

## LORD MARGRAVE'S SECRET DESIRE

*From the diary of Isabelle Darlington*

*April 1800*

My dearest Matthew and I have been blessed with a third daughter on what could otherwise be a dreary month in England. I feared my loving husband would be disappointed when his dreams of fathering a son did not come to fruition yet again, but my worries were unwarranted. Matthew was charmed the moment he beheld his youngest daughter.

Our little darling had the most serious expression when she regarded her Papa for the first time. Matthew marveled over the wise look in her eyes. He said it was as if she had lived a thousand lifetimes before blessing our family with her presence.

As with our other daughters, he has deferred to my wishes to name her after *my angels*, as he refers to them. My beloved pretends my study of angelology holds no interest for him, but I could tell he was eager to learn our daughter's name. We shall call her Sophia in honor of the archangel of love. Matthew declares it a most fitting moniker, and I could not agree more. Sophia embodies my heart residing outside of my body.



*Christmas, 1819*

Sophia Darlington studied her two older sisters' glum faces across the festive drawing room. With Uncle Charles away on one of his expeditions, the holiday season did not feel the same, but Sophia was determined to bring a little cheer to Hartland Manor on what should be the happiest day of the year.

She rose from her chair and clapped her hands. "Your attention, please, ladies and..." When her gaze landed on Crispin Locke, Viscount Margrave, he winked. Her heart fluttered and an uncontrollable smile spread across her face. "Ladies and *gentleman.*"

Her uncle's godson inclined his head. The sunlight pouring through the window at his back illuminated his golden blond locks; he returned her smile. *An Adonis in Uncle Charles's favorite chair.*

Sophia suppressed a dreamy sigh and continued with her address. "Uncle Charles could not join us for Christmas this year, but he will always be with us in spirit. I have little doubt he would tell us to stop moping and start celebrating."

"Hear, hear!" Aunt Beatrice nodded with approval while scratching behind her spoiled black poodle's ears. "As usual, Sophia speaks with the wisdom of one thrice her age."

Sophia's heart swelled with affection for her darling great-aunt. She suspected even if she suggested they storm the London Tower, Aunt Beatrice would declare it a marvelous idea simply because it was Sophia's. "Thank you, Auntie. We cannot forget to toast to Papa and Mama either."

Her sisters perked up at the mention of their late parents.

"Sophia is right," Regina said. "We mustn't allow Uncle Charles's absence to distract us from observing tradition. He would be disappointed if we did."

"Shall I ring for the good crystal?" Without waiting for a reply, Evangeline tossed one of Uncle Charles's old travel journals on the plush settee cushion beside her and hopped up to yank the bellpull.

The Christmas following the loss of Sophia's parents, Uncle Charles had instigated the ritual of toasting Mama and Papa to honor the memory of his little sister and her annoyingly perfect husband. Uncle Charles had ruffled Sophia's hair when he spoke of his brother-in-law, proving he held no true feelings of ill will toward his sister's husband.

Even though Sophia, Regina, and Evangeline had been mere girls, their great-aunt had retrieved the family crystal, filled the goblets with punch, and entrusted them not to break the valuable heirlooms. Sophia did not remember much about the day, but she recalled every toast since.

"Lord Margrave," Aunt Beatrice said, "my nephew keeps a bottle of claret in his study. Would you kindly retrieve it?"

"It would be my pleasure." Crispin rose from the leather wingback chair and

sketched a bow. "If you will excuse me a moment, ladies."

Sophia tried not to stare as he exited the drawing room, but he moved with a majestic bearing that mesmerized her. His handsome face and striking figure had been dominating her imagination these past few months as she prepared for her upcoming London debut. She often daydreamed of strolling through Hyde Park on his arm, dancing together beneath the glittering chandeliers at Lady Eldridge's annual ball, and allowing him to steal a kiss in Uncle Charles's drawing room.

The fantasy had become her favorite escape from the dreary weather plaguing the English countryside this time of year. Nothing more than an entertainment since Crispin never noticed her—until today. Much to her delight, he seemed incapable of tearing his gaze away from her.

Of course, she had changed a lot since he last saw her two years ago. She supposed he might simply be shocked by her transformation. No longer was she the scrawny girl who hung on his every word or laughed too heartily at his tales. She was a woman of nineteen. Some gentlemen even found her fetching. At the country assemblies this autumn, she rarely had been without a dance partner.

When he disappeared from sight, she released her breath—unaware she had been holding it. The twinkle in Aunt Beatrice's eyes and slight upturning of her lips suggested she had caught Sophia ogling. A rush of heat singed Sophia's cheeks, and she turned toward the fireplace to hide her blush.

A footman entered the room, and Aunt Beatrice asked the servant to bring the heirloom claret glasses.

"Yes, ma'am."

"It is time for kisses from Cupid," Sophia announced with exaggerated gaiety and plucked a stem of mistletoe from the garland draped across the hand-carved mantle.

Upon hearing his name, the dog scrambled from Aunt Beatrice's lap and came to jump up on Sophia's skirts. She bent to scoop him in her arms and held the stem overhead.

"Merry Christmas, *mon amour*." She affected a rather poor French accent—which coincidentally was a perfect imitation of the one she'd heard from the modiste commissioned to sew gowns for her coming out—and placed a noisy smooch on

Cupid's curly head.

Regina and Evangeline laughed, rewarding Sophia's efforts toward chasing away their blues. Encouraged, she marched to the fainting couch where her oldest sister was sitting.

"Look what I found," Sophia sang out and wagged the piece of mistletoe over Regina's head.

"Kisses from Cupid? *My favorite.*" Regina reached for their beloved pet and held him at arm's length in front of her. Cupid pawed the air in his eagerness to lick her face. She attempted to affect a stern expression, but her mouth twitched as she fought back a smile. "No slobbering this year. Do you hear me, little rogue?"

"The pooch only gives sloppy kisses." Crispin's voice rang out, startling Sophia. "I question his status as a rogue."

He continued to the sideboard with a slight smirk

"Come now, Margrave." Evangeline joined him at the sideboard. "I am sure you have licked a face or two in your day."

Sophia laughed at the ludicrous image her sister's words invoked, earning a playful glower from Crispin. The servant returned with a tray of heirloom glasses.

Evangeline grabbed an empty claret glass, flashed an innocent smile at Crispin, and held it out to him. "Please, may I have some?"

"Since you asked nicely..." He tweaked her sister's cheek, eliciting a pang of envy in Sophia, even though the exchange was innocent.

She retrieved the poodle from her eldest sister and approached the sideboard. "Kisses from Cupid. Who is next?"

"I respectfully decline," Crispin said. "I have a rule against kissing anything with more hair on its face than me." The full force of his smile landed on Sophia and stole her breath.

Evangeline set down her glass and held out her arms. "I never refuse a kiss from my favorite pup, not that Cupid usually gives me a choice." Hugging the dog to her chest, she placed a quick peck on his head while he thrashed in her arms, attempting to lick her face.

Crispin snatched the mistletoe from Sophia's fingers and lifted it above her head.

“I believe it is *your* turn for kisses.”

Her heart lodged in her throat a brief moment until she realized he was referring to kissing the dog.

“I had my turn while you were digging around in Uncle Charles’s study.” She grabbed for the mistletoe, but he held it out of reach just like he had done when she was a girl. She was too old to play such games. The reminder he likely still thought of her as a child stung. “Keep it. I do not want it anyway.” She tried to appear nonchalant, but her words sounded strained.

Evangeline carried Cupid back to their aunt and sat beside Regina on the fainting couch.

“I *will* keep it”—Crispin tucked the mistletoe into his waistcoat pocket—“if only to help you avoid falling into mischief.”

Sophia’s hands landed on her hips. “And who will help you?”

“There is no help for me, darling.”

Tingles swept through her at the term of endearment, and she couldn’t stop herself from beaming.

“Very well,” she said. “You may forego the Christmas kiss, but you must participate in the annual game of hide-and-seek.”

His eyes sparkled with good humor. “And if I resist, how do you propose to compel me?”

Rarely did she command his full attention; she likened it to being bathed in sunbeams. She was warm all over and feeling slightly reckless. “Some men find my charm irresistible.”

“Yes,” he murmured where only she could hear, “I can see how resisting you might be a challenge.”

She flushed with pleasure.

“Margrave will join us.” Regina left the fainting couch to collect glasses of wine for herself and Aunt Beatrice. “How could he say no? It is *tradition*.”

“You know how Sophia loves observing traditions,” Evangeline piped up. “You do not wish to disappoint her, do you, Margrave?”

“Of course not. I cannot abide disappointing a lady.” Crispin offered Sophia his

arm. "Shall we join your sisters and aunt?"

Aunt Beatrice led the toast to their parents while everyone raised their glasses. "To Mama and Papa," Sophia intoned and took a sip of wine.

"I am unconvinced any of you should be out in the cold," Aunt Beatrice said, "but if you insist on following tradition, you must don your pelisses and mittens."

Crispin gently nudged Sophia toward the door. "I promise to chase the ladies back inside before too long, madam."

He stayed to chat with Aunt Beatrice while Sophia and her sisters hurried to retrieve their warm outerwear. She lingered in the corridor outside her sisters' bedchambers, but when they took longer than usual to gather their belongings, she wandered downstairs to wait in the entrance hall.

Crispin's voice carried from the drawing room. "It seems early to be thinking about marriage, is it not? Regina and Evangeline have not made matches yet."

"Sophia begged for a Season last year, but my nephew and I thought it best to postpone her debut for that reason. With her twentieth birthday approaching, I have decided it is unfair to ask her to wait when her sisters show little interest in finding husbands, and I am certain Charlie would agree. Perhaps you might recommend a young man."

Much to Sophia's disappointment, his response was drowned out by her sisters' laughter at the head of the staircase. She hoped he had recommended himself.

"You are too slow, Margrave," Evangeline called as she descended the last few stairs. "That means you are the seeker."

"You have until I reach fifty." In a booming voice, he began counting. "One, two, three..."

"Ludwig!" Regina grabbed Sophia's arm and dragged her toward the front door. Evangeline scrambled after them. The footman opened the front door, and they dashed outside into the cold, laughing.

Regina released her. "We should split apart."

"Agreed," Sophia said. "I will hide close to the stables."

"Very good, and I will go this way." Regina darted toward the back of the house while Evangeline contemplated her direction a moment before heading toward the

fields. The soft ground grabbed at Sophia's boots as she rushed for the stables. The pungent scent of hay and horses greeted her as she neared the building and stayed with her as she rounded it en route to the old travel coach. It would make a perfect hiding spot while providing shelter from the cold.

The carriage, which had lost a wheel and listed to one side, was hidden beneath weathered sailcloth. It had been out of commission for as long as Sophia had been alive. She didn't know why Uncle Charles hadn't disposed of it. She kicked aside a couple of rocks used to weigh down the sailcloth, slipped beneath the cover, and climbed inside the carriage, taking care not to latch the door.

It wasn't long before heavier footsteps approached the carriage. It had to be Crispin. She covered her mouth, certain he could hear the churning of her breath. The sailcloth rustled as he circled the carriage. When he began to whistle a tune and walk away, she smothered a chuckle. He had been so close and hadn't found her. She was feeling rather clever.

The carriage door jerked open. "Aha!"

She screamed and rammed back against the carriage wall before bursting into laughter. "You startled me."

Crispin ducked his head inside.

"Did I?" A wide smile eased across his face. He climbed into the carriage, slid onto the bench beside her, and closed the door.

"No!" Sophia dove across the carriage, landing halfway on his lap. She sighed and sat up. "The latch is broken."

Crispin pushed on the door. It didn't budge.

"Now what are we going to do?" She flopped back against the bench. "Didn't you notice the door was open?"

"I did, but how was I to guess the latch was broken?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Surely you saw the missing wheel."

"Again, there is no connection between the wheel and latch. It is good you are not responsible for carriage maintenance."

She playfully wrinkled her nose. "Regina and Evangeline will come looking for us eventually. I suppose I can tolerate your companionship until they find us."

Crispin sank against the seatback, smiling and appearing untroubled by their circumstances. "Your aunt said you are entering the marriage mart next Season."

"I am." She folded her hands in her lap, curious to see where the conversation might lead. "This may be our last Christmas together. Next year you will regret not accepting your kisses. I doubt Regina or Evangeline will continue the tradition."

All traces of playfulness vanished from his demeanor, and his strong brow furrowed. "It is hard to imagine a Christmas without you."

"Bah..." She flicked her hand, unsure of what to say in return. His nearness created tantalizing quivers in her belly. She could barely think.

"Are you certain you are ready to marry?" he asked. "There is no need to rush into a decision."

"I am not rushing." She sounded slightly breathless. "I have been donning my mother's wedding gown and practicing my vows since I was nine. I am eager to find a love like my parents shared. Mama wrote about it in her diary. They adored one another and never spent a night apart."

"Your parents had a rare marriage, Sophia. I fear your expectations are too high, and you will be disappointed."

"How so?"

"I know most of the bachelors in Town." He scowled. "They are rascals, one and all. You cannot fall prey to their honeyed words."

His protest pleased her beyond measure. Could he be jealous? "Are there no respectable gentlemen left in England? That is disappointing. Perhaps I could tame one of these rascals and turn him into a good husband."

"Strike it from your mind, darling. They are unredeemable."

"I am afraid I am faced with a bit of a conundrum. I wish to marry, and the only available men are wicked rogues."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, pretending to mull over the situation. Crispin's gaze dropped to her mouth, and her heart fluttered with excitement.

"Perhaps I must lower my standards, my lord."

"Most inadvisable, I say." He leaned toward her. The cramped space grew

hotter—electrified. “You deserve better. You deserve someone who understands and appreciates you. Allow yourself time to find the perfect man for you.”

She had found him already. Emboldened by his nearness, she slipped her hand into his pocket and withdrew the twig of mistletoe. His body heat filled the space between them.

“It is not too late to claim your kiss.” She lifted the sprig of mistletoe above them. “This could be your last chance before I capture my rogue.”

Her stomach churned with uncertainty; his intense hazel gaze held her frozen in place. She did not fear desire. She’d been taught passion was natural and beautiful when love was involved. Fear of rejection, however, made her hands shake.

“Sophia.” Crispin’s voice had grown smoky, bordering on seductive. “You deserve better than *me*.”

“I am willing to compromise this once,” she teased and nervously swept her tongue over her lips. He inhaled, his nostrils flaring slightly. “Time is running out, my lord.”

Cupping her nape, Crispin eased her toward him, pausing to search her face as if she might change her mind. She lowered her hand to his chest, the mistletoe loosely clutched between her fingers.

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

“You are too irresistible by half, Sophia Darlington.”

“I warned you.”

When their lips touched, victory billowed beneath her breastbone, expanding in her chest. How long had she dreamed of this moment? He nestled his fingers into her hair, angling her head to leisurely take the kiss she had brazenly offered. She melted as his mouth teased hers—a nip of her lips, the tip of his tongue tracing the seam between them.

She exhaled. *Havers*. Her fantasy suffered in comparison to a real kiss from him.

Tentatively, she imitated his movements. A deep hum of pleasure sounded in his throat; her confidence blossomed. Parting her lips, she twined her arms around his neck to draw him closer. He dragged her against him and deepened the kiss; his tongue swept into her eager mouth.

This was no longer a polite acceptance of her offer but a claiming. She joyfully surrendered, arching into him and grasping the front of his jacket. His wine-tinged kisses and searing heat swirled around her, *through* her, intoxicating and lovely.

Her head filled with thoughts of their future. Of many more Christmases observing old traditions and creating new ones of their own. Of a lifetime of passionate kisses under the mistletoe after their children were tucked into bed. She would be his perfect companion, his helpmate, his eager lover, his Lady Margrave. *I adore you*, her heart whispered as it beat in a driving rhythm.

When he suddenly broke the kiss and eased her away, she blinked—startled and confused. She reached for him, but he gently caught her shoulders.

“Your sisters are calling for you,” he murmured and caressed his thumb over her cheek.

“Oh.” She was breathless. Her heart pounded in her ears. Her sisters shouted her name in the distance. Neither she nor Crispin made a move to exit the carriage. His hazel gaze, more brown than green in the shadowed confines of the carriage, bore into her. His expression was inscrutable, unmovable, as if he were made of marble.

She began to squirm under his unwavering gaze. “Aunt Beatrice has asked me to play the pianoforte after dinner. Do you have a favorite piece? If I have the sheet music, I could perform it for you—unless it is a piece I have played. I can recall the notes if I’ve played the piece.” She babbled when she was nervous. It was a deplorable habit.

He half smiled, half grimaced. “I am sorry, Sophia. My presence is required in Town this evening, and I am unable to stay.”

Her insides flinched. “But Aunt Beatrice said you would be our guest for several days.”

“Yes, that was my original intent when I wrote to your aunt, but a matter of importance forces me to return to London tonight.”

A lump formed in her throat. Perhaps her inexperience had been off-putting, or worse. He considered her another conquest in a long line of ladies who had been all too eager to be conquered by him. Unaware Sophia held a tender regard for him, Regina had found it amusing to share rumors of his escapades over breakfast last Season. Sophia had been sick with jealousy one moment, and hopeful the gossips were wrong

the next.

He captured her chin between his thumb and forefinger and urged her to look at him. "My man of business fell ill yesterday. He is a loyal man, and I feel duty-bound to insure he is receiving the best care."

"Oh, dear! I am sorry." She laid her head against his shoulder to hide her pleased smile, lest he think her heartless. She genuinely wished his man well, but knowing Crispin wasn't leaving to enjoy the company of another woman was a relief. "Will you visit again before Parliament is in session?"

"It is unlikely." He placed a kiss on her hair before easing her from his arms. "I meant what I said about you deserving better than me. It is hard to accept Little Sophia is grown and old enough to marry, and I might have unjustly judged the other men. You will find the right husband for you, and when you do, he will be the luckiest man in England."

She scowled. Was he teasing? Did he truly believe she would be happy with another man when it was obvious they belonged together? She chose to ignore his ridiculous suggestion that he was not good enough for her.

"Uncle Charles plans to meet us in London after Easter. I will look forward to receiving you at Wedmore House."

His smile seemed pleasantly detached. "I am certain Charles will have many tales of his latest adventures. You may rely on me calling at Wedmore House to hear them. Your nose is pink from the cold. We should return to the house."

He chucked her on the chin, his unromantic gesture infuriating after the kiss they had shared. She glowered at his back as he removed the carriage window, reached for the outside handle, and opened the door. He climbed from the carriage and offered his hand as he held the sailcloth out of the way. She refused his assistance when it was her turn to disembark and stood toe-to-toe with him outside, refusing to be dismissed.

"I am aware of your reputation, Lord Margrave. Tell me, am I another one of your conquests?"

His jaw fell. "Gads, Sophia. Is that what you think?"

Her eyes stung, warning her of impending tears. She blinked to keep them at bay. "I do not know what to think. This is all new to me."

His face lost its hard edges, and his eyes lit with a soft glow. "I would never see you as a conquest. You must know you hold a special place in my heart, but that does not make me the right man for you. Promise you will never settle for anyone who cannot make you happy."

His answer soothed her hurt. There was no doubt in her mind Crispin could make her very happy, but he needed time to realize it. "I will wait for as long as it takes."

She thought her promise would placate him, but his sour frown said otherwise. *Better not to allow him to dwell on it.* "My sisters have stopped calling for me. I should return to the house before Aunt Beatrice sends a search party. Will I see you inside?"

He nodded.

"Splendid." She started toward the house and tossed over her shoulder, "Merry Christmas, Lord Margrave."

## One

On the coach ride back to London, Crispin could still feel Sophia's lush mouth against his and the warmth of her cheek through his glove. Faint notes of her perfume clung to his cravat. He closed his eyes, savoring the alluring scent of camellias.

Try as he might, he couldn't break the spell she had cast over him when she'd reached into his pocket for the sprig of mistletoe, her nose and cheeks pink from the cold and her topaz blue eyes twinkling with anticipation. Her subtle desire for him had been charming, her innocence endearing.

When her pink tongue had darted over her lips in preparation for his kiss, it had nearly undone him. A heady desire to take her to his bed and love her to completion had coursed through his body as he'd grappled for control. Even now, his muscles quivered as he imagined eliciting cries of pleasure from her sweet lips. Her pleas for him to do it all over again would be granted until she was sated, languorous, and gave up any dreams of belonging to another man.

He shook off the ridiculous notion. It wasn't like him to be fanciful, nor did he intend to take a wife, which would be the only way he would ever have Sophia in his bed. She was special, one of Charles Wedmore's precious angels, and Wedmore would have Crispin flogged if he disgraced her.

*Hell.* Crispin would save his godfather the trouble and kick his own arse. Sophia belonged on a pedestal to be cherished, adored, and protected from men like him. Fortunately, he had come to his senses and done nothing more damning than satisfy her curiosity. He expected she would forget about him soon and enter the marriage mart this spring.

"Damnation," he muttered. *That is a depressing thought.*

A chuckle interrupted his introspection. Crispin glowered at his valet sitting on the opposite bench, which did nothing to stifle Kane's mirth.

In a voice formed of steel and ice, Crispin said, "What do you find humorous?"

A shrewd smile was plastered to the younger man's face. "Do I have leave to speak frankly?"

"Have you ever practiced restraint?"

“Rarely, my lord.”

“At least I can always count on you for an honest answer.”

“I blame you,” Kane said with a shrug. “You never taught me to tell a proper lie.”

Crispin’s rigid spine began to soften. Kane’s cheerful disposition had a way of spreading to others in his vicinity, which was likely the reason Crispin didn’t mind his presence on the long ride back to London.

“Kane, even when it would serve you well to hold your peace, you have a tendency to speak out of turn.”

“It is in my nature, I think.”

“I believe it is, and as I recall, this quality almost resulted in you being tossed in gaol when I found you.”

Kane lowered his head and grinned sheepishly. “It was rather fortuitous you came along when you did. I do not know how you got on all those years without me.”

“It is a mystery,” Crispin said with droll sarcasm.

His first encounter with his valet was on Bond Street eight years ago. Upon exiting the haberdashery, Crispin literally bumped into him. Kane had been knee-deep in a row with a baron over a scrawny boy who was curled into a ball on the ground. Tears had forged muddy tracks down the lad’s cheeks, and he was whimpering. It was a most pathetic sight, one so young reduced to picking pockets for scraps of food.

When it appeared Lord Nevitt intended to crack both of their skulls with his walking stick, Crispin had intervened and taken the boys into his service—a wise decision in the end. Ernest was the most loyal first footman under Crispin’s employ, and Kane was... Well, he was the worst valet in England, but he made an excellent spy and partner. Crispin felt duty bound to overlook Kane’s lack of fashion sense for the good of their country.

“I thought you were made of sturdier stuff,” Kane blurted, “and here you are fleeing from a slip of a girl.”

If glares had the ability to deliver a physical blow, Crispin’s valet would be severed in half. “I am running from no one. My presence is required in London.”

“Is it?” Kane cocked his head to the side. “I saw no messengers arrive during our short stay, and I had an excellent view of the stables from the servants’ quarters.”

Crispin's stomach churned uneasily. "You saw me with Sophia Darlington earlier?"

"If *you* are the one posing the question, the answer is yes. As far as anyone else is concerned, I was polishing your boots all afternoon and saw nothing."

Crispin lifted his foot to inspect his less than pristine boot. "You are a terrible liar."

"Then you are fortunate Charles Wedmore is not in the country to interrogate me. Otherwise, you would be a husband and father by next Christmas."

His valet's reminder of Crispin's careless disregard for Sophia's reputation was sobering. He thought he'd checked every direction for onlookers before assisting her from the broken carriage. He hadn't looked up—an amateur mistake that would earn his protégé a lecture if he had made it.

Crispin scrubbed his hands down his face and cursed his foolishness. "Wedmore will mount my head above the mantle, and you will dance on my grave."

"Balderdash!" Kane grinned. "I will be too busy raiding your wine cellar to visit your grave."

"Your loyalty is overwhelming."

Kane laughed. "Do not pretend you are unhappy with your predicament. You've always been fond of Miss Sophia, and clearly, your feelings have grown along with her. Now you can court her properly when she comes to London for the Season."

"Wedmore will not allow it. He has done his best to shelter his nieces from his work. He expects them to marry ordinary fellows and settle into an ordinary life."

"Egads," Kane said with a groan, "what a dull and dismal prospect. How can he expect his nieces to appreciate the charms of a conventional existence when all they have known is the eccentric?"

"It isn't my place to question my superiors."

Crispin turned to stare out the window, effectively ending the conversation. Kane had a point, but Crispin doubted his godfather could be swayed. When he'd learned of Crispin's choice to join the Regent's Consul, his position had been unambiguous.

*Espionage is a dangerous game, young man. I forbid you to follow in my footsteps. Tell Farrin you have changed your mind.*

When demands had no effect, Wedmore tried to appeal to Crispin's sense of reason.

*It is not too late for you, son. Do not make this decision carelessly. You cannot know where your path will lead in five years, or ten, or twenty. You only need to look at me to know I speak the truth. I had nothing to lose when I embarked on this life. Now I am guardian to three amazing little girls who deserve a certain future. I cannot guarantee I will be here for them, and they have lost too much already.*

Charles Wedmore, a founding member of the Regent's Consul, had lost his stomach for the work. At age eighteen, Crispin had viewed it as a weakness in his godfather, one *he* would never suffer. Everyone he loved was gone, and everything he had believed about his life was a lie. He'd had nothing to lose either when he joined.

He and Kane traveled in silence for the remainder of the journey. The young man presumably slept beneath the hat he's pulled low over his eyes while Crispin relived his last moments with Sophia. They arrived in London after dark.

"I have a matter to tend to before home," Crispin said.

Kane remained slumped on the bench. "Aye, my lord."

When the coach rolled to a stop outside Ben Hillary's Governor Square town house, Kane sat up and adjusted his hat. By the curious crane of his neck, Crispin could tell he wanted to ask why they had stopped to see an old school chum on Christmas, but his valet held his tongue.

Ben must have been watching for his arrival, because he exited the house before Crispin alighted from the carriage. His friend climbed inside and sat beside Kane. He sidled a glance at the servant.

"You may speak in his presence," Crispin said. "I see you received my message. Were you able to make the arrangements on my behalf?"

Ben inclined his head. "He is waiting at the coffeehouse across from the Esterdell Hotel."

It must seem odd for Crispin's younger brother to take lodgings rather than stay at the family town house, but if Alexander had arrived at Arden-Hill unannounced expecting accommodations, it would have been an awkward reunion.

"I will accompany you to make introductions," Ben said.

“Thank you for the offer, but no.” Crispin smirked. “Your wife has only of late grown tolerant of my company. I’ll not have her despise me for dragging you from bed.”

Ben chuckled. “You dined at our table three times last week. Eve likes you well enough, Margrave. I would even venture she looks forward to your verbal sparring.”

“Alas, we have something in common. I relish her sharp-tongue. It reminds me to watch my manners.”

When Ben and Eve were newly wed, Crispin had overstepped his bounds in an attempt to protect her from a danger she hadn’t known existed. Understandably, the lady hadn’t appreciated Crispin’s meddling and put him in his place, earning his respect.

To this day, Eve and Ben remained ignorant her life had been in jeopardy, but Crispin was obligated to keep the secret since it involved a fellow spy. Fortunately, Eve was safe now, and the couple was too enamored with their infant son to fret over bygones.

Crispin wished his own past were as easily forgotten. “Thank you for making arrangements on my behalf. There was no time before I was expected at Lord Wedmore’s home in Kent.”

“Are you certain you do not wish for my company? Moral support never hurts.”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t, but my morale is not in danger.”

After years of friendship, Ben seemed to accept Crispin had nothing more to say on the matter. They were men’s men; they did not require a sympathetic ear. Crispin had grown up believing his mother and brother were dead. It was a lie. No amount of bellyaching over the unfairness would change anything.

“Very well,” Ben said. “I will leave you to it.”

With a jaunty wave, he disembarked from the carriage. Kane settled against the seatback as the conveyance lurched into the street. Crispin trained his gaze out the window again, staring into darkness and seeing his brother’s neat handwriting in his mind.

Yesterday morning, as Crispin prepared to travel to spend Christmas with his godfather’s family, a letter arrived from his brother. He recognized the handwriting

from years of exchanging correspondence when Alexander was at boarding school in Edinburgh, and later after he purchased his commission as an officer in the 68th Regiment.

Lieutenant Alexander Locke had returned from Quebec two days earlier and taken lodgings in Town. Once the road became passable, he would travel on to Finchingfield where their mother resided with her second husband. It could be his and Crispin's only opportunity to meet.

Crispin had almost tossed the letter on the fire. He and Alexander had survived without one another's companionship for a long time. A meeting was unlikely to bridge the chasm carved out between them after decades apart. When Alexander admitted in his letter he did not relish spending another Christmas alone, Crispin's resistance had broken. It was not right for a man to feel forsaken and forlorn, especially upon his return from having served his country.

When Crispin's carriage arrived at Arden-Hill, he left Kane to unpack his belongings then continued to his destination. The Esterdell Hotel was a modest establishment compared to the rooms most gentlemen of his brother's station rented when staying in London. What did that say about Alexander? Had he grown too accustomed to the meager trappings of military life to find comfort in the luxuries available in a finer hotel, or had he accumulated debt that required him to be pennywise?

Crispin would know more once he sat down with his brother. He could always take a man's measure by looking him in the eyes.

Alexander was recognizable upon sight. Despite being the only man dressed in regimentals, he was a robust, younger version of their father with russet hair, a soft jaw, and blue eyes. The only physical similarity Crispin and his brother shared was a strong brow—a feature that caused them to look serious whether they were or not. Crispin's memory of his mother had faded over time, but he recalled he had inherited the physical trait from her.

This air of seriousness seemed to be working to his brother's advantage this evening. Alexander had been given wide berth and sat alone at one of the tables in the back of the coffeehouse. His eyebrows veered toward one another as Crispin

approached.

“Lord Margrave?”

Crispin slipped onto the bench across from him. “No need to stand on formality. We are blood.”

The lines of apprehension crisscrossing Alexander’s forehead disappeared. “I was uncertain you would claim me as kin. We are like strangers to one another.”

“I remember you,” Crispin said. “Not well, but I remember you tried to eat one of my building blocks when I wanted a playmate.”

“I was very young.” His brother smiled and ducked his head. “I am afraid I have no memory of you, but Mother spoke of you often after you found her.”

Crispin sensed his eyebrow arch in doubt and guided the conversation away from their mother. He suspected she could be a point of contention between them. “What brings you home? Has your regiment returned to England?”

His brother followed his lead and abandoned any discussion of their mother. “I am on leave. My stepfather fell ill a couple of years ago, and Mother writes that his condition has worsened. I’ve come home to see after him.”

It seemed he and Alexander shared something else in common, a devotion to the men who had raised them. Crispin hadn’t strayed far from his father’s bed at the end. He smiled sadly, reminded of his father’s demise.

“You are a good son. Mr. Ness is a lucky man.”

Blood rushed into Alexander’s cheeks, and he swiped his finger over an invisible speck on the tabletop. “I only now realized how that must have sounded. I am aware Zachary Ness is not my father, but he has no children of his own, and he has always treated me like a son. Forgive me if I’ve given offense.”

“I am not offended. I was remembering when our father was ill,” Crispin said. “You look like him.”

Alexander’s gaze shot up. “Do I? I always wondered...”

Crispin might not want to talk about their mother, but it seemed obvious his brother was curious about their father. For the next half hour, he shared stories about Father and answered Alexander’s questions about their family lineage.

As Crispin spoke, anger simmered inside him for the lifetime of memories their

mother had stolen from him and his brother; he buried the resentment deep before it bubbled to the surface. Appreciating this moment with his brother was more important. They might not see one another again for many years.

He and Alexander had been sitting across from one another for an hour when Kane walked past the table with his hat in his left hand; he switched it to his right.

*A signal.*

Crispin was yanked from the pleasant cocoon that had enshrouded him as he spoke with his brother. The Regent's Consul was calling him to duty.

He sighed and stood. For a moment, he had tricked himself into believing he was an ordinary man. "I have enjoyed myself immensely, Alexander, but I must take my leave."

"I expect I will be in London for some time," his brother said, looking up at him like an eager pup. "Perhaps we could meet again? I would like to see our father's home, if it is not presumptuous of me."

"It is not presumptuous, but unfortunately, I will not be in residence much longer."

"But you've only arrived in London. What calls you away so soon?"

Evading his brother's inquiry didn't sit right with him, but he had little choice. "A mundane task. I will not bore you with the details."

Alexander held a steady gaze. "I see." His sudden cool demeanor and stiff posture suggested he didn't see at all.

Crispin wasn't attempting to get rid of his brother, but he had responsibilities that transcended familial duties. "You are welcome at Arden-Hill even if I cannot receive you," he said. "I will inform my housekeeper to provide you with a tour when you call."

The wariness in Alexander's eyes diminished slightly. "Yes, thank you, I will try to find time to call at Arden-Hill before I leave London." Alexander stood, too. "Thank you for meeting with me, my lord. It was rather sudden. Perhaps you had plans."

"Nothing important. I am glad you contacted me." Crispin began to ease away from the table before the guilt ghosting over him could take solid form. He had begun to enjoy himself, but Kane's interruption was a harsh reminder of the solitary

profession Crispin had chosen. "I wish you a safe journey to your stepfather's bedside and pray for his recovery."

"You should come to Finchingfield when you are able. Mother would like to see you again."

"I will consider it," he lied. The woman had made her wishes clear years ago. She wanted nothing to do with him; he returned the sentiment.

Kane was waiting for him on the empty street. "I came by horseback."

Crispin fell into step with him en route to the mews. When he was certain no one was close by to overhear, he spoke. "What are my orders?"

"Limerick at first light. I am to accompany you. We must stop an assassin."

"One of our men or an enemy?"

Kane scoffed. "Ours. Farrin recalled his orders when the Lord Chamberlain discovered his plan."

"That must have been an interesting conversation," Crispin said. "To hear Farrin talk, he fancies himself the King's advisor."

"Or next in line for the throne."

Crispin smiled at the younger man's joke; there was a thread of truth in it. Like everyone in England, Farrin understood the rules of succession, but he was an ambitious man. The leader of the Regent's Consul would settle for pulling the monarch's strings like a puppeteer.

"There are rumors the Regent's Consul might be dissolved now that Napoleon is in exile," Crispin said. He didn't give the gossip much credit. England would always have enemies. "Farrin will have to take his pleasure elsewhere if that comes to pass."

Kane uttered a sound of disgust deep in his throat. "I shudder to consider what he might become without the rules of the Consul to temper him."

"It is a frightening prospect, indeed."

Crispin had been sheltered as a boy, but in his service to the King, he had discovered evil often lurked behind a thin veil of civility with men like Farrin. This potent reminder of the life he had chosen sobered him. He had left Sophia with no promises, because it had been the right thing to do. Still, kissing her made him feel like the worst sort of blackguard—as well as the luckiest man on earth.

*End of Chapter*

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