

Prologue

“What do you plan to do?” James Kerrington rasped as he leaned across Brantley Fowler, pretending to reach for the bowl of fruit. Kerrington watched Fowler’s countenance tighten as the man stared towards where the Baloch warriors held the girl. Kerrington really did not need to ask. He and Fowler were the original members of a group the British government “lovingly” called The Realm. All seven of the unit ranged between the ages of nineteen, and five and twenty. As he was the oldest among them, the others called Kerrington “Captain.” In many ways, he served as the leader of their unit, although the government never made any such distinction.

The others called Fowler “The Vicar” because he always wanted to *save* every lost soul he saw, especially the women and children. Surprisingly, through an authoritative persuasion, people confessed to Fowler nearly as quickly as they did an actual clergyman. He joined Kerrington after a short stint with some shady seamen following the young man’s alienation from his father and the title he would eventually inherit. His friend never said exactly what happened, but Kerrington’s family knew Fowler’s indirectly. James’s mother, Lady Camelia Kerrington, made her Come Out with Fowler’s aunt, Agatha Braton, the Duchess of Norfield, and so James knew some of the family history. Fowler’s father, the Duke of Thornhill, held a reputation for his lusty sexual appetite. Having seen his friend try to save more than one woman who suffered at the hands of a brute, Kerrington suspected some truth to the gossip.

Fowler gritted his teeth, offering a grim smile to the Baloch warriors sitting about the low table, while Kerrington immediately assessed the situation. Fowler hissed, “Each man who enters that tent gives the girl a rupee because Mir says that is all she is worth—one rupee—one shilling and fourpence in England.” His friend’s breathing became shallow, obviously biting back anger. “She is not yet sixteen.”

“You cannot save the world, Fowler,” Gabriel Crowden, another Realm member, cautioned.

Fowler insisted, “I can save her.”

“Oh, Lord, here we go again,” Crowden grumbled as he slid across the bench and into the shadows. “Give me time to get into place.”

Kerrington stiffened in anticipation as the future Duke of Thornhill stood slowly and stretched, pretending to need to exercise his legs. “I think I will take a walk,” Fowler announced, but before he could execute more than five steps in the direction of the girl’s tent, a burly-looking soldier blocked his friend’s path. Without saying a word, the man told Fowler to reconsider his choices.

Raising his hands in an act of submission, Fowler smiled largely and turned to Kerrington with a warning of what was to come. He shrugged as if to agree with the warrior, but in a split second, he struck the guard an uppercut, sending the man reeling with a broken nose.

A heartbeat later, Kerrington and Fowler stood back-to-back, taking on all comers, delivering lethal thrust after deathly jab. “I have it,” Kerrington called as he parlayed a broken chair for a weapon. “Get the girl. Take her the Bombay safe house.” He shoved Fowler towards the girl’s tent.

Kerrington’s partner did not look back; Fowler knew he could count on James and the others in his group. Together, they would give him time to make a complete getaway.

Preparing for the next assault, he wondered about his own sanity. How many times over the past two years had Fowler gotten him in “a fight to the death” in order to save some female? Somehow, James accepted his friend’s “need” to rescue the disadvantaged. It seemed only fair, if he was to die, that James should do so in an effort to save some woman—an act of penitence, so to speak. Kerrington could not save the woman he loved—Elizabeth Morris—the woman he married and promised to love and to honor and to protect “as long as we both shall live.” Unfortunately, Elizabeth Kerrington lived but two years, two months, and ten days before she died in childbirth—his child—their child. Maybe by saving these women he might atone for what he could not do for Elizabeth, and what he did to Daniel—just walking away from the boy, unable to look at his own child without seeing Elizabeth and feeling the pain of her loss.

Turning his head, Kerrington saw Fowler pulling the scantily clad girl behind him, heading for the horses. James spun, twirling a sword he pulled from his walking stick, using the stick and the rapier in

tandem with swinging figure eights to ward off three Baloch soldiers. “Now!” he called above the battle’s clamor, and the Realm members synchronized their final strikes, leaving their opponents sprawled on the tent’s floor. They dashed towards their tethered horses, swinging up into the saddles. They would distract their pursuers, heading in three different directions—all different from the way Fowler fled—to meet again in two days at their common house.

Racing towards the nearest hill, Kerrington pulled up the reins to take a quick look, making sure they all made it out safely. He felt responsible, although each man was quite capable and very menacing in his own right. “Let us depart, Captain,” Aidan Kimbolt called from somewhere behind him. James had seen all he needed to see—they all were moving away from Shaheed Mir’s tents. Turning the horse in a complete circle, he simply nodded at his riding partner before galloping away into the dying sunset.

Chapter 1

Five Years Later

“How are you, Sir?” James sat in the wing chair beside his father’s bed. The Earl of Linworth suffered from a weak heart and had been a bed for well over a year. James returned home nearly two years earlier to assume the position as his father’s heir.

“Your mother tells me you are off to Kent,” James noted that the earl’s voice seemed stronger than usual.

“Brantley Fowler finally returned to claim his title; Thornhill passed two months ago after a long illness. Fowler asked if I would come and take a look at the books for the estate. He says something does not seem right. I cannot imagine what it might be, but considering the late Duke was ill for some time, possibly someone took advantage of the situation.”

“How long will you be away?” The earl shimmied up in the bed, trying to use the many pillows as support.

James stuffed one of the smaller cushions into the stack to brace his father’s lower back. “I can handle the books from anywhere, so unless you need me for something specific at Linton Park, I thought of taking in some of the Season. I will stay at Worthing Hall.”

The earl gave a slight shake of his head in the positive. “You mean to look for a wife?”

“It is time, but I will not settle for the first girl out of the schoolroom. Daniel will inherit so I do not need an heir. I plan to just look. I heard from Crowden; he will be in London also. It will be more pleasant with old friends.” James silently cringed every time he thought of Daniel and the wrongs he did to the boy. His poor Daniel still faltered and seemed out of place when James showed him any attention, and although he knew things were inherently better, he did not know exactly how to repair things with the boy, and so the awkwardness continued.

James knew his answer would not please his father, who wanted to see him married and starting up a nursery before the man passed. However, the earl tactfully said, “Did you see to the new seed?”

“Yes, Sir. Everything is ready for the growing season. I met with the cottagers and with Mackleroy; there will be no problems.”

“You are a good son,” his father looked directly at James. “I could not ask for better.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

The earl took on a serious mien. “I want you to look for a school for Daniel; the boy is old enough for Eton. We cannot coddle him forever.”

James did not wish to send his son away; he had wasted too many years trying to kill the pain of losing Elizabeth. He realized his father was of the “old school,” those who sent their children off to be educated by others, but James had hoped to be an influence on his son’s life—to show his child his love, despite being an absent father for so many years. “I will look into it, Sir.” He would wait before parting with Elizabeth’s child; once Daniel started school, James would see very little of him. He had recently decided that in his search for a wife he would consider Daniel’s needs also. His son needed a mother, or, at least, a woman who would treat him with some kindness, maybe even affection. He would add those qualities to his list for his new bride.

“You will give Fowler our regards.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And if you make the acquaintance of his aunt, the Dowager Duchess, hint that your mother might wish to renew their social relationship. Camelia spends all her time tending to me; she deserves a life of her own, especially when my time is over.”

James looked uncomfortable, not wishing to speak of such a loss. “You have many years ahead of you, Father, and neither Mother nor I will hear of anything less. However, I will foster Her Grace’s good favour for Mother’s sake.”

“That is superior.” The earl paused, wanting to say something else but choosing not to. “You travel tomorrow?”

“Early—with the first light.”

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Eleanor Fowler rode across the estate, the late winter wind stinging her cheeks. Things at Thorn Hall changed the day her brother returned home. Now, Brantley was the Duke of Thornhill, and although Ella had not quite forgiven him for leaving her alone to bear the weight of running Thorn Hall and tending to William Fowler’s regrets, she thoroughly enjoyed letting someone else deal with the disorder surrounding the title for a change.

Recently, she had told her brother she had a desire to travel—to see the world—to be independent—to never be subservient to a man again. Ella thought Brantley receptive to what she had said; at least, he had listened without censure. She had seen what a marriage based more on lust and less on love did to a person. She thought spending the rest of her life alone might bring her happiness, an eccentric daughter of an eccentric duke; she would not settle for a marriage of convenience. She would be out of her element in a romance, even an arranged one. “No,” she thought, “it would be best if I simply chose not to marry at all.”

Today, she rode her favorite grey, letting the horse kick up its heels and prance when it wanted. They both needed to simply run free with no destination in mind, and it was the perfect day to do so. “Come on, Sampson,” she urged. “It is our time.”

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“You have no idea, Kerrington, how surprised I was to walk out of that gentleman’s club to find my sister waiting on the steps.” James sat in Brantley Fowler’s study, having arrived less than an hour before. “And poor Ella...she has dealt with it all since the Duke took ill. For two years, Father lay in bed enduring the ravages his lascivious life had brought him.”

James’s brows drew together. “How in the world did Lady Fowler manage? An estate this size would cause most men to falter.”

“Eleanor is quite resourceful. When the Duke, for example, had a lucid moment, Ella presented him with page after page of blank paper to sign so she could later write orders for supplies or work to be completed. Her farce perpetuated the rumors that Father suffered from a reoccurring bout of pneumonia.”

James thought Fowler’s sister quite ingenious. Few women would manage under such conditions. “I cannot imagine,” James said with a hint of amusement in his voice, “that you willingly agreed to return to Thornhill. You were always set on ignoring the entailment, even if it came your way.”

Fowler took another swallow of brandy, pointedly pausing before responding. “I refused, despite Eleanor’s best arguments. My cousin Horton Leighton would inherit, and Ella promised she would not disclose finding me in Cornwall.” His friend hesitated. “I should not have denied Eleanor’s request. I was aware of Leighton’s own depravity, but I could not relinquish my pride to save my sister from a life as Leighton’s mother’s companion.”

James noted Fowler culpability. His friend had spent years protecting the weak—searching for the noble cause. Now, Fowler admitted that he failed to “save” his own sister because of his personal ghosts. “What changed your mind?”

Fowler chuckled lightly. “Ella again. I underestimated her resolve. Women can be quite devious, Worthing,” he observed. “Eleanor returned to Kent, but she sent me a package—two miniatures. One was of my mother—a reminder of what she suffered in order that I might ascend to the title.”

“And the second?” James admired Lady Fowler’s way of thinking. She reached her brother’s inner motivations.

“The second was of Velvet. I had wanted to ask Ella about her when my sister dwelled with me, but I did not believe I had the right.”

James insisted, “Your commitment to Ashmita was for Sonali’s sake. You do not have to deny yourself the woman you have loved all your life because you saved an innocent girl from a crazy Baloch.” Every member of his Realm unit dreamed of coming home and making things right—correcting the wrongs each left behind. Not a day went by without his spending time in anguish over losing Elizabeth. She rested in his heart and in his soul, and he could not let her go—could not forget what she had meant to him. Dutifully, he accepted his fate: he had known the quintessence—the ideal love; and although he

was likely to remarry, he would never know such happiness again. Despite that fact, he would remarry; he owed that much to his parents and to his title.

“Sonali’s presence and the knowledge of my marriage has put a strain on my reunion with my cousin,” Fowler disclosed.

“Do not give up.” James offered a slow, triumphant smile. “My money is on you, Fowler.”

His friend nodded his agreement. “Speaking of Velvet, she and I were involved in an unusual attack three days ago. Someone took a shot at us as we visited the cottagers. I assume my cousin has accumulated no enemies.”

“Whereas you have, Fowler?”

“Whereas we all have, Worthing.”

James tilted his head in an acknowledgment of the truth. “Are you sure there is no way it could have been an accident?”

“I considered that—hunters or poachers—but Velvet and I were out in the open—standing along the riverbank. No one could have mistaken us for animals. The thing is—whoever did this hit Velvet...just a graze, but it is now personal. I will not stop until I know *who* and *why*.”

“Anything else?”

James watched as Fowler leaned back in his chair, fingers interlocked so he might mindlessly tap his chin. “Entries in my father’s ledgers, several of them. Each simply say ‘3L.’ Each for two to three thousand pounds.”

“And what do you want from me?” James suspected he knew the answer, but he would ask just the same.

Bran looked at his friend—leveling a direct gaze, solidifying their understanding. “It is important to me to rid Thornhill of its negative reputation. That means I must tie up all the loose ends. So, besides enjoying your company, I need another pair of eyes and a different perspective.” James knew this was his Thorn Hall mission even before he arrived; Fowler held an undeniable desire to wipe away his father’s reputation. Brantley Fowler wanted to be someone’s “knight in shining armor.”

“So, all we must do is to solve the mystery of missing estate funds, to absolve your family name, and to find a way to convince Miss Aldridge that you are the man she must marry.” James’s mouth curled in a sly smile. “Seems simple enough. All in a day’s work for the Realm. Did you have any ideas on where we should start?”

Fowler frowned thoughtfully. “Well, I do have a plan to convince Velvet that my marrying Ashmita was my past. Velvet is my future.”

The conversation reminded James of his and Fowler’s first mission together. From the beginning, they worked well as a team—their thoughts similarly detailed and predictable.

“I did not simply inherit the title; I also inherited my father’s position as Velvet’s guardian. Therefore, I plan to provide her and my sister a Season. When Velvet has had a chance to find another and, hopefully, has failed, I will claim her at the end of the Season; then we will be equal—she will see that things are not always as they are told in a fairytale or novel—dreams change.”

“It is a bold move, Your Grace. You are gambling with the prospect that your lady love will not choose another.”

“It is the only thing I can think of doing. Do you believe it is a mistake?”

Fowler looked worried. James recognized the feeling of disorientation Miss Aldridge brought to his friend’s life. He had known such anguish, too, in those early days of winning Elizabeth Morris’s affections. “In the game of love, I suppose it is as good as any other move. What do I know? I keep Mary as my mistress because love avoids me like the plague.”

Before they could continue, a light tap on the door announced Sonali’s presence. “Papa,” she giggled as she ran to where Fowler sat. “Look what I have.” James enjoyed the girl’s innocence: The child cupped her small hands lightly together. He sorely wished he had been at Linton Park to experience such moments with Daniel. She opened them enough for her father to see what she held. “It is a baby frog. May I keep it?”

Fowler glanced quickly at James before answering, “Does Mrs. Carruthers know of this, Sonali?” The duke manipulated her hold on the pet frog to keep her from accidentally crushing it in her palm.

The child shook her head rapidly. “Myles helped me catch it.”

Bran conspiratorially winked at James. “I see,” His friend took on a serious demeanor. “First, Child, as a frog is not really a house pet; I suspect it might be best to leave your catch in the pond where it might grow up naturally. However, before we speak to Mrs. Carruthers, say your good mornings to your Uncle James.”

James noted the look of innocent mischief playing on the child’s face. “Uncle James!” Sonali squealed and reached for him when she finally looked his way.

“Aah...!” Fowler warned. “Frog!”

The child froze in place before looking at her father sheepishly. “Sorry, Papa.”

“March!” he ordered good-naturedly, pointing towards the hallway. Watching her go, Fowler turned to James, “I will be back in a moment. Make yourself comfortable.”

James stood and walked casually about the room, taking a closer look at what William Fowler thought important to hang on his walls—he doubted that the room held anything much of Brantley Fowler’s. His friend had assumed the title only recently—not long enough ago to claim the study as his own, although a jade elephant, a Persian folding screen, and an ornate ebony and ivory chess set reflected their time in the East.

He had circumambulated the whole room when the door suddenly flew open, and James came face-to-face with a golden-haired beauty, who, literally, stumbled and fell into his arms. Instinctively, he steadied her stance by encircling her slim waist, clasping his hands behind her back. Her awkward movements to right herself skimmed her soft curves against the muscular hardness of his chest and abdomen, awakening something in his soul, as well as his body. She was breathtakingly beautiful at this close range and just looking at her aroused him. Although nearly as tall as he, the lady refused to look him in the eye as he used his hand to edge her closer to him.

“I...I apologize, Sir,” she stammered and blushed. Color waves flooded her face. James felt the heat of her body radiate into his, and something unknown stirred. He rarely acted so impulsively with any woman.

Tightening his hold on her, he whispered close to her ear, “I cannot say when I enjoyed an accident more. You have my permission, my Dear, to fall into my waiting arms anytime you so choose.” He had no idea why he acted so boldly. The woman was obviously a lady of good breeding and a member of Fowler’s household, and he should apologize, but James found he enjoyed this moment of indiscretion more than he should.

Eleanor Fowler forced herself to look into his countenance. The man’s steel-gray eyes sparkled with silver and gold, flashing in unexplained recognition. Broad-shouldered and athletically built, he was solid—time spent in the saddle or in the fencing halls was quite obvious. Dark brows, closely set, framed those mesmerizing eyes into which she now stared. A strong jaw held a firm mouth, biting back a self-assured smile, and Ella realized too late that her hesitation gave him permission to continue to hold her; his hand pressed against her lower back, moving her inches closer to his flat abdomen. “I...I am...I am capable of standing on my own,” she choked out.

“You may be, my lovely, but I find your presence leaves me quite incapable of even breathing without your aid. This close, you breathe out...and I will inhale the essence of you.”

James Kerrington often found a beguiling female in his embrace, but when this one actually tumbled into his arms, he did not expect his world to shift on its axis. When he spoke of finding it difficult to breathe, he only half joked through the flirtation. The scent of lavender tempted his nostrils, and he willingly inhaled her essence. Taller than most women he knew, her angular, bony frame molded nicely to his, and James felt a rush of blood to his manhood. Besides the lavender, sun-warmed skin, and a hint of cinnamon tea lingered, sending a new jolt of manly needs straight to his senses. Her red-gold hair shimmered like silk, and James fought the desire to loosen the pins and let it slide like satin through his fingers.

“Unhand my sister, Worthing,” Fowler demanded from somewhere behind them.

Although warned, instead of jumping back as propriety might expect, Kerrington leaned in close once more and whispered, “It seems I must endeavor to breathe on my own, my Lady.” Then he stepped back slowly and put distance between them.

Fowler came forward and placed his sister’s hand on his arm. James noted how Eleanor Fowler’s ears pinked with being caught in so compromising a situation. “I would introduce you, Eleanor,” Fowler began, “except I am not sure I wish you to meet the Honorable Viscount Worthing as *honor* is lacking at the moment.”

“I awkwardly stumbled,” she hissed under her breath, pure embarrassment obviously racing through her. “Lord Worthing caught me before my footfall sent me tumbling to the floor. It was nothing more, Bran.” The lady had no reason to defend him, but she did. She surely realized James could have released her immediately instead of pressing her to him. She impressed him immediately: He preferred a woman who did not faint away at embarrassing situations.

James faced them fully, having consumed several deep breaths to fight the bulging evidence between his legs. “*Shoma kheyli mehrban hastid*. You are very kind, Lady Fowler,” he bowed deeply, meeting only the lady’s eyes, “I am *honored* to be in your presence at last. Your roguish brother has spoken often of you; however, his Cambridge education shows its weaknesses. If he had attended Oxford, His Grace might know just the right words to truly describe a woman of such incomparable beauty.”

“I agree with your estimation of Eleanor’s worth.” His friend gritted his teeth with annoyance. “But perhaps I do not look on my sister as other men might. I assume, Worthing, you will refrain from your usual perfunctory teasing and leave my sister to her status as a duke’s daughter.” An admonition played through the words, although neither Fowler’s face nor tone betrayed his command.

Sophisticated superiority now rested on James’s countenance. “I shall treat Lady Fowler with the respect she deserves. Forgive me if I in any way offered an offense; it was never my intention.”

“No forgiveness is necessary, Lord Worthing, and please call me Lady Eleanor. I realize it is not standard usage, but my mother was Lady Fowler, and I could not assume her name,” she gave James a quick smile, and his heart lurched in his chest.

“Thank you, Lady Eleanor, for accepting my apology. It will be my honor to address you as you have indicated—to be accepted as part of your brother’s circle of friends.” Her name made James immediately think of Eleanor of Aquitaine, mother of both Richard the Lionheart and King John—a woman who participated in the Second Crusade as Queen of the Franks—a woman who acted as regent while Richard was away in the Third Crusade—the wife of two different kings and the mother of two others. She was unique and unwavering in her own way. James wondered if Fowler’s sister held such a powerful personality. His friend’s earlier tales of Lady Eleanor’s manipulations to bring Fowler home spoke of her tenaciousness and her intelligence. Her name, literally, meant “sun’s ray” or “shining light,” and, predictably, her golden red hair gave off a sunny glow, radiating an inner light. He could not remember being so quickly enamored of a woman.

She gave him a quick curtsy before turning to her brother. “I came to ask you to join Velvet and me in the front parlor for some tea. It is Velvet’s first day downstairs since her accident. She wished to thank you again.”

“Certainly, my Dear. You go ahead and pour; Lord Worthing and I will join you in a moment.” He patted the hand he still held in his. Without another word, she made a quick curtsy, but as she exited the room, she glanced over her shoulder to meet James’s trailing stare. For a few elongated seconds, she paused, a shy smile gracing her lips. Primal male instincts shot through him again, and James made himself look away.

Ella stepped into the hallway, but she did not close the door completely. Instead, she listened to her brother reprimand his closest friend for Lord Worthing’s actions. She knew her brother was correct, but for the life of her, she did not regret that brief encounter with the viscount. Although she thoroughly believed that living as an independent woman was her life path, she still wondered how it would feel to be held intimately in a man’s embrace—a man who found her attractive for herself and not as an imitation of

her mother. She did not approve of the way her body reacted to Lord Worthing—Ella recognized lust and would not succumb to such thoughts, but that did not mean she could not enjoy the effects of the viscount's flirtation. At age twenty, she had had no real experience with the opposite sex, except as her father's regent during the duke's illness. However, even an independent woman could store memories for her old age, and she would claim this one as her own.

"Lord Worthing," Ella pointedly began as she passed a generous-sized slice of seed cake to him, "what brings you to Kent?"

James shot a quick glance at Fowler; they had not discussed what story they would tell the others. "When I heard that your brother had returned to his ancestral home, I had to see it for myself." He offered up one of his best smiles to seal the lie.

"Yet, my cousin took up residence less than three weeks ago," Velvet Aldridge, the object of Fowler's attention, protested. James could see the similarity between Velvet Aldridge and Ashmita, although he preferred Fowler's sister, a woman of whose face his eyes could not seem to get enough. "How could anyone know so soon?"

"His Grace placed an order for new equipment and made inquiries into the Mayfair house's soundness. It does not take the gossipmongers long to latch onto the least clues, especially in light of the recent news of the former Duke's passing."

Ella appreciated the way the viscount twisted the words; she did not fully understand why Bran had brought his friend to Thorn Hall, but she knew her brother held a specific purpose. If nothing else, she knew her brother to be thorough in his dealings and to be a protector. If Lord Worthing had served with Brantley, he would be the perfect choice to help her brother tie up loose ends with the estate and with the recent accident. "May I translate for you, my Lord?" Worthing inclined his head in affirmation. "I believe His Lordship means Cousin Horton bemoans his loss of the title publicly." Ella's eyes sparkled in mischief.

"A lady of beauty and intelligence," Worthing declared; though he knew little of their Cousin Horton, he enjoyed the way Lady Eleanor's eyes lit up.

James watched with some amusement as Miss Aldridge screwed up her face in disbelief. She waited but a handful of heartbeats before she inquired, "Will you travel to London, Bran? Lord Worthing mentioned the town house."

Kerrington quickly realized he was also to be a part of his friend's plot to win Velvet Aldridge. Fowler took a sip of his tea, stalling before answering. "I wrote to Aunt Agatha and asked her to sponsor your and Ella's Come Outs."

James saw Fowler's sister react. Her brother's words shook her composure. Lady Eleanor's hand began to tremble, and, before she dropped it, Worthing reached for her cup. He enjoyed the brief touch of her fingers, but Eleanor Fowler's obvious distress bothered him. He would have liked to take her into his embrace and to tell her he would right her wrongs.

"Oh, Bran, we cannot; it is too soon." Her voice quaked with apparent anxiety. "The gossip will fly about our not maintaining a proper mourning period, and besides, I thought I made myself clear about what I would choose for my future." Worthing watched her closely; her unusual reaction piqued his curiosity, as well as his masculine need to protect her. Most young women would jump at a Season, but this woman evidently wanted nothing to do with one.

Fowler tried to assuage his sister's fears. "I beg to differ, Eleanor. As far as father's mourning period is concerned, blame me. I will simply say with father's extended illness, I deemed it improper to deny you and Velvet a Season; if not for this house's madness, you should have had one already. I can make such proclamations because I am a man and a duke. However, I have not forgotten our previous conversation. Instead, it is my conviction that before you are accepted in the manner we discussed earlier, you need Society's approval. After father's shunning of prescribed propriety, your refusing to accept normal conventions for a woman will never be tolerated. Before you choose your own manner of living, you must demonstrate you did not find theirs pointless by conforming to the *ton's* precepts. It is simply time you took your place in Society."

“I cannot bear a purposeful cut,” she protested. “Father’s reputation will follow us to London.” James observed how she bit her bottom lip, choking back the emotions, and he found her anxiety stirred something inside of him. He wanted desperately to ease her growing agitation.

Realizing belatedly that he intruded on a family matter, James made to depart, but Fowler motioned him to remain. They had served together for four years; they knew each other’s deepest secrets, especially regarding the former duke. “Father will always have his critics, but the *ton* chases one scandal after another. No one from this family has been to London for more than two years; the Fowlers will be old news. Besides, by the time we arrive in London, I will have introduced a different Thornhill to Society. I returned to Thorn Hall to obliterate William Fowler’s memory from the books. No one would dare to offer either of you a direct cut. Eleanor, you are a duke’s daughter and now the sister of one; in Society that means everything.”

James observed how Miss Aldridge also took offense. “You want us—Ella and me—to join the Marriage Mart?”

His friend tried not to betray his own anxiety at their entering the time of courtship known as the Season; yet, James ignored the tension between Fowler and Miss Aldridge. Instead, he turned his attention to Fowler’s sister. In his short acquaintance with her, James had decided that Eleanor Fowler needed the confidence to claim her place in Society, and he firmly believed Fowler would need to lead her through the process. Despite her ladylike presence, a personal relationship might be her most difficult battle. If even half of what Fowler said about the late duke held true, Lady Eleanor possessed no models of what a marriage might actually entail. Unlike James, whose parents displayed a loving relationship, Lady Eleanor saw only devastation in marriage. Somehow that thought gnawed away at him.

Eleanor had feared this moment—the moment when her brother would force her to be William Fowler’s daughter. She had hoped that when she told him she would prefer to travel the world, Bran would agree, and she could forget all Thorn Hall’s ugliness. Being a man, her brother saw things differently from her; he thought he helped her by allowing her to become part of Society. However, all Eleanor wanted was to be left alone—alone with her thoughts, but not her memories. The memories were too raw. She wanted new memories—such as the one from today—to replace the abyss in which she had lived under her father’s reign. She could be a bluestocking and simply live the life of an eccentric—a woman who had no desire to know marriage. She thought the only thing worse than her brother’s proclamation that he would give her a Season would be if Bran arranged a marriage for her. If he did, she would refuse her household’s alignment to another’s.

Aware of Fowler’s wavering position, James jumped into the conversation. “Well, I, for one, am looking forward to the new Season. Two such lovely ladies will make it most interesting. I am thankful to have an *in* and intend to claim my share of your dance cards.” He wiggled his eyebrows in a jest.

James watched as Eleanor Fowler swallowed hard, trying to release her disquiet. “It will be reassuring to recognize a friend’s name on my card.”

“It would be my pleasure to be of service to both you and Miss Aldridge,” he rushed to say, trying to bring her peace. “Especially in the Season’s early weeks. When your brother is unavailable, please call on me, Lady Eleanor, when you are in need of an escort.” Kerrington meant the words; he wanted to know more of this woman, although he suspected Fowler would not welcome that interest.

* * *

James sat in the library late in the evening. Accustomed to town, he whiled away the hours, reading an account of some of Wellington’s greatest battlefield accomplishments. Under his breath, he cursed the book’s many inaccuracies. It tempted him to find pen and ink and make corrections in the margin. Despite his somewhat “dangerous” reputation, even in London, one might easily find him at home at this hour. His reputation said one thing, but the reality of his life remained the reverse. He missed Elizabeth more than he would ever admit, even to friends such as Brantley Fowler. He had fallen in love with her from across a crowded ballroom—he a few months short of his majority and Elizabeth barely seventeen. He had elbowed his way through the crowd of young bucks lined up to claim her hand and

surreptitiously maneuvered the last position on her dance card. From the moment he first touched her hand, James had never left Elizabeth's side. They married the day after he turned one and twenty, and for two years, he knew paradise.

Then the child came, and James lost her. The boy—his heir—did not turn, and the only way to save his child was to sacrifice the woman he loved to the surgeon's knife. Elizabeth's eyes told him she knew her duty and would leave him, declaring her love the world's purest. Closing his eyes, he could see the angel looking back at him. Within three months, he was with what the public thought to be a group of mercenary soldiers, but, in reality, they ran covert operations against select targets. In actuality, the half-dozen carefully selected Realm members with whom he served worked for a secret British government agency. James relished those years of self-imposed banishment, despite the sometimes-harsh conditions under which they often lived. Those years dulled the pain of losing his wife.

A muffled footstep on the main staircase roused his attention, and he moved cautiously to discover its source. Fowler had told him of his suspicions regarding Miss Aldridge's recent injury, and for a moment, James wondered if he had stumbled upon an interloper sneaking about the sleeping household. Extinguishing the single candle, he worked his way warily towards the door. Listening carefully, he noted the intruder hesitated on the stairs.

"Now or never," his lips mouthed before he jerked open the door and leveled the pocket pistol he kept hidden in his boot at the uninvited guest. Heart pounding out of his chest, he drew aim on an intimately clad Eleanor Fowler. Gulping in air to steady his pulse, James slowly lowered the gun and stared dumbly at the vision standing rigidly on the third step. "Lady Eleanor," he stammered, assuming she saw the gun and froze. "I apologize; I held no idea you too were a light sleeper. I suspected someone trying to pilfer the estate's riches."

Eleanor simply continued to stare *at* him, actually *through* him, and James self-consciously shot a glance over his shoulder to see if anyone else lurked in the shadows. Feeling totally discomfited by her hard gaze, he reached his hand towards her, unsure what to do. Wearing a white muslin gown, she was the picture of British female innocence, but his body reacted anyway. Her bare feet and ankles peeked from the hemline, and the thin material revealed her breasts' rosy nipples and the V of her triangle. James knew he should look away; propriety required he do so, but he could not. "May I help you find a book, Lady Eleanor?" He kept his voice low, not wishing to wake the others and let them witness this unexpected meeting.

Pausing briefly, Eleanor took the last three steps and crossed the hallway to the open door, but instead of taking his hand or even speaking to him, she glided through the portal, stopping only when she reached the room's middle.

James circled where she stood, moving slowly so as not to frighten her. "Lady Eleanor, are you well?" His voice was barely above a whisper. "May I be of assistance?" Although he now stood before her, Kerrington instinctively knew she did not see him. Eyes opened wide, Eleanor Fowler spoke to a ghost.

"Yes, Papa." Her words shot through him. He thought to reach for her, but James feared his touch might *truly* scare her to death. "I will be a good girl, Papa; I promise. No, do not take Velvet!" She looked desperately at him as she dropped to her knees and pleaded for her father to believe her. "I will not move, Papa; I swear I will not." She pulled at James's hand and leg, and tears streamed down her soft cheeks.

"It is all right, Darling." James encouraged as he tried to lift Eleanor to him.

"I am your daughter, Papa. Love me, not Velvet," she begged.

Kerrington's heart ached for the hurt he knew she had experienced at her despicable father's hands; she beseeched the man to love her. "Come, Darling." James took her arms and helped the sleeping beauty to her feet.

Eyes still not registering, Ella bit her bottom lip. "Will you love me, Papa?"

James could not resist touching her cheek to wipe away her tears' remnants. "Of course, Sweetheart."

“May I sit on your lap, Papa?” She clasped James’s hand and pulled him to a nearby chair. Reluctantly, he followed and allowed her to push him down and then quite unceremoniously she climbed onto his lap and rested her head against his chest. “Is this right, Papa?”

“Oh, yes, Eleanor; it is very right.” As she snuggled closer, James began to instinctively stroke her back and down her arm. “Rest, Sweetheart,” he murmured into her hair. “I will protect you, Sweet Ella.” He now twisted several of her curls around his fingers. The firelight captured the reddish tints, and her tresses glowed as he laced his fingers through to the tips. He thought it might be Heaven to brush it for her in the evenings, letting the softness of it fall down her back to tantalize his bare chest.

Innocently, she moaned and allowed her fingers to trace his beard’s stubble. Her eyes were no longer open, and the angelic aura returned to her face. “You are beautiful.” James’s lips brushed against her temple, and despite the realization he should return Eleanor to her room, he tarried, enjoying holding a woman such as Eleanor Fowler in his embrace. It made him feel human again, and he was sore to lose her closeness.

She stretched, unexpectedly tilting her chin as if to receive him, and, of his own volition, James lowered his lips to hers and tasted sweetness. Immediately, he hardened; this was too much like an unspoken fantasy. Vulnerability shouted at him as he traced her mouth with his tongue and heard his own moan in response.

A shuddered breath forced his lips from hers. “Lord!” he gasped and made himself loosen his hold on her. “Let me return you to your chambers, Sweetheart,” he spoke as he lifted her to him. James expected to feel her weight when he raised her to him—her long legs dangling down to his waist, but instead, he hefted less than eight stone, and it thrilled him to hold her so intimately. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and James envisioned what it would be like to take her to his bed and sate himself in her warm body.

The visions climbed the stairs beside him as he stole brief kisses at her temple and along the side of Eleanor’s cheek, enjoying the taste of her skin. Finding her bedroom door ajar, he shoved it open with his shoulder as he maneuvered Eleanor’s svelte body through the frame. “You are a temptation, Sweetheart,” he mumbled as he lowered her to the bed and brushed strands of hair from her face. “Sleep well, Darling.”

A noise behind him told him they were not alone. He spun around to find a maid sleepily emerging from Eleanor’s dressing room. “M’Lord?” Accusation rested in her tone.

Aware of how this looked, James caught the woman’s arm and hustled her to the hallway, not wanting anyone else to see him in Eleanor Fowler’s room. “Shush,” he warned as he edged the door closed.

“M’Lord, I must protest on Lady Eleanor’s behalf.” The maid, obviously loyal to her mistress, spoke defensively.

“I assure you nothing happened to your mistress. I found her downstairs, and I simply brought Lady Eleanor to her bed.”

“Oh, Lordy, not again.” The woman looked apprehensively at the door.

James followed her gaze. “What do you mean, *not again*?” he demanded in hushed tones.

The woman wrung her hands. “Maybe I should tell Master Brantley,” she started.

“Tell me what you meant,” he insisted. “I will discuss it with His Grace.”

“My poor Lady Eleanor,” she wailed in whispered tones. “M’Lady’s been plagued with sleepwalking for years, but I be thinkin’ she be finally rid of her demons. Not once since the old Master passed did my mistress leave her bed. I sleep close by, but I did not hear Lady Eleanor tonight. Thank you, M’Lord, for protecting her.”

“Will Lady Eleanor be well the rest of the night?” James wanted time to consider what Eleanor’s maid shared.

“Oh, yes, M’Lord, but I be staying in the room meself.”

“Then I will bid you good night.” He needed to be away from Eleanor Fowler’s room. Something was not right, but James could not pinpoint it, with fresh thoughts of the delectable lady on the other side of the door.

“M’Lord,” the woman stopped his retreat. “No one else be knowing of Lady Eleanor’s problem ceptin’ me and Mr. Jordan.”

James shot another glance at Eleanor’s door. “I understand. Lady Eleanor’s secret is my secret; I pledge you my word as a gentleman.”

“Thank you again, M’Lord.” She dropped a curtsy, preparing to return to her pallet.

Now it was James’s turn to pause. “I believe it might be imprudent to advise your mistress of my interference tonight. I would not wish her such mortifications at knowing of my having carried her to her chambers.”

“Yes, M’Lord. Lady Eleanor she be very sensible. That be very kind of you, Sir.”

“Then it will be our secret.” With that, he turned on his heels and strode to his chambers, his friend’s sister having had an unexpected impact on him in more ways than one.

* * *

The next day James made a point to observe Eleanor from the moment she entered the breakfast room. When he had retired to his own quarters the previous evening, he spent more than a few minutes staring at the four poster’s ornate drapery in his guest chamber and reliving the experience of holding Ella, as her family called her, and as he now thought of her, in his arms twice in one day. Like most men of his age and station in life, James kept a mistress in town whom he visited when he needed a woman’s touch. He had established Mary Cavendish, a war widow, as his when he returned to England. Mary was pretty enough, although a bit older than James, and she never made unreasonable demands on him. He bought her a house in an upscale neighborhood and arranged for Mary’s income early in their relationship to assure exclusivity, assuming he would continue their relationship long into his impending search for a wife. Now, he wondered, if he was to choose someone like Eleanor Fowler, or any well-bred woman, for that matter, whether he should subject her to this form of degradation. Although many aristocratic women accepted such dalliances as part of their existence, he knew he would never have looked twice at Mary if Elizabeth had lived. Maybe if he found the kind of companionship he sought, the idea of dismissing Mary might not seem so foreign.

Then his thoughts fell once more on his hostess’s troubled mind. What experiences drove Eleanor Fowler from her bed? James had seen the phenomenon before; one who spent any time in battle or intense conflict knew how the mind sometimes compensated by acting out in sleep, but what trauma burdened Ella? Obviously, it involved her infamous father. Then it struck him, her need for love—her father’s deviance—and the need to protect Eleanor arose deep in James’s soul. If William Fowler were not already dead, James would find his sorry arse and kill the man with his bare hands. “Damn him!” he mumbled as he punched the pillow. He had to know—somehow he had to know the truth.

As she slid into a chair at the breakfast table, James greeted Eleanor with a cheery “Good morning” before joining her. “Might I find something for you, Lady Eleanor?” He gestured towards the side bar.

“No, thank you, Lord Worthing. Cook is preparing my usual. I fear I have a more than odd need for coddled eggs to start my day.”

He chuckled, enjoying this new level of intimacy with Fowler’s sister. Before he cut the sliced ham he piled high on his plate, he remarked, “It is pleasant to see a lady with an appetite.”

“Do you prefer your women to resemble those depicted by Robert Lefevre, as in ‘Madame Récamier,’ or even those displayed by Baron François-Pascal-Simon Gérard?” Ella charged without considering her words.

James liked the way she flushed with color when she opened herself to his possible censure. He purposely waited to prolong her discomfort. “I once thought I preferred my women petite and dark, such as your cousin Miss Aldridge,...but of late, I am no longer sure.”

Before she could respond, her brother appeared in the doorway. “Ah, Worthing, you are up early.” Bran poured himself a cup of coffee.

“I am, Your Grace. I thought I might prevail upon you to ride out with me and show off your new home.” James knew perfectly well that Bran had appointments with his steward and his father’s solicitor today. He had overheard his friend make the arrangements yesterday.

“I regret I cannot; I have obligations to the estate this morning.” Bran took the chair held by the footman. “Maybe we could induce my sister to be your guide. I dare say Eleanor knows the land as well as I, and she is recognized as an excellent horsewoman.”

James swung his eyes quickly to Eleanor Fowler to capture her true reaction to his manipulations. “Might you honor me with your company, Lady Eleanor?”

He watched as Eleanor shifted her weight, obviously discomfited by both men’s stares resting on her face. “That would be enjoyable, my Lord.” Her agreement seemed stilted to James, and he observed throughout the rest of the breakfast that Eleanor picked at the eggs she ordered. He never let his senses leave the presence of the woman as he and Bran reminisced about some of their closest friends, but James did not speak directly to her throughout the rest of the breakfast. He offered her a reprieve for the moment.

What could she say? She had internally decided to savor her memory of him, and although Eleanor found James Kerrington attractive, the idea of spending time with him alone sent her heart pounding. He was a magnificent sight, but she wanted nothing to do with any man beyond simple conversation. His intimate embrace yesterday still radiated through her body, and she could not help but feel breathless just thinking of it. Her brother and the viscount continued their exchange, but Ella spent her time trying to justify the way her breasts hardened and the way she felt an unexplained yearning between her legs every time she shot a glance at the all-too-handsome viscount. She could not explain the sensation. It was a hunger, but not one the coddled eggs would fill.

“And Crowden is in Yorkshire?” Fowler inquired.

“Gabriel is the new Marquis of Godown. I received a letter only last week. It gave me great pleasure to tell him of your restoration at Thorn Hall; I expect you will hear from him within days.”

“Do you suppose we might persuade the new marquis to join us for the London Season?” The duke continued to eat his kippers.

James, out of the corner of his eye, noted Eleanor flinch with her brother’s words. “Godown intends to establish himself as part of London’s society, as will you, Your Grace—claiming your seats in Parliament and all.”

“Who would think,” Bran mused, “the seven of us who fought so closely might all end up in Britain’s Parliament together?”

“Of course, Lowery and Wellston are minor sons, although word has it that the Earl of Berwick is near death, and Marcus will soon claim the title as his older brother is not right in the wits. The Earl has seen to it in the estate’s papers. Marcus will provide Trevor a home, but he will be the new earl,” James reminded his friend. “Lowery accepted a ranking position in Shepherd’s inner circle.” They spoke in a silent code of their former alliances.

“If you will excuse me,” Eleanor stood as she spoke. “I will retire to change into my riding habit. Might we say twenty minutes, my Lord?” Her eyes never looked directly at James, which actually disappointed him, although it offered no surprise.

“I will have the stable saddle your favorite mount, Lady Eleanor.” He stood to acknowledge her departure.

Eleanor curtsied and prepared to leave when Bran caught her hand. “Take one of the grooms, Ella.” James hated the fact that Fowler made an issue of a possible indiscretion. Evidently, Thornhill knew nothing of Eleanor’s troubled sleep, and James wanted no more guilt to plague her.

She nodded in agreement. “Everything will be as propriety demands, Bran. I assure you, I want no more scandal associated with the Fowler name.”

Chapter 2

“Are you sure you can handle Logan without our help?”

The groom pulled at his forelock. “Oh, yes, Lady Eleanor. If’n I walk him slow, old Logan will be fine.”

Eleanor had shown Lord Worthing most of the property’s points of interest, including the waterfall at the end of the nature walk and the large lake behind the north lawn. Now, she broke her promise to her brother by excusing the groom to return to the stables. “I will check on the horse when His Lordship and I return to Thorn Hall.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” The groom took the horse’s reins. “A stone be all the problem. Logan be new as a bairn in no time.”

Ella nodded her understanding. “Shall we continue, Lord Worthing?”

“Absolutely, Lady Eleanor.”

As they rode leisurely along a tree-shaded path, James continued to observe Eleanor first-hand. From Fowler he knew of her manipulations to keep the estate afloat—a fact which sparked his admiration. But his interest in her lay along more primordial lines: Simply put, the lady stirred his desires. James wanted to be near her—wanted to touch Lady Eleanor—wanted to kiss her senseless—wanted to feel her body’s heat pressed to his. She certainly did not resemble his Elizabeth, a mark by which he gauged all other relationships. As he told her earlier, he normally preferred his women dark in coloring and petite, so he could not understand why in bloody hell he could not withdraw his eyes from this golden-haired Amazon, a woman who evidently had no desire to participate in Society’s dictates for finding a husband? Did she not realize the gauntlet she tossed down with such words? They made him want to prove her wrong, and James knew other men would see it the same way. What would he do if...? *Bloody hell!* There he went again, thinking of Lady Eleanor as if she belonged to him. He had known the woman for less than a day, and if what he suspected had happened to her proved to be true, then he questioned whether any relationship might prove possible.

Riding out with the viscount had proven less stressful than Ella imagined. When the groom had to return to the stables, she considered curtailing the tour, but a quick glance at her brother’s friend changed her mind. He treated her with respect, and he listened to her. When she told him about the estate and what she had accomplished while she searched for Bran to resume the title, the viscount appeared duly impressed. Now, if he would not look at her with such intensity, she might be able to breathe again. “Have I offered an offence, my Lord?” Much to his embarrassment, James discovered Ella watched him closely.

“No,...certainly not, Lady Eleanor. You simply caught me woolgathering, I fear.”

Ella impulsively smiled at him. “Dare I ask the source of your search, my Lord?”

“Would I embarrass you, Lady Eleanor, if I declared you to be the focus of my thoughts?”

Eleanor tried to play off what he said as being absurd, but secretly his words thrilled her. The thought that this man might truly find her attractive ricocheted through her. “Lord Worthing, my brother warned me of your silver tongue. I own a mirror, Sir. I am too tall, too thin, too opinionated, and too lacking in feminine wiles to be a source of anyone’s musings.”

James had a sudden desire to slide his “silver” tongue, first, between her full lips and then down Ella’s body. “Ah, now, Lady Eleanor, you do me an injustice, thinking I purposely mislead any woman.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her and watched as she broke into laughter. “And I know what I shall give you on your next birthday.” He paused to reel her in. “A mirror that speaks the truth—one that reflects your splendor.”

A flush of color spread quickly across her bust line and up her neck, a reaction that James appreciated. “Lord Worthing, I must admit I usually disdain such frivolous conversations, but I find your idle chatter to be just what I need today, although I place no merit on your spirited speech.”

“Another wound?” he teased. “How will I survive?”

“I believe you will do well without my attention, Lord Worthing.” Ella actually laughed at his prattle. “Now, I will show you how to please me.” With that, she kicked the side of her gelding and took off across the open meadow at a full gallop—her laughter drifting back to him.

For a few heartbeats, James simply watched her go—her joy making him satisfied in his own mind; and then, he gave pursuit, rushing across the land—the heat of the horse’s flanks radiating through his thighs. He chased the tinkling sound of her merriment. As his stallion closed the distance between them, James suddenly realized that he could not remember the last time he found so much enjoyment doing nothing more than riding hard.

Then the shot rang out, and he watched in horror as Ella’s horse stumbled to its front knees, and she flew over its head, rolling on the ground—horse and rider entangled in pain’s wild dance. Seconds behind her, James was on his feet and running before he reined in his mount.

“Ella...Ella,” he called as he vaulted over the pawing legs of the gelding, pulling her away from the animal before it crushed her. “Ella, please,” he turned her limp body in his arms, checking for a pulse and finding one. “Speak to me, Ella.” He pushed the hair from her face, as he searched for other injuries, running his hands up and down her legs.

Holding her to him, James’s eyes scanned the perimeter. From where did the shot come? No trees—just open fields backed up to a rocky overhang—*has to be*. His instincts knew where to look—knew the only place a shooter could hide, and a shadowy movement proved his assumptions correct. He could smell the fear of his opponent even though he was still too far away for an accurate shot with the pistol he pulled from the holster strapped inside his jacket. Resting Ella on the ground, he was at a run again, moving towards the rise—eyes locked on the crevice in the rock face—gun loaded and cocked—ready for the next flash before firing his own weapon. Heart pounding—just like in the old days—he moved steadily towards the opening. Locked on, James waited—breathed evenly—watched for the gun’s glint in the sunlight—then he knew, knew when to drop and roll—saw the bullet leave the barrel before the sound found him. In one sleek movement, he lowered his shoulder to the ground and allowed his momentum to take him over—a complete rotation, and he was on his knee sighting down the gun, steadying it with his other hand. The gunpowder clouded about his face, but James never lost sight of the bullet. He saw its flight—straight and accurate—saw it hit its target—saw it go in the man’s shoulder—saw him fall.

Traversing the rocky outcroppings, within seconds James reached the opening and pulled the man to his feet without checking for other wounds. He had him by the lapels, pure force lifting the scant fool inches from the ground. “If you hurt her, I will rip you apart limb from limb.” Unable to control his anger, James’s fist met their assailant’s chin, sending the man flying backwards against the rock wall.

Not waiting to assess his attack’s effect on the man, James pulled off his own cravat and bound the interloper’s hands behind his back, and then half dragged and half shoved his prisoner to where Ella lay. “Open your mouth, bastard, and I will shoot you right where you stand!” Taking a strap from Ella’s saddle, he tethered the man’s ankles after removing the guy’s boots.

Leaving the man lying face down like a shorn sheep in the field’s middle, James returned to where Ella finally stirred. Her horse continued to whinny in pain, so before she could witness the act, he reloaded the gun and put the animal out of its misery.

“Sweetheart.” He cradled her head in his lap. “Ella, Darling,” he drawled.

“Quit calling me *Darling*,” she murmured as she tried to push up from the ground.

“Yes, Love.” He smiled in triumph as he supported her back and head to a seated position.

Ella shook her head slightly, clearing the cobwebs. “I am not your *love* either, Lord Worthing,” she insisted, still unsure what happened.

Smiling foolishly, James put a hand on her shoulder, keeping her from standing too soon. “Easy. You had a rough fall, Lady Eleanor.”

Finally, the realization of what had occurred set in, and Ella looked quickly to where the grey gelding lay on its side, legs twisted. “Sampson?” she whispered, throat dry with grief.

James shook his head, unable to tell her what he had done. “He will suffer no longer,” he assured her.

“My mother bought him for me right before she died.” The words sounded very far away, and James suspected she remembered the happiness associated with that moment.

“I am sorry, Darling.” James slid his arm around her shoulder, easing Ella into his embrace, allowing her to hide her sobs. After a few minutes, he edged her back. “I need to see you home, Lady Eleanor. Do you think you can stand?”

Ella nodded her understanding and allowed him to support her to her feet. When her eyes fell on the fettered man, they grew in size. “You were busy, Lord Worthing.”

“Anything for you, Ella.” Despite the impropriety, he helped her straighten her clothing and hat. “You need that mirror now,” he teased. “You look quite delicious when you are ruffled.”

“Wretch!” She pretended his familiarity offended her, but she squeezed his hand before letting go.

“Do you suppose you could hold the gun on our friend while I retrieve his mount?” If it were any other woman, James would expect a case of the vapors, but not Ella. Instinctively, he knew her strength. Somehow, this woman had survived William Fowler; she could handle herself.

She reached for the pistol. “I have never used a gun before. What should I do?”

“Just hold it steady.” He adjusted her hand on the weapon. “It is not likely he can move, but this is a precaution. I will be back in a moment.” Without a second look, knowing she would not panic, James scaled the rocky incline again. It took no time whatsoever for him to find the man’s horse tied to a bush along the access road.

Returning with the animal, he loaded their attacker across the saddle, cinching the cravat and leather strap to the seat. Next, taking the gun from her grasp, he brought his own horse alongside; he mounted and then motioned to Ella. “You will ride with me, Lady Eleanor.” He saw her start to object, but then the sensible Eleanor Fowler took control, and she accepted his extended hand. Placing her foot on the top of his in the stirrup, Ella climbed into his arms, settling on James’s lap. Enjoying having another excuse to hold her, James teasingly whispered close to her ear, “Do not get to used to all this attention, Lady Eleanor. I intend to take a full look at this year’s social offerings.”

Not anticipating his denial of their closeness, Ella flustered, “I assure you, Lord Worthing, I have no such expectations!”

“As long as we have an understanding.”

Ella muddled with indignation. “James Kerrington, you are the most frustrating...!”

Before she could finish her tirade, his mouth found hers. For a split second, she resisted, but then Ella relaxed into the moment. Although he fought to keep his senses clear, he was a possessed man. Her body’s warm glow intensified his need—feeding it. When Ella shivered, he allowed his tongue to trace the line of her lips—to touch her mouth’s soft surfaces. She awakened a latent need in him—a need he could no longer deny. Every nerve in his body existed to know this woman. He pressed Ella closer to him, breathing in the scent of her hair—her skin—her innocence. James wanted to smother her with his passion, but, instinctively, he knew it was not the way to go with Ella. If he guessed correctly, Eleanor Fowler had experienced some sort of maltreatment at her father’s hand. She would need small doses of affection before she could learn to trust again. Last night, James considered discussing his premise with her brother, but Brantley Fowler was known to use a hammer when a feather would better serve. Fowler’s sister needed a different kind of touch. Hating to end it, James slowly withdrew his mouth from hers. “Nice.” His grin reached his eyes. “I would wrestle another dozen men for such a reward.” The thrill of her intimacy rocked his reason, and he wondered whether she might feel the same.

Ella blushed and hid her face in the opening of his shirt. “I should never act so impetuously,” she rasped, but the thrill of his intimacy shook her sanity.

“It will be our secret, Darling.” James tightened his embrace before offering her an excuse, something she would need to justify her own actions. “I do not want to face one of my best friends on the dueling field. It was just the shock of what happened.” Ella’s head moved in affirmation of what he said, but James felt her arms go around his waist, and he relaxed, knowing he judged correctly how to handle the very complex Eleanor Fowler. After several such private minutes, he asked, “Did you recognize the man?”

Ella leaned back where she might see his face. “No...but it has been some time since I was off the estate. Unless he was a cottager or a village merchant, I would likely not have seen him.”

“We will let your brother question him.” James turned the horse they shared towards the main stables. He laced the reins of the other animal to a lead strap. “Bran was quite the expert in obtaining information when the rest of us could not. We used to call him the *Vicar*, what with people making confessions and your brother’s need to rescue every woman and child he saw.”

“Bran?” she gasped. This was a side of her brother Ella did not know.

“Your brother was one of my best men.” James assured her. “Whatever is happening at Thornhill, Fowler will figure it out.”

Ella looked at him with surprise. “Do you think, my Lord, someone wishes to hurt us?”

“Lady Eleanor, you are intelligent enough to realize that two shooting incidents in less than a week is not usual.” James shifted her weight into a more appropriate position as they came into view of the house. “I do not wish to scare you, but please be careful.”

Ella nodded in understanding.

“I want nothing to happen to you, Ella.” James lifted her chin with his finger. “You have no idea how frightened I was today when I found you under Sampson’s flaying hooves.” They stared deeply into each other’s eyes.

At the stables now, he knew he should release her, but James and Eleanor were lost to their closeness—lost in each other’s eyes, the rest of the world did not exist. “My Lord,” a groom’s voice invaded the moment; he stood by a mounting block and reached up to help Lady Eleanor to the step. Reluctantly, James released her. Almost immediately, the Thorn Hall staff surrounded them, and Fowler came running, followed closely by Miss Aldridge. For those few exquisite seconds, lost in Ella’s eyes, he saw his future—saw her by his side, and the thought did not shake him as he once considered it might: It actually seemed to bring closure to his loneliness.

“Worthing, what the hell?” Fowler’s voice held irritation as he encircled Ella in his arms, trying to determine who might be the culprit. Ella’s appearance told everyone something bad happened.

“I brought you a present, Your Grace.” James gestured to the trailing horse. “When I go after a shooter, I get my man.”

It pleased James that Fowler lovingly adjusted Ella in his arms protecting his sister. The woman needed such tenderness. Fowler bent his head to speak to her ear. “He shot at you?” He gestured towards the trailing horse.

Ella readily nodded. “Sampson went down; His Lordship took care of my horse after capturing that man.” The strength of her voice surprised James. Clearly, she held that inner resolve, the one he imagined for her, all along.

“Are you hurt?” Fowler demanded.

“Very sore and a bad headache...I was unconscious for a few minutes.” Ella glanced around at the gathering crowd, and then her eyes followed the line of her brother’s shoulder to find Lord Worthing. Someone had just shot at her; however, nothing else mattered but that intense moment she had shared with the viscount. This man just kissed her—she relived it in her mind, and without thought Ella’s fingers brushed her lips in recollection. She could not keep her eyes from him. He still sat on his horse, an example of pure male, and she found that thought very pleasing, although a bit disturbing. The smell of him—musky sandalwood—clung to her. She had never acted so impulsively with anyone, especially not with a man of James Kerrington’s apparent charms. In fact, Ella had only been kissed once in her life, and that was one of the stable boys when she was but ten years of age, and even then it was on the cheek. Now, she knew the power of a kiss, and she thought she might like to try it again.

As the others untied the captive, Fowler released his sister to their cousin’s care. “Let Velvet take you into the house, Ella.” As Eleanor leaned heavily on Miss Aldridge for support, James’s eyes followed, still mesmerized by the moment they had shared. He had known many women in his lifetime,

but for some unexplainable reason, Eleanor Fowler caught him by the shoulders and spun him around in circles. He desperately wanted to catch her up before him again and possessively ride off with her in his arms—to kiss the sprinkling of freckles he had seen earlier today along the slender line of her neck—to remove the pins and let her golden hair stream down over his waiting hands.

Fowler's words brought him to the moment at hand. "You men put Lord Worthing's capture in the root cellar. Place guards outside the door. I will send for the physician and the magistrate." Thorn Hall's footmen responded immediately.

Obviously not amused by James's preoccupation, Fowler demanded, "Would you care to join me in my study, Worthing?"

James chuckled when the duke did not wait for an answer. He slid from the saddle and followed Ella's brother to the house. "Hey, I thought I was the commanding officer," he called as he caught up to Fowler.

His friend's anger boiled over. "Not this time! This is personal."