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TOUCH OF A SCOUNDREL

MIA MARLOWE

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CHAPTER 1

Devonwood Park, 1844

Griffin rarely prayed in church. He used the time when everyone else's eyes were closed to sneak peek at Sabrina Ashcroft's rapidly growing bosom. Every fourteen-year-old boy in the shire was fascinated by the new bumps sprouting on her chest. Ogling those lovely mounds sent urgent sensations coursing through his body, driving all thought of prayer from his mind.

But he talked to God now as he urged his gelding to the top of the rise.

"Let the delay be enough," Griffin repeated. His mount's powerful haunches bunched and flexed under him as he forced it up the steep incline. He didn't say please, to the horse or the Almighty. He was his father's heir, after all, and the earldom of Devonwood was an old and venerated estate.

A peer of the realm demanded obedience from those subject to him and gave restrained courtesy to his equals. Griffin loved and feared his father as much as the vicar admonished him to love and fear God. In his mind, the two had always been intertwined so tightly, he suspected the earl spoke to the Lord as if they were on the same footing.

But a sense of urgency crowded Griffin's chest and he began to add a silent "please" to his repeated prayer.

He reined in the gelding and surveyed the rolling meadows of his family's ancestral seat. A blur of movement caught his eye. He narrowed his gaze at the lone horseman barreling down the tree-lined drive toward the haphazard castle that crowned Devonwood Park. His gut clenched with apprehension.

The sun burst from behind a westering cloud bank, dazzling with unexpected brightness for so late in the day. The sweet scent of newly cut hay wafted over the hedgerows. Larks threw their songs to the heavens. It was a moment to gladden any lad, but the eerie sense of having lived through this slice of time once before stripped away any joy Griffin might have felt.

His palms grew clammy and a hard shell formed around his hammering heart.

He didn't have to wonder what news made the horseman push his mount to such a breakneck pace.

He *knew*.

The *Sending* that morning had been so specific, he had dared break his father's rule and warned the earl about what his "gift" had shown him. Griffin hesitated to call it that, but his mother had insisted the ability to glimpse the future by touching inanimate objects was part of his birthright from her side of the family, inherited just as directly as his raven hair and storm-gray eyes.

The earl, however, didn't hold with such outlandish things. He thrashed his son every time he admitted to having a vision of the future, even though events always unraveled just as Griffin saw they would.

Griffin was never able to anticipate what would set off the miasma of lights in his head. It might be an accidental brush against a scrap of leather or a piece of carved wood. A china teacup might whisper the future to him. When he and his father had shaken hands to say good-bye that morning, his father's signet ring had all but screamed what was to come.

Once Griffin had *Seen* what the morning held for his father, he'd pleaded with him to change his plans and remain in the country for another day.

"Ballocks!" his father had said, and then whipped him for "gypsy-ish nonsense." The punishment had caused a mere fifteen-minute impediment to the earl's schedule, so Griffin had slashed through

the harness on his father's equipage with his belt knife. That set the earl's schedule back a full hour and earned Griffin the promise of another thrashing when Lord Devonwood returned in a sennight.

"I don't dare do it now," the earl had said through clenched teeth. "I'm too furious with you to trust myself to stop once I start."

Griffin didn't care. He'd welcome the beating if it meant his father would return. The only thing that mattered was undoing the future he'd *Seen*.

"Please let it have been enough time," he whispered as the future roared toward him with the horseman galloping toward his home.

Griffin dug his heels into his horse's flanks and charged back down the hill to meet the rider. Once he clattered over the drawbridge, under the portcullis, and into the bailey, he saw his mother had come out to greet the horseman. Baby Louisa was balanced on her hip and his brother Teddy clung to her skirts. *Maman* had never held with nannies or governesses for her little brood. It was yet another of her eccentricities that made Griffin wonder sometimes why his thoroughly conventional father had chosen her.

By the time Griffin reined in his horse and dismounted, the rider had begun his report.

"It was a deucedly freakish accident," the man said, twisting his cap nervously. "The earl's carriage collided with the mail coach at a blind corner. I'm sorry as I can be to tell you this, milady. The driver and the footman will mend, but Lord Devonwood was trapped inside the equipage and we had the devil's own time getting him out. His lordship . . . died before a doctor could staunch the bleeding."

"But the mail coach should have gone much earlier." The words tasted of bile as they passed through Griffin's throat.

"It was delayed," the man said. "Had to replace a wheel just outside of Shiring-on-the-Green."

All the air rushed from Griffin's lungs. If he hadn't interfered. . . if he had let his father leave at the time he'd intended . . . His vision tunneled until he forced himself to inhale. The welts on his back from his thrashing stung afresh.

Tears streamed down his mother's face. When she wobbled a bit, he wrapped his arms around her to keep her upright. Since their mother was crying, little Teddy began to howl and baby Louisa offered sympathetic whimpers.

In that surreal moment, Griffin noticed suddenly how short his mother had become. The crown of her head fit neatly under his chin.

"What would ye have me do now, Master Grif—I mean, Lord Devonwood?" The rider gave his forelock a respectful tug.

Lord Devonwood. He was the earl now. The full weight of the estate and all its retainers settled on his fourteen-year-old shoulders. Between one breath and the next, Griffin's boyhood slipped away forever.

"Ride to Shiring-on-the-Green and make arrangements to return my father's body for burial," he said, grateful his voice had not chosen that moment to break in an adolescent squeak. A pinprick of headache began to form behind his right eye. It happened sometimes when he'd had a vision. This was the first time the onset of the migraine was so delayed. "Then call on our man of business in London and tell him to prepare an accounting of the estate within the week. There are things that require our attention."

He noticed he'd already adopted his father's habit of speaking of himself in the plural.

As he helped his mother back into the house, Mr. Abercrombie's lesson from last week haunted him. His tutor had told him that theologians and philosophers often debated whether the future was immutable.

"Does Fate or the stars or a benevolent God dictate the course of our lives?" Mr. Abercrombie asked. "Or do we pilot our own souls?"

Griffin had argued for free will, but it was a debate he would never join again.

After today, he knew the answer.

The future was fixed, whether by God or the devil or plain dumb luck. He'd tried scores of times to prevent the realization of his visions, but he'd never been able to change a single outcome.

Not once.

Fate even used his interference. It was like trying to stop the wind. Pitiless time only swept him along, no matter how he struggled against it.

He resolved not to try ever again.

CHAPTER 2

London, 1860

Lord Devonwood halted beside the hydrangea to take a longer look at the fetching young woman seated on the stone bench. *It's not every day a man finds a nymph in his garden before breakfast.*

His full given name was Griffin Titus Preston Nash, but no one had called him by anything but his title, or its diminutive “Devon” since his father had died. He’d even ceased to think of himself by any other name. However, the young woman in his garden was comely beyond the common. His blood quickened as if he were still young Griffin, as if he were not weighed down with the responsibilities of a vast estate and all the lives dependent upon him for every morsel in their mouths and each coin in their pockets.

Women usually preened like peahens when presented to Devon since he was judged to be eminent and “eligible” by the matrons of the ton. This lady was preoccupied with a sketchbook and completely unaware of his presence. He could indulge in looking his fill at her unassuming beauty without concern over whether someone would take note, calculate his interest, and hope to capitalize on it.

A bachelor who wanted to remain in that happy state couldn’t be too careful.

The lovely woman in his garden was an unexpected windfall of distraction from the pounding in his temples. Devon almost blessed the grinding headache that had made him decide to take a turn in the fresh morning air before he sought his bed. He’d expected to be soothed by the scent of sweet lavender, the drowsy hum of bees in the St. John’s Wort, and the patter of the fountain. The shade of the alcoves of the garden behind his London town house eased his light-sensitive eyes. His quiet little Eden often relieved his suffering when he overused his “gift.”

The alternative was turning to hard drink, which muddled his thinking, or opiates, which obliterated his thought entirely. Devon was determined to resist those remedies as long as possible.

Fortune had been kind through the long night of gambling at his club. While he frequently lost money in the stock market, a deck of cards never lied to him. His gift of touch allowed him to make up shortfalls in the estate’s balance sheet over a game of whist or poque.

Devon moved farther along the path and peered at the girl from behind the topiary. Instead of admiring the flora his gardener spent so much time pruning and fussing over, she focused on the statue of an inebriated Dionysus. Head bent, pointed pink tongue clamped between her teeth in concentration, she labored over her drawing.

Ever since it had been noised about that Queen Victoria was a dab hand at sketches and watercolor, every woman in England fancied herself an amateur artist.

But that still didn’t explain the young lady’s presence in his garden.

Devon moved around behind her, brushing past the roses to get a better angle from which to view her unobserved. A thorn nicked the back of his hand. He gave it a shake and brought it reflexively to his mouth to suck at the small wound while he eyed the supple line of the woman’s spine. Her spreading skirts emphasized a narrow waist.

A single auburn curl had escaped her bonnet and trailed damply on her nape. Her tender skin appeared dewy and pink in the warm morning sun. He was surprised by the urge to plant a kiss on that spot, but tamped down the inclination at once.

Not that Devon was a monk. He was simply careful not to involve himself with the sort of woman

who looked as if she might require a trip to the parson should a man take liberties. With her buttoned down collar and crisply starched sleeves, this woman seemed that sort, even though the tight bodice displayed a full bosom.

But what man didn't prefer taking liberties when he could?

He moved closer so he could peer over her shoulder to see her artwork. She'd neatly captured Dionysus in every detail, even down to the arc of water spewing from the god's flaccid member in the basin of the stone fountain. Judging from the accurate rendering on the page, the lady possessed more than passing talent with a pencil.

And more than adequate understanding of male anatomy.

"You're blocking my light," she said without looking up.

Devon stepped aside so his shadow wouldn't continue to darken her page. He was treated to a clear view of her delicate profile. The slight upturn of her nose pleased him. It meant that while she was spectacularly pretty, she wasn't perfect.

Perfection was boring. And often demanding.

"The sketch doesn't seem to have suffered for my intrusion," he said. "You have an excellent drafting hand, if I may say so."

"You may." Her lips curved upward in a satisfied, feline smile over his compliment. "No harm done. I'm nearly finished as it is."

No harm done? Did she expect an apology when she was the one trespassing in *his* garden? Her flippant accent and brazen self-possession betrayed her as a Yank.

"American, are you?"

She flicked her gaze at him and rolled her large brown eyes at his grasp of the obvious. "Born and bred."

An Englishwoman would require a formal introduction before starting a conversation with a total stranger. Yanks were incredibly lax about that sort of thing. Devon settled beside her on the bench. *His* was his garden, after all, and his head still throbbed in time with the blood pounding through it. He ought not to stand on ceremony, especially when the lady didn't seem to mind informality.

"It's not only the accent that gives you away, you know."

"Really?" Her attention was riveted back to the page, where she added some crosshatched shading to the god's musculature. "What else makes you assume I'm an American?"

English women of his acquaintance tended to have more angular features, even bordering on coltish. The apples of this lady's cheeks were sweetly rounded, and she had that snub-nosed pertness so often found in those from across the Atlantic. With wide-set eyes, full lips, and a delicate chin, hers was a thoroughly charming, almost pixyish face, but he decided it wouldn't be politic for him to say so.

Women were unpredictable when it came to masculine opinions on their appearance. Honestly, what would his sister ask if a particular pattern in the fabric of a frock made her look plump unless she wanted an honest answer?

Devon decided to settle for something safer.

"Your choice of subject declares your nationality, for one thing. An English miss would sketch tea roses, not a nude statue," Devon explained as he studied her work. If the image was any guide, his knowledge of the male species was detailed and unflinchingly accurate. Perhaps he'd misjudged her on the basis of her severe wardrobe. This American miss might be entirely open to his taking a few liberties.

She fixed him with a direct gaze, her widening pupils darkening her eyes to the color of rich coffee. The effect was hypnotic.

A man might lose his way in those Stygian depths.

"Choosing to draw flowers instead of this magnificent statue speaks volumes about the insipid

nature of the English miss," she said with conviction.

Devon stifled a chuckle. Even though he agreed with her assessment, someone had to stand up for English womanhood. "And yet tea roses are highly regarded on this little isle."

"No doubt, but lovely as it may be, a tea rose does nothing to engage the emotions, has no intensity of feeling. There's simply no potential for the drama necessary to true art."

"No? Suppose the flowers were presented to a lady who refused them and tossed them onto the garden path," he suggested, not that he put much stock in anything as ephemeral as a feeling. "Wouldn't that mean someone's emotions were engaged?"

"Point taken, but mere flora still can't compare to the seething possibilities in that statue. I mean, just look at him." She waved a slim hand toward Dionysus. An ink smudge and a slight callus marked the longest finger of her right hand. Evidently she was as well acquainted with a writing pen as with a drawing pencil. "Dionysus is a study in contrasts, sublime and corrupt, physically strong and morally weak."

Not to mention that he was completely naked. "His state of undress doesn't distress you?"

"I wouldn't dream of fitting him with a fig leaf," she said without a trace of heightened color in her cheeks. "The beauties of the human form are not the least prurient."

Devon smiled. A woman who wasn't silly enough to be undone by the sight of a naked man. He'd lay odds she didn't feel the need to call a piano leg a "limb" either. She was a refreshing oddity. "And yet this Dionysus fellow isn't meant to be human, you know."

"No, but the Olympians were simply humanity writ large," she said, swiping at the deep auburn curls that had escaped her bonnet and fallen across her forehead. A few strands glinted copper amid the darker tresses. "Unless I'm mistaken, this statue is a replica of an ancient one, circa first century AD, judging from the attention to realism. It would be sacrilege to alter it. If the ancients had no compunction about portraying their deity in such a state, who are we to demur?"

A replica? Devon had paid the earth for the damned thing. The gong of pain sounding in his head grew louder. "What makes you think it's not an original?"

She slanted a look at him. "The marble has been distressed to give the appearance of extreme age, but I'll warrant it's not more than two or three hundred years old. Don't be dismayed. It's an excellent copy. Quite subtle. No doubt it would fool most."

It had fooled him. "So you're an expert in ancient art?"

"Hardly, but I know one who is," she said crisply, drawing her spine straight and lifting her chin. "My father is Dr. Montague Farnsworth, one of the world's foremost Egyptologists, though his knowledge of Roman and Greek cultures is extensive as well. If I know something about those subjects, it is because I have the honor of assisting him in his work."

Devon had never heard of Dr. Farnsworth, but then, his interests didn't lie in antiquities. He'd bought the statue to satisfy his mother's whim to have a classically themed garden. The countess had hoped for something like Lady Hepplewhite's collection of marble dryads.

"A veritable Grecian urn sprung to life," she'd claimed about Lady Hepplewhite's garden statuary.

Privately, Devon suspected his mother had never closely inspected an ancient urn. They were frequently peopled with figures engaged in extremely earthy endeavors, the sort the Countess of Devonwood would be certain to frown upon should any of them be reenacted in *her* garden.

He massaged his right temple in a gesture he hoped appeared thoughtful. Devon tried to hide his pain as much as possible. "So help me understand. You're a visiting antiquarian who's invaded the garden for the sake of sketching its art?"

"Nonsense. I'm merely drawing to pass the time. I'm here to meet Lord Devonwood," she said. "But apparently his lordship has been larking about London all night and hasn't found his bed yet."

After his night of gaming, Devon's pockets were lined with banknotes and IOUs. So long as he

played only with those who could well afford to make good on their vows, he suffered no pangs of conscience over the advantage his special ability gave him.

It was rarely such a benevolent gift. He reckoned the skull-splitter he experienced now more than paid for the privilege of using it.

“Out all night, eh? Larking about London?” He arched a brow at her, trying not to wince at the additional pain that slight movement caused him. “You make Lord Devonwood sound a perfect scoundrel.”

“My thoughts precisely,” she said with a conspiratorial grin.

“But there’s probably good reason for an earl to be abroad all night,” he said, feeling he ought to defend himself, though for the life of him, he didn’t know why. This girl, though very attractive, was nothing to him. “You may regret your first impression of him.”

“Regret is a waste of time,” she said with certainty. “First impressions are generally correct. If Lord Devonwood insists on *behaving* like a perfect scoundrel, it’s more than likely that’s what he *is*.”

He longed to plant his lips on the dimple that marked her cheek. Then he’d show her just how a perfect scoundrel steals a real kiss. Merely thinking about it eased the ache in his head as blood rushed to another part of his body altogether.

“Tell me. Why are you here to see Lord Devonwood?”

“I’m not in the habit of discussing my personal business with strangers, but if you must know . . .” She chose that moment to flip to a fresh page in her sketchbook and accidentally dropped her pencil.

In hindsight, Devon would come to realize he never should have bent to retrieve it, but his mother had tried to raise a gentleman. If the countess failed in some areas of her son’s upbringing, she succeeded soundly in others. As soon as his fingers closed over the wood, the world around Devon faded to muted colors and a vision poured into him, more real than his next heartbeat.

Her breath streamed across his lips, warming as a sip of brandy. She tipped her chin up to meet his gaze, her dark eyes wide.

Devon didn’t wait for another invitation. His mouth covered hers, slanting to create a firm seal. Her uniquely feminine scent tickled his nostrils. Sweet and ripe, like a peach in the sun.

He kept his eyes open as he kissed her, but hers fluttered closed. Dark lashes trembled in feathered crescents on her cheeks.

She made a small noise into his mouth, a needy sound that went straight to his groin. He pulled her flush against his body, wishing her boned corset would allow him to feel her breasts yield to the solid expanse of his chest.

The mere thought of those soft mounds roused him to aching hardness.

Hunger roared inside him, every fiber of his body vibrant with straining life. He deepened the kiss, sweeping in to explore the hot, moist cavern of her mouth. He made rough love to her with his tongue, thrusting and teasing.

She answered his invasion with her own, nipping and suckling his bottom lip, her kiss urgent and needy. She arched into him, pressing herself against his hardness.

His hands found the buttons on her bodice . . .

The pencil slipped from his fingers and the connection with his gift shattered. The vision evaporated like morning mist as his headache resumed its persistent throb. Miss Farnsworth’s face came into sharp focus.

“Well, it appears neither of us can keep hold of this pencil,” she said as she bent to pluck it from the clipped grass.

He reached for it as well, half-hoping for another few seconds of his vision, but he caught her hair instead. Her skin was warm and smooth and his headache suddenly lifted. The pain wasn’t masked or dulled. It was completely eradicated. He held her fingers for a fraction longer than necessary, reveling

in the unexpected sensation of normalcy.

~~“If you don’t mind . . .” She gently tugged her hand away and the relentless ache slammed back in~~
him.

The vision itself had been a welcome one for a change. He’d have liked to let the pleasant interlude
spool out to its sweet conclusion.

One thing was certain though. Sometime within the next twelve hours, the farthest edge of his
foreknowledge, he and Miss Farnsworth were destined to become better acquainted.

Much better acquainted.

Lord, she was sweet. Soft and pliant and responsive. The vision left him crowding his trousers.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, cocking her head at him, a hint of panic in her
taut features.

He was saved from a reply when a voice called from behind him.

“Oh, there you are, Devon.”

When he turned, he was surprised to see his younger brother, Theodore, coming toward him.
Always the sartorial peacock, Teddy was well turned out for mid-morning. His natty hat was rakish
askew and the boots that crunched along the garden path were spit-shined to a high gloss. An old
gentleman in a tweed jacket trailed in his wake. Devon rose and strode forward to meet his brother,
hand extended in welcome.

“You weren’t due home for another week, Ted. If you’d sent a wire, I’d have met you at the pier.”

“Plans change, brother. And I’ll confess to being too preoccupied to send word.”

Theodore’s handsome face was thinner than it had been when Devon had seen him last, but his skin
was so deeply tanned, his smile was blinding. Ted’s half-year tour of the major cities ringing the
Mediterranean had obviously agreed with him. He pumped Devon’s hand while peering around him
to smile at the woman. She had risen from the bench and approached them with graceful steps.

“I say, old chap,” his brother said, “you’re not trying to steal my girl, are you?”

“What? No.” *His girl?* Devon’s gut churned furiously. “What do you mean?”

Teddy pushed past him, put his arm around Miss Farnsworth’s waist, and cinched her close.
“Emmaline, I’d like you to meet my curmudgeon of a big brother, Lord High and Mighty, the Earl of
Devonwood. Call him Devon, if you like. We all do.”

Then Teddy turned to him with a triumphant grin. “All our lives, you’ve been first, brother. First to
ride a pony, first to go away to school, first at everything. But I always intended to be first at
something. Devon, may I present to you Miss Emmaline Farnsworth?” The gaze Teddy cast toward
her was filled with such adoration, it bordered on idolatry. “My fiancée.”

CHAPTER 3

Devon's smile felt so brittle, he feared his face might crack.

"Theodore, please," Miss Farnsworth said, neatly extricating herself from his embrace. She had blushed a bit over the naked statue, but now her face flushed crimson over Teddy's public declaration of affection.

"Oh, all right, she hasn't exactly said yes yet," Teddy admitted with a laugh. "But she's promised to consider my suit. It's only a matter of time before she succumbs to the Nash charm, and she knows it. *Less than twelve hours to be precise, but she'll be succumbing to the wrong Nash.*

Devon made a bow over Miss Farnsworth's hand and tried to murmur an appropriate greeting. He must have managed something because over the roaring in his ears, he heard the low rumble of conversation continuing around him. All Devon could think was that as sure as his heart kept beating, his brother's soon-to-be fiancée was going to be sighing in someone else's arms before midnight.

His arms.

Teddy beamed at them both.

Devon felt like excrement on the bottom of a pig-farmer's boot. He was destined to kiss Miss Farnsworth thoroughly and there was no stopping it. Then he remembered that in his vision, the lady had definitely kissed him back.

His teeth clenched. What sort of woman would toy with his brother's affections by kissing someone else?

"And this, of course, is Emmaline's father, Dr. Montague Farnsworth," his brother was saying.

"Delighted, milord." The man doffed his bowler, revealing a thinning head of iron-gray hair. He peered over the tops of his half-rimmed glasses and gave Devon's hand the limp shake of an academician. "Forgive my lack of specific knowledge about the English system. I believe Devonwood is among the older peerages, is it not?"

"My brother is the fifteenth earl of the name," Teddy said. "So yes, it's rather older than dirt."

"Though not so ancient as the Egyptian dynasties I have the honor to study, milord."

The man puffed himself up like a sparrow fluffing his feathers against a breeze. Now that Devon considered it, Dr. Farnsworth really did put him in mind of a drab little bird. His gaze flicked to Emmaline.

How had this unremarkable fellow sired such a lovely creature?

"Theodore Wainwright Nash," a fluty feminine voice called from the French doors leading out to the garden. "bedevil your brother without greeting your *maman* first?"

Their mother might only have been a countess, but she waited with empress-like dignity for her younger son to hurry to her side and offer a kiss to her expertly rouged cheek. Then Lady Devonwood swanned across the garden, clearly taking Miss Farnsworth's measure as she processed toward her.

"Welcome, my dear." As she kissed the air beside each of Emmaline's cheeks, Miss Farnsworth's face drained of all color. After the deep blush, she turned so pale, Devon wondered if the lady might swoon to the ground before her next breath, but she managed to stay upright. "So out of all the women in the world, this is the girl my son has chosen to be his bride."

The girl in question teased out a weak smile. She'd been so forthright, so quick to speak her mind with Devon before she knew who he was. The sudden change in her demeanor surprised him. It was as if she was a Drury Lane actress and had slipped into the role of shy ingénue.

“My lady,” Miss Farnsworth murmured as she dropped a shallow curtsy.

“Unassuming as she is lovely,” his mother said.

Teddy tossed Emmaline a roguish wink. “Unfortunately, I have to point out that she has yet to choose me back.”

“But of course, she will, dearest, if that’s what you want.” The countess patted Teddy’s cheek, then fixed Miss Farnsworth with a steely gaze. “What young lady in her right mind would refuse you?”

Miss Farnsworth’s mouth twitched, but she refrained from saying anything.

Probably a wise course, Devon decided. He was the only one who could ever disagree with his mother with any hope of prevailing.

“I say, *Maman*, how did you hear about our . . . attachment, for want of a better word?” Theodore asked as he sidled up to Miss Farnsworth again, edging her father aside. “I only just now told Devon.

“You should know better than to ask that, Teddy. In a great house like this, the servants know everything. Baxter announced that you were home and informed me of your *tendresse* for the young lady in almost the same breath. I swear sometimes I think that man can read our minds.” Lady Devonwood clasped her hands together and directed her attention to the Farnsworths. “But where are my manners? I’m certain our guests must be exhausted from their journey. Baxter!”

The ubiquitous butler appeared in the doorway almost immediately, a sure sign he’d been hovering just beyond the threshold. He didn’t show the least sign of chagrin at having been caught eavesdropping on the family he served, but it certainly put paid to the countess’s belief that he possessed the ability to divine anyone’s thoughts.

Baxter kept informed the old-fashioned way. He was a world-class snoop. Devon usually didn’t mind it, but now he wondered if the butler had spied Miss Farnsworth and him in conversation earlier. Baxter formed his own opinions about people, but never expressed them unless asked.

“Show Dr. Farnsworth and his charming daughter to the Blue Suite.” His mother bared her bright teeth at their guests. Devon wondered if only he realized it was a cat’s smile, meant to lull an unsuspecting mouse into complaisance before the kill. The countess might behave with outward decorum and welcome, but she was protective as a lioness when it came to her children. Devon was sure she was displeased over Teddy’s choice.

“Devonwood House is at your disposal. Do let us know if there’s anything you require.” Lady Devonwood wagged her fingers at the Farnsworths in a gesture of dismissal. “If you’d be so kind to follow Baxter . . .”

Dr. Farnsworth lingered over the countess’s gloved hand as he expressed florid thanks for her hospitality. Finally, he allowed his daughter to take his arm and escort him toward the French door. Miss Farnsworth tossed Teddy a quick smile over her shoulder before disappearing into the cozy interior of the town house.

“Thank you for being so decent about putting them up. They don’t know a soul in the city, and they wouldn’t hear of their going to Claridges when we’ve plenty of room here,” Theodore said once Emmaline and her father were out of earshot. “I know the engagement is a bit of a surprise, but you were gracious as always, *Maman*.”

“You have presented us with a *fait accompli*, have you not?” their mother said. “What else could we do but welcome the girl and her father into our home?”

“I can think of any number of things,” Devon said testily. “All right, Ted. What’s this betrothal business all about?”

“Love, brother. It’s about love.”

“Don’t be maudlin. The chit obviously has you dancing to her tune.”

“Hmm, I wonder,” the countess said as she settled onto the bench Miss Farnsworth had lately vacated. She cast a gimlet eye toward the stone Dionysus, shuddered in distaste, and turned back to her

sons. "Refusing to accept his suit is an odd way of leading a man about."

Devon suppressed the urge to swear. Since he was voicing opposition, their mother was free to indulge the fantasy that she wasn't aghast at the thought of Theodore marrying a penniless nobody of her girl. Scholars like Dr. Farnsworth might be well respected, but they rarely had any money beyond parsimonious university stipends.

"On the contrary, it's the best way to snare a fellow. A "no" is like a red flag waved before a bull. Now Teddy is more determined than ever to have her." He rounded on his brother. "What do you know of her really?"

"That's enough, Devon. Honestly, Theodore is old enough to make his own choices without our prying into his privacy," their mother said sweetly. "Tell me, Teddy, how did you two lovebirds meet?"

Devon ground his teeth together. Evidently it wasn't prying if the question was asked with a meek tone and a tilt of the head.

"On shipboard, of course, between Alexandria and Rome, so I'll admit the setting might have spoiled the romance along." Theodore sat beside their mother and took one of her hands. "Emmaline's father was giving a series of lectures, having lately come from a dig in the Valley of the Kings. Fascinating stuff. He found this little statue that—"

"Stop trying to change the subject," Devon said. The vision of kissing Miss Farnsworth was still so fresh in his mind, it was as if the event had already happened. "You've never made a secret of the fact that you want to marry up, Ted. Are you willing to overlook the fact that she's not only a commoner but an American as well?"

"Whichever irks you the most holds the greatest attraction for me, brother," Teddy said with a wicked grin. "A man's opinions on such matters can change, can't they? Are you listening to yourself? You sound like the prigs you used to make fun of. Besides, I'm not the earl here. It's not as if I have to make a grand match for the good of the house and all. That's your dubious honor." Then Theodore's smile faded and was replaced with a look of genuine concern. "What's gotten into you?"

Miss Farnsworth's tongue in less than a dozen hours, Devon thought with vehemence, cramming his fists deep into his pockets.

He'd given up trying to warn others of the events his visions showed him. No one wanted Cassandra moping about, God knew. But if he used his authority as head of the household to forbid Ted's relationship with this woman, it would only fuel his brother's determination to pursue her.

The countess patted Theodore's hand. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but Devon is making sense. I know travel is said to be broadening, but have you considered that your sensibilities might have become rather too broad, dear?"

His brother's lips tightened into a hard line.

"You could have your choice of women here in England, Teddy," she continued. "Lord Whitmore's youngest daughter has just come out. Surely you remember Lady Cressida."

"I don't want Lord Whitmore's daughter."

"Why ever not?" the countess asked, her tone still bland as porridge, as if she weren't afraid her younger son was about to make a terrible mistake for which there was no remedy that wouldn't result in scandal. "I hear Lady Cressida has grown quite lovely, and she's been hailed a very pattern sort of girl by one and all."

Calling a debutante "pattern" was their mother's finest compliment. It meant the young lady in question followed accepted protocol to the letter and never put so much as a kid-soled toe out of line.

Theodore gave their mother an exasperated kiss on the cheek, murmured something about catching up with his friends at White's, and made good his escape.

The countess sighed. Devon felt the weight of her displeasure settling on his shoulders. Since he

father's death, she'd leaned heavily on him for everything. She never scolded. She had no need. One sigh was enough to curdle his guilt-ridden soul.

"I'll see about it, Mother," he said.

She smiled brightly at him. "Oh, I know you will, dear. Just as you always do."

Devon took care of everything, and in a way that kept her from knowing the burdens he bore. Thanks to his winnings from last night, the estate was solvent again, but that could change in a heartbeat.

The countess was old-fashioned enough to abhor trade, but the truth of the matter was the revenue from the estate's lands was barely enough to cover upkeep and improvements. It certainly didn't generate enough to keep his mother in the style to which she was accustomed. Theodore wouldn't have been able to traipse about the Mediterranean for half a year on the estate's rents and their young sister, Louisa, would have no dowry to speak of.

If Devon didn't invest, sometimes speculatively, their coffers would be bare indeed. His latest debacle was half interest in a merchant ship called the *Rebecca Goodspeed*. Unfortunately, she hadn't been heard from since she'd tangled with a storm off the Cape of Good Hope. So Devon was forced to scramble to cover the shortfall. He'd never been able to summon his gift for a peek into the future of the stock or commodity, but fortunately, cards were another matter.

Being lucky at cards was a gentlemanly virtue none could question unless they wished to meet him on a field of honor. Since Devon never palmed a card and was known to be a dead shot, it was highly doubtful such a challenge would ever come.

"Are you all right, dear?" his mother asked. "You're looking a bit pale."

He forced a smile. "I'm fine," he lied. "I just need a little sleep."

"I shouldn't wonder with the hours you keep." She made a small tsking sound, then changed the subject with her typical quicksilver style. "You know, a thought just occurred to me. Perhaps our misgivings about Miss Farnsworth are misplaced. The girl might have Teddy's best interests at heart after all. She may have refused him because she recognizes the difference in their stations and fears they could never be truly happy because of it."

"Perhaps," Devon said, but he doubted it.

Then his mother switched opinions as she always did. She seemed incapable of settling firmly on one side of any issue. "But perhaps it doesn't signify that she is a nobody. Remember your great-grandfather married down and was deliriously happy as a result."

How could Devon forget? The woman his great-grandfather married had come from an untitled branch of the Preston family. Along with her common blood, his great-grandmother Delphinia Preston introduced the blasted gift of touch into his family's lineage.

"Maybe once we become better acquainted with Miss Farnsworth, we'll come to esteem her as much as Teddy has. Only . . ." She let the word hang suspended in time for a few heartbeats, signaling yet another shift in the wind. "I do wish he'd make a more conventional choice."

A "pattern" girl, in other words. Overhead, someone shoved back the heavy curtains and cranked open the multi-paned window in the Blue Suite.

Baxter would quietly have a fit. The butler was slavishly devoted to seeing that sunlight didn't damage the colors in the vibrant Turkish carpet.

Devon raised a hand to shade his eyes and looked up at the open window that framed Miss Farnsworth.

The town house was situated on a small rise. When Miss Farnsworth leaned on the sill and looked out over the brick jungle of London's chimneys and roof terraces, she could probably see all the way to St. Paul's gigantic dome. She untied the bow beneath her chin and removed her bonnet, letting the laces dangle by the laces as she surveyed the city.

Emmaline tipped her face to the sun's rays and her hair glistened with several shades of copper, gold, and amber. A smile of unabashed pleasure lit her features.

She was trouble, at the least. Discord, certainly. Scandal, possibly. Whatever else Emmaline Farnsworth was, "pattern" was definitely not it.

Lord Devonwood's home was designed to impress. As Baxter had led Emmaline and her father up the awe-inspiring sweep of the grand staircase, she had noted Ming vases and classically themed statuary tucked into its frequent alcoves. After the ostentatious art and the oppressive stares from the familial portraits glaring down at them on each of the landings, the Blue Suite was a welcome break of understated elegance.

Two sumptuous bedchambers opened into a common sitting room. The walls were swathed with ornately flocked wallpaper in a shade of soothing gray, accented with bright lapis tones. The hardwood underfoot was softened by a magnificent Asiatic carpet featuring a fight between a stylized pair of mythical phoenixes, awash in blue flames.

"Oh, please don't turn up the gas lamps during the day," Emmaline said as she turned away from the panoramic view out the window. "I much prefer natural light."

"As you wish, miss," the butler replied with a purse-lipped nod. "One has taken the liberty of having your trunks delivered to each of your chambers. If you require assistance unpacking, please ring for a chambermaid or valet. The countess has ordered that servants from the house be assigned to you for the duration of your visit."

"That's most kind of her ladyship since we were unable to bring our own servants on this particular journey," Farnsworth said.

Emmaline suppressed a smirk. *Our own servants, indeed.*

"If you wish, you may join the family for luncheon at half past one in the dining room, or if you prefer, a tray will be sent up. Dinner is served at eight o'clock sharp," Baxter said frostily. "Formal dress is expected."

Emmaline had the distinct impression they'd been weighed in the butler's balance and been found wanting, but there was no fault in his behavior toward them. Just a definite chill in his demeanor. She supposed the staff at Devonwood House might well resent an upstart commoner, and an American on top boot, for snaring the interest of their young master.

As soon as the butler gave them a final bow and closed the door behind himself, Farnsworth plopped into one of the heavy Tudor chairs arranged before the fireplace. A chess set squatted on the lacquered table between them.

"Well, the butler may have a broomstick up his bum, but this place simply reeks of old money," he said. "We've fallen on our feet this time and no mistake, Emma, my girl."

"Hush, Monty," she hissed as she perched on the chair opposite him. She glanced up at the portrait of a severe-looking matron hung from the picture rail above the mantel. She'd heard tell of peepholes being cut into the eyes of such paintings but these steely orbs seemed to be merely oil on canvas. "Didn't you hear what the countess said? The help knows everything in this house."

He chuckled. "In that case, you'd better call me 'father' even here in the privacy of our suite."

Emmaline snorted and picked up the black queen. The chess set was fashioned of onyx and ivory fitted with what appeared to be small emeralds for eyes. The worth of a set like this one would keep the wolf from their door for several months. Not that she'd stoop to petty thievery.

Not yet. She replaced the queen.

"Very well, *Father.*"

She didn't share a drop of blood with Montague Farnsworth, but he'd been more a father to her than the unknown man who'd sired her. Emmaline had only a shadowy memory of her mother, a sad, thin-

woman with large brown eyes and what had seemed like a perpetually trembling lower lip. But she remembered with crystalline clarity the day Montague Farnsworth had claimed her at the founding home.

“That one,” he’d said to the head matron. “The one with the enormous eyes. She’d make someone a good daughter.”

With a few strokes of a pen, she went from being plain Emma Potts, orphan, to Emmaline Farnsworth, a girl with a father and a home. He never told her why he’d chosen her or why a confirmed bachelor would bother to make room in his life for a small child, but Monty had raised her and educated her far beyond the lot of most girls. A little knowledge whetted her appetite for more. Once he taught her to read, Emmaline had devoured every book she could find.

Of course, when she grew older, Monty also trained her to use her nimble fingers to assist him in his confidence games. She became his shill for countless *pig-in-a-pokes* and *pigeon drops*. At first, the games were fun. Now, after being on the run for years, she wished they could turn to something more legitimate for their livelihood. She owed Monty so much, she rarely quarreled with him, but she felt compelled to this time.

“I don’t like this job,” she continued in a low tone. “It’s getting out of hand. Why on earth did you give Theodore Nash permission to ask for my hand?”

“If I’d said no, the jig would’ve been up. He’d have gotten clean away. As it is, we’re here in this lovely house. We don’t have to bluff our way into a fine hotel for the duration of the job. Or sneak out when the proprietor becomes too insistent about us paying the bill. This way, we’ll be able to observe the mark at close range and spring the trap when the time is right.” Monty rubbed his hands together. “This is the big one. I can feel it.”

Emmaline squeezed her eyes shut. Monty had been proclaiming each of his schemes the “big one” for years. So far, all they had to show for his nefarious plans were arrest warrants in several countries.

When she was younger, they’d lived a relatively quiet life in New York where Monty ran a rare book shop. On the side, he forged letters by Benjamin Franklin and George Washington to supplement their income. But the market for old documents could bear only so many fakes before his forgery was discovered and they were forced to flee across the Atlantic.

After that, Monty made use of Emmaline’s artistic talents and together they hawked sham religious relics in elaborately painted reliquaries on the Continent. If all the purported pieces of the True Cross that had passed through Monty’s hands were gathered in one place, Emmaline suspected there’d be enough lumber to build a small fort.

Now ancient Egypt captured everyone’s imagination and Monty stood poised to make the most of it. He had a prodigious memory, a professorial carriage, and a glib tongue. Given enough time to prepare, he could pass as an expert on any esoteric topic he chose.

“I still don’t like it. Theodore seems to genuinely care for me.” Emmaline crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s one thing to bilk someone of his savings. A mark can only be conned if he is greedy in the first place and a man can always make more money. It’s quite another thing to break someone’s heart.”

“Then I’ll rely on you to be clever enough not to destroy the lad utterly,” Monty said, surveying the room’s adornments with a slightly predatory gaze. “But you must admit he didn’t exaggerate his family’s wealth. Young Mr. Nash has certainly got the chinks.”

“No, his brother has the chinks,” Emmaline corrected. “Everything Theodore has is at the earl’s sufferance.”

“Well, then maybe you’ve snagged the romantic attentions of the wrong brother.” Emmaline laughed. “I think not.”

The earl had certainly seemed attracted to her in the garden before Theodore had claimed her. She

enjoyed their verbal sparring match. With his dark good looks, Lord Devonwood was more than easy on the eyes, but his unusual silver-gray gaze held a feral gleam at times.

She'd never been so discomfited by a man. Never been plagued with such a strange yearning when he had held her hand for a moment. It was as though her body knew more about him than she did, and liked what it knew very much indeed. She strove not to show how he twisted her knickers, but she'd never had such a visceral reaction to any man before.

She was no pudding-headed romantic. She didn't believe in love, let alone love at first sight. As she'd grown older, Monty had encouraged her to use her attractiveness to help him manipulate the men they intended to defraud. Experience told her Lord Devonwood would be far less biddable than his younger brother, less controllable.

And far more exciting, she admitted to herself.

Theodore was rather like an overgrown puppy, affectionate but clumsy, and easily brought to heel.

Lord Devonwood was more a wolf, powerful and unpredictable. She suspected he was possessed of a savage streak if he were crossed. There had been a moment in the garden when he'd looked as if he wanted to eat her up.

Part of her suspected she might enjoy it if he did.

"Nevertheless," Monty was saying, "when the time comes to make the pitch, we ought to include Lord Devonwood in the game now that we know he holds the purse. He's the type who'll be most likely to hand over the blunt if he believes the investment is his idea rather than his young brother's."

Emmaline nodded. Monty might chase after some wild hares from time to time, but his instincts about people were always on the nose.

He started to say something else, but was interrupted when a ragged cough wracked his frame. Monty covered his mouth with a handkerchief as the spasms continued.

Emmaline leaped up and scurried into her bedchamber to the washbasin, where she poured a glass of water for him from the ewer. When she returned, his coughing fit was winding down to shuddering heaves. He shoved his handkerchief back into his vest pocket, but not before she noticed speckles of blood on the white linen.

"Here you are, dear," she said softly as she held the glass for him to sip.

After taking a little water, he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

Determination stiffened her spine. Somehow, Emmaline had to make this scheme work. He tried to hide it, but the cough was growing worse. Monty's health deteriorated almost daily.

Neither of them had ever said the word *consumption* aloud, but it didn't matter. They both were thinking it loudly enough for the hissing sibilance of the hateful disease to swirl around the room.

There was a doctor in Germany who was said to be doing amazing things for consumptives. Emmaline and Monty needed one last big score in order to make it possible for him to retire to that alpine sanatorium, where he might regain his health and prolong his life.

"You know, you'd make someone a wonderful daughter," Monty said as he patted her hand. These words were a tender little game they played, a reminder of his first meeting with her.

She dropped a quick kiss on his brow and fought to keep her voice from quaking with worry for him as she gave the expected answer. "And you'd make someone a good father."

CHAPTER 4

Emmaline suggested Monty take a tray in their suite for luncheon and then lie down for the rest of the afternoon. She was concerned when he agreed without argument. It meant he was feeling even more poorly than she feared.

“But you’ll lay the groundwork for me this afternoon if you get a chance, won’t you?” he asked. She tucked the coverlet under his chin.

“Of course, I will,” she assured him. An essential part of any confidence scheme was dropping subtle hints about the supposed opportunity in a way that didn’t seem forced. Baiting the trap was more art than science. Emmaline had a knack for it. “I think Theodore is still off with his friends, though, so it may not be possible for me to start the game.”

“Not him,” Monty said as his eyes closed and his chest rose and fell in a regular wheezing rhythm. “The earl. Unless he, too, is resting in the arms of Morpheus.”

Her belly fizzed at the thought of the earl. “We’ll see.”

His lordship was probably catching up on missed sleep since he hadn’t found his bed last night. Of course, that didn’t mean Lord Devonwood hadn’t found someone else’s bed. The upper crust might be high-minded about some things, but if the members of the gentry she’d met while traveling about Europe were any guide, they were as low in their personal morals as any commoner might be.

Emma closed the door to their suite with a soft snick of the latch and made her way down the grand staircase to explore Devonwood House. She took her time, pausing before each of the portraits. She studied the faces, tracing Theodore’s sandy hair through several of his progenitors, but the dominant coloring, at least in more recent paintings, seemed to be Lord Devonwood’s darker hair paired with his unusual gray eyes.

She also noted the recurrence of an emerald necklace draped on the necks of several different Devonwood women, passed from mother to daughter. A portrait of the present countess boasted a long strand of beautifully matched pearls with a ruby pendant big enough to choke a horse.

Family jewels. Probably under lock and key beneath this very roof.

Emma had never stolen jewelry and suspected fencing it would be far more trouble than tricking a mark out of banknotes. But when she thought of Monty’s distressed breathing after that coughing fit, she knew she was capable of attempting a burglary for his sake if necessary.

She hoped he was right about this caper being the big one. She was so tired of living out of traveling trunks and always being ready to leave in a hurry should one of their victims realize he’d been duped sooner than expected. With each turn of the seasons, Monty’s face bore new lines, even aside from his growing illness. Their vagabond life had imprinted the road map of their travels on his features.

She supposed it was to be expected. He was approaching his seventieth year. Long past the time when he ought to have a regular hearth, complete with slippers and pipe, instead of their gypsy existence.

It was wearing on her soul as well. As she wandered Lord Devonwood’s elegant rooms, she wondered what it must be like to have servants to shine one’s shoes and mend one’s socks; only to ring a bellpull to have a tray of food magically appear.

More than that, the luxury of permanence called to her. Since they’d begun traveling, she despaired of ever being able to put down roots again. To know where she’d sleep each night would be such a gift. To make a genuine friend rather than regarding every chance acquaintance as a potential mark,

blessing beyond compare.

~~To have a husband and children of her own.~~

If she accepted Theodore's suit, would she finally be able to have a proper home?

She doubted it.

Even though the countess had been kind, Emma had detected a hesitation behind her smile. And why not? The aristocracy did not suffer an invasion of the rabble gladly. There was every chance Teddy's family would cut him off if he married her. It wouldn't improve Monty's situation one jot. If they suddenly had to provide a living for Theodore as well.

She wound through the dining room and a sitting room, then through a long hall tiled in deep blue squares in the style of Arabia. A fountain bubbled in a sweet-smelling orangery. She peeked into a stiffly formal parlor designed for receiving callers. The rooms were all beautifully appointed in delicate French style. Genuine *objets d'art* were tastefully and sparingly displayed instead of crowding every horizontal space with endless bric-a-brac.

But all the rooms' curtains were drawn.

If she were prone to flights of fancy, she'd imagine one of Polidori's *vampyres* lurked in the shadows of Devonwood House, slinking through the shadows away from direct sunlight. But when she opened the final door on the ground floor, she forgot all about *vampyres*. The chamber beyond made her breath catch.

It was a library to rival any she'd ever seen, even though it was dimly lit. As with the rest of the house, someone had drawn the shutters and set the gas sconces to flicker at their lowest level. Shelves of books stretched from the floor to the ceiling soaring twenty feet above. A wrought iron catwalk circled the room at half that height, accessible only by a small spiral staircase in one corner.

The ceiling had been painted in the rococo style, every square inch decorated with flowers and nymphs and dryads. An oval in the center was dedicated to a fresco of Cupid waking Psyche from her charmed slumber with a kiss. The simple sweetness of that captured moment, so potent with promise, made Emmaline's chest constrict with nameless longing.

She walked forward, her gaze transfixed on the ceiling. The beauty made her eyes ache.

What must it be like to be surrounded by such opulence, such incredible riches all the time?

Then a rumbling male voice came from a corner of the room, interrupting her thoughts. "Miss Farnsworth, are you having a religious experience?"

Devon had seen such openmouthed wonder only on depictions of saints in rapture. Or, now that he thought about it, on the face of a woman in the throes of sensual ecstasy.

He judged the second as far more likely in Miss Farnsworth's case. She was much too opinionated to qualify for sainthood.

After luncheon, Devon had retreated to his chamber to try to sleep away his headache, but after tossing on his bed for the better part of an hour, he finally took refuge in the dimly lit library. Baxter was sensitive enough to his moods to know when a migraine had descended and Devon must avoid bright light. Now he was seized by the wish that the heavy shutters were thrown back so he could further dazzle Miss Farnsworth with the majesty of his library.

"No, I wouldn't classify this moment as religious, milord," she said breathlessly, flicking her gaze to him before returning her stare to the ceiling. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Would it matter to you if you were?"

Her lips turned inward for a moment and then she shot a quick grin in his direction before tipping her chin up to admire his ceiling again. "Probably not. This is far too grand a place to regret seeing even at the risk of disturbing my host."

"And you believe regret is a waste of time. However, you are my brother's guest, not mine," Devon

said, still lounging in his favorite overstuffed chair. "But as long as you're already here, I may as well welcome you to my inner sanctum."

"A lady might catch her death from the chill of your welcome." She tossed him a pointed look.

He knew he ought to stand when a lady entered a room, but whether Miss Farnsworth was, in fact, a lady was open to question. Besides, he really didn't want to be alone with her. If he was rude enough she might leave. "Are you suggesting I should stand simply because you invaded my library without invitation?"

"No, if your manners require my prompting, the fact that you became suddenly upright would have no meaning." Her lips curled in a small grimace. "It's obvious you have little respect for me."

"As it's obvious you have little respect for my privacy," he said. "You occupied my garden earlier. Now you feel the need to skulk about my library. Turning up unexpectedly is becoming habitual for you."

"I am not skulking." Her eyes flashed and Devon decided her face flushed most becomingly when she was irritated. "Neither should my presence be unexpected. We were invited to stay in your home, milord. If you require your houseguests to remain confined to their chambers, perhaps you should bar their doors."

"No one consulted me about your accommodations or I might have suggested it." A retort about regretting that dungeons had fallen out of fashion danced on his tongue, but he bit it back. "I had little choice in the matter."

"I find it difficult to believe you are ever without choice, your lordship."

She did a slow turn so she could take in the entire sweep of the room. Her movements were graceful and drew his eye to the supple lines and curves of her figure. He wished she weren't so comely. Maybe then he wouldn't be fighting the urge to gather her close, crowd her against the bookcase, and lift her skirts.

"Your inner sanctum, you called it," she said as she turned back to admire the contents of the bookshelves. "Are you certain you're not the one with a religious bent?"

Devon's thoughts were running more on the idolatrous side at the moment. The kiss in his vision burst back into his mind with such vibrant clarity, his body tried to persuade him that worshipping Miss Farnsworth's delectable form would indeed be a fine way to spend the afternoon. His headache dimmed a bit. He'd cut off his vision before he'd unbuttoned her bodice, but his imagination was pleased to fill in the gap.

If only his brother weren't besotted with her.

He snorted with irritation and tried to forget the thoroughly kissable Miss Farnsworth in his vision. Sensual and responsive, the miss in his fantasy bore little resemblance to the real one, who seemed more interested in the stacks of books than in him. It ought to be easy to separate the two in his mind.

Less easy for his body, evidently. He shifted in his seat and the throb at his temples resumed.

"So, you're not the religious sort," she answered for him. "But you can't deny this room inspires reverence. Yes, that's as good a way of describing it as anything."

"Reverence for what?" he asked with a huff. If he could sustain annoyance, it would be easier to resist the pull he felt toward her. "There's no cause. It's only a collection of books, after all."

"Oh, milord." She cast him a look laced with pity and shook her head. "Rich as Croesus, but totally unaware of your bounty. Your home has become so commonplace to you, you can't see how magnificent it all is."

By thunder, no man would dare speak to him so. "Use is everything, they do say. This is the manner of living to which I'm accustomed. If I fail to be overwhelmed by it daily, I do not consider it a flaw in my character."

He supposed he should be grateful. She'd effectively squashed all his lustful feelings toward her.

giving him reason to stay annoyed.

“It’s not just the art and architecture, though that alone would be staggering,” Miss Farnsworth said. “The real treasure is all the minds converged in one place.”

“Minds? What do you mean?” He wondered if the girl was a bit balmy.

“In the books, of course. The thoughts of great men, and great women, too, I hope. Why, they’re fairly buzzing on the shelves.” Her dark eyes snapped with genuine pleasure. “Can’t you hear them?”

Minds on the bookshelves. He’d never considered his library thus, but the fanciful image made sense and in some strange way seemed to lessen the grip of his migraine. Devon smiled, despite his determination to remain irritated with her. “Now that you mention it, yes, I believe I do hear a faint hum.”

“So you do possess an imagination.” She strolled over to peruse the wrinkled spines in his collection. “I have hope for you, milord.”

“I’m gratified to hear it.” Devon’s mouth twitched in amusement over her presumption this time. Women usually tripped over themselves to fawn over him. The fact that she felt no such compunction was strangely refreshing. He closed the copy of *The Mill on the Floss* he’d been attempting to read and laid it aside. It was no loss. He hadn’t been able to focus on it properly for the last half hour. “Is there what attracted you to my brother? His imagination?”

Miss Farnsworth rocked on her heels, hands clasped behind her, while she studied the titles on the west wall.

“I don’t believe I ought to discuss my relationship with Theodore, since it’s clear you disapprove.”

“Did I say so?”

“Not in so many words.” She pulled a first edition Sir Walter Scott bound in Cordoban leather from the shelf and leafed through the frontispiece, examining the woodcuts of scenes from *Ivanhoe* with absorption. “You were quite amiable when we first met in your garden, but your demeanor has been noticeably cooler toward me since Theodore announced his intentions.”

She was far too observant for his comfort, but at least she couldn’t see the way he struggled inwardly to maintain his cool exterior.

“Perhaps I’m more concerned about your intentions toward my brother.”

She peered over the top of the book at him. “Theodore and I have not known each other long. I intend to continue our association until I’m satisfied on the question of whether or not we would be well-suited.”

“And it hasn’t occurred to you that the brother of an earl and the daughter of a scholar might be fundamentally ill-suited for each other?”

“Simply by virtue of our births? Theodore swears it makes no difference to him, though it is obviously cause for concern to you.” She replaced the Scott as carefully as if it were fashioned of glass. “I must confess, since you’re Theodore’s brother, I thought you might be more enlightened.”

“What makes you think I’m not?” Every man of good conscience wished to be considered enlightened. Devon was a peer of the realm. Who was this backwater bluestocking to make him feel like a cretin?

“So far you’ve not shown a talent for thinking that differs from the accepted.” She ran her fingertip over the leather-bound Dickens collection. Devon almost felt the caress along his own spine. “Though I do admire your taste in literature. Please tell me you have actually read these.”

“Most of them.” Devon rose and walked toward her. “Perhaps you’ll allow that concern for my brother motivates me.”

“Perhaps. That would be the most charitable view of your attitude toward me.”

Miss Farnsworth had no idea of his true attitude toward her. Despite his determination not to, she roused to her again. Prickly and unpredictable she might be, but against his better judgment, Devon

was drawn to her. Like the heliotropes in his garden that tracked the sun, he couldn't seem to look away from her.

"I'm thankful Theodore has a more open mind," she said.

Ted had always been charming, athletic and popular. Devon's brother was many things, but a deep thinker had never been one of them.

"Laying aside the question of whether or not you and my brother are well-suited," Devon said, "can you give me an example of Teddy's open-minded thought?"

She fixed him with a direct gaze and he sensed she was taking his measure in some fashion.

"Very well. Here's an example. When a discovery is made in an academic realm that upsets the previous order of thought about a subject, some scholars try to discount the new knowledge." She adopted a pedantic tone. He tried to focus on her words instead of the way her breasts rose and fell with each breath, but he wasn't entirely successful. "It means they must alter, sometimes discard completely, their previously held positions, you see. No one likes to acknowledge they've been wrong."

He'd never heard a woman speak so authoritatively. His estimate of her intelligence ticked upward by several notches. And so did his appreciation of her bosom.

"But the first time Teddy saw the Tetisheri statue, he wasn't the least concerned that it would change a number of preconceived notions," she said. "He didn't fear taking a new direction to advance our body of knowledge."

Devon scoffed and tried to steer his imagination in a new direction, away from undoing the neat row of buttons on Miss Farnsworth's bodice. "What Theodore knows about ancient history wouldn't fill a thimble."

"On the contrary, he might surprise you. He's been studying with my father every day since we met. I've never met anyone so anxious to master the finer points of Egyptology."

She pulled a copy of *Titus Andronicus* from the shelf that housed his Shakespearean collection and then leaned against the bookcase as she flipped the pages.

Probably looking for the gore-filled etchings embedded in the edition, Devon supposed.

"In fact, Teddy grasped the statue's significance almost immediately and without Father pointing it out."

"My brother has never shown the slightest interest in ancient history and even less in statuary. Unless the artwork featured a scantily clad female form. Theodore was obviously delving into ancient Egypt in an attempt to win Miss Farnsworth's favor. Devon couldn't blame him.

"Nevertheless, Theodore recognized the statue's importance." She tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. "I wonder if you would. Perhaps you should ask my father to show it to you."

"Perhaps I will." He leaned a hand against the bookshelves, pinning Miss Farnsworth against them. She held the copy of *Titus Andronicus* against her chest as if it was a shield, but she didn't try to scuttle away from him.

An eerie sense of recognition descended upon him. Devon suddenly realized that he and Miss Farnsworth were positioned exactly as they'd been at the beginning of his vision. Close, so close he could smell her sweet, peachy scent.

He felt a tug toward her, but resisted. Teddy would never forgive him.

She looked up at him, her eyes enormous. "What about you, your lordship? Are you the type to bow to convention or would you take bold action whether it's approved by the world or not?"

Yes, blast it all, he was very likely to take action. And kissing his brother's almost fiancée would most definitely not be approved.

Unless . . .

Unless he did it to save his brother from a woman who was undoubtedly wrong for him. It could be

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