



*A
Beast's
Love*

A
BEAST *of a*
DUKE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVA DEVON

**A BEAST
OF A
DUKE**

A BEAST'S LOVE
BOOK 2

by
Eva Devon

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This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the work of the imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

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my world.

Christy and Louisa, you are deeply appreciated

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CHAPTER I

“*I* have hidden the baby,” the dying duke declared with triumph. baby.”

Roderick Morrowby, eldest son of the Duke of Wrathborne stared at his father. He wanted to take the brandy glass from his withering hand, set it on the floor, then shake the old man until he saw reason.

Such an action might kill the already fatally ill duke, and Roderick was not willing to do murder. Although, it was damn tempting. The old man certainly deserved it.

“What have you done?” he hissed, trying to make sense of his father’s heinous pronouncement.

“I am making certain that the estates and the dukedom continue exactly as they should,” his father drawled from his bed.

Pillows propped up the bloated form of his father. The duke was a large figure amidst the Rococo extravagance of his gilded bed with sea-green curtains and gold tassels.

The old man began coughing, his lungs spasming. The wet sound echoed through the room. His entire body contracted around that cough, and his face turned pale as his skin turning a reddish hue with the strain.

His father had been ill for some time, but he was now standing at the double doors, which is why Roderick had come back.

The solicitors had made it clear that Roderick would soon be the Duke of Wrathborne. He would be able to make the changes that he and his brother Gabriel, had been dreaming of since they were children.

They would be able to help the people on their lands. They could reform the mining practices that had killed far too many in Cornwall. Yes, Roderick would finally be able to do good with a massive fortune and the power of the dukedom.

But his father... His father was far too clever, ensuring he could exert control from the grave he would soon occupy.

Roderick had been certain that there wasn’t anything that might have

to manipulate him, to bend to his father's will.

He'd been mistaken.

Bloody hell, he was naive. He'd not thought of himself as innocent. He'd seen war. He'd gone and fought on the Continent, something not in line with ducal heirs. But his father had loved that his son was out, acting like a man. "You old dukes had, claiming power through the sword."

After all, the old man had a spare, Gabriel, in case his eldest son died at his side.

But now, standing here in the dank bedroom with the scents of sweat and wafting about Roderick, he watched the old duke's mottled red face. He'd slurped his brandy after his cough receded, his eyes gleaming. It wasn't the same gleam one might expect in a conqueror who had set siege to a city and then broken through the gates.

It twisted Roderick's stomach, and he feared he would cast up his father's accounts. "What have you done?" he hissed again.

"You won't be able to find her," his father stated with a grim little smile. "Her, he thought to himself."

Roderick had not even known that much about his child—a child he'd only learned about this day. But the birth church registry that his father had thrust into his hands made it clear.

He was a father.

Yes, he was the father of a little girl named Vivian. It said so there on a parchment page.

And the mother? He had known her but a brief time. He had liked her well. They had had a quick romance, a wonderful experience, on his way home from the war. She'd been a young musician visiting his father's court, performing for them in the evenings.

He had not even known about the child.

"She came to you," he said, trying to make sense of it all. "She came to you with this news, and you kept it from me."

"Yes," his father said, "it was deemed best. She was far below her station. You could never have wed her."

"Who deemed her too low?" Roderick demanded. Though he had loved the lady, he would have done the right thing.

"By me," his father spat out. "Who else? I am the power here." Yes, his father was.

How his father would have loved to have been alive in medieval times when he could order the deaths of peasants, control Parliament. He'd maneuver armies. He would've been in his element then, but now the only things he could control.

His eldest son being one of them.

"Tell me where they are," Roderick ground out.

"The mother is dead," his father returned, plucking at his sheet. "The baby is with a family and very well cared for, I assure you of that. I won't have a person of our blood raised as a pauper." His lips curved. "They won't indulge her. They will raise her as the little sentiment."

"Tell me where Vivian is," he ground out. "She can be brought here and raised at the ducal estate here at Wrathborne."

"No," his father countered. His eyes flashed, even as they appeared sunken in his face that looked ever more like a skull. It was a harsh laugh. The way his face was drawn and his body appeared bloated with

The duke blew out a derisive breath. "That little girl is my only means of controlling you, because I know you have a soft heart. The moment that she had come to my door and told me she was with your child, I knew it was time to had you two watched and her after. I knew she'd taken no lovers. And I'd finally gotten my ticket."

"Your ticket," Roderick echoed, disgust rolling through him. "The baby. She is a human being—"

"And if you do not think that humans have used other humans to manipulate outcomes over the centuries, then you paid no attention to the house, tutors." His father took another gulp of brandy. Little rivulets trailed down his wrinkled chin. "You will never know where the child is. If you try to find her out, she will be sent away to a pauper's orphanage." His father tried to get himself up on the pillows, but his arms were too weak, and he flopped back down, which angered him. He spat out, "I have made certain of this. Only if your behavior, if it corresponds with what I want, will keep her safe. I don't understand?"

Roderick was so enraged that he wanted to tear the registry apart, but he did not.

After all, it was the only connection he had right now to his daughter. He had a child out there. A little girl. Vivian.

il times His heart began to pound. He had always wanted children, even v
nt, and was small. There was something about the idea of being a fat
re were correcting all the mistakes done to himself and his brother, that ha
him hope, and now it was being snatched away from him.

And that poor child, his child, was a victim of his father. Was tha
father was capable of creating? Victims?

s. "She It seemed so.

ll taken "Tell me where she is, dammit," he roared. "This shall not stand."

ed as a "Ho, ho, I do like your bluster," the old duke said. "But no. She's t
er with way that I will be able to keep you in line. Now, you will leave the
running just as I wish, just as I have given orders. And if you do not
ere and attempt to change the mines, if you attempt to change the cottages al
estates, if you attempt to make too many changes in the House of
ppared towards those ridiculous reformations you and your brother h
rowing achieve?" The duke's mouth tightened, and he lifted a shaking h
fluid. warning. "Well, she will disappear. You will never find her, and s
eans of have a miserable life, full of suffering."

hat slut Fury pumped through Roderick, and he charged forward. He grab
rue. I'd father by the shoulders and hauled him up off the bed, determined t
I knew him see reason.

But then his father began to laugh. "That's it. That's the rage that
She's ato see, the fury. That's my blood in you."

His father began to cough due to his laughing.

ians to Horrified, Roderick dropped the old man back onto the bed.
to yoursplashed everywhere.

d down The scent of it filled Roderick's nostrils, and he let out an appalle
to find "You are foul," he said.

to raise "Perhaps," his father drawled, "but I am powerful, and you s
ndered, powerful too, and you will not destroy the power that is our line." Unc
ly your by his brandy-soaked clothes, he mocked, "All you fools, people like y
Do you Gabriel, trying to take power away from our class. Do you even und
what you're doing?"

, but he "Yes, Father," he said tightly. "We are trying to prevent what happ
France."

ter. His "Ha," the duke snorted. "The only thing you can do with revoluti
and rabbles is kill them, crush them, and make them understand who r

When he His father could not be reasoned with, and so Roderick did not try
her, of moment.

and given He stared with dismay and whispered, "I did not realize you were
as this."

that all his "So bad?" his father repeated, his anger still hot. Perhaps his anger
the only thing he ever truly had. For he continued, "You mean the fact
wish to make certain that my son and his children and their children
the title of Duke of Wrathborne, and all its wealth and power for cent
he only come? That does not make me bad. That makes me a man willing to
be estated duty. You are not willing to do your duty unless I force you to it."

, if you His father's lip curled with disdain. "I have given up on Gabriel. T
ong this is a lost cause. He... Well, if I could have cut him off entirely, I would
of Lords But your mother, soft-hearted creature that she was, left him a fortune
open now he can cause trouble. If I could, I would crush him." The duke lo
and in the wall and breathed, "I wish he was never born."

he will "Can you hear yourself?" Roderick challenged, feeling despair
through him.

bed his "I can," the duke replied, drawing in a breath that rattled thro
o make room. "Sentiment is a fool's errand. We did not become powerful t
sentiment, Roderick. Don't forget that. Do not indulge in sentiment. N
: I want too like Gabriel. You need someone like me to shape you, but I wo
long. And so this will do it, won't it?"

"Yes, Father," he said through gritted teeth.

Brandy His father nodded, pleased. "You will be watched. I promise yo
And if you step out of line, you now know what will happen." He
ed sigh with a papery thin finger. "There's a locket over there on the table.
get it."

hall be Slowly, Roderick turned and crossed to the inlaid Italian table
lettered mirror that stretched from the floor to the ceiling.

you and He spotted his reflection. He wanted to hurl up his disgust at the
erstand himself. He was being led into a devil's bargain, and he knew it. H
seeing his haunted face.

ened in But he picked up the locket, the gold chain slipping through his fin
"Open it," his father ordered.

ionaries And he did as he was told, carefully unlatching the little clip. He
bles." There was a baby with beautiful russet hair, bright eyes, soft pink lips

in this winning expression.

“She’s yours,” his father grated. “God, she looks like you.”

so bad “Have you met her?” he asked, a war of emotions raging inside him.

“I did. I saw the brat myself,” his father informed. “I wanted to be certain that she did indeed look like you. Like us. She does. The only question is whether you will keep it with you,” he said, “as a reminder.”

inherit He swallowed, clutching the miniature. “Will you ever let me know where she is?”

do my His father leveled him with a hard stare. “It depends,” he said, “on how you behave over the years, if you come into my line of thinking, perhaps you’ll be united with her. Perhaps you can bring Vivian here one day, but I have no doubt it. I know the kind of dog you are. You’re stubborn, and you are going to respond to the stick. You must be beaten into obedience, and I shall beat you with this stick even when I am in the grave.”

It felt as if chains were being layered atop him, chains which would crackle him into a beast of a man, rather than the good one he had hoped to be.

The locket cut into his hand as he gripped it tightly.

How could he let his little girl suffer? For if he did not do as his father wished? He could lose her forever to...a hell on earth.

But how many would he have to allow to suffer to keep her safe? He didn’t know instinctively that he would do anything to keep her protected, but he would not let his father win.

He could not. There had to be a way.

“Is this what you wanted then?” he asked softly. “To be loathed, hated, despised, and abominated? Mother would be so appalled.”

His father was silent for a long moment and then he began, in a build of resignation, “Your mother was a good woman with a kind heart, but I loved her as best I could, but she was also weak. I never should have married her. She is the reason why Gabriel and you are the way that you are.” He did not wish to hear more vitriol about his mother, or of any kind of hatred his father, so he crossed back to the bed, the locket in hand.

“I will have to operate in the parameters you have given me as directed,” he allowed, “but if you think that I shall yield, that you have won, even if it is in my grave—”

“I have won, boy,” his father cut in. “You remember that. And if you ever try to defeat me, remember what will happen.”

He forced himself to silence.

If he fought or argued now, perhaps his father would send Vivian a
n.

He could not ever have real revenge against his father, not in the fl
o make No, he would have to wait until the man was dead, and then he
re's no have to operate in secret. He would not be able to tell anyone, not e
brother, Gabriel. He would have to keep this quiet and find Vivian.

e know Somehow, he'd have to find a way to bring her home, and he wou
to destroy all those who had gone into league with his father to keep
ftly. "If away from him.

perhaps Yes, he'd have to act like a beast of a man, cruel and harsh, and
y, but lose his brother's love.

re only But he would defeat his father and get Vivian back, even it took h
nd so last breath.

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s father

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you try

He forced himself to silence.

If he fought or argued now, perhaps his father would send Vivian away.

He could not ever have real revenge against his father, not in the flesh.

No, he would have to wait until the man was dead, and then he would have to operate in secret. He would not be able to tell anyone, not even his brother, Gabriel. He would have to keep this quiet and find Vivian.

Somehow, he'd have to find a way to bring her home, and he would have to destroy all those who had gone into league with his father to keep Vivian away from him.

Yes, he'd have to act like a beast of a man, cruel and harsh, and likely lose his brother's love.

But he would defeat his father and get Vivian back, even it took his very last breath.

CHAPTER 2

The Channel called to Hazel Smith as it had to her ancestors for hundreds of years.

Yet the storm outside tonight was far too terrifying to risk walking the cliffs.

Usually, little could keep her in her small cottage which overlooked the Channel that was the great waterway between England and France. It was one of the greatest waterways, in her opinion, in the world. Armies had crossed and fro. Product was shipped back and forth daily.

And since the war in France, well, the smugglers and the wreckers had only escalated in their trades.

Every night and every day, she walked the cliffs, staring out at the ferocious water. Water that could turn on a moment's whim from peaceful to calm to soul-destroying and life-ending.

Hazel's family knew that, just as all the families who made their living on the Devon coast knew it.

Hazel had lost a father and a brother to that water.

And a husband.

It was the debt that every family paid who was attached to that water between England and France.

Still, being forced inside was hard to swallow.

For she still looked for the ship that had gone down one night in the waters, taking her husband who had terrorized her through their marriage.

Her uncles had been wary of the marriage but had known it was necessary.

After all, men of the sea were often rough, but her uncles had been confident they could manage Elias. They could not.

But it had been an alliance between two Devon families. And alliances were essential. As was tradition.

She blew out a breath, trying to ease the strain in her shoulders that

seemed to soften.

The storm crashed against the windows of her cottage. The rain beat hard against the shutters. It slashed against her roof. She longed to go out and feel her gown whip about her body and her hair fly about her face. He would flap like wings, but no, even she was not so foolish as to travel hundreds of miles in such conditions.

For if she did, she might find herself in France or even perhaps in the Americas. The wind could be brutal off the Devon coast, and the cliffs could be merciless and the tide too.

So, she forced herself to stay near the fire, to clench her hands and not look out and not look. To wait to see if the very man she had so feared would return to be her destruction.

“He won’t,” she whispered to the fire, the sound swallowed up by the cracking wind outside.

Elias was dead. Several men had seen him go down under the icy waves at that time. The villagers knew it to be true too. They had even held a funeral for Elias, and all were respectful of the widowed Mrs. Smith.

After all, the villagers understood the debt to the sea too, and when their own went down under those foaming waves never to be seen again, well, they knew the price had been paid. And they knew that whoever had sunk beneath those waves was not coming back.

Hazel turned to the fire, stared at the kettle hanging on its iron hook, and willed it to whistle. She had only recently refilled it, needing the warmth and longing for a cup of tea to soothe her nerves.

The indulgence seemed worth it at present. All of her family were in the Channel to France. Her uncles and her brothers, Stephen and Jonas, had gone across the Channel to France. This storm had come up so fast that no one had expected it, and all she could do now was wait.

Wait to find out if any of them were safe. Wait to find out if she was alone in the world as so many women were, fruitlessly waiting for them to return.

The harsh bang on her cottage door jolted her, and she whipped toward the sound. For an absurd moment, she fancied she could see the paneling shaking on the iron hinges.

Who would come out in such a storm? Surely she was mistaken. She was the wind rattling the door, but then there it was again...

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. The pounding was strong and fierce, rattled out, to carried away on the winds of the storm.

Her cloak She crossed to the window, pulled back the curtain, and peered across the black, rain-soaked night.

Who was there? Who was so mad as to be out in this?

As she looked carefully through the parted curtain, she spotted a large and ominous, a man who looked like a demon come out of the wild night, leaned against her door as if he depended upon it for his

In the whirling wind and crashing rainwater, she could not see his face for six feet. She could not open the door, could she?

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. His knock caused the door to shake by the startled Hazel.

“Please.” His voice was harsh as he begged. “Let me in.”

Steeling herself, she went to the small pistol above the fire, pulled it down, and headed towards the door. The pistol was cold to the touch, heavy, but she knew it intimately. Her uncles and brothers had taught her to use it well. And in the last months with Elias, she’d considered using it again, than once.

She licked her lips and paused before the door, the pistol ready in her palm.

If the man had been hurt, she could not leave him to his fate. She’d be able to live with herself if he died out there after she’d turned him away.

That said, she was no fool to let a wolf in without preparation.

So, she checked to make sure the pistol was primed and ready. She pulled back the hammer and then, bracing herself, she pulled back the bolt of the door and let the heavy panel open. Lightning flashed across the room, illuminating the man for a brief moment.

She let out a cry.

Blood streaked from his temple down his cheek and to his forehead, staining his jaw.

He was a towering gargoyle of a man. Well over six feet, his russet hair flashed reddish in the lightening, and then the dark came back.

In that flash of light, she had made out chiseled features, wide shoulders, and clothes that were plastered to his frame.

He staggered forward.

orce. "Thank you," he breathed. "Thank you."
e it was He staggered a few feet, crossing towards her before he fell to the f
She could not catch him in time, and he plummeted to the carpet-c
out into stones. A gasp escaped her lips as she feared he would crack his head
stuck out his arms in time and lowered himself the rest of the way.
Hazel shoved the door shut behind them, barring it against the r
figure. wind.
e sea in With his size, he'd barely made it all the way inside.
s life. His boots were pressed up against the threshold.
face. She bolted the door again, turned to face him, and did not know
say.
ake and He seemed vaguely delirious in his sopping clothes.
She slowly crossed to him, then crouched, as she kept the pistol
behind her.
ulled it "What is it?" she asked. "What happened to you?"
ich and "I..." He shook his head. "I can't remember. I think I went ove
t her to and I tried to swim to shore."
it more "What were you doing out there?" she rasped before she tens
looked out towards the Channel, though she could not see it throu
r in her walls. "Were you by yourself?" she demanded.
His brow furrowed. "Yes. I went over by myself." He grimaced. "I
d never was by myself. I can't remember well."
way. "If you've hit your head, I'm not surprised," she said gently. And i
his head, it would certainly explain the blood spurting from his
e pulled slipping down his face, and staining his clothes.
on the She carefully rolled him onto his back before she raced to the fire
ie sky, grabbed a piece of woolen and doused it in the hot water from the kettl
She came back and kneeled beside him, her pistol still at the ready
prove dangerous in his delirium.
midable Gently, she wiped the blood from his forehead and then his cheek.
He blinked. His eyes were wild, hypnotic, unyielding, and a shade
set hair she could scarce believe it.
She'd never seen eyes like that. She'd never seen a man like him
oulders, Not even amongst the massive and intimidating lot she'd grown up wit
There was something about him. Something haunted. "What we
doing out there in this weather?"

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “Who are you?” he queried.
floor. “I’m Hazel,” she said slowly. “This is my cottage.” She bit her lip
covered studying him. “But you clearly don’t belong here.”

, but he And he did not. From his accent, he did not come from this
Devon. Or if he did, he came from a great house somewhere.

ain and “People will be looking for you,” she said softly.

“I,” he said softly, as if surprising himself, “am looking for someone
that, I’m sure.”

“Who?” she queried, leaning over him, realizing that soon he would
what toto feel the effects of the cold. Now, he was in shock.

“I don’t know,” he returned, his face creasing in frustration. “It
slipped away from me. I was washed ashore.”

tucked She looked down at his form. There was sand and grit all over his
“I can see.”

“I think I collapsed onto those rocks out there near the promontory
rboard, then...”

“You were that far out,” she gasped “In this weather?”

ed and “Yes,” he affirmed, his voice a low rasp. “Thank you for letting me
ugh her didn’t know what to do, but I saw the light in your cottage, and I managed
climb my way up the steps carved into the cliff.”

I think I She stilled as she truly realized what he’d endured. “Good heaven
could have died on those steps, you know? It would have been all too
if he hitslip, fall, and crack your head again.”

temple, “I had to chance it,” he rumbled. “I knew I was in danger. I
needed help.”

. Hazel He knew he needed help.

le. Perhaps he was dangerous. Perhaps someone was looking for her
rlest he perhaps he would kill her, but she did not think so. There was something
about him, something wounded in his spirit and soul. Something deep
despite his power and strength.

so dark “I will help you as best I can,” she said, putting the damp, blood-
wool aside. She would have to bind the wound soon. “But you cannot
before anywhere now, nor can I, not even for the doctor. Not in a storm like
th. let us tend to you as carefully as we can. Can you come to the fire?”

are you He let out a low groan as he tried to crawl up onto his hands and knees
“You are far too big for me to drag you,” she said. “We must get you

the chair and warm you up. So come please.”

wer lip, He let out another slow moan as he tried.

“Here, take my hand,” she instructed. He took it, but then his part offluttered closed, and he dropped it.

“Don’t you dare go to sleep,” she ground out, and she clapped her hand against his cheek.

one. Of He winced, but she had no regrets.

She knew the dangers of falling asleep. Sometimes villagers did not begin to stir when they fell asleep after hitting their heads. Or they fell asleep having lost too much heat in the frigid Channel. The cold water could have all lives, even after a soul had escaped the waves.

“Come,” she demanded, determined to get through to him.

clothes. His eyelids quivered open, and he brought a hand to his jaw. “Good woman, you’ve quite a lot of strength there.”

cry and “All the better for you,” she replied. “Now, up.”

She got her shoulder under his arm and helped him stagger to the floor. He was heavy, as heavy as her biggest uncle, Uncle Davey.

ne in. I She feared she’d collapse at any moment, but she managed to get him aged to the chair.

“Now we must get these things off you.”

ns, you “Fancy me, eh?” he drawled, his voice muddled from the cold.

easy to She would’ve found his humor amusing and in keeping with her own, but his eyelids kept trying to drift shut.

knew I “Oh. Absolutely,” she teased back, even as fear for his life shined through her. “So let’s hurry along. You mustn’t keep me waiting.”

Without reserve or concern for modesty, she began pulling off his clothing.

lim. Or She got off his tightly wound cravat, and it slapped the stones as it fell to the floor. Then she yanked his heavy cloak off his shoulders.

perate, She grimaced as she threw it aside, then she took his tightly tailored coat from his frame.

stained Good lord, how many layers did he have on? Surely, he should have been drowned. He had to be an excellent swimmer to have survived.

this. So Focusing on the present moment, she made quick work of his vest and shirt.

rees. Though she noted the hard lines of his muscled chest and arms, she forced herself to keep working.

rou into forced herself to keep working.

And then she spotted his boots. Damnation. "Sit," she instructed.

He swayed, then he slowly lowered himself, though the action is eyesmore akin to tumbling into the wood chair.

She grabbed hold of his boots and groaned with effort as she tugged her handwet leather from his large feet.

It was no easy feat, and she nearly fell face forward onto the floor from the effort.

At last, she threw the boots aside and then made quick work of pulling up her afterstockings and breeches.

She veritably had to peel them off his limbs. There was no time for her observations about his shockingly perfect form or his male virility.

He was beginning to shake as the cold finally began to show its effect. Driven now to beat the frigid sea that had seeped into his boots, she rushed to her bed. She yanked off the wool blankets and linen she had crossed back to him and began to wrap him up, wiping the water from his face with the linen sheet.

As soon as she had him cocooned in the wool, she loaded the firewood and then she poured out tea into a mug.

She pressed it into his big hands.

"Drink this," she said firmly. "Slowly."

He was trembling and the tea danced in the mug.

Fearing he would spill it all over himself, she guided his hands at the mug, raising it to his lips.

He swallowed and then sputtered. Exhaustion strained his features as he met her gaze. "Are you an angel?"

"Absolutely not," she stated simply. "Angels do not live in cottages."

"I disagree," he rumbled. "I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been here."

"Died." She said simply because it was the truth.

Still, he was a stranger. And her life wasn't meant for strange things. People kept away from strangers. Their trade made that necessary.

Yes, he was a mystery indeed.

For with every word that slipped over his lips, she was certain he was a man of a much higher class.

The clothes she'd stripped from his beautiful and perfect form were made and expensive.

If he survived the night, when the storm ended, she would have
was farout where he was from.

For it was imperative she get rid of him as quickly as possible bef
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Before her family could silence him.

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If he survived the night, when the storm ended, she would have to find out where he was from.

For it was imperative she get rid of him as quickly as possible before her family discovered he was here.

Before her family could silence him.

For these cliffs and the stairs along them were not for the likes of him.

CHAPTER 3

“Cease,” he groaned. Sitting in the chair had proved too much and R had collapsed to the floor before the fire.

Pain stabbed his limbs like sharp needles all along his feet, calves, and arms. His teeth chattered together, creating a cacophony in his head.

He could not stop shaking. It was most infuriating. Surely, if he had the supreme will upon his body, his body would do as it always did and listen. Yes, his limbs would do exactly as they were told, as they always did when given orders by him.

Everyone followed his orders.

He knew that inherently, but he could not remember *why*. As he lay before the fire, someone kept rubbing his damned legs. Their hands, cold yet strong, moved fiercely, rubbing hard.

“Cease,” he groaned again.

“If I stop,” she said firmly, “you could die, and I don’t fancy having a dead man on my cottage floor. So, no, I’m not going to stop.”

The words were said in an accent he wasn’t familiar with. Or was? Somewhere on the outskirts of his mind, he felt as if he could recall it, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

Certainly, she spoke differently than he did, but the tenacious nature of her sentiment did not go unmissed.

“It hurts,” he ground out.

“Of course it hurts,” she said quickly without pausing in her efforts. “You were out in the English Channel. It’s frigid at this time of year. God knows how long you were in the water. Then you staggered up here in the rain. Of course it hurts. It’s going to hurt for a while, but pain is better than death.”

Right now, he wasn’t so certain.

“Sleep,” he said. “I want to sleep.”

“Everyone who went through what you went through wants to sleep,” she said. “But if you want to live, you will not allow yourself to be present.”

“W-whatever you say,” he managed.

“I’m glad we’re finally in agreement,” she replied.

But then an intense wave of need coursed through him, a need so powerful and visceral he could not contain it.

“I have to find someone. I have to find someone,” he repeated as he tried to sit up, feeling compelled to head back into the storm, even though he knew that made no sense.

“You’re not going out into this weather to find anyone,” she said, pushing at his shoulders. “Not in your condition and not with the storm. You would die in a few moments.” The intensity of her voice calmed, and her hands gentled on his shoulders as she met his gaze and assured, “We will find whoever it is you need to find when you are better.”

But the urgency inside him was so strong that even her steady hands could not quite calm him.

“I don’t want to wait,” he gritted as he sucked in breaths. “I’ve been waiting too long.”

But the truth was, in this instant, he had no idea how long he’d been waiting. He could not bring the details to his mind, and he found the silence terrifying.

“I can’t recall my name,” he ground out through his clattering teeth. “Do you know my name?”

He hated the way his voice sounded suddenly plaintive as he asked. “I do not know your name, sir,” she said. “We’ve never met.”

He blinked, trying to take in her appearance. Her golden hair fell over her face, tumbling, curly, and wild in the fire’s glow. Her face was heart-shaped, and her pointed chin suggested she was capable of mischief.

But at this moment, her eyes were wide, and she was clearly alarmed. “You should try to keep him awake. Her wool shawl was draped over her shoulders and tied about her waist so that it would not fall off as she worked over her hands. Her hands were strong though small.”

Her mouth was pert in her warm, inviting face. He’d not seen a face like hers. It did something to him. It made him feel as if anything was possible. Whatever was torturing him could be met and conquered.

“Who are you?” he gritted.

“My name is Hazel, and that’s enough information for you at present.” “Hazel,” he echoed before he clasped her hand in his. “Thank you.”

letting me in.”

She stilled at his touch, and she let her gaze trail from their entwined hands back to his face. “Of course I let you in. Any good human would be the same.”

He tried He blew out a rough laugh. A bitter laugh. “Then you do not know what I know, Hazel.”

“Oh, I do sir, and worse than you,” she countered as she pulled her hand out, from his and began her vigorous rubbing of his limbs. “Quite worse.”

He wondered at that. What could she mean?

“Do you live alone?” he asked as he realized that an angry husband would find his brother might come charging through the door.

There was a long pause as if she did not want to admit the truth.

“I promise I won’t hurt you,” he said.

She arched a brow. “You can’t hurt me in your state right now.”

“Probably true,” he agreed, still unable to stop the shaking. “It’s tiring,” he said. “I need it to stop. I need it to stop very badly.”

“I’d like it to stop too,” she concurred as she added another piece of cloth to the fire before she dragged her hands up and down the wool blanket she put over him.

Her nose wrinkled and her mouth turned into a hard line as she appeared to consider her options. “There’s nothing for it. I’m going to lay down with you, and I want you to hold on to me,” she stated.

She stood and picked up a clay bottle with a stopper. She uncovered the kettle with a cloth as she filled the bottle with steaming water. Working swiftly, she then wrapped it in a small piece of woolen cloth.

“Put this at your feet. And hopefully the combination of me and the bottle will help.”

“Are you going to strip naked?” he asked, shocked. “Y-You don’t have to. Y—”

“Shhhh. No, I am not,” she said matter-of-factly. “But I will be close to naked. Without hesitating, she untied her wool shawl, then made quick work of the lacing at her bodice. She tugged her frock down her frame until she was in nothing but her stays and chemise.

“If you try anything,” she warned, a glint of something hard flashed across her face, “I promise, you’ll regret it. I have brothers, and I know you for a few things about how to make sure a man is most regretful of any

action.”

He gave a tight nod. “I couldn’t even if I wanted to, and I probably would never wish to harm you.”

“Good,” she said with a sharp jerk of her chin. “You don’t seem manytype.”

He didn’t know what that meant, but he found himself grateful to her hand as she assessed him as thus. Somehow, he knew he wasn’t the type either, his job was protecting people, not hurting them, or at least he bloody well hoped that was true.

The muscles in his body were so bloody tense that he could not manage to relax, even as she laid down next to him.

“Wrap your arms about me,” she said.

It took several moments to force his clenched body to do so. He moved in slow degrees, opening up his embrace so she could slip into the blankets. Then she laid beside him, pressing into his long form.

Her skin was almost hot to him. He wanted to pull away, but she would not let him.

“Come then, get as close as you can,” she said.

He made himself do as she willed.

Though he hated this feeling of helplessness, he wanted to live with her. There was no romance or seduction in this. It was simply two bodies together, desperately trying to find warmth. He felt the hot water bottle at his feet and let out a groan of satisfaction. At last.

The heat felt wonderful. But he was still in pain.

She kept rubbing his arms and his back, and he kept chattering his teeth.

“When will it stop?” he asked.

“It will stop when it stops,” she said simply.

“That is an infuriating answer.”

“I only have infuriating answers just now,” she murmured against his chest. “Time will see it cease,” she assured, but she seemed tense, and that gave him concern.

What if it did not? What if he never found who he was looking for? What if he died on the floor of this cottage?

“Breathe,” she said. “Breathe. Tell me, where are you from?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Oh dear,” she said. “You really can’t remember anything after

your head. Hopefully it'll come back soon," she said.

"It's frightening," he admitted, "and honestly it's causing me to feel uncomfortable not knowing where I'm from and the chattering and the

"I'll tell you where I'm from," she rushed.

"All right," he said, grateful for the distraction. "Thank you."

"We're in Devon. Do you know that?"

"No," he said.

"Well, we are. It's where I have always lived."

Devon. The word slipped through his mind. He had a friend here
And that friend had been helping him find someone.

Images of a ship, of waves... They flashed through his head.

He hesitated, then blurted, "I remember that I was on a ship. We
oved in the coast and were trying to find a cave."

"You were trying to find a cave," she whispered, horrified. "Abs
mad. What would make you want to do that?"

There was something in her voice, as if she was keeping a secret.
had frightened her with his information.

"I don't know, but I know that I'm trying to find someone, and th
why we were looking for the cave."

"It must be very important to you. The caves here are not safe. Es
her, histo outsiders."

His heart was slamming against his ribs as a wave of irrational
swept over him again. It was primal, and he couldn't control it. "I
leave. I should go find—"

"You don't even know your own name," she countered f
"Whoever you need to help will be failed utterly if you try to go now."

He stilled, her hard voice cutting through his panic.

She was right. So very right. And he had to remember that whe
inst his feelings swelled inside him.

"Tell me more about you," he urged. "Perhaps that will help."

"My name is Hazel, as I said. I have two brothers and two uncles.
? What my brothers and my father died at sea." Her voice was almost metho
she relayed her history. "My mother died of a broken heart while walk
cliffs."

Though she said it so matter-of-factly, it was clear that her pain wa
hitting and deep.

“Why did your mother walk the cliffs?” he asked, though he el quite already knew the answer.

—” “She was looking for them,” Hazel whispered. “My father, my brother drove her to an early grave. It was as if the sea had stolen her heart...’

She was holding back, uncertain.

“Please, unburden yourself,” he rumbled. “It will distract me from bloody shivering.”

“My husband died too.”

, didn’t Husband. The word did something strange to him. Something he couldn’t identify. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“I’m not,” she gritted.

had left He was tempted to ask what devilry her husband had performed to cause such loathing but before he could, she hurried on in her discourse.

solely “Now, it is I who walk the cliffs. Waiting. Watching. A woman from my family has always walked the cliffs. There is a path we have worked out. As if by tradition and, honestly, I think it’s superstition too. We’re afraid that if we aren’t walking those cliffs, well, then all the men might not come here. What a washope is that they’re still...”

“What?” he prompted softly.

pecially “Well, that they’re still at port and that they haven’t tried to return last night. If they have, it’ll be a devil of a time.”

thought He held her now, close, for comfort and not just to ease his pain.

should “Are they in France?” he asked softly.

“You should not ask such things,” she warned.

fiercely. With her terse words, he realized that he might have oversteered. Suddenly, he remembered that many of the people along these cliffs were their living crossing to France and bringing back illegal goods that had been swallowed. He would not press her further. She was helping him, and he did not wish to make her feel uncomfortable.

“Tell me more,” he said, “about your life.”

One of She nodded, her cheek brushing his chest. “I grew up along this coast, half on ships and pulling oars on fishing boats,” she said. “I played with the rocks and the shallows, watching the tides, studying the ships. I played in the caves too. But I’ve never had a night like this. You are the strangest fish I’ve ever caught.”

He laughed at that as his muscles began to ease. “Yes, a very odd one.”

felt hehe agreed.

“Now,” she said, “you’re beginning to slow in your shaking. I th
other. It can feel a touch of assurance.”

’ He nodded. He felt it too. His body was beginning to relax agai
heat, the heat of the fire, and the hot water bottle at his feet.

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“Don’t!”

“I’m not sleeping,” he said, snapping his gaze open lest she clock
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“What’re you thinking about?” she said.

“Someone... I’m trying to see them. It’s a child, I think.”

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“Then I will help you find Vivian,” Hazel said. “I promise you
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urn this “Thank you,” he said as his heart began to ache, and the power
ache shocked him.

He longed for this little girl, whoever she was, and in a moment
came to him—a face with freckles and blue eyes and curling hair.

Only it wasn’t the memory of an actual face. It was the memo
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he agreed.

“Now,” she said, “you’re beginning to slow in your shaking. I think we can feel a touch of assurance.”

He nodded. He felt it too. His body was beginning to relax against her heat, the heat of the fire, and the hot water bottle at his feet.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

“Don’t!”

“I’m not sleeping,” he said, snapping his gaze open lest she clock him on the cheek again. “I’m thinking.”

“What’re you thinking about?” she said.

“Someone... I’m trying to see them. It’s a child, I think.”

“You came looking for a child?” she whispered, a plaintive note to her voice.

He nodded. “I think so. Vivian,” he said softly.

“Is she your child?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly as a wave of feeling came up in him. “I think... I think so.”

“Then I will help you find Vivian,” Hazel said. “I promise you that. I know everybody in these parts, and I’m sure we can find your little girl.”

“Thank you,” he said as his heart began to ache, and the power of that ache shocked him.

He longed for this little girl, whoever she was, and in a moment a face came to him—a face with freckles and blue eyes and curling hair.

Only it wasn’t the memory of an actual face. It was the memory of a picture. A small picture that he could hold in his hand like a locket.

Was this image his little girl?

He could not recall. And as he gazed down at the young woman who was keeping him warm, he felt a wave of gratitude for her because he knew, deep in his soul, that it was very important that he live for this little girl.

CHAPTER 4

*A*fter several long hours of keeping her strange, beautiful man alive finally let out her first breath of relief.

Once his shaking had ceased and his temperature had normalized, allowed him to drift off into restorative slumber.

The big man's color had returned to him.

His skin was now its natural color. The frightening pale blue had r Now, he appeared warm, and there was good color in his cheeks. His hair, warmed by the fire, tumbled over his face, and she found examining him.

The firelight danced over both of them.

Shadows clung to his cheeks, stubble caressed his jaw, and his lashes, much darker than the hair on his head, teased the hollows under his eyes.

His mouth was sensual, lush, and his body stretched out the entire length of the fireplace.

It had been difficult trying to keep him warm since he was so large, but she'd had to use every single one of her blankets and every resource she had. But in the end, she had triumphed.

She had beaten back death, and she had kept him here on this earth, and she had her to do what he needed to do.

And that thing was not small. For he was in search of his child. She could not imagine a more noble reason to keep a man alive.

The truth was that she knew many men who cared mostly about their families. Oh, they loved their families. There was no questioning that. But they did dangerous things to keep their family fed and clothed.

It was tradition on these coasts to be violent, to be strong, and to use the Channel as a weapon. She'd grown up with men dying constantly, whether from the sea or from exchanges with excise men. Or even with each other, for sometimes the families were distinct rivals.

Her whole life had been spent carefully avoiding another clan,

family that was powerful in the area. A family that was dangerous and
to wreck more than it liked to race across the Channel.

That family was terrifying.

Once, she had seen them race down from the cliffs to the rocky
and kill.

But Hazel At least she could say her family had never pretended to be a light
to lure poor, unsuspecting ships in.

she had Her family had never tried to drive a ship to ground upon the rocks
her family had not rushed in to kill everyone on board and take their goods

Her family dealt in a far more artful way of taking coin from the cargo
of the Channel.

They used speed, they used duplicity, and they used their knowledge
of the caves.

She'd always been proud of her brothers and her uncles and her
too. Well, her whole village. They were good at outwitting authorities
they helped people get a nice cup of tea, a glass of brandy, a bit of silk
that most people could never afford, especially now with the war on.

But it was dangerous.

There was nothing safe about it. And especially with the other
wrecking? Her life had been one of danger indeed.

This man beside her, he seemed strong and tough, but had he known
violent things? She doubted it very much, judging by his accent. Sullivan
was a man more given to balls than to battles. She looked at his hands
were callouses there, but not the kind that came from pulling on a rope

Perhaps he wielded a rapier or rode a horse without gloves
wondered. She wondered at such a man being out at sea. And much
shock, she found herself lifting her hand and brushing a lock of russet
back from his face.

She felt inexplicably connected to him because she had saved him
because of what he had told her, and how lost he seemed. She prayed
his memory back. Perhaps it would come quickly. That would be the best
everyone. She laid beside him, her body enfolded tightly in his arms.

A part of her longed to stand, to stretch, to dress, and to create
formality between them. But when she tried to move back, he let out
rumble of protest and pulled her closer to him.

Much to her surprise, she found she rather liked that possessive

id likedmade her feel safe, protected, and so she dared to let herself nestle into

The man who she had married had been big too. But his frame had been used for violence, never for her protection. She still struggled to understand why her uncles had wanted her to marry Elias, who came from the wrecking clan, but she knew why.

house They had to keep the peace.

They had to keep that family from wrecking her own, and marriages. No, often the best way.

So, it had been for hundreds of years, from lord on high to lowly peasant. Everyone understood what marriage was truly for. It wasn't for love, but for allegiance. It was for union. It was for the creation of more wealth and the protection of all.

She closed her eyes for a moment and allowed herself to concentrate on the rising and falling of the stranger's chest, the soft breath coming from his lips. The gentle rise and fall of his chest was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and she took such pride in it. She was so glad that he had found her, that she had let him in and not left him to be alone out there on the cliff.

Her brothers would've warned her against it. Her dead husband's family told her to let him die, but she could not.

After perhaps a half an hour, she slowly extricated herself and moved. Quietly, she headed towards his clothes where she'd left them.

Who was he? Surely, there was some clue.

She began to sort through his sopping wet things carefully. They were so drenched, so she brought them to the fire. She picked up a bowl and twisted out the water from the clothes into it as best she could.

The work kept her warm, though she stood in her chemise. The stranger's hair still felt the heat they had made together.

And of course, her fireplace was still crackling with heat, giving her a sense of life, amount of wood she'd put on it. She'd never used so much firewood before, but it had been in a good cause.

One piece after the other, she methodically draped his clothes on the rack so that they could begin to dry.

Then, with only an ounce of hesitation, she dug her hands into one of the small pockets.

There was a bag of coins in it. She pulled the hefty leather drawstring bag out.

it. She let out a gasp as she opened it and looked inside.
always The sovereigns glistened gold in the firelight.
gled to It was a fortune. In fact, she couldn't recall ever seeing so much
ie from her life. She'd certainly never held so much.
She swung her gaze back to him.
Was he a smuggler or a man of distinction?
ige was From his clothes, he certainly wasn't a pirate. With his accent, it
more likely he was a gentleman.
r sailor. She frowned.
; it was A wealthy man had been out at sea and washed up upon her shore
and forlooked at the clothes again and slipped her hands back into the pockets
There was a locket and a small notebook. She opened the book,
rate on ink had all run, leaving the pages covered in black, blurry squiggles.
rom his was able to make out the names Gabriel and Vivian repeated througho
g she'd Her heart stopped.
nd her, The child! That was the name he'd said. Vivian.
fs. His little girl.
ould've Who had taken her away? Her mother? Such a thought gave her
shudder.
l stood. Maybe the mother was running from him and did not wish to be
But he did not seem cruel or violent. She had known him but a few
She was being ridiculous herself to make such an assumption, and yet
y were it in her heart.
nd then Given her upbringing, she'd always been able to tell which me
vicious at heart. It had made her dread marrying her husband.
ely, she She'd always had a good instinct, one she followed carefully, and
her out of trouble time and time again. Until she'd had to marry.
ven the She rifled through the man's pockets and found an expensive kni
l in her pulled it out. This she would keep to herself.
She contemplated his cloak now. Again, she thought how lucky
ie chair that it hadn't caused him to drown.
It was made of expensive, heavy wool.
e of the He must have fought with every ounce of strength he'd had to ma
shore.
wstring She crossed to the fire and lingered before it. If her family was
France, it could be a few days before they returned. They would be

wait for the storm to finish, perhaps give it another day, and then return

Still, it was dangerous keeping the stranger here. Her family would not coin in like a stranger in their midst. No one from these parts would like it.

And if the wrong people found out he had planned on searching throughout around this area, the man might lose his life.

Tossing a fellow into the sea with a few rocks tied to his legs was a far unfamiliar practice along these parts.

She turned and stared down at her beautiful gargoyle of a man and a wave of determination washed over her. Somehow, she felt like he belonged here. She was now. That she was responsible for him.

As if he could feel her staring at him, he blinked. "Hazel," he said softly, opening his eyes and lifting his hand towards her. "Come back. But she whispered.

She was tempted to tell him no. She did not owe him anything, but the color was back in his face, but she did go back to him.

Not out of obligation, but because she realized she wished to.

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And if the wrong people found out he had planned on searching the caves around this area, the man might lose his life.

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CHAPTER 5

He jolted awake.

Sun spilled through the cottage windows.

Hazel was in his arms.

She fitted perfectly there, but she was not supposed to. He knew that was not supposed to be here either. His blood began racing through his veins, humming, driving him upward. He tried to stagger up. He needed to find the child, Vivian.

He couldn't linger, he was certain of that. But before he could act on his rash brain's urging, she grabbed hold of him as she woke.

"Don't," she said. "If you stand too quickly, you shall fall and crack your head, and then we'll be right back where we started."

He stopped, realizing the sense of her words. "Forgive me," he said. "I feel..."

"Yes," she said softly. "You feel out of sorts, as one would expect after the ordeal you went through last night."

"You handled it very well," he said.

"Thank you," she replied. She tilted her head back and smiled up at him.

That smile stole his breath and knocked him senseless. "You are exactly what you seem, are you?" he asked.

She cocked her head to the side, her golden curls teasing about her face. "And what is that exactly?" she said.

"A young woman in a small cottage by the sea."

"I am a young woman in a small cottage by the sea," she replied firmly.

"Who knows how to handle a pistol," he said, "and a big man."

She narrowed her eyes. "Would you prefer that I hadn't had the pistol? Did I did not know how to manage a big man? Would you prefer that I was a victim who could have life do its worst to me?"

"Not at all," he said. "I'm exceptionally glad you're so skilled. Strong women are not like anyone I've ever met."

"Is your memory coming back to you?"

He winced. "It all feels very blurry, if I'm honest."

His head was pounding, he realized. He lifted his fingers to his temple. Yet, the pain there felt like a good sign. He felt alive and alert. The blanket had tumbled down around his waist, and he felt a moment's embarrassment.

He had been pressed up against her all night, her body keeping him warm. He was desperately grateful to her, but this felt terribly awkward.

She'd felt as if she fit against him, but this was not how things were meant to go, of that he was certain. "Thank you for saving my life,"

he said suddenly.

"No need for thanks," she returned. "I could not have left you to rot in the woods of doors."

"Some might have," he pointed out.

"Yes, some might have," she agreed, "but not me. Now we best get on with it in you," she said. "You need your strength."

"Thank you," he said again, hating that he was about to lose her but he knew he could not hold her forever.

Hazel pulled away from him and stood. Her chemise tumbled about her, and the light of the fire left her in a shadowy silhouette.

Though he knew he should not, he admired her curves. He could not help himself.

For some reason, he felt suddenly invigorated. He knew it was because he'd almost died, and her body was causing quite an effect on him. It was as if his body longed to declare that he had won, with her aid, and had defied the darkness.

He offered her a smile. "Forgive me, I am not myself. I do not wish to stare."

She laughed softly. "Are you remembering yourself?"

"I know it instinctively," he said. "Now, I should get dressed and should leave you be."

"No," she said, "you should not. We need a doctor to look at you. I will go into the village and fetch one."

"Can I come with you?" he said. "Perhaps someone will know what I'm doing."

"What if you were running from someone?" she pointed out softly.

"Running from someone?" he echoed. The idea had never occurred to him.

“Yes. To be out at sea in such a storm, in search of the caves. The
emples.normal,” she said with a tsk. “Now, I think it best we try to figure c
lanketsyou belong to.”

ment. “Who I belong to?” he repeated. “You make it sound as if I’m in
1 warm.a keeper.”

“Perhaps you are,” she teased, “but you did mention a child las
gs wereAnd I think finding out who your people are will be the fastest way
he saidher.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “Why are you helping me with her?”
die out She looked away as if she did not wish him to see her emotions.
you mind. Now, I want you to sit up and in the chair again.”

Hazel thrust her hand out for him to take. Given her formidable na
get fooddid. Clutching the wool about his waist, he felt weak as he forced
upwards. His legs trembled as he crossed the short distance.

touch, She let out a groan. “Good heavens, are you made of stone?” sl
And with that, she helped him sit in the chair.

out her “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She tsked again and wrapped him up in more blankets.

not stop “You’re treating me as if I am a child.”

“I’m treating you as if you have almost died,” she replied. “Now,
becauseget you a cup of tea, some bread and butter, and then we shall go i
Yes, itvillage. A walk and some fresh air will likely do you good. But we
that hecareful.”

He couldn’t agree more. He wanted to be out of this small cottag
nean tothough it was a place that had kept him safe. He felt the need to get c
racing of his thoughts was beginning to increase.

What had happened last night? Why had he been out in that storm?
, and I His eyes turned to the pistol on the table. No doubt she would’ve
if necessary.

1. I will She brought out bread and spread butter upon it quickly.

“Here, eat that,” she said as she shoved the plate at him.

10 I am He took up the bread and butter, eyed it, and then did as instructed
the most delicious thing he’d ever had. The butter caressed his tongue,
nearly swooned.

irred to “It’s good, isn’t it?” she said with a smile.

“Did you bake it?” he asked around a mouthful.

at's not "I did," she said. "I'm quite a good baker, if you must know. I have my own skills."

"Good for you," he said. "I'm fairly certain that baking is not just a hobby for you."

She laughed. "I looked at your hands. I do not think baking is one of those things that you do at night either. Nor is sailing. You would have far more callouses than that. As to the matter of fact, I think you're a gentleman, so someone must be looking after you."

"A gentleman," he said. He paused. "Yes, I suppose that's right." "Never felt right, but there was no way to know for sure at present. He went to the cottage windows. The sun was streaming through them. Storms broke. It was the truth about them. He wondered if that was true in himself. He thought that it was, and yet he felt that he had been in a storm for a very long time. One that had not broken. And he wondered if he were actually in it, even though the clouds had gone."

He gazed at her, watching her move about the cottage with confidence. She was striking and capable and fiery. He liked everything about her, even though he knew he shouldn't.

"Will you tell your family about me?"

"Oh, you remember me telling you about them?" she queried, her eyes resting on the wool gown that she'd left by the fire.

"Indeed, I do. I assume they taught you how to handle yourself."

She gave him a surprisingly open grin. "I will absolutely tell my family about you... If you are still here when they arrive. We do not lie. The other, you see."

Her lips pursed as she turned towards the windows. "I don't want to be the first thing they see if they do return swiftly." She used it "That could be very difficult for you."

"I'd imagine," he said. "Family can be rather fierce around someone like you."

"Do you have a sister, do you think?" she asked.

He paused. "No. I'm fairly certain that I do not. Though I think I have a brother. That feels correct."

"Good. Things must be coming back to you."

He closed his eyes for a moment, and for an instant he saw a large boy and another boy. This boy looked a great deal like he did, and the

many running about the grounds.

“Yes, a brother,” he said with growing certainty.

She smiled again. “Now, let’s see if your clothes are warm enough on.”

But when she crossed to them and touched them, she frowned. “No, as a matter of fact. I think you shall have to borrow some of my brother’s things that were left behind by.”

“I see,” he said, as he eyed his own things, which were clearly suitable but fit him. He was surprised she had not mentioned her husband’s clothes. Had she gotten rid of all traces of the man? It seemed so. “If you insist always,” she said. “I don’t think that we should linger and wait here too long. I have a family to untie your mystery.”

She crossed to a trunk, lifted the heavy lid, and rummaged in it. As she was still satisfied with her search, she crossed back to him with a pile of clothes in her arms. “Here,” she said, “I shall wait outside.”

“You don’t have to do that. Just as long as you turn and face the wall, I’ll do everything.”

He stood and then he swayed back and forth. “Bloody hell,” he muttered. “Actually, I think I might need your help getting dressed. Can you do that for me?” “Only if it’s not a ruse for me to see you naked,” she teased. “Remember, I’ve already done that.”

“Only because you fancied me,” he teased right back, recalling her words and a wave of shock traveled through him. He knew instinctively that she would not laugh or tease in some time. He cleared his throat. “I promise you, I will not.”

“Right, then, I’ll help you.”

He wrapped the wool blanket tighter about his waist. “Shirt first, I’ll do the rest.” She nodded and closed the gap between them. Tentatively, she took one step forward, then another, arm by arm, as he carefully adjusted his position, bearing his nether regions, she tugged the shirt over his head.

It skimmed his skin, and he felt as if she was caressing him too. “It’s quite unusual and evocative.”

He gazed down at her. There were only a few inches between them. “I found myself wanting to be even closer to her. As close as he would have been in the house at night.”

Perhaps it was the dramatic events that they’d experienced together.

shock of it, but somehow he felt as if he'd always known her, as if close to her and could trust her with anything.

And then she grabbed the breeches. "Give me your legs, then," she

With that, her cheeks flushed red as she began to hoist the breeches, not at "Can you do the rest?" she piped once she got them past his knees.

"I suppose I can."

"I'm going to close my eyes," she said suddenly, and she did. 'till wetbrothers, but I suppose you should like your privacy."

things. "Thank you. If I'm honest, I'm having trouble controlling my reactions," he confessed, though he was loathe to admit it.

But she was awakening him, and the heat traveling through him was different than the warmth from the fire.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, though she did not seem horrified.

"I am a man, after all," he apologized. "And you are quite beautiful." "Am I?" she scoffed. "What a ridiculous thing to say."

"Do you not know that you're beautiful?" he asked as he tugged breeches up quickly so that she could not see how his body had hardened. her nearness.

And then he buttoned his breeches quickly. He was gaining his bearings, now, and he didn't feel quite so lightheaded.

The bread and butter had most certainly helped.

"I suppose I am fairly pretty," she said, "but I'm not really interested in the attraction of men."

"Are you not?" he asked. Society always made women care about looks, didn't it? He blinked as a wash of memories of ladies in silk and jewels curtsying one after the other traipsed through his head. images gave him no pleasure. Not like she did.

"What are you interested in?" he asked.

"The sea," she said swiftly. "I've always wished to have my own ship, but I've never been allowed, as a girl. I used to go out when I was sixteen.

It was then one day I was forced to stay on the shores, waiting for the men to come. Waiting is most frustrating," she admitted.

And deep in his heart, he knew it to be true.

He too had been waiting for *something* for years, something that had caused him a great deal of pain, and instantly he knew it was the little girl.

Her, the His Vivian.

he was “I’m sorry,” he said, and he took her hand in his, “that you have n
allowed to do what makes you happy.”

She said. She stared down at his hand and then carefully tugged it back.
“I’ll pick you up,” she said, “but wishing is pointless. And far too risky.”

Risk.

All of this was risky. As was his growing admiration for her. Sur
“I have feelings coursing through him now were solely based on the nature
meeting and would swiftly pass.

As he drank in her scent of the sea and the fire, he feared he w
much mistaken.

But deep in his heart, he knew he had no time for mistakes. He
searching for far too long.

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CHAPTER 6

The village was all but carved into the cliffside.

Houses and shops perched precariously along the steep hills descending into the Channel.

He felt a moment of unease as they began to descend the slick, cobblestones that were still shining from last night's rain.

In fact, rushing rivulets of water were traveling downward from the top, pouring along the small, cobbled road, which led back down to the Channel.

It was no irony to him that they'd had to ascend from her cottage up the cliffs to walk along the road that would then lead them down into the village.

Devon was a strange and formidable place. It was also beautiful. He had no words to compare. Like a jewel in a box of dross.

Somehow, he knew that he'd traveled. He'd seen many places. In the matter of fact, he was certain that he'd been to the Continent and that he'd fought in war. He'd loved Italy, Rome being one of his favorite cities. He'd avoided Paris.

He knew also that he'd traveled all over England and that he had friends in Cornwall.

In fact, he felt certain Cornwall was home, or at least the place he was from.

He hoped it would all come back.

But as he followed Hazel down the winding road into the village, he wondered what exactly they were going to find. He felt out of place in his clothes that did not fit him correctly and not just because they were ill-

They chafed.

He was used to different fabrics. He knew that from the clothes that he had taken from him and, of course, the fact that the shirt and breeches were terribly wrong.

The fabric felt rough, and he was used to being dressed far more formally. Usually, he required gloves, cravat, hat, tight breeches, a well-cut

linen shirt, stockings, and polished boots. His current attire was comfortable, but the wool was scratchy.

What was his name? It was driving him to the heights of frustration. He kept his eyes on Hazel and her golden hair as they slipped into the street. The bustle of people hawking fish and oysters filled the air. Dogs barked and children darted back and forth as they chased hoops and played with other.

Old men smoked pipes as they sat just outside their doors which pressed up to the cobbled street.

He had no idea how she was going to find out who he belonged to. She seemed extremely capable.

After several moments, they slipped to a side street and headed to a small shop, one that sold seafaring supplies, or so it appeared to him.

There was rope everywhere, bits of tackle, and compasses. Quick crossed to the desk at the back, and an elderly man looked up. His eyes widened and a lock of white hair tumbled with a surprisingly boyish air over his sea-worn face.

“Hazel, whatever are you doing here?”

“I need information,” she said softly “about a ship that was sailing where I live. You see, I’ve got a bit of cargo.” She cleared her throat. “It’s gone missing from that ship.”

The man’s gaze darted behind her and caught sight of him. “Him.”

Yes, he truly was growing quite tired of not knowing his own name. He was going to have to pick something.

“That man is the cargo, I presume?”

“Yes,” Hazel whispered. “We have no idea who he is. He stumbled into my cottage, and I helped him in the storm last night. We need to find out where he belongs lest he get into a great deal of trouble. I know you’ll be careful.”

The older man nodded, looking quite grave. “Yes, we must keep quiet,” he agreed. “And your brothers and your uncles, they’re not back yet.”

“No,” she affirmed.

“Right.” The man pushed back from his desk and brushed his hair over his grey breeches. “I will put out quick and careful feelers to see who were going past the cliffs last night.”

pletely “Thank you,” she said. “We will wait.”

“You will wait tucked away,” the old man warned, pointing to a
n as he the corner. “Over there.”

village. “Indeed,” she agreed.

ked and And with that, she pulled him over to a small table that was largely
th each view of the door.

“Are we not to go out and ask more questions of the village
h were inquired, finding the whole exchange very strange.

She snorted. “Not if you wish to remain alive,” she returned.

to, but He laughed. “That dangerous, is it?”

She did not smile as he expected but remained quite serious,
l into a paused.

“What kind of people are here?” he said. “Criminals?”

ly, she She did not answer, which only affirmed his question. It was
is eyes beautiful village, filled with laughing children and the elderly gazin
air over the comings and goings of daily life.

Smugglers.

That’s what had to be happening here.

ng near The whole Devon coast was rife with the system. He wasn’t alar
at. “It’s appalled by it. As a matter of fact, he was shocked to find that he felt

He did not know why, which did cause him some alarm.

Was he a smuggler or did he assist them in their trade?

A name came to his mind then. Darius Price.

me. He Darius Price.

Who the bloody hell was that? But somehow, it was conne
smuggling. And to him.

ed upon He knew that in his bones. He was half-tempted to ask, but then t
ind out opened, the bell rang overhead, and a man slipped in with the steal
will beshadow.

His black hair was dark as river stone in the dull light, and his taw
rep this kissed skin was a strange contrast to the usually pale faces of the E
k yet?” The man’s cloak whirled about him like storm clouds marring a blue s

And because he was leaning ever so slightly out of the nook to c
nds on the man, their gazes met.

at ships “Bloody hell, man,” the newcomer hissed. “What the blazers a
doing here?”

He blinked, stunned into silence for a moment, because it was quiet in that whoever this stranger was? Well, they had met.

“Do I know you?” he demanded abruptly.

The man let out a snort of laugh. “This is no time for jokes, Roderick. Men have been looking for you since daybreak. We were terrified they took you. And I was damned afraid I had your death on my hands?” he God, man. What the hell came over you?”

He blew out a breath, taken aback, and so he replied honestly, “I don’t know what came over me.”

The man’s dark eyes flashed. “You were washed over the side by the waves and he You were staring out at the cliffs. I told you to go down below, but you defied good sense. ’Twas almost as if you were possessed.”

“I don’t remember any of it,” he said quietly, wondering if this man had such a key to his past and to Vivian.

The man swung his gaze to Hazel, who was staring at the stranger as if he was straight out of hell.

“You know this man?” she whispered, her face paling.

“It seems so,” he said.

“Bloody hell,” the man drawled. “Roderick, cease.”

“He had quite a blow to his head,” Hazel said suddenly before pointing to Roderick’s temple. “You can see there.”

The man stopped and blinked, taking in the wound.

“Damnation,” the man rumbled. “It’s true. You did bang your head. How?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” Roderick replied swiftly. Given the man’s mysterious confidence, he felt certain that Roderick likely was his name. “I think I hit my head on the rocks when I was trying to swim in.”

The man let out a whistle. “And you didn’t drown or die of exposure?”

“Here I stand. She saved my life,” Roderick said, glancing at Hazel with a look of sun-gratitude.

The man narrowed his gaze at her. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

She gave a tight nod. “It’s Darius Price,” she said softly.

Roderick nearly coughed. “Darius Price,” he echoed. “That name has never entered my head moments ago.”

“Then your memories are coming back,” Price announced, “which is a damn good thing. We have urgent business. Does she know why you’re here?”

te clear here?"

Roderick assumed he knew why he was here, but what if there was
"She knows I'm looking for a child. Do you know why I'm here, D.
ick. My think I'm looking for a little girl. My little girl."

e storm He was trusting this terrifying looking man, but he knew him so
. Good And not just casually. They had been connected for a very long time.

She let out a note of alarm as if he was making a deal with this de
'I don't it was clear that the devil knew him.

"Yes, dammit," Darius Price growled. "We're looking for a litt
a wave. Yes, it's your daughter, and it sounds like you've told this woman eve
out you that you know, as best you know it. And you may have put Vivian

Have you forgotten the stakes as well?"
an held A sick sensation traveled through Roderick. "It seems I may have
he confessed softly. "But I feel certain she can be trusted."

as if he Price shot Hazel a dangerous look. "Can you keep a secret,
woman?"

"I can," she said swiftly, clearly aware of the danger suddenly fill
room at Price's hard turn of emotion.

"Good," Price whispered. "Because you know what happens to
ore she who spill secrets in these parts?"

She stiffened. "Of course I do."

"Are you threatening her?" Roderick demanded as he stood slow
r head. took a step towards the man. He was aware that Price was formidab
man crackled with power, but he was no milksop. He knew that as hi
man's easily flexed into fists.

hit it "Oh, dear God." Darius Price rolled his eyes. "Have you
developed affection for her? It's only been a few hours."

re." He was tempted to deny it, but he did not. Darius's eyes flared. "M
el with you have. You and your brother were always—"

"My brother?" he cut in.

u?" Price nodded. "Gabriel. Yes. Both of you are good men... Though
not shown that side to the world since your father died. And fo
me just reason."

He winced. He'd not been a good man? Since... A vision of his
ch is a wasted, laying waxen on embroidered linen sheets flashed in his head.

you are "Right then," Price announced. "You stay here, young woma

coming with me.”

“I cannot allow it,” she said tightly, stepping in front of Roderick.

“You cannot allow it,” Price mocked.

She squared her shoulders, a considerable gesture of defiance
Price’s clear power. “I do not know if you have good intentions for
saved his life, and I cannot allow him to just go off with anyone, es
evil, but someone like...”

Price cocked his head to the side and folded his arms over his darl
le girl. “Someone like who?”

“You,” she stated firmly.

And then Price threw his head back and started to laugh. “You’
something, aren’t you? All right then, lass, if you wish for trouble,
done,” found it. You can come with us.”

“You think that she lives nearby,” Hazel whispered. “Do you
young picture of her? For if she does live nearby, I will know where.”

Price shook his head. “I—”

“Price,” she dared to cut in. “You don’t live in these parts. You o
here and control things from afar. But I know every cottager in
people village.”

“It can’t get out who we are seeking,” Price warned, his voice l
hard. “You have no idea what will happen if people find out that
vly and looking for her. The consequences will be catastrophic for Roderick
le. The the child. Do you understand?”

She did not understand, it was clear, but she nodded her ascent. “I
put the little girl or him in jeopardy.”

“Good,” Price breathed. “Show her the locket. Do you have it?”

The locket. Yes, he had it.

He had put the piece into his pocket this morning, sensing that he
went about with it.

Roderick pulled it out, his throat tightening before he quickly unl
you’ve and stared at the little face. He knew it. He knew it like he knew his ov
r good

“Vivian,” he breathed, and she let out a gasp.

“This is the child?” she snapped.

“You know her,” Price bit out.

She began to back away. “I... I do.”

“Where is she?” Roderick demanded.

“How do you know her?” Price challenged, taking a step forward.

And suddenly Roderick’s heart began to pound. His palms went wet and he reached for Hazel, grabbing her. “Please tell us. My daughter is given know where she is—”

“Yes,” she rushed. “I would know that face anywhere.”

“You’ve seen her,” he breathed, stunned. All this time, he had been searching for her more than he could have imagined.

Tears filled her eyes. “I have seen her. I have seen her almost every day for the last seven years,” she returned.

“Seven years?” he gasped, shocked. He realized he had been looking for his daughter, but he had not realized he’d been searching for so long. “How have you not seen her in seven years?”

Price crossed to Roderick and grabbed him by the shoulder. “I understand that you cannot remember all the details right now. It must be very difficult and painful to you, but you are about to be reunited with her, and this woman is going to help.”

“I can’t,” she suddenly blurted. “I can’t help you.”

Roderick whipped away from Price and gently took her arm. “Why can’t you help me after all that you promised?”

“You don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head wildly.

“I do,” Price said softly. His voice lowering.

She sucked in a sharp breath. “You can’t possibly...”

Price’s dark gaze narrowed. “You know her because one of your family members has her, don’t they?”

She swallowed as her face went pale.

Roderick let out a low sigh of dismay. “It can’t be. Surely, your family would not do anything like that, would they?”

But then it hit him immediately that his own father had been a villain and it all began to slip back.

His father on his bed mocking him, a brandy glass in his hand, proclaiming how he’d stolen away Roderick’s daughter and that he would keep her in secret to keep his son in line.

“Hazel,” he urged passionately, “if your family is hiding my daughter, you must tell us where she is.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I don’t know what kind of people you truly are. I don’t know what you’ll do. I don’t know if you’ll hurt her and... I love her.”

“You love my daughter,” he ground out, his hands tightening about her. He forced himself to calm even as she sobbed. You emotion that had been captive in him began to rise to the surface “Go ahead, I’m glad someone loves her. Now, you must let me have the chance to love her too, for I have been looking for her, and I have never even had the chance to hold her. All because she was stolen away from me.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “And now you are going to take her away from me every day, aren’t you?”

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e her.”

“You love my daughter,” he ground out, his hands tightening about her arms, careful not to hurt her. He forced himself to calm even as all the emotion that had been captive in him began to rise to the surface “Good. I’m glad someone loves her. Now, you must let me have the chance to love her too, for I have been looking for her, and I have never even had the chance to hold her. All because she was stolen away from me.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “And now you are going to take her from us, aren’t you?”

CHAPTER 7

*F*amily.

It was not truly the correct word.

Yes, they were family by definition...

The little girl was with her deceased husband's family. And the dangerous. But that had not stopped her from loving the little girl who lived with them. After all, being Elias's wife had meant she'd spent a great time in his family home on the coast.

And though she had lived in a veritable personal war with her husband that had not meant that she could keep her heart locked away from the beautiful little girl who lived with Elias's parents.

How she longed to see the little girl laugh and be happy. It was one of her life's main purposes now.

She and the little girl had gone out together on many occasions. They had set out on adventures over the cliffs, chasing butterflies, picking flowers, looking out onto the horizon, picking out the ships sailing by.

The little girl was not named Vivian.

As long as she'd lived here on the Devon coast, she'd been named Vivian. This was a terrible coil!

But there was no mistaking the picture of the little girl for the one they were looking for, and it also made sense.

Years ago, the baby had suddenly appeared. The village all knew the little girl was adopted. Such things were impossible to hide in a small community, after all.

But the village was good at their keeping secrets. And the child was definitely their secret.

Had Elias's family taken in this stolen child? Her insides twisted in pain upon Roderick's face and began to feel the full force of the news that she had just taken in.

Did Elias's parents know that the baby had been taken away from her father standing before her, whose heart had clearly been ripped out?

Another tear slipped down her cheek as turmoil tumbled about ins
“I am so very sorry for this. I’m so very sorry for any part I have had
pain, but I promise you I have done all I could to keep her happy.”

“Is she happy?” Roderick asked, his voice near breaking.

“You do not know what you are getting involved in,” she
carefully.

Darius Price’s face grew dark as a shadow crossed over it. “It
husband’s family, isn’t it? Not your brothers or your uncles. Those f
y were they’re decent enough...” Darius’s mouth twisted. “But Elias’s family
io lived the cusp of the darkness that blights this coast.”

deal of “How do you know?” she whispered.

“I might not know every face of every cottager as you do, Mrs. .
usband, he said, “but I know the history of this place as if it were the blood
om the veins. We might not have ever spoken, but that does not mean that I
e of her informed about the families at play in this region. How else do you
keep my power? There is a war coming, and I am prepared for it. I
think that you are.”

They’d She grimaced.

ers, and A war. She did not want to face such a thing, and she did not war
to be part of it either, especially given the bloodthirsty nature
husband’s family.

Alice. “They take care of her, but they are not good people,” she stated.

Roderick plowed a hand through his thick hair. “I am not surprised

ne they “Why are you not surprised?” she queried, confused.

He gave a cold smile. “My father was not a good man. So, of cou
that the placed her with harsh people, people good enough to keep her safe,
such a but not enough to raise her to the station that she should be, or to peop
as most might show her softness. He gave her to people who would hide
matter what...and who would give her away if they had to.”

She let out a jagged cry of surprise. “What do you mean give her a

as she “Shall we tell her?” Darius Price asked. “Everything?”

Roderick let out a low moan. “I do not remember everything, Dariu

Darius’s lips parted with shock. “You don’t even know your own
om this do you?” Darius asked softly.

Roderick’s lips twisted in a wry grin. One which bore no humor.
you’ve told it to me. And I can remember my father. I can remem

hide her feelings of victory as he insisted I'd have to behave as he wished to keep my line intact. But what line?"

Darius blew out a low breath as his gaze searched Roderick's face. She held her own breath, trying to understand.

warned What could it be?

Who was this man, Roderick?

's your It felt momentous.

'ellows, "You're the Duke of Wrathborne, my friend," Price said quietly.

are on Her jaw slackened, and she whipped her hand to her mouth, stunned. She had saved a duke.

"If you were spotted in the village, we do not have much time, Smith," stated. "A man of your status? Someone will recognize you from my news sheets. Your likeness has been in it enough times. So, we must remain as quiet as we can. Get Vivian and go."

think I "You're just going to steal her away?" she queried, appalled.

do not "What would you have me do?" he returned, clearly bowled over by the declaration of his title. "I don't know anything right now about my title or life as a duke, but I do know I'm a father. And I miss my child, a child that Alice has never even held."

of her Gently, he placed his large hands upon her shoulders and gazed down at her eyes. "That much I know to be true, Hazel. I have been looking after her since she was born. I cannot let her go. Do her parents love her, the one who look after her?"

She thought of the way Beth Anne kept the child in strict discipline, he carefully watched, fed, but not loved. Hazel had always wondered why a man as warm would adopt a child that they did not wish to love.

ole who Now she knew.

her no Money, power. That was why they'd taken in the girl.

"The truth is," Hazel said, "they're the only parents that the little girl has ever known. But I do not think that they love her. They will turn her in if they find out of them if she's not taken away, but it'll be hard on the village to lose her." Her voice began to shake as she finished, "She's loved by many, in my name, myself."

"Then come with me," the duke said suddenly.

"Well, Darius Price's eyes flared. "What the devil are you talking about?" Roderick ignored Price, and his gaze lit with passion as he looked

keep our upon her. "Come with me, Hazel, and provide a sense of constancy to Vivian's life."

"I can't go with you," she protested. "I have lived by the sea my whole life."

"I think I'm from Cornwall," he said swiftly. "So the sea must be in your hand."

Darius let out a laugh. "You are from Cornwall. Not too far from Cornwall, though closer to Bodmin Moor."

"I can't live inland," she rushed.

"Then let my little girl go," he grated. "You yourself are clear that the Price people she's with are not good people. She should be taken away from Cornwall and raised by someone who loves her. By her father."

"We are wasting time," Darius broke in. "If anyone deduces where she is seeking the child, she will disappear."

"What do you mean she will disappear?" she bit out.

"I know this, but apparently Rodrick cannot remember," Price said sharply. "The old duke? He arranged it that if Rodrick ever went looking for his daughter, the little girl should vanish and go to a pauper's orphanage."

A shiver traveled through her. "Truly?" she rasped.

She'd seen those places when she traveled to towns. Dank, smelly, and hopeless, soul-crushing places. The children there were dressed in ragged clothes and hardly fed. Any hope or joy was quickly ground out of their faces.

They were a last resort.

And she could not bear to see little Alice there.

"I will go with you then," she said before she could think twice, "to make Alice's life better."

Then something struck Hazel. She was seized by a new horizon of possibility before her. "In fact, I wish to go... I ask to go. Of course, I wish to go because my girl has Alice, but if I go, I shall have chances and opportunities that I will never have here."

"Good," Roderick said as relief eased the tension in his shoulders.

She was going with the duke.

That title rattled around her head like a bolt of thunder. She had never known the duke, one of the most powerful men in the country.

Even she understood that.

A man with wealth, a man with an estate, a man, dear God, who

uncy incrush her entire family, who could set the excise men on her broth
uncles if he was angered.

7 whole No doubt, he had already deduced that they were involved in some
suspicious trade. Though she wished to go with him for Alice's sake
near atpossibility of a new path for herself, she had a lingering fear of what h
do.

the sea, His faced softened. "I can see it, your fear."

"Can you?" she retorted as she curled her palms into fists. She had
to help him, but she had not understood what would befall her, or her
that their doing so. She still did not truly understand. For the world of a du
n them, very different than her own. "What will you do about it?"

"I'm not going to hurt you, or your brothers, or your uncles
we are promised. "All I want is Vivian."

"Her name is Alice," she said softly.

"Alice?" he queried.

replied She nodded. "That is what my brother-in-law and his wife call her.

king for He sucked in a breath, then eased his hands from Hazel's should
ge." she wants to be called Alice, she shall be called Alice. But she's my da
and I wish to give her all the love I can, all the love she deserves, a
ouless, her from all that my father did."

in bare "Then I shall help you do it," she said, realizing that this was
m. thing. Even if it was frightening. "But I do not understand what I shall
how this shall work."

"I will take care of all your concerns but for now, we must go," he
"if it'll passionately, taking her hands in his, those big hands she had adm
much the night before.

opening "If Darius is right," Roderick said, "then the man who owns th
to help could be inadvertently putting Alice at risk. Do you understand?"

er have Her eyes flared as she understood his meaning. "It never even occur
me."

Darius looked at them both before he demanded, "What the blazes
mean?"

saved a "She asked the man who owns this shop to put word out about me
to find out where I might be from."

Darius let out a low curse. "I should have known that's why you
o could here. We go now. My men will scour the area for any suspicious beh

ers andand we shall race ahead. We will take your daughter, Roderick, and s
be safe.”

sort of Roderick clapped Price on the shoulder, keeping Hazel’s hand in h
and the She was glad of it. For despite the wild encounter here, she did n
e couldhim to let her go. She was not certain if she ever wished him to let her

“Lead on,” the duke ordered with an authority that was undeniable.

With that, they swept out of the shop. Her heart pounded in her chest
l swornshe wondered what the devil she had gotten pulled into.

family, She rushed to keep up with the men as thoughts tumbled throu
ike washead.

They headed out into the cold salty air, seabirds crying over head.
es,” he She was going to go and live with the duke.

It was all happening too fast. She was half convinced it was a dr
dream that had become a nightmare.

Surely, this was impossible. Last night, she had been alone in her
” during a storm, not daring to go out and walk the cliffs.

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and we shall race ahead. We will take your daughter, Roderick, and she will be safe.”

Roderick clapped Price on the shoulder, keeping Hazel’s hand in his.

She was glad of it. For despite the wild encounter here, she did not wish him to let her go. She was not certain if she ever wished him to let her go.

“Lead on,” the duke ordered with an authority that was undeniable.

With that, they swept out of the shop. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she wondered what the devil she had gotten pulled into.

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They headed out into the cold salty air, seabirds crying over head.

She was going to go and live with the duke.

It was all happening too fast. She was half convinced it was a dream. A dream that had become a nightmare.

Surely, this was impossible. Last night, she had been alone in her cottage during a storm, not daring to go out and walk the cliffs.

Now, she was in the company of a duke and one of the most powerful and terrifying men in Devon. She could not gainsay Darius Price. Anyone who did would see themselves tossed out to sea, left for the fish to eat their flesh.

Darius Price might have good manners, but he was as formidable and dangerous as any wrecker. He was no better than her husband’s family. In fact, he was likely far worse.

How was it possible that the duke was friends with him, such a dark man. But it seemed like Darius genuinely cared about the duke, and he truly wanted him to find his little girl.

So, she would do the only thing that was right, the only thing that was just. She would take the man she had saved to his child just as she had promised she would do, and then she would guard Alice with her life.

CHAPTER 8

*H*azel was brave.

Of that, there was no question. It was a thought he could not escape as they rode across the Devon landscape, each pound of the horse's hooves bringing him closer to his daughter. The ache of it was intense, as was the terror that she might slip through his fingers.

The stakes... That was what Darius had said. He had forgotten the stakes but now he knew. And the risk he was taking was extreme. If he failed, his daughter might disappear forever.

But after seven years, it was clear he had been pursuing her vigilantly, only bringing in Price to aid him.

Now, he had another ally. A fierce, beautiful ally.

She was going to do the right thing in Roderick's estimation, even if it was going to upset her world entirely. He was asking so much of her to give up the cottage, the life she'd always known, to come and meet her daughter and make her daughter feel safe.

He did not even know, in this moment, if he was doing the right thing. But he felt in his soul that he was. Surely, he should be with his little girl.

And from everything that Hazel had said, the people who were entrusted to look after her did not love his daughter as she deserved, and his daughter did deserve love.

Powerful, all-encompassing love.

And he was going to give it to her. But now, as they neared the cottage where she lived, he felt a wave of uncertainty. He was not himself. He had all the facts in his brain. He could not remember so many things.

Memories of Darius were beginning to come back. The dark-haired man with the gravelly voice who looked as if he could conquer the world had been in his corner for a very long time.

Yes, they had been friends for years. Roderick could recall that. They had met in odd circumstances. It was singular, the eldest son of a noble and a smuggler becoming friends.

But he had been young and wanted to understand France.

He'd slipped across the Channel in the dark on a smuggler's Darius's boat. Roderick had gone and seen the revolution firsthand, his father's wishes.

Images of Paris's bloodied streets were easy to recollect, as w mobs that tore living bodies to pieces, so full of rage were they at how starved for years.

cape as

At how they'd been treated like nothing.

hooves

was the

It had changed the way he saw the world, and he'd known then father's world could not be allowed to continue any longer.

stakes,

led, his

So, he and his brother Gabriel had made plans to change the world.

His father had clearly not approved. And the consequences had been

e baby

And apparently, he'd always struggled with listening. He still str with listening, and he'd struggled with listening on Darius's ship th before.

though

her, to

ake his

To his relief, the memories were coming back swiftly. He'd been stay below, but he'd been so consumed with the need to find Vivian could not stay below.

Besides, the oppressive feeling of the cloistered air in the lower de made him feel cornered, and he'd needed to come up for a breath of fr

ing, but

And then he had been washed overboard.

trusted

aughter

It made him feel like a failure, but he wasn't a sailor. He could n known that such a storm would toss him like a mere stick into the ocea bobbed and turned about.

But he knew now.

He knew that he had been thrown from that ship for a reason.

e house

did not

gone up for a reason. He'd been captivated by the light on the windows glowing from a cottage on the cliff.

Yes, he had swum to the shore, following her lights.

ed man

ad been

He remembered it now.

As he had been tossed over and the foamy waves had crashed c head, he had focused on the light in her windows, and it had called to h

at now.

a duke

He had answered that call, striking out fiercely, arm over arm, refu die, refusing to give up, refusing to swallow the salt water that kept t find its way into his lungs.

And he had clawed himself onto the pebbled shore, then dragged

up to her house and banged upon the door.

boat— She was his connection to his daughter now.

despite As they neared the small white house, he turned on his horse, carefully adjusting the reins, and called to Darius, “Is this a mistake? I don’t want the little girl to be frightened. What if it turns into a pitched battle?”

they’d “It won’t,” Darius assured from atop his obsidian-colored stallion. “I have too much influence in this area. Remember, that’s why you came to help.”

that his “I can’t remember so many things,” he confessed, to his frustration. Things were coming back and quickly now, but it was still maddening.

“Then let me help you to remember why you came to me,” Darius said in a calm tone. “Most of the people in this area are under my command, or at least under my influence. Some of them operate in small groups independently, and I allow them to do as they please. Elias’s family is one of them. They’re not good people. They’re rather dangerous.”

But they’re not the worst lot either.”

told to “And she was married into that family?” he asked, stunned, trying to imagine Hazel in such a household.

She was riding just a few paces behind, her attention focused on her mare.

ash air. Darius nodded. “My men knew of the alliance between her family and Elias Smith’s. I do not get into the weeds of petty rivalry if I can help it. I would prefer the families to sort it out if they can. Smith’s family is dangerous, but not the worst. And her brothers and uncles have smuggling in their blood. That’s what they’ve always done. They bring back goods, and sometimes the goods that those wanted by the French government escape, but they’re not murderers.”

He had Darius blew out a breath. “I don’t know why your father would have been so close to Vivian with the Smiths, for there have been times when that family did things that would make you shudder. But it is harder for them to be brutal than it is for the excise men running up and down the coast so frequently.”

“My father did it to make me suffer,” Roderick explained. “Even though I never did not know what sort of people my daughter was with, no doubt I would have been glad to know. I would have taken delight in knowing that his granddaughter was being raised by such good people and that I would never find her. But he underestimated me. Why would he?”

“Yes, he did,” Darius said with approval. “Now, when we go in, I’ll tell them myself. It’s plain to the Smiths what’s to happen, and they will listen to me. But I’ll let you handle it.”

go in there blustering, it could get tricky. I want you to linger back.”

Roderick nodded, though it was hard to accept. “I called you into carefully a reason, so I will allow you to be my guide.”

want the “And Hazel, will they be furious with her?”

Darius shook his head. “It is impossible to know. If you offer me money, then they might accept her going easily. She doesn’t tell me for belong to them anymore since the husband died. That’s why she has the cottage on her own.”

stration. “You truly do know a great deal about these people.”

Darius smiled slowly. “I know every nook and cranny and mousehole in this county of Devon. My only regret is that I did not realize that their leader was my child.”

ow that. He gave a nod of his head. “How would you? My father was a very rough man.”

And with that, they rode in slowly.

ying to He glanced back at Hazel, who looked most alarmed to be atop a horse.

It was clear she’d ridden, but he rather thought she’d probably ridden Devon ponies rather than a large mare. Still, she held her own, her blouse streaming out behind her.

ily and As they approached the cottage, the door swung open. A woman stepped into that open rectangle and cocked her head to the side, planting her hands on her hips. “Whatever are you doing, Hazel Smith, with these two men?”

od. It’s And then Mrs. Smith caught sight of Darius Price. She let out a sharp breath and took a step back. “Mr. Price, “she called out.

ers.” “Yes, Mistress Smith, you’ve the right of it,” Darius said with a slight incline of his head.” Would you care to invite us in?”

l things “Of course, of course, you must come in,” she rushed, wiping her brow with her apron.

And with that, she gestured for them to cross her threshold.

hough I The three of them dismounted and tied the horses to a tree near the one that had been whipped and beaten by the wind but still managed to hold hard and coil its strong limbs towards the sky.

, didn’t They crossed into the small house that was clean and warm. Roderick kept looking about for signs of his daughter. His breath hitched when he spotted a doll sitting on a table in the corner of the hall.

t if you He looked about, searching, and as he crossed through the hall and

the kitchen, his heart nearly stopped.

this for A little girl stood scrubbing clothes. Her hands went up and down, dragging the wet garments along the board. Her hands were red, worked, the little girl looked hardy and bright. She did not look sad.

er them As a matter of fact, she was singing a tune as she labored, but miraculously tough labor for a child so young. He longed to take her, wrap her in his arms, then sweep her away to a place where she would never have to experience this difficulty again.

But then he realized, she was strong and healthy.

er in the At least there was that.

ttle girl Darius crossed to the woman. "Where's your man?"

"Out back," she said swiftly. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Price? My clever husband's left brandy. He'll be back very soon."

"I think that a very good idea," Darius replied. "What is he doing?"

"He's taking care of the ponies."

orse. The ponies were a part of Devon culture. He'd heard about them, the Darius, how they helped to transport and smuggle goods in the dark and hard difficult pathways.

As if called, a big brawny man came in through the back of the kitchen, crossed calling his wife's name. "Beth Anne, who the devil is here, woman?"

er hands "Mr. Price and his friends," she replied loudly, her eyes wide with wariness.

ragged The man strode into the room, his legs thumping like tree trunks. His hair was shorn close to his head, and there was a scar across his eye as if someone had slashed it with a knife.

Roderick didn't feel intimidated by the man's rough presence, a man whose hands were calloused when he remembered he had faced men in battle. His body knew the tension, the preparation of it. And so he inclined his head. "How do you do, sir?"

house, Mr. Smith eyed him carefully. "Very well, and you are?"

to turn "This is my friend," Darius said with a low sort of warning. "Of course, you know me."

oderick Mr. Smith gave his forelock a tug. "Indeed, Mr. Price. But when he bloody hell is our Hazel doing here with you two? She should be back in the cottage waiting for her brothers and her uncles. They should be back here by this passed moment."

Mr. Smith gave her a disapproving look. "Hazel, you should go and see your mother. A good supper waiting."

She said nothing, much to her credit.

"What can I help you with Mr. Price?" Mr. Smith finally asked.

Price paused. "You have someone here that is of interest to my friend."

The woman and the man tensed. "Do we?"

Price nodded, spinning the information out slowly, like a rope measured the depths of the sea. "The little girl, Alice. You've adopted her."

"We did," Mrs. Smith rushed. "She's an asset to the house, a hard worker. We like her well. There's no need to take her away at present."

Price nodded, folding his arms across his broad chest.

Roderick stepped forward. "But you've been given orders to stay away, haven't you, if you get a message?"

Both the man and the woman grew pale. "How do you know that?"

"Because I am her father, and you will give her to me."

Mr. Smith flinched but did not retreat. "You cannot have her. We've been given strict instructions."

"The man who gave you those instructions is dead," Price stated. He raised his hand, a gesture of good will. "No doubt payment has been made for some time, but that arrangement is done. This is the new Duke of Wrathborne. You have his child. And he wants her."

The man began to shake his head. "That's not how it's supposed to be done."

Price cocked his head to the side. "Did you want to have trouble with me?"

Mr. Smith began to fidget as he realized he was in a difficult situation. "No, Mr. Price. I don't want to have trouble with you."

"Good." Price clapped his gloved hands together and smiled. "They will understand each other. You will give him his little girl. You will not take her again. And you will understand that the arrangement that you had with the old duke's over. Now you can have an arrangement with the living Duke. I'm sure that the Duke of Wrathborne will be happy to give you coin for what they're your troubles."

Mr. Smith's eyes narrowed, as if sensing something was afoot. "Would His Grace do that if we no longer have the child?"

Roderick arched a brow and replied, "Because Hazel Smith is g

and have come and live with me and look after the little girl. To make her feel comfortable while she adjusts to her new life..." He drew in a breath and drawled. "I don't doubt you'll be heartbroken."

The woman scowled. "My heart doesn't break so easily. I've lost children before. It's the way of it. And I never loved Alice. I made sure of it because I knew one day I might have to send her away. But if you are her father, assuring you've defeated the old duke's plans, my hat is off to you, sir. Good work, Your Grace. But your father was a wily old fox. You best watch out. A worker never knows what he had planned."

"Are you threatening me?" Roderick growled, taking a step forward. Price asked. "No, they're not, because they know what the consequences are of threatening my friends."

The woman winced, and her husband nodded hurriedly. "We don't want to offend Mr. Price. There'll be no trouble from our quarter. But Hazel should stay here. She doesn't want her going off to be the doxy to some duke."

"Doxy?" Roderick boomed.

"Do not be ridiculous," Hazel finally piped up. "He's a perfect gentleman. A Priceman who has lost his child. And it would be in Alice's best interest if I were arranged for a time to make certain that she feels..."

"Feels what?" Mrs. Smith scoffed. "She's a child. All that matters is a warm bed and a good roof. That's all she should care about. She shouldn't be bothered by anything else."

Roderick winced. Was that all his child had had? No, he knew it wasn't. He knew it because Hazel cared about her.

As if the little girl had heard Hazel's voice, she popped in. Her russet hair curled wildly about her pink-cheeked face. Her clothes were simple and slightly frayed. But she was sturdy and confident as she rushed forward. "Aunty Hazel, you're here," the little girl exclaimed. "Can we go after walk, please?"

Hazel knelt down, holding her arms out, and the little girl ran into them. "Not right now, pet. We're sorting out a few things, but then I shall be glad for all happy to take you for a walk. Would you like that?"

The little girl nodded and threw herself deeper into Hazel's arms. "Why have you work to do in the kitchen. When you're finished here, will you come and get me?"

"Of course," Hazel assured, giving her another squeeze.

feel safe The little girl pulled back and started for the kitchen, but then she
said, “No and peered up at Roderick, staring at him carefully.

“You look familiar...” she began.

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The little girl pulled back and started for the kitchen, but then she paused and peered up at Roderick, staring at him carefully.

“You look familiar...” she began.

“Do I?” he queried, his throat tightening. For a moment, he was certain his eyes were about to fill with tears. For here she was. His daughter. And the love he felt was so intense that it was almost agony.

But it was an agony he welcomed. Dear God, did he welcome it. This was what it was to love...

She tilted her head to the side, her brow furrowing. “Yes, but I don’t know why.”

“Go to the kitchens,” Mrs. Smith ordered.

With that, the little girl jumped and rushed off.

He wondered if his daughter recognized herself in him, for in many ways, she was his spitting image in little girl form.

“Now, you will give me what’s mine,” Roderick said firmly, willing the Smiths to understand. “And I will pay you for Hazel to come and work for me for a time.” But then he gave them both a look of warning that he prayed they felt in their souls. “And you will not say another word about Hazel being my doxy ever again. For she’s far above either of you.”

Hazel sucked in her breath at his pronouncement. And Price gave him a warning stare.

It might have been a damn dangerous thing to say, but it was the truth. And he was done with lies.

At last.

CHAPTER 9

Now that Roderick's daughter was so close to being returned to long last, he did not know what to do. Roderick stood in the small room. Mr. and Mrs. Smith stared back at him, awed, angered, but won

He was almost incapable of movement.

Still, not having all the facts in his head did not make it easier. He and looked to Hazel as if somehow she could direct him.

"You should go to her," she said softly. "Ask her if she'd like to see you. Explain what... Explain who she is." Hazel gave him a gentle but smile. "You've waited all this time. Go."

All this time.

The agony of all those years crashed down upon him. He remembered. Dear God, he remembered. The sleepless night impossible searching. The standing alone in his chamber, cursing his He'd had to be so bloody careful, using men like his old friend Darius to finally be in this moment.

Evading his father's traps had been no small thing. But he had done it. Because, in the end, his love for his daughter had been more powerful than his father's cruelty.

With that, Roderick nodded, and he started for the small kitchen.

As he crossed the small sitting room, Darius clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We need to go soon," he said. "It is better if we leave now. I understand you need to ease her into this. But—"

"I understand," he replied, and he squared his shoulders and headed for the small kitchen with the fire blazing and the girl standing over her work. She was washing dishes now.

"Hello," he said.

She paused, turned, and glanced back at him. "Hello. Who are you?"

"My name is Roderick," he replied as his heart began to pound in this momentous meeting.

"Roderick, are you friends with Mrs. Smith and Mr. Smith?" she asked.

rather boldly.

He cocked his head to the side. "Are they not your parents?" he softly.

"No," she said swiftly, her mouth crooking as she considered. "Th me in when no one wanted me," she added, "and I do my very best him atmy keep."

His heart twisted at her words. Had she lived in fear that she'd be sitting out if she did not earn her keep?

"You look like you do a very good job," he said softly.

"Thank you," she replied. "I'm most skilled. Even Mrs. Smith says e turned

"She must be right," he said. "And do you enjoy other things go with books?"

"I can't read," the little girl said easily. out firm

He blinked. Of course, she was still quite young. "You can't read?"

She scrubbed at a porridge bowl as she explained, "Hazel pron And he teach me though. She says that I'm going to learn how to read books, a s. The very excited about it."

The little girl scowled as she took up another bowl. "Mrs. Smi father. books are a waste of time, and a girl like me doesn't need letters, bu is Price the idea of disappearing into books. Do you like books?" she asked.

He was surprised by her forthright line of conversation. He blinked done it. I do like books. I have many of them."

"You do?" she breathed before she gave a bright smile. "How wor ul than How many do you think you have?"

Suddenly, a room came to him. He could see it in his mind. "C on his mused, "hundreds, I think."

"Hundreds?" she gasped. "I did not even know hundreds of led into existed."

"They do," he said, realizing he was making her quite happy wi ork. conversation. "Do you think you might like to come and see my books

"Oh, yes," she said, but then her smile dimmed. "But I don't see l ?" get away. I'm very busy. Mr. and Mrs. Smith always have me at wor at this of every day."

"What if you could come and stay with me, and Mr. and Mrs. Sm e asked already said yes?"

She stared at him warily. "I don't know you at all," she said.

“It might feel strange?” he queried.

He asked, “Yes,” she affirmed before she chewed her lower lip again. Alice seemed.

They took “Alice,” he began, “there’s something that I must tell you, and to earn know if you will like it or not.”

She wiped her hands on a piece of cloth beside the washing up and turned to him. “That’s all right. Life is full of things that are unpleasant. You just out with it if it’s unpleasant.”

Her practicality was breathtaking, and so he did not hold back. “Yes, so.” I’m glad that you know that the Smiths are not your parents. That you go, like they are simply the people who took care of you. Did they tell you anything about your mother and father?”

She gazed down at her hands. “No, not a bit. They simply said I was taken away, and that I shouldn’t expect to ever see them, and that I was likely to live here. They said one day, I might be sent away, but not to my parents and I’m somewhere harder, especially if I don’t behave.”

He winced. He doubted Hazel would approve of this, and he was just that says now that he was here to offer his daughter security.

“What if I told you that your father wanted you very much indeed?”

Her eyes widened. “My father?” she whispered. Her eyes flared. “Yes, you my father?” she suddenly whispered.

He sucked in a shuddering breath. “Yes, Alice, I am, and I have been wonderful. looking for you for a very, very long time.”

She let out a small cry. “What? I don’t believe it,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “You were taken away from me when you were a baby,” he rushed never even got to meet you, and I have spent so long looking for you here where you are. I’d like you to come and live with me.”

She blinked, her eyes filling with tears. Then she shook her head. “That can’t be true. It’s too much like a fairy story.”

“It’s not a fairy story,” he assured. “As you said, life is unpleasant now I’ll be full of difficulties. My father was not a particularly nice man, and he sent me away. I’m sorry for it, but I’ve been able to find you. Please come with me and let me be your father. And I can see that you like Hazel. She has a lot to do with had come too, and I have agreed.”

“I am to live with Hazel?” she breathed, and he realized that that was the true boon of all of this.

“She loves you, doesn’t she?”

rabbit, it She nodded.

“And you her?” he asked.

I don’t “She has shown me so much kindness,” Alice said passionately.

the thing which makes me happy, and you are saying I could live with

I turned He nodded, his heart aching, but now he felt that there was a good

shouldhope too. “Yes, she will come with us, and you will live in my house

and I will get to know each other. You’ll have all the books you could

you see, want and a place where you know that you will never be sent away from

you know will never require that you do so much work to earn your keep.”

nothing She stared at him aghast. “But we must earn our keep,” she said.

He took a step forward and knelt down. “Your keep will be learned
as sent read and getting an education.”

lucky to She gazed to the window. “Do you live very far away from the
ents, to cannot imagine living away from the sea.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t even live so very far away from here. Not really
grateful if you consider it. I live in Cornwall,” he said.

“Cornwall?” she echoed as if it was a distant fantasy land.

” “Do you like Mr. and Mrs. Smith? I can permit you to see them with
d. “Are you wish.”

She let out a strange sound. “I don’t like them,” she said honestly.
I don’t dislike them. They keep me safe and warm and fed, but I know
they don’t particularly like me.” She wound her hands together. “Hazel
the other hand...”

shed. “I Alice’s lips turned into a small smile. “When do we go?” she asked

ou, and “Immediately,” he said. “Is that all right?”

She blinked. “I’m frightened, if I’m honest.”

‘It can’t “It’s all right to be afraid,” he informed carefully. “I have been afraid
and Hazel has been very kind to me. Especially when I was afraid.”

ant and “Hazel is kind to everyone,” she stated. “I hated it when her husband
ent you mean to her. I could see how it brought her down, and I tried to cheer
with me, up.”

sked to His insides clenched. And he found himself wishing he could bring
husband back from the dead so he could bury the monster again. How
was the anyone be cruel to Hazel? But he knew the world was full of people
loved to prey on the good.

But no one was ever going to prey on Hazel again.

“I’m sure you did cheer her up,” he said. “And now we can all be together. Would you like that? And be free of all the unpleasantness?”

“She is in place.”

“Her?” Her eyes widened. “I would like that very much,” she said quickly. “I shall get my things.”

“Please do,” he said.

How he wanted to take the little girl into his embrace, but he did not dare ask for such a thing. It seemed too much, but then she looked at him again, “You are my father?”

“Yes, Alice, I am. And I have loved you since I learned about you. I cannot wait to get to know you.”

She eyed him carefully then. “I have always dreamed about meeting you at sea? If you are my father and mother. Will I get to know my mother too?”

His throat tightened. “I am so very sorry,” he managed. “She died many years ago.”

She nodded. “I understand this isn’t to be perfect, but...” The girl crossed slowly towards him where he was kneeling and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “I am glad to meet you,” she said. “I knew so much about you when I saw you in the sitting room. You look so very much like me, and I know. “But I like my heart knew. It called out to you. I can’t explain it,” she hurriedly said. “I know that you were my home and that you’d change my life.”

Hazel, on the other hand, tears filled the little girl’s eyes, but she blinked them away rapidly. “I declared, “I’m so glad you found me, and I’m so glad you’re going to take Hazel away too.”

He held her tightly to his chest, tears of his own filled his eyes. He knew and they stung. But in the very best of ways.

“I did too,” He swallowed them back, and he breathed in her little girl’s scent and the sea. This was heaven. It was as much heaven as he could ever have.

“I did too,” This was what he had been working for years to attain, and this was the beginning of freedom for himself and for her. And, he was certain, for her too.

“Get your things,” he said as he gave her another hug.

“I can’t,” She pulled back from him and cupped his cheek with her small hand, wiping away his tears. “There is no reason to cry, Papa,” she said, “for we have each other.”

“They’re not tears of sorrow, my love,” he said softly. “They are kind to joy. Pure joy.”

And at that, she smiled. “I give you joy?” she asked.

He nodded, hardly able to speak as emotion overcame him. “Oh, so much. I can hardly bear it.”

She beamed at him, nodded, turned, and ran from the room to go to her things.

Hazel slipped in and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I listened to that last part,” she said very proud of you.”

He glanced up at her. “Proud of me?” he said.

“It couldn’t have been easy,” she said, “bearing your heart like that, trying to find a way to tell her the truth about herself and you.”

“It was not easy,” he said, “but the moment I realized I was giving her my dream, all the worries fell away.”

“Her dream?” Hazel whispered.

“Yes,” he said, taking her hand in his. “To go and live with you.”

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CHAPTER 10

Darius Price's ship cut around the coast of Devon, sailing to Cornwall with ease. It was a ship designed for evasive maneuvers and avoidance of attack and detection.

They were able to sail quickly and cleanly, the members of the crew working efficiently.

Still, it was strange for Hazel to be on a ship again. Generally speaking, her age, ladies did not go aboard.

Even if they had been raised going up and down the coast, wives stayed at home doing the necessary tasks so that the men could go out with a joy to be back on board, and it was a joy to watch Alice run about.

She wondered if Alice would choose the name Vivian. It was not to be known. She felt that Roderick was being wise in taking it one step at a time. Roderick was a marvel.

The man was coming into his own. Memories were coming back rapidly, and his daughter wishing to come and live with him had much of the heaviness about him away.

The man seemed as if he had shed a Herculean weight of labor from his shoulders. He stood on the deck, broad shoulders back, russet hair wild in his face up toward towards the sun, a smile tilting his sensual lips.

He was such a beautiful man, and the grim resignation had gone from his face. Now, he looked as if the world was open to him.

He raced back and forth with Alice, keeping her entertained.

Both of them laughed as they lost their footing when the ship crossed a wave. They staggered into each other's arms, delighted.

She still remembered how to walk on such a vessel, feet slightly off-balance, able to sway with no problem, taking care to go with the ship rather than against it.

Darius Price was with his men, ensuring that they would be comfortable at port.

It had been decided that they take the ship rather than go across land.

It was a long journey by land, over a hundred miles to Roderick's and they would be able to avoid any sort of difficulty if they went by sea.

The truth was she felt unsettled having left so quickly. She'd left for her brothers and her uncles and an invitation for them to come where she would be staying, but she did not know if they would take it towards something lightly. She hoped they would understand that she had gained a new life and the

And not only that, having a duke as their ally would be a far better than having the Smiths. Roderick had paid the Smiths generously, them the purse of gold coins that she had found in his clothes.

They had been shocked and pleased.

She had a feeling that Roderick would be paying them yearly, but the relief on his face to be near his child, she did not think that he would that unduly hard.

Roderick turned, looked back at her, and smiled. He held out his hand "Come," he called. "Come be with us."

Eagerly, she joined them. A wave of relief ran through her invitation, and she let out a joyful laugh as she spotted the seals skiing along beside the ship.

She pointed them out to Alice and Roderick.

They stood at the helm of the ship watching the beautiful animals through the water now, diving under the prow, playing.

They were such magical creatures with liquid eyes. She often felt they were the key to a magical realm. Many of the people along the coast felt so. Certainly the Irish did, and those myths had traveled about.

She often wondered if she had a magical creature's blood running in her veins. It was a silly fancy, but when one was raised by tales by the fire beside the Channel, it was easy to wonder about such things.

Much to her shock, as she stood so near his strong frame, she herself longing to be in Roderick's arms. It was a dangerous longing, she could not forget how protected she had felt in his embrace by the fire. He held out his hand to her—his big, broad hand encompassed in a stitched leather glove—she could not resist the urge to slip her own hand into his.

He pulled her close and gazed down at her. There was an intimacy between them that was strange. It was because she had saved his life.

she home, knew that. And yet she was to be in his employ, wasn't she?

ea. Or was there relationship to be different?

t a note He smiled. "Are you comfortable?" he asked.

and see "Oh, I am always comfortable at sea," she said.

such a "No," he said. "That's not what I mean. Leaving your family, leaving a whole life you've known. Though it was what you asked for, that is nothing."

er thing "I am comfortable," she said, though the unknown beckoned and the giving always a bit challenging.

"I am grateful for it," he rumbled. "This will be an opportunity to start a new chapter. For all of us."

it given She shook her head, amazed at what she had chosen. What should she find seized. "I have been stuck so long in my life. I do not even know what to lie before me."

and. "Anything you wish," he replied quickly. "You have given my daughter so much happiness. I want you to teach me how to take care of her too."

at the "What?" she gasped. "I've never had children. I don't know how to bring them up."

He smiled slowly. "I'm not asking you to be her nanny or nursemaid. You are her friend. The closest thing she has to a mother."

als race "I'm glad," she said softly. "She was always such a lost little girl, always looking about for affection. I had to give it to her."

elt as if He nodded. "And you did. I have such a debt to repay to you. My daughter is the lifeblood of my coast."

re coast "There is no debt," she said firmly. "Caring about Alice filled my heart with affection too. For she loved me back."

irelight He smiled. "She is wonderful."

And they studied Alice, who was racing up and down the deck again, her hair golden in the sunlight.

but she "What are you two doing?" Alice called as she felt their eyes upon her.

And as "We are talking about you," Hazel declared.

a richly She grew very serious for a moment. "Have I done something wrong?"

nd into Roderick knelt down and held his arms out to his daughter. "No, you haven't."

We were considering how wonderful you are. You are wonderful," Hazel said. "I love you. And loved."

fe. She "You are wonderful too," Alice said, crossing to him before she could say more.

fiercely, “and you must be loved as well. I mean, I see the way she looks at you. She thinks the world of you. And if Hazel thinks the world of you, you must be marvelous indeed.”

With that Alice turned and ran away.

Hazel gulped. She felt caught out.

“You think the world of me, do you?” he teased.

“I do think you are remarkable,” she admitted. “Coming all that way, looking so long for her, never giving up, defying the challenges. That’s a small thing, Roderick.”

He gazed down at her, his eyes searching over her face. He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. “You are a marvel too,” he said.

“Why do you think so?” she challenged. “I walked the cliffs and built a little cottage and defied my husband and did the very best I could to care for your daughter. That doesn’t make me a marvel.”

“Oh, it does in my eyes,” he mused. “I know what it’s like to live with someone who does everything they possibly can to keep you down, to control you, to raise you, to bend you to their will.”

She swallowed, doing her best to keep memories of Elias, his first name, away. “You do?”

It was hard to admit that the last years of her life before her husband had died at sea had been exactly as Roderick described.

Her brothers and her uncles had hated it, and they had done everything they could to make Elias stop once they realized what sort of husband he was.

But Elias had been a man of fire, impossible to intimidate. And she had done everything she could to stand up to him, to make certain that she was not warped by him or physically broken, and not just emotionally.

“My father was like that,” he said carefully. “My brother and I defied him at every turn, but he was a powerful man, and he controlled me even in my grave. It was hell. My brother would look at me with such disdain and I did not understand what was transpiring.”

“But you stood up to your father,” she defended. “In the way that you could.”

He nodded. “And I look forward to making amends with my brother. That’s the thing I’ve wished for most after finding my daughter.”

“Then you will,” she pronounced.

His expression turned grave. “I hope he can forgive me.”

t Hazel “Of course he will,” she assured. “You are a good man.”

world of “Gabriel is stubborn.”

“So are you!” she teased.

“Do you think so?” he winked.

“Oh, I know so,” she said.

Then he found himself leaning down slightly towards her. And in this way, sunshine on the deck, before either of them could think, he lowered his head and kissed her.

It was the softest of touches before he pulled away. “Forgive me for this,” he said. “I should not have done that.”

“Yes, you should,” she breathed.

lived in “I do not want to prove Mr. and Mrs. Smith right,” he counted on his fingers. “I cannot take advantage of you.”

“It is not taking advantage of me,” she replied. “I think it’s very clear that there is something between us, and we should not deny our friendship. We should embrace what life has given us.”

“You are very bold,” he whispered.

sts and “Life is for the bold,” she replied without hesitation. “I’ve seen women who do not live without boldness.” She shuddered. “Intimidated and scared? I would not want to do it again. Are we to be friends? Am I to be your servant? I wish to be clear because if I am to be your servant, then no, you cannot kiss me.”

“You’re not to be my servant,” he cut in passionately. “You are more than my friend,” he said. “You are why I found my daughter. You are why she was alive.”

“Then,” she said, “how can it possibly be wrong for us to be close and embrace life together.”

rom the He smiled. “Is that what you wish? To embrace life with me?”

ince he “Isn’t that what you wish?” she asked, her heart skipping.

“More than I could possibly say.”

hat you “Then do not apologize for the kiss,” she said. “In fact, I wish for you to be with me and another,” she said. “For I have lived my life without affection and I cannot do it any longer.”

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CHAPTER II

They descended upon his house to find a shocked group of servants. The butler, Hawksforth, was agape, but his butler's eyes also shone with hope.

The man had been Roderick's advocate since he was a small boy, just as he had been Gabriel's. Watching the rift between the brothers had broken the butler's heart.

Hawksforth had been employed by his mother, and he had been kind. It had been brutal working for his father, Roderick knew that somehow the butler had carried on. And now as he crossed up the wide steps with his daughter and Hazel just behind him, he met his gaze and called out to him, "It is a good day, Hawksforth. We have reunited."

The butler blinked. "Your Grace, it is wonderful to see you looking well and pleased and with so many guests."

Roderick did not usually have guests.

No, he'd spent most of his hours doing everything he could to keep the estate from descending into cruelty and chaos, the sort of cruelty that his father thought good. The sort of cruelty where tenants lived in houses that barely passed muster. To his disgust, most of his tenants were living in conditions that were sickening.

But now? This was the beginning of a change of everything. He could get rid of the beast that had clawed his heart and made him seem a monster. This was the moment that he could come out of all of that horror and declare who he truly was to the world.

"I wish you to meet my daughter," Roderick said to Hawksforth.

The butler's eyes widened again as he turned to the little girl. "It is an honor to meet you," he said quite sincerely.

"This is Miss Alice," Roderick said. "Born Vivian but everyone calls her Alice," he explained.

The butler nodded. "Alice," he said.

Alice peered up at him. "I have never met someone like you before."

said.

“And what is that?” Hawksforth said.

“You have a very lovely accent,” she said, “and very intelligent manners.”

The butler gazed at her for a long moment and then inclined his head. “Thank you, Miss Alice. I appreciate your observance of my fine qualities.”

She beamed at him.

“I think Alice is in need of a repast,” Roderick said. “Do you think a repast could be arranged?”

“I shall take her,” Hazel said. “If you don’t mind, I should like to look about the gardens first. We need to stretch our legs.”

“Of course,” he said, turning then to Hazel. “This is Mrs. Smith, Hawksforth, and she is a most honored guest. Would you mind taking the butler’s leave? You’re the most suited for this. And I must bid my friend goodby and thank him for all his aid.”

Price stood just to the side, having sworn to deliver them all to the doorstep before he returned to his ship.

“Of course, Your Grace,” the butler said. “And may I ask how long Mrs. Smith will be staying with us?”

“Mrs. Smith will be staying indefinitely, and we wish her to enjoy her new life here.”

“Very good,” Hawksforth said as if it was the most natural thing in the world. In fact, the old butler looked...pleased. “Mrs. Smith, we shall find a room in the family quarters, as well as Miss Alice. After our walk in the garden, I suggest hot chocolate. “It has been quite brisk this morning.”

Alice let out a squeal of pleasure before quickly clearing her throat, pointing out, “Yes, but I’m quite used to the cold weather,” she said. “I’ve had a great deal of time outdoors.”

“How very wise and how good for your health, Miss Alice,” Hawksforth observed as he began to lead them to the gardens.

Hazel gave a quick glance over her shoulder at Roderick, but then turned herself up and headed off.

Roderick wondered if she would feel off foot in such an environment, but she seemed oddly confident, and he adored that about her. Whatever she had been before, it had surprisingly prepared her. She seemed completely un-intimidated by the massive house.

Most were, but then perhaps it was because she had not been raised to want such things or need such things. She could return to the sea town resting to her little cottage and the wild waves below.

Most wanted to climb and pull others down, ripping people to shreds to gain a few coins. Perhaps she found this golden life absurd. He died for it.” enough.

The house was gargantuan, built not long ago and in the height of the fashion of the last century.

He and Price entered over the threshold and crossed the marble floor. Gold gilding was everywhere. White plasterwork soared overhead. The opulence of it sometimes made him ill, but he did revere the artists who had spent so much time trying to make it beautiful.

And yet, it was not a home. It was almost a museum, a monument to the wealth that his family had accrued and been determined to set in stone building form.

He often wished that he lived with his brother, Gabriel, in the manor that he had inherited from their mother. That place... That place was Mrs. farm, and Roderick could feel the lifeblood of people in it.

This place still felt cold, as if all the fires in all the world could not bring joy or bring life into a place that had been built upon the suffering of so many.

Roderick wondered if he could let the place go now that he could go in the whatever he wanted. He could live where he pleased. It struck him that he had options he had, and he realized he could seriously consider it. Or perhaps in some way, somehow, now that Alice was in it, he could find a way to make it work.

Darius kept pace with him as they strolled down to his study. Memories of his boat and were quickly coming back to him. The house had already blazoned its name on his mind, the floorplan of it and how he spent most of his life in only two rooms.

He'd been rather relieved when the doctor on ship told him that temporary memory loss was quite normal if one hit their head. But it was only last a few days, or weeks at most. As long as it came back clear, it could be drawn within a month, there was no need for concern.

If it was longer than a month, then the memories would likely be permanently gone, but the past was coming back apace. He was glad that he did not have to worry about large parts of his life disappearing.

“Come,” he called to Price as they strode into his study. “Let’s drink. Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

aised to Price laughed. “I suppose so. No doubt your brandy came from
narrow,perhaps even her brothers and uncles.”

“I think it possible,” Roderick agreed, and with that he crossed to t
reds totray, uncorked the crystal decanter, and poured out two sniffers. “A
d oftenreturning to Devon immediately?”

“Yes,” Darius returned as Roderick passed him one of the beautifi
: of thesnifters. “Turmoil is growing there, and I need to be present to ma
things don’t get entirely out of hand. The wreckers are causing trouble
oring. think they can take me down, but they cannot. I am there to ke
ad. Thebalance,” he said. “And I will keep the region in balance.”

who had “I’m glad to hear it,” Roderick said. “With the war in France, this
is on the brink. And I will finally be able to help people, to e
it to alldiscontent in this area. It is vital that the mines are fixed and that worl
lown invaluable.”

“I cannot agree more,” Price said. “Your brother will be delig
: Tudorknow you will be able to repair the mines and make them safe.”

e was a Roderick shook his head, staring down at the amber hue of his

“Good God, my family has more than enough money to fix them fift
it warmover. It is only the desire of my ancestors to keep people down that pre
many. it.”

ould do Price let out a sigh. “I will never understand why some people thi
ien, thekeeping people down and in poverty is the way the world should be ru

perhaps “I think it’s because they’re afraid,” Roderick said swiftly, “to lo
m. own sense of self. After all, that is the only thing that makes the
emoriesspecial, that they’re far above the poor.”

l in his A grimace creased Darius’ strong face. “I think you’re right, but
rooms. them cold comfort.”

m that “My father was a miserable man,” he said before he stared at the
shouldthen put it aside, no longer wanting it as it caused those final images
quickly,father on his bed to come to mind. “And I shall not live like that. I s
my joy from seeing others uplifted. Nothing can stop me now.”

cely be He thought of the look on his brother’s face, not long ago in th
that hestudy, as Gabriel had pronounced his disgust at Roderick’s behavior.

How he had longed to tell Gabriel the truth, but he had not been
have ado so. Not without risking Alice. So, now as he stood there, he felt ho
his own sense of power and accomplishment at last flowed through h

me. Orbody.

“What will you do with Hazel Smith?” Price said.

he grog “What do you mean?” he asked, crossing to the bell pull so that h
are youorder coffee.

“The two of you. You’re close,” Price pointed out with a ruefu
ully cut“Very close.”

ke sure He arched his brow. “Not that close,” he retorted.

e. They Darius tsked. “I think you shall be soon from the way the two of yo
eep theacting on my ship. Promise me you’ll take care of her.”

“Of course I’ll take care of her,” he proclaimed, rather incens
countryDarius felt the need to ask. And yet he was glad Hazel had people wh
ase theabout her welfare. So, he said quite truthfully, “I owe her everything.”

kers are “Yes,” Darius ventured slowly. “But these things have a tendency
muddled. She’s far beneath you in class.”

hted to “Can you hear yourself?” he asked, astonished.

“I can hear myself.” Darius sighed. “But do not forget you are du
brandy.things can go very strangely.”

y times He squared his shoulders. “I’m a duke with no restrictions now, ar
eventeddo exactly as I please.”

“And what does that mean exactly?” Darius asked.

ink that “I want her to stay here with us forever.”

n.” “Forever?” Darius drawled. “Are you planning on setting her up
se theirmistress then?”

em feel “No,” he replied and then he drew in a long breath.

Price gaped, then challenged, “You’re going to ask her to marry yo

it gives He nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do. It’ll be perfect.”

Darius stared for a moment. “Are you going to ask her because
brandy,falling in love with her or because it would be the perfect revenge
s of hisyour father?”

hall get Roderick could not make a quick reply as his throat was tightening

“That long pause gives me some concern,” Darius said.

uis very “I care about her,” Roderick defended. “I cannot explain it. S
woven herself into me, and I do not want to let her go. I know there
able todifficulties, but I do not care.”

je. And “You should care,” Darius ground out before taking a long drink
uis tiredbrandy. “Those difficulties will define your relationship, and you r

prepared for them. You must be prepared for her brothers and uncles with your family. Are you prepared for that? To go into battle with the mightsmugglers?”

“Do I have a choice?” he bit out.

“Of course you have a choice,” Darius hissed. “You can let her have her up with a fortune—”

“No,” he said. “I cannot. I cannot explain it. If I were to try, it would be for my wife.”

“Just make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons,” Darius said before he drank his brandy to the dregs and then thumped the snifter down on the polished desk strewn with papers. “Don’t do it to get revenge against your father. I know that you would love that above all things, but remember the old man is dead and in his grave, and he’ll never know you’ve married from the cliffs of Devon.”

Darius brushed his hands together and then tugged on the lapels of his coat as if that could set him to rights. “Now, I’ve delivered you safely and I cannot go back and leave you to your fate.”

“Thank you, my friend, for everything,” Roderick said, feeling sorry and odd, something foreboding, in his chest.

Darius made no reply, but he inclined his head. Then he turned on his booted heel and headed out into the hall.

Roderick stood alone with his thoughts at last, master of the house but a victim in for most of his life.

He considered Darius’s warning.

Did he wish to ask her to marry him for revenge against his father? He wasn’t, years ago, he’d wanted revenge so very badly and known that he would never get it, not while his father was alive.

Could he get it now that his father was dead?

He’d proved his father wrong and broken his power.

Alice was here in the house that the duke had promised she’d never leave unless he has not if Roderick didn’t behave as the old man wanted. Well, now the duke’s will could spin in his grave, for he was going to fulfill his own dreams, and he was going to fulfill Alice’s too. And he was fairly certain that if he was careful, he might be able to fulfill Hazel’s as well.

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CHAPTER 12

*F*or several moments, Hazel wondered if she had made a terrible mistake as they wandered in the shadows of the vast house of the D'Wrathborne.

She realized that she had had no concept of who he was or his life, but perhaps she understood in some sort of vague way, but she had never been close to the aristocrats of Devon.

She'd not gone to great houses, though she knew many people had read about them. Her life had been consumed by the ways of the sea, the Channel, by her own cottage, by climbing rocks and scouring cliffs.

This was an entirely different life.

The edifice of the house, if one could call it a house, towered above the Columns propped up the roof, and there were engravings of ancient Greece upon it, as if the creator wished to emulate a time gone by.

She barely was aware of such parts of history. For though she had read, she did not have access to grand libraries or museums.

She had only seen sketches of such figures in the newsheets where they were articles about the British Museum, and the adventures of people in Greece and Greece.

This was a whole other world, a world for which she knew she was not prepared. She had done everything she could to act confidently, but she was rather glad that they had not gone farther into the house but had decided to wander in the garden.

It was perhaps the best way that she and Alice could become accustomed to the place. In degrees.

The butler was being exceptionally kind. He had already sent someone off to arrange a repast for them, and he was guiding them around quietly with surprising sincerity. Enthusiasm filled him as he showed them a fountain made by an Italian artist and a walled garden by a rather famous landscape artist as well.

Actually, the word artist came up every few moments, and she was

if the people who had commissioned all of this did actually appreciate or if it was all for show. To impress and intimidate.

There did not seem to be genuine love anywhere.

There was something quite distancing about the house. She frown had come here for a change, and she'd certainly gotten it.

mistake The butler smiled at her. "Thank you for helping to bring the li
uke of here."

ife. Oh, "Oh, it's a pleasure," she said, "I could see how much the duke lo
er been have his daughter."

oved to "He has been miserable," the butler confessed quietly. "None of u
, by the about this child," he added. "But she seems to have brought him peace

still understood. For he seemed to care a great deal about Roderick.

"Will the servants accept her?" she asked as Alice played far
ahead, tracing her fingers along the statue of a young girl blowing
e them. petals.

people The butler considered this, his wrinkled brow furrowing. "I thi
oved to shall. They all remember what the duke was like before his father die
think we're all hoping he will return to that."

"What has he been like after his father died?" she dared to ask.

in there "Blunt, distant, grave, and in many ways like his father." The
in Italy eyes darkened with sorrow. "Putting the means of the mines and profit
estate before anything else. It's not like him. We were all so very worr

was not "Well, I do not think you need to worry now," she assured. "He d
she was seem like that at all to me."

ed to go "I'm glad to hear it, and you shall stay?" the butler inquired, tilt
head to the side as he took her in. "The way he looked at you..."

stomed "Yes?" she prompted.

omeone Instead of finding her wanting as she expected, the butler gave her
tly and smile. "He's a good man, our duke, at least he was as a boy. And if
ountain here and he is returning to that kindness, I hope that you can make him
andscape and he you. For I see you have a role in returning him to himse
coughed delicately. "But there will be many challenges."

"I like a good challenge," she returned with a smile.

ondered "Do you?" the butler asked, surprised, but then he grinned. "As do
see, anything that makes His Grace happy makes me happy too, so I s

the artvery pleased to support you if you are here to be his wife.”

“What?” she gasped. “How could you think such a thing? I’m here because I asked him to bring me, because I wished my world to change.”
ed. She “It certainly has done that,” the butler allowed.

“Is it so easy to tell?” she asked tentatively.
ttle girl The butler gave her a gentle nod, looked at her clothes, and said
From your entire manner to the way you are dressed, it is clear you were
nged toborn to this life. But he does not need someone born to this life. He
someone different, someone to care about him, someone who will
is knewcaught up in the rules and trappings of a dukedom.”

.” She folded her hands before her as they walked along the gravel path
but shesuppose I could do that, but he’s not going to ask me to marry him. That
why I’m here.”

ther up “Isn’t it?” the butler asked, but before he could say another word
flowerwas a call from the house.

The Duke of Wrathborne was beckoning to them from a balcony.
nk they “It looks like we’d best go in,” she said. “But thank you for a
d, and I support. It is greatly appreciated.”

The butler made no reply but gave her a respectful bow.
Alice looked up at the house as she rushed back to them. “It
butler’s large,” she said.

s of the “It is, but we shall manage it,” Hazel declared. “Look at all we’ve
ied.” A house like that shall be nothing.”

oes not Alice nodded and slipped her hand into Hazel’s grasp, and together
the butler leading them, they hurried back to the house.

ting his And it was good thing they had the butler!

They never would have been able to find the small salon that they
was in without the aid of the fellow.

r a kind It didn’t matter that she and Alice were quite good navigators. The
you arehouse was one of twists and turns, stairs, hallways, and lavish rooms
n happyroom after room.

lf.” He So, when the butler led them through the vast structure into a room
looked as if it had been festooned with gold, she and Alice looked at
other, both of them amused.

o I. You “My goodness, do people actually sit in this room?” Hazel asked.

shall be The duke laughed. “Do you not approve?”

She and Alice looked at each other before Alice let out a sigh. "It's
m herecold house. And very lonely."

e." The duke looked about the room, which was decorated in pink past
golden filigree. There were paintings of ladies upon all the walls.

"Lonely?" he echoed. "I tried to choose the happiest room in the
l, "Yes. You think it lonely?"

ere not Alice gave a nod. "There are so few people in so many rooms."

e needs The duke nodded and crossed to the table, which was laden with
not bepots and sweets of every kind. "Come," he said. "Surely, you are hung

Alice beamed. "I am." And she raced forward and looked at every
path. "I"Who else is coming?" she asked.

at's not The Duke of Wrathborne blinked. "Who else?"

"It is far too much food for us," Alice pointed out. "Surely, you
d, thereinvited others."

The duke's hands paused on the table. "It is all for you, Alice."

She shook her head. "That is not right," she said. "Others must co
ill youeat all these sweets. What will happen to them if I do not eat them?"

The duke blinked, stunned. "I don't know."

Hazel crossed behind Alice and looked at the cakes and scor
is verysandwiches and strawberries and the pots of what was likely hot ch
and tea. "We are not used to so much extravagance," she said. "We ba
e done.so much once a year. Perhaps at Christmas, but then we share
everyone."

er with He nodded, a pained expression crossing his face. "I see," he b
before he straightened his spine. "Oh dear, I have put on quite a sh
you, and it is a mistake."

ie duke Alice reached out and grabbed him by the hand. "It is very kind c
she said, "but if this house is to be less lonely, we should invite more
No, thehere."

m after "Well said, Alice," he said, the pained expression fading. "You s
my teacher."

om that "And you mine," Alice quipped. "You promised me there was a
at eachWill you teach me what books are the best?"

"I shall show you the library later," he promised. "And I will
show you my favorites and read them to you."

Alice beamed anew. "I would like a slice of cake now, please."

s a very “Of course,” he said. He winked. “You may even have two.”
tels and “Two?” she laughed. “Far too much, but perhaps I can manage it.”
house. And with that, he looked at Hazel and waited.
 Hazel blinked. “Oh, would you like me to serve?”
 “Yes,” he said. “It’s generally customary for the lady of the house to serve.”
 “I am not the lady of the house,” she reminded.
h silver “Would you like to be?” he queried, locking gazes with her.
ry.” For an instant, she could not breathe.
ything. “Of this house? Do not be absurd,” she scoffed.
 But then she thought of what the butler had said. Did he wish to marry her?
ou have “I am not being absurd,” he countered patiently. “Not at all. I think you would do wonderful things here.”
 “I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” she admitted.
me and “And that is perhaps the greatest thing of all of it,” he declared excitedly. “You won’t do things the way everyone predicts. You won’t do exactly what has been done before. You will have no care for tradition.”
ies and She groaned at his boyish enthusiasm, though she found it hard not to be swept up by it. “I have been raised with tradition. If you think people on the Devon coast are not obsessed with tradition, then you do not know me.”
it with “I do know you,” he rumbled. “Perhaps I do not know all the details, but you must admit it too, Hazel. From that first night, we’ve known each other well.”
reathed Without a second thought, she reached out and gently touched his forehead. “I cannot argue that point. I agree,” she said. “But what you are proposing is most odd. And it will require a great deal of negotiation and care.”
ow for Alice swung her gaze back and forth, quite fascinated by the conversation.
f you,” He cleared his throat. “You do know what I’m asking, Hazel?”
people “Are you asking me to run your household? Certainly, there are family people to do it.”
shall be “No, Hazel,” he exclaimed. “I’m asking you to be my wife.”
library. Alice’s ears perked up at that. “Oh, do say yes,” Alice rushed. “They shall be here forever with me, and that would make me very happy.”
happily Hazel blinked as emotion began to swell through her.

“You said you wanted me to take you away from where you were, your chances and opportunities. As my wife, there will not be an opportunity or chance denied you. You will be able to do anything you could buy a fleet of ships and run them. You could fill this house to the brim with people. You can—”

“Yes, I see,” she broke in, “but you make it all sound very easy. I’m a fool,” she said. “There are difficulties.”

“There are always difficulties,” he pointed out. “What life does not have difficulties?”

She stared at him for a long moment, then let out a laugh. “Dear God, you’re right.”

“In this? Most certainly. My brother married his housekeeper and she stepped closer to her and turned his face towards her touch. “Gabriel is the way, and I mean to follow.”

“How scandalous,” she teased, unable to stop herself. “It was a bit,” he agreed. “But I could see that she made him happy with whatever it was that I understood, they needed to be together.”

“And do we need to be together?” she breathed. “I feel like I can be honest with you,” he began, drawing her close. “More honest than I could be with anyone else. I will have to marry or not at all.” I want to marry. I want Alice to have siblings.”

She blushed. “We so easily speak of siblings?” she asked. “Do you not want children?” he queried, taking care to listen to her. She looked at Alice. “I always wanted to hold a baby of my own in my arms. I loved holding Alice.”

Then he said, “Let us be married. Let us make a family. Let us conquer the world.”

“Defy the world?” she whispered. “I did not think that you, a duke, would be so naive.”

“How is that naive?” he demanded. “I hold so much power.” “You do,” she agreed, “but the world is full of darkness, and people who will do all they can to tear happiness from us.”

“That storm that almost ate me up?” He cupped her cheek, his willpower. “It was a reckoning for me. I almost never met Alice. I almost never married. Nothing can stop me after that.”

She gazed up at him, savoring the feel of his palm on her cheek. He

to give adored it. How she longed to feel his warmth forever.

single “I believe you,” she said. “And this is what you want? You want n
g. You your wife?”

he brim “I want to change the world for you,” he announced. “And for mys

“Then, yes,” she said brightly, covering his hand with her own.

I’m no your wife, not because you are offering me a title, or wealth, or oppo

but because from the moment you stumbled into my cottage, I felt s
ot have protected. Something that I haven’t felt in a very long time.”

At those words, he enveloped her in his arms, surrounding her v
od, you strength, with his power, with his kindness.

Alice let out a hooray. “This is a very exciting day,” she cheere
r.” Heshould celebrate with cake.”

started Hazel laughed. “Yes, with cake.”

He beamed down at them. “To our new family.”

Hazel began parceling out slices of the beautiful, fruited cake o
y. From ivory and floral painted plates.

This was the beginning, she thought to herself.

And whatever came, they would survive it. They were strong.

to him. But a whisper of argument went through her heart because, des
ne day. optimism, an unpleasant feeling snaked through her.

A feeling that something might come out of the dark to hurt them,
it had done when she had married Elias.

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adored it. How she longed to feel his warmth forever.

“I believe you,” she said. “And this is what you want? You want me to be your wife?”

“I want to change the world for you,” he announced. “And for myself.”

“Then, yes,” she said brightly, covering his hand with her own. “I’ll be your wife, not because you are offering me a title, or wealth, or opportunity, but because from the moment you stumbled into my cottage, I felt safe and protected. Something that I haven’t felt in a very long time.”

At those words, he enveloped her in his arms, surrounding her with his strength, with his power, with his kindness.

Alice let out a hooray. “This is a very exciting day,” she cheered. “We should celebrate with cake.”

Hazel laughed. “Yes, with cake.”

He beamed down at them. “To our new family.”

Hazel began parceling out slices of the beautiful, fruited cake onto the ivory and floral painted plates.

This was the beginning, she thought to herself.

And whatever came, they would survive it. They were strong.

But a whisper of argument went through her heart because, despite his optimism, an unpleasant feeling snaked through her.

A feeling that something might come out of the dark to hurt them, just as it had done when she had married Elias.

CHAPTER 13

Seeing the house through the eyes of Alice and Hazel was a revelation.

The truth was that Roderick had never liked the house.

He had never felt at home here, nor had his brother. They had spent as much time as possible out of doors, whether it be at the stables, down by the sea, or out upon the moors.

They'd also preferred to go to their grandmother and grandfather's establishment, Ridgely House.

The farm had allowed them, though often in secret, to spend time with their animals. And the brothers had seen what it was like when people worked with the earth.

His father's family dug deep into the earth and cared little for what came upon it.

After all, tin was the source of their great fortune. Now, he wondered if the pile of stones he looked around the mausoleum through the eyes of Alice and Hazel, a pile of stones built to memorialize his father's family, should be torn down.

That would be a waste, of course, to the artists who had devoted themselves to the paintings, to the woodwork, to the marble, the engraving, and the plaster. He could not decimate all that, but he suddenly asked himself if he wished to live here.

Did he have to live here in a place that would never feel warm, in a place that felt more like it was a tomb for the dead than a home for the living?

Alice was tucked away in the room next door.

He had spent an hour reading to her, and Alice had loved every word of *Gulliver's Travels*.

He loved the work by Jonathan Swift and, frankly, he hoped that she would enjoy him reading to her every night.

It was his goal to teach her the wonder of books, and she was mostly there. She had held the first volume in her small hands, smiling as if it was indeed a portal to another world. And it was, he supposed.

Without books, he would have been miserable as a child. Without

in these last years, while trying to navigate the world in which his father left him isolated from his brother, he would not have survived.

It had been the reading of old favorites—Pamela, Moll Flanders, Gulliver’s Travels, Tom Jones—that had saved him. Those favorites had sustained him in a time of great loneliness. The characters in the books had been his only friends. The people that he had been friends with in his childhood had withdrawn from him because they could not understand his behavior after his father’s death. He’d all but driven them away because he could not risk telling them the truth.

Now, he could tell everyone, and the relief was immense.

He paused before the room just down the hall from Alice’s, knocking gently.

Hazel’s soft voice called, “Come in.”

He felt like he was being beckoned home with the sound of that voice as he entered her chamber. “Are you settling in?” he said.

“Can anyone ever settle into this?” she said, gesturing around the room with a laugh.

He studied the chamber as if he’d never seen it before.

It was an immense room.

He’d tried to give her one of the more intimate chambers close to his own, but even so, the bed towered. Roses were embroidered into the curtains, and the coverings were a beautiful pink silk. The bed was large enough for four people to lie in. It required steps to go up to the mattress.

The fireplace was a work of art that belonged in an Italian villa, its marble gleaming in the moon and candlelight. The windows were tucked out to the gardens with polished glass.

The curtains themselves were massive swaths of silk, and the furniture were a riot of gilded French frippery. He rather liked the brightness of French style, but sometimes it did feel as if one was living in a frivolous world of nonsense.

Hazel did not suit nonsense.

That was one thing that he could not argue with. Hazel looked like he belonged in a castle by the sea and, he wished his ancestors had been that bent. His family had not done great battles on the coast of Cornwall to get their dukedom.

No. Their battles had come later.

her had They had fought, of course, but not as medieval knights.

Yes, Hazel would have suited a castle.

landers, Even so, she would be better suited at Ridgely House or some-
tes had similar and, for a moment, he let the possibility dance through his head.
oks had if he, the duke, picked his own house? A small house.

own life It was such a shocking idea that, for a moment, he could not speak.

ehavior “Are you quite all right?” she asked.

uld not “You have opened me to ideas that I never considered,” he in-
ruefully.

“How odd,” she said, tilting her head to the side. “That’s what you
ockings supposed to do for me, but we have such different experiences of things
that I think it natural that we are going to be able to do it for each other
that,” she added as she crossed to him. “Are you quite sure you are all

ice. He “Should I not be?” he queried softly.

“A great deal has happened,” she reminded as she gently placed her
with a on the lapel of his finely cut coat. “Your life has turned completely
Your daughter is here, and I am in your house, and you’ve asked me to
your wife. Surely, that is a great deal.”

“It is a great deal of good,” he replied. He slipped his arms about
his, but, waist. “When I laid next to you in the cottage,” he murmured, “I had
; which myself in check that early morning. During the night, I was barely able
to sleep when I awoke and pulled you into my arms by the fire, and I knew that
survived? Oh, I wanted to make love to you, Hazel.” He tilted his head
s white towards her, his lips tracing lightly along her temple. “I wanted to pro-
owering I had defied death.”

“Well, you’ve done so every day since,” she said, her skin begin-
ishing as awoken to his touch.

; of the “I want to defy it again,” he growled softly.

lous bit “Will you kiss me?” she asked, her voice hitching in anticipation.

“I want to kiss you over and over.”

Then, much to his amazement and delight, she raised herself up
like she booted toes, pulled his head down, and took his mouth in a kiss.

n along It was unbound passion. There was no reticence about it, no coy
wall to flirtation. She gave herself fully to him, and he was nearly undone by it.

It was as if all the tension, all the fear, all the doubts were being
out of him by her kiss.

For the first time in a long time, he felt truly...warm. Not just of body but of soul.

He had never thought that night in the cottage that he might be finally. Whatever thing that he had always needed whilst pursuing his daughter.

But it was clear to him, standing in this room with her arms wrapped about his neck and his about her waist, that he was finding a something he thought he'd never have. And so he allowed himself to be formed entirely to her, to the kiss, to the moment.

It was all he wanted. This new life that had unfolded before him. He did not care about the dukedom then.

He did not care about anything except for her and Alice and the good. I like they could do together.

She pulled back and gazed up into his eyes. "This is very rash," she said, "but I think only the best can come of it."

"Good," he said, leading her towards the fireplace and pulling her around before it. "I agree."

Her eyes lit with desire as she eased down with him. "This is so different than the night we met."

"Well, I'm not dying," he teased.

She laughed, a low melody. She said as she twined her hands with his, but "What shall we do with each other?"

He gazed down at her and traced his fingertips along her lower lip. "I think we should find a new house to live in."

She nearly choked. "You need another house?"

"Oh, I have dozens," he informed, tracing his hand to her jaw and then to the nape of her neck. "Make no mistake on that, but I think we should choose a house for ourselves, one that will suit us and one that will suit Alice."

He let his attention wander to the room that was nothing more than a wealthy facade. "This place? It is not for us. It is not for you. It is not for her. Just like Alice said, this place is cold and alone. It needs to be filled with laughter, but it has too many memories for me. I wish to strike all of it out. I wish to strike out the past, and I wish to start something new."

"Just like I did," she said, "when I asked you to bring me here."

"Just like you did," he agreed, tilting her head back and winding his fingers into her golden hair. "You're inspiring me, Hazel," he said, "to

ody but life, to so much more, and I know my brother is going to love you for
as...”

ling the “Yes?” she urged.

He did not allow himself to think. Instead, he allowed his true de
rapped flow. “Just as I am coming to love you.”

harbor, Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. “No one has ever told n
give in love before, or that they were coming to,” she amended quickly.

“You deserve love, Hazel. You deserve the world.”

She shook her head. “I do not want the world, good sir. In this mo
only want you.”

ood that He guided her before the fire and lowered them to sit before the h
reminded him of their closeness in her cottage by the sea when she ha
he said, his life. Yet this fire was far larger than hers, with its marble man
crackling fire, illuminating them in a red glow.

r down Roderick reached out and caressed his palm over her cheek before
his fingertips to her soft, rosy lips. She was so beautiful, both with
so very without, and she was going to be his.

She was nothing at all like the sort of woman he was supposed to
for his wife. But she was exactly what he wanted, damn the consequen

with his, His life had been a misery for so long, and it hardly seemed possi
so many joyous things were coming to him, one after the other. He wa
lip. “I certain she was a large part of that.

Fate had put her in his path, and who was he to argue with fate?

Hazel tilted her face into his touch, clearly savoring the feel of his
then to slipping along her lower lip.

need to With hands trembling slightly, for he felt in awe of this mom
will suit reached for the hidden ties at the front of her gown. He eased the woo
down from her shoulders and let it fall to her waist.

than a She sat in her chemise and stays, a strange look on her face.

for her. Though he longed to lay her back and make love to her, he pause
ed with don’t have to do this. I don’t want you to do anything that displeases y

of them “I do want this,” she whispered. She winced. “But I must confess
particularly enjoyed this with Elias. I want to do this with you. But...”

His heart ached for her. Of course, this might bring back memorie
ing his unpleasant husband who was cruel to her.

o a new Anger simmered inside him. Anger at a man who had taken a won

it. Just tried to crush her.

He would do everything he could, not to eradicate those memories, but to create new ones. “We truly don’t have to do this now—”

Her eyes flashed with determination. “I want to do this now. I will not let you control me anymore. Not in any way.”

He held out his hand to her and felt a moment of relief when she placed hers into his palm. “I will go slowly, and I will stop if there’s anything you do not like.”

She nodded her head, and he gently reached out, took her in his arms, and brought her over into his lap.

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her softly.

Then slowly, paying close attention to her reactions, he worked her clothes off fully from her body, then her stays and chemise, until she was completely naked before him in the firelight.

She sat proudly before him, making no attempt to hide herself.

“Will you help me?” he asked, knowing that giving her power and control would help her feel in control.

The muscles of her throat worked as she swallowed, but then she nodded. “I should like to very much.”

Tentatively, she tugged at the buttons of his waistcoat before slipping it off his shoulders. Then her brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of his garments. She unwound his cravat, pulled his shirt from his breeches, and then with steady and ever growing confidence, she divested him of the rest of his garments.

When they both sat before the fire naked, he lifted his palms and pressed hers to his. For a long moment, they gazed into each other’s eyes.

They did nothing but take time to become used to each other. The crackle of the fire filled the air. With each moment, he felt his desire grow, and from the rise and fall of her breasts and tightening of her nipples, he knew she felt the same.

“Kiss me, Roderick,” she urged.

He needed no further encouragement. He took her mouth in a hot kiss, a give and take, of breath and wonder, and tongues teasing.

Then he gently leaned her back to the soft, ornately woven chair. He traced his fingertips down her pale neck, over her clavicles, between her breasts. Slowly, temptingly, he palmed her breasts and massaged the

she arched into his touch.

As he broke their kiss to study her visage, she stared up at him in wonder.

He did not let her gaze slip away from his as he trailed his hand and farther downward, teasing over her hips, then her thighs.

Her breath came in ragged takes as she held tightly onto him.

Then he deliberately dragged his hand back up again until he rested his fingertips between her legs.

He let out a groan as he slipped his fingers into her hot, wet folds.

It was the promise of bliss. The promise of their union.

As he teased her, she grabbed hold of his shoulders. "I do not know what is to happen next," she breathed, her body arching, straining toward the completely unknown.

"We are going to be united in pleasure," he said, his heart beginning to pound as his body yearned for hers. "But if I do anything you don't want, my agency will stop," he assured.

She wound her hand into his hair and whispered, "Please don't stop. I want you now."

A low groan of anticipation slipped past his lips as he focused on bringing her body to its peak.

Her lips parted and her eyes flared as, suddenly, she held on to him as tightly as he had done in her cottage before the fire that had brought them together. Her body began to shake, not with cold but with the promise of cresting pleasure as it built inside her.

She gasped, reaching out for something she'd never experienced, as her cheeks began to warm with the color of desire.

He loved that look upon her face, and so he did not stop until she began to cry, and he growled out his name.

Her body coiling with bliss gave him immense pleasure. Gently, he kissed her. Roderick took his hard sex and gently teased it against her opening.

Her thighs parted, welcoming him, and he rocked deep inside her body. She let out a startled sound, but then she sighed as her hot core ached for him. She wrapped her arms about his broad back. At her urging, he stepped closer. Her rolling rhythm, caressing her inside, pleasing her again. Her tight, hot body had been her most delicious thing he'd ever known.

The intensity of it stole his reason, and he took her hands then

them with his over her head. He was determined they should come
m withyes he was determined that they would become one.

And as he thrust deeply inside her, nearly losing all restraint, sh
fartherher thighs and crossed her legs at his hips.

The angle of her slick sheath and the way in which he could
forward sent them both colliding into pleasure.
sted his Her taut muscles rippled around him, and he let out a cry of she
that mingled with her cry. For in that moment, she was thrown into
with him.

His breath came in hot, rough takes as his body began to calm, the
w whatdidn't not know how it ever could after such a union with her. R
rds thelowered himself beside her, pulling her into his arms.

"I never knew it could be like that," she said, her voice a blissful
ning tothe night.

t like, I "It can always be like that," he said, placing his palm over her hea
only with you, and it will only get better."

i't stop And in turn, Hazel placed her hand over his heart and said, "Hov
my life be anything but better with you in it?"

ringing

ito him
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them with his over her head. He was determined they should come as one, yes he was determined that they would become one.

And as he thrust deeply inside her, nearly losing all restraint, she lifted her thighs and crossed her legs at his hips.

The angle of her slick sheath and the way in which he could piston forward sent them both colliding into pleasure.

Her taut muscles rippled around him, and he let out a cry of sheer bliss that mingled with her cry. For in that moment, she was thrown into ecstasy with him.

His breath came in hot, rough takes as his body began to calm, though he didn't not know how it ever could after such a union with her. Roderick lowered himself beside her, pulling her into his arms.

"I never knew it could be like that," she said, her voice a blissful note in the night.

"It can always be like that," he said, placing his palm over her heart. "But only with you, and it will only get better."

And in turn, Hazel placed her hand over his heart and said, "How could my life be anything but better with you in it?"

CHAPTER 14

The days that passed were the most fulfilling and busy that Roderick ever known. For several years, he'd been busy trying to cope with all dangers and twists and turns his father had created in the estates. To keep things from going from bad to worse had absorbed all Roderick and the lack of support from people he cared about had nearly broken him.

But now, oh how he consumed himself with his daughter, with Hazel, the improvement of his estates and lands.

As a duke, his lands were vast—hundreds of acres all over England he was improving all of them. But at present, he was putting most attention on his estate here in Cornwall. He had already fired his father's agent. He'd replaced most of the people in charge of the estates, the and the keeping of the tenants' houses. He had hired new equipment mines and farms.

All of it had happened within weeks.

He had holed himself up in his study, only coming out to walk with Hazel and Alice over his lands. Spending spend time with them was essential because they kept him going. They inspired him to do better.

Yes, this was for his darling daughter, for Hazel, for the people of the lands and of England. Progress would not be stopped by the skeletal remains of the past. And so gossip was already spreading all over Cornwall that the Duke of Wrathborne had somehow woken up one morning as a changed man.

Construction works were happening at the mines. He had made sure that all the workers were paid while the improvements were being made. He had brought in vast quantities of food to ensure that the children and wives of the workers were fed while all labor was stopped in the mines.

He had already arranged for several more schools to be opened up on his estates. The village schools would be improved, made stronger, and he had hired teachers from London. Several of them had radical ideas. Ideas inspired by Rousseau. Ideas where the child was to be respected and not beaten or forced to simply repeat facts. No, real learning where children could

with the joy of curiosity would transpire in his schools. Where one question spurred another question, and then an answer and more curiosity.

Oh, how glorious it would be to see children's eyes light with hope than flare out in despair. He already saw it in Alice. For every day seemed to understand that her real work was not to keep anything clean or scrub floors or dishes, but to sharpen her mind.

Oh, the child was still vigilant in the keeping of her chamber, and proud of her. She did her daily tasks. She was proud of herself for being capable. But each day, even in her young years, she devoted herself to questions out of doors. And he was happy to go out with her and explain her about the plants and the animals on his lands and in the sea.

She was a fount of ever-burgeoning questions, and he could understand why anyone would wish to crush that for profit. No. He wanted to put a stop to all that if he could.

And Hazel. Hazel was at his side. She was a woman of vast capabilities, and she was not interested in hundreds of new gowns or giving teas to the mines, or for the society.

She had already organized large kitchens and dining spaces where people could come to eat. The miners' lives were already seeing improvement because she had thought what a wonderful idea it would be if they could eat together and form a beautiful community.

She was arranging dances and gatherings for the people to experience because she claimed joy was important, and community was important. He couldn't agree more.

So every Saturday, the Duke of Wrathborne went wherever Hazel was. He danced and dined with the miners and the people of his lands. A certain Hazel nearby.

Now, he stood in his study trying to decide what course to take for the road that he was building through his estate. A new road to ensure his workers might be able to move more efficiently.

But before he could decide, a vast cacophony filled the hall outside. "I'm coming through, Roderick," a voice boomed. "You damn well let me in."

He startled.

His brother's voice was completely undeniable.

Hawksforth threw open the door. "He's here, Your Grace. I assure

question wish to see him.”

“Of course I do, Hawksforth,” he said. “You did not try to stop her rather you?”

“No, but he’s moving with such rapidity that I did not know if I’d clean or to announce him or not,” Hawksforth replied. Then he declared, “Gabriel Morrowby.”

And with that, Gabriel stormed in with his cane in hand.

Roderick stared at the brother who was a veritable mirror in books, himself.

They were barely two years apart. They were and always had been close in image, close in spirit. But since their father’s death, they had not spoken, and the rift had been agonizing.

Hawksforth eyed the two men, then quickly slipped out and shut the door. Gabriel stood with his shoulders back, his russet hair wild, and his eyes sharp as knives. His hand flexed on the head of his cane. His coat draped about his body as he came to a halt.

At last, he demanded, “What the bloody hell is going on, and why are you called upon me?”

How he had wanted to call upon his brother, but he did not think he deserved to call upon Gabriel. Not yet. Not until he had shown Gabriel much he was going to do, because the last seven years had lowered his joy intensely in his brother’s esteem that they had only spoken to quarrel. “I am myself again,” Roderick said quietly.

“I can bloody well see that,” Gabriel growled. “But what has happened? Is it this woman in your life? Did she cause you to see sense again?”

“Yes, in a way, Hazel has caused me to see sense,” Roderick agreed. Gabriel eyed him carefully and then took another step forward. “Whatever it is, I am deeply grateful, but I fear you will suddenly disappear again, and you will...”

“Disappear?” Roderick ventured.

Gabriel gave a tight nod. “Why haven’t you come to see me?”

“I have been very busy with work,” he said honestly, though he knew there was more. “And I wanted to show you what I was doing instead of telling you what I was going to do. I did not really think you would have come if I simply told you.”

Gabriel cocked his head to the side, a muscle tightening in his forehead.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t have believed you. Especially after that night, when you went down and visited the mine and then did nothing about it.”

“I couldn’t do anything about it,” he gritted.

“Why the bloody hell not?” Gabriel asked, his voice a low rumble.

“Lord Gabriel’s wife had not gentled him, and he was rather glad that he was still his fierce, passionate self. Heather was not a gentling influence. Heather was an amplifying influence of her beast from Cornwall, and Roderick always loved that about his brother. His fierce nature, his growling voice, his determination to change the world, despite the fact that everyone in close proximity wanted to fight him.

He barely looked at Heather.

He still remembered that day out on the moors when he had been locked in the door, longing with all his heart to spend Christmas with his brother. But he was unable to do so because of the rift between them.

And he had seen the doubt on Heather’s face about whether she should marry with Gabriel. After all, housekeepers did not generally marry lords. Heather hadn’t told her to embrace happiness and he would support her, and he had

Now, he expected the same from his brother because he was confident he would feel her happiness too.

“What kept you like that?” his brother asked softly.

“Father,” he stated, his throat tight.

“What did he do before he died?” Gabriel rasped. “I always suspected there had to be something he said. I wasn’t here when he passed away.”

Roderick looked to the fire, fighting the unpleasant memories. “He promised me something.”

Gabriel blew out a derisive breath. “Why in God’s name would he promise that man anything?”

“Because he held something dear to my heart.” Roderick swung his head back to his brother and stared at him a long time.

“The little girl,” Gabriel breathed. “Your child.”

Roderick nodded. Gabriel was no fool. He’d already deduced it.

“How the devil did he keep her from you?” Gabriel asked.

“You know father. He was a man of resources. And I had to work hard to believe I wasn’t telling anyone, otherwise...”

Gabriel winced. “I can only imagine what father had planned for me. I know his jaw, you did not dance to his tune. I would put nothing past that man. I f

sense had lost you,” Gabriel bit out as emotion filled his voice. “I feared you
it.” gone into darkness.”

“Oh, I was in darkness,” Roderick returned. “There’s no question
that. I felt as if I would never be myself again. It was like being coated
Gabriel thickest, blackest soot. I feared I would never be able to rub it clear
fluence. things that I had to do and approve and allow, but I could not let her
he had could not lose my daughter.”

ice, and Gabriel took another step forward, and then another, and then
seemed around the desk. He clasped Roderick’s shoulders, stared at him in the
and then pulled him into an embrace. “Of course you could not. She
child. She is my niece, and you had to fight for her in any way you could
onging, only wish you could’ve told me, but I understand why you did not.”

’d been He held him tightly in his embrace, and Roderick wrapped his arm
his brother, feeling as if he was finally coming home, feeling as if
ould be finally being reunited with himself.

But he Gabriel leaned back. “How the devil did you find her?” he asked
he had. voice gruff with emotion.

roosing Roderick winced. “If I am honest, I cannot remember all the details
the storm, my memory is murky, but I had to proceed with great caution
see, father made certain stipulations that if I were to seek her out, she
be sent away to a grim fate.”

ected it Gabriel’s face transformed into a mass of horror and fury, “If I could
him up right now and kill him myself, I would.”

ie made “I appreciate the sentiment,” Roderick rasped. “My bitter anger
for years, but I could tell no one. Not even you. It was too risky. Look
ld you her was very slow-going. I couldn’t let anyone know what I was doing
couldn’t raise any suspicions until at last I asked Darius for help.”

his gaze “Darius,” Gabriel echoed, his brows rising.

Roderick nodded his affirmation. “Who would suspect a smuggler
all? And he knows how to be very discreet.”

Roderick drew in a long breath, finally able to tell the tale. “He
investigating for me, carefully, indirectly. Over the years, he found that
without our father employed to handle this. The men who were watching me
actions. And he used his unique tactics to help them to understand that
r her if were to act in any particular way against me or himself, that they would
feared I themselves with their flesh flayed by the bottom of his ship.”

you had Roderick paused. "As you know, Darius can be very persuasive."

Gabriel's lips twitched at that but his gaze was dark as he listened about "Indeed, brother."

and in the "We weren't entirely certain where my daughter was," Roderick brought back the old fear caused him to tense. "Darius had deduced she was down the Devon coast and he was certain she had to be with one of a few families there. So, we set sail."

crossed "I see," Gabriel whispered, "And you found her?"

the eyes, "It only took seven years," Roderick replied, the pain of it still shared as your "Thank God it did not take another day."

could. I Roderick clapped his brother on the shoulder, so grateful that he was now, and that his daughter was safe. It had been agonizing having a patient, having to be careful, and having to let Darius do all of the dangerous work in the dark.

But in the end, it had paid off. And that was all that mattered.

and, his "I've missed you so much," Roderick said honestly.

"And I you," Gabriel returned, his voice nearly breaking. "It has been the greatest hole in my heart. I know Heather has tried her best to fill it, but you know that nothing could fill what you are supposed to."

and would "Then let me back into your life?" Roderick asked.

"With all my heart," Gabriel proclaimed. "And you will let me back into your life? My niece, will you not?"

Roderick laughed. "Of course. Of course I shall. And you will let me be a friend to your wife. She's going to need it. The biddies of the court are quite something, as Heather is already learning."

loing. I Gabriel grinned. "Luckily, it sounds as if she is as formidable as Heather."

"Oh, she is," Roderick agreed. "But even more ignorant in the view of the aristocracy. Heather, at least, knew from the point of view of a housekeeper."

and began "Your wife does not know at all," Gabriel replied, understanding.

the men "She's not my wife yet."

and my "Ah, you have not married her in a secret ceremony." Gabriel clapped Roderick on the back. "Good. I shall be able to come to the wedding. I would find she should marry her soon."

"I agree," he said. "I wanted you to be there, but I didn't know how

you or how to reach out to you again.”

listened. “Well, I’ve done that for you. Here I stand,” Gabriel declared as he stepped away slowly. “Do not wait, Roderick. Waiting is dangerous. You never know when life will take something from you.”

own on “You’re thinking of Thomas Baker,” Roderick said softly, remembering the miner who had died the day that Gabriel’s leg had been broken.

“I am always thinking of Thomas Baker,” Gabriel said. “I will never forget him. He taught me the most valuable lesson. You must learn it too.”

“I plan on living life to the full,” he assured. “And helping all those around me too.”

“Good. Then I expect a wedding. Tomorrow is best.”

He let out a laugh. “Tomorrow? I must invite her family.”

Gabriel asked but then smiled. “I suppose that is important.”

“Then we can be a family,” Roderick said, his heart daring to hope.

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CHAPTER 15

*H*azel and Alice had picked one room of the house and done the best they could to make it theirs.

It was, in her opinion, the loveliest room in the house. With a roaring fire, books everywhere, and a cat, she and Alice felt at peace.

The cat, a marmalade fellow, was curled up before the fire, his soles turned upward as if he was hoping that, at any moment, someone might come forward and give it a good rub. Seeing that sign, Alice did just that.

She sat by the cat and began stroking him gently with her small hand, while turning the page of her children's book with her other hand and looking at the pictures.

They spent most of their days out of doors. Out in the wind, across the moors, heading out as far as they could, and then returning when it was time for tea.

It was a good existence, but in many ways they felt like they were on an island in a vast sea of strange chambers. Still, they were very lucky because they were able to do so much good work.

Hazel had had such a little life, she realized, in her cottage on the Channel. It had been one of adventure, that was true, unlike the lives of many, but now she could make so much meaningful change that she dared believe it.

Roderick had given her power, a great deal of power, and she was to wield it.

She had not realized how entirely resourceful she was, but she had included her in several meetings so that she understood the workings of the estate.

As she did every afternoon just before tea, she was working on her journal, coming up with ideas on how to improve the lives of those on the estate.

At present, she was particularly concerned with the elderly on the estate. She had noticed that very often older people were left alone

their children died, or moved away, nothing was done to care for them, at least not on these estates.

In her community, people tried to take care of each other. But there was a strange culture on the Wrathborne estate, one which she knew her husband wanted to eradicate, where everyone felt isolated and alone.

So, she was doing everything that she could to change that. The assembly rooms, the community hall, the weekly meetings, the dinner parties—everything was all meant to bring people together.

The people of her village on the Channel would go out fishing together, sing together, work together.

She wanted that here, though without the dangers of smuggling and wrecking.

She believed in music, so she had also brought musicians together for everyone. In addition, she was supplying free music lessons to the children of the estate, which also kept those musicians further employed.

It was a beautiful thing to see music being passed down, and dancing, recipes for food.

She wanted people to feel loved. She realized love was so important to a child, she'd felt it, and even her uncles and brothers, imperfect as they were, had loved her dearly.

It had not been until her marriage to Elias that she had felt separated from the world and had to fight against it. Now, unified with her soon-to-be husband, she did not feel that fear at all, and much to her amazement, the community had welcomed her with open arms.

They seemed to prefer the fact that she was almost one of them rather than someone high above, lofty in a silk gown, parading about in a carriage, not having little time for them. Perhaps it was because they were finally seeing their children fed and educated. She wanted them to feel safe. So she would understand that they were safe with Roderick and herself looking after them.

The door opened and Hawksforth came in. "You have a visitor, Mrs. Smith."

She blinked. She did not usually have visitors. There had been two ladies who had attempted to come with their mama. It had not gone well. Lady Jane and her daughters, Lady Persephone and Lady Patience, had been in rather grandly, eager to judge.

hem, at Patience had had little patience. Persephone had had no knowledge of the origin of her name, and Lady Jane had really just come to gawk at Hazel because of her lack of knowledge of the town.

husband They had had nothing to talk about. She was not interested in the ball taking place in town, and, no, she was not planning on having a ball assembly all after she was wed to Roderick.

—those Perhaps one day she might venture such a thing because she wanted to understand the power of the aristocrats, but her husband was organizing the ball, and she really didn't have time at present.

She sighed and turned back to her journal. "Whoever is it, Hawksforth?"
"It is Lady Morrowby, Lord Gabriel's wife," he pronounced with a smile.
"And Master Alec."

to play She gasped. "Show them in," she urged, closing her journal.

to the With that, Lord Gabriel's wife, Lady Gabriel, entered. She was a beautiful woman with dark black hair floating about her pale face. Her dress was simple wool, and a boy followed her of about twelve to thirteen years of age.

nt. As a He had ruddy cheeks and bright eyes, and he was dressed for the occasion as if he could not wait to be out in it.

"How do you do?" Lady Gabriel called brightly.

variation "I do very well," she returned, standing to greet her guest. "Would you care to come and sit by the fire?"

ent, the "I would indeed. Thank you."

"Hawksforth," Hazel called, "would you please send up tea and cakes, and sandwiches?"

coach, Hawksforth gave a nod. "Of course."

seeing "You must call me Heather right away," her guest enthused, holding out her hand. "I am still getting used to the idea of being Lady Gabriel, and it seems a little odd. Especially if we are to be friends, which I'm certain we shall be. You will allow it."

r, Mrs. "I would be happy to be your friend. I think I shall need as many as you can get," Hazel said honestly, crossing to her.

young "You are not mistaken there, and I'm glad you know it." Heather closed the distance between them and took Hazel's hand in her gloved hand. "Welcome to the family," she declared. "I'm so glad our fellow friends are reunited."

e of the She beamed at the frank and warm woman. "As am I. It gave R
zel andpain to be distant from his brother."

Alec grinned at Alice and the cat and immediately went to them,
re ballsdown beside them.

here at "You like cats?" he said.

"I do," Alice returned, letting her book flip closed as she turn
she didattention to the older, friendly boy.

ng that, "I also like mice, which makes life very difficult," he teased.

The little girl laughed. "Well, perhaps mice should stay outside
orth?" they belong."

delight. His laugh joined hers. "Yes, but it is so tempting for them to vent
houses where it's very warm." Alec hesitated, then asked, "Would you
come outside with me?"

was a Alice gazed up at Hazel. "I'd like to go outside. May I?"

r gown "We shall all go," Hazel announced, "and then we can come back
years ofand cakes. Does that sound acceptable to you, Heather?"

"It does," Heather replied swiftly. "I far prefer a good walk to
weathercooped up in rooms, if I'm honest. Unless, of course, we attend a
party."

"I'm all for reading parties," Hazel agreed. "Perhaps we could d
uld youoften! After a walk."

"A marvelous idea," enthused Heather.

And with that, they all bustled out of the room and headed out
kes andrather oppressive house into the fresh air.

"This is much better," Hazel said with a sigh of content as the c
washed over her.

er eyes Heather gave a firm nod of agreement. "This house... Oh dear
it feelsabout to say something out of turn."

all be if "It's quite all right," Hazel said. "We all feel it."

"Do you?" Heather asked, her brow furrowing. "I think most
as I canwould think it a fairy palace."

"It is a palace, and it's most unpleasant. We are thinking of
r easilyaway."

ed one. Heather's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh dear. Please don't say tha

's have "Oh no, not far away," she rushed, realizing how easy it would
misunderstand her declaration. "To one of the other houses on the esta

oderick “You must come and see Ridgely House,” Heather encouraged
walked through the formal garden. “It is splendid. Perhaps something
, sitting that would suit you.”

Then Heather’s cheeks flushed with an exciting prospect. “Perhaps
could consider building something like it and give employment to a
red her designer.”

“What an excellent idea,” Hazel said. “We could implement the
ideas in building and have a house that suits us well.”

where “I like the way you think,” Heather declared as they passed the
beds that were only just seeing green shoots push up from the earth
are into land needs improvement, not clinging to old ways that are unhealthy
like to should only carry forward the old ways that are good.”

“Yes,” Hazel all but crowed, feeling as if she had found a mutual
understanding. “Old ways like community and kindness and helping
k to tea other.”

“I have heard what you are trying to do,” Heather said softly.
being matter of fact, I think it’s so marvelous that I’ve started to implemen
reading like that at Ridgely House and the surrounding area.”

A smile turned Hazel’s lips and her heart swelled with apprecia
to them like the idea that my actions will affect others. The more good we can
the better. Shall we help each other then?”

Heather gave a most satisfied look. “Yes, we shall.” Heather hoo
of the arm around Hazel’s. “You and I come from similar backgrounds, I thi
will not always be liked, but we shall have each other.”

cool air “I’m not really interested in being liked,” Hazel said.

“Splendid,” Heather breathed. “That will make your life much bett
. I was Alec and Alice were running about the edge of the moor, laughing
crossed out of the formal gardens.

Alec was pointing up at birds, and Alice was watching, taking
people boy’s information as if he was a hero.

It did seem to her that Alec was a lovely young man.

moving “He’s wonderful,” Hazel observed.

“He is,” Heather agreed. “He saved me in many a dark moment, a
t.” been a good friend to him, as he is to me. No doubt he shall be a good
d be to Alice.”

te.” “She needs friends,” Hazel said seriously. “I worry that there

as they children in the house.”

ng like “Well, as long as you keep the village schools going, then I th
shall be all right. And you shall be part of our family,” Heather said
aps you wobble of her dark brows. “I’m eager to come to your wedding. Ha
t young planned a dress? Flowers?”

She laughed. “No, not really.”

newest Heather said, “Oh, dear. Then I must help you in this. Will you
me?”

flower Hazel smiled at the beautiful woman with such an open heart. “
i. “This she said, and she realized she had not had a female friend in a very lon
hy. We She had been surrounded by men and isolation out in her cottage. S
never gotten along with Mrs. Smith, and somehow she felt...

spirit of Well, as if her life was improving in so many ways, in every di
ig each and she was so deeply grateful for it.

“Now you must tell me how I can help you too,” she said to Heath

“As a “Oh, I’m sure I can think of dozens of ways, but the first is...” I
t things nibbled her lower lip and then rushed, “You must invite us all to din
then I shall return the favor. I think we should see each other as c
tion. “I possible. The brothers have been apart far too long, and we shall l
t all do, assist them. They’re fighting for the same cause, after all.”

“I could not agree more,” Hazel agreed, and suddenly she kn
ked her Heather was truly going to be her friend.

nk. We And the world felt even less lonely than it had just moments before

er.”

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children in the house.”

“Well, as long as you keep the village schools going, then I think she shall be all right. And you shall be part of our family,” Heather said with a waggle of her dark brows. “I’m eager to come to your wedding. Have you planned a dress? Flowers?”

She laughed. “No, not really.”

Heather said, “Oh, dear. Then I must help you in this. Will you allow me?”

Hazel smiled at the beautiful woman with such an open heart. “I will,” she said, and she realized she had not had a female friend in a very long time. She had been surrounded by men and isolation out in her cottage. She had never gotten along with Mrs. Smith, and somehow she felt...

Well, as if her life was improving in so many ways, in every direction, and she was so deeply grateful for it.

“Now you must tell me how I can help you too,” she said to Heather.

“Oh, I’m sure I can think of dozens of ways, but the first is...” Heather nibbled her lower lip and then rushed, “You must invite us all to dinner and then I shall return the favor. I think we should see each other as often as possible. The brothers have been apart far too long, and we shall have to assist them. They’re fighting for the same cause, after all.”

“I could not agree more,” Hazel agreed, and suddenly she knew that Heather was truly going to be her friend.

And the world felt even less lonely than it had just moments before.

CHAPTER 16

“Who the bloody hell are they?” Roderick eyed his brother, then his gaze back to the approaching group of men crossing the moor.

“I have a fairly good idea. I don’t suppose you are armed, are you?”

Gabriel gave him an absurd look and arched his brow. “I do not generally carry a pistol about me, though I suppose it’s not a bad idea. I’ve considered having my stick turned into a sword.” He brandished the stick. “This will have to do if they plan fisticuffs, and they look capable of it.”

The men crossing the moor were intimidating indeed. There were ten of them of varying ages and varying size, but each one of them looked as if he could take a man and split him in two. Luckily, he and Gabriel were capable themselves.

Roderick had expected her family to arrive, but he had not expected to have to have discourse with them on the open moors. He’d expected to have them in his study or in one of the long chambers, impress them with his brandy that likely they’d provided, and a host of items to mollify their attitude toward him.

But that was clearly not what they planned.

“I’m Jasper Rowe. Which one of you is Roderick Morrowby?” asked the tallest with icy blond hair.

“I confess it is I,” Roderick drawled.

“You two look far too much alike,” the man with dark hair declared.

“I assume that I have the good fortune to meet my soon-to-be brother-in-law and uncles-in-law,” Roderick stated, trying to take their measure without offense.

“I don’t know about good fortune, but you’ve the right of it there. I’m the younger one with dark black hair. “I’m Marcus Rowe. Hazel’s brother. And I’m going to level you into the ground in just a moment if you don’t explain yourself to my satisfaction.”

Gabriel took a step forward. “Now look, this is not how it’s done.”

“I’m Davy Rowe, and that’s quite interesting. You’re concerned

how things are done?” A barrel-chested man with wild sandy blond hair countered, “Then perhaps you shouldn’t have stolen away a young woman from her family.”

Marcus stepped forward. “It is only Darius Price that has kept me from coming up here, killing you in your sleep, and taking her and the child away from you.”

swung “Jasper Rowe folded his massive arms across his broad chest. “It is also the fact that we hear you’re doing decent things, which has caused us to pause on the idea of murder.”

generally “Gabriel narrowed his gaze. “Are you threatening my brother?”

re even “Are you having trouble hearing?” Davy mocked. “We are not threatening him. We are making it clear that we considered it and have decided to do so.”

four of “Still, it doesn’t look good, does it?” The last of the men pointed to a man with dark hair shining in the sunlight. He was a bull of a man.

if they “Your sister... Your niece, Hazel,” Roderick explained calmly. “She wanted to come with me. And I admire her very much.”

rather “Admire, is it?” Davy challenged.

ected to “Yes,” Roderick stated.

to meet “It’s taking you bloody long enough to marry her,” announced Jasper.

ith tea, “I agree, but we wanted to invite you to the wedding and make sure you could come.”

y their “Marcus snorted.

growled “Gabriel shook his head and challenged, “What exactly are you all here for? Are you here to make my brother’s life difficult, or are you here to take Hazel away? Or are you bloody attending the wedding as invited?”

d. “We are here,” Jasper began slowly, firmly, “to make it absolutely certain that he bloody well better make her happy.”

hers-in- “I have every intention of doing so,” Roderick replied honestly.

without “Good,” Davy growled. “We don’t care if you’re a duke. We’ll bury you in the ground or toss you out to sea.”

e,” said “Like you failed to do with her first husband?” Roderick mocked. “You don’t know about him. You married her off to Elias Smith to form an alliance between yourselves and the Smiths. She was miserable with him. He was a failure.”

ed with “Marcus strode forward. His eyes narrowed, emphasizing the crow’s feet he had achieved by hours at sea and the sun reflecting off the waves. “I would have liked to see you into the ground right now except for the fact that I rather admire the way you’ve run this place.”

de hairwish our Hazel had been protected. It says something about your cl
womanthat you don't think a man like Elias should have been married to her.'

“He shouldn't have been married to anyone,” Roderick grette
is fromsounds like a monster.”

back.” “He was,” Jasper returned.

There's And then Davy's lips curved ever so slightly. “But he's not with u
ed us tois he?”

Roderick sucked in a sharp breath. “He died at sea, did he not?”

There was a long silence.

ire not “Oh, yes. He died at sea,” returned Marcus. “With a little bit of he
ave nother family.”

“He drowned. That is what everyone knows,” said Jasper with a sh

out, his “And how did he drown?” Gabriel asked, clearly intrigued.

Davy cocked his head to the side. “Let's just say that there was
refully,tied to his ankle. He tripped.”

“He fell overboard, and then he got dragged by the ship,” Jasper fi

And it struck Roderick then that these men were confessing mu
him.

er. “You do realize I'm a magistrate,” Roderick informed carefully.

ure that Davy smiled. “Oh, yes. We realize it. And unless you wish to h
accident happen to you, we expect you to keep this to yourself. Also,
the fact that we did it for Hazel, and we rather think that you will li
l doingAfter all, you'd not be able to marry her, would you, if she was still i
to taketo Elias?”

Marcus's face grew grim. “And she would have been driven i
ly clearground by him. We tried beating him up. We tried reasoning with h
tried everything one could do with the man, but the violence in him v
strong. And he felt like he owned her, that he could treat her as h
ary youpersonal bag to be punched.”

Jasper's eyes grew cold. “And so there was really only one solution
ked. “I Roderick nodded. “I cannot outright say I approve of murd
allianceventured, “but I do approve of the freeing of Hazel from such a man.”

as—” “As do I,” Gabriel said firmly. “I often wonder if my mother wo
's linesbe alive and thriving if my father had met a far earlier end.”

uld belt Davy nodded before drawing in a long breath. “Good. We
hat youunderstanding then.”

Character Jasper arched an icy brow. "You know that if you step out of line, Hazel in any way, you shall have to deal with us."

d. "He "You're not intimidated by the fact that I'm a duke?" Roderick questioned. "Dukes die just the same as regular men," replied Marcus.

"And we'd all be willing to die for Hazel or go to prison for her," Davy said now.

"You see, we did not know that Elias would turn out like that," began. "We never would have let her marry him if we had."

Roderick drew in a relieved breath before he replied, "You know I don't understand that. She thinks that she was a sacrifice that you were willing to make."

Jasper winced. "It is unfortunate, but we don't want to tell her that. We don't want to implicate her."

"You should still find a way to let her know," Roderick pointed out. "You love her that much, that you would do anything for her, and that didn't just trade her for a bit of safety."

"Safety?" Davy growled. "We would have risked anything to keep her safe. And we'll do it again if necessary."

"Glad to hear it," Roderick intoned. His respect for the men was genuine. "And perhaps you might appreciate that the alliance you are about to make is far better than any alliance you could have with the Smiths. Would you like to get free of alliance with them?"

"You're friends with Darius Price," Jasper stated. "That's enough to make me wary. He is vicious, but he's a good man, and we will be on his side in the battles."

"Battles?" Roderick asked, wary now.

"You don't know about his current issue with a rival family?" Roderick challenged, surprised. "One that's trying to take over Devon and who has a problem with running ships aground?"

"Darius told me that there were difficulties coming and that he would have a great deal to fight for," Roderick confessed.

Davy gave him an assessing stare. "Well, you better be on his side because it seems like he's been on yours."

"I will lend him all the support I possibly can," Roderick returned.

"As will I," Gabriel said swiftly. "We both owe Darius a great deal of gratitude."

ne with “We all do,” Marcus said. “Now. Later this evening we will meet my sister, and we expect to see that she’s happy. Any sign that she cried. under duress and you know what will happen.”

Roderick nodded, rather enjoying the passion of the Rowe
” put in “You’ll burn my house to the ground and throw me to the fishes to be

“Correct,” said Davy.

Jasper Jasper let out a low rumble of a laugh. “You’re actually a good man
“I try,” Roderick said truthfully.

ow she Davy narrowed his eyes. “We had heard rumors you were no
were all actually, you were the worst sort of aristocrat.”

There was no point in denying the past and so Roderick said, “The
e truth. things that made it necessary that I behaved that way for a short pe
time.”

it, “that “But all of that’s over?” Marcus queried.

hat you “Yes, it’s over,” Roderick assured before he gave Gabriel a quick

“My brother will make sure of that. And I have every intention of making
eep her daughter proud.”

“Alice?” queried Jasper.

rowing. He nodded.

make is Jasper drew in a relieved breath. “We’re glad Alice was taken away
n’t you the Smiths, if she’s happy here with you. And the letters we’ve gotten

Hazel certainly seem to say that she is, but we want to see it with our
for us. eyes before the wedding.”

coming “As you should,” Roderick declared. “And I’d admire you for it.”

“Then if all this proves true,” began Jasper in a most serious tone
he vowed, “If you’ve given Hazel happiness, then I am your man.”

Jasper “And if it is true that you protected Hazel from Elias Smith,” R
sees no returned with his own vow, “you all are my family, and nothing can
that bond. I will stand by your side in whatever is to come, as long as
would always fighting for her.”

As those words rang between them, Jasper strode forward, spat
is side, palm, and then held it out. “A deal then. We are family.”

Roderick spat in his own palm and took Jasper’s hand, ready to enter
his future and his new family.

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CHAPTER 17

As they crossed over the moor, Roderick held Alice's hand in his.

He savored the feeling as it warmed his soul and filled him with love.

He had been searching for this for years. It was his now, his and Alice's. His heart swelled with emotion. He loved his little girl so much, and he knew she was growing to love him too. Roderick took special care to give her his attention every day, to read to her, to walk with her, to listen to her. Today, he needed to make certain that she truly approved.

And so he paused before a large set of stones on the moor, picked up Alice and gently placed her upon them. "I have a question for you, Alice."

She cocked her head to the side. "Oh?" she queried. And then she looked to grow concerned, her breath quickening. "Have I done something wrong?"

His heart ached that she feared that he might send her away. "Alice could never do anything to upset me," he said. "I promise you that. Whatever happens," he assured slowly, "we will help each other. It is my duty as your father to guide you through this life. When you make mistakes, it is my duty to hold your hand and to love you through them. Are you afraid I will send you from me some day?"

She looked away for a moment. "It is a fear in my heart. It is true. I know all, I was sent away when I was a baby. It could happen again."

He held her hand very carefully in his. "Listen to me, Alice. I can predict the future. I cannot guarantee I will always be safe, that you will always be safe. But I promise you will always be loved. My brother, Heath, will love you and look after you. He's your uncle. His wife, Heath's wife, Alec will love you. And of course, Hazel."

She smiled at that.

"And Hazel is what I wish to speak to you about. You know that you are to wed?"

Alice nodded, most solemn now. "I do."

"I must ask you, and I should have done before. May I have your permission?"

Alice's eyebrows shot up. "My permission? You're a duke. I'm an adult."

"I am both a duke and an adult," he agreed, "but you are my daughter and I want to make certain that this pleases you."

"I think it pleases me very much," she said softly. "You are the people I love the most in the world. Hazel and you together?" She beamed. "It is like heaven."

ve.
Alice's. He pulled her into his arms, hugging her close. "Then I am pleased
ie knew With that, he helped her down from the stones.
ive her Together they walked across the moor, and he felt his heart s
er. And feeling grateful. More grateful than he had ever felt in his life.



her up,

seemed "My goodness, the old duke is certainly rolling in his grave. It is a de
ong?" my soul that he is marrying someone who his father would find so po
ce, you abhorrent. I have been cheering for days."

hatever Hazel paused just outside the open doorway, freezing.
as your The voice of the woman was rich and confident, but the word
ny duty appalling.

ill send She stilled, and it suddenly struck her. Could that be why Roderic
e. After marrying her? She knew how much dislike he had for his father, and
horrible he had found the man.

cannot Could he be marrying her out of some sort of revenge?
ou will She slipped into the room and caught sight of the much older
confident Lady Mayhew speaking to Hawksforth.

Gabriel, She was elegant with her silvery hair coiled atop her head and de
er, and with jeweled pins. She was dressed in the finest silks, and she acted as if
room was inherently hers.

ve plan It was a sight to behold.
Hazel had never been in the presence of such an intriguing woman
was so clearly wealthy and independent.

re your Hawksforth, on the other hand, looked as if he had been caught nally
parading in the gallery. He bowed and excused himself swiftly.

Lady Mayhew turned to her and gave a quick look of apology. "My apologies, I
you were listening. I hope that you are not offended. I am absolutely

And an approval of this wedding.”

“I’m glad to hear that you approve of it, Lady Mayhew,” she said, calmly. “I know that you are his mother’s friend.”

“Indeed, I adored her,” Lady Mayhew enthused before a touch of the darkened her tone. “She was a wonderful woman. Her husband, on the other hand, was a terrible fellow. So many dukes are terrible fellows, do you know?”

“Too.” And with that, Lady Mayhew took Hazel’s arm and led her to the

“Come, my dear, you must sit by me.”

Hazel wasn’t entirely certain if this was like a spider asking its prey to sit on its web, but she was not about to tell her no. The woman was clearly getting her way.

So she did not protest as they crossed to the settee embroidered with roses and sat down.

“You look quite out of place here, I must admit,” Lady Mayhew said, but everyone looks out of place in this house.” She asked. “I don’t know why they hired that particular designer. Terribly, terribly snobby and extremely expensive. But this is not the sort of house one lives in.”

“I agree,” Hazel replied carefully.

“You see,” Lady Mayhew declared, “we are already becoming friends.” She patted her hand, then looked to the tea. “Shall I be made and how shall you?”

“Please do, Lady Mayhew,” Hazel encouraged. Without any further for affirmation, Lady Mayhew turned to the set of tea things and ordered but pouring out.

“I cannot wait for the wedding tomorrow. I am so honored that you invited me.” Lady Mayhew cleared her throat. “I did not know if you would be if the

“Why would we not?” she asked.

“Well,” Lady Mayhew began, arching a brow, “I am aware that there have been some members of society that have not been particularly kind to you, but that shall stop with my friendship. I’m putting my foot down immediately. No one shall gainsay you or they shall have me to deal with.”

“I should have thought the duke was enough,” Hazel said with a sigh.

“It should be enough,” agreed Lady Mayhew, straining the tea. “The duke, my dear, after all, my dear. But ladies... They can be particularly difficult in the duke does not enter their drawing rooms after supper. No, he just

gentlemen, doesn't he, with brandy? You, if you ever attend such parties, replied, have to go in with the ladies, and they?" Lady Mayhew pursed her lips. "They can cut one to ribbons. It is what they have been raised to do, after sorrow shall be by your side, and I shall be your shield."

She wasn't entirely certain if she was pleased about this, but she didn't want to tell that Lady Mayhew meant it in good friendship. "Thank you, Lady Mayhew," she said.

Lady Mayhew thrust a delicately patterned cup of tea at her. "Drink, my dear. Drink it up. You need all your sustenance for tomorrow. You were staring at all day."

She licked her lips and took the fragile cup. "What you said about my father, that it would displease him immensely?"

"Oh, it would." Lady Mayhew let out a delighted cackle of a laugh. "He would be furious. As a matter of fact, he'd no doubt be arranging a carriage accident for you before the whole state of affairs occurred."

She gasped. "Truly?"

"Oh yes, he was an evil old sinner, that one." Lady Mayhew scooped up her tea. "It is lucky that the ground did not spit him up once he had been put in it."

"My goodness."

"He ruined everybody's lives, including my dear friend, Rose's mother." Lady Mayhew shook her head and stirred sugar into her tea. "I know it is not the done thing, but I'm so glad you are here. I can tell you're making him happy. I saw him today, and I've never seen him so well. Most importantly, he and his brother are getting on marvelously well. He is clear his daughter Alice adores you."

"You met Alice?" she asked, stunned. She would have thought of things beneath Lady Mayhew.

"Oh yes. I went up to the room and brought her some presents. Lady Mayhew paused. "She didn't seem very pleased with the dolls I brought down. I think I shall have to get her a pony instead."

Hazel stifled a laugh. Lady Mayhew was clearly used to giving the best of everything to everyone and there was no doubt that it mattered to her. He also didn't quite realize how privileged she sounded.

"How very kind of you," Hazel replied gently. "Would you consider doing something similar for some of the village students?"

es, will Lady Mayhew blinked at her. “Ponies for the village students?”

“Well She took a sip of the delicate and fragrant tea she’d come to so
er all. I “Yes, I think it could be quite good for them to ride out, to take care o
brush them. The ponies are something safe for the children to care for
e could think sometimes the children, well, they need an animal to make them
y, Lady peace. Home lives can be so difficult when poverty is...”

“Oh yes, my dear,” Lady Mayhew cut in enthusiastically. “I wo
k it up, happy to be a part of any project you deem worthy.”

ou shall “Thank you,” Heather said, smiling. She took another sip of tea, b
moment before she dared to ask the unthinkable.

out his “Do you think that’s why he is marrying me?” she blurted suddenly.

Lady Mayhew froze before she plunked her cup back down in its
gh. “He “I beg your pardon?”

arriage “Do you think Roderick is marrying me because of his father? Be
would make him upset.”

Lady Mayhew lifted her teacup again, bolstering herself before she
wled as quick drink. “You know, my dear, I really couldn’t say.”

m back Hazel felt her blood run cold.

“I would like to think not,” Lady Mayhew ventured. “He’s a lovely
man. He always was until his father died, and then we all had to grit o
lerick’s with the man he became. It is good to see his old self returning. But t
tea. “He was treated...” A look of resigned sorrow crossed Lady Mayhew
ell that “That can produce quite a bitter streak, and actions can be questionable
look so Lady Mayhew put her cup and saucer down and folded her bej
, and ithands in her lap. “The truth is that if you are concerned about it, you
ask him yourself.”

ht such Her mouth dried. It was not the assurance she had hoped for. “Tha
Lady Mayhew.” And she stood.

” Lady “Oh, I didn’t mean now,” Lady Mayhew declared, stunned.

ought. I “Yes, but I think now is best since we are marrying tomorrow,” s
her voice much quieter than she’d hoped, given the sudden tightening
best of throat.

But she “You mustn’t leave him at the altar,” Lady Mayhew said sudden
she realized the seriousness of what was transpiring. “You couldn’t p
onsider do that.”

She grimaced. “I could if he doesn’t want to marry me for me.”

“But, my dear,” Lady Mayhew rushed, stretching out a hand, ‘
to enjoy, never forgive myself.”

of them, “Oh, Lady Mayhew, if he is marrying me out of revenge, I co
: And I thank you enough for alerting me to it.”

to feel at Squaring her shoulders, she turned and strode from the room, desp
find out what the truth was. No matter how unpleasant.

could be



trying a

Roderick was busy arranging the last bits and pieces of the wedding
y. flowers were not of interest to Hazel, he had made certain that the chur
saucer, festooned with silks and the earliest winter flowers.

He wanted everyone to feel joy, to feel freedom from the past
cause it wedding. So when he spotted her at the door to his study, he held h
out. “Come, I want you to approve this last bouquet. It shall be you
to take know.”

“Thank you,” she said, locking her eyes on him. “It is beautiful.”

“You barely looked at it,” he said, his brow furrowing as he studie
to young “I confess, I am distracted.”

ur teeth “With what?” he queried, studying her face and noting it had lost i
he way color. She looked as if she expected the world to be suddenly yanke
’s face from her.

to.” “Something Lady Mayhew told me,” she whispered.

swelled “Oh, you mustn’t listen to anything she says,” he replied, reliev
should ready to assure her. “She loves to make grand statements. She’s a d
soul, but she puts her nose in everywhere.” He paused and hi
nk you, furrowed. “Actually, she’s the reason why Heather is married t
Gabriel.”

Hazel swallowed. “Well, then it seems that she puts her nose in
he said, where it’s needed. She said something that I must speak to you about.”

to of her “What?” he asked softly, his own heart beginning to beat faster
liked as he suddenly felt that he was walking towards an abyss an
ly as if from firm ground.

possibly She licked her lips as her face creased as if what she had to say
her pain. “There was the suggestion that perhaps you were marry
because it would upset your father. Is it true?”

“I shall He drew in a long breath. There was no point denying it. “My father would be furious that I’m marrying you. He would do everything he could not stop it.”

She gazed down at their hands. “And does that affect your decision to make me your wife?”

He was quiet for a long moment. It had certainly crossed his mind. Darius Price had verily accused him of it. He couldn’t meet her eyes in that moment, and she pulled her hand back from his.

“I see,” she rasped.

“Hazel,” he bit out, desperate to make her understand. “My father was a monster. And if I can thwart him from the grave, it will give me a certain pleasure to do so.”

Her face tensed. “With me as your tool to do so?” she challenged.

“No,” he said, reaching out for her, but she stepped back. “I love you, you have come to love me with all my heart,” he said.

“I don’t know if I can believe that,” she returned as tears filled her eyes.

“I’ve seen the way men can change. I’ve seen the way their hearts can change. Elias was not awful to me before I married him. And then, dear God, he made my life a living misery.”

Horror raced through him as he began to make sense of her feelings. He longed to take all that doubt away from her, all that panic that things were going very wrong again.

“I will not do that to you. I promise, Hazel,” he said, again reaching for her as if he could somehow pull her back to him, but, once again, she pulled away.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” she said flatly, as if she were Lord hardening her heart, protecting it from pain. “Perhaps I should simply not marry you.”

I can be your friend. I can be your mistress. I do not have to be your wife. “Do not be afraid to be my wife,” he declared. “It is what I want more than anything.”

“Yes, to make your father roll in his grave,” she rushed, shaking her head away. “I don’t want to be that. I don’t want to be a means to your revenge. Revenge does the worst things to people.”

“It is not revenge,” he protested, trying to remain calm even as it felt as if his future was being ripped from him. By his father. Again. “It is doing the right thing. It is changing society. And that’s what would infuriate him.”

fatherground out.

ould to She gasped. "What?"

"Marrying you," he explained, "changes everything. You see, I am
ision to the world that I am not going to be like other dukes. I am not going
caught up in tradition. I am going to change things. I am going to be
nd, and man. I am going to—"

in that "I am a symbol of all you plan to do." She nodded, but she looked
had yanked out her heart. "That's very noble."

"Hazel," he said, aghast, "I don't mean it like that."

r was a "But you do," she countered. "And you are a good man. Roderic
e great are going to change the world, and I am going to help you do it. But
wish to be a symbol. I wish to be the woman you love, and I want to
your heart inside and out. But I am afraid. I confess it."

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him.

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an turn. marry me if I am a symbol to show the world that you are changed."

ie made And with that, she turned and strode from the room.

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Though she was gone, her fear remained. He could feel it. He sensed

s might What she'd said was just an excuse.

g out to father or because of a symbol. Because she believed in the symbol too.

stepped She was running from him because of Elias. She was running from
because of what marriage had done to her in the past. And he had
he was how to convince her that he would never betray her, that she was the one
be free for him.

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ground out.

She gasped. “What?”

“Marrying you,” he explained, “changes everything. You see, I am telling the world that I am not going to be like other dukes. I am not going to be caught up in tradition. I am going to change things. I am going to be a good man. I am going to—”

“I am a symbol of all you plan to do.” She nodded, but she looked as if he had yanked out her heart. “That’s very noble.”

“Hazel,” he said, aghast, “I don’t mean it like that.”

“But you do,” she countered. “And you are a good man. Roderick. You are going to change the world, and I am going to help you do it. But I don’t wish to be a symbol. I wish to be the woman you love, and I want to know your heart inside and out. But I am afraid. I confess it.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, feeling as if she was withdrawing from him.

“Forgive me.” She drew herself up and said fiercely, “But you should not marry me if I am a symbol to show the world that you are changed.”

And with that, she turned and strode from the room.

Though she was gone, her fear remained. He could feel it. He sensed it. It shuddered through him.

What she’d said was just an excuse.

He knew it in his bones. She was not running from him because of his father or because of a symbol. Because she believed in the symbol too.

She was running from him because of Elias. She was running from him because of what marriage had done to her in the past. And he had no idea how to convince her that he would never betray her, that she was the only one for him.

CHAPTER 18

Tears streaked down Hazel's face as she raced through the hall desperate to get outside. But before she could even reach the stairwell she dashed straight into a man who teetered, grabbed hold of her, and then his cane into the ground.

"Steady on," he rumbled, clutching at her. He leaned back and took a deep breath. He gaped, clearly astonished. "Are you trying to escape the wedding already? It's too late for that now. Many of the guests are already here."

She blinked through her tears as she contemplated the man who looked very much like her soon-to-be husband. At the sight, more tears burst from her eyes.

"Oh dear," Gabriel said, "I'm not quite used to watering pots, but I know it's very healthy. Come with me, or should I leave you here?"

"I don't want to speak to anyone at the present moment," she said through her tears.

"Well, woe to you," he said. "That won't be happening."

Gently, he took her arm with his gloved hand and began guiding her down a small room.

Her favorite room. The one she and Alice had claimed.

"I hate this house," he said with a sigh.

"Everybody seems to," she said.

He laughed. "It's because my father and grandfather filled it with so much poison."

He gazed around and his face softened. "This was my mother's room. I'm sure you'll find it amusing. It is, I think, the best room in the house."

"It is the one that I use with Alice," she said, and it surprised her that somehow she had felt the connection to Roderick and Gabriel's mother. She had always felt as if there was hope in it.

The books that filled the shelves were all largely happy stories and adventures, and there were travel memoirs. The portraits on the wall

beautiful. Pictures of hope. Pictures of beautiful things. And the room was the only room that had a decent sense of warmth to it.

“My mother did her best to combat my father,” Gabriel said as if stepping back in time for a moment. He cleared his throat. “It’s the reason your brother and I turned out as well as we did. Without her, I think we’d be always, monsters of men.”

“I don’t see how you two could be monsters.”

Gabriel snorted. “You did not meet my father,” he said.

She shuddered. “Your father is still extending his hand from the grave to think.”

Gabriel’s brows rose. “Oh, my father will likely be trying to reach out from the grave until we are all dead. But it is our job to deny him.”

“I don’t know if your brother can,” she said, honestly.

“What do you mean?” Gabriel asked, looking down at her before reaching out with his gloved hand and wiping a tear from her cheek.

She let out a shaking laugh. “Forgive me. I do not mean to spill my emotions upon you.”

“What better thing to do than spill your emotions on your future bride-in-law?” he asked sincerely before instructing, “Tell me.”

“What if...” She bit the inside of her cheek, her insides twisting with her fears. “What if Roderick is marrying me because of your father?”

Gabriel let out slow laugh before sighing ruefully. “Oh, he certainly is marrying you because of my father.”

“What?” she gasped, the pain only increasing in her heart as it traveled through her. “That is not what you’re supposed to say.”

“Oh. Forgive me. Was it not?” he queried kindly. “What am I supposed to say?”

“That he’s marrying me for me.”

Gabriel’s brow quirked. “Well, he is marrying you for you, Hazel. You are exactly what father would find appalling. And you must understand that the greatest of compliments. Without Father, Roderick would not be the man he is, and he would likely not marry a woman like you. No. He’d be looking for a young lady who came from an excellent family who was looking for a young lady who came from an excellent family to create the breeding thing and create more wealth.”

Gabriel grimaced. “All he’d be trying to do is create more power because of the way father was, Roderick doesn’t want that. He war

was theJust like I wanted Heather. I will tell you that Heather was quite a
when I asked her to marry me. She didn't like the idea at all. She pulled
slippingand stormed from the house."

Why my She let out a brittle laugh. "Oh dear. That's exactly what I've done
both behind."

"Well, you haven't left the house, though it does appear you were told
Gabriel pointed out. "And it is rather funny that I'm about to do for you
he did for me, and I hope you'll listen. He cares about you deeply. I'm
grave, the way he looks at you, the way he looks at Alice. You are his family.

Please don't abandon that just because you think he's doing this for
each of his high ideal. The ideal is important to him. It is a part of who he is. He
separate himself from it. But you, you are part of that ideal because
so wonderful, Hazel. You are a good person. That's why he wants you
liftingbecause it's going to make him some sort of heroic figure. He loves you

She sucked in a shaking breath. "I don't know if I can..."
all my His gaze searched her face and he let out a low note of understand
"There's something else, isn't there? Something that happened to you?"
brother-

She nodded and twisted her hands together.
"I ran into your brothers today and your uncles," Gabriel began.
with all "Did you?" she asked, astonished. "They're here? I have yet
them!"

"I did," he said, his usually hard face softening. "And the truth is
know you've had a hard time of it."

dismay And, as if somehow Gabriel mentioning them had summoned her
she heard their voices out in the hall.

posed to "Get in here," she called.
The voices stopped for a long second before they came into the room.

Gabriel arched a brow and drawled, "You haven't spoken to Hazel
el. You They had the good graces to look chagrined.

and that is Jasper cleared his throat, his blond hair almost silvery in the candle
light. "We don't like the house. It's rather intimidating, and we preferred
a dukeout of doors as long as possible."

Why, to do She laughed. "No one does."

Marcus gave her a chastened smile. "We were seeking you over
er. Butbecause we wanted to see you before the wedding and make sure you
its you, you have our approval."

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“I don’t need your approval,” she returned.

“Well, you have it anyway,” Davy returned.

“Thank you,” she breathed, her tears flowing again.

“Unless,” Marcus growled, “you’re crying because of him.”

“Because then we need to go dig a hole,” added Davy.

“Or find a boat,” mused Jasper.

Her brother Victor lingered in the shadows and said nothing but a ve seen affirmative grunt.

Gabriel gave a strange look at the men. “You need to tell her the truth now.”

Her family stared back at Gabriel as if he had lost his wits.

“You need to tell her the truth,” Gabriel repeated. “Because right now you are she’s thinking about taking a midnight flit and not marrying our fellow you. Not And it’s because she’s afraid.”

“I did not say that,” she gasped.

“You didn’t say it. You didn’t have to. But it’s the truth,” Gabriel said. “Now, I’m going to leave you all to sort it out amongst yourselves.”

Gabriel thumped towards the door. “I need to go and commiserate with my brother. No doubt he’s terrified that the woman of his dreams is going to leave him in the lurch.”

Gabriel gave her a long look before he headed out into the hallway.

“I am not the woman of his dreams,” she countered swiftly, wiping her eyes. “He never dreamt of me at all.”

“Oh, Hazel,” Jasper replied, his voice low and rough like the sea. “I don’t think that’s true. I think that fellow has been looking for love all his life and hasn’t been able to find it, until you and Alice.”

“What is this stuff about you being afraid?” Davy asked gently.

“I don’t know,” she blurted.

“I do,” Marcus ventured. “It’s about Elias, isn’t it?”

She winced. “What if he turns out...?”

“He’s not like Elias,” Marcus said passionately. “Nothing about him is like Elias.”

She faced the chorus of men. “That’s not true. He used to be a beast.”

“Yes, but for a good cause,” pointed out Jasper, who knew that good men were often required to do unpleasant things. “Elias’s beastliness was a necessary evil. He knew heart. He loved no one and nothing. The duke is full of love. He was willing to die to protect his daughter.”

“Don’t you see?” she whispered, her voice trembling. “I’m afraid to marry him. I’m afraid that it will all go wrong.”

“Then you are a coward,” Marcus said gently but firmly. “And nor have ever been cowards.”

“Take that back,” she bit out.

“We should never have had you marry him,” Jasper said softly, and gave up. “Can you forgive us?”

She gazed up into her brother’s steely eyes, which were full of emotion. “I went away because I was afraid you would marry me off to someone just like Elias again,” she said honestly.

A low groan came up from the room. “Oh sister, that was never going to happen,” Marcus said.

“Why not?” she dared.

Her family gazed at each other, waiting for the first to speak.

Jasper drew in a breath, then he declared quietly, “Because we know the reason Elias never came home.”

Her eyes flared. “You didn’t?” she gasped.

And she felt both a wave of horror and a wave of gratitude go through her.

“Sailors drown,” her uncle said simply. “It is part of life. Something helped him to do so, these things do happen off the coast of Devon.”

She blinked and wiped her tears away. “You shouldn’t be telling me this.”

“We weren’t going to,” Davy pointed out, “but it’s clear that you know we were always going to protect you. That we will always protect you and nothing will ever harm you again.”

“Certainly not the duke,” Victor said at last, his gentle voice carrying through the room as he came out of the shadows and met her gaze. “I think he might drown in his own sense of honor. Look what he will do to protect Alice.”

Marcus nodded. “And he loves you. He will protect you at all costs.”

Davy crossed to her, placed one of his large hands upon her shoulder, and added, “He will stand as a fortress between you and anything that might hurt you. It is in his will. It is in his heart.”

She tried to take in everything they had just told her. She felt as if she

raid to vibrating with all of it. "I see."

"I hope so," Jasper said.

re of us Then, as one, they crossed to her and took her in their embrace, a circle of men.

"I felt so alone," she admitted through hot tears. "Thinking throssing all..."

"We're sorry," her uncle said.

emotion "So very sorry," Marcus whispered.

omeone And they held her tightly. As they held her close, she prayed. She that she could accept what they said and seize the life she had always vgoing to



He was not certain what would happen now, or if she would leave the entirely.

But the soft knock on the door gave him pause.

"Come in," he called, his spirits low as night fell upon his study and through the light of the fire illuminated the chamber.

Gabriel had left him.

And if It had been tempting to ask Gabriel to stay and drown his conc coast of brandy.

But in truth, he did not want to have brandy. And neither of them ing me cared for drink these days. He did not wish to escape into a bottle.

wished for her to come back to him. To see her worth and how m need to adored her.

ect you, Gabriel told him he had tried to reason with her, but he was unce his words had had significant effect.

cutting All he could do was wait.

. "That He wanted to be alone. To await his fate.

e did to The door opened, and he half expected Hawksforth to come in : him she had departed. Or that she'd sent a note that the wedding was o s."

But instead Hazel stepped into the study, her blonde hair shining ler, and the firelight.

it try to She shut the door behind her and lingered there in her simple gov of many practical gowns she'd handmade for herself and Alice, th she was managed to make her look beautiful beyond compare.

“Forgive me,” she said, her voice rich and full of emotion as stared with shadowy eyes.

a warm But something else simmered in those orbs. Something he could not make out.

What you “Forgive you for what?” he asked gently, barely able to contemplate even though she stood before him.

“For doubting you,” she declared passionately. “For doubting myself, doubting us.”

prayed He had not realized how much tension he was holding, but her last words washed over him, and suddenly he felt like he could breathe again and the pain in his shoulders. A pain caused by bracing for the worst.

He’d braced for the worst for so very long.

“You don’t have to marry me,” he assured. “I will take you any way you want. I will get you, Hazel. You can be my mistress. You can be my friend, though I will greatly miss our intimacy. You can be anything that you want. Whatever you please you and will not drive you away. Though I wish for you to be my only wife, I cannot lose you.”

“You don’t have to lose me,” she said, crossing to him. She took his hands into hers, and then she slowly brought them to her lips and whispered inwhispering, “Just what you’ve said proves that you are nothing like my

husband. And the fact that you let me go, you let me have time to come to my own terms with my own fears? It speaks so well of you. And Gabriel said No, he family, they told me. They told me that you would always fight for me

much he He pulled her gently into his arms. “There could be nothing true about that. You saved my life, Hazel. But you did more than that. You gave me a chance to rebuild my life, to rebuild other people’s lives. And that gives me a feeling of such joy and worth after the bitter horridness of my life.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but they were different tears this time. These were tears of hope and joy. “I did that?” she breathed.

and tell “Oh, you did,” he confirmed as he drew her even closer and then wrapped his arms about her. For he never wanted to let her go ever again.

gold inwould not have had so warm a father. Without you saving my life and me on? All the people on my lands would’ve known hard, bitter lives. I mean, one miners would have been forced to continue to work in terrible circumstances

What stillBut you have freed me from all of that, and you have given us all a chance. Please don’t deny it to yourself. Please don’t deny us love. I’ll

l at him what happened to you. I will spend every day trying to show you—”

“No,” she cut in, lifting her fingertips to his lips. “You don’t have to quit that. You have already done so. It was I who needed to understand. I needed to throw myself into trust. And because of all you have given me, I hope the belief, the choices, the new future—I will always also stand for myself.”

elf. For He kissed her fingertips as he truly understood her. She was not leaving. She was staying. Here. With him.

t words Then through her tears, she gave him a mischievous smile. “So if you release a foot wrong, I’ll find something and bash your head in.”

He laughed then, relief flowing through his body, mingling with the love he had for her. “Good. You should. We should all stand up for ourselves, Hazel. I wish I’d stood up against my father more. I wish I’d stood up for my mother more. But I have learned every day, through all of the things we must fight and never give up for what we believe in, for what we love. And he lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” she returned, surrendering to his embrace. “I will always will, no matter what storms we face.”

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“And I love you,” she returned, surrendering to his embrace. “And I always will, no matter what storms we face.”

EPILOGUE

Five Years Later

The wedding had indeed taken place.

The church had been full of people. In fact, it had been packed to veritable brim. The nave had fairly shaken with noise and excitement.

All of the people from the estates had come. Her family and Mayhew had also sat, quite proud, in their respective pews.

It was a moment of exceptional excitement. And when they had said the guests had let out a thundering cheer.

That moment of celebration had been the first of many. And just months later, they had chosen not to live by the Channel or by the sea.

After all, she had done so all of her life, and it was time to do new. So she and Roderick had chosen a spot close to Bodmin Moor, called Ridgely House.

The ground had been broken and a beautiful, intimate, loving home had been made. They'd hired a new, young designer, someone who understood what they wanted, a place that was for love, a place that was for gathering.

And now the halls were always full of villagers, of people from the estates, of people coming in from London who were educated philosophers, or scientists.

Lady Mayhew was often in attendance as was her family. They talked shockingly well, drinking brandy, playing cards, and debating the more gray areas of the law.

She and Roderick hosted dozens of people at any given time.

The halls were full of laughter. They were full of music and dancing and actors.

Dancing and joy filled the rooms.

Not so many aristocrats were invited, but whenever Lady Mayhew came to stay, they did invite all the local families. And Lady Mayhew acted as a bastion between Hazel and the silliness of people who thought that

distinctions of class somehow made them better than the duke's wife.

No one was an outright fool, of course, or treated her ill in public, knew that they thought her strange.

But it was that strangeness that made her relationship with her husband wonderful. Every day they walked together. It was their tradition.

He, she, and Alice would walk across the moor, and then they meet Heather, Gabriel, and Alec.

And of course, both Hazel and Heather had produced children.

l to the So now there were small children tottering all about, getting into causing messes, and so much love.

d Lady Yes, there were children underfoot and there were children laughing

id I do, Alice was the most wonderful of big sisters, and Alec also made children laugh, teaching them about the creatures of the moor and wonders of the outdoors.

t a few After their daily adventure upon the moor, they would all return for And of course, for cake and sweets.

things. Which they shared with everyone.

lose to Yes, their tables were always laden with good things, but as Alice once proclaimed, now it was all shared.

me had Now their lives were full of warm hearts and goodwill.

no had And as Hazel looked up at her husband, as the children raced about in an inviting chamber, full of the latest books and old favorites and with a fire crackling in the beautifully carved hearth, she was grateful that she had opened her cottage door in the storm.

om the She was grateful that he had seen the light of her small abode where he was striking his way towards the shore.

got on And that he had the strength to make it through those crushing waves morally wind to land.

There was even a small part of her that was grateful for all the pain suffering they'd experienced. For it was each step through those crawling days that had led them to this.

For they had left cruelty behind, and they were creating a world where good would be shaped and made by generosity, by love, and by all their w came good.

ed as a Because they had each other. Hazel smiled to herself. They had at such other and they always would.

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THE END

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If you missed book 1, *The Beast of Cornwall*, [read it here!](#)

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After an accident in a mineshaft, his life is full of pain. The pain in his heart is even deeper, for he knows the darkest of betrayals. Isolated in his manor, he spends all his hours trying to improve the lives of local people. Desperate to do good, his heart is forever closed. One day, at a friend's insistence, a formidable and capable lady arrives at his manor to assist him. Surely she will mean nothing to him. But day by day, she tempts him to take a chance on hope and love.

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