniel leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

“Did you bring Her Ladyship’s medication?” a voice behind him demanded.

Nathaniel reached into his inside pocket and removed the powder packets the doctor had given him. He extended his arm to the side, but his eyes never left his grandmother’s face. “Here.”

“Thank God” The woman snatched them from his fingers. “Margaret, fetch fresh water and a clean glass.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Nathaniel caught his grandmother's hand in his. He rubbed it gently between his two. "Do you remember how you used to rub my hands just like this? I was so foolish. I would rush outside to build snowmen and forget my gloves. But you never reprimanded me for being a boy. You would laugh and then tend to my frozen fingertips with the most gentle touch." He stroked the rheumatic hand with his fingertips. "Gram, Jamie needs your touch as much as I. He has no one to love him but we two."

Rosellen watched in fascination as the earl tended to his grandmother. Tears misted her eyes at seeing his gentleness. She'd missed that part of family relationships. Had never known it actually. Surprisingly, she felt a twinge of jealousy. What she wouldn't give to have someone's undeniable devotion: It had been her dream for as long as she could remember.

"Here, Miss." Margaret returned with a fresh ewer of water.

Rosellen poured a glass. "What is the dosage?" she said to the earl's back.

"The whole packet," he ordered without turning around.

Rosellen stirred the powder into the glass to dissolve it. "If you'll support Her Ladyship, Sir, I'll spoon in the medicine."

Nathaniel stood and maneuvered into the tight space where he might lift the countess to a seated position. He braced her against his shoulder and held her head securely in place.

"Countess," Rosellen encouraged. "His Lordship has brought your medicine, Ma'am." She gently tapped the countess's chin. "I'll feed you spoonfuls."

Thankfully, the woman opened her eyes. "Rose," she murmured.

"Yes, Ma'am. It's Rose. I'm here, and so is His Lordship, Ma'am. We'll take care of you." Rosellen began to spoon in the medicine. "After each mouthful, she helped the countess close her mouth and waited for the woman to swallow before offering another.

Nathaniel dutifully braced his grandmother's frail body and waited for the woman to tend to his kin. He'd thought her nondescript, but then he'd looked into her face. Heart shaped. Sun kissed skin. A pouty mouth, which begged to be kissed. Reddish gold hair pulled back in a tight braid, but several strands had worked their way loose and brushed her cheeks and ears with the lightest of wisps. Along with the bluest eyes he'd ever beheld. Nathaniel forgot to breathe as he concentrated on her. Her small breasts pushed against the square neckline of her dress. And a desire went straight to his groin. Barely seven hours ago, he'd taken his pleasure in Lena's soft body, but somehow this was different. This woman didn't flaunt her wares; yet, his body reacted to her.

Rosellen spooned the medication into the countess's mouth, but she was completely aware of the man who supported the woman. Out of her eye's corner, she could see his long fingers holding his grandmother's shoulders. His hands fascinated her. They spoke of strength and love and dependability. Then she foolishly raised her eyes to meet his. Steel-gray. Nearly translucent eyes. With flecks of gold. She sat transfixed.

"Is that all, Miss?" Margaret asked from somewhere behind her.

Rosellen blushed. "That . . . that should be adequate," she stammered. She placed the glass and spoon on the end table. "Do you wish to sit up, Your Ladyship?" Rosellen began to straighten the countess's clothing.

The earl moved from behind his grandmother. "Here, Gram. Let me help you." He gently lifted the woman as Margaret adjusted the pillows. Then he sat beside the countess again. "You gave me quite a scare. Thank goodness, Viscount Harcourt knew to come to Leigh Hall."

His grandmother motioned to the water pitcher, and he poured some in an empty glass before bracing her again so she might sip. Finally, she said, "I suspect Rose sent the viscount."

"Rose?" Nathaniel turned to the woman who'd been tending the countess. "Would that be you, Miss?" he asked suspiciously.

Her chin rose in defiance. "I'm Rose Warren, Sir."

Mrs. Warren suggested that you send your larger coach. He remembered Harcourt's words. "Ah, yes. The viscount mentioned you." He stood and offered Rosellen a bow. "I thank you, Ma'am, for your attention to Her Ladyship. It was most kind of you to give up your travels to remain with the countess."

"No, Nate." His grandmother reached for his hand. "You don't understand." She paused to catch her breath. "I've asked." Pause. "Mrs. Warren . . . to be my companion." Pause. "And I'll give her . . . my sponsorship for the Season."

Nathaniel straightened and eyed Rosellen cautiously. "From the time that I returned to London to your departure, you've made Mrs. Warren's acquaintance and taken on her sponsorship?" He stood by the countess's bed and held her frail hand, but he didn't remove his eyes from Rosellen. "What might we know of Mrs. Warren?"

"I know all I need to know, Nate." Pause. "Without Rose, I wouldn't have survived the night," the countess declared. "Her quick thinking made the difference."

He replied, "Then the lady has earned my deepest gratitude." However, his body language spoke of his suspicions. He'd assessed her plain clothing and had drawn the conclusion that the woman had taken advantage of Her Ladyship's kindness. "I believe I'll seek a room. At Mrs. Warren's suggestion, I've requested the traveling coach. When you've recovered, we'll return to London in style." He squeezed his grandmother's hand.

Holding silent, Rosellen lifted her chin and ignored the earl's glare. "Margaret, shall you require assistance with Her Ladyship's needs?"

"No, Miss. I can attend the countess easily."

"Then I'll freshen my things. I'll order a tray, Lady Eggleston; let's see if you can eat something." Rosellen started toward the door.

The earl followed. "Can I have a word, Mrs. Warren?" He caught her elbow and directed the woman to the hallway, politely closing the door behind him. Then he guided her along the passage. "Which is yours?"

She pulled up, breaking his hold. "I'm afraid, Sir, that despite my affection for your grandmother, I'll not entertain you in my chambers."

Nathaniel reached for her again, jerking Rosellen into his body. "When I ask for something, Mrs. Warren, I'm not in the habit of being denied," he hissed.

The woman stared intensely in his eyes—pure fury unmistakable. "I would've thought you've had your pleasure satisfied already today," she challenged.

Nathaniel set his mouth in a tight line. "Explain, Mrs. Warren."

"Even after riding for hours across the English countryside, you still reek of your ladybird." A look of triumph crossed her face when he reacted to her charge by turning redder.

"How does a genteel lady even know the word *ladybird*?" He gave her a little shake to emphasize his point.

“First, I never claimed gentility. I’m but a gentleman’s daughter and a squire’s sister, but both of those men have come home from a night with their women, clothes rumpled, unshaven, and covered with the scent of a woman’s perfume. I suppose that I should’ve pretended not to notice, but acting was never my strong point.” She set her shoulders for his retort.

Nathaniel gritted his teeth. “Ours is not a conversation I care to have in this dark passageway. You’ll join me, Mrs. Warren, in the inn’s private room for supper.”

“As you wish, Lord Eggleston. Now if you’ll excuse me. I’ll freshen my things and return to your grandmother.” The lady broke his grasp and strode away.

Despite the anger she engendered in him, Nathaniel couldn’t help but to enjoy her hips’ gentle sway. Without thinking, he brought his sleeve to his nose and took a deep whiff. An amused eyebrow rose in recognition. The lady was correct. Lena’s expensive perfume, a gift from him, in fact, lingered on his clothes.

Fearing the earl meant to follow her, Rosellen shut her door quickly behind her. She turned the key and leaned back against the cool wood frame. “Lord!” she gasped. She’d never been that close to any man. The earl’s strong chest muscles had caused her breasts to swell and had sent a cramp to her secret place. And her fingers still tingled where she’d clung to his arms. “Well, that was unexpected,” Rosellen chastised. “I’ll have to be on my guard. The earl’s *charm* may be hard to resist.”

* * *

Nathaniel had ordered a hot bath and had made a point of scrubbing away any remnants of Lena’s presence. His coach had arrived, and although he’d made due without a valet, the change of clothing had brought him renewed confidence in dealing with the appealing woman the countess had engaged as a companion. “Mrs. Warren,” he said as he stood. “Thank you for being prompt.” Nathaniel held Rosellen’s chair for her. “I’ve taken the liberty of ordering.”

Rosellen simply nodded her agreement. She thought it ironic that both the earl and his grandmother “had taken the liberty” to order her meals. “An aristocratic attitude,” she told herself. She still analyzed her earlier reaction to him.

“I fear,” Nathaniel continued, “that you and I have gotten off to a poor start. My earlier behavior was inconcinnity. I must beg your forgiveness. My grandmother is an integral part of my life, and my worry for her health and safety resulted in my less than gentlemanly actions.”

The lady sat with downcast eyes throughout his practiced speech. “Neither of us performed to our best,” she said softly.

“Her Ladyship has explained your role in her recovery.” Nathaniel poured her a glass of wine. “May I ask where you learned to tend someone with a weak heart?”

“My maternal grandfather suffered in the latter years of his life.”

Nathaniel didn’t like the fact that she’d yet to look at him. He wouldn’t mind another chance at losing himself in her eyes. The innkeeper had brought their meals, and for the next few minutes, they busied themselves with arranging plates for easy serving dishes. Nathaniel finally took a deep breath. “Mrs. Warren, I could ask my grandmother the nature of your relationship, but I don’t wish to overly tire her. Would you be so kind as to explain to me how you came to be traveling with Her Ladyship?”

For the next thirty minutes, Rosellen explained about the countess’s kindness, his grandmother’s offer, her initial denial, the card game, and the countess’s illness.”

“If I understand you, Mrs. Warren, Baron Craddock was less than amiable after the game,” Nathaniel clarified. He’d found that part of the woman’s story very interesting. Craddock had long ago become Lady Charlotte’s paramour. He’d discovered, after the fact, that Craddock had been his wife’s lover prior to both his marriage and the baron’s joining to Lady Amilda Jonesboro. The baron had lost his wife to childbirth and had assumed his place at Charlotte’s side. Nathaniel had thought it more than a bit suspicious that Craddock had visited the same inn as his grandmother. The coincidence increased his mistrust of Rose Warren. *Was she too good to be true?*

“The baron stormed from the room, not even offering Her Ladyship common courtesies,” she disclosed.

Taking a sip of wine, Nathaniel stalled. *Could Charlotte be up to no good?* He’d thought her satisfied with the freedom he’d allowed her, but maybe his wife’s sudden interest in their child wasn’t just another of her whims to irritate him. He’d need to be more vigilant. He was thankful that he had had the foresight to bring his son to London. He’d feel better knowing that he could protect the boy himself. “That sounds like Craddock,” he assured. “The baron holds a reputation for a quick temper.”

“Viscount Harcourt made a similar observation.” The woman smiled with some satisfaction.

Nathaniel held more questions than answers. Obviously, he’d allow Mrs. Warren to accompany his grandmother. The countess trusted the woman, and he wouldn’t upset his grandmother, but he’d remain observant. “Your brother had no objections to your coming to London alone?” he asked as they finished their meal.

“James has his own family, and we were never close. He was our mother’s favorite, but Papa catered to me. Is that not the way of life?” she observed. “Girls win their father’s hearts, and mothers lovingly tend their sons.”

“I suppose,” Nathaniel remarked. “My mother was often ill, but Her Ladyship stepped in when I was alone.”

The woman finally looked directly at him. She’d avoided eye contact during the meal—actually addressing many of her comments to her plate or her wine glass. “I noted your gentleness with the countess.” She paused. “I wouldn’t wish to seem uncharitable. God has been good to me, but I’ll own that I quite wished to some day know such a devotion.”

Nathaniel studied her countenance. The lady was either truly sincere or the greatest actress he’d ever known. “My family is very precious to me.”

His intense examination increased, and she looked away. “I should’ve withheld my opinions. My observations are of no significance.”

“On the contrary, Mrs. Warren. If you’re to reside under my roof, I want to know your thoughts.” Nathaniel paused, wondering whether to humor the woman or not. “You may express your opinions in my presence. I’ll keep your confidences.”

* * *

Nathaniel lay awake late into the night. Something about Mrs. Warren had fascinated him, but he couldn’t pinpoint the why or the wherefore. Was it her tenderness in dealing with his grandmother? Or was it something more sinister? Was it her quick mind? Was it the way she hid her beauty under the plainness of her clothes and her hairstyle?

She’d live in his town house, and, therefore, he couldn’t consider sampling her mouth. Nor could he discover the beauty she kept concealed. Gentlemen didn’t have affairs with women to whom they extended their protection. However, she was a widow, not an innocent green girl.

She'd seen some of the world. "I might keep the lady close to deter any other plans that she might put in place."

Wondering if she should've told Lord Eggleston that she was actually a "Miss," not a "Mrs.," Rosellen returned to her room. She questioned the idea of whether she should conceal such an important fact from the man. Yet, a part of her now believed the countess had been correct in her assertion that as a widow Rosellen could experience Society, but as plain Miss Warren that wouldn't happen; and Rosellen wanted Society and an adventure. Plus, if she'd told the earl the truth, he'd suspect her of practicing a scam or some such silliness. One thing, for certain, she'd need to visit one of London's lending libraries and read about Salamanca.

* * *

Although the countess had objected, Nathaniel had insisted that his grandmother take an extra day toward her recovery before they set out for London. He'd placed her in his traveling coach, and purposely had assigned Mrs. Warren and Margaret to Her Ladyship's smaller coach.

"I'm pleased that the color has returned to your face, my Dear," he remarked some twenty minutes into their journey.

The countess smiled knowingly. "Why do you not just ask me about Rose?"

Nathaniel stretched out his long legs. "What do you know of Mrs. Warren?"

He'd tried to hide his curiosity, but, he, evidently, wasn't fooling the woman who'd raised him. "I imagine Rose told you of the storm, of our thwarting Mr. Delgado's interest in her, and of the card game."

His grandmother's mentioning the unacknowledged Mr. Delgado bothered Nathaniel. Mrs. Warren had omitted the gentleman from her retelling. *But why? Did the man own Mrs. Warren's heart?* Nathaniel hated to admit that that possibility didn't set well in his mind. "The lady gave me a sensible rendition of your last week of traveling. What I don't understand is why you'd invite a stranger to be your companion."

"At first, I was simply interested in the girl. She's an unpolished diamond, but I've quickly developed a fondness for Rose."

Nathaniel listened carefully to what the countess did not say. "And?" He emphasized the word.

"*And* when I first met the girl, she told me that she wanted nothing to do with the Eggleston name because my husband had mysteriously released her grandfather from his employment. Ellis Newsome was a steward on the Hampshire property. I've no recollection of the incident, but somehow it's clouded Rose's life."

"Would you wish for me to find out what happened?" Nathaniel offered.

The countess smiled lovingly at him. "I admit that I want to know the truth behind the incidence. Surprisingly, I don't believe that Rose realizes the whole story. She's heard only her grandfather's side of what happened. I know, as well as anyone, that Norman Epperly could be a hard man, but he wasn't one to take such decisions lightly. Was Mr. Newsome a complete failure in the role as a steward? My gut tells me otherwise. I've convinced Rose that what happened between Eggleston and Mr. Newsome shouldn't affect our chance to help each other."

Nathaniel again wondered if Mrs. Warren had practiced some sort of scam on his family. She seemed innocent, despite how delectable that he had found her. Yet, Nathaniel wouldn't allow any woman to bring perfidy to his doorstep again; he'd learned the hard way of the deception that women executed.

* * *

Stepping from the countess's coach before the Eggleston's town home, Rosellen realized how out of her normal lifestyle this experience was. "It's quite impressive," she remarked to Margaret as a footman helped them from the carriage.

"Lord Eggleston's home is in one of the most prestigious areas," Margaret murmured. "You should see the main estate."

Rosellen sucked in a steady breath. "I had no idea."

"Come." Lord Eggleston motioned to Rosellen to join him and the countess.

She caught the elder woman's arm to steady the countess's balance on the entrance steps. "Hopefully, your journey was comfortable," she remarked.

"Quite so." The countess moved swiftly under the circumstances.

The earl preceded the women into the house, barking orders to his staff to attend to his grandmother. "Mrs. Greene has prepared your regular room," he told the countess. "Margaret will see to your unpacking. I expect you to rest before supper."

The countess gently patted his cheek in affection. "You're an exemplary grandson." Then she turned toward the stairs.

"Shall I attend you, Ma'am?"

"No, my Dear. Learn your way about the house. I'll see you at the evening meal."

Watching the countess's retreating form, Rosellen stood in the spacious foyer. Unsure what to do, she tightened her hold on her reticule. Although she held no idea where in London she actually was, for a brief moment, she considered a quick exit.

"Join me in the library, Mrs. Warren," the earl requested. "Mr. Spalding will see to a room for you."

With another deep sigh, Rosellen followed the man. They'd spoken little since sharing their evening meal on His Lordship's first day at The King's Table. She'd ridden with Margaret in the second coach, and Rosellen had taken advantage of the maid's insights into the Eggleston household. Although she still held a certain prejudice against the countess's husband, Rosellen had listened carefully to the servant, who spoke in glorious terms of both her mistress and the present earl. The woman's words had given Rosellen the nerve to continue with her arrangement with the countess. After the earl had cleverly questioned her over their shared meal, Rosellen had wondered if he might resent her earlier confrontation with him.

Nathaniel had thought long on the conversation with his grandmother. What he knew of both his grandfather and his father had told him that neither would've dismissed Mr. Newsome without just cause. Yet, his limited experience with Mrs. Warren said the lady would fully believe her family had suffered at the Epperly hand. So much of the woman warned him of becoming too attached to her. In fact, part of him wished to rid himself of her completely. That part was counterbalanced with the memory of how the lady's body fit so perfectly to his, and his sensible mind quickly lost the battle to the heat forming in his loins.

He strode into the library, totally aware of her lithe form close behind him. His lust filled brain sought a way to be close to Mrs. Warren again, but his plans had taken a sudden twist.

"Da!" A chubby-fisted toddler rushed to greet Nathaniel, and he knelt to catch the wobbly child into his arms, lifting the boy into his embrace.

"I apologize, Sir," the child's governess began her excuse, but a shake of his head stifled the woman's words.

The earl smiled at his son. "Jamie is fine, Mrs. Miller."

The sound of Rosellen's entrance caused him to turn suddenly. "Mrs. Warren, this is Mrs. Miller, my son's governess." The women exchanged a curtsy, but Mrs. Warren's eyes remained locked on him and his child. "And this is James Epperly, my son."

Rosellen blinked her surprise away. In her imaginings, she'd never considered the fact that the earl might have a wife, a countess of his own. She chalked up her misjudgment to his encounter with a mistress, one to which he indirectly admitted. "I was . . . I was unaware, Your Lordship, of your family beyond the countess," she stammered.

Nathaniel handed his pocket watch to the boy to distract the child. "Jamie and Mrs. Miller reside at my Yorkshire estate, but I wanted them close while I was in town."

"Of course," Rosellen agreed. She still hadn't fully entered the room. Setting her shoulders, she stepped forward. "Might I hold your son, Your Lordship?"

Nathaniel's eyes searched Rosellen's face for a motive. She reached for the boy, and Nathaniel reluctantly released the child.

"He may kick up a fuss," he warned. "Jamie is rarely around strangers."

Mrs. Miller explained. "The fireplace in the nursery was smoking some. I asked Mr. Spalding to have someone clean it. That's why the young master and I spent time in here."

Nathaniel watched as his son playfully searched Mrs. Warren's face with his fingertips. She pretended to nibble on each finger as it crossed her lips, and Jamie giggled repeatedly. Nathaniel loved the sound of his son's laughter. "Again, Mrs. Miller, it's quite acceptable to be in the library at any time with the child."

Mrs. Warren strolled toward a nearby window. "Let's see what's outside." She shifted the child in her grasp, perching his legs on either side of her hip so he might turn to see out the window. "Oh, my," she pointed to the busy street traffic. She and the boy pressed their heads to the window. "Look at the beautiful horse." She tapped lightly on the window to direct the boy's attention. "See the horse, Jamie. Some day you'll have a horse just as grand."

The child pounded easily on the glass with an open hand while gibbering to her and to whatever he'd seen outside.

"Maybe once I settle in my room," she told the child, "Mrs. Miller shall allow you to visit with me there."

"Master Jamie stays in the nursery, Mrs. Warren," the governess clarified.

Nathaniel unconsciously took a step toward the picture of Mrs. Warren and his child hugging each other and cooing together. It was an image he'd always held of motherly love. Charlotte had never once held their child. Even right after giving birth, she'd shoved the baby into the waiting hands of its wet nurse. "I've done my duty, Eggleston," she'd asserted. "You have an heir. I shan't go through this again. You must do without a spare."

Before he considered his words, Nathaniel corrected the governess. "I'd have no objection to Mrs. Warren spending time with Jamie. The boy seems to like her."