

“Why does she not have a net?” Henry Selkirk, Viscount Bexley, asked his secretary. “If she falls, all of our hard work will be for naught. The papers will carry the story of a dead performer, not that of the celebrations for the Regent’s birthday and Britain’s triumph over the French.”

“Yes, my lord,” Morton said, scribbling notes in a small book he carried. “Make certain the rope walkers have a net,” he murmured to himself.

Henry couldn’t understand why the woman would venture out on a rope without a net in the first place. Did she want to die? He certainly did not want to see her pretty face battered and bruised.

But then, Henry did not understand the motives behind what most people did. Especially those who *enjoyed* taking risks and confronting danger. Henry walked on, his dark gaze scanning the walk and the parade of couples passing by. “Half of these lamps are not lit, Morton,” he said. “It’s far too dark. No wonder the pickpockets are so bold.”

“Too dark. Yes, my lord.”

Henry heard a giggle and a shush from one of the shadows. It was not difficult to ascertain why the walks were not properly lit. Lovers wanted darkness for privacy. And they could have their privacy and their damn walks back just as soon as the prince’s celebrations were ended. God knew Henry wanted them over more than anyone.

He tossed a glance over his shoulder.

Except perhaps Morton.

“Keep up, Morton.”

“Yes, my lord.” He all but jogged to keep pace with Henry’s long strides.

“I did not ask for this position, Morton,” Henry said, walking on. He’d been to the pleasure gardens just outside of London half a dozen times over the past fortnight. He’d signed contracts with musicians and with George Barrett, who owned Vauxhall Gardens. The prince

wanted a masked ball, a concert with fireworks, and a grand ball. His Highness had tapped Henry to organize it all.

“I wanted no part of this business, Morton.”

“No, my lord.”

“I went to see Prinny on an entirely different matter.”

“At the urging of the Lords, sir.”

“Yes. I was to speak to him about his overindulgent spending. Do you remember, Morton?”

The secretary nodded. “It was a ploy, my lord.”

“It was an outright trick. Send the new man into the lion’s den.”

“It’s not your fault you are newly a viscount, my lord.”

No, that was his cousin’s fault. The damn man had to fall from a horse and break his neck. And this after his fathers and brothers had succumbed to a fever. Why was no one in his family ever careful? But after a string of unlikely deaths that led Henry—far, far down in the line of succession—to inherit, Henry was beginning to believe this viscountcy was cursed.

If only he hadn’t happened upon the prince and his cronies when the group had been planning celebrations for the victory of Waterloo and the prince’s birthday. When Henry had suggested to the prince that he might try to economize, the prince had agreed.

“Right you are, Bexley, and you are just the man I need.”

Henry had looked from the prince to Prinny’s friends Lord Alvanley and Sir Lumley, known to his friends as Skiffy. The gentlemen had looked as perplexed as Henry. “Your Highness?” Henry had finally offered.

“You will help me economize, Bexley. I hereby declare you the...er—” The prince looked to his friends for inspiration.

“The royal master of ceremonies, Your Highness,” Alvanley had suggested with a smug smile. Henry had never liked the baron.

The prince clapped his hands. “Exactly!”

Henry had been the prince’s royal master of ceremonies for precisely sixteen days, four hours, and almost forty-five minutes. In that time, he had persuaded the prince to combine the Waterloo and birthday celebrations, convinced the prince that he did not need to arrive nightly in a bier borne by four elephants, and counseled against a champagne fountain.

And the celebrations were still wildly overbudget.

And now that Henry was finally seeing the gardens at night, as they would be during the celebrations, he was demanding lamps be lit, rope walkers be protected, and more security brought in. All of those changes would require blunt. But Henry hadn't been to Vauxhall Gardens since he'd been a child, and he hadn't realized how much it had deteriorated. The last thing he needed was for the prince to be harmed or accosted during the festivities.

Henry and Morton rounded a corner, entering a particularly gloomy area of what was known as the dark walks. Thus far they'd encountered only lovers seeking privacy, but now they came face-to-face with a group of youths harassing a young man.

Henry cursed under his breath in frustration. This was exactly the sort of thing he wanted to avoid. He was no coward and would not run from the situation, but how he wished he were home in his library, safely ensconced before a fire.

One boy of about eighteen, with hair blond enough that it shone in the darkness, pushed the smaller lad so he stumbled. The boy was caught by another of the gang, this one a few years older and a ginger with a flat face full of freckles.

"What is this about?" Bexley demanded. It seemed the sort of thing he should say.

"Help me, sir," the boy said before the ginger pushed him down to his knees.

"Shut yer potato hole." The ginger put his hands on his hips, and the other three youths closed ranks behind him. Henry wasn't overly concerned. These might be thugs, but they knew better than to lay hands on a nobleman. That was a hanging offense. Still, he was careful and alert.

"Release that lad at once."

"And if I say no?" the ginger asked.

"Then I'll call for one of my constables and have you escorted from the gardens. It's time we removed all the riffraff. You, sir, are no longer welcome here."

"Is that so?" the ginger asked. The boy on his knees, small and slim, trembled and ducked his head.

"Yes."

"You got that turned about, guv. You're the one not welcome." He looked at his friends. "What do you say we give the nob a farewell present?"

The youths nodded, and Henry braced for a fight. He'd been in his share of fights on the streets of London when he'd been young and reckless and a fool. Now he preferred to avoid risky situations (there was the cursed viscountcy to think of), but he really had no choice at the moment. He couldn't leave this defenseless boy, and it was too late to walk away. Henry was careful but not a coward.

It had been some time since he'd had a scuffle, but he was confident he could inflict some damage and cause enough of an uproar to attract one of the constables.

But to Henry's shock, the ginger didn't come for him. Instead, he yanked the lad up from his knees. Henry barely saw the glint of the blade before it slammed down and into the boy's belly. The boy bent over, blood dripping onto the ground. He took a step and fell.

Someone screamed, possibly Morton, possibly the boy who'd been gutted. Henry rushed forward to catch the boy. But the lad staggered away and crumpled into a twisted ball.

"Morton, call for the constable," Henry ordered, yanking out his handkerchief. He bent, taking the lad by the shoulders. "How bad is it? Here, let me staunch the flow of blood." As he reached for the lad, the boy rolled slightly onto his back. He looked up at Henry with a look Henry couldn't quite decipher, and then he reached up and wrapped his arms around Henry's neck.

"Now!" the injured boy yelled, sounding far too robust for a lad who was bleeding profusely from a belly wound.

"What—" Henry began.

"My lord! Watch out!" Morton called.

Cursed, Henry thought.

That was his last thought before all went black.

He came awake slowly and by degrees of pain. First, he was aware of the pain in his head. The back of his head throbbed incessantly, causing a roaring in his ears akin to that of a riotous mob. Next, he was aware of the pain in his shoulders and his arms. He tried to touch his aching head, but his hands were bound behind his back. Moving them at all shot pinpricks of agony up and down his skin. The limbs had obviously fallen asleep and objected to waking up.

His back was the next area of discomfort he noted. He lay on something hard and cold, and his back protested not only his hands digging into it but the unyielding floor. Finally, he tried to open his eyes.

That was the worst pain yet. The room was poorly lit, but even the gloomy lamplight made his head swim. He snapped his eyes shut again. After a few moments, the roaring in his ears seemed to subside and he was aware of voices.

“Where’s Hedgehog?” a low, melodious voice asked.

“The boys have him outside, Duke. Do you want him?”

“Bring him in.”

Footsteps came alarmingly close, the boards near his head quavering in response. Then a door opened, and all was silent except for the sound of footsteps, lighter and more muffled. Perhaps a man walking on carpet? Henry was half tempted to open his eyes again. He was prepared for the light now, and the ache in his head was tolerable, barely, but if he opened his eyes his captors—it was becoming increasingly clear that he’d been abducted and bound—would know he was awake. Better to feign unconsciousness and plan his escape.

Escape?

How was it he, Henry Selkirk, was planning an escape? This sort of thing was not supposed to happen to him. He was too cautious to be abducted, damn it.

Footsteps shook the floor, and a door creaked open. This time, multiple footsteps sounded as well as some sort of scuffling. “Let me go!”

Henry risked cracking his eyes open and saw a man struggling in the grips of the ginger and the blond he’d seen at Vauxhall earlier that night. Through a small window, he noted it was still dark outside, so he hoped it was still the same night. He had no idea how much time had passed or how long he’d been unconscious. He also had the quick impression of a small, dark room paneled in wood before he closed his eyes again. The man between the thugs from the gardens must be the one they called Hedgehog. With a short, round body and spiky hair, he looked like a hedgehog.

Hedgehog emitted a string of inventive profanities before a low, silky voice interrupted. “You did this to yourself, Hedgehog.”

“Duke, I can explain.”

Duke. This was the second time someone had called the leader—the man with the honeyed voice—*Duke*. But if he was a duke, what was he doing with criminals from Vauxhall? And why would he keep a viscount tied up?

“I don’t want your explanations. You stole from me, and you know the price for that.”

“No, Duke. Don’t!”

Hedgehog was moving away from Henry and toward the duke. Too late, Henry realized he knew this because he’d opened his eyes and was staring straight at the man they called Duke. And he was no duke at all. He was the lad from Vauxhall, the one who had been stabbed. His white shirt still bore the crimson stain of blood. The stabbing must have been a trick, a lure to reel Henry in. But why had they wanted him and—more important—what would they do with him now?

Henry stared at the scarlet on the man’s otherwise well-made linen shirt. Of course, it wasn’t the lad’s blood at all. Just another part of what must have been a plan to abduct him and—what? Ransom him to his family? Kill him? Keep him hostage until after the prince’s celebration?

Oh, very well. The last one was wishful thinking.

The lad they called Duke raised a brow, or so it seemed. His face was shadowed by the cap he wore. “You might as well quit pretending to sleep,” he said. “Go ahead and sit up. You’ll want to see this. It will save me the trouble of devising a new lesson for you.”

Henry struggled to roll over, not an easy feat with his hands bound and nothing to use for leverage.

“Red,” the duke said. “Help him.”

“I can do it,” Henry all but growled. He’d just as soon look a fool than accept any help from the ginger who had smashed his head.

“Hurry up. I don’t have all night.” The duke reached for an iron bar and slapped it into one small hand—pale, delicate hands that looked as though they should play the violin or sip tea.

Or pick a pocket. The best pickpockets prized their hands above all else.

Henry rose to his knees, a sickening lump forming in his belly.

“No, please. No!” Hedgehog begged, tears and snot running down his face. Red, the ginger, held his right hand down on a lovely cherry wood desk. It was bare of paper or ornamentation, but for the pistol on one corner.

Seeing that Henry was on his knees and had a view of the desk, the one they called Duke nodded. Then he looked at Hedgehog. "If you ever steal from me again," he said, his low voice menacing, "I'll put a pistol ball in your brain. Count yourself lucky tonight."

Hedgehog could do nothing but blubber.

The duke raised the black bar. Henry wanted to look away, but he wouldn't give this duke the satisfaction. With a soft thud and a crunch of bone, the bar landed on the vulnerable flesh. Hedgehog screamed. Henry winced. The hand had a visible dent in it, and blood welled from the flattened fingers.

"Get him out of here," the duke said.

Red yanked the sniveling Hedgehog away, the man cradling his injured hand to his chest. The duke looked at the blond. "Clean this up." He gestured to the desk, which had a splatter of blood arcing out from where the hand had lain.

"Yes, Duke." The blond jerked his head toward Henry. "What about him?"

"He comes with me."

Henry was still staring at the spray of blood on the once lovely wood of the desk when the duke jerked him to his feet. For a small man, he was surprisingly strong. He reached into his boot, pulled out a knife with a long, sharp blade, and slit the rope binding Henry's ankles. Unlike his wrists, his ankles had not been bound tightly, and Henry had no trouble standing on his own.

Until the duke grabbed the rope around his wrists and pushed him forward. "Hey!" Henry yelled when he stumbled.

"Shut up and walk." Such a melodious voice for such harsh words. And then when Henry didn't move fast enough, the duke grabbed the bindings on his wrists and yanked upward.

Henry bit back a scream. He wouldn't cry like a child, but the duke would pay for that little act of cruelty.

If Henry made it out of here alive.

"Walk," the duke ordered.

Henry walked. Using the bindings, the duke guided Henry like one might a horse through what Henry realized must be a tavern or inn. He heard voices in a room to his left and what sounded like the clink of glasses. And he smelled the yeasty scent of freshly baked bread and the thick, rich odor of broth simmering with potatoes and spices. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, and his stomach let him know that, along with his head and his back, it had complaints.

Finally, Henry was marched up a back set of stairs such as servants might use and pushed before a wooden door. He glanced down the hallway and saw other doors were nearby, all shut like the one before him, and the hallway ended abruptly. It was closed off from the rest of the building. Which meant if this was an inn, situated in Lambeth or another of the areas near Vauxhall, the patrons using it might have no idea of the presence of these criminals.

It was an ideal lair for these delinquents. And, of course, this was an unfortunate realization, because it would make finding Henry that much more difficult. That was, if anyone was even looking. For the first time, he wondered what had happened to Morton. Had they taken his secretary, or had the man been able to get away to alert a constable, or perhaps call in the Bow Street Runners?

“Barbara,” the duke said. “Open the door.”

“Open it yerself,” came the tart reply.

The duke stiffened, pulling back on Henry’s bindings. Henry was tempted to point out that he was not the one who’d offended.

“Barbara, open it now, or you can spend the rest of your days on your back in a brothel in Seven Dials.”

“What nonsense,” came Barbara’s reply, spoken in a carefree voice. But a moment later, the door opened, and Henry looked down and into the face of a plump and pretty blond woman. She had dark blue eyes and pink cheeks, shown to advantage with her golden hair pulled into a pile on the top of her head. Her ample hips, large bosom, and bright smile spoke of a woman who enjoyed life.

Her smile turned curious as she took him in. Her gaze flicked behind him, presumably to the duke. “I didn’t know you had company.” She arched a brow, then winked at him. Henry merely stared at her in bewilderment, a constant state of late.

“He’s not that sort of company,” the duke answered, pushing him forward.

“I see that now,” Barbara answered, obviously noticing his bindings. She shut the door and moved in front of him again, her gaze more assessing. “But what can he have done? A tall, dark, and handsome gentleman like this?”

Henry wondered if Barbara was attempting to incite the duke’s jealousy. Was she his lover? She’d been waiting in what must have been the duke’s bedchamber. It contained a wardrobe, a dressing screen, and a large bed.

“That’s not your concern. Leave us,” the duke ordered.

“Leave you?” Barbara looked appalled. “Alone? With him?”

“We have matters to discuss. Private matters,” the duke added.

“I’d like to discuss the state of your shirt, Duke.”

At what Henry surmised was a warning look from the duke, Barbara stepped back and raised her hands. “But we can discuss that later. Set it outside, and I’ll collect it for washing. As for him”—she gave Henry one last look—“you’d better keep him tied up.”

“I intend to.”

Barbara left them, and Henry tensed, not certain what would come next. “I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I won’t speak to you until I know whether my secretary is alive and well.”

The duke cocked his head, his face in shadow and partly hidden by the cap. “The balding man you were with?”

Henry gave a slight incline of his head.

“He’s with the men in the servants’ quarters. I imagine he’s more comfortable than you at the moment.”

“I want to see him.”

“I don’t care.” The honeyed voice had an edge to it now. “You aren’t in charge here, Henry Selkirk.”

“How do you know my name?”

“How do you *not* know mine?” The duke put his hands on his hips as if in challenge.

“I heard them call you Duke,” Henry answered, but the duke waved a hand dismissively.

“My real name, Henry. You said you would never forget me.”

“I said...what?” The duke was obviously delusional. “I’ve never met you before in my life. I’d give anything not to have met you now.”

“So sure, are you?” The voice took on a different quality. It was still low and melodious, but now it had almost a teasing tenor.

And then the duke reached up and grasped his cap. With a tug, it came off, revealing short honey-brown hair tucked behind small ears, a small pale face, and large brown eyes he could not have forgotten had he wanted to.

“No.” He shook his head. This was all wrong. This boy couldn’t be—but it wasn’t a boy. The illusion had been broken, and Henry couldn’t help but see the delicate bones of her face, the slim lines of her body hidden beneath boys’ clothing, and the long lashes framing the eyes.

“Kate,” he said, the name sounding halfway between a prayer and a curse.

“Welcome to The Griffin and the Unicorn, Henry.”

Appropriate name for the place, Henry thought, because none of this could possibly be real.

Chapter Two

“Surprised to see me?” she asked, though the look on his face answered that question easily enough. He looked more than surprised. He looked at her as though she were a ghost.

Perhaps to him she was.

“I was surprised to see you,” she continued, not liking the way the heavy silence fell in the room. “I had no idea you were in line to become a viscount.”

“I wasn’t,” he said, his voice rough, as though he hadn’t spoken in years. “It should never have happened.”

She circled him, wishing she could remove his bindings but not ready to trust him yet—if ever. “And yet it did happen, and now you are one of the prince’s set.”

He shook his head, his dark curly hair catching the light of the candles with the movement. He’d always had such thick, dark hair, the curl like spirals if he let it grow too long. Now it was cut just short enough to tousle, as was the fashion, but not long enough for her to insert her finger into a midnight spiral, as she had when they’d been children. “I barely know the prince. I was tapped to organize the celebrations—” He broke off. “It wasn’t supposed to happen.”

She moved before him again. “There seems to be a lot of that in your life.”

“Yes,” he said, his gray-blue eyes meeting hers. She’d always thought his eyes such a pretty color, especially set off as they were by his otherwise dark features. The slash of brows, the mop of hair, and now the dark smudge of stubble on his cheeks and jaw. She was tempted to touch that stubble, but she refrained. She wouldn’t have liked to be touched thus if she’d been bound, and the least she could do was extend him the same courtesy.

That was about all the courtesy she had to give.

“What are you doing here, Kate?” he asked suddenly. “Why do they call you Duke? Why dress as a man? Why go to all this trouble”—he nodded at her stained shirt—“to speak with me?”

She gave a harsh laugh. “You think all of this is about you?”

His brow furrowed, and oh, but it was as adorable as it had always been. Although, he was no longer what she would call *adorable*. He was a man now—tall, muscular, and strong. If

he hadn't been bound, he would have attempted to overpower her before she could blink. That kind of power and danger were far from adorable.

Which was why she should have put him in the dungeon—what they called the room in the servants' quarters where they kept rivals from other gangs and where his secretary currently resided—but she couldn't send him away without first speaking to him.

Playing with fire, her mother would have said. And yes, Kate had always been one to play with fire.

And get burned.

“None of this is about you, *Lord Bexley*.”

“Just call me Henry.”

“If you insist on acting like a pompous ass, I'll treat you like one, *my lord*.”

“Kate—”

“You may call me Duke.”

“Not likely, *Miss Dunn*. Answer me this. If none of this is about me, then why am I being kept prisoner?”

“After all this time, that is the burning question you wish to ask?”

He gave her an exasperated glance. “It seems the most pressing as my hands are numb and my arms throbbing in pain.”

“I am sorry about that.” And she was. “Perhaps I can find a way to make you more comfortable. But first I want out of this bloody shirt.”

He closed his eyes.

She shrugged. “Bad puns. A weakness of mine.” Ducking behind her screen, she shed her coat and attempted to unfasten the buttons on the shirt. Her hands shook so badly she had to pause and take a deep breath. Perhaps sending Barbara away had not been the best idea. She could have used her help now.

Kate closed her eyes and felt the sting of tears she would never allow herself to shed. She could still hear the crunch of Hedgehog's bones when the rod had come down on his hand. She was sick to her stomach at the thought of what she'd done—and yet she'd had no choice.

She knew he'd been stealing from her for months. She'd given him veiled warnings and cautions, and he hadn't taken them to heart. She was relatively certain Red also knew Hedgehog was stealing, but when one of the cubs—the youngest members of the gang—had come to her

and reported Hedgehog was a thief, she'd had to act. She hadn't become the leader of the gang and a duke of the criminal underworld by allowing her own rogues to steal from her. And if she showed any sign of weakness now, any sign of softening, there were a dozen men and boys waiting to take her place.

Fear and a grudging respect kept her gang in line. She'd had to do unspeakable things to earn her position, and if she fell, all of the sacrifices she'd made would be for nothing.

Kate opened her eyes again. She hadn't enjoyed smashing Hedgehog's hand. It would mean an end to his days as a pickpocket, but she'd spared his life. He could find other work. Most of the arch rogues of the other gangs would have killed Hedgehog for less.

She'd always thought that once she had power, she could afford to be merciful. But now she wondered if her mercy toward Hedgehog—little as it was—might be the sign of weakness one of her own needed to try to overthrow her.

If that happened, she knew what she'd be forced to do.

Kate blew out a breath and started on her buttons again. A deadly calm settled over her. This was her life. She couldn't close her eyes, couldn't turn her back, couldn't trust anyone. The moment she thought she was safe, that she had "made it," was the moment she'd be the most vulnerable.

And now she'd found Henry Selkirk. Her old friend Henry had grown up and become a viscount. What must it be like to wake up one morning and realize you were a lord? A titled peer of the realm. He had everything—wealth, safety, power—and he'd done nothing to earn it.

Kate didn't think the two of them could be more different.

It hadn't always been that way.

She pulled the shirt over her head and dropped it on the floor.

"You can't keep me here, you know." Henry's voice floated across the room, reaching her behind the screen. "I'll be missed."

"That must be nice," she said, untying the string holding up her trousers. "Having people who miss you. Your wife? Children?"

"I meant my staff," he said.

Ah, so no wife and children, then. Why should that please her? It wasn't as though she wanted to marry him. That would be a girlish fantasy, and she'd long outgrown those.

"If you cooperate, you will be safely tucked into your mansion in Mayfair in no time."

“I don’t live in a mansion.”

Was it her imagination, or was his voice closer than it had been a moment ago? She remembered she’d cut the bindings on his ankles, which meant he was free to move about her bedchamber.

“Don’t you?” She turned and caught him watching her from the other side of the screen. “My lord, a gentleman would never spy on a lady.”

His face reddened slightly, and he turned so his back was to her. She stared at him, surprised at his behavior. She’d expected him to argue, to point out she was hardly a lady. Instead, he’d treated her with courtesy. Her gaze dropped to his hands, which had turned purple. She had certainly not given him the same courtesy.

She allowed her trousers to drop to the floor, then started unwinding the bindings that flattened her breasts.

“I wondered how you had managed to hide your figure,” he said. She looked up at him, but his back was still turned. “I should not have been so curious.”

She shrugged, forgetting he couldn’t see her. “I don’t have much to hide.”

“Forgive me, but from the glimpse I had, that’s not quite true.”

Now it was her turn for her cheeks to heat. And suddenly her nakedness made her feel vulnerable. She reached for the silk wrap she wore when she was alone—one of her few luxuries, her few nods to her femininity—and pulled it on, cinching the belt tightly.

She removed the daggers from her boots, then toed them off. Taking hold of his bindings, she cut them. It was probably a mistake, but she didn’t want to look at those purple hands any longer.

With a hiss, he lowered his hands to his sides, then groaned as he rotated his shoulders and crossed his arms over his chest. She winced in sympathy. She’d been bound before, and she knew the pain of numb limbs coming back to life. Giving him a private moment to recover, she strode across the room and poured a glass of wine from an open bottle. She sipped it, then shrugged and poured him one as well.

She turned. “Drink this. You can probably use it.”

His handsome face was contorted, but he gave a quick nod. “Thank you,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Don’t try anything,” she added when he began to move toward her. “I still have my knife, and I know how to use it. I can gut you in three seconds flat.”

His brow wrinkled. “That’s not an image I want to examine too closely.” He took the wine she offered and sipped it with all the elegance of a titled nobleman. His gaze dipped to her attire, but he lifted it again quickly.

They watched each other in silence, both sipping wine. Finally, she sat on the edge of her bed, tucking her bare feet under her robe. Her knife was beside her.

“It’s been a long time, Kate,” Henry said when his glass was half empty. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I’m sure you wish you hadn’t.”

“This isn’t how I would have chosen to renew our acquaintance.”

She gave a short laugh. “If you’d known what I’d become, you wouldn’t want to be acquainted with me at all. I’m not suitable company for a viscount.”

His face wrinkled in annoyance. “You think I’d put title above our friendship?”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I don’t know Viscount Bexley. The Henry I knew didn’t scurry about to do the prince’s bidding, didn’t strut through Vauxhall giving orders, didn’t dress as though he were a peacock.”

She gave a pointed look to his tight coat and crisp white cravat—at least it had been crisp and white.

“The Kate Dunn I knew didn’t assault innocent men or threaten them with knives, not to mention abducting them.”

“We’ve both changed,” she admitted.

“What happened?” he asked, moving closer to her. She stiffened and held up a hand, a clear warning for him to stay back. He nodded. “One day I saw you, and the next you had disappeared. You never even said good-bye.”

Her heart constricted, and she clenched her hands. She could not allow him to wiggle through her defenses. She wasn’t Kate Dunn anymore, and he wasn’t Henry Selkirk. “I’m certain my disappearance warranted a quarter hour of discussion over dinner, if that. But don’t pretend you actually missed me, my lord. Don’t pretend you looked for me.”

She’d wanted him to look for her, wanted him to find her, to save her. But he’d never come. No one had come.

She'd had to save herself.

"I did look for you. I inquired—"

"Stop." She waved his paltry words away. "We were children. Life happened *to* us. We're not children any longer. We shape our lives and our future."

He sipped his wine again, regarding her over the rim of the glass. Those eyes. She had to look away from those eyes. They looked through her, penetrated her defenses. They always had.

"What are you saying?" His voice was flat.

"You are a problem for me, Lord Bexley."

"After all we shared, that's the sum of what I am to you?"

She jumped to her feet. "If you meant nothing to me, you wouldn't be standing here. You wouldn't be alive."

"You're a murderess now?"

"I'm worse than that. I am every ill Society has ever conceived of. Think of the worst hovel you can imagine; I lived there. Think of the worst crime ever committed; I did it. I am the Duke of Vauxhall. If you haven't heard of me, you haven't been paying attention."

She could tell by his expression he had heard of her, and even though all the evidence of who she was now had been right before him, he was only now piecing it together.

He took a step back.

"I can't think you are as bad as they say, Kate. I *know* you."

"Not anymore you don't." She advanced on him. "I will kill you, Bexley. I may not want to, but I've sinned more times than I can count. I'm damned to hell, so what's one more black mark on my soul?"

He set the empty wine glass on the bedside table. "What do you want from me?"

Finally, the heart of the matter.

"Walk away. From the prince and from Vauxhall. Your...shall we call them improvements are cutting into my profits. More constables make it harder for my cubs to pick pockets. More lights make it difficult for my gang to sneak in and out of the gardens. And now that Barrett has all of your meaningless assurances of safety, he isn't paying his insurance."

Henry's brows rose. "Is that what you call extortion in your circle?"

“I don’t have a circle, Bexley,” she said, advancing on him until she was all but touching him. He was a head taller than she, but she didn’t allow his height to intimidate her. “I have a band of malefactors and miscreants, and you do not want me to give them free rein.”

He folded his arms, the action causing him to brush against her. “If all you needed to do was issue them free rein, then why abduct me?”

Oh, Henry was no fool. He never had been.

“I’m not a savage, Bexley. I’d like to accomplish my goals without bloodshed or violence. Besides, if the public is scared away from Vauxhall Gardens, the prince’s celebration will be poorly attended. That isn’t good for business either.”

“So if I understand correctly, you want me to resign my position with the prince and run back home with my tail between my legs.”

She shrugged. “Go home however you wish. I seem to remember you arriving in a coach and four.”

“You’ve been watching me,” he said, and for whatever reason, the tone of his voice made her breath catch.

“I like to know my adversary.”

“I’d expect nothing less. And if you’ve been watching me, you know I don’t take this position lightly. You might even know that it wasn’t of my choosing.”

“Are your knees rough from all the bootlicking?” she asked sarcastically. “My own have calluses, I assure you. But I don’t lick…boots anymore.”

Quite suddenly, he put a hand on her shoulder. She reached for her dagger, but it wasn’t at her side. She’d left it on the bed. Careless and stupid of her.

“Don’t touch me,” she said.

“Why? Afraid you’ll feel human again for a moment or two? You’ve explained your position, Kate. Now hear mine.” His hand seemed to burn through the thin silk of her robe, straight into her cold flesh. It had been so long since she’d been touched, and she couldn’t remember the last time a man had touched her gently and without anger.

But that was a lie, because the last man to touch her that way was the same one touching her now.

Henry’s hand sat heavy on her shoulder. But he didn’t grip her. She could have shrugged him off. To her shame, she didn’t.

“I may not have wanted this title,” he said. “But it’s mine. I may not have wanted to serve the prince in this capacity, but I see it as serving my country. And your threats, stark as they are, won’t sway me from doing my duty.”

“They are not mere threats, sir,” she hissed. Now she did shrug his hand from her shoulder and moved back toward the bed. “And we are at an impasse.”

She knew him well enough to know he would never shirk his duty. It was one of the reasons she’d always loved him. He did what he thought was right and damn the consequences. Damn him. He would force her to kill him. She reached back and slipped the knife into her sleeve.

“Not an impasse,” he said.

She arched her brow.

“What if I told you I could make this mutually beneficial for everyone?”

“I’d say you belong in Bedlam.” The knife was cold in her hand, hard and cold.

“I’m not insane.”

“Then you’re lying.”

He frowned at her. “You know me better than that. Won’t you even give me a chance?”

“I don’t trust you,” she said.

“But you would have trusted me enough to let me go had I agreed to resign. Give me the opportunity to find a solution that’s mutually beneficial. Not every outcome must favor only one party.” He reached up and stroked her cheek.

At his touch, Kate snapped. It was one thing for him to touch her shoulder, but touching her like this, like a lover, was unpardonable. She flicked the dagger out from her sleeve and held it under his chin. His hand stilled, and his gaze locked on hers.

“I told you not to touch me.” She moved in a circle, forcing him to move with her.

“Why not?”

“I don’t like it.” They’d traded places now, and his back was to the bed.

“Are you certain? Perhaps you’re afraid you’ll like it too much.”

She shoved him back hard with a hand to his sternum. He fell back, not attempting to resist her at all. She crouched over him, her knife poised over his heart.

“Perhaps you want to die today.”

He gave her a half smile. “It would save me some trouble.”

Kate wanted to hit him. Why did he smile at her? Why wasn't he afraid? Why wasn't he begging for his life? He wasn't even trembling, and she was forced to award him grudging admiration. Didn't he think she would kill him? She would. She saw where his pulse beat evenly in his neck. She could cut him there, end him forever.

"Kate, I know you don't trust me anymore, but you trusted me once. Give me a chance now. Let me prove to you that I can find a solution we'll both agree upon."

Trust him? Everyone she had ever trusted had betrayed her. She'd learned early that if she didn't trust, she didn't get hurt. But he was right. She had trusted him, and though she considered his abandonment a betrayal, she knew it an unreasonable expectation. He was only two years older than she, and when they'd last seen each other, she'd barely been twelve. He couldn't have helped her even if he'd wanted to. Generally, she didn't care about fairness, but perhaps in this case she could admit her judgment of him unwarranted.

"How do I know you won't betray me?" she asked.

"How do I know you won't order me killed?" he countered.

"You don't."

He inclined his head slightly. She considered.

After a long silence, he said, "This isn't any easier for me than you. My own trust has been violated in the past, and not even the distant past."

"Somehow, I think our situations are not quite equivalent."

"Yes, you don't have a knife pointed at your heart."

She looked down at the dagger. She could kill him. She could finish this now. The Duke of Vauxhall didn't trust noblemen. She didn't trust anyone.

Squeezing the handle of the dagger, she shoved it down and into his flesh. His eyes widened in disbelief, and his hands came up to grip hers. And then he frowned.

Because he wasn't in pain. He wasn't bleeding. He wasn't dead.

His hands slipped to her wrists, and she lifted the dagger, showing him the false blade, then flipping it to the real blade. "Next time I'll use this side, and if you betray me, I'll make certain you suffer."

He sat, pushing her off him and to the side. Brushing at his shoulders, he stood, as though he had been the one in control all along. "Charming to the last," he murmured. "Where is my

man? The sooner I leave, the sooner we can both get on with the business of never seeing each other again.”

“Red!” she called, going to the door when the quick answer came from the other side.

“Duke, right here.”

She opened the door, and Red’s eyes flicked to Bexley before they went back to her. She couldn’t always read Red, but tonight she saw surprise in his face. He’d expected her to kill Bexley. She would probably regret not having done it. “Bring the viscount’s man out and take him and Lord Bexley back to Vauxhall.”

“Yes, Duke.”

“Allow them to leave unmolested. But Red”—she looked over her shoulder at Bexley—“if he gives you any trouble, leave him bleeding in a ditch on the side of the road.”

“Gladly, Duke.” Red pointed a finger to Bexley. “You, let’s go.”

Henry walked past her, his gaze forward. When his shoulder almost grazed hers, he moved it to avoid touching her. She stood in the open doorway, but he never looked back.