



*Special Glimpse!*

*Once a Scoundrel*

## **Chapter One**

*Hartsfield Park, Kent  
September 1842*

“I heard he had an affair with Baroness Marston.”

Faith Westover rolled her eyes. If she had to hear one more giggling comment from her friends about Stephen Crenshaw, Marquess of Dunwich, she was going to scream.

As she did her best to ignore the group of silly things gathered near her and glanced around the crowded ballroom at the partygoers who had come to celebrate her father’s birthday, she supposed she couldn’t blame them. There was a decided lack of excitement at the party and a veritable dearth of interesting men, which she blamed entirely on her brother James for remaining at university. Which meant that none of his Cambridge friends were in attendance. Which meant that she and her friends had precious few eligible gentlemen to dance with.

And *that* meant that her friends had little else to occupy their attentions except for Stephen Crenshaw.

Yet her friends weren’t alone. The room buzzed with guarded whispers about the young marquess. Rumors had spread fast and thick all season about what Stephen had been up to since returning from India three months ago, but even though the partygoers were titillated by the thought of finally seeing for themselves the prodigal marquess, they knew not to openly disparage the man. Not at Hartsfield Park. Not when her father had been best friends with Stephen’s father and uncle since their army days. But rumors still spread in whispers behind flitting fans and over glasses of wine about Stephen. Apparently, *that* was perfectly fine.

Although she was born into their midst, Faith feared she would never understand English society.

“No, it was Viscountess Rathbourne,” another friend corrected amid a flitting of fans as all six girls leaned in to hear.

“It was the *dowager* Baroness Marston—”

“But isn’t the dowager dead?”

“Yes,” Faith answered with a heavy sigh of exasperation. “And it wasn’t her daughter-in-law either, as the baron and baroness have been on the continent since April.”

“So it *was* the viscountess!” Her friend’s eyes lit up. “What’s the truth, Faith? You know him.”

Had her friends lost their minds? “I don’t know about a—” She lowered her voice and whispered behind her fan, “A man’s *bed sport*.”

From the looks her friends gave her, none of them believed her. Instead, they all stared at her, waiting expectantly for her to declare the rumors true.

“Viscountess Rathbourne already has a...*friend*, in that regard,” Faith confided. Oh, her mother would skin her alive if she heard her talking about her guests like this! But she was certain she wasn’t the only one gossiping about Lady Rathbourne tonight, who was in attendance only because her husband served on the same committees in parliament as Faith’s father. “And he isn’t Stephen Crenshaw.” Although the rascal would most likely be sorely put out that he wasn’t, given the viscountess’s famous beauty and infamous allure.

Disappointment darkened their faces, and this time, they flitted their fans with consternation that the juiciest of the night’s gossip had been quashed so easily.

“All I can say for certain is that he accepted Mama’s invitation to the house party.” Which had been the only society invitation he’d accepted since his return. Given that he’d shadowed the end of the season rather than engaged in it, Faith easily understood why so much gossip had arisen so quickly about him. All of it shocking. Truly, it was as if he’d returned to England and situated himself right back into the same flurry of rumors that had been swirling around him when he left.

Now he was due to arrive at any hour. He should have been here already, in fact, with the other guests who’d arrived that afternoon. But leave it to Stephen to flaunt even the most basic rules of society.

And truly, Faith didn’t care if the scoundrel never appeared. She’d be glad of it, in fact. Glad! Then she wouldn’t have to pretend as if they were still old friends, as if she were happy to see him again. As if a part of her didn’t still blame him for leaving.

“Perhaps he decided to spend the sennight with his mistress.”

Faith froze, her fan in mid-flit as an unexpected bolt of jealousy struck her. Her friend smiled, oblivious to the emotions roiling inside her and happy to broach the most scandalous of the rumors which had surrounded Stephen like a storm cloud since June. That he’d been keeping a mistress.

“I don’t...I don’t...” Faith stammered, unable to form an answer while her friends continued to stare expectantly at her as if she were the Oracle of Delphi, able to solve the deepest mysteries of the age. Of which Stephen Crenshaw had apparently become one.

Worse, she was unable to dissemble—all right, flat out *lie*—on his behalf because she’d not seen him since his return.

“How can you stand it?” one of her friends demanded. “I’m practically beside myself to see the marquess! Aren’t you the least bit excited?”

“No.”

“Oh, Faith!” Her friends turned up their noses in disbelief that she wasn’t over the moon the way they all were at Stephen’s impending arrival.

But that was because, unlike her friends, she knew him. And his recent behavior was simply Stephen behaving true to form by doing absolutely nothing to dissuade the busybodies and everything to make the rumors as scintillating as possible. He took a perverse pleasure in being the scapegrace the gossips proclaimed him to be.

Oh, he’d always been one for trouble. Even as a boy he’d resisted the responsibility and sense of duty that had been thrust on him since the day he was born a marquess. He wasn’t spoiled the way so many young lords were—far from it. If anything, Stephen had been

constantly reminded of how fortunate he was, expected to work twice as hard as his friends, and taught to behave like an adult from the time he was just a boy.

Under that stress, could anyone blame him for rebelling? So he'd secretly joined the army when he no longer found escape in cards, drink, and whatever other mischief he could find—including bedding the bored wives of half the queen's council, if rumors could be believed. Knowing what Stephen had been like during his university days, *that* rumor Faith was willing to accept at face value. In the ranks, he'd been just another captain, and he'd enjoyed his new-found anonymity, until his commanding officers discovered that he was the adopted son of General Nathaniel Grey, one of the most respected men in the War Office.

"You and the marquess spent a great deal of time together, didn't you?" another friend pressed. "Before he went off to India?"

"I suppose so," Faith dodged, turning her attention back to the crush around them before they could see any unbidden emotions for Stephen flitting on her face.

Because they had spent time together. As much as allowed, that is, because she had been just nineteen and in her second season, and Stephen had already earned himself a notorious reputation. But her older twin sisters had been in their fourth—and what would prove to be their last—season as eligible ladies before they married, with her younger sister Margaret in her first. The twins had taken London by storm, much to their mother's joy and their father's chagrin, and Margaret had been all caught up in the excitement of her debut. With those three stealing attention everywhere they went and James finishing his last year at Eton, no one had paid Faith any mind...except for Stephen.

He and Daniel Llewellyn, his best friend from university, had come to London that May when they were graduated. Even then, rumors about Stephen's scandalous activities were swirling through Mayfair, and Daniel's penchant for engaging in the same sort of behaviors, surely egged on by Stephen, hadn't helped quell the gossip. He was a rogue, a friend...

And then somehow, he became more.

At first, she'd ignored his attentions. This was *Stephen*, after all. Someone she'd known all her life, a young man who oozed charm and flattery with every breath. Flirtation was his second nature.

Then he'd kissed her.

Oh, she was certain it had been a mistake. That Stephen Crenshaw would find her attractive...ridiculous! Then he'd done it again the next time they were alone, and again and again...Faith's head had spun to know that he wanted to spend time with her, and her heart— Oh, that silly thing simply somersaulted! He made her feel special and beautiful, as if she were an alluring woman instead of just another eligible miss in pastel satins. As if she were the catch of the season instead of the young lady he'd previously spent his existence ignoring.

Yet for all his kisses, he never asked Papa for permission to court her, and he never made her any promises of love. He also did nothing to curtail the rumors of scandalous trysts with society wives and widows.

At the time, she'd been too enamored of him to doubt his motivations. Now, though, she knew he'd only enjoyed the convenience of her kisses and the flattery to his pride of having her starry-eyed attentions on him. Nothing more. He'd been his scoundrel self, while she'd been too inexperienced with men to understand that.

Then in July, he and Daniel joined the army and left for India. Without warning or explanation to his family—without even a note to her. Whatever feelings she thought he had for her sailed away with him.

She'd been devastated and cried inconsolably, and all of it had been made worse in that she couldn't tell anyone. Not even her own sisters. They would have said it was her own fault for falling for a rake, and for *that* rake in particular.

And truly, wasn't it? She'd been a fool for ever dreaming of his love.

"Stephen was with Daniel Llewellyn when he was killed, wasn't he?"

Faith stiffened at the unexpected comment. "Yes," she answered quietly.

"India must have been ghastly for him!"

She was certain it was. Especially since Stephen had given the order which led to Daniel's death.

Their regiment had been attacked, the order for a counterattack given...Daniel had been killed in the fray. There had been nothing Stephen could do to save him. Letters from Stephen had been few and far between before that; afterward, no letters came at all.

The next she'd heard of him was three months ago when Stephen had returned to London as unexpectedly as when he'd left. Three months during which he hadn't bothered to call on her while the rumors of his new rakish pursuits flourished. If she needed any more proof that she'd meant nothing to him, that was it.

"He'll need to find a wife soon," another friend interjected. "After all, he needs an heir."

Faith rolled her eyes. Oh for heaven's sake! Were her friends incapable of talking about anything except Stephen Crenshaw?

A commotion went up from the front entrance, and Faith caught her breath.

*Speak of the devil...*

Stephen appeared in the wide doorway. He paused to sweep his gaze around the ballroom and to unwittingly give English society their first good look at him in four years. Every inch of his regal demeanor declared him the marquess he was born being, and the devil-may-care grin, which even now crooked up his lips in an audacious half-smile, acknowledged the rakehell he'd become. Tall and broad-shouldered, with sharp cheekbones and piercing blue eyes, he commanded the room's attention with his quiet presence. Even though he'd arrived unannounced, everyone knew who he was, and a new round of whispers went up.

The Master of Ceremonies called out the next dance, and the orchestra struck up the first notes. But no one noticed. Their attentions were rapt on the marquess.

"Lady Faith, our dance."

Except for one, apparently.

She tore her gaze away from Stephen as Arthur Billingsby appeared at her side. Heavens, she'd completely forgotten that she'd agreed to dance with the man. He was a friend of her brother-in-law, which had made it impossible for her to turn him down.

Although dancing was the last thing she wanted to do at that moment, she knew her place at tonight's party and forced a smile. "Of course."

He placed her hand on his arm and led her onto the floor. The couples took their positions, then bowed and curtsied before launching into a series of turns and sashays.

As she worked her way down the row toward the head of the line, not missing a step in her bobs and turns, Faith took surreptitious glances at Stephen. She watched from the corner of her eye as he crossed the room to greet her mother and father and then greeted his aunt and uncle, the Duke and Duchess of Chatham, before finally turning to his own parents. He shook the general's hand and lowered his head to allow his mother to kiss his cheek. When Lady Emily fussed over the way his valet had knotted his snow-white cravat in the latest minimalist fashion, Faith fought back a smile at his expense. Mothers never changed, no matter how old or

troublesome their sons.

*He'd* certainly changed in appearance, though.

Despite being dressed in the same black and white formal attire as every other man in the room, right down to the black tailcoat worn open to reveal the intricately embroidered silk waistcoat beneath, nothing about him was ordinary. As if to impress that point, he'd forgone proper shoes for a pair of well-worn boots. They were the only indication in his apparel that he'd spent the last four years on horseback in the army rather than haunting the clubs on St. James's Street, yet no one could overlook the proud and straight-spined military bearing he wore like a uniform. A demeanor that distinguished him from every other young man in the room.

His boyish features were gone, and in their place was solid man. Only those deep blue eyes, the curly black hair he still wore unfashionably long, and that charming half-grin that curled at his lips were the same.

Oh, how she remembered that grin! Faith had always found Stephen dashing and his scandalous nature secretly thrilling, even when she'd been a girl in the schoolroom and he'd been at Harrow. All those years when she stared after him dreamily while he'd paid her as much mind as a chair, she'd hoped that someday he might notice her as something other than Strathmore's daughter. That he might finally do more than make her stare after him longingly and sigh whenever he gave her the smallest compliment. That he might dare to kiss her in some dark garden the way he was rumored to do with other ladies...

Then he did.

And now her foolish heart regretted *ever* wanting that.

The dance ended. The ladies twirled back into their original positions as the last notes died away. Billingsby led her off the dance floor, taking the long way around the room to return her to her friends. And the way furthest from Stephen so she couldn't get a better look at him, not even when she craned her neck. *Not* that she wanted to see him anyway. He meant absolutely nothing to her now, she told herself. And someday she hoped to believe that.

"Dunwich's arrival has created quite a stir," Billingsby commented.

"As always," she muttered, the familiar anger at Stephen tightening her chest.

When Billingsby glanced down at her, puzzled at her tone, she forced a smile. After all, he was a friend of the family, so she needed to be polite to him, and he was only here for the evening. Thank goodness. Because she didn't like the way he kept staring at her chest. As if a giant stain covered her bodice.

"Your family is close to his, I understand," he added.

"Very." Although she wished with all her heart that they weren't. Then she wouldn't have to see Stephen again or speak to him...or pretend he hadn't wounded her.

"I'm certain you've heard the latest rumor, then."

Her smile faded. "You mean the untruth that he's keeping a mistress?" Surely Billingsby realized what a boor he was to spread gossip about a family friend to her face.

"Not just keeping her—"

She sniffed haughtily. No, apparently the man had no sense of decorum.

"—but her *and* her son, whom he refuses to acknowledge as his."

Her heart skipped. An *illegitimate* son? Impossible. Even from a scoundrel like Stephen. "You are mistaken, sir."

"Then so is half of London." He seemed amused at her defense of the marquess—heaven knew Faith was puzzled over it herself—but he didn't notice that she'd put as much room between them as possible in the crush while still holding onto his arm. By her fingertips. "You

know as well as I how rumors start. There's always a grain of truth at the heart of each."

"Then *that* rumor is the exception." Her chest tightened until each hard beat of her heart made it difficult to breath. How on earth had she managed to find herself defending Stephen, the very last man she should be championing? "Dunwich is a peer who has given the last four years of his life in service to his country."

"Of course," he said quickly, as if finally realizing that he'd overstepped. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't. I just—" The words choked around the knot in her throat.

Oh bother! She'd sworn to herself that she wouldn't let Stephen's presence at Hartsfield Park upset her. Yet her eyes stung with unshed tears, and she trembled. Not with sadness, but anger. At Stephen for the way he'd so cavalierly treated her...and at herself that she still let him distress her.

She pulled her hand away. "Excuse me. I—I need a glass of punch."

"I'd be happy to fetch—"

She walked away before he could see the hot tears glistening in her eyes. And what a relief that for once he was left staring at her back instead of her bosom. Of course, if Grace's husband found out that she'd just cut the man, she'd never hear the end of it from her sister. At that moment, though, she couldn't care less.

With trembling fingers, she took a glass of punch from the refreshments table, then welcomed the relief when the drink washed away the knot in her throat and helped ease the pounding of her heart.

The orchestra sent up the opening flourishes of the next dance. A waltz.

She sighed gratefully. She seldom waltzed and so could safely remain at the side of the room, enjoying both her punch and the moment's respite to gather herself from—

"Good evening, Faith."

The glass slipped from her fingers.

A hand shot out and grabbed it before it could smash against the floor.

She whirled around, her mouth falling open. Her heart stopped. *Stephen*. For one pained moment as she stared at him the world froze around her.

She should have hated him, should have scratched his eyes out, should have screamed! All these years, she'd thought about what she'd say to him when this moment came, what cutting remark she'd level on him, what sophisticated and urbane wit she'd unleash on him...

But now that he stood in front of her, in flesh and blood and gazing back at her with the same wary unease that swirled through her, she couldn't find any words through the riot of emotions inside her.

Then he reached past her to set down the glass, and the moment shattered. Her heart lurched to a start, and the rushing blood roared deafeningly in her ears.

"Hello, Stephen," she forced out. *Why did you simply leave, as if I meant nothing to you? Did you think of me at all while you were gone? Did you know that I loved you?* Thousands of questions swirled inside her. But too overwhelmed in the moment to put voice to one, she lifted her chin and accused instead, "You're late."

"Still better than never." He gave her that devil-may-care grin that had fluttered hearts across England...and broken hers. "I wouldn't dare miss Strathmore's birthday party. Or the chance to catch up with the Westovers and Mattesons." His gaze searched her face, just as uncertain as she about how they would go forward. "I missed you, Faith." He hesitated, carefully selecting his words. "I treated you badly before, and I've come to ask your forgiveness."

She struggled to breathe as his words shivered through her. *Tell him that you need to return to your friends, that your sisters have asked you to join them...Oh, tell him anything to make him stop looking at you like that!* “There’s nothing to forgive.” She forced a smile. “I’d forgotten about it completely, in fact.”

His eyes narrowed briefly, as if he’d recognized that for the lie it was. He didn’t believe her, but she didn’t give a fig about what he believed. He’d never again get close enough to wound her.

Even now, with his nearness stirring up the anger she’d carried inside her for so long, she wasn’t certain if she could ever offer forgiveness. But she knew her role for this party, knew she was supposed to smile and be pleasant, to show that the Westover family had accepted him back into the fold with open arms. So she whispered, unable to put full voice to the lie, “We’re still best of friends.”

He held out his hand. “Then how about a waltz for an old friend?” When she hesitated, he cajoled, “I’ve been away for four years, and my horse made for a lousy dance partner.”

Panic churned inside her. No, not a dance. Certainly not a waltz! Being in his arms would be torture, even in the middle of a crowded dance floor.

So she seized on the only excuse she could— “Papa doesn’t like for me to waltz.”

“Strathmore finds waltzing too scandalous?” he asked, disbelieving.

“He finds waltzing too scandalous for his unmarried daughters,” she corrected. Not entirely a lie.

“Even with me?”

“*Especially* with you.”

He laughed easily. Faith was suddenly reminded of how close they’d once been, and an aching sense of loss knotted in her belly. They’d never have that again.

“I’m a soldier come home from the wars.” He clucked his tongue with mocking disapproval. “Where’s your loyalty to crown and country?”

With the weight of what seemed to be every pair of eyes in the room on her, she knew she couldn’t refuse him. Not an old friend of the family. Not when the busybodies were simply salivating for any new bit of gossip about him.

She drew a deep breath to gather her resolve and offered him her hand. “Apparently, the same place as my pride,” she muttered, then winced as soon as the too-earnest words slipped from her lips.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her with a chuckle as he led her toward the dance floor. “It all goes before a fall.”

Before she could respond to that cryptic comment, he pulled her into his arms and whirled her into the waltz.

She’d expected him to be rusty after being away from society for so long, but he danced expertly through the steps, fluidly twirling her around the floor. Each movement demonstrated his natural athleticism, and she followed easily, aware of the heat of his gloved hand on the small of her back and the strength of his fingers folded around hers.

“For someone who doesn’t waltz,” he commented, carefully keeping his voice guarded so other couples couldn’t overhear, “you’re quite good at it.”

“I could say the same about you,” she grudgingly acknowledged with a sniff.

That earned her a crooked grin. “I aim to please you, Faith.”

She stiffened at the subtle flirtation. Drat her flip-flopping stomach! And drat him for being so charming, for being so...*him*. He’d always been able to flummox her with only a passing

compliment. Apparently, some things never changed.

“Mama is thrilled to have you as our guest,” she commented, swiftly changing topics. Best to keep the conversation away from flirtations and firmly on the painfully proper.

“I would never refuse an invitation from the duchess.” He glanced across the room in their parents’ direction, then looked down into her eyes as he turned her in the corner and led her back across the floor. “Or miss an opportunity to see you again.”

She ignored the butterflies in her belly, knowing his words were only empty flattery. “How odd, because Hartsfield is only a short ride from Elmhurst Park, and you returned to England in June,” she reminded him, an air of pique permeating her voice. “You’re a bit late in paying a call to close family friends.”

His smile faded. “I am, and for that I apologize. You know how much you mean to me.” He squeezed her fingers and added quickly, “How much all the Westovers do. But I had business to attend to at Elmhurst Park that kept me away.”

She didn’t believe that. When had he ever cared about his estate? During the years he’d been gone—long before that, if truth be told—she’d heard rumors about the mismanagement there by a series of land agents he’d hired to care about the estate in his stead. But there was another rumor that had caught her attention...“I’ve heard that you’ve decided to resign your commission and remain in England.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he half-muttered, gazing down into her eyes. “I do have a marquessate and responsibilities here, you know.”

“Oh, I know that.” She gave a pointed lift of her brow. “I’m just surprised that you do.”

His expression hardened at her chastisement, then softened into a grimace. “I suppose I deserve that.”

Faith supposed he deserved a lot more for running away to join the army and leaving his family worried. Leaving *her*. And if the rumors about his having a mistress and illegitimate son were true, oh, how much more he deserved!

“I’ll admit that in the past I’ve been a bit...”

“Inconsiderate?” she prompted, unable any longer to keep her anger at bay. If it were possible to cut a man while waltzing in his arms, this was it. “Selfish? Irresponsible? Callous for not considering your mother’s worry, *all* of our worry—”

“Yes, all that,” he wisely interrupted and twirled her through a tight circle before she could describe more of the concern and pain he’d left in his wake. “But I’m a different man now. I’ve come back to England to start over.”

Ha! And tigers changed their stripes. “I don’t—”

“Starting with you, Faith.”

The sincerity in his voice startled her, so much that she tripped. He tightened his hold around her and expertly kept her upright in his arms and moving through the steps. Surprised, she stared into his eyes, her pulse beating so furiously that she feared he could feel it.

“Me?” she squeaked. And drat his eyes for glittering like that at her discomfort!

Except that what she felt when he gazed so earnestly into her eyes wasn’t discomfort. Far from it. A warmth simmered low inside her, the comfort of an old friendship mixed with the familiar longing she’d always felt for him, and when he squeezed her fingers, an electric tingle shot up her arm to her breasts, pebbling her nipples beneath her bodice.

“But I meant nothing to you,” she protested softly, somehow keeping her voice from breaking. “And I told you, I’ve forgotten all about it. There’s nothing to forgive—”

“That’s a damned lie if ever I heard one,” he bit out.



She stopped dancing, too stunned to care that the other couples had to step around them or that a new round of whispers went up across the ballroom.

“I was an arse for leaving you the way I did,” he explained ruefully, bitter anger aimed at himself, “without so much as an explanation.”

“Yes,” she agreed in a breathless whisper, “you *were* an arse.”

Wisely ignoring that, he said instead, with remorse thickening his voice, “And for that you have a right to blame me.”

She tried to pull her hand away, but he held tight to her fingers, refusing to release her. “It doesn’t matter any—”

“I want your forgiveness, Faith. I will do anything to have it.” He sucked in an uneasy breath. “Can you at least make an attempt to forgive me?”

The sincerity on his face sliced into her, leaving a raw wound in her belly. “I don’t know if I can...I don’t know...” Fresh tears stung at her eyes, and her words choked.

“All I ask is that you try.” He tenderly squeezed her fingers.

She gave a jerky nod. “I’ll try.” It was the most she could promise now, when her confused heart simply didn’t know what to feel.

He took her back into position in his arms. They danced on silently for several more measures before he murmured, “You must have hated me.”

Unable to answer that with the truth, she turned her face away. It wasn’t hate that she’d felt for him. “Your parents must be thrilled to have you home,” she dodged. “They missed you.”

A knowing flicker registered deep in his midnight blue eyes at her rapid change of topic. “Mother is, of course. I’m not so certain about Father.”

“He is, too,” she asserted, although she knew how strained Stephen’s relationship had been at times with his adopted father. She also suspected that General Grey was part of the reason Stephen had joined the army, so that he could prove himself in a way the general would appreciate.

Something else nagged at her, though...She drew a deep breath and charged ahead by asking, “Since you’re already here, will you ask my father for permission to court Margaret?”

“Your sister?” He puzzled. “Why would I do that?”

“It’s always been expected that you would marry one of Strathmore’s daughters.” But now that the twins were married and she’d failed at her chance with him...She shrugged. “She’s the only one left.”

He stared down at her with a peculiar look that she couldn’t place. “I don’t like to do the expected.”

“Or the proper.”

He frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“That you’ve always prided yourself on being scandalous and stirring up trouble.” And the bigger the trouble, the more he was thrilled by it.

“Not anymore,” he said with conviction. “I’m a respectable man now.”

She wished she could believe him. That would go a long way toward forgiveness.

And yet...“I’ve heard rumors that you’re keeping a mistress.” Throwing all caution to the wind, hoping that he really had changed and that the gossips were wrong— “And that you have an illegitimate son.”

He stiffened. Only one missed step as he turned her through the last circle indicated that her comment pricked him, yet no one watching from the crush would have noticed anything wrong at all.

“Don’t tell me you believe those rumors?” he dodged, glancing away.

Her heart fell. He hadn’t denied them. He’d simply side-stepped the topic and avoided admitting the truth. Which saddened her more than she wanted to admit.

Apparently, he hadn’t changed at all.

“I know what you were like before, Stephen.” And he’d been exactly the kind of man to sire an illegitimate child. “Since you’ve returned, you’ve done nothing to discourage—”

“Daniel,” he bit out with a ferocity that startled her.

“Pardon?”

He hesitated, his lips parted as if to tell her— He shook his head, then pressed his mouth into a tight line as he looked away.

“Stephen?” she pressed, a sudden dread clenching her at the mix of raw emotions flitting across his face.

“Daniel’s death changed everything,” he said finally, quietly, yet Faith had the feeling that he’d wanted to say something else.

“Of course it did,” she murmured. She might never forgive him for the way he treated her, but at that moment, her heart melted for him.

Her eyes stung at the reminder of that letter from two years ago in which he described the uprising, how his regiment had been attacked without warning, how everyone would have been killed if not for Stephen’s order to charge. A charge which resulted in his best friend’s death. She couldn’t imagine the guilt he felt over that, or how much pain he still carried inside him.

“When you wrote about Daniel, you didn’t say what happened to you.” She swallowed hard. “What was that fight like for you?”

“Hell,” he answered solemnly, offering nothing more.

The last notes of the waltz sounded. *Thank God.* Around them, the whirling couples came to a stop. She gratefully stepped back, although the loss of the heat and strength of being in his arms rushed over her so intensely that she shuddered.

As she curtsied and he bowed, he murmured, “Meet me on the terrace at midnight.”

She nearly fell over in her surprise as she rose. “Pardon?”

“I need to speak with you alone.” When she hesitated, he pressed, “Please, Faith. For an old friend.”

*An old friend.* She blinked away the stinging in her eyes and reluctantly agreed. “All right.”

Stephen took her arm to lead her to her parents who were waiting at the side of the room. The false smile Faith fixed on her face told everyone how simply thrilled she was to have the marquess back in England, even though her heart was ready to throw him onto a packet to China.

He lowered his mouth to her ear. “I missed you, Faith.”

“You did not,” she returned, forcing her smile not to waver.

“So much more than you realize.”

They reached her parents, and he bowed politely before excusing himself, muttering something about seeking out a cigar. He gave her a parting look that sent the butterflies in her belly fluttering anew.

Quick anger at herself flared inside her. Even now, after all the anguish he’d caused her, he could still so easily unsettle her.

“So,” her father drawled as he watched Stephen walk away, “Dunwich has returned.”

“Yes,” Faith answered, struck by how Papa had referred to him. She couldn’t remember her father ever using Stephen’s title before. He’d always been referred to as Grey’s son. Or

simply Stephen. Never before had Papa acknowledged that Stephen was not only a fully grown man but nearly his equal as a peer of the realm.

She wasn't certain he had changed, but his return had certainly changed the way people thought about him.

Papa leaned down to ask her, "Did you enjoy your dance?"

"Yes." Not entirely a lie. There were moments when she'd enjoyed it a great deal. She bit her lip. "Are you upset that we waltzed?"

"Not at all. He's Grey's son and deserves our hospitality."

She quirked a dubious brow at that, not certain she believed him, yet she placed a kiss on his cheek just the same. "Thank you."

"But be careful with him, Faith," he warned, as always the overprotective father who had England's most eligible gentlemen quaking in their boots at the prospect of asking to court his daughters. "The army changes the men who serve in it. He isn't the same man you knew before."

She hoped he was right.

*To continue reading Stephen and Faith's romance...*

<https://amzn.to/3ybXlbg>