

Divine

NICHOLE VAN

PROLOGUE

*The ballroom
Stratton Hall
Warwickshire
March 10, 1808*

Sebastian Carew was a man without a heart.

Not that he didn't have one in the conventional sense. There was definitely an organ in his chest that beat a steady rhythm, and friends regularly described him as good-humored and courteous.

He was by no means *heartless*.

But rather, Sebastian had quite thoroughly lost his heart years ago.

He pondered this reality as he stood in the Earl of Stratton's ballroom. Listening to bright, cascading laughter.

Not any laughter.

Her laughter.

The sound had slammed into his solar plexus, hard and swift, leaving him gasping.

Straining to see through the crowd of people, he located her gleaming head on the arm of her brother. She was smiling, brilliant, drawing every eye. Candles flickered around her golden hair, surrounding her in light.

As if some angel were sending him a sign.

Sebastian swallowed and glanced away. He wasn't sure he believed in signs, divine or otherwise.

And if there were some divine angel, it would be a decidedly ironic one with a wicked sense-of-humor.

Dwelling on *her* would only bring him heartache. And a man of his social position did not have the luxury of heartache. He should just walk away, out the door without looking back.

But against his will, his head turned, drinking her in.

He pushed against the memory of that morning six years earlier when he had topped a small hill, lifted his head into the rising sun.

And saw *her*.

Standing in the dew-kissed meadow, surrounded by wild flowers and burnished sunflare. Her back to him, blond hair hanging loose in waves down to her waist, shimmering like spun gold just as poets describe. Her arms outstretched wide, face tilted toward the sky. The goddess of morning come to embrace her realm.

The moment had seared into his soul, stretching time. The precise point which had divided his life ever after into two distinct parts.

Before her and *after her*.

When his heart had been irretrievably lost.

And now, like a helpless planet to her sun, she pulled him into her gravity, held him tethered and thrallled.

Miss Georgiana Elizabeth Augusta Knight.

It had been four years, six months and—here Sebastian did a quick calculation—fourteen days since he had seen her last. He shook his head.

How *pathetic* that he knew that.

Her grandmother's estate, Lyndenbrooke, was part of the local parish where Sebastian's stepfather was vicar. Georgiana had lived with her grandmother at Lyndenbrooke for a year after her father's death. That one glorious year in which she became everything that he knew he would never have. A highborn heiress like Miss Knight did not marry a poor vicar's stepson with nothing to recommend himself beyond a charming smile and good-natured humor.

Such were the rules of polite society.

And as one who inhabited merely the edges of polite society, Sebastian knew better than most the power of such rules.

He stared at her across the ballroom, surrounded by eager swains, all desperate to win her attention. She was here as a distinguished guest, whereas he had only been invited as a local gentleman and distant relation to the earl. Someone who could be relied upon to dance with every wallflower and flirt outrageously with each widow.

Sebastian knew he had few uses in life, but charm was definitely one them. His lack of prospects were all that prevented Georgiana from considering him as a potential suitor. If he were wealthy and titled, then she would *see* him.

He tossed that thought around his brain. Tried to convince himself of its truth.

Tried to believe she was the kind of woman who cared about status and money.

She was not.

He watched Georgiana curtsy prettily to Lord Harward—Lord Stratton's son and heir—and his new bride. Georgiana tilted her head. Her long neck graceful, the pearls around her throat and elegant white dress proclaiming to one and all her eligible status as a wealthy debutante.

Lovely. Angelic. Always just out of reach.

Sebastian would just watch her from a safe distance. That would be enough.

But his feet had other ideas apparently, as he soon found himself threading through the ballroom toward her.

As he drew near, her head swiveled, and his heart thundered as he saw

recognition dawn. One of her wide, glorious smiles lit up her face. Warm and welcoming.

It was enough to slay a man.

His emotions seesawed between excitement and dread, neither emotion quite gaining the upper hand. He swallowed, tight and hard.

There was no helping a greeting now.

“Miss Knight, it is a pleasure to see you.” Sebastian performed a short bow and gave her his melting smile. The one that his mother said could charm birds from trees. Granted, mothers *had* to say such things.

But Georgiana returned the smile in full measure. She was something of an expert in melting smiles herself, Sebastian realized. The kind that turned one’s insides to pudding.

“Mr. Carew, what a delight!” Georgiana curtsied in return. Her brother cocked a curious eyebrow, and she turned to him. “James, this is one of my friends from my time with Grandmama, Mr. Sebastian Carew. Remember? I believe you may have met. Mr. Carew, may I present my older brother, Mr. James Knight.”

Sebastian executed another of his flawless bows, noting the resemblance between James Knight and his younger sister: golden hair, shockingly blue eyes, that same wide smile.

“Carew, eh?” Knight asked, also bending in greeting. “Any relation to John Carew, the Earl of Stratton?” Knight gestured toward the elegant silver-haired earl across the room.

“Distantly. My father died when I was a babe and my mother remarried the local vicar.”

Knight nodded his head, casually scanning Sebastian’s attire. Noting the serviceable coat which didn’t fit quite as tightly as it should, the boots still shabby despite the hours spent polishing them. All the subtle telltale marks that did *not* add up to money, to prospects.

There was no judgment or condemnation in Knight’s eyes, thank goodness, unlike other powerful men. But there *was* an air of dismissal. That quiet assessment which instantly placed Sebastian into a box labeled ‘Not Eligible for My Sister.’ A look with which Sebastian was long familiar.

The orchestra struck up the first bars of a waltz.

Don't do it. Do not ask her.

“Miss Knight, may I have the honor of this dance?”

He asked her.

Even a poor, distant relation of the Earl of Stratton deserved a moment of heaven. A tiny taste of the life he would never have.

“Of course, Mr. Carew. I would be honored.” She placed her hand in his. Even through gloves, her fingers seared.

“Miss Knight?” she murmured as he led her to the dance floor. “Really, Sebastian, have we become so formal as that?”

Oh, how he had missed the sound of her voice in his ear.

“Well, I decided to have pity on your reputation and not call you ‘Georgie’ with everyone looking on,” he chuckled lowly.

She gave him another lushly wide smile and playful tap with her fan.

“Heavens, but it is so wonderful to see you. How are you, my oldest friend?”

Gutted to the core at the sight of you but otherwise fine.

Thank goodness his mouth obeyed him enough *not* to say that.

“Delighted to see you, Georgie,” he said instead.

He placed his hand on to the small of her back and twirled her into the familiar down-up-up rhythm.

This made four, he realized.

Four times that he had danced with her. And this was the first waltz.

It felt shockingly right to hold her in his arms, to feel her warm breath against his chin as she spoke. Being with her had always been like this. Effortless and comfortable, without a trace of awkwardness, even now after a separation of four years. Such a pity social conventions decreed that unmarried men and women could not exchange correspondence. He had to rely on chance meetings to talk with her.

He saw her reflected in the mirrored walls of the ballroom. Tall and slender, white skirts swirling around them.

He had always loved her height, that he didn't have to crouch down to talk to her as with other women. Being the tallest man in the room did have its

drawbacks. As it was, her head still only reached his shoulder, golden hair contrasting with his brown.

Blood pounded in his ears. It was the worst sort of agony. Having her in his arms, feeling so much like home, and yet knowing there would never be anything beyond this moment.

Why was he doing this to himself? Dancing was only going to make everything worse. He twirled her once, twice.

“I assume you are staying at Lydenbrooke with your grandmother, Mrs. Knight?” he asked.

“Of course. We just arrived earlier today. Grandmama has been happy of our company before we continue on to London.”

Georgiana stared off into the mid-distance, lost in thought.

“Still an expert at wool-gathering, I take it,” he said, suppressing a smile.

Georgiana started slightly and gave him a rueful grin.

“Please tell me your thoughts, at minimum, involved a dank castle and dastardly rogue?” He arched an eyebrow.

She laughed, quicksilver and bright.

Really, it shouldn't be legal—a laugh like that. It wreaked havoc with a man's good sense.

“Remember, Sebastian, you are to pretend *not* to notice my daydreaming? But no, no dastardly rogues this time. I was thinking about that year. It was such a difficult time for me, with my father's sudden death, my mother a little crazy with grief, and James trying to hold us all together.”

As if Sebastian could forget that year. As if every minute he had spent with her wasn't emblazoned in his memory. Hiding underneath the drooping branches of that huge white willow as she spun fantastical stories about kidnapped maidens and heroic knights, her giggling laughter as he taught her to catch frogs and skip rocks, sitting in the vicarage kitchen making biscuits with his sisters, gossiping and teasing.

Yes, he remembered *everything* with vivid clarity. Too vivid.

He gave her a game smile. “Not to mention all the quilling your governess obliged you to do.”

Georgiana gave an elegant shudder. “Tis most ungentlemanly of you to remind me, Seb. Poor Miss Smith was exceptionally fond of paper filigree. Quilling is so incredibly tedious, endlessly twirling and gluing and molding all those tiny strips of paper. Do you remember that work basket she forced me to complete?”

“The one with the puffy, little lambs?”

“Precisely. It was hideous.”

“Oh, I don’t know that I would call it *hideous*. There is a certain elegance to lambs prancing through roses.”

Georgiana froze slightly, her eyes hesitantly searching his for any hint of mockery. Sebastian tried to keep his look innocent, but it was no use. His lips twitched upward.

“The rainbow arching over the entire scene was a nice touch,” he said innocently and then ruined the entire effect by laughing.

At least he told himself it was a laugh. Not a guffaw.

“Seb, you are truly terrible!” Georgiana pursed her lips and attempted a quelling stare. Her dancing eyes betrayed her, however.

“Well, I do try. Having so many older sisters has given me a certain amount of practice.”

Georgiana chuckled appreciatively and locked her playful eyes with his. Those impossibly huge blue eyes, pools of morning sky. Eyes which transported back to that year.

When they had been Seb and Georgie. Georgie and Seb.

Living in each other’s pockets, finishing each other’s sentences. When he had surrendered himself to her, heart and soul.

He had thought—wished, even, in his darker moments—that the connection he felt to her would fade over time.

But, no, Fate would not be so kind to him.

For just a moment, he allowed himself to hope. Maybe he could woo her, win her. Claim a small share of happiness for himself.

Hope. Such a foolish, futile emotion.

He twirled her again, drinking in her glorious eyes.

Maybe . . . just maybe, this time she would finally *see* him . . .

She smiled up at him, fondly. “Despite your teasing, you were so generous to befriend an awkward, chatterbox of a girl. You made the grief of that year more bearable. I felt so blessed to have your friendship. It was like God had sent me another brother. I will always appreciate your kindness.”

Sebastian felt his smile freeze.

Brother. *Ouch.*

The pain was swift, slicing deep.

She thought of him as a brother. Warm, uncomplicated filial feelings. While his for her were decidedly . . . *not.*

Well, his feelings were *warm* too. But they were about as far from filial . . .

He swallowed. He needed to change the topic. *Now.*

“Tell me of the latest on-dit.” It was a question born of old habit.

She arched an eyebrow at him.

“*Tell me a scandal,*” he’d say. “*Something shocking.*”

“*Why should I know anything scandalous, Seb?*”

“*Please. You love gossip like you love to breathe.*” He nudged her shoulder. “*Probably more.*”

“*Well . . .*” She tapped her lips. Thinking. “*I did overhear Grandmama talking with the housekeeper this morning about Lord Harward . . .*”

“What makes you think I still read the broadsheets, Sebastian?”

“The sun still rises in the east, so I am quite sure the world as I know it has not entirely collapsed. And of all people, Georgie, you would remain the same. Here, I will even give you the topic—Lord Harward and his recent marriage.” Sebastian nodded his head toward the gentleman dancing across the room with his new bride.

“Oh, that has been delicious, has it not?” Georgiana grinned. Her face lit with mischief. “How wicked of Lord Stratton! Requiring his heir to marry before his twenty-seventh birthday or risk losing his entire fortune.”

“And to gooseberries, no less.”

“That *is* the best part of the story. I understand Lord Stratton found the whole situation entirely diverting.”

“And Harward decidedly did not appreciate his father’s ridiculous meddling.” Sebastian gave a rueful smile.

His decidedly eccentric relation, John Carew, Earl of Stratton, had determined several months ago that his wayward son and heir, Viscount Harward, needed to marry. Being the president of the West Midlands Heritage Gooseberry Society and a decided enthusiast, Lord Stratton had altered his will. The new will stipulated that if Lord Harward did not marry before his twenty-seventh birthday, the absurdly large sum of sixty thousands pounds would be divided between three gooseberry societies: one being Stratton’s own gooseberry society—the other two belonging to his longtime friends, Sir Henry Stylls and Lord Blackwell.

Good friends, all three men had spent the last twenty-five years indulging in a shared a passion for the small fruit. Fierce gooseberry devotees, Sir Henry and Lord Blackwell had reportedly been giddy over the prospect of potentially receiving twenty thousand pounds each to devote to their gooseberry cultivars.

Given young Lord Harward’s distaste for gooseberries and love of money, it had proved an ingenious motivation. Harward had courted and married within eight weeks. Sebastian looked over at the silver-haired Lord Stratton, standing and chatting with two widows, regal and yet sparkling with energy and mischief. The elderly earl was an unmitigated rogue.

“I heard tell that women were endlessly inventive in their attempts to woo Lord Harward. It is said that Lady Margaret Simon hid in Harward’s dressing room intending to trap him into marriage.”

“Have you still not learned that it is not proper for a lady to gossip?” Sebastian shook his head in mock censure, spinning her again. The strains of the waltz drifted around them.

She laughed and made a dismissive gesture with her head, easily brushing away any prick of conscience.

“Please! You asked me about the scandal first.” She shot him an amused eyebrow.

He chuckled. “Indeed. My apologies.”

“Besides, without gossip, what is a lady to do?” Georgiana said, matter-of-fact. “How else should we occupy our time? As ladies, we are obligated

to merely pretend not to like it, that is all. Gossip is what makes the world turn round, I daresay. Secrets are far too much fun. It is the only way to be involved, to feel truly connected, don't you think?"

Ah, Georgiana. Always so utterly herself without apology.

Sebastian nodded in agreement, grinning at her. They twirled again, her body light and graceful, flowing easily with him.

"We are off in a week to London for the Season. I am somewhat fearful, as it will be my first. Will I see you there?" Georgiana asked.

He hated the hope in her eyes. As if a man such as himself had the money to spend any time in London. As if any London hostess would let one such as him through their door.

"That will be unlikely. Lord Stratton has taken pity on a poor relation and has generously purchased an officer's commission for me in the Third Light Dragoons. I join my regiment in just a few days and will most likely be shipped off to Spain within the year."

"Heavens!" She missed a step as she twirled.

"Do I detect a note of concern?"

"Though I understand our men are needed there to aid the Spanish in their rebellion against the French, I should be most sorry if Napoleon's men were to turn you into a hunting target."

"Not as sorry as I should be, I assure you." He gave a game chuckle, trying for a devil-may-care attitude.

Georgiana's wide eyes searched his. Not amused.

"This is no laughing matter, Sebastian. You could be killed."

"Yes, that is generally the risk a soldier runs." Sebastian shrugged.

Her eyes flared wider. Her concern more gratifying than he cared to admit. His heart hummed with it.

Pathetic. He was pathetic.

"But . . . why? Why turn to a soldier's life? Why not the Law or the Church?"

"Why not?" he countered, hating that he had to explain himself. To justify his limited life choices to her. "I should like to think I am an affable fellow, able to

rub along well with others. I am not suitably serious for the Church and hardly studious enough for the Law. I am strong and not afraid of hardship and wish to do my part for King and Country. What else am I to do with my life?"

"Well . . . I mean . . ." she floundered. She regarded him for a careful moment. Stared but not really seeing.

She never *saw* him. That had always been the problem.

"Please be careful, my old friend. I should be sad if anything were to happen to you." Words spoken softly.

"Yes, I am like a brother to you, after all." Sebastian managed a crooked, sardonic smile.

"Precisely," she instantly agreed, completely missing the irony in his voice. "I could not imagine losing any of my brothers."

They twirled, the air between them suddenly weighty.

"You must promise me you will return," she said, catching and holding his eye. "I could not bear it if you did not. Please. Promise."

The memory of her face in that moment would cling to him for years afterward—concern, worry . . . *emotion* . . . all for him.

His heart hung in his throat, tangling his tongue. An odd mixture of intense elation and devastating sadness.

She *did* care for him, he reminded himself.

Just not in *that* way.

He spun her again, memorizing the lilting stretch of her neck, the warmth of her back under his gloved hand, the rustle of her skirts brushing his legs. Her subtle scent—roses and silk.

Memories that he stored for a long future bereft of her. A future of guns and cannon blasts and the moans of the dying. A future filled with relentless, mind-numbing boredom and brief moments of ghastly terror.

"I promise," he said, helpless to resist anything that she asked of him. "I will return."

To you, he added silently. *I will return to you.*

Not that it mattered. Even if he did return whole and sound. Even if she did not marry in the interim. Even if his prospects improved enough for him to

honorably offer for her.

Even if . . . even if . . .

Even if he were crowned king, could he ever *be* enough to capture her heart?
Would she ever see *him*?

The waltz came to a close and, reluctantly, Sebastian delivered Miss Georgiana Elizabeth Augusta Knight back into the care of her brother, knowing the next time he saw her—if he saw her—she would most likely be the wife of some unworthy man.

Sebastian didn't know who he would be. But he knew the man would be unworthy.

Unworthy of her bright spirit. The sunlight of her soul.

For months afterward, he could still hear Georgiana's laughter across the room, could still see her backlit, the burning candles turning her golden hair into a crown.

But Sebastian knew she didn't need light behind her to be illuminated. It came from within. Radiant. Miss Georgiana Knight would take sunshine wherever she went. Bestowing her cheerful, unspoiled nature on any and every person who crossed her path.

And Sebastian also knew, with despairing surety, that person would *not* be him.

Jersey, Channel Islands

Officer's billet

December 14, 1812

Nearly five years later

Captain Sebastian Carew sat alone in his room, staring at the two letters the post had just delivered.

They could not have looked more different. One was a thin, tattered missive from his eldest sister, most likely written with the lines crossed and then crossed again to conserve paper.

By contrast, the other letter was thick, white and pristine, bearing the official mark of a prominent London solicitor.

Winter winds battered the solitary window and whistled down the chimney, licking the small fire which burned in the grate. The room was spartan: a chair, a table and low bed in one corner. A rag rug on the floor.

Such was a soldier's life. At least he had a roof over his head, an improvement over the canvas tents of the Peninsula.

Below him, Sebastian could hear the low rumble of men's voices and the clink of glasses filled with brandy as they wiled away long hours in the parlor of the gentlemen's billet. He should join them.

But he didn't. Not yet.

It was coming on Christmas and, yet again, Sebastian would spend it far from home. He wondered, as he always did this time of year, when he would see his friends and family again.

If he would ever see *her* again.

Over the years, Sebastian had kept himself apprised of Georgiana's life through letters from his sisters. She had a brilliant first Season in London but did not accept any of the numerous offers of marriage she received. Nor did she her second or third Season. He was slopping through the mud of central Spain when he learned that her grandmother had died, leaving Lyndenbrooke to Georgiana.

And still she didn't marry. It felt like an ax waiting to fall, the end of any faint hope he still possessed.

But, thus far, he had kept his promise to her.

That crazy, impetuous promise.

For himself, it was hard to care if he lived or died.

What future awaited him? To hear news that she had married elsewhere? To scrimp and save and perhaps one day amass just enough money to sell his commission and support himself and a family, always teetering on the edge of poverty? Or perhaps even worse, marry and retain his commission, forcing his wife to follow the drum, moving with him from camp to camp?

It was no life for a lady.

Though he personally held his own life cheap, that one pledge had made all

the difference.

Every skirmish with swords glinting, every battle charge into blazing guns, her words echoed through him.

Promise me you will return.

He had to stay alive, if only to spare Miss Georgiana Knight a few tears weeping for his fallen body.

It was truly pathetic when he thought too much about it.

He was pathetic.

But as long as she remained unmarried, he could hope. Could dream that impossible dream where somehow he became *more than*.

More than a captain in King George's army. More than a brother in *her* eyes.

An utterly futile dream. He knew this.

But Hope was a persistent beggar. Always hovering around the edges of his life, needing only the smallest glance of encouragement to start clamoring for a coin to purchase a place in his soul.

He looked at his sister's battered missive and declined to read it just yet. His sister was a diligent correspondent, bless her, but he never found village gossip as fascinating as she.

Instead, Sebastian carefully opened the solicitor's letter.

And gasped.

Surely, this couldn't be.

Stared. Read it again.

Felt a wide grin spread across his face, as the beggar Hope suddenly revealed herself to be an angel, granting him the deepest wish of his soul.

Sun shattered the gloom of his wintery mind.

He jumped up with a shout, bringing feet running.

"Something amiss, Carew?" asked Captain John Phillips, popping his head into Sebastian's room.

A cashiered officer, Phillips had arrived just a few weeks previously from Canada with letters of recommendation from General Brock. He was currently an unofficial member of the billet, but was considering purchasing another commission and joining Sebastian's regiment.

Phillips had proved himself an immediate friend, good-humored and always up for a lark. When Sebastian didn't immediately respond, Phillips walked fully into the room, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

With another whoop, Sebastian threw back his head and laughed at the ceiling.

And then read the letter one more time. Just to be sure. Somewhere, his mind noted that the paper he held shook violently.

Phillips waiting patiently, a wry smile on his lips.

"Well," Sebastian began, his voice hoarse.

He cleared his throat and started over. It didn't help; his voice was still hoarse.

"It would seem that I shall now be styled as The Right Honourable Earl of Stratton."

Phillips blinked and then gave a crack of laughter.

"Good one, Carew." He slapped Sebastian on the back. "You almost had me with that Banbury tale, but you shan't turn me sweet. I still intend to win my ten quid back from you tonight."

Sebastian could only shake his head, still staring at the letter, the glorious reality of it all sinking in.

"No, Phillips. 'Tis most true. My cousin, Lord Harward, and his family were killed in a tragic carriage accident. Upon hearing the news, the old earl's heart gave out. I had always thought a large family of cousins in Shropshire were next in line for the earldom, but there have been other deaths the last few years and, well . . . as it turns out, I am the next heir."

Phillips snatched the letter from Sebastian and quickly read it.

"It says you need to report to London immediately and present yourself before the House of Lords, something about the will needs to be addressed, but you have full possession of all properties, real and otherwise . . . It goes on and on."

Sebastian knew his face looked stunned silly. He could see the expression echoed on Phillips'.

"Lord Stratton." Phillips chuckled. Then made a deep, somewhat mocking, bow. "If your right honorable lordship will permit me some impertinence, I think

this occasion calls for a celebration.”

Laughing, Sebastian shook his head and allowed himself to be led downstairs, listened to the huzzahs and shouts of congratulations from his fellow officers. Grinning all the while, his joy and relief almost palpable.

Fate had suddenly given him options. He was no longer penniless. He could provide for his parents and sisters. Ensure that his nieces and nephews had advantages he never did.

He was an *earl*. A peer of the realm.

His life suddenly held social status, security, purpose.

Possibilities. *Hope*.

Visions of Georgiana danced through his head.

At last! He could finally do something. He could *act*, instead of just longingly wish.

The joy of it fizzed through him. Champagne bubbles exploding in his chest.

It wasn't until he woke the next morning that Sebastian remembered the letter from his sister. Friends continued to move in and out of his room, congratulating him. The entire officer's billet had been turned into an impromptu party, celebrating Sebastian's good fortune.

In between laughing jests from fellow officers, Sebastian gingerly opened his sister's missive and decoded the words written across each other.

One phrase haunted him for months to come.

Oh, did you hear about poor Miss Knight? The one who inherited Lyndenbrooke? It seems she is now consumptive and has been sent off to some specialist doctor in Liverpool. No one expects her to survive the winter. 'Tis such a shame. She was such a pretty, vibrant thing.

Somehow, no one in the crowded room heard his heart freeze and then crack, shattering into a thousand pieces. This seemed almost impossible, as the sound thundered in Sebastian's own ears.

Later, Sebastian would ponder the cruelty of the moment.

Fate handing him the means to finally reclaim his heart and then cruelly

crushing all hope in the same day.

The irony of Georgiana dying when Sebastian had survived so much.

He tried to imagine her as a consumptive: emaciated, pale, racked with cough. Dying.

But all he could see in his mind's eye was a girl, twirling, lost in a flame of golden sun, holding his heart in her brilliant light.