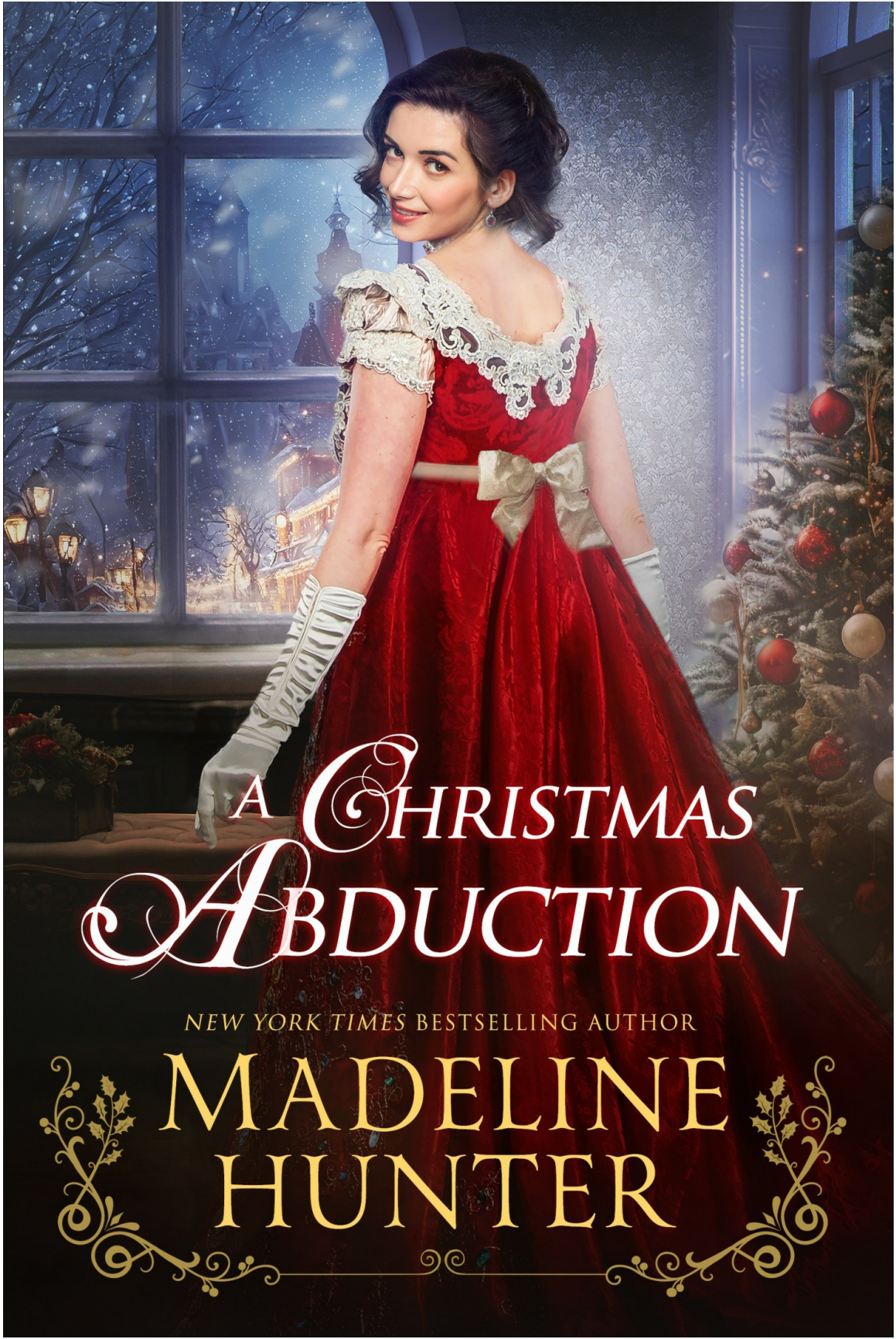


A CHRISTMAS
ABDUCTION

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MADELINE
HUNTER



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A CHRISTMAS ABDUCTION by Madeline Hunter

Caroline Dunham has a bone to pick with notorious rake Baron Thornhill—and a creative plan to insure his undivided attention. Yet once in close quarters, she finds herself beholden to their smoldering connection . . .

Books by Madeline Hunter

THE MOST DANGEROUS DUKE IN LONDON
A DEVIL OF A DUKE
NEVER DENY A DUKE

A CHRISTMAS ABDUCTION

MADLINE HUNTER



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A Christmas Abduction

MADELINE HUNTER

Chapter 1

Thirty miles out of Carlisle, the light snow turned to rain. For Adam Prescott, Baron Thornhill, it was a fitting end to a miserable journey.

By the time the mail coach careened around a bend and slowed to a stop in the coaching inn's yard, his greatcoat hung heavy with damp and a steady stream dribbled off his hat's brim onto his nose. He told himself that even this was better than being inside the coach with Mr. Liddle, an odiferous gentleman whose fashionable garments did not mask a lack of washing. Adam felt bad for the two elderly ladies inside who could not take refuge in the open air on the top of the coach. One had gazed longingly when he did so himself at the first stop outside London.

Now he climbed down to stretch his legs while the coach changed horses for the final stage of the journey. The other passengers hurried inside to warm themselves, but his mood did not beg for company. Rather he paced the yard for a few minutes, then took refuge under the inn's eaves and watched the steady drizzle make tiny ponds in the dirt.

Thirty miles more and he would be in another coach, this time with a warming pan and a fur rug, and with a velvet cushion under his ass instead of a board. No one would crowd him and no one would, heaven forbid, smell. After a pleasant afternoon ride through the country he would be welcomed into his cousin's family for a week of unfettered luxury at someone else's expense.

And after that, an entire lifetime of comfort, if Nigel's plan worked.

With such promise awaiting him at the end of this journey, he shouldn't even notice the rain or smells or his sore hindquarters. He should be dreaming about the fortune within reach.

So why wasn't he?

He had begun turning his mind to the unfortunate answer to that question when a disturbance distracted him. Scuffles sounded around the corner of the inn. Ruffians were engaged in a fight from the sounds of it. He took a step in the opposite direction; then a voice caught him up short. "Unhand me, you

rogue,” a woman hissed lowly before she gave a short cry.

Any inclination to retreat disappeared. He pivoted and marched to the end of the inn, then turned the corner.

And found himself facing the end of a pistol barrel. He stared, frozen in place.

A young blond-haired man in a broad, rustic hat held the gun high, peering down its sights. Not that Adam noticed him much, due to that pistol being so close to his face. Nor did he much note the bit of skirt disappearing around the back of the inn, although he absorbed he had been the victim of a ruse.

“You come this way now,” the man said, stepping back. “I said this way. Are you looking to see me fire?”

Adam took a slow step forward. “I was merely distracted by how very large and black this end of a pistol appears when it is all but up your nose.”

“A bit more now.” The man took another two steps back.

Adam paced forward, wondering if this man really would shoot, or was any good at shooting if he would. He could perhaps simply turn and run back around the building. The close proximity of that barrel to his head made him reject that rash idea. Even the worst aim would probably find its mark this close.

“I must tell you that I have very little money on me.”

The blue eyes taking aim wandered a moment, up and down. “A gentleman like you should have enough.”

“You would think so, eh? Although, really, what is enough? I ask you, is there ever enough? Well, never mind. My situation is such that right now, on this day, I do not have enough, whatever your enough is. You chose the wrong gentleman. Now, Mr. Liddle, when he comes out, is probably flush with blunt. He is the sort who always would be. I should warn you that he smells, so you won’t want to insist he follow you this closely. However—”

Just then the horn sounded, as the coachman warned the passengers of an imminent departure.

Adam cocked his head to see past the pistol. “I need to go now. What do you say we just forget about this? You go rob someone else, and I’ll be on my way.”

“You aren’t going anywhere.”

Sounds of feet and voices moving to the coach came around the corner. Adam patted his coat, opened a button, and reached toward his purse. In doing so his hand hit the folded vellum tucked into his frock coat. “I’ll give

you what I have, but I truly must return to the coach immediately.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“What then? My hat? It is a very good one. It is yours.” He removed it and handed it forward.

“I’ve no use for it.”

Probably not. And yet, perhaps once he did. This criminal’s speech lacked the tone and syntax one would expect of a pistol-toting thief. At some point this man had been educated.

“If not my hat and not my purse, then what do you want?”

No reply came to that. They stood there not speaking while the feet around the corner stopped landing and the voices muted. They were still facing each other in silence when horse hooves began pounding the ground and the mail coach rolled away.

With Adam’s baggage still tied to its back.

Other wheels rolled, this time from behind the inn. A wagon came into view, with a woman wearing a large, deep-rimmed bonnet and heavy garnet mantle holding the reins. She let the ribbons drop, then climbed into the back.

“Get in.” The man waved the pistol in her direction.

“Are you abducting me?”

“I said get in.”

Adam walked around the wagon and climbed in. The horse stood at attention. A very nice horse, from the looks of it. Deep chestnut, with good lines. Maybe six years old. Too fine to be dragging this wagon.

Some bales of hay lined the edges of the open space of the wagon. The woman gestured for him to sit. Then she accepted the pistol from the man, who climbed to the seat and took up the reins. She sat on another bale, facing Adam, the pistol firmly grasped in her hands.

“I know how to use it,” she said.

Her voice riveted his attention. Low, throaty, melodious, it was the voice of a mature woman but one still young. He peered at her through the drips of rain separating them, those coming off his hat and her bonnet, and all the ones between. He saw a face as young as her voice sounded. Not a girl, but not middle years yet either. Maybe twenty-five or thereabouts, he guessed.

Her hair, barely visible deep inside that bonnet, looked to be dark, and her eyes showed an arresting deep brown color. Her complexion appeared fresh and lovely and exceedingly pale in a good way, not pallid and unhealthy.

The wagon began moving. He waited to see if anyone was out in the yard.

If so, he intended to call out for help and risk that pistol going off. She said she knew how to use it, but very few women really did.

Unfortunately, the rain had sent everyone to shelter, even the grooms and inn's servants. He could see some faces at the inn's windows as they rolled onto the road.

"I don't know what this is about," he said, loudly enough for the man to hear, too. "However, you are committing a serious crime."

No reply came.

"If you hope to ransom me, it won't work. No one will pay. You will be stuck with my keep to no purpose."

Nothing.

"I will be missed. My baggage is still on that coach. When it arrives and my property is there, but I am not, a search will be made."

That at least caused the woman to blink. "They will decide you slipped and fell into the stream behind the inn and the rain washed your body down a ways."

"You have a spirited imagination. They will think nothing of the sort. "

"It is the most logical explanation, and being lazy they will accept it. It will be weeks before they suspect something else might have happened. In the meantime, with Christmas soon, no one is going to spend much time looking for a stranger."

"I am not entirely a stranger to these parts."

"We know who you are."

Did they now? "If you know who I am, then you know that you risk your necks with this rash act. I am a peer and the Home Office will involve itself if I disappear. My cousin is also a peer and he will not look well on you once you are discovered."

"We know the power of the Marquess of Haverdale. His view of us will not matter by the time he learns of this."

So he would learn of it, eventually. At least they didn't intend to shoot him and bury him in a shallow grave. He had not led the best of lives, but even he did not deserve that.

The rain fell harder. Adam gave up trying to fight the results. He relaxed on the bales and let the weather do its worst. He speculated on what addlebrained scheme these two had concocted.

"Keep it dry, Caro," the young man said over his shoulder.

The woman draped her mantle over the pistol and tucked her bared hands

underneath. Adam noticed how red and raw they appeared.

“You are both going to hang. How sad. It is a disgusting way to die. Have you ever seen it? I’ll beg them to transport you instead, but my cousin will insist you hang and a marquess normally gets what he wants.”

The man looked over his shoulder. “You talk too much. Watch him closely. He is trying to distract you.”

“I won’t be distracted. You watch the road. The rain is making parts barely passable.”

“I am not trying to distract her. I am just passing the time with conversation.”

“Too much conversation,” the man muttered. “It’s a wonder all those ladies can abide your company.”

So they did know something about him. “Where I come from, conversation is expected. I am considered clever, even witty.”

“Part of your charm, is it?” The woman offered a thin smile with the question. “In these parts we save talking for when we have something to say.”

If there was to be no conversation it could be a long journey. They turned off the main road and jostled down a much poorer one. The wagon bounced in and out of ruts.

He began to stretch out on the bales, thinking a nap might spare him an hour of wet silence. As he did he noticed that the pistol no longer aimed right at him but rather down at the wagon’s floor. The fingers holding it became visible as the mantle edged back.

“Have you no gloves?” he asked.

“Not ones fit for this.”

Not leather then. Knit. He sat upright and peeled off his gloves. Recently purchased but not yet paid for, the gloves with their softness had seduced him as surely as a woman’s velvet skin. He handed them toward her.

The woman hesitated. She glanced at the man’s back, then took the gloves.

She had to set the pistol on her lap in order to pull a glove on her left hand. It was too big, but the fine lambskin meant it would not be too clumsy. Still, it interfered with getting the other glove on her right hand.

Adam leaned forward, took her hand in his, and pulled the glove on for her. He took the opportunity to push the leather lower on the fingers so it fit fairly well.

She watched with wide eyes. She glanced once at her companion in crime,

then down again at what he did.

He picked up the pistol and put it back in her hand. She flushed at the evidence that he had indeed distracted her, but not with words. She grasped the pistol with determination while he set about making the glove fit better on her left hand

He looked into her dark eyes, so in contrast with her white skin. She was a handsome woman, with a face that would still be attractive thirty years hence, when the fashionable beauties of the day had long lost their prettiness. When she smiled a severity in her expression disappeared. He peered into the bonnet's shadow while something nudged at his memory.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Caroline."

"I should not address you with such familiarity."

"I would prefer that you do not address me at all."

"Then I will pose a question while I have your attention. Have we met before?"

She just looked at him.

The wagon suddenly halted. "What are you doing? Caro, are you mad? We know he is a rogue and a rake."

She and Adam both turned their heads to where their driver glared over his shoulder. Not at their faces. His scowling gaze rested lower, where Adam still held a gloved hand in his own.

Caroline snatched her hand away. Adam lounged back on the bales and smiled apologetically. The wagon moved again.

And just then, at that moment, the rain turned to snow.

Chapter 2

Caroline regretted that she had scolded her sister, Amelia. Of course the girl's head had been turned by this man. Between his face and his charm, a female would have to be dead not to be affected.

That Caroline herself had briefly succumbed could be blamed on nature, not her character. She had assumed he would not dare anything with Jason two feet away. She had also assumed he would not find her worth daring anything for. She had not counted on his being a man who flirted and dared for amusement, and perhaps to advantage himself in a situation like this.

That was the problem with carefully laid plans. They were based on assumptions. They had to be. She had convinced herself that this would unfold how she needed it to unfold, and already it wasn't working out quite that way.

She really wished she had taken the reins instead of Jason. She could manage this wagon just as well. Then she would not have to look at their captive. Now she could not avoid it, since she needed to keep this pistol on him so he did not jump off the wagon and run into the trees.

He had lain down now, to take a nap it appeared, with his hat cocked over his brow, but she could still see his beauty. His limpid dark blue eyes alone would command attention. They had humor in them, even when facing a pistol. The result was the finest of lines on the side of the eye she could now see. As for the rest of his face, his regular features and rather perfect skin made him appear to have stepped out of a painting, where the artist embellished reality by removing the flaws nature inevitably provided.

And yet, now, with his eyes closed and his face in repose, he appeared harder than he did when he looked at her and smiled. Older. Perhaps even a little weary.

Of course he was a rake. With that face, what else could be expected? Women probably lined up when he entered a drawing room, all but begging to be seduced.

She realized that she had just found a way to excuse him for his horrible

behavior. All because of one brief touch through a glove. A fine caretaker of the family honor she was! She would have to be on her guard not to let his manner and appearance lead her to question her plan on how to save Amelia.

He opened his eyes, looked to the sky, then sat up. He removed his hat and shook off the snow, then brushed his coat. “Will we go much farther?”

She shook her head.

“That weapon must be getting heavy. You can put it down for a while. I am not going to jump on you and take it.”

So he said.

“I give my word as a gentleman. See? I’ll keep my hands above my head like this.” He waved his hands, then clasped them behind his head. “And I’ll cross my legs so any move will take time.” He entwined his legs together, hooking one boot around the other.

He appeared so comical that she smiled despite herself. “I never thanked you for the use of the gloves. It was not in your interest to do that. If my hands went numb, I could hardly shoot you.”

“I would not know they were numb enough, however. With my luck today, I would take my chance only to have you shoot me dead in the road.”

“Shooting you dead would not be necessary. An arm or leg would suffice to stop you.”

He peered at the pistol, then into her eyes. “Are you that good an aim, that I might not end up dead by mistake?”

“I am that good.”

“I will take your word on that.” He looked at Jason’s back, then leaned in to speak quietly. “Would you tell me why he decided to abduct me? Was it just my misfortune to take shelter under those eaves, or is there a reason?”

Goodness, his face was close now. Luminous in the overcast day. Her tongue felt thick, but she managed to speak. “He did not decide to abduct you. I did.”

“Truly? You seem fairly sensible, but the situation is ludicrous. What if I had not stayed outside in the rain under those eaves?”

“If you had not taken shelter, we would have found another way to do it. I had several plans.” One had been for her to enter the inn, flirt with him, and beckon him outside for a quick—whatever it was people did when beckoned outside. She had even worn a dress that might aid in that, hidden now beneath her pelisse and cape.

Just as well he had gone to the eaves. She had not had much faith in that

particular alternative. She had little experience in flirting, and no evidence it worked when she tried it.

“Why? As I said, no one will ransom me.”

“The marquess would not want to be known as a man who left his cousin to his fate because he was too miserly to pay a ransom.”

There would be no ransom, but for now let him think there would be.

Jason turned the wagon off the road and onto the lane leading to Crestview Park. Lord Thornhill turned to watch the new direction. “Are we going to that house up there?”

“We are.”

“What is it called?”

She didn’t answer. The less he knew, the better.

* * *

“I’ll dry these out for you, and give the hat a good brushing.” The elderly, thickly built red-haired man took the garments as if he were a valet. Only he wasn’t a valet, but half of a pair of servants who greeted Adam when he entered the low-slung stone house, with its two levels of windows and rambling wings. He did not miss that lacking a coat meant escape would become a good deal less comfortable.

The man left, limping to favor his right leg.

The young man did not follow Adam in. Caroline did, still holding the pistol.

“Warm yourself here,” said the other half of the pair, a short, round old woman in a big white cap and apron. She led him into a good-sized sitting room and toward a roaring hearth fire. Solid, serviceable wood furniture filled the room, with two high-backed upholstered red chairs facing the fireplace. A simple writing table in one corner held a thick ledger on its surface. The space appeared comfortable but far from luxurious, as if nothing new had been put in it for many years.

At least they did not stint on the fuel. He positioned himself to both dry and warm. The old woman smiled with satisfaction at his expression of bliss in experiencing the heat.

“May I know your name so I can thank you properly for building up the fire in preparation?”

The woman’s face fell. She glanced at Caroline, then said, “Smith. Mrs.

Smith. He that took your hat is Mr. Smith.”

“I want you to know that Mr. and Mrs. Smith are not in any way involved in your being here,” Caroline said while she shrugged off her cape onto one of the red chairs. “They work here, and will help see to your comfort, but they are not part of it.”

“That is good to know, but of little use to them. When my cousin starts looking for necks to stretch, he won’t care about nuances.”

Mrs. Smith blanched. She grabbed the cape and hurried out.

“That was unnecessary,” Caroline said.

“She should know the truth. She is here. I am here. I am a prisoner. She is helping imprison me. That is all that will matter.”

She untied her bonnet and cast it aside. Fire burned in her dark eyes. “You can frighten her as best you can and she will not be disloyal. She and her husband have been here for years, and are as good—Are you even listening to me?”

“Of course.” Hardly. With that bonnet gone and the fire blazing, he could see her distinctly. His initial perceptions of dark eyes and hair and white skin, of a handsome face that would be more notable as she aged, held. Only now those eyes were ablaze with annoyance and her head balanced just so on exact posture and her presence warmed him as much as the flames at his back.

“Then hear me when I say do not try that again. If you do, you will not eat well here.”

“Surely you are not threatening me with bread and water?”

“It won’t kill you. In fact, it might do you some good to lose a few pounds.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am not saying you are fat, only that you have thickened a bit, as men do when they leave youth behind and start softening in their middle years.”

“*Excuse me?*” *Thickened? Middle years? Softening?* He was barely twenty-seven and at most weighed five pounds more than when in university.

“Have I insulted you? Oh, dear. I do apologize.” She did not sound the least sorry. “Now you must come with me so I can show you your chamber.”

She strode to the entry and called for Mr. Smith. The man showed up a few minutes later. With a flourishing gesture, Caroline bid Adam follow Mr. Smith up the stairs. She followed behind them both.

They trudged up to the attic level, and to a chamber intended for a servant.

Rough plank boards and a slanted timbered ceiling contrasted with simple whitewashed walls. A low window broke through the eaves to provide a view of the countryside.

“You will stay here,” Caroline said. “Your meals will be brought to you, as will water for washing and such. There is plenty of fuel for the fireplace, as you can see.” On her mention of it, Mr. Smith knelt to build the fire.

Adam paced around the Spartan chamber. “What am I to do here? My baggage is gone. I have no clothing, no razor, no books, no anything.”

She turned to leave with Mr. Smith. “I will find garments and books and send them up to you. As for how you spend your time, perhaps some reflection and penance would be good for the soul.”

The door closed. A sound scraped against it. He waited a few minutes, then tried the door. It budged only an inch, enough for him to see that it had been barred. They had planned this for some time if they had constructed that to ensure he could not leave.

He paced around the small chamber one more time. It had so little space that moving in it could not satisfy his restlessness. It was a damned prison. He tried the bed. At least the mattress had enough stuffing to cushion the ropes. He rose and checked a little wardrobe. It held nothing except a chamber pot.

He disliked confinement of any kind. This would become annoying quickly. Already anger nibbled the edges of his mood.

He bent to look out the small window. No tree outside, not that he could fit out the window easily. Down below, a stone wall held back the land from the foundations of the house and some steps that he guessed went down to the kitchen. If he jumped or tried to lower himself, he would drop four levels, not three. Only an idiot would risk it.

He threw himself on the bed. Penance, she suggested. She must know more than a little about him. As for her recommendation, plenty of penance awaited him if he found a way out of this cell.

That alone was enough to dampen his rising indignation. In a manner of speaking, this ridiculous adventure was a reprieve, brief though he expected it to be. A small delay before he chained himself to a woman whom he in no way suited or even much liked. Even her fortune might not repay him for the life she would subject him to.

He went to gaze out the window again. The rolling land said they were still in Cumberland and probably still north of the lakes. If he could escape he

could probably find his way to Nigel without undue time or trouble. He still had some coin on him, and his boots and greatcoat should keep him warm enough. He rather regretted not retrieving his gloves now.

Then again, he could stay here and reflect, as Caroline put it. Review his carefree life before he sold himself in marriage to that woman. He could reminisce about lovers recent and old, about big wins at the tables, and ignore the bigger losses, about indulgences enjoyed despite no money to pay for them. He could revel in the infamy that meant even rustics like the ones in this house knew who he was.

Why not? And if he could get out of this chamber, the hills out there and the sitting room below offered some unexpected diversion. He did not know why he was here, and that alone was an interesting little mystery to be solved.

The scraping said the bar had risen. He sat up as the door opened. Caroline marched in and dropped a bundle on the bed. "Not the finery you are used to, but they should do and no one in society is going to see you. There's a Bible there, and one of Mrs. Smith's novels, and a journal or two. I added some newspapers. They are old, but not of London, so you may find them new enough. There are also a few necessities."

He eyed the stack of garments and publications. "How long do you intend to imprison me?"

"Five days if the weather holds. Longer if the snow keeps falling."

"Until Christmas then."

"Yes."

He would regret missing the festivities. A marquess knew how to do up Christmas smartly. Watching his nieces' and nephews' excitement always provoked a pleasant nostalgia.

"You do not have to bar the door and lock me in. If I did not try to escape off the wagon, I won't now. Nor would it do me much good if I managed it. I don't even know where I am." He smiled his best smile, to cajole her to reconsider.

For an instant her mouth softened at the edges and her eyes shone with new lights. Then her brow puckered while she glanced around the chamber to avert her gaze. She turned on her heel and left.

He returned to the window. Fifteen minutes later two figures came up the steps down below. At the same time, the wagon rolled into view.

The two figures, all bundled and hatted against the cold, climbed on the wagon; then it aimed toward the rolling landscape.

Mr. Smith had been driving the horse at the wagon. It had appeared that the young man who abducted Adam had climbed into the wagon. A third man worked here, too, however.

The three of them flowed away, getting smaller. As they did, spots appeared on the crest of the nearest hill. The spots trickled down the land toward the wagon.

Adam squinted at the overcast, snow-filtered distance. Horses. A small herd of them galloped toward the wagon and its hay. The two men began throwing bales onto the ground while the wagon slowly moved.

He gazed at those horses. He recalled how Caroline had looked familiar in some way. In a blink it lined up in his memory.

He knew where he was and probably why he was here. The goal might be a ransom, but the motivation was revenge.

* * *

Heavens, but she was being a fool. That was what happened when a woman lived in isolation with no society and precious few friends. She turned into a puddle when a beautiful man gave her any attention, even if he did so for dishonorable purposes. She was supposed to be filling her father's empty place, being clever and strong like him—not melting like hot beeswax when a bit of warmth entered Lord Thornhill's eyes.

Caroline threw another bale, harder than she needed, so hard that it made her arms ache from the effort. Old Tom noticed.

“Don't you go hurting yourself,” he scolded. He set down the reins and began to rise.

“You stay there. You are the one who has been hurt.”

“Should have stayed with Mum,” Jason muttered beside her while he bent to lift a bale himself. “Don't know why you think you have to do a man's work when there are two real men here.”

Had Jason not been a childhood friend and if she did not depend on him so much, she might have put him in his place for that. Not that his place would be clear to either of them anymore. The very notion of places rang hollow these days.

“You are not my brother, Jason, so don't you dare scold me. I will do as I see fit and there was no reason for you and your father to stay out in this cold twice as long while you fed them yourself.”

“If the snow keeps on, we’ll be doing this every day for a long time,” Tom said. “Maybe Jason should stay here until it passes and not go off.”

“While Jason is gone, I will come out with you,” Caroline replied. “He has to go. We can’t keep Lord Thornhill in that chamber forever.”

“Why not?” Jason muttered. “It’s more than he deserves. I’d have let him sleep in the barn.”

“There was no way to bar him into the barn.”

“You know what I mean. No need to give him all that fuel and a fresh mattress. A bit of discomfort is due him. And you told Mum to cook enough for him, which seems too generous to me.”

“He will hardly be amenable to our demands if he has been freezing, eating gruel, and sleeping on a bad mattress.”

“She has a point, Son,” Tom said over his shoulder while he maneuvered the wagon among the herd that now crowded them.

Jason bent to his bales. “Don’t be asking me to serve him, that’s all. I’ll not be bringing him meals, or playing his valet. You cater to his needs, Caro, since you think it so wise.” His expression told Caroline that he still didn’t like giving Lord Thornhill comforts of any kind.

She could expect nothing less, she supposed. Jason had taken the situation with Amelia very hard. He refused to blame her, which meant he had to blame someone else. Himself in part, for not watching over her better. Lord Thornhill mostly, since a gentleman should behave better. Jason and Caroline had been equals in play when they were children, but Amelia had been the younger sister who needed protection.

“That’s enough,” Tom said, turning to eye how many bales were left. All around them the horses ate, necks bent low. “If it turns colder the pond over the hill will ice and we’ll have to break it up. Looks to be a bad few days ahead. They should be fine until tomorrow, though.”

Caro’s gaze surveyed the little herd through the steady fall of snow. She lingered on an especially fine mare of dappled pale gray whose coloring blended with the landscape. Three years old now, Guinevere had the blood of champions in her and should be bred with a stallion of equal lineage come spring. The one that qualified in these parts was not available, however. At least not at a fee they could afford.

One more reason to dislike Thornhill and his family. She would think about every item on that list the next time he turned that disarming smile on her.

Chapter 3

With dusk came cold. Adam built up the fire. Enough snow had fallen that the hills shone white, reflecting the failing light.

Nigel would know he was missing by now. Would he raise the hue and cry or tell himself something very ordinary had happened? *He probably nipped up to a chamber at the inn with some woman, and missed the coach's leaving while taking his pleasure.* If so, it would be another day at least before the full significance of that unaccompanied baggage was acknowledged. Even then he would never guess who had his cousin.

If he was right about where he was, he could walk to his cousin's estate cross county in a day if the sun showed long enough to give him some sense of direction.

He had made the best of a bad situation all day, but as the light dimmed outside he began to consider that had been a mistake. These might not be typical criminals, but that did not mean he should make this crime easier on them.

He allowed his anger to rise. His food would come soon. One of the men would bring it up, he guessed. When that door opened and that fellow appeared, his hands occupied with the tray he carried, one push should send him sprawling. Once at a disadvantage, he would be easy to overcome.

Then, door open, stairs clear, a quick bolt to freedom. He'd take a horse from the stable and find a village, at least.

He hoped his coat hung on a peg along the way, of course.

Footsteps on boards outside the chamber. The scraping of that bar. He pressed the far wall and faced the door, ready to lunge when it opened.

Only a man did not kick it back. Caroline maneuvered the door while she balanced a tray. She noticed him at the wall.

"What are you doing? Preparing to overpower me?" She set the tray down on the bed. "Let us have it then. Do your worst."

"My, you are suspicious."

"You are coiled like a cat preparing to pounce."

He shrugged off his intentions. "I was not expecting *you*."

"Obviously not. This is your dinner. It is quite good. I will tell the cook you send your appreciation of her efforts."

He went over and peered beneath the white cloths. "That would be Mrs. Smith. Only that is not her real name. You might have chosen something more original."

"Her name is indeed Mrs. Smith. She told you as much, after all. It is astonishing you think it isn't, despite the evidence of your own ears."

"She could not remember it at first when you introduced us. With a name as common as Smith, I think it would be hard to forget if it really were hers."

"*Any* name would be hard to forget if it were hers, don't you think? Nor did she forget it. You flustered her, that is all."

"So you say. I say you gave her a different name in an attempt to obscure her identity. If I am to play a role in this farce you are writing, at least show some creativity. Mrs. Pepperstone, for example. That would be a fine name."

"You are all nonsense and that is a stupid name."

"And you are half-mad, at the least."

She laughed. "I am not the least mad. Do I look it?"

"*You abducted a lord*. Only someone addlebrained or half-mad would do such a thing. As for Mrs. Smith, a new name will not help her, as I said. She is in the thick of it, same as you, and will swing beside you." He angled his head so as to gaze below her chin. "Such a lovely neck. How sad it will be."

"You do not frighten me."

"I should." He moved the tray to the little table near the window and set the one chair beside it. "Do you provide conversation as well as food, or am I to live in silence, too?"

"There is nothing to talk about." Yet she didn't leave.

"I think there is a good deal to discuss. Why I am here, what you hope to gain, what will satisfy you so I can depart—" He set aside the white cloth. "Whether this is not about me at all, but other members of my family. Many things."

He glanced over at the last. She reacted, much as she tried not to.

He proceeded to cut the fowl on the plate. It smelled delicious, but then he was very hungry.

Caroline stood there for a ten count before speaking again. "Why would you think this was about your family?"

He casually chewed some pheasant. Mrs. Smith was an excellent cook. "I

saw the horses the men were feeding.”

“If that held significance to you, maybe you are the one half-mad. Many farms in these parts have horses.”

“I expect some have several and I know some have whole herds. Twenty, thirty, even more. I thought it odd that you have seven out there in addition to the ones in the stable. More than you would need for farming and a household.” He looked over at her. “Too few for a farm that breeds them.”

Those dark eyes just watched him.

“Unless—” He helped himself to another forkful of food while he let the word dangle.

“Unless what?”

“Unless there was once a much bigger herd, but it had decreased unexpectedly. Been sold off, for example.” Another bite. “Or suffered from a disease.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath, like a backward hiss. He looked over. Flames in those eyes now. Her expression had tightened.

“I knew I had seen you before,” he said. “You are Miss Dunham. This is Crestview Park.”

“You no doubt think you are very clever.”

He set down his fork and turned to her. “He had no choice. My cousin only sought to protect the other farms in the county.”

“We could have separated the ones that were sick. We could have kept them all here and let it run its course and kept others away. He did have a choice. He *wanted* to have them all killed.”

“That is too harsh.”

“He had bought Galahad and didn’t want another born who might challenge his champion. So he tried to obliterate the bloodline.”

He wished he could insist Nigel would never do such a thing, but Adam had seen his cousin’s ruthlessness on more occasions than he wanted to remember. He had also seen Nigel’s delight in possessing Galahad. In winning with him and in being the envy of the Jockey Club. Crestview Park had a long history of producing some of the best racing horses in England, slowly and carefully, until the strangling disease had taken hold here.

“That was over two years ago. You are rebuilding quickly.” His memory reexamined those dots on the hillside and their sizes. “Ah. He didn’t get them all, did he?”

“It doesn’t matter. Even if we rebuild, it will never be the same. It broke

my father. Not only financially, but in his spirit. He died last year.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“No one in your circles would know, since we don’t sell prize thoroughbreds anymore.”

“And now I am to pay for that? Is that why I am here?” If this woman schemed for revenge, this might be more dangerous than he had thought.

She gestured to his table. “Finish that up. I’ll be back soon to take the tray away. Please have your boots off by then, so I can take them, too.”

“My boots?”

“You know who I am. You know where you are. You probably think you can walk to your cousin’s home. But I don’t think you will go out in that weather without boots.”

* * *

“He knows.” Caroline informed the others of Lord Thornhill’s clever musings while they all ate dinner. The meal was always late, due to the work the farm needed and the few hands to do it. “He saw the herd, and guessed the rest. Not why he is here. He has that wrong. But where he is and the family who live here.”

“Thank goodness,” Mrs. Hoover said. “I’ll not have to pretend I have a different name at least.”

“You will. And you, Jason—he’s barely seen you, so I don’t want him seeing you again until it can’t be helped.”

“I won’t even be here.”

“You still think to go?” Mrs. Hoover said. “Surely not, Caro. There’s snow and—”

“No more than four inches, Mum,” Jason said. “Of course I’m still going. I’ll ride a horse and bring another with me.”

“A horse! Amelia can’t come back on a horse!”

“Don’t see why not,” Old Tom said. “Safer than a wagon. Less bumpy, too. She won’t be jostled nearly as much. You take the chestnut mare, Jason. She’s mild enough and sure-footed.”

Mrs. Hoover turned to Caro, exasperated. “We must wait for the weather to clear.”

“Then we contend with either frozen or muddy roads and lanes,” Caro said. “Listen to your husband. He is right. The horse will be safer even then.”

“I don’t like it.” Mrs. Hoover passed around the platter of pheasant again.

“We could just leave her where she is,” Caroline said. “Do you think we should? Let her stay with Aunt Elizabeth and let Lord Thornhill go?”

Mrs. Hoover shook her head. “You be careful with her, Jason. You hear me?”

“I’ll be careful. If she is not doing well on the horse, I’ll hire a carriage. I’ve some coin.”

“Where’d you get coin?” Old Tom asked.

“Never you mind.”

Caroline finished her meal. She drank the rest of her beer, then rose to help Mrs. Hoover clear the table.

“You are not to worry,” Caroline said when they were alone in the kitchen. “Once Amelia is here, it will all settle into place. He’s a gentleman, and there are rules about these things for them. Remember how my father would do things he’d rather not because he was a gentleman, too, and honor counted for more than money?”

“It’s not money we expect from him,” Mrs. Hoover said. “He may be a gentleman by birth, even a lord, but there’s been talk about him in the county since he was a boy and would visit his uncle. Wild doings. He never outgrew that either.” She shook her head and turned to the washbasin. “I hope you are right about all of this.”

“I am doing what my father would have done. Papa isn’t here, so it is left to me. I can’t call him out like a man would, but I can make sure he faces her, and accepts his duty. He will not be able to avoid her this way. He will not be able to put us off, or refuse to receive us, the way he could in London or at his cousin’s house.”

Mrs. Hoover sighed heavily while she lifted a hot kettle from the hearth.

“Say, let me do the washing today,” Caroline said, grabbing an apron off a peg.

“You need to go up and get that tray.”

“I’ll wash and you can get it. You will be getting the better half of the bargain. Bring some water, so we don’t have to take that later. And remove his boots from his chamber.”

Mrs. Hoover gave her a long look, lifted a pail of water, then headed to the stairs.

“Just take the tray and boots and leave,” Caroline said. “Don’t let him draw you into a conversation. He will try to frighten you then. So don’t dawdle.”

“Is that what he tried with you? Made you linger so he could frighten you?”

“Something like that. It didn’t work, though.” The last was a lie. She did not want to talk about what had frightened her and how she had lingered in part to watch how the dusky light made him even more handsome, casting his face in silvery tones so he looked like a beautiful statue come to life.

She plunged her hands into the water. She could be such an idiot at times.

Chapter 4

Adam woke with the dawn. He lay abed a good while, not wanting to relinquish the warmth of the coverlet. For a prison, the room had a comfortable bed.

He finally cast the bedclothes aside, strode to the fireplace, and threw on some fuel. A blaze roared. He stayed there while it heated the small chamber and the pail of water, then went to the window and bent to look out. Already he could tell that the sun would shine today, but the frost on the window's glass indicated it would not help much with the temperature.

He judged there to be a good four or five inches of snow. While he took its measure on the wall below, two figures emerged from the house and climbed the stairs, bundled and anonymous. One hat looked like the same as that worn by his male abductor, though. That figure walked away, and the other returned to the kitchen door.

He washed, shaved, and dressed, deciding that his own garments would survive one more day. Those brought to him yesterday looked to almost fit, although whoever owned them was a bit stouter. Not as stout as the old man, but more so than the young abductor. While he would not buy the coats himself, they were of better quality than he expected, and the shirt had been ironed. The cravats had no starch and would only be acceptable in the most informal of ties. Still, no one intended to make him look like a rustic.

Having finished his day's preparation, he pulled the chair to the door, sat, and examined the latch and closure. Last night, lacking anything to occupy him, he had begun testing the bar on the other side. First he tried the razor but quickly nicked himself. One of the journals brought by Miss Dunham had firm binding and was thin enough to press through the small crack, however. It seemed to him that when he slid it up, the bar had initially resisted but then risen a bit. Could he raise it enough that it slid down one of the makeshift ledges holding it on either side of the door?

He slid that journal through again. The bar rose an inch or so, but then he felt its weight defeating the journal. He pulled the journal out, lest it crumble

and get caught, bearing evidence of his activities.

Being right at the door, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He swung the chair away to the table, and threw himself in it just as the bar scraped. The door opened.

Miss Dunham carried in breakfast. That brought a smile to his spirit. Her absence last night when the tray was taken had disappointed him.

She appeared fresh and bright and all business. The morning light cast her pale complexion in the coolest whites. Her dark eyes and hair made a stark, memorable contrast. She wore the simplest of dresses in brown, plain wool with a white knit shawl tied around her shoulders.

She strode across the chamber and all but dropped the tray on the little table. "We all have things we must do today. It may be hours before anyone comes for this."

He lifted the cloth and noted the food but also the implements. "If you leave the door open, I would be glad to bring it down myself."

She folded her arms over her chest and lowered her gaze on him. "You must think I am very stupid."

"Not at all. I give my word as a gentleman not to escape."

"Would that I could trust that word."

"I have given you no reason to think you cannot."

"Your whole life is a reason I cannot. Do you think we are so isolated we don't hear about the gossip and scandals in London and elsewhere? Such stories are prized in these parts since they give people something to talk about."

"What ones have you heard about me?"

She shrugged. "I can't remember the recent ones."

He laughed. "Are my scandals so bad that it embarrasses you to mention them?"

She flushed. "Fine. There was that problem you had with that actress you threw over who was going to kill herself, for one thing."

"She had no intention of killing herself. She dined for a month over the threat of it, though."

"And that family who accused you of breach of contract, and intended to see you in court."

"Which they never did, because I had contracted nothing and promised even less. When I said sue or be damned, they went away."

She set her hands on her hips and lowered her lids. "In the last eight

months your name has been linked to three women at least, who were described as your mistresses.”

She had him there. “Such friendships are apart from matters of honor, such as keeping my word.”

“Three. In eight months,” she reiterated bluntly. “Such inconstancy does not speak well of your character.”

“I can explain that, but the truth does not speak well of me either. Each of those ladies chose to end an alliance when she learned that I made a decision last year to no longer go into debt over women. With the lack of jewels and other expensive gifts I became far less charming to their eyes.”

She seemed to find that interesting. “So you have begun to reform?”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t go as far as saying *that*. I merely decided not to owe every good tradesman in London.”

“Which has led to changes in your habits.”

“Of a sort.” He still owed money everywhere. Just not as much.

She smiled. “An important sort. You cannot be a rake anymore. Becoming domesticated probably has much more appeal now.”

That smile softened her whole expression. She might have just heard long-awaited happy news. “*Domesticated?* I don’t think—”

She was already at the door. “You should eat that before it gets cold.”

* * *

No one came for the tray. Morning stretched into midday. He read one of the journals, then looked out his window, left to his thoughts. He pictured the Christmas preparations taking place at Nigel’s estate.

It would be the first time in years that Adam had not attended those festivities. His father had brought the family each time, often braving worse weather than what lay outside this day. It had been a way to have good food and entertainment that their own family could not afford. If Adam’s father had resented the better fortune of his older brother, he never showed it. Why should he? Having been named a baron in his own right, Adam’s father had done better than most younger sons.

Of course, this year others would be at Nigel’s besides family. Mr. Millerson had been invited along with his daughter Margaret. Pretty Margaret. Lovely, vivacious, spoiled, cruel Margaret. She thought herself fit for a duke no doubt. Adam wondered what her father had promised her to get

her to agree to marry a lowly baron.

Jewels, probably. A house in London for certain. A percentage of the profits of that canal partnership that her marriage would allow him to buy into with Nigel? It was a massive endeavor, with canals large and small all over northern Cumberland. If she received any of that, it probably would go into trust so her wastrel of a husband did not gamble away the money and stocks.

He had overheard her berating her maid once. Margaret's words had sliced the poor woman's emotions to shreds. The maid's transgression had been minor but Margaret's criticism ruthless and hard. He had walked away, imagining that tongue turned on him every day, and not for his pleasure.

Movement outside. The wagon came into view, beginning its little journey toward that hill. Only one figure on it today. Adam wondered where the other two were.

The wagon stopped not far from the house. The driver stood and turned around. Adam realized that someone had come out of the house down below him. Mrs. Smith's white cap identified her. The two exchanged some words; then Mrs. Smith walked away, down the length of the house.

Right before the driver turned to sit again, he turned his face upward, as if looking at the window from which Adam watched. White skin and dark eyes showed beneath the brim of the man's hat before the figure turned. The driver was none other than Miss Dunham.

Why would she be going to feed the horses alone? The men must be occupied elsewhere. If Mrs. Smith had not returned to the kitchen door, the house might well be empty now.

He grabbed the fork off his tray and headed for the door.

Ten minutes later he walked through an empty house, in search of his boots.

* * *

The horses galloped down the hill. Caroline stopped the wagon. Guinevere, never one to hold back her speed, led them.

Caroline climbed into the back of the wagon. She ached from yesterday's chores and adventures, but this had to be done. She paused a moment and pictured her father and how being a gentleman never stopped him from lending a hand in the work if it was needed. Holding his memory in her heart,

she lifted a bale and rolled it off the side of the wagon.

She had managed two more of them when she sensed movement on the snow behind her a split second before a horse and rider charged across the white expanse. Not Jason, who had left early this morning. Not Mr. Hoover, whose bad leg had acted up last night and who rested now in the cottage he shared with his family. She knew how they both rode and would have recognized either one from a distance, even if she already knew neither would be riding here today.

This rider sat on the horse differently. Expertly. She knew who he was.

How had he escaped that barred room? Her heart sank at the evidence that he had managed it despite her precautions. Now he would ride to his cousin's house, swear down information with a magistrate, and send them all to gaol. She wondered if she really would hang after all. The notion left a sick foreboding in the pit of her stomach.

The horse and rider aimed for the trees to the right of the pasture. In a few moments they would be gone.

Suddenly they pivoted, turned, thundered right toward her, and stopped twenty feet away.

Lord Thornhill looked down on the wagon and her. One of his disarming smiles broke. "If you are the one man today, you must have been the third man yesterday."

She turned to address one of the bales. "How did you get out of that chamber?" Her mind spoke the same question but added a few curses.

He dismounted and walked his horse to the wagon. He proceeded to tie it to the back. "If I tell you, you'll make sure I can't do it again."

She noticed he had found his boots, coat, and gloves. What a disaster. Not only had he escaped; he'd also proven she was hopelessly inept at executing her own scheme.

"Where is the old man?" he asked.

"He hurt his leg a week ago and it has taken a turn. He needs to rest it more." Old Tom had returned to helping her before he should have and now paid the price.

"And the young man?"

"On errands."

Adam climbed onto the wagon. "Then it is just you and me. You take the reins and I'll take care of the hay."

She swung one leg over the bench seat's back, then paused. "Why didn't

you keep riding? You could be well away by now.”

He lifted a bale and threw it out toward some horses. “I recalled that I gave you my word not to escape.” He turned that smile on her again. “I also wanted to see you in pantaloons.”

Her position, straddling the back of the seat, showed how she looked in pantaloons rather too well, she realized. She tugged down on her coat and finished her move so those pantaloons would be hidden while she sat. She heard a soft laugh behind her.

She moved the wagon and bales flew. “That should be enough,” he finally said.

To her surprise, he climbed over and sat beside her.

“How do you know what is enough?” she asked. “Have you taken care of horses?”

“As a youth I dawdled around my uncle’s stables. Now I make good use of my cousin’s when I visit. I find horses excellent society, often better than that in the drawing room.”

How well he put it. Few people understood what he meant, but Caroline did. She had always had an affinity with her father’s horses and had learned to care for them while still a girl. That had made that horrible day when the men came with muskets all the worse and a tragedy from which she had never really recovered.

She turned the wagon and headed back to the house and outbuildings. Lord Thornhill did not try to take the reins from her, even though he wore his good gloves now. He must have found them where she set them near the door. There really wasn’t enough room for both her and Adam on the seat, which meant that they were pressed against each other. She inhaled the scent of the soap she had left him and noticed how those gloves fit his hands perfectly, as if molded to their strength with liquid leather.

“I suggest we come to an understanding about my stay with you, Miss Dunham.”

“I am listening.”

“You now know I can get out. I propose you simply allow that and spare me the effort of getting that bar up again.”

“Next time perhaps you will not stop before you disappear into the trees.”

“I will swear my parole. In olden times, when a knight was taken in battle, and was being held for ransom, he was not imprisoned. If he swore his parole he had free movement in the house and grounds. He might join the household

knights on hunts, and would eat at the high table.”

“We don’t have a high table. Just one. If you dine at it, you will dine with servants.”

“Which will save you and those servants the trouble of feeding me up in an attic.”

Considering most of the servants, if she could even call her faithful retainers that, could not serve anyone at the moment, his proposal had some appeal.

“What happened if one of those knights broke his parole?”

“That rarely happened, because if it did the world would know that man had no honor.” To her shock, leather-encased fingers lightly touched her chin and turned her head until she was looking into the bluest eyes she had ever seen. “Whatever you have heard, whatever you think, I am a gentleman, Miss Dunham. When I say I will not escape, on my honor I will not.”

Her chin and neck quivered under that touch. She could not pull her gaze away from his. Confusion swirled in her mind, and shock at her lack of will. She remained enthralled for a half minute until he released her, but that release was all his doing, not a matter of her demanding it.

She snapped the reins to get the horse moving faster. She needed to get back so she would not feel his warmth against her side like this, and so she would stop stealing glances at that face of his. As stupid as she felt for again succumbing, she grasped the one good thing to come out of the encounter. She counted on his being a gentleman once he saw Amelia. If he kept insisting like this that he was one, it would be impossible for him to refuse to do the right thing when that happened.

* * *

Miss Dunham brought the wagon right to the stable yard. She hopped out with a quickness a dress would have denied her. The coat she wore had little length. It looked to be a boy’s coat, chosen so it would not drown her in fabric. That meant, however, that he had a fine view of how those pantaloons encased her legs and hips while she unhitched the horse.

He climbed down himself and looked around. On the other side of the house, past the gardens, a cottage showed smoke rising from a chimney. Beyond that some livestock dotted two pens. He followed her into the stable, leading the horse he had ridden.

A large structure, it had stalls for at least a dozen horses, all empty. The horse she now guided into one of those stalls was not the chestnut from yesterday. That horse was nowhere to be seen.

Caroline came out to retrieve grooming supplies.

“I will do it. Some activity will be welcomed,” he said.

She stood speechless while he pried the pail’s handle from her grip and removed the brush from her other hand. He took them into the stall. After a hesitation, she followed him.

“It is a fine little herd you have there,” he said while he worked. “That bay mare is magnificent.”

“You know horses well.”

“I would not be a Prescott if I did not.”

“I suppose not.”

He glanced over at her. She still wore the man’s hat that had obscured her identity when he watched the wagon yesterday. Low-crowned and wide-brimmed, it cast her lovely face in a shadow, but her eyes’ brightness would not be defeated.

“Even so, I perhaps know them better than most Prescotts,” he added. “I advise my cousin sometimes. He would not request that if he did not think my judgment better than his. Which he does, grudgingly.”

“Did you advise him to buy Galahad?”

“He did not need me to tell him that Galahad was one of the finest horses England had seen in years. Your father’s eye was unsurpassed, and his patience finally rewarded.”

Adam thought it a compliment. She did not react that way. “Galahad has been put out to stud now,” she said. “The fee is enormous.”

“That is the true value of a champion.”

“The bay you admired is from the same stock, only a different line.”

“Is she fast?”

“Not only fast, she has the heart for it.”

He might be discussing a horse with a member of the Jockey Club, so easily did they fall into the language of racing. She was saying that the mare had speed, and also the desire to win and the strength to stay the race.

“I asked your cousin to allow us to breed them. The mare and Galahad. I asked him to give us a lower fee, or to allow us to pay over several years.”

He kept the brush moving over the horse’s flank, but he knew what Nigel had said to that. Nigel was not famous for his generosity. “He refused?”

She nodded. "After what had happened, I thought—"

She thought there should be enough guilt, or enough justice, that the owner of Galahad would help the farm that bred him rebuild.

Adam picked up the pail and moved to the next stall and the other horse. He was pleased to see her follow him. "That was wrong of him," he said while he used the brush. "However, if you think taking me will force him to change his mind, if you expect to see Galahad coming home over that hill, you will be disappointed."

She turned up her face to him. A playful belligerence showed in her eyes and half smile. "I do not think I will be disappointed at all in abducting you."

He regarded her while his mind tried to tease the meaning of her confident statement. It didn't get far in such considerations because she appeared so lovely there in the most unconventional way. Those pantaloons, probably a youth's, fit her nicely and showed the shape of her legs and most of her hips. The coat nipped at her waist and bulged higher where it buttoned over her breasts. His mind started removing that coat, then more.

Her expression changed. Softened. She knew what he was thinking, and she was not running away.

He needed no more encouragement than that. He followed his inclinations, as was the habit of his life. He strode across the space separating them, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her.

Chapter 5

She should have turned and run, but she didn't. Watching him groom the horses had mesmerized her. His hand, unsheathed from that glove, looked so masculine while it held the brush. The horse appeared in a state of bliss, as if she knew that a seductive man handled her.

Even so, when he came toward Caroline with his face firm and his eyes determined, she should have known what would happen and run. He was not for her, and she was not for him, and the last thing anyone needed was for this kiss to happen.

Yet it did happen, and she found herself breathless with astonishment, shock, and delight. The last was very bad of her. She had no business enjoying that kiss. None at all, for many reasons. Yet she did, too much, and his embrace warmed her inside and outside. His arms became a shelter, an enclave of comfort, intimacy, and excitement.

The kiss itself seared her heart. It had been years. Forever. Her memories of girlhood kisses had grown so dusty from age that she might have been untouched. Nor had the mouth that claimed her then belonged to a man. Certainly not this man who had kissed too often and knew too well how to do it.

She had no defenses. She had not even realized she needed any. So she permitted it too long, submerged in happy confusion that blocked any intrusion from her conscience.

He pulled her closer yet. His hand fussed at a button on her coat. Her better sense reasserted itself and saw what she was doing. Indignation met a wall of sadness, but she still pushed away from him and staggered back.

Nothing about him apologized. Not words from that mouth or regret in those eyes. If anything, he appeared as if he would follow her steps and embrace her again.

She backed up more, lest he try. "You should not have done that. You know it, too."

"I am not well schooled in self-denial, especially when it comes to an

intriguing, lovely woman like you.”

“I am not a woman to be a plaything to a rake. I am insulted you thought I might be.”

“It was an honest expression of honest desire, Caroline, not a search for a plaything.”

“I think it was a calculated strategy to have me drop my guard in other ways, and to petition for release. A man like you does not have any need of a woman like me.” She strode away. “Do not do it again,” she said furiously over her shoulder. “Good heavens, wasn’t one Dunham daughter enough for you?”

* * *

Since Caroline did not march him back to his attic chamber at the point of a gun, Adam decided that meant she had agreed to the terms of his parole. Since her departure indicated she would not want company he chose to remain outside and investigate the property further.

He walked closer to the cottage beyond the garden. Smoke still rose in a ribbon from the chimney. He thought he saw Mrs. Smith’s face peer out a window at him. Perhaps the old couple lived here, rather than in the big house. It was the kind of privilege only afforded the married servants, and valued ones at that.

He retraced his steps and walked around the stable. Beyond there lay a large paddock surrounded by sturdy fences. Fifty horses would fit in it easily, perhaps as many as seventy.

This was where it must have happened. He pictured the space teeming with horses, all pacing and noisy because they sensed the danger. Within a half hour all of them were dead, shot by men at close range from behind the fence. Unable to defend themselves, they had stampeded around the paddock in a frenzy.

He had been invited to participate in that carnage. As if anyone would want to shoot thoroughbreds like that, as sport. Too many had volunteered. Nigel had joined in. To add to the injury, they had left the remains for the Dunham family to deal with.

He had assumed Caroline had abducted him as part of a plan of revenge for that day. From her parting words in the stable, however, it seemed he may have been wrong.

Wasn't one Dunham daughter enough for you? He propped his boot on the bottom rung of the paddock's fence and looked into the enclosure while he considered the accusation embedded in her words. She believed that he had kissed her sister and perhaps done more than kiss.

Hell, he didn't even remember she had a sister.

All the same he searched his memory for another Dunham. Calling up every female met at parties and assemblies would take too long, so he took the opposite approach and tried to remember all the women he had at least kissed in the last few years.

That alone meant reviewing a good number of faces. Try as he might, he could not picture anyone with the last name of Dunham.

It was possible she had used a different name. It was also possible that his memory failed him due to his being foxed when the meeting occurred. He often claimed that never happened, but the problem with drinking to the point of obliterated memories was that one did not remember what had and had not happened, including one's state of inebriation.

The wind had risen by the time he concluded he could not prove he had never kissed another Dunham sister. He made his way back to the house and entered through the kitchen door, where he shook the snow off his boots and hung his greatcoat on a peg next to the coat Caroline had donned earlier.

He wandered into the kitchen. Mrs. Smith could not be found there, but something delicious smelling cooked in the hearth in a cauldron. He found the stairs and went above.

His departure had been hasty. Now he took his time. Besides the large sitting room he visited a small library and a chamber that served as a study or office. A morning room, long and narrow, stretched across the back of the house. A dining room could hold a decent party.

It was an old house, and handsome in its way. More dark wood panels than was fashionable now. Dark papers on the walls, too, and a few floors paved in tiles instead of boards. He judged it to be a couple hundred years old at least.

He settled into a stuffed chair in the library with a book on thoroughbred breeding. Since it was a topic of interest, he soon became engrossed. So it was that Miss Dunham arrived without his awareness. He only realized her presence when the scent of the household soap reached him.

She had changed into a blue dress with little adornment.

"I hope you did not give up the pantaloons on my account. There's no

reason to stand on ceremony with a prisoner.”

“It had nothing to do with you.”

“For whom then? From what I can tell no one else is here.”

“Of course others are here. Mrs. Smith—”

“Some food awaits in the kitchen, but she does not. I think she went home to her little cottage.”

She made no retort to that. So they were alone here, as he thought.

“You should be up in your chamber,” she said imperiously.

Perhaps so, if they were alone. “This suits me better.”

“It is not for you to say.”

“I swore my parole and will do so again if you want. If you insist I live all day in that attic, go get your pistol, because I will not return there until I retire otherwise.”

“If you give me cause, I will indeed get that pistol. Just so you know.”

“It was one kiss, Caroline. I am not going to assault you. However, since you mention it, I apologize for succumbing to the impulse, small though the transgression was.”

“Small? It was very, very wrong of you, and you know it.”

“I know it was wrong. Not very wrong, let alone very, very wrong.”

“I can’t believe you insist on that. Considering my sister—”

“Ah yes, your sister. What is her name again?”

She gasped. “You are a terrible, incorrigible, conceited man.” She gathered her composure. “I am having dinner at six o’clock. If you go down to the kitchen at seven o’clock, there will be a meal waiting for you. After you eat your meal, return to your chamber. You can carry your own water up. Since you have sworn your parole and have free movement, you don’t need us to serve you.”

Then she was gone in a flourish of plain blue wool and flaring brown eyes.

* * *

Caroline left the study at six o’clock and walked down to the kitchen. This was where the household had taken their meals ever since her father died. Carrying food up to the dining room seemed an unnecessary elaboration. It had been much easier to join the Hoovers below.

Redolent now with the smell of rabbit stew, the kitchen had been improved so Mrs. Hoover could cook for everyone at Crestview Park. The table had

space for fifteen to sit and during the good times the servants from the stable and fields would come in, washed and tired, to take their meals there. Some remained long after they could be paid, mostly for the cooking. Eventually, however, financial realities had seen even those loyal retainers find other situations.

Only the Hoovers remained now. *We know nothing else*, Mr. Hoover had said. *You can't do it all yourself anyway*. So it was that she found a new family in them and they all shared the same impoverishment.

At least Amelia had been spared the worst of the deprivations. Caroline always found a way to buy her new dresses and for six months kept a carriage just so Amelia could visit friends without arriving on the wagon. Their aunt and uncle had joined in the plan and invited Amelia to spend time with them in Carlisle while they doted on her and gave her something of the life she was supposed to have had.

Caroline peered into the cauldron that Mrs. Hoover had left simmering. She ladled out some stew, then carried her plate to the table. She found the bread baked in early morning and set it on a board near her plate. She drew some beer from the keg, then sat to eat.

She wondered if Mrs. Hoover had made any plans for their Christmas meals. Last Christmas had been barely celebrated, coming so close after her father's passing. They should do more this time, lest they all lose the ability to experience the joy of the season. Of course, the amount of joy would depend on how things were settled with Lord Thornhill and Amelia. At the moment Caroline's optimism on that had dimmed considerably.

No sooner than she had eaten two bites than she heard boot steps on the stairs. She swallowed a curse, gritting her teeth instead. She had clearly told him seven o'clock and it was only ten minutes past six.

Lord Thornhill strolled into the kitchen as if it were a drawing room, looking ravishingly handsome and ever so charming. If she were a man she would find a way to wipe that vague amusement off his beautiful face.

"I said seven o'clock."

"I was hungry and the smell of that food permeates the house." He went over and stuck his nose to it. "Rabbit?"

She sighed. "The plates are in the cupboard over there. You may serve yourself."

She ignored him as best she could while plates clanked and the ladle dipped. He carried over his plate and placed it right next to hers. While he

went looking for a fork, she shoved his plate across the table.

Boot steps behind her paused, then reoriented themselves around the table's head. He settled down at his new place.

"Where did you get the ale?"

"It is beer." She pointed over her shoulder toward the keg, then thought better of it and stood. "Don't move. I will get you some." She did just that, making sure it was not too much. She did not need this man imbibing more than a half pint at most. Left to help himself, who knew how much he would enjoy?

She brought the crockery cup back and set it before him. If he thought it too little he said not a word.

She returned to her meal and he turned to his. She had wanted to dine separately so she would not have to talk to him. She would be damned before she entertained him now.

"This is very good," he said. "You have a prize in Mrs. Smith."

"Enjoy it while you can. Her husband normally hunts for us and this is the result of his last venture out. He will not be able to do so for at least a week because he hurt his leg. He rose to help me too soon, but I have told him he must rest it for an entire week now."

"What about the other one? The young man who helped abduct me? Can't he hunt for you?"

She poked at her food, wishing she had refused to talk. "Not right now. He has other duties to which he attends." It sounded like she was hiding something, even to her.

He was good enough not to press the matter. Silence fell again.

"About your sister," he said after another five minutes. "When am I supposed to have kissed her?"

Caroline set her fork down hard enough that its contact with her plate rang through the kitchen. "*You don't remember?*"

"I don't think I do, no." He cleared his throat. "I have been combing through my memories, and there is no Dunham female among them." He had the decency to at least look chagrined. "Perhaps her face—Does she look like you?"

"Enough that you thought you had seen me before. Her hair is not as dark and her eyes are blue, however."

"I thought I had seen you before because I *had* seen you before. I am sure of it. At the country fetes my uncle and now my cousin holds. I come up for

those, and you were at some of them.”

“I am well aware that you attend the fetes.” Bold of him to even mention it. “I was not at the last one, to my regret. You did not remember me from a country fete years ago.”

“I did. One year you wore a yellow dress and were present when your father handed Galahad over to my cousin.”

She *had* worn yellow that day. “My sister wore blue and was right next to me. Did you lure her with a memory of her garments, too? Tell her how memorable she had been? Flatter her into trusting you?”

“I am sure I did not. I regret to say, as I have already said, that I have no memory of her at all. Even her name.”

“Amelia, you rogue. Her name is *Amelia*.”

He pondered that name as if she had spoken Egyptian. “Amelia. Amelia. Amelia Dunham. No, nothing.” He flashed that damnable smile of his. “There has been a mistake. I never kissed her.”

She came close to throwing her dinner plate against the wall. Instead she held on to the thread of temper that remained and stood, took her plate and cup to the sink, and left them there.

“Please put your things in the sink before leaving,” she said as she passed him.

“You are angry because I don’t remember. Consider this, however. Perhaps it did not happen.”

His words caught her at the bottom of the stairs. That last thread snapped. She turned to him. “Oh, it happened. Nor was it only a kiss, you scoundrel. You seduced her. You got her with child, and you *don’t even remember her name*.”

She turned on her heel and marched up the stairs, taking small satisfaction at the look of shock on his face.

Chapter 6

A child. Was it possible?

Adam finished his meal not even noticing that he fed himself. All of his thoughts were on Caroline's accusation.

He needed more information. He put his plate and cup in the sink and went in search of her.

He saw that the study door was closed and assumed she had taken refuge there. He tried the door and found it locked. "Caroline, open the door, please."

No sound or movement came from within.

"Miss Dunham, we need to talk. You cannot say such a thing and walk away."

Still no sound. *Damnation.*

"See here, if I can break out of a locked chamber, I can break into one. Either that or I will wait until you retire and see you then and there."

"You wouldn't dare." Her voice sounded muffled but close, as if she was right on the other side of the door.

"Wait and see what I would dare. I'll not let you sleep until you have answered my questions. I deserve that much."

"You deserve nothing except a horsewhipping. Would that my father were alive. He would have called you out. I wish I could in his stead."

"Open the door, damn it."

Nothing. He eyed the door, to see how firmly its hinges were embedded.

"Wait for me in the library," she said. "We will talk there."

He strode off to the library and cooled his heels half an hour before she arrived.

"Forgive me," she said. "There was a letter I had to finish."

The hell there was. She had made him wait just to prove she did not have to come at all.

She sat on a small wooden chair. "You have questions?" she asked primly.

"Many. First of them is what makes you believe I seduced your sister?"

“She told me you did.”

“She named me?”

“When the evidence of her condition could not be ignored, she admitted to me that she had succumbed to the blandishments of the infamous rake Lord Thornhill. It was devastating news, but I don’t blame her. I blame you. She was an innocent and inexperienced. She would not know that your words were lies and your intentions nefarious.”

“I am not nefarious and I don’t seduce innocents.”

“Are you so sure? After an afternoon of drinking and whatever, have you never broken what remains of the few rules you claim to follow? Can you swear this?”

It was a hell of a question and raised once more the problem of remembering that which cannot be remembered. “It has never happened before. Not those rules.”

“Oh, not *those rules*. Because you are a gentleman, you mean. Even foxed, you would restrain yourself if *those rules* raised their flags. Of course you did not really know her, however. You could have convinced yourself she was not forbidden to you, especially if your judgment was impaired by drink.”

She was proving adept at cornering him. “I am very sure that a mistake has been made. Perhaps another used my name.”

“Do you expect me to believe something so unlikely? That another scoundrel and rake was there and chose to behave abominably using your name? I am not stupid, sir.”

“Where was this seduction supposed to have taken place? When?”

“At last year’s fete, as if you don’t know.”

“Since I was not involved, I don’t know.”

She stood abruptly. “Lord Thornhill, my sister is not a liar. Given a choice of her memory and yours, I think it safe to say hers is more reliable. She has been seduced but once, and would remember the man. You have seduced so often that I doubt you can name even half of your conquests.”

“Other than youthful adventures at brothels, I can name every woman I have ever—um, all of my conquests, as you put it, although in truth in some cases I was the one conquered.” This was an odd conversation to have with a woman, but he saw no way to avoid it if she kept accusing him like she did.

“Then it appears either you are the liar, or you had a new experience yourself late last summer. Now, the evening wears on and I have work to do tomorrow. You will have to excuse me.” She swept out of the chamber,

leaving him far from satisfied with what he had learned.

He followed her. "Do you have an image of her? A miniature, for example?"

"I do not. Nor would any image do her justice. She is very beautiful, however. I can see why you might have lost your head on seeing her." She began mounting the stairs. "It doesn't excuse you, of course, but it is understandable."

The stairway's shadows swallowed her. He watched until her footsteps disappeared when a door closed.

She had tried and convicted him on her sister's testimony. Nor could he swear he was innocent.

There was some humor in being taken to task for a pleasure he did not even remember. It was the kind of devilish development that made the angels laugh. Less humorous was the way this revelation interfered with knowing Caroline better. He stood by the stairs, imagining her in her chamber. Nefarious scoundrel that he was, he pictured her removing her dress and stays and finally her hose and chemise, revealing layer by layer the body he had surmised while she wore pantaloons. The mental pictures made him hard and half-convinced him to go up to her, stupid mistake though that would clearly be.

He went in search of some spirits in the library, thinking that if he was guilty of sinning with Amelia, he had definitely seduced the wrong Dunham sister.

* * *

"He claims to have no memory of it." Caroline spoke after eating her breakfast. Mrs. Hoover stood at the hearth, starting the day's dinner. With no one hunting, the good woman had sacrificed one of her chickens to the pot today.

"Not something she would get wrong, it seems to me," Mrs. Hoover said. "A woman remembers the first time at least."

Caroline thought anyone would remember every time. Except a rake. She imagined all those names and faces melted quickly from such a man's memory. Lord Thornhill's claims to the contrary did not hold much credence with her.

"He may refuse," Mrs. Hoover said. "What then?"

“I don’t know. I’m counting on him accepting responsibility when facing the truth of it here, where he can’t avoid Amelia. Perhaps I am too optimistic.” If she was, this entire plan could end very badly for all of them. The logic of it had seemed unassailable when she started down the path, but the pitfalls seemed to grow with each day. Increasingly Lord Thornhill’s assessment that she was half-mad to even attempt this looked correct.

“He seems a gentleman, for all his sins. A bit weak when it comes to women, is all. That is common enough. I’d not give up hope yet.”

“How is Tom faring?” Caroline wanted to change the topic. She had spent much of the night debating the character of Lord Thornhill and Amelia’s fate.

“He’s saying he can get up and help you, but I told him he must rest that leg another few days.”

“I said a week. I want him well healed, not having it give him trouble for years on end. Don’t let him leave the cottage. If matters become dire about the food, I will go hunt.” She knew how. She just disliked it enough that she avoided it if she could.

“I’ll keep close watch.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “This will just cook away like yesterday’s stew. It will be ready when you want dinner. Until then there is cheese and fresh bread and eggs if you want them. You can cook that much.”

Caroline’s lack of cooking skills had achieved infamy in the house. “Yes, I can do eggs.”

“I’ll leave the porridge warming here on the hearthstone for His Lordship. I cooked some salt pork, too, so he keeps up his strength.”

“He will find it, I am sure. I need to go out soon. It became very cold last night and I have to check the pond to make sure it didn’t ice over.”

Mrs. Hoover swung her cape around her shoulders and picked up a pail with some of the porridge and pork. “You be careful. Don’t forget how Tom says to do it if you need to break the ice.”

“Don’t tell him I might be doing it. He’ll only worry.”

With a nod, Mrs. Hoover left.

Amelia returned to her chamber and changed into the pantaloons and shirt. She pulled on half boots, wishing she had nice high ones like men wore. The snow would come over the tops of these, and her feet would be wet soon.

She grabbed her coat off the peg below and let herself outside. The feeding could wait for afternoon. Right now she just wanted to make sure the horses had water. They could eat snow, but it wasn’t the same.

She saddled a horse and rode across the pasture to the hill. She crested it and looked down. The pond of several acres lay at the base on the other side, fed in part by drainage and also a small spring.

As soon as she saw the pond she knew she would be there for a while. Despite the overcast sky, light sparkled on its gray surface. She rode closer to confirm that it had indeed iced up.

She dismounted and took down the pick that she had tied to her saddle. She approached the edge, set her legs apart for balance, then swung the pick and brought it down on the ice with all her strength.

The metal bounced off the surface. The ice did not even show cracks.

She swung again. And again. She stopped to catch her breath. While she did Guinevere broke away from the distant herd and came galloping toward her.

She petted the horse's neck and gave her nose a kiss. "Don't worry, girl. If this doesn't work I'll bring water out to you in pails on the wagon when I bring you dinner." The time and work involved in doing that made her lift the pick again.

She eyed the pond. It seemed to her the ice was not as thick farther in. Five feet away from the edge water could be seen beneath the solid surface.

She set her boots gingerly on the ice in front of her. It held solidly. She took another step. Then another. Not daring to risk more, she raised the pick and stretched forward while she brought it down with a satisfying thump.

The tip penetrated the ice. Small cracks formed and water flowed through. She was congratulating herself when a larger crack appeared, aiming right for her.

She turned even as she felt the ice on which she stood moving. All of a sudden it sank in one large mass, and her body followed. Bitter cold shocked her and the water dragged her down and back. She found some sense within her panic and fought to get her head above water. Relief flooded her when her face broke above the surface. Desperate, she grabbed at a big ice slab behind her that had not given way.

Shivering and exhausted, she clung with all her strength, inching her body out a bit. Then she screamed, even though she knew no one would hear her.

* * *

Adam finished his breakfast and returned upstairs. Silence greeted him

with each step. No one was here, not even Miss Dunham.

It was early to bring out the hay, but perhaps she had done so. He dressed warmly in the garments she had loaned him and went to saddle a horse. Perhaps she could manage on her own, but another pair of arms would make it easier and he had nothing else to do. Nor would he mind a good ride.

He paced toward the hill, looking for evidence of the wagon. It had not been in the stable yard, but perhaps it was stored elsewhere and she was not using it after all. He was about to aim for the trees, to explore the little woods there, when a horse appeared on the top of the hill. Pale and perfect, she was the bay Caroline had called Guinevere.

The horse rose up on her hind legs and pawed at the air. Then she turned and charged down the hill, right toward him, full speed. He had seen many horses race in his day, even the champion Galahad, but he did not think he had often seen a horse run this fast.

She swooped around him twice in a large circle, then charged back up the hill, as if daring him to race. Even though the horse he rode was no match, he took off after her.

She did not stop at the top of the hill but headed down the other side. He reined in his horse to see where Guinevere aimed. A large pond of several acres lay there, and beside it stood another horse.

Once more Guinevere rose up and pawed the air. He looked at that pond, searching for a young woman in pantaloons along its edge.

Then he saw her. Not on the edge. Inside the pond itself. Only her head showed, and the arms of that boy's coat. His heart rose to his throat and he kicked his horse.

He was out of the saddle in a shot, running to the pond's edge. "Caroline!"

"Oh, thank God," she cried.

His breath returned when he saw she was conscious, and alive.

"Don't move. Stay right where you are," he called.

"I fear the ice I am holding will give way if I do anything at all." Her voice broke while she spoke, and the rest came haltingly, while she cried. "It is very cold. Like being buried in a frozen world."

He stood on the pond's edge and examined the surface while blood hammered in his head. His mind raced for a plan to get her out.

"Don't tell Tom," she said, then swallowed a little sob. "He will be furious I fell in and blame himself."

"I'm going to blame *you*. What were you thinking?"

She muttered something about the ice not breaking and trying it a bit farther in. "I was never more than a step or two away from the ground."

"You should have come and gotten me before you even came here," he said, furious that their argument was probably why she had not. "You should have asked for my help."

"If you could wait until I am out of this cold water before scolding me I would appreciate it." She sniffed, then added in a miserable little voice, "I really would."

The defeat and worry in her voice broke his heart. He tried his weight on the ice. It gave just enough for him to not risk it. Perhaps if he lay down . . .

"Are you standing on the bottom?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Do not come out here or we may drown together."

It wasn't drowning he worried about. "How long—"

She swallowed another sob. "I don't know. It seems forever."

He shrugged off his greatcoat. He lay down on the ground with half his body over the ice. "I am going to throw the end of this to you. Grab hold when you can."

It took three throws before she grasped the bottom edge of the coat. "I have it now."

"Can you hold tightly? I am going to pull you in."

She cast off her wet knit gloves one by one, then twisted her hands into the coat's fabric. "My fingers are cold and stiff, but I think I can hold it."

"You must. Do not let go whatever happens. Even if the ice breaks in front of you, hold on."

He began pulling the coat toward him, bit by bit. Ice fractured around her and she moved closer through the shards. He could plainly see the fear in her eyes. He kept pulling more of the coat. Finally her body popped out of the water and slid toward him.

He grabbed her arms, then the rest of her, and pushed himself back onto the ground, dragging her with him. Finally he had her soaked body in his arms. The tears had their way then, and she shook while she cried from relief and cold.

He took a moment to catch his breath, then stood and picked her up. Guinevere looked on.

"She saved your life," he said. He threw his coat around Caroline, then lifted her into his arms. "Now we have to get you to a fire and warmth."

He set her in the saddle of his horse, then swung up behind her. He

grabbed the reins of her horse and began the way back, embracing her shaking body close to his.

Chapter 7

He all but carried her up the stairs, and lifted her completely once they made the top. “Which door?” he asked.

She pointed to her chamber door. She would have answered with words, but her teeth would not allow it, they gritted so hard in order not to shake her whole head. She had never before been so glad to see this house, or so grateful to be alive. But she still felt as if she were submerged in that water.

Cold. So very cold. She wondered if she would ever be warm again.

He carried her in, kicked a chair near the fireplace, and set her down. He bent and built up the fire, adding fuel until the flames reached high.

He rose and turned to her. “Can you stand?”

She shook her head. She did not want to stand. She wanted to huddle here in his greatcoat because if she removed it she would freeze.

He set her on her feet. “You have to get out of those garments. They only hold the cold close to your body.” He peeled away the greatcoat.

She tried to unbutton the coat she wore, but her fingers would not cooperate. He took her hands in his, holding them in a little shelter of warmth that felt wonderful. Then he went to work on the buttons himself.

“I should . . . You should not . . .” she murmured while she watched his fine hands do their work.

“Hush now. I do not importune women close to freezing to death. As it happens, my skill at undressing women is vast, and my innumerable views of feminine bodies have jaded me. You are safer with me than with a physician.”

The cold seemed to be worse and deeper, down to her bones. She would do anything to stop it. She allowed him to strip away the coat, then the shirt and pantaloons. Somehow her nakedness became clothed in her nightdress. He wrapped her in a blanket he stripped off her bed.

Removing the wet clothes helped, but not enough. She still shook. And she was still so tired and cold. She started to weep.

He moved the chair closer to the fire. “Come here.” He sat in it and

reached for her. "It will help, I promise you." He set her on his lap and wrapped his arms around the bundle she had become. He made sure her feet were swaddled, then reached within the blanket for her hands. He took them both in his right one so his own warmth would seep into her.

She cried hard then, out of fear for her close call and misery at her chills, out of relief that he had saved her and gratitude for the care he gave her now. He said not a word but let her weep until her emotions found some peace.

Then she just gazed at the flames as very slowly, bit by bit, the worst of the cold began to pass.

* * *

She fell asleep in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder and her breath teasing his ear. He could put her in her bed now and pile quilts on her. With luck she would feel no ill effects of this misadventure.

He kept her on his lap, suffering the heat from the fire and blanket, making sure she did not need more warmth and that her rest was a normal sort. The hands he cupped no longer had icy cold skin. He untucked the blanket a bit so he could see if any damage had occurred.

Nice fingers. Tapered and long. Not especially delicate. They showed the results of months of labor on this farm. Knit gloves would never spare her that. When he returned to London he would buy leather ones and send them to her. If he had the fortune for it, he would send the men to do the work instead of her.

Once she recovered he would scold her severely for venturing onto that ice. It was not something to try when alone, no matter what she might have seen her father or Tom do in the past. When Adam had not seen her at first, only her horse, when he had realized what Guinevere was trying to tell him, his blood had run as cold as the pond's water. It would be wrong for such a remarkable woman to meet such an ignoble end.

She stirred, and he thought she would waken. Instead she nestled closer. He held her closely while the flames subsided and both took and gave warmth with the body in his arms.

* * *

Caroline opened her eyes to streaks of rose and orange outside her window. The sun must have come out and now set with a splendid display.

She watched the colors peak and dim, then turned her mind to why she was in bed at dusk.

It came back to her in a rush. The pond. The ice giving way and the cold water claiming her. Lord Thornhill finding her and bringing her back.

Other memories joined the worst ones. Being held on the saddle. Being undressed. Being held in front of the fire.

She sat up and looked around. He must have put her in bed once she fell asleep. She needed to thank him for all of it. After the way she had spoken to him while he was here, she wondered if she would find appropriate words.

She rose from bed and padded to her little dressing room. She checked herself in the looking glass. Lord, she looked a fright. She wrapped herself in a long and heavy woolen shawl, slipped on some shoes, and made her way down to the kitchen to find some food.

Mrs. Hoover bent over the cauldron. She looked over when Caroline entered.

“You are to stay in bed until tomorrow,” she said crossly.

“No one told me that.”

“I’m telling you now. And His Lordship told me, so he is telling you, too.”

“Where is he?”

“Out with the wagon. Feeding the horses. He left almost an hour ago, so will be back soon. I’d be in my chamber by then if I was you.”

“I am grateful to him, but please remember that while he is a lord, he is not our lord or lord of this manor.”

Mrs. Hoover straightened and waved her ladle in Caroline’s face. “You could have died. What then? What of this manor and of us and your sister? How often did Tom tell you never risk going on the ice, no matter what?”

“I have seen him do it.”

“You are not him. He’s had over sixty years to learn how to do it right. And if you saw him, he was not alone. If Lord Thornhill had not been here . . .” She turned away and lifted her apron to wipe her eyes.

Caroline embraced her. “How did you learn about all of this?”

“He came and got me, didn’t he? Said you needed hot fluids, soup and such. Suggested tea, but we’ve none of that, of course. He asked Tom what needed to be done with the horses besides bringing them hay.” She spoke between sniffs. “He may be terrible about women, but I’ll not hear a word against him after this.”

“Do you have any of that soup made yet? I could use something. I am

hungry.”

Mrs. Hoover pointed to the table and took a bowl off the shelf. “Chicken soup from the bones out of the stew. Should be hot enough.”

Caroline spooned the rich liquid into her mouth. It warmed all the way down.

Mrs. Hoover sat beside her. “I was thinking just as you came in that he might be a good husband for Amelia after all.”

Memories jumped into Caroline’s mind, of a kiss that should never have happened. “He is a rake. He will break her heart.”

“Yet he seems to know about horses. That would be a help here, it seems to me.”

“He isn’t a farmer or horse breeder. He is a gentleman by birth and a peer and more likely he will return to London with or without Amelia. I would not build a lot of hope about him.” She spoke to her own heart more than to Mrs. Hoover’s ears.

The temptation to become sentimental about Lord Thornhill was strong right now and Caroline knew she had to fight it. Yet he had saved her and taken care of her and perhaps even worried about her. Itemizing all the ways he really would not do under other than dire circumstances did not change the softness she felt toward him, much as she counted on it doing so.

“He chatted with Tom a bit when he came to get me. Seemed he knew at least some about horse breeding. Not as much as your father, of course.”

Few men had known as much as her father. Even fewer had his natural talent for it, as if he could smell a future champion on first seeing it born. Caroline had learned a lot just by standing by his side, but she could never duplicate his skill and instincts.

She finished her soup and went above to return to bed. Perhaps Mrs. Hoover was right. Maybe Lord Thornhill would stay at Crestview Park and lend a hand to the horses. With time maybe he could even manage it all. He might even get his cousin to permit Galahad to breed with Guinevere.

The idea should please her and give her heart. Instead a heavy thickness lodged below her heart. She forced herself to acknowledge the sadness for what it was.

If Thornhill took an active part here, she would see that face and those eyes daily—while he built a life and a family with her younger sister.

* * *

The next morning Adam went down to the kitchen to see what Mrs. Smith had left for breakfast. He found porridge and crisped salt pork and coffee again. Hardly the variety or richness he would be enjoying at Nigel's house right now, but he found it more satisfying.

A step he now recognized came down the stairs. Caroline entered, dressed in gray pantaloons and a white shirt. The linen fell over breasts he doubted suffered the restriction of stays. She served herself some food and sat at the long table.

"What are you doing up and dressed? You should be resting today, Miss Dunham."

"Any more rest and I would go mad." She ate heartily, then gave him her attention. "I see they almost fit."

He looked down at his garments. He had used the ones she provided again. "Well enough. Thank goodness for the braces, though, or these trousers would be down at my ankles when I stood up."

She giggled. "That would give new meaning to your being an upstanding gentleman."

"I will picture that now whenever a man is called that."

"They were my father's. He was similar in height, and an active man his whole life. There is a shorter coat than yours that you can use if you want to ride with me. I am going out and you can come along if you want."

Eager now, he finished his coffee quickly. "Where are we going?"

"I thought I should see how the rest of the manor fares with this cold and snow."

They saddled the two horses in the stable, mounted, and rode toward the hill. She pointed to her right. "Those woods are ours and are good for hunting. Fowl and rabbits mostly, but on occasion deer. We will go around to the other side this way so we stay in the sun."

That sun shone brightly, making the land glisten with sparkles of rose and blue. The snow softened all sounds, even the crunch of their horses' hooves through the frosty surface. Little wind meant the cold was bearable, even invigorating.

They rode around the north end of the woods and onto a fairly flat plain. "It is an oddity," she said while her arm swept the view. "It is as if the land just rose in one big mass. When we had the large herd, they tended to summer here but did not care for it in winter. There is water, but it is over at the far side, near our border. It is down a little cliff, however, so not

convenient to horses.”

“It is a plateau then. Is it fertile?”

“Grasses grow on it, not much else. I doubt it could be farmed, but it might do for sheep if we wanted to build that kind of husbandry. Your cousin tried to buy it from my father, but I can’t imagine why.”

Nigel had tried to purchase part of the Dunham property? He had enough already, nor did this look to be a profitable patch. “Perhaps he sought to make amends.”

“My father would have none of it, no matter what the reasons. His solicitor offered again after my father’s death, but I refused, too. That was probably rash and sentimental. The money would have been useful.”

She turned her horse abruptly and used her heels. Adam followed and they flew over the land, around the hill, past the pond, and on. To the west he could see the horses.

“They appear well enough,” he said when his and Caroline’s horses slowed to a walk and plunged in among them. “Now this one here is handsome. I had not noticed him before.” The young stallion was almost black and maybe two years old. “Are you going to race him?”

“One or two races would be good, to establish his speed and value. The fees, however . . .” She pointed to two other horses. “More important is to breed the mares. Guinevere, and those two. We need to bring in other blood.”

“I disagree. If you race this one and he wins or places, Crestview’s name will be reborn. If you race Guinevere you will be famous at once. Even breeding the others will become easier as other farms seek yours out.”

“I know how it is done,” she said mildly.

“Of course. My apologies.”

She laughed. “You can’t help it. You are a man. Even Jason tries to tell me my business at times, and he is no baron.”

Adam fell in beside her as they moved out of the herd. “Jason? Who is he?”

She turned to look at him. “Ah, that is right. You never learned his name. Jason is the young man who helped me abduct you.”

He lined up his impressions of this Jason in his mind. Blond hair, blue eyes, attractive enough, taller than average, and a bit lanky. Well spoken. All of that did not raise any jealousy. That he was a close friend, close enough to join her in a crime, did.

“Where is he now? I haven’t seen him since that first day.”

“He went to bring my sister home. You didn’t think I had her locked up in the attic, too, did you?”

Chapter 8

“I assume you have a horse in London.” Caroline had slowed her horse to a walk while they approached the house and stable. She spoke after he fell in beside her. She had risen in the morning none the worse for her plunge in the pond. No fever or malady had taken hold overnight, to his relief.

“I do.”

“A good one?”

“He is a fine gelding. I have had him four years.”

“With your eye, I would expect him to be better than fine.”

“He is finer than I could hope to own. Fortunately, my cousin believes that it won’t do to have a Prescott on anything except very fine indeed. There is the family reputation to uphold.”

She looked over. “Has he been so generous that you are in his debt?”

“Not financially.” There were other kinds of debts, however. Other ways to extract payment for generosity. Margaret Millerson, for example.

Nigel wanted Millerson’s money in that canal project, but the two men did not really trust each other. They were too much alike. So a marriage between families would serve as it always served, as a blood tie that proved good intentions. With an allowance dependent on Nigel, and other debts like the horse and social connections, Adam was hard pressed to refuse.

He had not thought about Margaret for two days now and was surprised that the proposed match appealed far less now, when it had never appealed much at all.

“After you marry my sister, would you want to stay here and help rebuild Crestview Park? Would he object to any of that?”

She asked it ever so calmly, as if the first part were a given and the second parts the only unknowns.

“Marry your sister?”

“Of course. That is why you are here. I thought you knew that by now.”

He had enjoyed this ride with her. He liked horses. He liked her. Now they were in a conversation about his future that ideally would be held elsewhere,

if at all.

Caroline had brought him here, abducted him, to coerce a marriage with her sister. “Why didn’t you just write to me in London, explaining the situation and learning my reaction?”

“Would you have responded? I could not count on it. Nor could I depend upon your seeing her if I brought her there, or to your cousin’s house. More likely we would have been turned away. Now you will have no choice but to see her and hear her name you, and remind you of the truth of it. Then as a gentleman you will do the right thing.”

“Only if I truly am the man who seduced your sister, something I have no recollection of.”

“I think you will remember everything when you see her.”

He considered the implications of that while they dismounted and led their horses into the stalls. He left his and came over to help her unsaddle hers. “When will Jason have her back here so I can meet her?”

“You have already met her. However, she will be here in a day or so. So you can marry her.”

Caroline thought he had figured all this out. He should have. He would have if his thoughts had not become increasingly preoccupied with Caroline herself.

“And if I refuse?” He set the saddle on the beam where it lived. He turned to face her and saw her expression set in one much like that while she held him at pistol point in that wagon the first day.

“You will marry her,” she said. “I’ll not have my sister live her life in shame because you lacked courage. The border is less than a day’s ride away and we will go to Scotland and you will wed there.”

“And if I refuse?” he repeated with irritation.

“I promise that you will agree.”

“Or what? Am I to marry at the point of a sword? Or the end of a pistol? Who will hold either? You?”

“There will be no shortage of volunteers. I may now lack the courage, but others will not. You may think I am beholden to you, and might take your chances with me, but you would be mistaken to do so with the men.”

She meant Tom and that other one, this Jason. The one who had not been here since the first day. Of the two, the young one would be the danger, not Tom.

“If you force this it will not hold. It will not be legal, Caroline. Contracts

made under coercion are not legitimate.”

“There will be witnesses that say you were willing. You can go to the courts and claim you were forced, but it will be a very long time before you are heard and I don’t think any judge will believe you. I expect men say that all the time to get out of marriages.”

She began walking to the stall’s entry. He blocked her path. “Why might you lack the courage? You had more than enough four days ago.”

“Because you have helped me. I think of you as a friend. It was probably a mistake to allow that, but after yesterday—it would be difficult to shoot you now.”

“I should hope so.”

“Now, I should go. You still need to unsaddle your horse.”

“Not yet.” He did not move. “Caroline, do you want me to marry your sister? Truly? Because doing so would be—”

“Be what?”

“Unnatural. She is not the sister I want.”

Her expression fell. She looked away and visibly struggled with her composure. “She carries your child. You don’t get to choose.”

“Don’t I?” He lowered his head. “Don’t I, Caroline?”

“N-no.” Her voice broke on the word. She turned away.

He reached for her and turned her back. He lifted her chin so he could see her face beneath that broad brim of the man’s hat. He swept the hat away and looked into moist brown eyes that carried too much sadness. God help him—he bent and kissed her lips carefully. “She is not here yet, darling. At least let me kiss you while I can.”

“You should not.” She barely breathed the denial.

“No. But—” He brushed her lips with his again. She did not resist. She did not pull away. He kissed her again, fully. He took her in his arms.

Sweet kisses, touched by salty tears. She embraced him awkwardly and kissed him back, but he felt the sorrow in her, the awareness that this could never be. She believed that and it kept his impulses in check. He did not want her doing more than this, which she had agreed to with that kiss, even if he wanted much more.

The potential hopelessness of their passion affected the kisses and embraces and even the air around them. He made each kiss count because it might be one of a handful he would ever have. He lifted her closer so their bodies pressed together and he could feel her breasts and hips against him.

He cajoled her mouth open so they might join more closely.

“You will not—” She breathed out the command that was half a question, too.

“No. I promise.”

She believed him although she had no real cause to. And yet perhaps here, these last days, he had been a man she could trust. He only knew he had not been the man who left London, nor the one expected at his cousin’s house. He kissed her like he was going to stay here forever, riding the hills with her, grooming Guinevere for her first race, watching the seasons change on that hill.

The images added a poignancy to the pleasure the closeness brought him because at the heart of them was the promise of an emotion he would probably never have, at least not with this woman. He realized with both amazement and certainty that he would not want it with anyone else.

He caressed her, down the wool of the coat and over the fabric of the pantaloons. She rose against him when he smoothed the roundness of her bottom with both hands, holding her close so he pressed against her. The sensation sent him careening into a drive for more. Despite his promise, he began calculating if one of the stalls had clean straw to serve as a bed.

The familiar ruthlessness of his hunger caught him up short. He had made a promise, and if ever he kept one now was the time. He gentled his kisses again, calming them both while he did so. Yet the last one begat another, and another yet, because he feared there would be no more, ever.

Somehow, with a final caress, he summoned the strength to step back and release her. She released him, too. They looked at each other briefly, deeply. Then he stood aside and she walked to the house.

* * *

Caroline tried not to look at Thornhill all through dinner. At least they were not alone. Tom hobbled over from the cottage so Mrs. Hoover could feed them all properly in one sitting. The men kept up a lively conversation about the horses while Mrs. Hoover served her stew and dumplings and some boiled carrots dug up from the kitchen garden last month. Caroline wondered if Thornhill spoke so much in order to disguise how she did not talk at all.

Her head was too busy for dinner conversation. In it she relived what happened in the stable and tried to reconcile herself to the odd reality that she

did not feel nearly as guilty as she should. He had asked to kiss her while he still could, and she had allowed it. They had done nothing wrong. Yet.

Could she live here after that wedding took place? Watch him and Amelia together? Be the strange older sister who donned pantaloons to help with the animals? Thornhill would never tell anyone that for a day or so, before he married, he had kissed a different Dunham woman. She would never tell anyone either. It would remain a fond memory of grabbing a little joy before it became wrong to do so.

It all sounded so reasonable when she lined it up that way. So honest. Only in her heart she knew it had been wrong. She also knew that she would not be able to be the old friend of the husband, and sister to the wife. Her heart would break every time she saw them together.

She might have to leave, if her heart did not take the next few days in stride. Leave this land and the horses. She could go to Aunt Elizabeth in Carlisle, she supposed, just as Amelia had visited so often. Only Amelia had been a marriageable young woman whose beauty compensated for her lack of fortune. Caroline would be the spinster relative with no prospects and no money.

It did not sound like an appealing life, but she would accept it if it meant Amelia could be happy in her marriage. It would be wrong, so very wrong, to in any way interfere with that, even through old memories.

“You must admit he is a fine-looking man.” Mrs. Hoover leaned over to murmur into Caroline’s ear while the men talked on.

Caroline looked at the fine-looking man in question. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Suppose so, do you? As if any woman would not notice. Of course he knows it. Men that look like that always do.”

“Yes, he does.” And yet she did not think him especially vain. He knew his advantages but also his own flaws from what she had seen of him so far. He was no saint, but at least he did not pretend his weaknesses were virtues.

“I don’t think Jason will come around to liking him much for a long time. He may even leave here once we are done. He said as much to me last week. Said he didn’t want to serve a lying scoundrel who took advantage of innocent girls. I’m hoping you will talk some sense into him.”

Thornhill kept glancing at their whispered exchange, even while he still regaled Old Tom with stories of races he had witnessed. He probably guessed they discussed him. She didn’t think she could convince Jason that this was not a lying scoundrel, much as she now disagreed with that description.

Perhaps she would leave with Jason. She would take a few of the horses as her birthright and find a small plot of land to rent and start over with Jason's help. She would not have to give up all she knew then or be a dependent relative.

Old Tom began struggling to stand. Thornhill rose to help him.

"I should walk him back," Mrs. Hoover said. "I'll come back and clean up."

"I can clean up. You take care of Tom."

"I will walk with you," Thornhill said. "You can lean on me, Mr. Smith."

Mr. Hoover drew himself straight. He gave Caroline a long look, then faced the baron. "My name is Tom Hoover, not Mr. Smith. My wife there is not a Smith either, nor is my son, Jason. We have been here since before horses roamed this land and if you marry Miss Amelia you are stuck with us, too."

"Tom—" Caroline began.

"Na, don't, Caro. I'll have my say. There's things I want to know from this man before I accept his shoulder for support."

"What do you need to know, Mr. Hoover?" Thornhill asked.

"Caro here has run this place for over a year now, and done a fine job of it. She ran it the year before when her father was not himself. After you marry into the family, what are your intentions here? Do you intend to displace us all?"

"He can't do that, Tom," Caroline said. "There won't be enough money to displace anyone for a number of years still."

"And what of her?" Tom angled his head toward her without acknowledging her comment. "Will you be expecting her to leave and you run the place?"

"A lot would depend on Mr. Dunham's will," Thornhill said. "However, it would be my intention that Miss Dunham never leave this land, and have a hand in its management as long as she chooses."

Caroline was astonished by the ease with which he said that, as if he had thought it out already and decided her hand in the continued management was important.

A big smile broke on Tom's face. He beamed a grin at his wife. "I told you I should come tonight. Share a pint with a man and it clears the air. You can stop worrying now, see?"

Shaking her head, Mrs. Hoover threw on her cape and tucked a basket over

one arm. "Share a pint with a man and there's a lot of fool talk, seems to me. Come on now, and watch your way so you don't break something with a fall."

Thornhill pulled his greatcoat off its peg, slid it on, then walked beside Tom. As they left the kitchen and began up the stone stairs, Caroline saw Thornhill's arm go around the older man to ensure he did not fall on the steps.

She closed the door behind them, then turned to the sink. Water already warmed on the hearthstone, and she poured it into two basins. She made quick work of the dishes and cups, then began scouring the cauldron.

She was drying it over the fire when the door opened and Thornhill returned. He hung his coat and paced through the kitchen while she finished. The house all but quaked with its emptiness. The air grew heavy with their mutual awareness that they were alone here now and would be until early morning.

"Am I going to have to bar you into that chamber again?" she asked while she straightened the crockery.

"I don't think so."

But he didn't know for sure, from the sounds of it. It would help if excitement did not keep sparkling in her blood. It would be hell to deny herself, and yet she must.

"They are good people," he said. "I am glad you had them with you these last years."

"For what little they received in the bargain they were saints to stay. You must promise to take care of them."

He neither responded nor left. She felt him still behind her. Felt his desire reaching for her.

What he contemplated could not happen.

"You should go above now. You really should," she said, keeping her back to him.

No sound. Then slow boot steps, coming closer. She closed her eyes and tried to contain what that did to her. She imagined caresses like she had experienced in the stable, and hot kisses on her nape, and arms surrounding her. Then more. Much more.

The steps stopped. Then they sounded again, firmer now, walking away.

Chapter 9

Lord Thornhill was gone.

Caroline accepted the truth after breakfast. He had not been down to eat while she was in the kitchen. She went looking for him afterward and finally ventured up to the attic chambers. The garments she had brought him and that he had worn yesterday waited on the bed, folded neatly. All of his own things had been removed.

She ran out to the stable. Only one horse greeted her. Thornhill had taken the other and broken his parole.

She had been a fool after all, to believe him and trust him. He had lured her and charmed her and taken advantage, just like he had with Amelia. Nor had she proven stronger than her sister. She had softened and melted and surrendered her good sense. He had not even had to try very hard.

It would be a miserable Christmas now, not one with some joy. They would all spend the day waiting for the county magistrate to come and take them all to gaol.

She went about her day, doing the chores. Tom insisted on driving the wagon when they brought hay to the horses. She should have refused, but she needed the help. Neither he nor Mrs. Hoover even asked where His Lordship was. Everyone agreed without words not to speak of the failure of the plan.

In the afternoon, Caroline took one of the muskets from the gun rack near the kitchen, mounted her horse, and headed toward the woods. Tom couldn't hunt, so someone had to and it would have to be her. She had a good aim and brought down two pheasants before long. She tied them to her saddle and headed home.

Just then the crack of another shot broke the snow-packed silence. She followed the sound to see a poacher lifting his prize off the ground. She trotted closer to warn him off. As she neared she recognized the greatcoat.

Thornhill held up a large hare. "Mrs. Hoover should be able to do something with this, I think."

"Where have you been? I thought—"

He came over to her horse. "You won't mind if I tie these here, will you? I don't want the blood to get on my coat." He looked up at her. "You thought what? That I had run off? Tom knew I would be gone today. He is the one who gave me the musket."

"I hope you got more than one hare if you have been hunting all this time."

He swung up on his horse. "I only now started hunting. Since you did so well, I can skip the rest and go get warm."

"Then where were you?"

He smiled. "Does it matter? I am back, true to my word."

They turned and aimed back to the house. Her mood lightened with his return. She couldn't stop smiling, her heart felt so bright. She had been imagining Amelia giving birth to a child with no father while her sister faced a merciless judge. Also she had been picturing her never seeing Thornhill again.

"It is a fine day again," she said.

"I would prefer it were summer."

"You seem to do well enough in the cold."

"I enjoy all seasons. But right now, if it were summer, you would not be wearing that coat that hides your breasts."

She glanced down and blushed.

"And if it were summer the grass would be high and the air warm." He stopped his horse and hers stopped, too. "I could take you to the other side of that hill and lay you down and find the buttons on your shirt and remove your pantaloons and see you, as I have often imagined, but not chilled from a freezing pond."

She dared not look at him. His voice, rich, clear, and quiet, entered her blood. The place where she pressed the saddle prickled until she wanted to squirm against the hard leather. It was wrong for him to speak like this to her. Scandalous. Yet she did not want him to stop.

"I could kiss every inch of you, Caroline. Your mouth and neck, your breasts and stomach. Your thighs, high and pale. Everywhere. I could be with you the way I imagined all last night. In you."

She stared straight ahead, barely breathing. He might actually be doing those things now, from the way she felt.

"Do not tell me it would be wrong, darling. It would be right in every way. If ever in our lives it would be right, it is—"

His voice stopped abruptly. She glanced over to see him squinting into the

distance. She set her attention there, too, and saw what he saw. Two horses came from the northwest, off the road that wound toward Carlisle.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“Jason.” She swallowed hard. “And Amelia.”

* * *

He took a deep breath, as if the longest sigh in history wanted to emerge from him. Instead he moved his horse forward.

“Does she know I am here?” he asked.

“She thinks she is coming home for Christmas. I asked Jason not to give her the particulars about your visit.”

Visit, hell.

They drew near the house. The other riders had gone around to the front. He stopped the horses and reached over to untie the pheasants and hare from her saddle. “I am going to bring these to Tom so he can clean them for dinner. I will join you shortly. Don’t tell her I am here. Let it be a surprise.”

He rode off while she continued to the house. She would enter through the kitchen, he assumed. Amelia might use the main doors, but Caroline would be practical.

He dropped the animals outside Tom’s door. The old man must have heard, because he came out. “Hunting, I see. Should last us a few days.”

“Perhaps not. Miss Amelia has just returned. I expect Caroline will want to feed her well on her first day back.”

Tom made a face. “Gave the girl airs, she did. That aunt of theirs made it worse, dressing the girl up like a doll. Nothing that can’t be changed, though. You go and see her and I’ll take care of these here and tell my wife the news.” He offered a man-to-man smile. “Been a while, eh? Eager to see her, no doubt.”

“You have no idea.”

He took his time making his way to the house. He went around to the front. He dismounted and tied his horse. He took a bundle from the saddle, then dawdled a few more minutes while he admired the snow-covered landscape. Finally he let himself in the big door and removed his greatcoat.

Voices came from the sitting room. Caroline’s low, melodious one and another higher, younger one. He tucked the bundle behind a bench in the reception hall and approached the door.

Caroline still wore her pantaloons. Beside her on a divan sat a younger, softer, less starkly contrasted version of herself. He judged Amelia to be nineteen at most. She wore a richly colored sapphire dress of high quality and recent fashion. On a chair nearby rested a deep scarlet mantle and elaborate bonnet.

His gaze stopped for a five count on her hands. She wore scarlet gloves. Lambskin gloves that fit her delicate hands to perfection.

She appeared the grand lady of the house and Caroline the faithful retainer. He resented that far more than he should.

Caroline noticed him in the doorway. She touched her sister's arm. "Look who is here, Amelia. See who has come to visit."

Amelia looked over at him. Her brow puckered in confusion. Then her expression fell and her eyes widened. "Oh. Oh, my."

Oh, my, indeed.

He advanced on them. He bowed. He even smiled. She just stared at him.

Up close he could see the bulge that revealed her pregnancy, even though the style of dress disguised it well. He made a point of noticing it in a way she could not ignore.

Caroline began offering a story about his arrival that made it appear he had come of his own accord. He would have none of it.

"Your sister is dissembling. In truth she and Jason abducted me, so you and I could marry. That is why I am here."

Amelia looked ready to faint. She even swooned a bit. A figure rushed out from a corner. Jason. Adam had not even seen him there, sitting to the side. Now Jason hovered over Amelia, worried. He glared back at Adam. "She's a delicate sort and the journey was long. You should be more careful with her and not give her shocks like that."

"She is fine. Aren't you, Amelia? Thank you for bringing her home, Jason. Miss Dunham, perhaps I could have a little time alone with my intended? She and I have much to discuss."

Caroline rose. "Of course. Come with me, Jason. Give them some privacy. Perhaps you would take care of the horses we were riding, while you deal with your own."

Jason left grudgingly, with many dark looks over his shoulder. The door closed on them both.

Adam gazed down on Amelia. She in turn gazed down at her gloves.

"Look at me, please."

She slowly raised her head.

“There was always the slightest chance that your accusation against me was true. Now that I see you, I know it is not. You and I have never spoken before, nor even been in this close proximity. While we may have attended the same fete, we had nothing to do with each other. I know it, and you know it. So please explain to me why you told your sister that I am the father of your child.”

She finally blinked. Long dark lashes fluttered over her robin’s-egg blue eyes. “Well, you are the sort to do such a thing, aren’t you? And as you are a peer, and usually in London, and not known for constancy, no one would expect you to do the right thing by me.”

“You lied so that you would have a story regarding a man whom no one would openly accuse. Why not just name the real father?”

“I couldn’t do that. No one would believe me, and even if they did nothing would be done about it. He is married, you see.”

Ah. Caroline demanded a name, and the real name not only was of no use but also compounded the sin. So “Lord Thornhill” was a convenient lie with, to Amelia’s mind, no consequences. Amelia did not know her sister nearly well enough.

“Give me his name now and I will see what I can do to make sure there is at least a settlement to care for the child.”

She cocked her head. “I don’t think that will happen. He is not the sort to be impressed by such as you. Your being a baron would be of no consequence.”

This man had truly turned her head if he had her believing that. There were few men who were not impressed by a lord.

“His name, Amelia. I must insist that you share it, for the good of you, your child, and your family.”

* * *

Caroline kept her ear to the keyhole, for all the good it did. A muffled conversation reached her, but not the words. At least they both were talking, and she could not hear Amelia crying, so it must be going well.

Thornhill had appeared more lordly than normal when he entered that room. His frock coat and waistcoat had been brushed at some point, by himself she assumed. She had no idea where he procured the clean and

starched cravat. She had noticed none of this while they rode back.

His manner had been less than gentle with Amelia, but then he would not be happy under the circumstances. Still, with time, they might make a good marriage. If that notion left her hollow, that was her own fault for allowing herself to think of him as something other than her own sister's intended.

The door abruptly opened. She almost fell forward. She looked up to see Thornhill gazing down.

"Did you hear?"

"I tried but could not make out the words. You should have spoken louder."

He smiled vaguely and stood aside. "Your sister has something to say to you."

She did not have to enter the room far to encounter Amelia. Subdued and docile, she met her sister a few feet from the door. "I made a mistake," Amelia murmured. "It is not Lord Thornhill. I am going up to my chamber to rest now."

With that Amelia rushed past her.

Caroline stood where she was, stunned. Thornhill closed the door again.

"How . . . ?"

"She made an error. Leave it at that. Come sit with me while we decide what to do next."

Caroline wandered around the chamber, her mind all mixed up. She sank back into the divan. "So who is it? That child is not a miracle. Some man—"

"Do not press her for a name. I know who it is, and there will be no marriage. Her seducer already has a wife and family."

Caroline's heart sank. "I have been most kind about this, but now I will scold her severely. Even a girl knows not to allow a married man to—"

"She will need even more kindness now, Caroline."

She sighed heavily. "What is to be done? I suppose, if her condition was not noticed in Carlisle, that after the child is born she can return there and try to make a life for herself."

"It is unlikely her condition was not noticed. I saw it at once."

"Then what?"

He shrugged. "She lives here, at her home, I suppose. She is not as delicate as you have led her to believe."

"I have led her to believe?"

"You indulged her, then sent her to your aunt, who did so even more. Put

her in some pantaloons and let her groom horses with you. If it is good enough for you, it is good enough for her.”

“You are angry that you were abducted and accused in error, and to no purpose. I understand that. We will give you one of the horses and you can go. You will be at your cousin’s by Christmas, easily.”

He turned his body so he faced her. “I think I would like to spend Christmas here. I went to the village this morning and sent a letter to my cousin explaining I would not be attending his celebrations. He will not miss me.”

So that was where he had gone. Yet he could still go to his cousin’s now if he wanted to. Only he didn’t. The implications of that teased at her. She dared not hope he dallied for her sake, and yet.. “If you had told me you were going to the village I would have asked you to bring back a few things.”

It was a stupid thing to say but all she could summon short of spilling out her relief and gratitude that she would see him for a few more days at least.

“Like salt and flour? Mrs. Hoover requested it. I also brought back sugar and a few other provisions.”

The last of the sugar cone had been used months ago. Mrs. Hoover would be elated.

It gave Caroline joy that he would remain with them a few more days. But Amelia . . . “I wish we had family down in the Midlands or somewhere else far away and Amelia could go there until the child is born. She might still have a reputation left afterward, and a life.”

“That is one way such things are handled. Another is the girl marries a man who accepts he will raise another man’s child.”

“That would take a handsome settlement, I assume.”

“Very handsome.”

“So that is not a choice either. Not that there is a convenient man about. I don’t think you are offering yourself.”

“No.”

She began to stand, but he pulled her back down and leaned toward her. “There will be no privacy on the floor with your chamber now. I assume Amelia will sleep up there. The attic, however, is still my kingdom. Come visit me tonight and we will find a solution to the problem that is Amelia.”

She looked into his eyes and knew they would not only talk through her family’s problem if she went to him. He might not have seduced Amelia, but he had every intention of seducing the other Dunham sister.

She could not agree. She did not disagree. She stood; then on impulse she bent down and kissed his lips. An inner debate waited in the hours ahead, but she already suspected how it would end.

* * *

Adam knew that kiss had not been a promise. It did give cause for optimism, so he spent the next hours in good humor.

He set the sugar cone in the kitchen as a present for Mrs. Hoover. Then he wandered out to the stable. Jason was finishing up with the horses. “Do you need help bringing out the hay?”

“It’s warmed up a bit and some snow has melted. They will find the grass now on the southern slope of the hill. No need to bring the hay.”

Adam watched him move. The horses liked his handling, and one kept nibbling at his hair. “It was not me. She just told her sister.”

Jason paused. Then he lifted a hoof and inspected it. “Who then?”

“A married man. There will be no more abductions.”

Jason cursed. “Not much life for her now. I was at that fete. I should have watched her better.”

“Don’t blame yourself. She could have a good life if another man marries her. One who cares for her, and would not hold one mistake against her.”

“If you find that man, you send him to me.”

Adam strolled over to the horse while Jason went around the other side to inspect another hoof. “Why not you?”

Silence. No sound. No movement. Then a blond head rose and looked over the horse. “She is a gentleman’s daughter. I am a servant. That is all we are in truth. We may all eat at that table together, but we are not of the same place in life.”

“No one knows all the places better than I do. However, you are well spoken and hardly a typical servant. As this farm rebuilds you will have more responsibilities. I expect in five years you will be a steward. That is a servant, too, but of a different sort entirely. More like a solicitor is a servant.”

He laughed, shook his head, and moved back to the horse’s rear hooves.

“How did you come to be educated?” Adam asked.

“Mr. Dunham had me take lessons with Caro—with Miss Dunham. We’re about the same age. He told my parents to send me over in the mornings when the tutor held lessons. I wasn’t the best student.”

“Neither was I.”

His head popped up again. “No? Well, we’ve something in common.”

“Several things. That and horses. I have wondered about something. Would you have shot me that first day?”

“I am sorry to say I probably would have. I was wanting to, so if you had given me the excuse—” He looked up again. “My apologies for all of that, seeing as how you were innocent.”

“Jason, is there any other woman you have ever met for whom you would shoot a peer? Would you have done that for Caroline? For the girl you first kissed?”

Jason smiled roguishly. “One and the same, ain’t they? Don’t tell her I told you. We were fifteen and curious. Wasn’t much to it. I couldn’t figure out what all the fuss was, but she is like my sister, ain’t she? Now Amelia—never kissed her. Wouldn’t dare even when she was old enough. I just knew it would have been different, though.”

“If you are in love with her, perhaps you should consider what I said about a marriage. If you do not see her as a sister, she may not see you as a brother. Raise the possibility with her, and give her time to think about it.”

Adam waited for Jason to deny being in love. When it did not come he patted the horse’s flank and left the stable.

Chapter 10

They had a feast that night with the hare and pheasant and even used the real dining room. Mrs. Hoover made a honey cake now that she had enough flour. Amelia ate sparingly. Most of the time she kept her gaze on her plate, although on occasion Caroline saw her send resentful glares at Thornhill. He noticed, too, but his spirits were so high he didn't seem to care. He showed the humor of a man just spared from the gallows.

"A gentleman would have married me anyway," Amelia said that night while Caroline brushed out her hair. "Then I'd be a lady and live in London and go to grand balls. Now I'll just be a fallen woman with a baby who has no father."

"Of course he has a father. You named the wrong man, but you know the right one. If you tell me—"

"I can't. Thornhill made me promise not to tell you."

"He did, did he? I'm your sister. If you can't tell me, whom can you tell?"

Amelia sealed her lips closed hard. Caroline guessed the answer. She could tell Thornhill, which she had. So he knew, but her own sister did not. That would never do.

After tucking Amelia into bed, Caroline marched to the stairway and went above to the attic chambers. Thornhill's door stood open. She peered around the threshold to see him sliding something under the bed. His coats were off and his shirt sleeves rolled up. A pail of water warmed on the small fireplace hearthstone.

He looked over and saw her. "Why do I think you did not come up here to give me a kiss?"

She stayed at the threshold and crossed her arms. "I want to know his name."

He shook his head. "I will talk to him, but you will only get trouble for your time if you do."

"You know him, then."

"I probably know most of the men who were at that fete who might

impress Amelia.”

“It is your goal to vex me.”

He walked right up to her. “Caroline, my only goal today, the single one that occupied my thoughts, was getting you to come up here tonight.” He reached around and closed the door behind her. “It appears vexing you was the path to success.”

The sails of indignation deflated at once. She looked around his cell, thinking it had been unnecessary to force him to live like this, especially after he gave his parole. She could hardly have him in the chamber next to hers, however. Who knew what ideas he might get?

He took her hand and stepped back, leading her farther into the chamber. The tiny creases at his eyes’ edges subtly deepened.

“I amuse you,” she said.

“No. You charm me. You are adorable and precious.”

“I think, my lord, that your eloquence is the result of dishonorable intentions.”

He sat in that one chair, still holding her hand. “Not too dishonorable. Sit here with me so I can hold you again.” He drew her closer, then down so she sat on his lap. “We have many things to talk about, Caroline.”

“What things?”

“My next few days here, mostly.”

His last days here, he meant. She kept her expression steady, but that arm embracing her and that face so close to hers almost defeated her. The truth about Amelia had cut two ways. On one edge was relief that Caroline would not have to see the man she loved marry her sister. On the other edge was sadness that he had no reason to remain here now.

“I have them all planned if you are agreeable to my thinking,” he said. “Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Mrs. Hoover can start her cake. Jason and I will go hunting for Christmas dinner. You and Tom and Amelia can take the wagon to the woods and bring back some boughs of greenery.”

She had to smile at the thoroughness of his plan. “It will be a wonderfully festive celebration.”

“I think so. That will be the next day when we will all eat, drink, and be merry. The day after is the servants’ day off. Unless the household is to lack washing water and fuel and warm food, those who are not servants will have to serve. That means Amelia and I will be servants to the rest of you.”

“Amelia won’t like that. She will think I should be a servant, too.”

“You have served her and this legacy plenty. She will do it. Trust me.”

He seemed very sure about that. She wondered what had been said while she listened at the keyhole.

“Then the next day,” he began, then paused.

She waited for the rest. *Then the next day I will have to leave.*

“The next day, it is my turn to abduct you. We will make a little journey to Scotland, as you always intended. Only you and I will wed, not Amelia.”

She gazed down at him in the stillness. He gazed back, right into her eyes. Waiting. Searching.

“I am no great prize, I know,” he said. “Other than my title I have little to offer except a reputation that will embarrass you and more debts than are decent. However, you have stolen my heart, Caroline, and given me more happiness and purpose these last days than I ever thought to know. I must at least try to convince you to be mine.” He slid his hand behind her neck and pressed just enough to bring her lips to his. He showed the kind of convincing he had in mind.

She could have answered his proposal right then. The words were in her head. The warmth of that kiss undid her, however. Words became unnecessary. Intrusive. She accepted how the sweetness turned passionate, then almost desperate. She welcomed the way her blood sizzled and coursed down her center.

He nuzzled at her ear while he caressed down her side. “We will wait if you want, but I—”

“I don’t want to wait.”

Was that a thank-you she heard before his kisses pressed her neck in a dozen thrilling ways? Her mind narrowed to nothing except the sensations he created in her body, and to the building desire filling her body.

His caress smoothed over her breast so naturally that she almost nodded, it felt so right and good. He tantalized her with new pleasures so intense that impatience entered her joyous abandon. The arm embracing her shifted and she felt her dress’s tapes loosen.

“Stand here.” He set her on her feet in front of him. The fire warmed one side of her and the cool of the chamber touched the other side, but the heat inside her came only from him and her and what he was doing.

He slid the dress down until it pooled at her feet. He turned her to work the laces of her stays and removed them before he turned her back again. She stood there in nothing more than stockings and a chemise. The cloth of the

chemise hung loosely off her breasts. She looked down at how they had grown heavy and full and how the tips had tightened against the fabric.

He pulled her closer, between his thighs, and eased the chemise down until her breasts were naked. To her astonishment he leaned forward and licked at one tip and the sensation sent her reeling. He kept torturing her with his tongue while he pushed the chemise farther down until she was completely naked.

She could barely stand now. She could hardly see. He tongued at the other breast. A pulse throbbed low, between her legs, demanding more pleasure, beating a little drum of desire.

He took her breast into his mouth, but his tongue still flicked and aroused. His embrace lowered to her hips and caressed, then held, her bottom. His other hand slid between her legs and touched that throbbing pulse.

Shocking pleasure overwhelmed her. She gripped his shoulders so she would not die from it all. Her mind cried whimpers of need and maybe her mouth did, too. She heard nothing except his voice while he moved her toward the bed. He laid her down and covered her, then undressed.

With only a shirt and trousers to remove, it did not take long. She caught a glimpse of him limned by the light of the fire, all lean strength like the thoroughbred he was, good lines, his chest and arms as arresting of attention as his face.

He joined her in the bed and gathered her into his arms. "Does something amuse you?" he asked while he covered them both. "You have an impish smile."

"I am thinking it was wise of me to demand Jason stuff the mattress. He thought you should sleep on the ropes alone. Or the floor."

"It is not a bad bed. Small, but enough space for the two of us."

Considering how they lay, it was enough space. His body lined hers and his chest hovered over her. His head dipped to kiss her and lead her back into passion.

Slowly, carefully, he aroused her. His kisses drew her toward abandon. He teased at her breasts with his tongue and teeth and caressed her body with confident, knowing hands. Her shyness fell away, and then her dignity, and finally her hold on herself. She moaned from the pleasure and it seemed that only made him find ways to make it better. When caresses on her thighs rose higher, he touched and toyed at her private flesh until impatient desire had her grasping him with fevered need.

He mounted her, finding ways not to crush her with his weight. He bent her knees, then rose high on tight, taut arms and began to press into her. He filled her slowly, but it still left her breathless. Even as it pained her she did not emerge from the stupor of intimacy that filled her consciousness.

He withdrew just as carefully, then filled her again. And again. Pleasure teased at her even within the soreness. She could tell he restrained himself for her sake, could feel the power building in him that he held in check. Maddening sensations started to overwhelm the pain and she moved, rocking up to accept him, joining him in the hard, consuming kisses he dipped his head to give her.

His thrusts came harder then. She did not find that unpleasant and even urged him on with caresses and kisses because it brought them closer and banished the rest of the world. Their hard passion might have lasted a few minutes or many; she could not tell. There was no time, only emotion-drenched intimacy.

Finally he was on her, his deep breaths in her ear as he collapsed after his finish. She wrapped her legs around him, and her arms, too, and held him close. She turned her head so her lips touched his cheek.

“Yes, I will marry you.”

Chapter 11

“Where did you get that, Adam?” Caroline watched while Thornhill stood on a chair and tacked a ribbon to the top of the sitting room door’s threshold. An apple hung within it and a mistletoe bough dangled at its end. It added a bright note to a chamber already decorated with green boughs on the windowsills and five thick candles awaiting dusk and lighting.

“A woman in the village had the ball and mistletoe. I added the other greens. I thought to catch you under it and steal a kiss.”

“I think you have had enough the last two nights.”

He checked the ribbon. “There will never be enough, darling.”

Perhaps not. One kiss became more with them. She had surprised him by arriving at his door last night. Still sore from her first time, she had not been able to stay away. He had been unable to deny them both, although he displayed heroic restraint and care again.

He hopped off the chair and pulled her into yet another deep kiss. “I think we should tell them today at dinner. Then we can do this whenever and wherever we want.”

She laid her head against his chest. She enjoyed a few moments in his arms before the day’s Yuletide festivities began.

Boughs of evergreens decorated the house. Down below Mrs. Hoover finished her dinner and cake with Amelia at her side. Amelia had complained about the chores she was expected to do now, so Caroline gave her a choice in them. To Caroline’s surprise, the choice had been learning to cook.

She looked through the frosted windows. Fresh snow had fallen last night but not too much, and now the sun shone on an unblemished blanket of white.

“Jason is coming with a big log,” she said.

“Tell him to bring it in here to dry,” Thornhill said.

She went to open the front door and call Jason in. He set the log on its end near the fire. “Should be fine in a few hours.”

He paused to look around the room, at the greenery and berries and

candles. His gaze settled on the mistletoe bough for a long moment.

“Stay and get warm,” Thornhill said. “I’ll see if there is some hot coffee below.”

A little confused, Jason took position in front of the fire and pulled off his work gloves. Thornhill left and shortly returned. “It will be up soon.”

“I’ll get some later. I still need to get the wagon and hay going, what with the snow again.”

“No, no, stay. You should take a few minutes on this day.”

Jason shrugged and turned back to the fire.

Five minutes later, Amelia arrived with a tray. She stopped right inside the door. “Has the king called on us? If not, I don’t see why I am carrying refreshments up those stairs.”

“Stay there. I will take it,” Thornhill said. Yet he did not move.

Over at the fire, Jason watched Amelia.

Caroline watched them all.

Jason looked above Amelia’s head. With an expression of resolve, he made the few strides that brought him under the bough, too. He took the tray and set it down on a table. Then he did not steal a kiss. Instead he took Amelia’s face in his hands and kissed her fully.

Caroline could not ignore the kind of kiss it was. Shocked, she took a step forward to stop him. A hand on her shoulder pulled her back.

She looked up at Thornhill.

Jason picked up the tray again. “I think I’ll drink this in the morning room. Why don’t you sit and have some, too, Amelia? You have been working as hard as I have.”

Wide-eyed and perplexed by that kiss, Amelia followed him out of the room.

Thornhill smiled.

“Are you matchmaking?” Caroline asked.

“I appear to have a talent for it.”

“Jason?”

“He is clearly in love with her. He probably has been for years. I am surprised you did not see it.”

“She will never marry a servant.”

“He is not a common servant here. She knows his interest now. She has already begun reconsidering him, and how she views him. That will take some time, but—Who knows what she will do?”

Caroline stretched up and kissed him. "I will pray that the love she already has for him becomes that kind of love. It would be a wonderful conclusion of her misadventure. Is this a Christmas gift to me?"

"I thought of it as a gift to Jason and Amelia."

"The mere chance of this match lightens my heart, so it is my gift, too. Thank you, for this and everything else you have done for me."

* * *

"I think that went well, don't you?" Caroline asked. Her question broke the silence that fell after an energetic passion left her screaming into the night on her release. Adam hoped no one went running to her chamber to see what accident had overtaken her.

He doubted she knew she had done that. Nor did he think that she now congratulated them both on the artful sensuality of the last half hour.

They had announced their forthcoming wedding before dinner, and it made for a very merry feast. Afterward, in the sitting room while the Yule log crackled, there had been games and songs, then more of the Christmas cake.

"No one seemed too shocked," she added. "Except perhaps my sister. She does not resent it, though. She only asked me later why I would marry such a demanding man."

"She is unhappy that I said tomorrow she and I would be the servants to the rest of you. She thinks you should join us because officially you are half owner of the manor."

"She is correct in that. My father's testament left it equally to us both. I should play the servant with you."

"I have decided you will not. Not another word will be spoken on this matter."

"My, you *are* demanding. And commanding." She nuzzled his neck.

Both when necessary. He wanted Amelia to serve Caroline, for once, even if it was in this mock fashion. Amelia did not comprehend how her sister had lived and worked while Amelia played the gentleman's daughter. He doubted Amelia had noticed the toll it had taken on Caroline's hands.

That thought had him feeling down beside the bed until his hand hit a bundle propped against the wall. He grasped it and pulled it up. "I have something for you." He set the bundle on his chest right in front of her nose.

She sat up. "What is it?"

“Gifts. Small and hardly good enough for you. Useful at least, perhaps.” It had probably been a blessing to only have the village shops available. If in London he would have been tempted to spend hundreds for jewels and luxuries. Hundreds he did not have. For these small gifts he had enough, though. In time, with Caroline at his side and his one talent put to use with the horses, perhaps there would be more than enough.

She took the bundle and felt through the muslin wrap. She petted the red silk ribbon that bound it together. “This alone would be enough.”

It had been a day of laughter and joy and a night of unbearable pleasure and powerful emotions. A dark anger now threatened to ruin that, and he swallowed the reaction. He pictured his cousin and Margaret Millerson today, living as if the luxuries they enjoyed were their due.

Later, he thought. Not too much later, but not now.

Caroline pulled at the ribbon and unfolded the muslin. She lifted a fur muff. “Oh, my.” She rubbed the fur against her face. “It is beautiful and I will treasure it. Not very practical for riding a horse, of course, but—”

“It is to keep your hands warm when you ride in a carriage.”

She was good enough not to say she had no carriage.

“As for riding, keep looking,” he said.

She peeled back more muslin and squealed with delight. She lifted lambskin gloves and immediately pulled them on. “They fit perfectly. Like another skin.”

“You can pick up a farthing while wearing them.”

“I can also hold and shoot a gun.”

“That too.”

“There is something else—” More muslin and another squeal. “Good solid work gloves! You have given me a whole wardrobe for my hands.” She fell back into his arms and kissed him.

He held her against his body. “I never want to see you with red, raw hands again, Caroline.”

“I am surprised you found all of this in the village.”

“Most shopkeepers have a special drawer that rarely opens. Small luxuries await the right patron. I would have bought a wardrobe for your body as well, but that will have to wait for town.”

“I have nothing for you,” she whispered.

“You gave me yourself, Caroline. There is no gift more precious.”

She rose on her arm and looked down at him. “Perhaps I do have

something else.” She caressed down until she reached his cock. “You may have to tell me how to wrap it, though.”

He told her just how to do it.

* * *

Two mornings later, Caroline slipped out of Adam’s bed while he slept. The announcement of their marriage had been met with shock, happiness, and good cheer, but that did not mean they could openly share a bed.

He had not been in his chamber when she arrived the night before. He still had duties as a servant down below. A day of that, with only Amelia to aid him, had left him working long into the night. Food from Christmas meant no one had to cook much, but the dishes still needed washing and the pots scrubbing.

Amelia had complained about having to help when Caroline did not. It seemed unfair to her. To Caroline, too, who again petitioned Thornhill for her to be made a servant. He would have none of it. He meant to humble Amelia, she knew, perhaps so she would be amenable to Jason’s eventual proposal. Mostly, however, he knew that Amelia would live at Crestview now, and if a peer of the realm could help groom horses Amelia could help groom chambers.

Caroline was in the kitchen with Mrs. Hoover when Tom hobbled down the stairs outside and opened the door. “Riders coming up the lane. A carriage, too.”

They all looked at one another and shrugged. “I can’t imagine who it could be,” Caroline said. All the same she went up to greet whoever was coming to their door.

A coach and two riders on horseback drew closer. The riders wore livery. The huge carriage sported an abundance of brass and two liveried footmen. As it rolled to a stop in front of her house she saw the escutcheon on its door.

Jason came up behind her in the hall. “Go above and wake Lord Thornhill,” she said. “Tell him his cousin is here.”

A footman hopped off the back of the carriage, opened the door, and set down steps. A man emerged. The face beneath his hat’s brim was a fuller, older, coarser version of Thornhill’s. His shorter body showed more weight. Caroline gritted her teeth. This man would soon be family to her, but she still hated the sight of him.

One of the footmen came to her at the door. “The Marquess of Haverdale has called for Lord Thornhill.”

“Please ask him to come in and wait by the fire.”

“He intends to remain outside.”

“If he chooses to remain in the cold, so be it. He is welcome here. No one is going to assault him.”

The servant looked shocked by the very notion of an assault on his lord. He returned to the marquess and delivered her message.

The marquess appeared indecisive. The damp and cold won out over any inclination to stand his ground. He approached, bowed, and followed her into the house.

“Lord Thornhill will be with you soon.” She ushered him into the study. “Will this do? The blue chair is very comfortable.”

He gave the chair’s seat a little brush with his gloves. “This will do.”

“I will leave you then. I have preparations to make for the day.” She closed the door upon leaving, hoping her father was not turning in his grave.

* * *

Adam took his time dressing and going below. He had expected the carriage. He had not expected Nigel to be inside it.

Caroline sat in the reception hall. “I put him in the study.”

“I did not expect him, if you are wondering about that.”

“I was wondering.”

“I would not invite him here, knowing how you feel. Now, keep the family in the kitchen. My cousin can be dramatic in his anger and I do not want witnesses to his histrionics.”

“Will he be as angry as that? He has no reason to hate us.”

Someday he would tell her just why Nigel would be angry. Not all of it, though. It would take a while to decide what she needed to know.

He entered the study and closed the door. Nigel glared at him from where he sat on a blue chair. A folded paper rested on the desktop within his reach. He tapped his finger on it.

“Hell of a thing to receive that. Good of you to let me know you were alive, at least.”

“I sent word as soon as I could. Did you have a good Christmas, secure in knowing I was safe?”

“Good enough, although Miss Millerson was distraught with worry even with the news.”

“The hell she was. She was indignant that I did not crawl if necessary to have the privilege of her company.”

“Now, we talked about that, and about the benefits of that match to you. Come back with me. All is not lost on that account.”

Adam rested his hips against the desk’s edge. He removed a folded vellum document from his frock coat and set it down. “There will be no match. Here is the special license. You paid for it, so you may as well have it.”

Nigel fingered the vellum, then tossed it in the fire. Once more he tapped the letter Adam had sent. “What did you mean by the threat in it?” He picked it up and read: “ ‘If you do not want your family, the peerage, and all the realm to know about Amelia Dunham, send your coach to her home two days after Christmas. I will explain all later.’ ” He threw it down. “Who in hell is Amelia Dunham?”

Adam tossed the letter into the fire to join the license. “I had intended to have this out with you after I returned from Scotland, but we may as well do it now since you are here.”

“Of course I am here, when my own cousin threatens me.” His voice boomed in the little space they shared.

“Swallow your anger until you hear something insulting and wrong. You seduced Amelia at your county fete last summer. She will name you publicly if necessary. She was an innocent, and my guess is she hardly comprehended what you were about until it was too late.” He paused. “I will accept it was a seduction, and not something worse.”

“Are you judging me? *You?* That is a fine joke.”

“For all my sins, I never ruined an innocent. It isn’t done, and you know it. Worse, you did it as an act of revenge. Her father would not sell you some land you wanted. Her sister had just refused again. How much will it cost you to change the route of the canal you wanted to build there, with that land not open to you?”

Nigel’s face reddened. “Thousands. Fool man. Stupid woman. Stubborn, the two of them. I offered more than it was worth, too.”

“I doubt that.”

“So you know of my little indiscretion. I don’t care.”

“I don’t think the gentlemen in your clubs will think it so little. I am sure your wife will not. She tolerates your mistresses. A bastard born of an

innocent you ruined is another matter.”

Nigel’s face fell. “The girl is with child?”

“She is at that.”

His cousin recovered. “And the price of your silence is a carriage to take you to Scotland?”

Adam sat in the other chair and stretched out his legs. “I am not so good as to stop there. I want much more than that. A settlement for the girl, for one thing. That is the only proper thing to do. Shall we say enough in trust to provide an income of five hundred a year?”

Nigel chewed his lower lip. “Only if she keeps the child. And if it is a boy, I want to see him from time to time.”

“I think that can be arranged. You will see him, but he will not see you. There is one other thing you must do.”

“There isn’t anything I must do, damn it. But let us have it.”

“Galahad.”

“I’ll not be selling you Galahad. Or giving him to you, or anyone else.”

“Not sell. This spring, however, you will send him here to be bred with some mares, so Crestview can rebuild its bloodlines and expand again. Two months of his services are all that is needed.” He averted his gaze. “I have chosen to believe you did not play a long game, and deliberately ruin Dunham with that massacre of his horses so he would be amenable to a land sale.”

Silence fell beside him. Nigel might have ceased breathing, it grew so quiet. He glanced over to see his cousin looking down at the carpet. And in that instant those blue eyes glanced up and their gazes met. Nigel might appear cowed, but a ruthless star sparkled in his eye.

He had indeed played that long game. Adam’s chest thickened. In that moment he knew that his dealings with Nigel would only be the most formal sort in the future. He would never be friends with this man again.

“What did you want that damned carriage for? Damned inconvenient to bring it. Scotland, you said.”

“In an hour or so I will depart, along with Miss Dunham. Caroline Dunham. We are getting married.”

Nigel was on his feet in a snap. “The hell you say. I’ll not have it. It will be the end of the allowance you get. This family is a thorn in my side and if you marry into it I am done with you.” He paced and ranted for several minutes.

Adam just waited.

He saw the exact moment when Nigel's good sense broke through the cloud of bluster in his head and he realized what this marriage meant. No more cursing then. Only quiet contemplation. That star began sparkling again. "If you are married to her, you control her land."

"Not to sell. I won't have that right, of course. But the use of it, yes, as her husband that will be mine, assuming her sister is agreeable to my intentions."

"So for a price you could allow a canal to go through that parcel in question."

"Damnation, I suppose we could." He feigned shock, then grinned. "Come to me in a month with your proposal. It might be better received if in addition to a payment, you gave us a share of that company."

"I already have five partners."

"So now you will have six." He stood. "I must prepare for this journey. I trust you have a horse for your return, or another carriage down the lane."

Nigel did not care for being thrown out. He rose in a huff and marched to the reception hall. At the door he paused. "The girl—"

"She will be well cared for. And I will see that your child is educated and raised properly, whether Amelia marries or not."

Chapter 12

Gretna Green was not the closest Scottish town to Crestview Park, but the roads meant it was the easiest and fastest to access. Two mornings later Nigel's best coach rolled into the center of the little town and its passengers stepped out.

Old Tom needed help from Thornhill, but Mrs. Hoover, excited by the day's event and by her first real journey in years, simply jumped down. She tugged Caroline aside. "I'm still thinking we shouldn't have left them alone together. Jason has been giving her some long looks. I am afraid he is smitten."

"I am sure they will be fine. We couldn't all come, and Jason is of more use there than Tom would be." Caroline had not said one word to Amelia to insinuate she had any concerns about Jason, but she had asked Thornhill to speak to Jason himself. He had refused and insisted that Jason would know what to do. Considering Thornhill's history, she wondered what *know what to do* meant.

The man in question came toward them with Tom.

"So do we find the anvil?" Tom asked with a big grin.

"I think we can do better than that," Thornhill said. "Every village has a church. We will find it."

That did not take long, since it was a small town. Thornhill returned with the vicar in tow, after finding him in a nearby tavern.

"We don't get many this time of year," the vicar said. "I'm happy to witness your vows if you want, though."

They entered the little church, cold and damp and dark on this overcast day. Evergreen boughs rested at the base of each window and around the sanctuary. Caroline removed her muff and handed it to Mrs. Hoover. Hand in hand, skin on skin, Caroline and Lord Thornhill faced the vicar to say the vows.

When it was done, Tom and his wife clapped while Caroline and Thornhill kissed. Then all of them filed back out to the open air.

“Did I hear tell there’s a tavern around the corner?” Tom asked. “Seems to me this calls for a drink of good whiskey to celebrate.”

“You two go,” Thornhill said. “We will be there soon.”

The Hoovers ambled off, arm in arm. Two snowflakes drifted down in front of Caroline’s eyes. Then several more. “Snow,” she said.

Thornhill took both her hands in his and faced her in the churchyard. “I hope it snows every year at this time, to remind us of taking hay in the wagon and the views from the house.”

“I look forward to any future we have together. At Crestview I hope, but wherever you go I will go.”

“Of course we will stay at Crestview. And I can predict the future for you. Crestview will soon be as great as it ever was, and once more that kitchen table will feed fifteen hands and servants. You will have at least two children, a boy and a girl. Amelia will have a son; then she and Jason will have five more. As steward he will live in that cottage, and our children will play together. When the Hoovers pass, we will bury them near your father.”

He believed every optimistic word. Her throat burned on mention of her father. “Won’t you miss London? Your life was there.”

He kissed her. “London is in our future, too.” More snow fell now, dusting their garments. He took her hand and they followed the Hoovers’ path. “We will make long visits, so I can attend Parliament and you can enjoy the theater and parties and have time to order new wardrobes.”

He continued describing a life very different from what she had known, especially the last few years. An impossible life. She allowed his fantasy to sweep her up, however, and she laughed over the details as he continued giving them.

They found the tavern and heard the sounds of cheer within. He reached for the latch, then paused. “I forgot! How careless of me. I meant to tell you that my cousin gave us a wedding gift.”

“He did? What is it?”

“Galahad for two months in the spring.” He opened the door as if he had spoken nothing of consequence.

She could not move. *Galahad*. Suddenly all the predictions about Crestview and London and new wardrobes became real possibilities.

He smiled at her. “Come inside and get warm, darling, and I will tell you the rest.”

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Chapter 1

Did you kill him?

The voice spoke in his head vaguely, as if traveling through distance and fog. Not as the voice of his conscience, the way he had heard the question in the past. A different voice now. A female one.

I doubt it. Help me here.

He looks dead to me.

I promise that he isn't dead. Now, take this and hold it while I . . .

A bit clearer now. Closer. So close it made his head bang with pain, like each word was a hammer blow. The more words, the more blows, and the closer they sounded. That made the blows harder.

Maybe I should call Jason to come here.

We do not need Jason. See?

Bam. Bam.

Bad enough already, without that.

*We are not the ones at fault here. Hold the lamp closer, so I can make sure it is safe. Wait, give the lamp to me. I think he is—He is! Now I wish I **had** killed him.*

You should never say such things. Even here you should not. What are you doing with that?

Bam, bam, bam.

Bringing him around so I can find out why he is here.

Bam—

The fog disappeared, washed away by an onslaught of liquid that brought him back to full consciousness. He tipped his tongue out to lick some drips on his lips. Not water. Wine.

He did not open his eyes right away. He spent a few moments accommodating the pain screaming on his scalp. His legs felt strange and his arms hurt. He tried to move both and could not. He realized they were both tied behind him, and together, bowing his body. Someone had trussed him like a sheep, only backwards.

He sorted through his aching head for where he was, so he might determine if he was in danger.

Then he remembered. Hell, yes, he was in danger.

He opened his eyes to see the end of a pistol mere inches from his head. His gaze traveled up the arm that held it, until he looked into the furious dark eyes of the murderess, Margaret Finley.

* * *

Hell.

Minerva added a few more curses under her breath while she held the lamp close to the intruder's face. She had not expected to find Chase Radnor skulking around her home. Had she known it was he, she might have hit him even harder with that bed warmer.

"He looks to be coming to," Beth said. She raised the warmer as if to give another blow.

"Put it down, he is tied now and I have my pistol."

"He looks big. The ropes may not hold him. He may overpower you. I should be ready just in case."

"He will not attack me." More's the pity. She would have justification to shoot him then.

Mr. Radnor had indeed come to. He just did not know it quite yet. His long lashes moved. After a moment he strained against the bonds. Minerva waited for him to accommodate his situation.

Why was he here? For that matter, how had he even found her? London was a big city, and she made it a point to never associate with the kind of people who would be in his circles. Yet here he was, and suddenly her future had become precarious again.

Various reactions assaulted her while she trained her pistol on his harshly handsome face. Fear. Anger. Mostly, however, a surge of the unsettled spirit that had plagued her for over a year once, and that she thought she had banished forever.

Finally those lashes rose. Sapphire eyes focused on her pistol, then his gaze moved up until he looked right into her eyes. He again strained at the ties that bound him. Then the scoundrel smiled.

"Mrs. Finley. How nice to see you again."

Beth sucked in her breath. Her thick body bent so she could dip her capped

head closer to the lamp and face. She frowned. “Is that—”

Minerva nodded. Only two people in London knew Minerva Hepplewhite had once been Mrs. Finley. Well, three, counting the man trussed on the floor of her study. That name, and the life that went with it, had been abandoned almost five years ago, when she, Beth, and Beth’s son, Jason, had come to London.

“You can untie me,” Radnor said. “I never take chances with pistols, and I am not a danger in any case.”

“You are an intruder. I think I’ll leave you like that while I swear down information against you,” Minerva said.

“We both know you will not do that. It would spawn too many questions about you.”

“I am not afraid of questions.”

“Aren’t you? You changed your name, after all.”

“Only to keep people from prying.”

“Because you wanted to escape what prying would reveal. Now, untie me. I have something important to tell you that will explain why I am here.”

She hated how that provoked her curiosity, and also her trepidation. He might tell her that the investigation had been revived. Then again he might reveal that at long last the poacher involved in that accident had been found.

Or he might tell her that he had come to take her to gaol.

“Explain yourself first.” She leveled the pistol firmly. “I am not inclined to trust a housebreaker.”

He gave one furious tug on the ties behind his back. He narrowed his eyes. “I have come to inform you of something that benefits you significantly.”

“What is that?”

“Margaret Finley has inherited some money. A great deal of it.”



Studio 8

Madeline Hunter is a *New York Times* best-selling author with more than 6 million copies of her books in print. She has thirty-two nationally best-selling historical romances to her credit, including most recently *A Devil of a Duke*, *The Most Dangerous Duke in London*, and *Never Deny a Duke*. A member of Romance Writers of America's Honor Roll, she has won the RWA RITA Award twice and been a finalist seven times. Her books have appeared on the best-seller lists of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly* and have been translated into thirteen languages. She has a PhD in art history, which she has taught at the university level. Madeline loves to hear from her readers and can be reached through her website at www.madelinehunter.com, on Facebook, www.facebook.com/madelinehunter/, and at twitter.com/madelinehunter.

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