

1 THE POT CALLING THE KETTLE BLACK

Mivart's Hotel, London, September 1851

A sister who liked to spy on people could be unbelievably irksome.

Cecilia Paring glanced up from fastening her leather dancing boots and caught her fifteen-year-old sister, Evangeline, peering at her.

Evangeline quickly glanced away, hiding her interest, but the pinched expression she wore made Cecilia feel as though Evangeline had been examining her for flaws.

“Can’t you content yourself with spying on the guests instead of me? Mivart’s Hotel has plenty of spots where you can conceal yourself and watch the evening unfold.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. After all, she knew exactly what it was like to be excluded from a ball. She’d been in the same position only a year ago.

Evangeline rolled her eyes in a way only an adolescent would. “Do be sensible. What makes you think you’re worth spying on? Besides, this is my room, too.” She stewed for a moment.

Cecilia instinctively knew Evangeline had something more to say. Three, two, one...

“And I feel compelled to point out,” Evangeline continued,

“that accusing me of being a spy is like the pot calling the kettle black. You’re the one who first showed me the best way to sneak around our house undetected.”

Cecilia remembered crouching on the balcony above the entryway next to her sister as they watched Mother and Father’s guests arrive for one of the many events that used to take place in their elegant London mansion. She’d loved seeing each gown revealed as the women shed their cloaks. Unfortunately, both the mansion and the country estate had been entailed and upon their father’s eventual demise it would pass to a distant male cousin. For want of a son, their home was lost.

“You’ve far surpassed me as a spy,” Cecilia said, grinning at her sister. “I plan to try to catch you out tonight. After all, ‘it takes a thief to catch a thief,’ or in our case, it takes a spy to know a spy. But I doubt I’ll spot you. You’re one of the best spies I’ve ever seen.”

Evangeline cocked an eyebrow in disdain. “Well, if you *saw* them, then they weren’t very good, were they?”

Cecilia chuckled. “Good point.” She sat down to face the mirror above the dressing table so she could return to preparing for the evening’s ball.

She needed to do something with her hair. Mother’s lady’s maid would have been extremely helpful just now, but Mother needed her at the moment. Cecilia could manage.

“I can help you with that.” Evangeline was still watching her.

“I’m sure I can do it.” Cecilia brushed and pinned her hair, but after a few minutes, she sighed at her reflection. Her hair was a disaster, and the glittering necklace she wore of square-cut rubies rimmed with diamonds made it look laughable in contrast. Her head looked lopsided, and she could tell that as soon as she stepped onto the dance floor, the entire mess would come tumbling down.

“Will you let me help you now?” Evangeline asked. “I can hardly do worse.”

Cecilia grimaced. Evangeline was right. “Go ahead. It has to be an improvement over this fright.”

As Evangeline crossed the room to the dressing table, she

paused to open the doors leading out to the tiny balcony. A cool breeze swept into the room and caused Evangeline's pale-green hoopskirts to sway. She looked quite fetching tonight, and she'd managed to arrange her own light-brown hair in a simple style. Cecilia knew Evangeline thought her nose was too long, but Cecilia had always believed it made her sister look elegant. She'd been a pretty child, but at fifteen, it was obvious that she would become a lovely woman. Much to both sisters' irritation, Mother had the habit of describing Evangeline as being a paler, younger version of Cecilia.

Evangeline stepped behind her and then deftly plucked the hairpins from Cecilia's tresses, placing them all on the dressing table. She gently brushed out Cecilia's mass of medium-brown hair.

"Your hair is much thicker than mine," Evangeline murmured. Her features wore a look of intense concentration. She pulled a lock of hair from Cecilia's eyes and tucked it behind her ear. "That's probably why those hairpins looked as if they were about to fall out."

Cecilia watched her sister's movements in the mirror as Evangeline deftly made a neat bun at the back of Cecilia's neck and then pulled a few curls free so that they framed her heart-shaped face.

Evangeline firmly secured the hairpins in place and said, "You know, if you place a second hairpin over the first one to form an 'x,' the two hairpins will stay locked in place." She patted the bun with a satisfied nod. "There. That should stay put."

A tight-chested sigh escaped from Cecilia. "Thank you." She'd need to remember how to do that hairpin trick with the 'x.'

"Cece, what's wrong?" Evangeline asked, using a pet-name she hadn't trotted out in months. "I can tell when something's bothering you."

Cecilia let out a surprised snort as she turned to face her sister. "What's wrong? Let's see..." She tapped her finger against her lower lip as she made a show of intense concentration. "Tonight I'm attending a ball where I'm supposed to help convince everyone that our family isn't *really* low on funds and

that we're quite *happy* with all the changes we're about to make to our lives. Then tomorrow I'm obliged to attend an auction where we'll be selling off all Mother's jewelry to the highest bidder." She touched the necklace she wore. It would soon be gone. "Father made certain that everyone knows the proceeds will be used to fund our dowries. He isn't mentioning that he also plans to use the money to pay for all that property he purchased in Cannes. It galls me that he plans to use us to play on people's sympathies. It's humiliating."

"You must admit, it will probably work."

"Not you, too! How could you approve of that sort of behavior?"

"Because it will fund *my* dowry as well. I'm only being practical."

"Turncoat. Maybe it's good that you're all moving to the south of France as soon as I'm married. You can deal with Father's wild schemes and finally leave me out of it. I can't wait to be alone." She clasped her hands together and pressed them against her lap. As she listed her problems, she realized it was the last one that troubled her most. Losing her family. "You know I didn't mean that. I'll miss you."

"You won't be alone. You'll have Devin." Evangeline shot her a reproachful look in the mirror. "How could you forget about him? Hasn't it been your dream to marry him for years?" Sometimes Evangeline sounded more like Cecilia's older sister than her younger one. It could be quite irritating.

Cecilia looked down at her hands, now folded primly in her lap. "Nothing seems to take the romance out of a romance the way marriage does. Honestly, I was much happier pining away for Devin and dreaming about him. Now that he's about to become my husband, I find that I'm petrified at the prospect."

"Don't be foolish."

"Haven't you noticed how much he's changed?" She glanced out the window at the darkening sky. She'd need to go down to the ball soon. "Being away at university did something to him. I'm shocked that he still wants to marry me." She shifted uncomfortably on her stool. "I think he regrets making the

offer.”

“Of course he still wants to marry you.” Evangeline stared at her in astonishment. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Now you’re the one being foolish. Don’t you realize I’m not the right kind of wife for him? He’s self-contained and orderly, where I’m disorganized and spontaneous.” She waved her arm toward the dresses piled on one of the beds. “Just look at the mess in here. How can I expect him to tolerate such chaos?”

“Now really, Cecilia. That’s going too far. If Mother’s lady’s maid hadn’t been needed elsewhere, the room wouldn’t be in such a state.” Still, Evangeline frowned at the mess. “Our financial situation will improve tremendously once the auction is over. We’ll be wealthy and will be able to afford a second lady’s maid. Even an entire army of lady’s maids.” She let out a deep sigh. “I suppose Devin will adapt to your rather careless manner. After all, I did.”

“Will he?” Cecilia stood up, plucked one of her discarded dresses off the bed, and hung it in one of the wardrobes, shoving her other dresses aside haphazardly. “He isn’t the type of man to lower his standards. He expects me to raise mine and conform to what society expects a barrister’s wife to be. And I’m trying. Truly I am. Did I tell you he wants me to take comportment lessons?”

“What?” Evangeline’s look of outrage made Cecilia feel better. “But I thought he loved you...why would he want to change you?” Evangeline looked genuinely worried.

“Why indeed?”

“I know he’s always been a bit stiff-necked. It’s just his way. As I recall, his parents are exactly the same, aren’t they?”

“They’re even worse. Maybe I’ll be lucky and tomorrow’s auction will be a failure and Devin will break our engagement.”

“Don’t even say such a thing,” Evangeline scolded. “You’ll bring us bad luck.” Then she pulled at her bottom lip with her thumb and forefinger as she lowered her brows. “Do you really think Devin would do something so low as to throw you over?”

“No, of course not,” Cecilia said, brushing the question away with a casual wave of her hand. “It was just a bit of wishful

thinking. He can't back out. That would be breach of promise. He can't afford to have a black mark like that against his name. Just think of the damage it could do to his career. He wants to become a judge. Did I tell you that?"

Evangeline plopped onto the edge of the bed. "Then I suppose you'll need to take those comportment lessons."

The knot of tension in Cecilia's chest tightened. "I suppose you're right, which is why Devin thought of it."

"Of course I'm right. I might be the youngest person in our family, but I'm also the most sensible one."

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As Cecilia's parents escorted her to the ballroom, she noticed a flash of pale green fabric disappearing through a doorway leading outside to the elegant Mivart Hotel's gardens. She immediately recognized Evangeline's dress. She hadn't really thought she'd catch sight of her sister tonight. She was a little disappointed to spot her so easily.

At least Evangeline would have an excellent view of the ball from the gardens. And if she became bored with what was happening inside the hotel, she could always take a moonlit stroll. Father had arranged for a refreshments table to be set up outside to encourage people to wander through the torchlit gardens. Evangeline should enjoy London now, while she still could. After all, it wouldn't be long before Father whisked her away to a small town nestled along the southern coast of France for the sake of Mother's health.

Cecilia felt her resentment melt away. Mother needed to live in a more temperate climate where the air was clean. The dampness and soot of London were terrible for her. The doctors said she'd improve if she moved to Cannes, and Cecilia clung to their assurances. They had to be right. They simply had to.

"Montlake said he planned to arrive early," Father said. "Watch for him once we enter the ballroom. He's saving us some chairs so your mother won't have to stand."

"Stop fussing," Mother protested. "I'm perfectly capable of

standing.” The topaz necklace she wore was accented with small, bright citrine gemstones, their golden-orange brilliance a stark contrast to her mother’s dwindling vitality. Seeing it on her now sent a pang of loss through Cecilia, not because it would be auctioned tomorrow, but because she could so clearly remember how vibrant and lovely her mother had once looked when wearing it. She’d once possessed a fire that outshone even the brightest of her jewels. But not anymore.

Cecilia and her father exchanged dubious glances, and then she squeezed her mother’s arm. “Of course you are. No one will make you sit if you don’t want to.”

“Now you’re being patronizing,” her mother grumbled, and then she took in a deep breath. “But I appreciate your concern. At least you aren’t trying to tell me what I can and cannot do.” She patted Cecilia’s hand.

Mother seemed to have a bit more energy this evening. Cecilia hoped it would be enough to carry her through the night.

As they neared the entrance to the ballroom, a tall, dark-haired man stepped away from the paneled wall and strode toward them. A tingle of pleasure washed through Cecilia as she recognized her fiancé, Devin Montlake. He always had that effect on her. She drank in his distinctive profile with its strong jawline and full lips. She’d always been acutely aware of Devin, even when she was a young girl. Despite their differences...their many, *many* differences...something about Devin had always enticed her, as cheese tempted a mouse, and when he’d asked for her hand in marriage last year, she’d never even considered rejecting him. At least...not until later.

It was only recently that she’d finally come to the realization that they simply didn’t make sense as a couple.

“Good evening, Lord Babbage,” Devin said, pinning his gaze on her father.

“Montlake. What are you doing out here?” Father asked, surprise evident in his tone. “I thought you were holding chairs for us.”

“I have everything in hand,” Devin replied, unaffected by the brusque words. He looked crisp and capable in his black cutaway

coat and starched white shirt. Even his sideburns were impeccably groomed. “My friend Leeland Raven is already in the ballroom and is holding five of the best seats available. They’re close enough to the refreshments table to be convenient, but not so close as to cause us to be buried in a crush of people. They’ll provide us with an excellent view of the dance floor.” He was quite logical and capable, as usual.

Why was it that even now, when she realized they were so terribly ill-suited for one another, she still felt this tug of attraction?

Cecilia glanced away from Devin as she plucked restlessly at her mesh gloves. They weren’t really traditional evening wear, but Cecilia always liked to add her own bit of flair to everything she did. It had been so warm all day that she’d decided to take a chance and eschew the heavier kid leather ones in favor of this open-weave cotton pair, but now it seemed almost decadent to be able to see her skin through the diamond weave of the mesh. But that was silly, wasn’t it? After all, her shoulders were bare for the world to see, so why should a glimpse of her hand make her feel so self-conscious?

And then Cecilia realized that her self-doubt came from being so close to Devin. Now she constantly questioned herself. All because he wanted her to take *compartment lessons*.

This man would drive her mad. One moment she was noticing how incredibly handsome he was, and the next moment she was resenting the way he was trying to take over her life.

And he *was* handsome. She’d always thought so. Simply having him stand so close that she could feel the heat radiating from his body made her want to edge closer to him. That was wanton of her, wasn’t it? She glanced up at him, and just as quickly, she glanced away. Even now, she had to force herself *not* to reach up and tuck the errant curl of hair behind his ear. He would *not* approve of that. She was certain of it.

Even so, her heart beat slightly faster as her imagination began running off on a tangent. If she were to be so bold as to brush back his hair, what would stop her from briefly cupping his jaw and feeling the heat of his skin and the faint roughness of

the stubble that had grown since he'd last shaved?

Cecilia shook her head, forcing herself to break free of the fantasy. If these weren't thoughts of wanton behavior, what were?

"Five chairs, you say?" Father repeated. "So your friend will join us? That should be fine." Then he frowned and glanced doubtfully at his wife. "Does that sit well with you, my dear?"

Sit well. On chairs. Cecilia smirked. Had Father noticed his own pun? Now Devin was giving her a strange look. Drat.

"Oh, do stop fussing," Mother snapped. "Of course it's fine. Mr. Montlake has been most considerate." Mother gave him a stiff smile.

Cecilia tried to hide her dismay at the sharp tone Mother used, because her peevishness was a sure indicator that she was already beginning to tire. Cecilia looked at her more closely and noted how pale she seemed in the glow of the gas chandelier. Her skin was almost translucent.

Father and Mother would leave for Cannes in just a month. Everyone avoided using the word "consumption," but that's what she had. And there was no cure. But even so, living in a mild climate was said to help considerably.

Cecilia knew better than to try to convince Mother to return to her room. She might be ill, but she had the determination of one of Father's foxhounds once it had caught a scent.

"Why don't we join Mr. Raven?" Cecilia said instead. "I, for one, would love a glass of punch." The sooner Mother sat down, the better.

Devin offered her his arm and she slid her gloved hand through it, resting her fingertips along his forearm and enjoying both the heat radiating from him and the texture of his evening coat. Perhaps these mesh gloves really *were* decadent.

As Devin led them across the room, she saw Leeland Raven watching them. She'd met him in London last season, and apparently, Devin knew him rather well. The man had such a lighthearted disposition and pale hair that he was, in many ways, the antithesis of Devin. She'd always thought it odd that a man named Raven would have such pale hair. Maybe some fey

creature had replaced the real Leeland Raven with a pale-haired fairy child. She smiled at the thought.

“Good evening,” Mr. Raven said, rising to his feet. His gaze focused on Cecilia’s smile and he returned it.

They greeted one another and, despite her earlier protests, Mother willingly took a seat.

“Miss Paring, are you free for this next dance?” Mr. Raven asked. “Because I hoped you’d do me the honor of being my partner.”

Devin’s expression remained stoic, but Cecilia saw the small muscle in his jaw tense. Had he planned to claim the first dance with her? Well, there was nothing she could do about it now. She couldn’t refuse Leeland Raven. It would be abominably rude. *Comportment lessons, indeed.*

“Yes, I’m free,” Cecilia said. “I’d be delighted.” She checked her dance card. “Oh, and look, Mr. Raven. The next dance is a waltz.”

Devin cleared his throat. “Would you do me the honor of putting me down for the following waltz?”

Cecilia smiled and nodded, quickly penciling both Mr. Raven’s and Devin’s names on her dance card.

A moment later, the first notes of music began playing, and Mr. Raven offered her his hand. Once she took it, he immediately wheeled her out onto the dance floor. His right hand rested lightly on her waist as he led her through the graceful one-two-three rhythm.

“You look lovely tonight, Miss Paring.”

“Thank you, Mr. Raven,” she said, blushing at the compliment.

“I know we only met each other a few months ago, but I hadn’t realized that you and Devin knew one another, let alone that you were engaged. He’s been rather closed-mouthed about it.”

“He never said a word?” The polite smile she’d been wearing felt stiff. She glanced back at Devin, past the other dancers. He’d never even spoken of her?

“But then again, Montlake and I don’t run across each other

very often,” Mr. Raven added, obviously wishing he hadn’t said anything. “London is such a big city.”

The tension in her cheeks eased as her smile faded. Devin was a rational and dependable man who was never given to indiscretion. That might not sound like the most flattering way to describe one’s fiancé, but when Cecilia had been younger, those had been the most desirable traits she could imagine. Long ago, she’d decided she wanted someone she could count on. Someone strong and reliable.

Someone who was the opposite of her father.

Someone like Devin. Had that simply been a childish fantasy?

“Have you known Montlake long?” Raven asked.

“Almost since I was born,” Cecilia said. She glanced across the room, trying to find Devin again, but since she and Mr. Raven were waltzing, they had traveled to the far end of the ballroom, and she couldn’t spot Devin. “Our country homes were near one another, and we frequently attended the same social events while we were growing up.” He’d always been the one to come to her rescue and pull her out of her many scrapes. He’d been her hero. Her champion. She tipped her head back to glance up at Raven. “And you? Did you first meet him in London?”

“No, at Oxford.”

“You were a student there?” That startled her. Mr. Raven had never impressed her as being the studious type.

“Yes,” he said with a chuckle. “Don’t sound so surprised. We were both in Balliol College. We had some law classes together. Montlake was brilliant. The best in the class. He’s an amazing barrister, and he’ll make a fair and just judge.”

A flash of pride flared within Cecilia. She admired Devin, she always had, but she couldn’t help feeling pleased that Mr. Raven held a similar opinion. “And you? Are you a barrister as well?”

“No, I’m a solicitor. I prefer working with people to arguing points of law in court.”

“I would feel the same way,” she replied, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Although I don’t see that drawing up legal papers would be much of an improvement over debating

the law.”

“Ah, yes, but at least I have the opportunity to work with many different people from all walks of life. Poor Montlake only has judges, solicitors, and other barristers to associate with. Take my word for it, they’re a stodgy lot.”

Cecilia laughed. “So I’ve noticed.”

“You’re sure to liven things up once you become Mrs. Montlake. Those humdrums won’t know what to make of you.”

Cecilia’s smile fell. “That’s exactly what worries me. I’m not entirely certain I’m cut out to be a barrister’s wife.” She fixed her gaze on his lapel, not wanting to see the agreement she knew would be on his face.

“Don’t talk that way,” he said, tightening his grip on her hand. “You’re bound to liven up those bores. They need someone like you to keep them from putting each other to sleep.”

She tried to meet his gaze, but couldn’t. “I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am. You’re good for Montlake. I see the change in him when you’re around.” He lifted his gaze as he sought out something across the room. “Did you know he hasn’t taken his eyes off us since we stepped onto the dance floor?”

Her mouth opened to protest, but then she realized he must be looking over the other dancers’ heads at Devin. It must be nice to be so tall.

He glanced down at her and grinned. “If his family knew he was being so obvious in showing his affection for you, they’d be appalled. It bears repeating...you’re good for him.”

“They don’t approve of me,” she muttered. “They never have. They think I’m a hoyden.”

“His parents? Then they don’t know a good thing when they see it. You make him happy. That’s what matters.”

Cecilia couldn’t stifle her snort of disbelief. She was snorting altogether too much tonight. “Not to them, but I thank you for your kind words.”

The waltz came to an end, and they drifted to a stop, but Mr. Raven didn’t release her. “Don’t disparage yourself. There are enough hurtful people in the world who will gladly do it for you.

There's no reason to help them."

She glanced away. He was right, of course. Wasn't he? Despite her confidence in Devin's noble nature, she couldn't stop the niggling self-doubt that kept creeping into her thoughts. She wasn't convinced that Devin still truly wanted to marry her, and until she was, she'd never be completely at ease with her decision.

Devin tracked her approach, and she immediately knew that he'd been watching them dance, just as Mr. Raven had said.

"Are you looking forward to tomorrow?" Devin asked her.

She looked at him blankly for a moment before comprehension dawned on her. "Do you mean the auction?" She almost said 'no,' but then remembered her role tonight. She was supposed to be happy about the auction. So she'd be happy. "I suppose so. I've never been to one as glamorous as this before. I've only attended little country auctions. I wonder how different it will be to hear jewels being bid on rather than horses."

One corner of Devin's mouth tilted up in a half smile. "I imagine the bids will go much higher than they would for a plow horse."

She gave a slight shrug with one shoulder as though she didn't really care. "Probably. Father's counting on it being a success. He invited everyone he thought would be interested in attending tomorrow's auction to come to the ball."

Devin indicated the crowded ballroom with a jerk of his chin. "Judging by the number of people here, the auction is certain to be well attended."

"I hope so," she said, turning to sit next to her mother. "I just want it over with."

"Cecilia, for shame," her mother scolded. "You know how important it is. We're doing this all for you, my dear."

She whipped her hand up to cover her mouth as she widened her eyes. "Was that indiscreet? I'm terribly sorry. I shouldn't have been so...I don't know," she said, searching for the right word, "so thoughtless."

Her mother snapped open her fan and began fluttering it. "You need to learn to be more circumspect."

Another of Devin's acquaintances, Harris Kenning, joined them. "Good evening, Lady Babbage, Miss Paring."

"I didn't realize you'd be here this evening, Mr. Kenning," Mother said. She flashed the man an unusually bright smile. "It's always a pleasure to see you."

"And you, Lady Babbage," Kenning replied. "Would you care to dance?"

"I'm afraid I'm a bit weary this evening," Mother replied, looking disappointed, "but I believe my daughter is free for this dance. Perhaps you'd like to be her partner."

"I'd be honored," Mr. Kenning said, offering his hand to Cecilia.

She took it as she rose from her chair. "Actually, I'm not particularly fond of dancing the quadrille. Would you mind walking with me instead?"

Devin frowned.

Cecilia stiffened. Apparently she'd made another social blunder. But the gardens were busy and well lit. It wasn't as though some illicit tryst could take place there. Any guest could look out his hotel window and see the guests wandering among the paths.

Did Mr. Kenning look disappointed? She wasn't sure, but if he was, he hid it well. "I'd be delighted to," he said, offering her his arm.

She accepted it and he escorted her away from her family and out through a set of double doors leading to the hotel's gardens. A number of guests gathered near the refreshments table, but Mr. Kenning maneuvered past them and onto the wide path.

Small torches were scattered throughout the grounds lit the way. London's night noises were soothing after the cacophony of the ballroom. The buildings surrounding Mivart Hotel's interior courtyard muted the sounds of hoofbeats and carriage wheels along Brook Street.

"It's lovely out here," Cecilia said as they walked a short way along the path next to the hotel. "It's hard to imagine that winter will soon be upon us. My parents will escape it this year since they'll soon be leaving for Cannes. I almost envy them." Perhaps,

for a change, Father would be correct in his predictions. If the region became a new favorite destination for British travelers, as many prophesied, investing now would show brilliant timing on his part. But from what she'd learned, the area was still quite rustic. It was hardly more than a fishing village. No matter what happened, her parents' futures would be tied to the place. She could only hope her father's ability to forecast trends had improved.

"I must admit," Mr. Kenning said, "Cannes has an allure about it that is difficult to deny. I've heard your father plans to invest there, and I'm inclined to believe he's quite forward-thinking in attitude. In a few years, you may find that he led the wave of British arrivals there."

"I hope you're right. After Mr. Montlake and I marry, we plan to set up residence here in London, so I won't be there to witness the construction of the hotel he plans to build. Father plans to transform Cannes from a fishing village into a destination that will attract everyone in England. It's a daunting task." A small sound near a door leading back into the hotel caught Cecilia's attention, and she turned to look. As she stared more closely, she was surprised when she identified the bit of pale green dress peeking out from the slightly open door. This was the second time tonight. Evangeline must be slipping.

"Someone's watching us," she told Mr. Kenning.

He tensed. "What do you mean?"

Cecilia made a slight gesture toward the door. "My sister's peeking out from just over there. Our parents won't allow her to attend the ball, since she's only fifteen. She's quite disappointed."

Kenning's shoulders relaxed and he glanced in the direction she'd indicated. "I see her. Or, at least, I see her dress. Shall we go and speak to her?"

"You wouldn't mind? I think it would make her quite happy."

"Think nothing of it," he said, turning toward the spot where Evangeline was hiding. "I remember what it was like to be her age."

As they approached her sister, Cecilia called out, "We can see you."

Evangeline didn't even hesitate, but immediately stepped through the doorway. "Is the ball as much fun as it looks?" she asked as she moved toward them. But then she stopped short and peered at Mr. Kenning more closely. "I'm sorry. I thought you were Mr. Montlake." She frowned. "You gentlemen all look alike when you're dressed in those identical black cutaway jackets."

Cecilia introduced them. "We were just taking a short walk and were about to turn back. They're playing a quadrille," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Ah," Evangeline replied, looking faintly disdainful. "The dreaded quadrille. Why do you dislike it so much? It isn't much different than dancing a schottische, and you claim that dance as your favorite."

"I don't know why, I just *don't*." Cecilia hated it when her sister tried to argue her out of her likes and dislikes. Why did her preferences matter so much? After all, she never chided Evangeline for not liking to eat peas. How was not liking a particular dance so different? She searched for a new topic of conversation. "Mother seems a bit weary tonight."

Evangeline frowned. "Perhaps she should rest."

"You know she won't."

Evangeline let out a sigh. "But she should. You know it's the logical and prudent thing to do."

"Mother's determination won't be swayed by logic. She already decided to attend the ball. You know there's no swaying her once she sets her mind to something."

"How was I born into this family?" Evangeline asked, not for the first time. "Not one of you is the least bit logical."

"But we make up for it with our charm and intuition," Cecilia quipped.

A man's voice came from behind her. "And you have that in spades. I can vouch for it," Devin said.

As Cecilia turned to face him, a smile spread across her face. It was nice to hear him compliment her. Well, he *sort* of complimented her, didn't he? "Look who we found," she said, gesturing toward her sister.

“Miss Evangeline,” Devin said. “This is a surprise. I thought you’d be in your bedchamber, enjoying the novelty of having it to yourself while sister was at the ball.”

“I tried, for a while, but since I couldn’t ignore the music of the orchestra drifting upstairs, I found it hard to concentrate on reading *David Copperfield*.”

“I thought you already read that,” Cecilia said.

“It bears a second, and even a third reading. Mr. Dickens is a wonderful writer.”

Cecilia opened her mouth to retort, but Devin interrupted her. “I believe our waltz is about to begin,” he said, cutting off the disparaging comment that was already on Cecilia’s tongue.

She shot him a sidelong glance. He’d done that intentionally.

Mr. Kenning cleared his throat. “Miss Paring, if you don’t mind, could Mr. Montlake escort you back to the ballroom? I’d like to walk farther down the path.”

“Of course,” Cecilia said.

Devin offered his arm and she took it.

“A good evening to you both, Misses Paring, and a good evening to you too, Mr. Montlake,” Kenning said, and then took his leave.

The buildings surrounding the garden blocked most of the cross breezes, but the brisk wind that swirled straight down on them from the sky above had changed. It was significantly cooler now, and Cecilia could sense a change in the air that suggested a storm was coming. As gooseflesh pebbled her forearms, she wished she had her wrap with her. She moved closer to Devin, pulling his arm a bit more snugly to her side. It felt sinfully good to press his upper arm into intimate contact with her breast. After a moment, the heat he radiated suffused her with warmth and her gooseflesh faded away.

As an afterthought, Cecilia glanced back at her sister, but Evangeline was already gone. She’d disappeared as though the breeze had whisked her away.

Cecilia thought she caught sight of Mr. Kenning as he passed one of the torches, but she couldn’t be certain. He was farther away than she’d expected. And then she couldn’t see him at all.

They were alone for the moment, so Cecilia paused on the path and turned to face Devin. "I'm nervous," she said.

"Why?" He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Is it the auction? Are you worried about the outcome?" When she didn't say anything he continued. "I don't care about the auction. All I care about is you."

Cecilia's jaw dropped, just a little. "But I thought..."

He wrapped his hands around her elbows, pulled her closer, and gently kissed her. "It's you I want, Cecilia Paring," he murmured. "Remember that."

A tingle ran down her spine. She hadn't realized how much she needed to hear him speak those words of comfort until he said them. But was he being honest?

The door to the ballroom opened, and Devin took a quick step away from her, ending the moment of intimacy. He took her arm in his and they slowly wandered back, giving the couple approaching them a nod of greeting.

As they stepped into the ballroom, Cecilia very nearly walked directly into Monsieur LeCompte. She'd met the tall, slim Parisian when she'd returned to London just a couple of weeks ago. He'd immediately impressed her with his knowledge of the people living here, especially the French expatriates who'd taken up residence in the city. He seemed to know all about their comings and goings and their activities.

She had been curious about him at their first meeting and had started observing him closely. She quickly discovered that there was more to him than he let people see. As she watched him at the various events they'd both attended, she'd come to understand that he wasn't the shallow man he appeared to be. He was much more complicated than that, but her inner sense told her that he was essentially good, and she'd learned to trust that sense. It had never steered her wrong.

"*Bon soir, M LeCompte,*" Cecilia said.

M LeCompte's cool gray eyes were focused intently upon Cecilia, and judging by his raised eyebrows, she'd managed to pique his curiosity. "*Mademoiselle Paring,*" he said, with a slight tip

of his head. “*Quelle surprise*. You left with Mr. Kenning yet you return with Mr. Montlake.”

Startled, Cecilia could only stare at him blankly. It had never occurred to her that anyone would note that she’d acquired a different escort, let alone comment on the fact. It was unnerving to find that he was watching her so closely, but she did her best to shrug off her disquiet. “It isn’t surprising at all. Mr. Montlake is my partner for the next dance.”

“And so he stole you away from Mr. Kenning?” M LeCompte shot Devin a conspiratorial grin. “You must be a very eager fiancé.”

A muscle tightened in Devin’s jaw as he moved a little closer to her in what felt like a protective gesture. “You’re very observant,” Devin commented in a relaxed tone. It was so perfectly calm that Cecilia could imagine him using it in a courtroom.

“It is a skill I have cultivated,” LeCompte replied, with a one-shouldered shrug.

“And you’ve chosen to practice that skill by observing me with my dance partners?” Cecilia asked in a chilly tone.

“Do you believe that others haven’t noticed as well? That would be most foolish. It isn’t every day that London hosts an auction such as the one your father has planned. It’s only natural for everyone to be curious about your family.”

Curious about Father turning his title over to his nephew and moving to France was more like it. Cecilia considered LeCompte’s words and then surreptitiously peered around the room. A number of people suddenly glanced away, avoiding her gaze. LeCompte was right. People *were* watching.

M LeCompte lifted his hands, splaying his fingers. “It’s nothing untoward, I assure you. I simply like to observe people—to understand them better.”

To observe people, or to spy on them? There was a fine line between the two.

“I believe we understand each other,” Devin said. Something in his tone made Cecilia believe that he’d read the undercurrent in LeCompte’s comments as well...

Be circumspect. Be watchful.

“Perfectly,” LeCompte said with a slight tip of his head. “This has been most illuminating.”

The strains of the waltz began. “If you’ll excuse us,” Devin said, “I believe this is our dance.” He moved forward, guiding her toward the dance floor.

When Cecilia glanced back, she saw LeCompte disappearing through the doors leading into the gardens.