



THE
MERCER'S
HOUSE
BOOK 6

A
CHRISTMAS
BETROTHAL

MARY KINGSWOOD

A CHRISTMAS BETROTHAL

The Mercer's House Book 6

A Regency Romance

by Mary Kingswood

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Author's note:

this book is written using historic British terminology, so *saloon* instead of *salon*, *chaperon* instead of *chaperone* and so on. I follow Jane Austen's example and refer to a group of sisters as the Miss Wintertons.

A family in trade moving up in the world. A family of landed gentry stepping aside for them. And the sons and daughters caught in the middle.

Michael Plummer has never forgotten the woman he fell passionately in love with a few years ago. He was courting a beautiful heiress, in the hope of rescuing his family from financial ruin and the loss of their home, but it was her companion who won his heart. When she ran away from him, Michael was plunged into despair. Now both women have returned, and he has a chance to correct the mistakes of the past. But does he have the courage to do the right thing this time?

Margarita Brooks is still recovering from the devastating events that almost ruined her life. She's found a tranquil haven as companion to an elderly woman, but when her employer takes her to a family celebration, she's brought face to face with the tangled emotions she hoped were left behind, and the web of lies she wove to protect herself. Can she find a way to atone for her errors, and is her heart the price she must pay?

Rosie Fletcher has agreed to marry her noble suitor, a connection which will raise her family in society and bring pleasure to a great many people. She's made up her mind once and for all, and she's determined to make it work. But her timid nature will put her at a disadvantage in the exalted world of her husband and his family. Rosie must finally stand up for herself to make this marriage the way she wants it, but if she pushes too hard she may lose her chance of happiness altogether.

This is a complete story with a happy ever after. A traditional Regency romance, drawing room rather than bedroom. Book 6 of a 6 book series.

Isn't that what's-his-name? Regular readers will know that characters from previous books occasionally pop up, or are mentioned. The redoubtable Captain Edgerton and Mr Willerton-Forbes have been helping solve murders and other mysteries since *Lord Augustus*. The house in Harlington Terrace in Sagborough where the Fletchers moved for Rosie's wedding was the home of Ferdy Makenham in *The Seamstress*.

About the series: A family grown rich in the wool trade. The landed gentry they've displaced. And the gentle daughter whose beauty will open the door to an even greater prize - the nobility.

The Fletcher family is moving from Yorkshire to a mansion in the south of England. After generations in trade, can they escape their roots and be admitted to the leisured world of the gentry?

Their new home is Chadwell Park, in Hertfordshire. **The Mercer's House.**

Book 0: The Mercer: the rich merchant and the poor widow. (*a novella, free to mailing list subscribers*).

Book 1: A Winter Chase: the wild daughter and the reluctant clergyman.

Book 2: A Spring Dance: the flirtatious son and the prim paid companion.

Book 3: A Summer Game: the mischievous daughter and the strait-laced gentleman.

Book 4: A Michaelmas Truce: the cross bachelor and the even crosser spinster.

Book 5: An Autumn Courtship: the intellectual son and the flighty widow.

Book 6: A Christmas Betrothal: the beautiful daughter, the unhappy son and the lost lover.

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Table of Contents

[The Fletcher Family](#)
[The Plummer Family](#)
[The Heaman and Corsfield Families](#)
[The Landers Family](#)
[1: An Offer Of Marriage](#)
[2: Visitors From The West](#)
[3: Visitors From The North](#)
[4: A Step Forward](#)
[5: An Old Friend](#)
[6: A House In The Country](#)
[7: Dinner At Chadwell Park](#)
[8: Meetings](#)
[9: Confrontations](#)
[10: Of Love And Marriage](#)
[11: Unexpected News](#)
[12: Lady Plummer's Ball](#)
[13: Awaiting The Carriage](#)
[14: After Supper](#)
[15: Before Breakfast](#)
[16: A Visit To Kelshaw House](#)
[17: The Embroidery Box](#)
[18: Making Plans](#)
[19: The Day Before Christmas](#)
[20: A Disagreement](#)
[21: A Christmas Betrothal](#)
[22: Afterwards](#)
[23: A Change Of Circumstances](#)
[24: Christmas Day](#)
[25: Saturday](#)
[26: Sunday](#)
[27: A Letter](#)
[28: Shocking News](#)
[29: Friends And Relations](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Thanks for reading!](#)

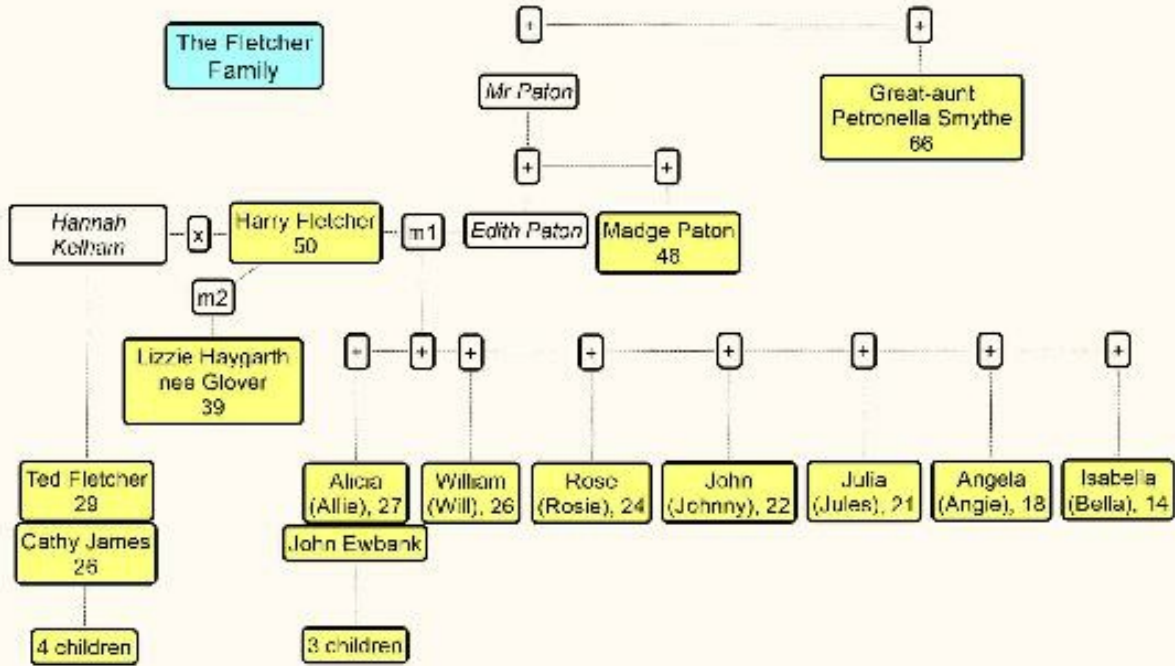
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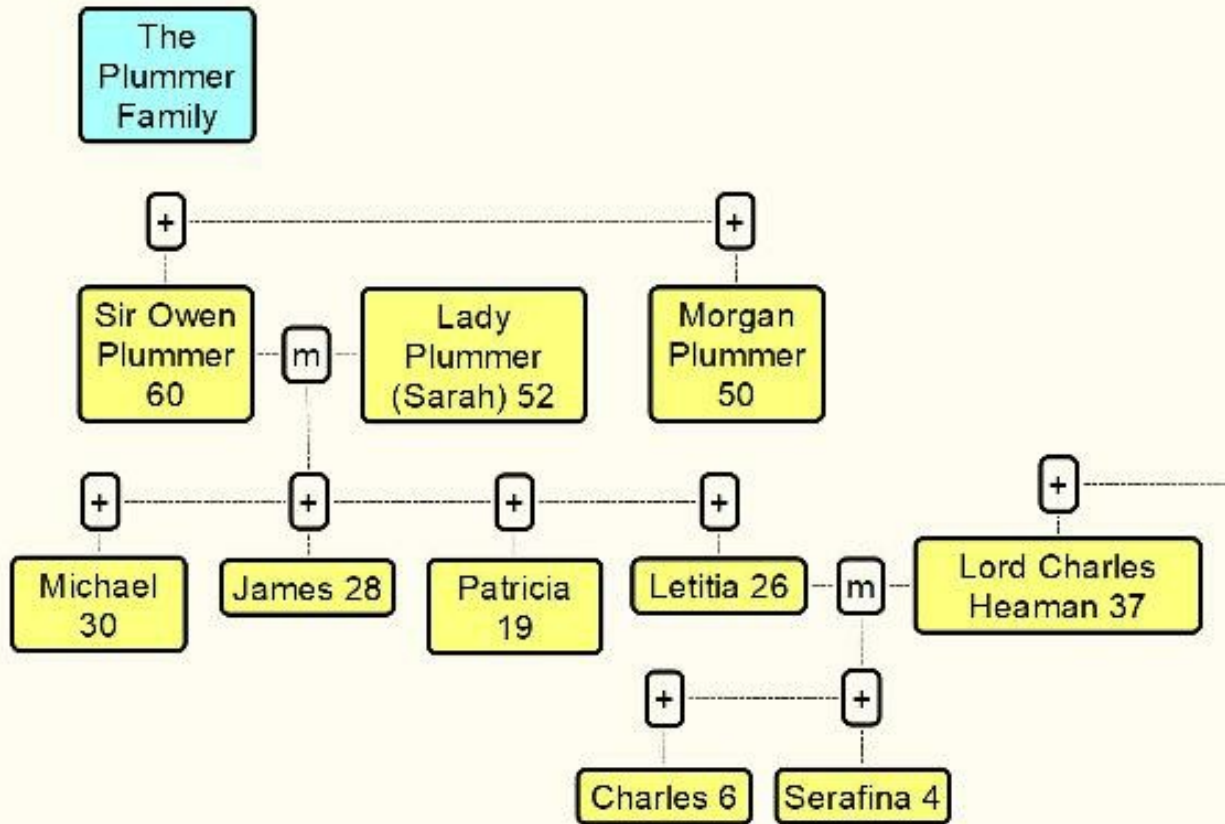
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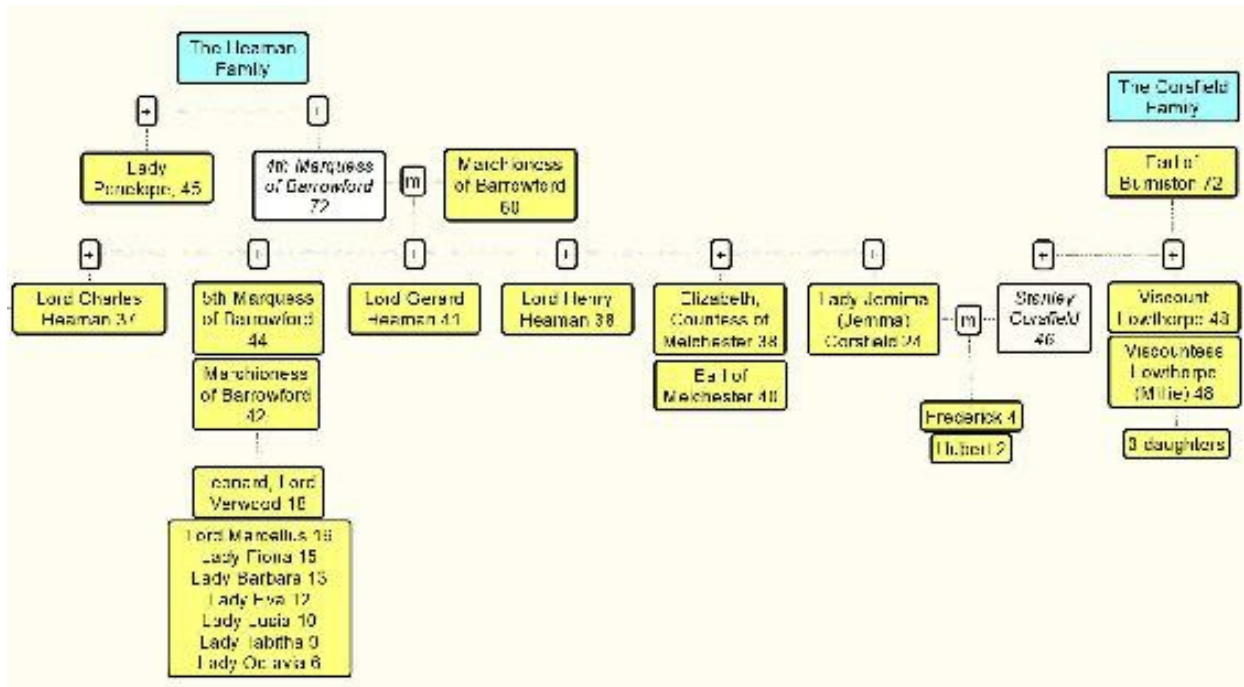
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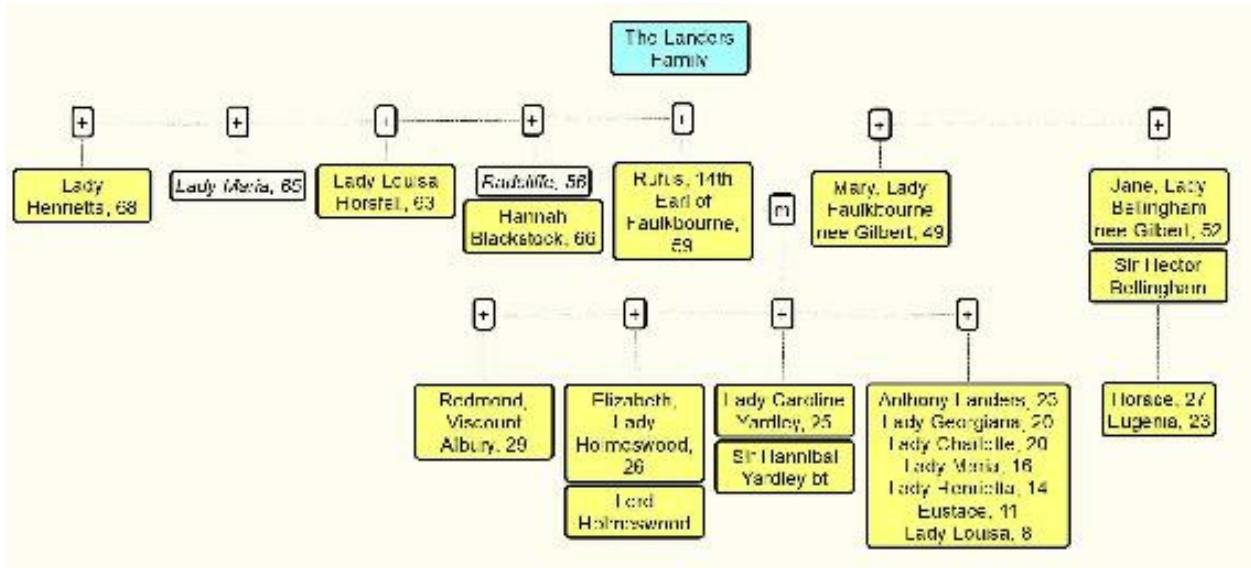
The Heaman and Corsfield Families

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The Landers Family

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1: An Offer Of Marriage

CHADWELL PARK, HERTFORDSHIRE. THE FIRST DECADE OF THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY.

DECEMBER

Rosie had chosen her gown weeks ago, a new one of fine blue wool with some very pretty embroidery about the hem and sleeves. As soon as it had arrived from the seamstress, she had set it aside. It was too pretty for everyday wear, but for a proposal it would be perfect.

Not that she had known then the precise day that Lord Albury would propose, but she had come to see that it was inevitable. He was the sort of cautious man who liked to prepare the ground thoroughly, so she had suspected she would receive notice of his intentions before the day he had chosen. Not for him the impulsive seizing of the moment, the impassioned declaration because he just could not wait an instant longer. Redmond could always wait a little longer.

But then he was a viscount, and would one day be an earl, so the question of his future bride was a matter of some import. Normally a man of such rank and with such connections would not have looked at Miss Rose Fletcher, daughter of a lowly Yorkshire mercer. But his ancestral home had a leaky east wing, and Rosie had a dowry of fifty thousand pounds, and so he had been guardedly circling around her for some months now. They had met in London in the spring, and again in Bath in the summer. He had visited Chadwell Park, and Rosie had been invited to Chaseley Court to be approved by his parents. He had talked to Pa and received permission to pay his addresses, and today was to be the day. He had told Pa so the last time he had called at Chadwell Park.

Today she would find out what sort of man Lord Albury truly was.

The Fletcher sisters were not the sort of indolent society ladies who breakfasted in bed and never left their bedchamber before noon. Rosie was in the music room at precisely eight o'clock, practising a new piece by her sister-in-law, Eloise. Angie accompanied her on the harp, and Bella, who always liked to be different, was learning the guitar. Then Bella left for her morning ride, Angie took over the pianoforte and Rosie set to work on a

piece of Italian translation. She had left the schoolroom eight years ago when she was sixteen, but she had taken to heart the adage that a lady's education was never complete.

Breakfast was at ten, and Pa liked the whole family to be gathered together for the occasion. It was a rather smaller family these days. Ted and Allie were long married and settled in Yorkshire, and more recently Will, Johnny and Julia had married too. Only Rosie, Angie and Bella remained, and Aunt Madge, of course. Dear Aunt Madge, who secretly ran the entire house while allowing Mama the credit for it, who had astonished everyone by marrying at the age of forty-six. Morgan Plummer was a funny sort of man, and the two of them squabbled constantly, but there was a genuine affection between them, despite that.

Rosie rather envied them that. All her sisters and brothers had married for love — no, that was not quite true, for Johnny had been forced into it, but he had been so obliging as to fall instantly in love with Jemma, and now exuded happiness. Such joy in marriage was not for Rosie. She was not in love with Redmond. He was a pleasant man, well-mannered and agreeable company, and she liked him well enough, but nothing more than that. His affection must be enough for both of them, for her duty was to marry into the nobility and raise the family in society. It was why they had left Yorkshire a year ago and bought the fine estate of Chadwell Park, the house with its handsome Palladian proportions and elegant decorations, and the deer park and woods and coveys full of birds for Will to shoot.

After Pa had spoken the prayers and the toast was passed around and the morning cake cut, the conversation was all of the company invited for Christmas, now fast approaching. Redmond and his family would be the principal guests, there to celebrate the engagement, but there were others who had a claim to join their party. Angie's future husband would come from Bath, and Great-aunt Petronella, who had recently descended on them from Yorkshire, had declared her intention of staying for the festivities, too.

“Might there be room for one additional guest, Mrs Fletcher?” Morgan Plummer said diffidently. “My young friend Sir Constantin Pluckrose would like to visit for a few days, if it can be managed.”

“I am not sure... if he comes with his parents...”

“No, no, just the boy himself. He will be no trouble, you know... happy to sleep in one of the attic rooms, and he can leave before Christmas if you are very pressed for space.”

“Well...”

“I’m sure we can find room for him,” Aunt Madge said. “He can double up with Angie’s Mr Appleby if need be.”

“Yes, but there will be his valet, and a carriage and horses and a couple of coachmen to be accommodated, too.”

“The coachmen and horses can go to Orchard House — Will won’t mind,” Aunt Madge said firmly. “The valet will be a useful extra pair of hands serving at dinner.”

Mama’s face brightened. “That is true. One can never have too many manservants on these occasions, and I am sure we can find livery to fit him. Very well, then.”

After breakfast, the men went off to their masculine pursuits, and Mama and Aunt Madge disappeared to the kitchen wing on domestic business. The weather being unfit for a walk in the garden, the three sisters repaired to the parlour to work on their various projects, with the aid of Miss Crabtree, Bella’s governess. Rosie was embroidering a map of Hertfordshire for a fire screen, and Angie was trying to compose a piece of music for the harp. Bella was ostensibly reading a history book, for at fifteen she still had one foot in the schoolroom, but in fact was settling down for a comfortable coze.

“Are you excited, Rosie?” she said in a dramatic whisper. “You must be, I am sure.”

“Why would she be excited?” Angie said robustly. “Rosie has had thousands of proposals.”

“Not thousands,” Rosie protested. “Not even hundreds. A few. Pa was always very good at dealing with them on my behalf.”

“That is so poor-spirited,” Bella said. “I should be ashamed to have to get Pa to see off *my* suitors.”

Miss Crabtree looked up from her own book. “Bella dear, you should not be thinking of suitors at your age, but that is what fathers are for, to

protect their daughters from unwanted attentions. If a refusal is inevitable, it is far better to come from a girl's father. Is it not so, Rosie?"

"Oh yes, for then there need be no awkwardness afterwards. Or not so much, anyway."

"But Pa will not be protecting you from Lord Albury, will he?" Bella said slyly.

"No, I shall see Lord Albury myself."

"Bella, you must not tease your sister on this subject," Miss Crabtree said. "I am giving you a degree of licence today, for it bids fair to be a momentous one, but do not press her on matters which should be private."

"You are very good, Miss Crabtree," Rosie said gently, "but I do not mind Bella's questions. It is natural for her to be curious."

"How can you be so calm?" Bella said. "I could not be so easy about it, even if I had had as many proposals as you have, Rosie. Today is the day your life will change for ever. You must feel a little agitation. What will he say? How will he act? Will he kneel, do you think? Will he press hot kisses onto your hand... or your cheek... or—"

"Enough," Rosie said firmly. "You are too fanciful, sister."

"But you must be thinking about it," Bella said. "You must wonder what he will say, so that you can formulate your response."

"It hardly matters what he says or does," Angie said. "Rosie's response is already settled. She will thank him for the honour he does her, express her obligation and say '*Yes, please*'. What else is needed?"

"A great deal," Rosie said. "There is much to discuss before the matter can be settled, I assure you."

"Such as?" Bella said, and even Angie stared at her.

"Where we are to live, for one thing, and how much we will have to live upon."

"But Pa has already talked to Lord Albury about such things, and to his father, too," Angie said.

"True, but no one has talked to me about it," Rosie said. "And that is all

I wish to say on the matter. Bella, you should apply yourself to your book.”

Bella opened her eyes wide. “Rosie Fletcher, you are going to refuse him!”

“Of course she is not,” Angie said scornfully. “You are such a goose, Bella. As if Rosie would turn him down after all this scheming to bring him to the point. Still, you have some plan up your sleeve, Rosie, I can tell. But then, you have had so many proposals that I suppose you know exactly what to say and what a suitor might forget to mention. Do you remember one of the Weston girls who married an attorney in York and only discovered afterwards that she would have his four unmarried sisters living with her?”

“Good heavens!” Miss Crabtree said, closing her book, all pretence of reading long forgotten.

“And his mother and an aunt,” Rosie said, smiling. “Yes, indeed, and it is not the sort of thing a girl’s father would think to ask. Men talk about money and houses and prospects, but forget to ask about indigent relations. Let that be a warning to you when you start to receive proposals, Bella, although it will be some years before you may expect your first, I imagine.”

“Oh, I have already received my first proposal,” Bella said airily. “I accepted it, too.”

Angie squealed in astonishment. “*Bella!* How on earth...? And *who?*”

“It hardly matters,” Miss Crabtree said sharply. “Bella, you are far too young to be thinking of marriage.”

“Yes, but who was it?” Angie said.

“Sir Con Pluckrose, of course. I should have thought you might have worked that out.”

Angie squealed again. “How romantic!”

“Really, Angie, you must not encourage her in this folly,” Miss Crabtree said. “Bella, you are not serious about this, I am sure. He is but eighteen and hardly looking for a wife just yet, and you are not even properly out in society. It was a piece of fun between you, I dare say — a game of some sort.”

“Not a bit of it. Just because we are not yet of age does not mean we do not know our own minds.”

“Whatever is in your mind should stay there, at your age. As for Sir Con, I had thought better of him than to be speaking of marriage to a girl of fifteen. Has he talked to your father or mother about it?”

“Heavens, no.”

“There you are, then,” Miss Crabtree said. “It is very bad of him, and of you, to encourage him. You must put the idea out of your heads at once.”

“I agree,” said Rosie. “It is very romantic, I make no doubt, but you cannot marry the first personable man who crosses your path. You will fall in love a dozen times before you settle on a husband.”

“Do you not believe in love at first sight? Sometimes one just knows,” Bella said with dignity.

“Knowing and doing anything about it are two very different things,” Miss Crabtree said repressively. “You are both far too young to marry, and your father would certainly say the same.”

“Of course,” Bella said. “We have no intention just now of marrying or entering into an engagement or anything of the sort. But in three years’ time, Con will be twenty-one and I shall be eighteen, and he will go to Pa then to ask formally for me. Pa will not say no. Con is a baronet with his own estate and seven or eight thousand a year — he is not quite sure — so he could scarcely be more eligible. We will be able to marry then.”

“Pa may insist on you waiting a year, as with me,” Angie said. “He will not let *me* marry at eighteen, so he will not allow you to do so, either. You know how punctilious he is in applying rules — it has to be the same for each of us. No favouritism.”

“You have to wait because you have only known Mr Appleby a short time,” Bella said loftily, “whereas I shall have known Con for three years by then.”

And there was no turning her from this position.

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Noon had come and gone, and the hall clock had struck one and then two o'clock. Great-aunt Petronella, resplendent in a vast lace cap, and her companion, the nondescript Miss Elinor Paton, had emerged from their bedchamber. Mama had changed into a fancier gown and the ladies had moved to the saloon, the grandest room in the house, ready for the formal acknowledgement of an engagement. Yet Lord Albury did not come.

Rosie sat calmly with her embroidery, as the others chatted in a desultory way and pretended not to look at the clock every two minutes. It would be amusing if he failed to appear at all. After the better part of a year of courtship, and everything agreed, to the last clause of the settlements, was he now to falter at the final furlong?

But no. A carriage was heard in the distance, drawing nearer, pulling up at the front of the house. The heavy, measured steps of Keeble, the butler, and the lighter patter of the footmen could be heard crossing the hall. Then the creak of the heavy front doors opening. Keeble's deep tones, and another, lighter voice, barely audible.

Footsteps again, approaching the doors of the saloon, passing by. Silence. Then a sharp knock on the door, making them all jump. It was Keeble.

"Lord Albury has arrived, madam, and asked to be shown into the master's office."

"Thank you, Keeble."

"But why—?" Bella began.

"You will be silent unless spoken to, Isabella," Mama said, in her most uncompromising voice.

"I expect Pa will ask me to talk to Lord Albury in his office," Rosie said, rather sorry for Bella, who only wanted to know what was happening after all. "It will be more private there."

Bella nodded, and subsided into silence.

Another knock on the door, and again they all jumped. Bella's book slid to the floor with a thump. Pa's head appeared.

"Rosie, love."

It was time. She rose smoothly, and shook out her skirts, then followed him from the room into the corridor.

“Come into the parlour for a moment,” Pa said, holding the door open for her. “Well, he’s here, and you know what he wants to say. Rosie, I don’t need to tell you the importance of this moment. I want you to understand very clearly that you don’t have to do this, not if you have the slightest doubt or concern in your mind. Don’t do it just because it’s expected of you or you think it will please us. You’re far too inclined to take other people’s wishes into account above your own, but when it comes to your own marriage, it’s got to be what *you* want, above any other consideration. Do you understand?”

“Of course, Pa. I know what I want.”

“Good, but will you be happy with this man? I know he’s a lord and a wealthy man, and he’ll tow us upstream in society, but you’ll have to face him over the dinner table for a great many years, God willing, so you’d better be very sure you like him.”

Rosie gave a little laugh. “I like him very well, Pa. Stop worrying.”

“Aye, but I *do* worry. I worry about all of you, but you more than any of the others because I never know what’s in your head, Rosie love. You always present such a calm face to the world, and I don’t know what’s behind it, and that’s the truth. The one thing I want for all my children is for them to be happy, so whatever you do, don’t marry this man if there’s the least hesitation in your mind.”

“No hesitation, Pa. No doubt or fear or uncertainty. I made my decision months ago.”

“Did you?”

“When we were in Bath in the summer. There was time to catch my breath after the whirlwind of the season, and I came to know Lord Albury better in the quieter atmosphere there. He will suit me very well, and we shall be happy together, of that I am quite, quite sure.”

“Hmpf. Well then, he’s waiting for you in the office.”

Rosie nodded and made her way there without haste.

He looked exactly as usual. His features were undistinguished and his

height was not above average, but he carried himself with the air of the patrician. Centuries of high rank would do that to a man. The coat was one of his newer ones and fitted him to perfection, but no one would ever mistake him for a man of fashion. His boots were the same serviceable pair he always wore, and his neckcloth was tied in the same simple style as usual. She imagined that in twenty years' time, when he would be almost fifty, he would look very much as he did today.

“Miss Fletcher.” A neat bow, and then, abruptly, a wide smile. “Rosie.”

“Lord Albury.” She made her curtsy and sat in one of the chairs beside Pa’s desk. “Will you sit down?”

He did so, still smiling, although with a flicker of uncertainty at her formality. “Now that this moment has arrived, I find myself quite at a loss. I have long wondered what I would say to you... how I should behave at such a time. I imagined an eloquent speech, as I stride about the room, impressing you with my oratory. But perhaps there is no call for oration. You understand why I am here, so there is no need to tell you the advantages of the match, or remind you of all that I can offer you. So let me not insult you by stating the obvious.”

This was good! He would not test her patience with a long rehearsed speech. She nodded encouragingly.

“But there is one point on which I must elaborate,” he went on. “I must be honest, for I do not wish you to be in any doubt upon the point. When we first met in town in the spring, it was not accidental. I already knew you as a woman of fortune, whose dowry was substantial enough to put in hand all the repairs to Chaseley Court that would preserve it for generations to come. That you were also a woman of great beauty and gentle demeanour was of secondary importance to the size of your dowry. And so I took advantage of my brother’s acquaintance with yours to introduce myself to your family, and thus to you. It was despicable of me, and I do not attempt to justify it in any way.”

“There is no need to do so,” she said. “Marriage must always be a pragmatic matter before all else.”

He looked surprised at this. “Perhaps... prudence is necessary. But it

was mercenary of me, and made me no better than the fortune hunters who pressed upon you in town. So I withdrew. But then we met again in Bath, quite by chance, and I discovered the sweet, charming girl beneath the cool façade. I wanted to know more of you, and as I came to know you better, the strangest thing happened. I fell in love with you, Rosie. Gradually, without any awareness of it, I reached a point where my whole happiness depends on you. I want you by my side for the rest of my life, dearest, most beloved Rosie. Will you allow me the very great joy of calling you my wife?"

It was adequate, she supposed. He was not a man of great passion, or at least, she inspired no such feelings in him, so he had not worked himself into a frenzy. Still, his affection was undoubtedly sincere. She had been aware of the change in his feelings for some time now. Even so, she would not waver in her resolve.

"I thank you for the honour you do me," she said calmly, "but there is one matter on which I should like clarification."

He frowned, not liking this divergence from the accepted forms. "And what is that?"

"Where do you propose that we live if we marry?"

The frown deepened. *If we marry...* yes, perhaps he should retain just an iota of doubt in his mind.

"Why, at Chaseley Court, naturally, where else? We should have our own quarters, Rosie. Mother and Father have already agreed that we might have the whole of the north wing."

Mother and Father have already agreed, have they? How considerate. It was just a pity that no one had thought to ask Rosie's views on the matter.

"Redmond, I will not live at Chaseley Court. I should be very happy to be your wife, but I must have my own house, and it must be at least thirty miles from Chaseley Court."

He looked as shocked as if she had slapped his face. "Not live at Chaseley? *Thirty miles away?* What nonsense is this?"

"These are the terms under which I will accept your proposal. I ask for nothing else, but I must be mistress of my own establishment."

He rose to his feet, his face darkening ominously. “I must consider this carefully, and what my father will say to it I cannot conceive. I bid you good day, Miss Fletcher.”

With a perfunctory bow, he swept from the room.

## 2: Visitors From The West

Rosie sat motionless in her chair for a long time. Pa's office was tucked away in a corner of the house, so she could hear nothing from the hall or saloon. After a few minutes, scurrying feet passed by, heading for the door beneath the stairs and the passageway to the stables. Redmond's carriage was sent for, then. And sure enough, a few minutes later it rattled past the window and drew up at the foot of the steps. She heard the sound of doors, a barked order to the coachman and then the wheels crunching on the drive again, the sound disappearing into the distance.

He was gone, and perhaps this time he would be gone for good. Well, that would answer the question of where his loyalties lay once and for all, and maybe that would be for the best.

No, she should not think of it that way, as a reprieve. It would be a failure. Finally, a man she had been willing to marry, and she had driven him away at the last.

Pa put his head round the door. "Are you going to bite my head off, Rosie love?"

She laughed. "Of course not, and I did not bite Redmond's head off, either."

"No? But you've made him very cross. I thought you were going to accept him."

"I was... I have... at least, I will, but only if he will give me my own house, and not make me live at Chaseley Court with all his grand relations."

Mama's head was the next to appear, pale and anxious. Poor Mama! She had been scheming for such a match ever since she had married Pa, and although she was now aware of the frailties of the nobility, she still longed for it. Calmly, Rosie told them all that had happened.

"Thirty miles!" Mama said in astonishment. "Why thirty miles?"

"Too far for them to just turn up on the doorstep every day, I'd guess," Pa said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"But such an insult to Lord and Lady Faulkbourne," Mama said. "To

tell them, almost in so many words, that you do not want them to call on you. Naturally, they will want to visit their daughter-in-law very often.”

“I cannot say what *they* want, but I know perfectly well what I want,” Rosie said. “They may come and stay, if they wish, or we may stay at Chaseley Court sometimes, but I need my own house.”

“Now you sound like Allie, love,” Pa said, chuckling. “She was always grumbling that she needed her own house.”

“Allie was right to grumble about it,” Rosie said. “Four years it took to persuade Jack to buy a place, four long, difficult years.”

“And now she’s grumbling about the new house and the servants and how she’s sure the tradesmen are cheating her. Allie’s never satisfied, but for all that, she was keen enough to marry before she had her own house, as many folk have to do.”

“Because she was head over heels in love with Jack, that is why,” Rosie said, “and Mr and Mrs Ewbank are sweet, kindly people, not in the least overbearing. Anyone would be happy to live with them. But I am *not* in love with Lord Albury, and Lord and Lady Faulkbourne are not sweet, kindly people, and I do not wish to live with them.”

“I completely agree,” Mama said, to Rosie’s surprise. “I should not like to live at Chaseley Court, either, under the disapproving eye of those two. Besides, I never saw a more disagreeable house, all draughts and rattling windows and uneven floors. Let Lord Faulkbourne use your dowry to make the place habitable again, and once Lord Albury inherits, you will be perfectly comfortable there. In the meantime, he can lease somewhere for you. He can afford it, after all.”

“He’s no money of his own,” Pa said. “His father holds the purse strings and the cost of a separate establishment is not small, as I have reason to know.”

“He will have Rosie’s dowry,” Mama said, “and there are some very pretty properties in Hertfordshire.”

“I did not specify the county, Mama,” Rosie said with a smile.

“Aye, you’d look well if he settles you up in Northumberland or away



in Cornwall,” Pa said. “And don’t forget what he once said — that he’s got aunts and uncles and cousins in every county in England. Wherever you end up, his ma and pa could find a relative to stay with and be visiting you every day.”

“But they could not stay for ever, could they?” Rosie said. “Sooner or later they would have to go home, and I should have my house to myself, and that is all I ask for.”

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‘To Miss Jupp, St Peter’s Road, Sagborough, West Riding. My dearest friend, How I miss you at times like these! Such momentous times, and troubling, too, for I know not how it will end, and there is no kind friend to listen to all my woes and tell me that what I have done is all for the best. No one here enters into my feelings fully on the matter, and so I am a little lost and unsure. Yet I must be determined or I shall fail at the first obstacle and then I shall be doomed. To my news, then - Redmond has proposed at last, and he failed to meet my three conditions. It is true that he told me he loved me, although in very measured terms, which makes me sad. If a man cannot be impassioned when proposing, when can he? But of the other two, he failed dismally. Of explaining why he wishes to marry me, he said only that I was sweet and charming, which may be said of anyone, and nothing of the particular charms which drew him. There must be something in my nature which attracts him, beyond my dowry. As for the third point, there was nothing at all about protecting me or taking care of me, and so his loyalty to me above his family must be called into question. Naturally he has his duty to his father and his future position as earl, but I must know that he will stand by his wife, against his own family if need be, and at present I am by no means certain of that.

‘As a consequence, I have said everything as I told you I would. Now he has gone away in high dudgeon, and I have no assurance that he will ever return. I am in rather a quake over it, for if he fails at this stage, I shall have to begin again and that means town and all the trials of the season, and Mama will be upset and Pa will be disappointed, and I hate above all things to distress them. However, of one thing I am certain — if Redmond truly loves me, as he says, then he will move heaven and earth to please me. It is

not an unreasonable request, is it, a house of my own? It does not seem so to me, and he can afford it. Oh, but if you had seen his face when he first heard the idea! He went quite red and left the house at once. So now I wait to see if he will pass this test, and it must be the final one, for I cannot try his patience any further. This second sheet is filling fast, so I must tell you very briefly the other big news - Bella has an understanding with Sir Con Pluckrose!!! Can you imagine it, and so young! He is to approach Pa when he is one and twenty, if you please, and she is perfectly determined that it will be a match, and nothing we say can deter her. Fortunate girl, to know her way forward so early in life, and a love match, too! All my brothers and sisters have found love, excepting only myself. I will stop here, because I know how you hate crossed pages. Pray apologise to your pa again for the postage, but I must speak fully to you, my most understanding friend, as to no one else. Oh, how I wish you were with me, to comfort your anxious friend, Rosie.'

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#### CHADWELL MANOR, HERTFORDSHIRE

Michael had spent the morning shooting with his brother, James. Not that Michael had shot very much, only a couple of pheasant and some ducks, which tended to sit around unconcernedly until the gun actually went off, an easy enough target even for him. James was the expert with a gun, steadily filling his bags with small birds. Michael had barely registered a shadow flitting above them before James had calmly taken aim and brought it down.

But then, that was his life in a nutshell. Michael might be the heir to the baronetcy, but his younger brother was the epitome of the country gentleman, who strolled casually through life, respected and admired wherever he went, doing everything well and without the least effort. He had even succeeded where Michael had spectacularly failed, and was now happily married and setting up his nursery. James should have been the eldest, the one to inherit, if there was any justice in the world. Instead, he was the one in the rectory, while Michael, inadequate and useless as he was, was fated to step into his father's shoes. He returned to the Manor in the gloomiest frame of mind.

"Good shooting, sir?" Padwick said, as he pulled off Michael's muddy boots.

“Oh... not bad, I suppose. My brother was far more successful than I.”

“Ah, but Mr James is out every day except the Sabbath, sir,” Padwick said. “He is bound to be wise to the ways of the birds, the time he spends chasing them about. There now, I’ll leave these to dry out a bit.”

“It was terribly wet down by the river. I am afraid I have given you quite a task.”

“That’s my job, sir. Now, will you wear the blue coat or the maroon?”

“Oh... the maroon... no, the blue... no, perhaps the maroon. What do you think, Padwick?”

“The blue, sir. Lady Plummer is in puce today, and the maroon will clash.” A small hesitation. “Sir Owen would like to see you, sir, at your convenience.”

“What? Why did you not say so earlier? I would not keep him waiting for the world.”

“He was very clear that there was no urgency, sir. Whenever convenient and with no urgency, that was what he said.”

“Where is he?”

“In his book room, sir.”

“Ah.” That was a relief. A serious matter would have entailed the library in all its formal stateliness, but the book room... that was a less terrifying prospect.

Sir Owen was busy writing at his desk when Michael entered the book room. It was not a large room, made gloomy by a towering oak tree outside the window, but Lord Charles had taken over the original book room when he had married Letitia. Sir Owen was too gentlemanly to reclaim it when the family had sold Chadwell Park to the Fletchers and moved back into the Manor. Michael rather liked the Manor, with its medieval quirks, its dark passageways and oddly shaped rooms. The Park was all symmetry and high ceilings and a certain grandiose hauteur, and he felt its loss keenly, but the Manor felt warm and comforting, like an old friend.

“Ah, there you are, Michael. Was the sport good today?”

“Tolerable, Father. You wanted to see me?”

“I did, yes. Shut the door and sit down.” He carefully wiped his pen and laid it down on the standish beside a line of identical pens. “Let me tell you Lord Charles’s news first. His brother has suffered a seizure of some sort.”

“The marquess?” Michael said. “A seizure?”

“Indeed. His mother, the Dowager Marchioness, has written to inform Lord Charles of it. Lord Barrowford was berating his chaplain about something when he simply dropped to the floor like a stone, and is now confined to his bed, unable to move or even to speak.”

“Good gracious! But he cannot be very old.”

“Forty-four. Far too young to be struck down,” Sir Owen said. “I tell you this so that you will be prepared, for there will be much discussion as to what Lord Charles should do now.”

“Naturally he will wish to be at his brother’s bedside at this difficult time,” Michael said.

“That is your opinion, is it?” his father said in his mild way.

“Of course, although... they have not even spoken for years. He might not wish to surrender after so many years maintaining the quarrel. And yet, it is only right to show his brother every attention. The head of the family, too. What was the quarrel about, do you know, sir?”

Sir Owen shook his head. “Neither Lord Charles nor Letitia has ever seen fit to enlighten me, but one presumes it is a serious matter for Lord Charles to refuse to speak to his own brother. But you see the difficulty. If he assumes Lord Barrowford is on the point of extinction, races to Barrowsworth and then finds the marquess quite recovered, the meeting will be very awkward. On the other hand, if he fails to attend, and the marquess dies, Lord Charles looks heartless.”

“It is difficult indeed. What would you do in such a case?”

“I should never be in such a case,” Sir Owen said firmly, “for I should never quarrel with a family member for years. However, his duty is clear. Since his mother has written to tell him of it, she clearly expects him to go. Still, I do not know how much that will weigh with him. They are a strange

family altogether.”

“What was the other matter about which you wished to see me?” Michael said.

“Ah, yes.” He sighed. “I have had Kelshaw here, with something of a conundrum. With Christmas coming, and the Fletchers planning to fill the house with their noble friends, and Lady Plummer holding her first ball for several years, Lady Frederica has set her heart on having company for Christmas, too, and she is minded to invite Miss Greaves. A distant cousin and almost alone in the world, so naturally she wishes to pay her the proper attention. Now, Michael, they would not for the world do anything to distress you, but it has been two and a half years now, and they feel that perhaps enough water has flowed under the bridge for you to meet her again without awkwardness. However, Kelshaw wished to ascertain your thoughts on the matter.”

Miss Greaves! The familiar sensations rose in his breast... the rapid heartbeat, the breathlessness, the terror that threatened to overwhelm him. He licked his lips helplessly.

His father went on in a softer tone, “I can see the idea troubles you.”

“No... well, a little perhaps, but Kelshaw and Lady Frederica must be free to do as they please. It would be unconscionable in me to dictate whom they may invite to their own house, Father.”

“That is true, but they are kindly people who would not wish to reawaken memories long buried. Kelshaw was very clear on the matter — if you prefer not to see Miss Greaves again, then she will not be invited.”

“I cannot imagine that *she* would wish to see *me!*” Michael burst out. “After the way I treated her! And yet she wrote me the most charitable letter afterwards — hoped I was recovering well, and that we would always be friends. So forgiving, and I did nothing to deserve it.”

“Not only has she forgiven you, but she still holds you in affection,” Sir Owen said with a slight smile. “If you wished it, she would be yours for the taking. Kelshaw said that she has been shipped off to this relation or that — an aunt in Bristol, and one in Hereford, I believe — to see if another suitor might catch her eye, but none have done so. It is you she wants, Michael.”

More panic. How could he answer? It would be unutterably cowardly in him to say that he could not contemplate marrying Amelia Greaves... or anyone, except for just one person and where in the world was she now? Did she still think of him as he thought of her? Did she think of him at all?

His father sighed. "Michael, you almost married Miss Greaves once. You were as good as betrothed, and the prospect was not unappealing to you."

"But I had not then met... *her*."

"She is gone, Michael. Whatever happened between you — and I shall not ask, nor need you ever reveal it to a soul, for it is your secret to keep. Take it to the grave with you, if you wish. But whatever it was, the girl left Hadlow Hall that night and not a word has anyone heard from her since. Not a word to her good friend Miss Greaves, and not a word to you. She is not coming back, Michael. She is *never* coming back, and you must resign yourself to living the rest of your life without her."

"I know, Father," he whispered. He knew it all too well. It was his first thought when he woke every morning — the start of yet another day without *her*. And the memory of her filled his mind before sleep claimed him. Sometimes she haunted his dreams, too, but not often. Not often enough.

"Then what you have to decide is whether you could bear to live out your days with someone else, someone who would bring you affection and children and a fulfilling life, not to mention eighty thousand pounds and a very fine house in Gloucestershire."

Michael chewed his lip uncertainly. "I am your heir, so I ought to—"

Sir Owen held up one hand. "None of that, if you please. There is no longer any pressing need for you to marry if you are disinclined, since you have a brother who looks likely to fulfil all our hopes of continuing the Plummer line. Furthermore, the dire circumstances that prevailed after your grandfather's death have been alleviated. Chadwell Park has been sold to the Fletchers, and our financial affairs are on a sound footing again. Three years ago, when we were at our lowest ebb, it was natural to turn to you to restore our fortunes, and you did your very best, until fate intervened. But none of that applies now. If you would like to meet Miss Greaves again, and see if

something good might yet be salvaged from the wreckage of that time, then by all means do so. At the very least, you could restore the friendship you once shared. But if you would prefer not to meet her, I shall tell Kelshaw so, and he will ensure she does not come here.”

Still Michael hesitated. “What do you think I should do, sir?”

His father smiled sadly. “Michael, all I have ever wanted for you, and for all my children, is for you to be happy. I should like to see you settled and contented, that is all, as I have been ever since I married your mother, and as James is now. You once thought that Miss Greaves could provide that contentment. Would you not like to see if that hope could be rekindled? There is no commitment on your part. She will be staying with the Kelshaws, and you will meet only now and then, at evening parties and so on. There need be no awkwardness about it. You will not have to say more than a few words to her, for the sake of politeness, unless you wish it. She will take her cue from you. What do you say? Will you try it?”

A long silence. It was so difficult! He could not see himself married to Amelia, yet he understood very clearly that his father wished him to try, at least. How could he decide?

His father nodded. “Ah. I can see that you are not minded for it.”

“No commitment?” Michael blurted. “She will not expect... an offer... or anything of that nature?”

“Indeed not. It will just be two former friends renewing their acquaintanceship, nothing more than that. If it *should* happen... should you decide to propose marriage to her, your mother’s ball at Christmas would be the ideal time to make an announcement. But all of that will be entirely up to you. If you find it too much, you may go and stay with Patricia over at the orphanage, you know. She will not leave her babies, even for Christmas, in case of a sudden emergency... those children are one long emergency, if you ask me, but we can invent an excuse at short notice if it becomes too much for you.”

That was a possibility! An escape route if it became too much... yes, that would work. “Very well, Father. I should be... pleased to meet Miss Greaves again.”

### 3: Visitors From The North

HODGEHILL, NEAR CARLISLE, CUMBERLAND

Margarita was trying to find a usable pen. It was a perpetual chore, for Mrs Landers discarded pens like apple blossoms in spring whenever they became defective, and then they became wedged under books or hidden by the drift of papers on the desk or fell to the floor and were trodden underfoot. Margarita gathered them up and mended them and replaced them in the standish, but her mistress used them faster than the supply could be replenished. Nor would she consider buying new, for that cost money and why should she lay out her blunt for new when the old ones were still serviceable?

Such was the lot of the paid companion, and Margarita was not dissatisfied with her position. Considering her lowly status in society, she was fortunate to have such employment, and it was of no consequence if her salary was not paid very often... or at all, if she were honest. Always promised, never forthcoming.

“Where is that pen, Margaret?” Mrs Landers said. She never called Margarita by her correct name, insisting it was a heathen, foreign abomination, and not such as any English woman should bear, but it was a harmless enough quirk and Margarita minded it not a bit. There was very little she minded enough to make a fuss over. She had a roof over her head, enough food to eat, warm fires in the winter and work to keep her occupied. How could she be discontented when she was so blessed?

She unearthed a nearly perfect pen from under a gazetteer. “Here’s one,” Margarita said, hastily passing it across the mountain of books, journals and assorted papers that littered her employer’s desk.

With a cluck of irritation, Mrs Landers said, “Will you never learn proper speech? *‘Here is a pen, madam.’* That is the way to do it. The accent is bad enough without mangling the words as well.”

“Here is a pen, madam,” Margarita said obediently. She made no effort to moderate her accent. Having lived in Somersetshire for most of her twenty-six years, there was no getting the county out of her tongue.



Mrs Landers wrote perhaps two words before that pen broke, too.

“Useless things! Find me another, will you?”

A hearty rap on the door was followed by the ample form of Mrs Hind, the housekeeper, bearing a silver salver laden with letters and newspapers.

“Mail’s in from Carlisle, madam, and there’s one for you, Mrs Brookes. From India,” she added in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Thank you, Mrs Hind,” Margarita said, taking the thin letter and pushing it into her work bag to read later.

“Writing at last, is he, that husband of yours?” Mrs Landers said, looking at Margarita over the top of her spectacles. “Not a man of words, is he? It must be six months since the last. What does he say — that India is hot?” She cackled at her own wit, before turning to her own letters.

Margarita only smiled. Nick was very good to write at all, considering everything.

There was peace for five minutes while Mrs Landers opened one letter after another, scanned each briefly before casting it onto the mountain in front of her. Margarita set herself to mend as many pens as she could find in this interlude.

“Not reading your letter?” Mrs Landers said, with a wry look at Margarita. “You are too secretive, Mrs Brookes, hiding your mail away. You read them by candlelight, I suppose, when you should be asleep in your bed, and sigh over them, and try to find the hidden meanings behind the words. Does he still love me? Are there prettier girls in Madras, or wherever he is? Will he ever come back and rescue me from this drudgery as companion to a cross old woman?”

“I’m very satisfied with my position, I assure you,” Margaret said with a smile. “A wife is a drudge, too, after all, and less comfortably situated. Mr Brookes needn’t hurry back on my account.”

Mrs Landers chuckled. “Hmm. What sort of marriage is that, eh? Well, when next you write, tell him to hurry back on *my* account, for I should dearly like to meet this Mr Brookes of yours. I wonder sometimes if he even exists, letters or no letters. It could be anybody writing—” She started,

looking more closely at one letter in particular. "Well now! And about time, too. Look at this, Margaret — that boring nephew of mine has finally found himself a girl willing to take him. Such an unpromising specimen, but the title is a lure, I dare say. Oh, she is in trade, so that accounts for it. No one of his own class would touch him."

"Which nephew?" Margarita said, only half attending. "One of your sisters' boys?"

"Faulkbourne's, of course. Viscount Albury. The chit fancies being a viscountess, I imagine. They all think it so wonderful to be a part of an aristocratic family until they realise what miserable specimens of humanity they all are."

"All of them, Mrs Landers?" Margarita said. "Surely there must be one or two noblemen of worth in the kingdom."

"Not a single one," she said stoutly. "But you shall see for yourself, for we must go and meet this girl. Mary says she is meek and well-behaved, and she is not exactly free with her compliments, so the girl must be a veritable paragon of maidenly virtue to squeeze even such a grudging description from her. Besides, it will be vastly entertaining to watch Rufus and Mary admit a tradesman's daughter into the family. The betrothal is to be at Christmas. You had better book us seats on the mail as soon as may be."

"The mail!"

"Of course. Why waste good coin on post horses and postilions and the Good Lord only knows what else. We shall take blankets and a basket of food and drink. How long will it take?"

"It's forty-eight hours to London, by the schedule," Margarita said faintly. "It departs from Carlisle before six in the morning."

"We are not going all the way to London, only to Huntingdon, so you will need to work out where to change. Go and fetch Paterson's, will you? Come on, girl, look lively. I want to be on the road as soon as it can be arranged."

"Huntingdon? Oh, Chaseley Court?"

"Did I not say so? Faulkbourne's place, and a great mouldering pile it is

too. Oh, that must be why he is prepared to hold his nose and let his heir marry into trade, to patch the leaks in that barn of a place.” She cackled suddenly. “Heh heh heh! Not so nice in his ideas when he needs the readies, is he? Why are you still here, Margaret? Paterson’s, quickly. We have a mail coach to catch.”

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CHASELEY COURT, HUNTINGDONSHIRE

Mrs Landers had been obliged to hire a post-chase for the final stages of the journey, despite her best endeavours, for the mail coach which should have deposited them at Market Harborough at five in the afternoon had finally swayed tiredly into the town twelve hours later, and not all Margarita’s persuasive powers or Mrs Landers’ bluster could procure them seats on any stage coach to Huntingdon that day. As a result of the unexpected expense, she arrived at Chaseley Court in a towering rage.

The Earl of Faulkbourne was not at all pleased to see his sister-in-law. “I cannot imagine why you have come all this way, Hannah,” he grumbled, as he met them in the vast stone-flagged entrance chamber. “It is not at all sensible at this time of year, and there is no need for it, you know. You never showed any interest in Albury before this, so why now? In any event, you may have wasted your time, for this betrothal is looking less likely by the day. The girl refuses to live here, can you believe it? Insisting on her own house, and at least thirty miles away. Did you ever hear such impudence?”

“She has no mind to live under Mary’s eye, I take it? Sensible girl,” Mrs Landers said, her ill-temper evaporating instantly. “And why should she not have her own house, Rufus?”

“The expense, Hannah, the expense!”

“She has a good dowry, I take it, so it will be no cost to you.”

“I want that dowry to fix this place once and for all! Ack, what is the use? One does one’s best for one’s children in the hope they will — But the boy is worthless, utterly worthless. If he allows this girl to run rings around him now, he will be completely under her thumb when they are married.”

Margarita had maintained an amused silence until this point, helping her

mistress divest herself of her voluminous outer garments, but these words forced a bark of sudden laughter from her.

The earl turned his disapproving gaze in her direction. "And you are...?"

After a pause as she waited in vain for Mrs Landers to introduce her, Margarita said, "Mrs Brookes, my lord. Mrs Landers' companion."

"Companion, eh? A widow?"

"Mr Brookes is in India at present."

"Hmpf. And you find my words amusing, do you?"

"Surprising, perhaps, because in my experience, it's very much the other way round, my lord."

"Explain."

"A woman has power over a man only before they marry. If he wants her, he'll do whatever it takes to secure her, and any outlandish claim may be made. But when they marry, she promises before God to obey him. From that point on, it's the man who has all the power."

"Only if he is willing to use it," the earl snapped. "I see no sign that Albury will assert himself. Weak, that is what he is. Always has been, always will be. This Fletcher girl wants his title, so she must knuckle under and live here, where we can keep an eye on her. I have told Albury, I shall not lay out a penny piece for another house, and he has no money of his own. Ha! I have him there, I believe."

"You must have other houses," Margarita said. "I know you do, for Brierfield is yours as well as Hodgehill, isn't it? There must be others, too, for a man in your exalted position in society."

It was an innocent enough remark, but it sent them both up into the boughs instantly.

"Brierfield! He is not having *that!*" Mrs Landers said.

"Do not remind me of Brierfield!" Lord Faulkbourne barked. "Now that you are here, I shall expect an explanation, Hannah."

"Explanation? Brierfield is *mine*, and that is all the explanation

necessary. Hodgehill and Brierfield are both mine, Rufus, as you know perfectly well.”

He would have contested the point vigorously, but Lady Faulkbourne and several other ladies drifted into the hall at that moment, and the subject was overtaken by surprised introductions and concerned enquiries as to the journey.

“The mail coach!” said Lady Faulkbourne faintly, horror dripping from every syllable. “You did not! Why not a post chaise if you could not bring your own carriage?”

“A post chaise!” Mrs Landers said in outraged tones. “A post chaise, all the way from Cumberland! Great heavens, Mary, you must think me made of money. We were obliged by the tardiness of the mail to post the rest of the way from Market Harborough, and a pretty penny that cost. Two pounds thirteen and sixpence! It is daylight robbery for no more than forty miles, and on top of the seven pounds ten shillings for the mail — more than ten pounds! Ten pounds! I shall be a pauper at this rate.”

“Well, why did you come, then?” Lord Faulkbourne snapped. “It is not as if you were a regular visitor. Is it ten years, or twelve, since you were last here? You could have saved your ten pounds and stayed snug at home.”

“I am sure we are very pleased to see Aunt Hannah,” said one of the younger women, a daughter, perhaps. “Is it not delightful that she has come all this way in the depths of winter to meet Albury’s betrothed? Mama, which rooms shall we prepare for Aunt Hannah and Mrs Brookes?”

“Oh... let me see... the west tower, ground floor, I think. Mrs Brookes can have one of the top floor rooms.”

“I need Margaret with me,” Mrs Landers said. “I must have someone nearby to call if I should wake in the night. She can sleep in my dressing room.”

“Very well, sister,” Lady Faulkbourne said. “Caroline, will you see to it? Dinner at seven, ladies.”

Thus dismissed, Margarita followed the little procession away. At last — a decent bed, regular meals and — oh, bliss! — perhaps the joy of a bath.

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Chaseley Court might be a great mouldering pile of Elizabethan splendour, a vast monument to the stonemason's art, but it was warm and dry, or at least the parts that Margarita saw, and it did not rock and sway and jerk into great potholes just as one was nodding off to sleep. It had comfortable beds where an exhausted companion might sleep for twelve hours at a stretch, and rise feeling several degrees less like a quaking blancmange. There were tables groaning with food twice a day, and a hot supper, too. Coal and candles were plentiful, the company was agreeable, and there were cards and music after dinner every evening. If she could have enjoyed a bath as well, she would have declared the place perfection itself, but mouldering piles were sadly deficient in hot water, seemingly.

Mrs Landers was fully occupied with being a nuisance to her relations, so Margarita had ample time to enjoy the delights of a household where, despite the talk of leaking roofs and broken shutters, no expense was spared. Chaseley was an old house with its share of problems, but the earl was a wealthy man who liked to have his family about him. Since he had three sons and seven daughters, as well as a vast number of indigent cousins, there was constant bustle and activity.

Margarita had never before lived amidst such a lively family. Her earliest memories were of her father's parsonage, of long, placid days punctuated only by the routine of Sundays and Holy Days. Then school, with its quiet discipline. Her brief marriage to Jack Aitken, and more orderly days. Then the move to Hadlow Hall with Amelia, another small, subdued household.

Amelia... she must be married by now, a mother perhaps. But there was no point thinking about that, because it led inexorably to the memories Margarita did not wish to revisit, not ever. She would not think about *him*, she was determined on that, nor about the desperate time after she had left Hadlow. If Amelia was happy, then it had all been worthwhile, and she need reflect on that time with nothing but pleasure. Or at least, with less pain, less grief. It was more than two years ago, after all. Long in the past.

So Margarita sat and read all the newspapers and journals that the house provided, and felt herself connected to the world once again. In the evenings,

having left her own work bag behind in her haste, she worked her way through a basket of mending for the younger children, while the family chatter swirled around her. There was only one topic of discussion, that of the heir's betrothal, and everyone had their own opinion as to what he should do. It hardly mattered, for the earl was determined not to provide a separate house for the potential bride, and since his son had no income beyond an allowance from his father, there was not much to be done about it. The earl was grimly implacable, while Lady Faulkbourne was quietly triumphant.

"I always knew she was a flighty piece," she said smugly. "She seems oh-so-demure, but I always distrusted her."

Her closest allies all nodded knowingly, leaving Margarita with the liveliest desire to meet the young lady in question.

She felt rather sorry for the harassed heir. He was an inoffensive young man, officially known as Viscount Albury, but his brothers and sisters called him by his Christian name, Redmond, or even 'Red'. His manners were beautiful, however, and he found time, even amid his own troubles, to seek out Margarita, and welcome her to Chaseley Court.

"Your husband is working abroad, I understand," he said.

"Mr Brookes is in India," she said, as she always did.

"You must miss him very much," he said with genuine sympathy. "It is hard for two people to be so far apart, and India, too! Such an unforgiving climate."

"Every man must make his way in the world, my lord," she said. "But tell me of your young lady. Miss Fletcher encompasses every female virtue, by all I hear."

His face lit up at once. "And of how many ladies is such a glowing encomium applied, and all too often with no regard for the truth? Are they not all accomplished and demure and prettily behaved? But in Miss Fletcher's case, such a description comes closer to the truth than is usual. She is an angel, Mrs Brookes, and I shall be a fortunate man indeed if I can lead her to the altar before long."

"Then, for your sake, I hope the present difficulty may be resolved

soon.”

His face clouded instantly. “I do not know if that is possible. My father is against it, and I cannot defy his clearly expressed wishes.”

“Even when your own future happiness is at stake? And not only yours, but Miss Fletcher’s?” She could see the sudden doubt in his eyes, so she went on, “My father was only a clergyman in a small country parish, Lord Albury, but he taught me a valuable lesson. He told me that if I were ever uncertain what to do, especially if it’s a momentous decision, I should consider what might happen in each case. Not just the possible good that might arise from each choice, but also the worst that might follow. Then I could weigh one option against another, impartially, and choose that way. On that basis, I’ve twice made the decision to be married, and I’ve never regretted my choices. In your case, the two paths are starkly different. If you follow your duty to your father, you lose any possibility of marrying Miss Fletcher forever. That much is certain. But if you defy him... what’s the worst that can happen? He can’t disinherit you, and you may find that, as time passes and your angel provides you with an heir or two, he’ll come to like your marriage very well. It would be presumptuous in me to advise you, but I wouldn’t have you surrender Miss Fletcher without at least considering the options.”

“These thoughts have been in my mind, also,” he said slowly. “It is difficult, and the wrong decision could have profound consequences for many people.”

“True, but you must be your own man, my lord, and not *dither*. Hesitation in such cases is fatal, quite fatal.” His eyebrows rose at the force in her voice. Quickly, she went on, “At least your father is not against the marriage itself, only the house. There could be some compromise there, surely? If Miss Fletcher were to understand—”

“No,” he said sharply. “She is insistent that she must have a house of her own, and I do not quite understand why she is so vehement about it.”

“Perhaps you should ask her,” Margarita said.

He smiled then, his thin face transformed. “Perhaps I should.”



## 4: A Step Forward

*'To Miss Fletcher, Chadwell Park, near Ware, Hertfordshire. My very dear friend, We are all on tenter-hooks here — what are tenter-hooks, anyway? Such a strange word! Whatever they are, we are very much upon them, awaiting news of your viscount and The House. Will he come up to scratch, do you think? And there is another odd expression. How full I am of nonsense this morning. Nevertheless, it is true that we are all anxious to hear that the business is settled once and for all, for your sake. How you must feel this delay, my dear friend, and the uncertainty. How you must be wondering! But surely he will not fail you now. There is little news from Sagborough except that Ma has been abed this week past with this influenza which is everywhere about just now. Happily, she is on the mend again, and no one else in the house has been afflicted except the new scullery maid. Fortunately, my new ball gown was already ordered before Ma was struck down, and it will be ready in time for the assembly next week. I cannot wait to see how the sleeves have turned out. They always look so well in the journals or on you, my dear friend, but Mrs Platten is no London modiste, and is very likely to make a hash of it, and I should so like to look my best, for there is a big party staying at Percharden House just now, and some of them are to come to the assembly! I should so like to dance with some of the gentlemen. You see how you have spoilt me, dear Rosie, by taking me about with you in Bath. The sons of millers and drapers are not good enough for me now, for I must have a gentleman! Not that any of them would notice me, of course, new ball gown or not, but I do hope they will come and add a touch of society polish to our rustic ways. I must close now to help fold the clean sheets. Do write as soon as you have news of Lord A to relieve the mind of your anxious friend, Belinda. Post script — Ricky would send you his regards as usual, but he is so busy that we have scarcely seen him, except at church. His shop is so successful, you cannot imagine. Is it not wonderful?'*

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Rosie was busy trying to distract Great-aunt Petronella from gloating over the Marquess of Barrowford's seizure.

"I told him to curb that vicious temper of his before it got him into trouble," she said, laughing merrily. "Didn't I say he'd have an apoplexy one

day? And now he has, and serve him right! Nasty little man.”

To divert her attention, Rosie read the society columns of the London newspapers. Great-aunt Petronella had never met most of the people mentioned therein, but she took an avid interest in them, all the same. The doings of the Royal Family were of no interest — “A rag-tag disreputable bunch, with all their mistresses and their poor, fatherless children, and none of them doing their duty as they should,” she said roundly — but the peers and more elevated of the gentry were endlessly fascinating to her.

Angie and Bella were supposedly helping Miss Crabtree pack before her marriage to Thomas Leadbetter, but since Miss Crabtree owned no more than would fit into one small box, even with the addition of the wedding clothes which Mama had insisted on giving her, Rosie suspected they were up to mischief, as usual.

“Lord Albury, madam,” Keeble said from the door.

Rosie jumped.

There was Redmond, a slightly anxious look on his face, his eyes searching the room for her. He saw her, his face relaxed, he smiled. Hestia jumped down from the sofa and bounded happily across the room to him, her little tail wagging. He laughed, knelt down to fondle her ears, and then scooped her into his arms.

His impeccable manners meant he went first to Mama to make his bow and apologise for his long absence, for it was almost a week, and lately he had rarely been away for so long. Pa came in, notified by Keeble of the arrival of so important a guest, and then Angie and Bella, and Morgan Plummer wandered in, too, so for a while they were all caught up in greetings and politeness. When they had satisfactorily settled the question of everyone’s health and the state of the roads, however, Redmond withdrew a paper from an inner pocket, shuffling Hestia to his other arm to do so.

“You asked Mother to provide a list of those who might be invited to join you here for Christmas,” he said to Mama. “I am afraid it is rather long — fourteen names in all. You will not have room for so many, I am sure.”

“Indeed, we have plenty of room,” Mama said, rather smugly. “Sir Arthur Plummer, who built this house, loved to entertain, so he had the entire

attic floor filled with bedrooms. We shall be well able to accommodate everyone on Lady Faulkbourne's list, and with a dressing room for each married couple. Oh... Mrs... Radcliffe Landers? An aunt of yours, Lord Albury?"

"Widow to my father's younger brother," he said. "She has come all the way from Carlisle, and on the mail coach, too, to meet you all."

"Goodness," Mama said, in her mild way. "The mail coach from Carlisle. A brave lady. And Mrs Brookes?"

"Her companion. Aunt Hannah likes to have her close by at night, so perhaps she might have an adjoining room?"

"Of course. You may tell Lady Faulkbourne that there will be no difficulty."

He nodded, his face serious. He was always serious, Rosie realised. There was no levity in him at all, and she was unsure whether that was merely his nature, or the weight of his illustrious future as an earl bearing down on him. All the more reason to separate him from his family and allow him to breathe freely.

"How curious to turn the attics over to bedrooms," Redmond said. "Where then do you keep your lumber? Or are you so tidy that you have none?"

"We have as much as most people, I imagine," Mama said. "We use the basement for storage of unwanted items. But you have never seen over the house properly, have you? Rosie, why do you not give Lord Albury a tour of the house? Angie, Bella... you may go, too."

They began in the basement, with its storerooms and myriad narrow passages, and then up the secret spiral stairs. There were four of these, narrow and treacherously steep, intended for the servants to creep about unseen, but too dangerous for carrying anything other than a candlestick. Angie and Bella, with their usual energy, raced ahead, but Rosie proceeded more cautiously, with Redmond treading anxiously behind her, still carrying Hestia.

"Do take care, Rosie," he murmured at frequent intervals. "So dark! Ah,

now this must be... it is! The dining room. Oh, another stair... are we going up again? Do hold tightly to the rope. I should hate you to miss your footing.”

“You need not be concerned about me,” she said. “I am used to these stairs.”

By the time they reached the attic floor, Angie and Bella were out of sight, although their high voices were still audible in the distance, and by dint of ambling slowly from room to room, and stopping to admire the view from every window, Rosie and Redmond contrived to find themselves quite alone. He saw the opportunity, just as she did.

“I have made little progress with... the condition you stipulated... having your own house,” he said, eyeing her warily. “My father refuses absolutely to countenance the idea. I have explained your position to him, that you have set your heart on it, and—”

Rosie spun round to face him. “It is not a matter of the heart, Redmond. One sets one heart on a new bonnet, or attending a ball. Marriage is a pragmatic matter of dowries and settlements and pin money and jointures, a negotiation. Your father wants my dowry, and he may have it, but only if I have my house.”

“But that would mean less money available for his own plans,” he said. “Besides, he feels it is late to be making conditions, and that the house should have been mentioned before.”

“I was not consulted before,” Rosie said calmly.

“You could have told your father what you wanted, and he could have raised it when the settlements were discussed.”

“That would be presumptuous indeed in me, to be telling you what I will and will not accept in marriage before the offer has been made,” she said gently, and he had the grace to look ashamed. “Besides, you might have had a house already in mind. Your father has numerous seats, I understand. How could I know where you propose we should live until you tell me?”

“You are correct... as always,” he said, although a little stiffly. “It was wrong not to consider your opinions earlier. Yet now we are at an impasse. My father is adamant that he will not pay for a separate house for us, not

when there is room for us at Chaseley, and you are equally adamant that you will not marry me without your own house, and I cannot see a way to keep everyone happy.”

So much talk about his father? Was he so in thrall to the earl that he had not a single thought of his own? But perhaps she could find out.

“What do *you* want, Redmond?” she said.

He looked surprised. “I? That hardly matters.”

“It matters to me,” she said softly. “Where would you live if you had a free choice?”

“Why, at Chaseley, of course, where else? It has been my home all my life, and will be my principal seat when I inherit. Naturally I prefer it above all other houses.”

This was so badly the wrong answer that for a moment she was astonished into silence. Rosie had inspired impassioned lovers for more than ten years, and been assured on many occasions that a mere hovel with Rosie in it would be a palace, all for love and the world well lost, death was preferable to rejection, and a great deal of similar nonsense. Such hyperbole was tiresome, but at least a man who professed it had fire in his belly, and she vastly preferred that to Redmond’s sedateness. Could he not, for once in his life, rise to the occasion? A man who loved her — *truly* loved her — would say at once, ‘*It matters nothing where I live so long as you are there with me.*’ And then he would find a way, somehow, to give her a house of her own.

She could say none of this, however, taking Hestia from him, for the little dog was such a comfort when she was disappointed. “Mama will wonder what has become of us. Shall we go back downstairs?”

He assented, and they made their way down the service stairs to the bedroom floor.

“This is a fine house,” he said. “So elegant and practical, no draughts and always plenty of hot water. Modern houses have so many advantages.”

Rosie laughed. “Oh yes, Pa is very keen on hot water, and we are to have water closets put in next spring. Imagine that! Chadwell is not so

splendid or ancient as Chaseley, but it is very well appointed. We even have a gallery, although it is not so grand as yours. Would you like to see it?"

"Very much."

She led him towards the main stairs, then gestured to a curtain draped to one side of the stairs. Lifting it aside revealed a wide passageway that curved around the stairs, and then into a long, narrow room lined with statues on plinths and a few paintings.

"We have no ancestral portraits or suits of armour," she said, "and all these objects came with the house. They were bought all at once when the house was built, I imagine, for the Plummers never wanted them. Still, I like this place. It was my refuge when we first moved here and I was miserable."

"You were miserable? Of course, you must have missed Sagborough."

"Yes, but it was my friend I missed most — Belinda Jupp. You met her in Bath, but I dare say you do not remember her."

"I do, yes. A pleasant girl. Easy to talk to, as I recall."

Rosie chuckled. "A chatterbox, you mean! She was my dearest friend, always. I never remember a time when she was *not* my friend. You would think that when a girl has four sisters, she would choose an intimate friend from amongst their number, but for me, it was always Belinda. We complemented each other wonderfully. She talked enough for both of us, so I never had to. I told her all my innermost thoughts — well, everything fit to be shared, anyway. So when I moved here, I missed her abominably. Every time a letter arrived from her, I would sit on the floor here, just in that corner behind Julius Caesar, and weep and weep. I was such a watering pot in those days."

She sat on a window seat, releasing Hestia to skitter about and inspect all the odd corners, as Redmond sat beside her.

"But you like the house? You like *this* house, even if you dislike the Court?" he said gently. "I am trying to understand, you see, why you do not wish to live there."

That was a more hopeful start.

"I find Chaseley Court oppressive, as if the weight of history is bearing

down on me, but I shall like it well enough in the future — *far* in the future, we must hope, when your father leaves this world. And your mother... there is a dower house, or some such, I take it, if she wishes to maintain her own household?”

“There is... after a fashion. It is full of elderly aunts and cousins at present, but it could be used for its intended purpose. So it is my parents you dislike?”

“Not dislike, no. I need to know them better, certainly, but... oh, how can I explain? The trouble is that I am not argumentative, Redmond. I am a peaceable person, and hate disagreements and quarrels and raised voices and slammed doors and sulks. It distresses me beyond all bearing, but my own family understands that, and you understand it, too, I think, so none of you chafe me. But your parents will not have such restraint. Ten or twenty times a day they will chide me or hint or suggest, in the gentlest possible way, and I shall not wish to set myself up in opposition. So ten or twenty times a day, I shall surrender a little more of my own will and gradually, almost imperceptibly, they will grind me into dust.”

“You do not imagine that I can protect you from all this?” he said, frowning.

“No, for you do not stand up to them very much, either.”

“I should do so if it were important... if it were for your comfort and happiness.”

She almost cried out in frustration. Such easy words to say, and yet he would not do the one thing — the *only* thing — she had asked for.

Schooling herself to her accustomed calmness, she said, “Should you? Truly? Consider this — we do not need permission from anyone to marry. We are both of age, Pa and Great-aunt Petronella have already said they approve, so we would have the interest from fifty thousand pounds to live on. We could disregard your parents altogether. Now ask yourself — would you do it? Would you marry me in the teeth of your parents’ disapprobation?”

“Of course I would,” he said quickly. “Naturally I would... although... hmm, my mother’s view I care nothing for, since she is blinded by her own prejudices, and she dislikes your origins too much to appreciate your many

virtues. But my father... if he were against the match... he would have good reason, I think. That I would have to consider. And besides, I am the heir, I have obligations and—” He shook his head ruefully. “No, I could not do it. Perhaps they have already ground me into the dust,” he added sadly.

“I think it would do you good to live separately from your parents,” Rosie said quietly.

“Yes!” he said eagerly. “A little house in the village. The old manor house, even, although that is quite large, and you might find that just as troublesome as the Court.”

“No,” she said softly. “At least thirty miles away, too far for a casual morning call, for otherwise they would be constantly dropping in, and telling me how to go on.”

“You do need to learn about your new position in society, and how to go on,” he said. “Your upbringing has not fitted you for such society. They only want to help.”

“Not fitted me? We are not *barbarians* in Yorkshire!” she cried, jumping to her feet so abruptly that Hestia gave a little yelp and scuttled back to Rosie’s feet. “I have had governesses and masters for all the gentle arts. I have accomplishments, I can write a fair hand, I know the proper topics of the day suitable for a lady in conversation. I have had all trace of a Yorkshire accent stamped out of me. Can you tell me one way in which I have erred in society? You cannot! And I am not afraid of a *large* house, Redmond. I know how to manage servants and order meals and keep the accounts and make sure the tradesmen are not cheating me. But I cannot withstand your family — that aristocratic bearing that brooks no opposition. *That* is where I need your help, if you are able to. I need to be far, far away from them so that they will only visit when invited. I need my own house where I can learn to be mistress of it in my own way, and slowly grow into my new rôle.”

“And not be ground into dust,” he said slowly.

“Do you understand?” she said softly, sitting down beside him again. “You always listen, but I need you to understand as well.”

Gently, she put her hand in his, and his face lit up with joy.

“I do.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, and the warmth of it made her skin tingle. He kept hold of it, gazing down at it and gently rubbing her fingers with a little smile. They had never held hands before, never caressed as lovers do, beyond the briefest touches required by politeness — a shocking thought when they stood on the brink of a betrothal. But she could do something about that. And perhaps increasing the intimacy between them would motivate him to stand up for himself a little more.

“Redmond, will you kiss me?”

His face melted into hopefulness, his breathing becoming rapid. “Ohhh... may I? I have wanted to do so for such a long time,” he whispered.

She nodded. With his free hand, he stroked one finger gently down her face, as his lips slowly curved into a smile. “Rosie...” he murmured.

Then he kissed her, the touch of his lips soft and gentle. He shifted away from her, gave a tiny laugh, and then leaned into a longer kiss. His skin was smooth against hers, one hand caressing the back of her head. She closed her eyes, luxuriating in his happiness. There was no awkwardness, no discomfort, no liberties taken. It was all very pleasant, and when at last he pulled away, his eyes were shining with joy.

“I *shall* do it, Rosie,” he whispered, his lips so close to hers that she felt his breath warm against her skin. “You shall have your house, I promise. Darling Rosie...”

They had taken a step nearer to the altar, but this step was different. Now there could be no going back.

5: An Old Friend

Michael was reading the newspaper in the parlour before dinner one evening when Mother swept in and announced, “Miss Greaves has arrived at Kelshaw House, Michael. I shall call upon her tomorrow, and you will accompany me.”

He dropped the newspaper, his chest suddenly too tight. *Could not breathe...*

“I will come with you, my dear,” Sir Owen said. “Michael may not wish to call so soon.”

“It is better by far to get the first meeting out of the way at once,” Mother said firmly. “Then he will know what to expect, and may be quite easy about encountering Miss Greaves by chance in the village or at an evening engagement. Letitia, you will come, too.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Letitia always did as Mother wished. Usually, Michael did too, for it was by far the simplest way. So reasonable, so practical... get the first meeting over and done with... then he might be easy.

“Charles will not wish to go, so we will not be crushed in the carriage,” Mother continued. “We shall depart at one. Ah, Jefford, there you are. The carriage at one o’clock tomorrow, to go to Kelshaw House.”

Michael said nothing, his whole concentration taken up with breathing at that point. His father glanced at him, but said nothing further, and just then James and Julia arrived and the subject was dropped in favour of Julia’s state of health and the optimism surrounding her delicate condition.

Not that delicate was an epithet one would ever apply to Julia in the normal way, a tall, rather ungainly girl and a strange one — all the Fletchers were strange, in their different ways — but Michael rather liked her, now that he knew her better. Julia was very like James, carefree and quite unconcerned about what the world thought of her. Neither of them ever worried, as Michael did incessantly, whether they were doing what was expected of them, or whether they were a disappointment to their relations. On the contrary, they seemed to do precisely what they wanted, and not only did

nobody mind, everybody loved them. Even Sir Owen, the highest of high sticklers, smiled on Julia and was merely amused when she spilled her soup or tripped over a footstool. Not for her the delicately raised eyebrows that conveyed, without a word spoken, a certain sorrow at some perceived transgression.

Michael's whole life had been ruled by those eyebrows of his father's. Sir Owen had never once expressed displeasure, still less anger, for he was the consummate gentleman, restrained in all things, but Michael felt his own failings deeply, nonetheless. Sir Owen had been an efficient and respected leader of men in his army days, and was equally efficient and respected as a member of the landed gentry. There was no hope of ever rising to his standards. At least, Michael had long ago surrendered that hope, and James had never tried, going his careless way in all things. Lucky James, not haunted by the shadow of inadequacy.

Mother chose not to discuss Amelia Greaves at dinner, with the servants no doubt agog with curiosity, nor could they discuss Lord Barrowford, still silent and immobile in his bed, for Lord Charles was adamant that he would not visit his brother.

"Nothing has changed," he said loftily, whenever anyone tentatively suggested he might go. "Some insults are too great to be overcome. Besides, Barrowford is far too young to die. It is all a hum and he will be up and about in no time, you mark my words, and perhaps he will control that temper of his a little better in future."

Instead, Letitia rattled on about some imagined ailment of little Serafina, complaining that Patricia cared more about the fatherless babies at her orphanage than about her own nephew and niece, and was she *never* to have a day at home?

"Not to worry, sister," James said cheerfully. "When you and Lord Charles are dead, and young Charles and Serafina are orphans, Patricia will care very much about them, you may depend upon it."

Letitia sulked for the rest of the evening.

When the ladies had withdrawn, Sir Owen said, "James, we are to call upon Miss Greaves tomorrow — Lady Plummer, Letitia and I, and Michael,

if he cares to come. Do you wish to join us? It would be a courtesy to wait upon her at an early date, and she is about Julia's age."

"I should like to, but we have Thomas Leadbetter arriving tomorrow to prepare for his wedding on Friday, and we volunteered to hold the wedding breakfast, so you may imagine the chaos in the rectory just now."

"A wedding breakfast?" Sir Owen said. "How ambitious you are becoming. I recall you used to eat in the kitchen with the servants before your marriage, James."

James laughed. "Mrs Selwyn is a housekeeper in a thousand. She keeps us civilised now. But as soon as Thomas and Miss Crabtree are safely wed and dispatched to Froxfield Green, I shall take Julia to call upon Miss Greaves, you may be sure. Michael, shall you go with Father, or would you rather wait and go with Julia and me?"

"Mother thinks I should get it over with," Michael said.

"There is something in that," James said. "But what do *you* think?"

But Michael could only chew his lip anxiously.

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In the end, Mother swept him into her plans by not giving him any opportunity to back out. She instructed Padwick to lay out suitable clothes and ordered Michael up the stairs to be dressed appropriately. It was easier just to do as he was bid.

The short journey to Kelshaw House was accomplished all too quickly, and there was no time for Michael to compose himself, to slow his pounding heart, to stop quivering like a leaf. If he could only *breathe*. He was going to be ill, he knew it. Please God, let him not be ill!

The carriage stopped, they descended. Would his legs bear him up? Just about. The short flight of steps, the door, the butler, a footman... his father removed his hat for him.

"Your gloves, Michael."

"Oh... yes... gloves." Hastily he tore them off, dropped one, bent to retrieve it, dropped the other one. A footman scooped it up. "Sorry... sorry."

Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“This way, if you please,” the butler said, throwing open a door, and intoning loudly to the occupants, “Lady Plummer, Lady Charles Heaman, Sir Owen Plummer, Mr Michael Plummer, my lady.”

The room was full of Lady Frederica’s heady perfume, rustling gowns, girlish voices exclaiming. For an instant, the room spun, and the familiar blue and yellow damask chair coverings and the Aubusson rug faded and swirled about. And out of the confusion, a head of yellow hair and a well-remembered face coming towards him.

“Michael! How lovely to see you again. How are you?”

She was exactly as he remembered. How strange. Nothing had changed. The pretty lace tucker she always wore, the lapis lazuli brooch that had been her mother’s, the plain ribbon through her simply dressed hair... and the shining eyes, a deeper blue even than her brooch.

He licked his lips, smiled a little. “Well... I am well... and you?”

“Very well, very well indeed. Make your bow to my cousins, and then we may have a comfortable coze.”

Obediently, he bowed to Lady Frederica and the girls, then followed Amelia across the room to a deep window seat. Such memories that brought back! The very first time he had met Amelia had been here in this room, almost three years ago. Then, as now, Lady Frederica had invited her in the hope of making a match between them, the impoverished heir to a baronetcy and the unworldly orphan with a fortune in her hands, both of them unsuited to the hurly-burly of the London marriage mart.

They had taken to each other at once. She was easy company, enjoying the small, confined society of the village and, amazingly, seeming to take pleasure in Michael’s society, too. She never made him feel awkward or uncomfortable. Three times she had visited the Kelshaws, but then had come the invitation to stay at her home in Gloucestershire, Hadlow Hall. He was to meet her guardians, who were too elderly and frail to travel, and there would be talk of financial matters, then a betrothal.

Instead, he had met her companion...

He shivered, dragging his thoughts back to the present.

“You were far away, for a moment,” Amelia said. “Are you remembering? So much has happened since we were last in this room. You have sold your lovely house. How dreadful for you! I should be devastated to sell Hadlow. At least you still have the Manor, although... living so close, does it not pain you to see strangers there, in *your* house?”

“A little... although they are very pleasant people.”

“So my cousins say. I look forward to making their acquaintance, although they are much engaged at present, I understand. The eldest daughter is about to be most advantageously married, and there is to be a celebration of their betrothal at Christmas.”

“Yes.” He could think of nothing to say about the Fletchers, and just at that moment, had no desire at all to be reminded of betrothal celebrations.

Perhaps she, too, felt the subject was infelicitous, for she lapsed into silence. Across the room, Mother and Lady Frederica were industriously making the laboured conversation of neighbours with no great liking for each other, while Sir Owen was gallantly quizzing the Miss Kelshaws about their Christmas entertainments.

Leaning forward, Amelia said in a low voice, “Did you ever hear anything... from *her*?”

He shook his head, the pain that abruptly speared through him making speech impossible.

She sat upright again. “Nor I. Not a word. I set the lawyers to find her, you know, but they only traced her as far as Tewkesbury. After that, nothing. They tried her old school and any number of other girls’ schools, but no one had news of her. I should like to know that she is well, that is all, and not... oh, slaving somewhere as a scullery maid or some such.”

“A scullery maid!” he said, astonished.

“It was always a joke of hers, when I caught her helping in the kitchen, for she was very good in any domestic crisis. She used to say that she was practising for the day when I should throw her out, because she would be well trained for work as a scullery maid. She used to laugh about it, but I

hope she is *not* a scullery maid, for all that.”

It was a sentiment with which Michael fervently agreed.

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Rosie was practising on the pianoforte one morning before breakfast when Keeble came into the music room.

“The mistress would like to see you in her dressing room, madam.”

She rose at once, tidied away her music and closed and locked the instrument.

Mama’s dressing room was very comfortably appointed, with an elegant little dressing table and stool, mirrors everywhere and a pretty silk wall-covering in pale apricot. At one end, two sofas were arranged around a low table, presently bearing a silver pot and two cups. Here Mama sat, still in her wrap, and in the grey light filtering through the windows, she looked pale and a little anxious.

“Come in, Rosie, and take some chocolate with me,” Mama said.

“Thank you, Mama, but I have already had my morning chocolate.”

Mama had the pot raised, hovering over the cups, but now she pulled a face and set it down again. “I am not sure I want any, either. Sit down, Rosie, for there is a matter I should like to discuss with you, and I want you to answer me with complete honesty, do you understand?”

“This is serious indeed!” Rosie said. “But of course I will answer, if I can.”

“This business of the house. Are you looking for a way out of this betrothal? Because if you are, you need only say so, and your papa will deal with it for you, without the least trouble to you. There is no need for you to —”

“Dearest Mama! I am not trying to escape the betrothal. I *want* to marry Redmond.”

“Oh! Oh, that is a relief!” She laughed suddenly and patted Rosie’s hand. “The trouble is, you present such a placid face to the world, that one wonders sometimes — But then, why make such conditions? For I must tell

you, Rosie, that gentlemen dislike being pushed into a corner and made to dance about to a lady's will, at least, not in an obvious way. A man must always feel that he is master of his own fate, you know, and that whatever he does is entirely his own decision."

"But Redmond's decision would be to do whatever his father wishes, and I cannot allow that," Rosie said. "He would have me living in a corner of Chaseley Court, completely cowed by his parents, and I could not bear it. He has told me that he loves me, but—"

"Oh! That is excellent!"

"Yes, but I do not entirely believe him. I have seen so many examples of *real* love in my life — Allie and Jack, you and Pa, Julia and James, Will and Eloise, Johnny and Jemma... even Miss Crabtree and Mr Leadbetter. When a man is in love, he wants to do everything in his power to please the object of his affections. Look at Pa — you wanted to be mistress of a great estate, and here we are. He did that for you, because he loves you. And Johnny... he fought for Jemma to have her sons back with her, and went to extraordinary lengths to ensure she was happy, even though it was not how he planned his life at all. Johnny is my example in this, Mama. When I look at Redmond, I compare him with Johnny. Redmond says he loves me, but he has never asked me what I want, has never considered how happy or unhappy I might be, living under his parents' roof. So I have set him a test, and if he fails me, then I shall not marry him, because I shall know that he cannot make me happy. But if he passes..."

"If he provides you with a house, in defiance of his father... yes, I see. Good heavens, Rosie, to think I worried that you were too meek! I thought *I* was the schemer in this family. But if he fails this test, will you be upset?"

"He will not fail," Rosie said, with more confidence than she felt. "I have... given him some encouragement to do what I want."

"I dare not think what you might mean," Mama said, her eyebrows rising.

"I kissed him," Rosie said, laughing. "And he enjoyed it, so I think he will find a way. I very much hope so, for now that I have made up my mind to marry him, I shall be very put out if he falters when we are so close."

“So you are not taking him just because everyone around you seems to want it?” Mama said tentatively. “I have wondered, you see, whether your reluctance to marry stemmed from more than not meeting the right man. You could have had your pick of them... the best of Yorkshire *and* London, yet you turned them all down. After the spring, when no one seemed to please you, not even the best that London could offer, I confess I began to think... Will you set my mind at rest? There is... nothing holding you back, no deeper reason for your reluctance? Rosie, I know I have pushed you towards Lord Albury rather, but you must be aware... and if you are not, let me state it clearly now, so there is no mistake... I would not for the world have you contract a marriage purely to please your father and me. It must be your own choice, freely made. If you have any doubts at all—”

“But I do not,” Rosie said quietly. “Dear, dear Mama, you worry too much! I am not some green girl, too young to know her own mind. I am four and twenty, and I have never been more sure of anything than this. It is true that London was... overwhelming. I greatly disliked many of the men who pretended to pursue me. They saw me as an object to be acquired, or as a fortune to bolster their finances, or they crowded round me simply because I was fashionable. It was horrid! But Bath... Bath changed everything. Or it changed me, perhaps. Everything became clear to me. And I came to know Redmond better, I saw that he was a good man and not like the others. I am not in love with him, but I very much want to marry him.”

Mama nodded thoughtfully. “In a match like this, where the man holds great rank, it is as well to be clear-eyed about the business and not befuddled by love. Marry him first, on your own terms, and your affection will grow just as his has. He sees you now as more than merely the fortune who can restore Chaseley Court to its former glory. But you like him well enough to marry him?”

“Believe me when I say that there is no reluctance in me regarding Redmond. Indeed, I am in terror that I have gone too far and driven him away!”

“He will return, I am sure of it,” Mama said.

“I hope you are right,” Rosie said. “Otherwise, this may be a mistake I will regret for the rest of my life. Have I set your mind at rest?”

“Oh, yes, so let us talk of another matter. What say you of this business of Bella and Sir Con Pluckrose?”

“You know of that, do you? I am glad. Angie and I were in two minds whether to tell you of it. Angie was reluctant to betray a confidence, but Bella is so young, and if he is to stay here at Christmas—”

“Precisely. Miss Crabtree told me of it, on those grounds alone. If he is to be under the same roof as Bella, then her parents must be aware of what is going on. But do you think it is a serious affair? Can they possibly know their own minds at fifteen and eighteen?”

Rosie frowned. “I do think it is possible for a person to fall in love at a young age and not waver as the years pass by, yes,” she said slowly. “And if it is the same for both of them, and they remain steadfast, then there is no reason they should not contract a very happy marriage. But to make promises... to bind oneself to another person before one is mature enough to understand oneself, let alone other people... that is a different matter. One cannot know how one might change — not in essence, perhaps, but in how one views the world. A man who appears all that is desirable at fifteen might seem... very different at eighteen or twenty-one or twenty-four. A man who speaks of marriage to a girl of fifteen...”

She tailed off, but Mama said briskly, “He might change his mind, you mean?”

“Or forget about it altogether,” Rosie said quietly. “And then she would be well advised not to sit about and wait for him to remember her, but to get on with her life.”

“Quite so,” Mama said. “Your father will have a word with Sir Con, and I shall talk to Bella.”

“You will not try to turn her against him?” Rosie said in some alarm. “That never answers.”

“I hope I have more subtlety than that,” Mama said, smiling secretively. “Besides, he is very eligible. I shall say, of course, that we would be very happy to entertain Sir Con’s suit when he is of age, and in the meantime he is welcome to visit us two or three times a year. If he fails to come, then she will draw her own conclusions from that. And I shall watch them both very,

very carefully, you may be sure.”

6: A House In The Country

The sun shone on the day when Miss Violetta Crabtree, governess of Chadwell Park, married Mr Thomas Leadbetter, parson of the parish of St Agnes. The church of St Hilary's was as full as it could hold, for Mr Leadbetter had been curate there for a great many years before attaining his present living, and he had numerous well-wishers in the parish. The Fletchers were all in attendance, and joined the multitude squeezing into the rectory for the wedding breakfast. They also provided the carriage that conveyed the newly married couple away to their home at Froxfield Green.

Slowly, in a long, straggling line, they walked back up the tree-lined drive to Chadwell Park, chattering animatedly about the wedding, the congregation and the interesting question of when there might be a young Leadbetter to liven the St Agnes parsonage with his wailings.

Keeble greeted them with barely suppressed excitement. "Lord Albury is here... with *drawings*."

"Drawings, Keeble?" Pa said, amused. "What sort of drawings?"

"Houses, sir," Keeble said triumphantly. "I took the liberty of putting the cover on the billiard table in the library so that his lordship might have adequate space to spread out the drawings, which are rather large."

The men went straight off to the library, but Mama, despite the excitement glittering in her eyes, insisted on a decorous removal of bonnets and pelisses and gloves, and an adjustment to her cap before she would permit the ladies to follow him.

Redmond was excited, too, more so than Rosie had ever seen him before. He bobbed about the billiard table where three large documents were unfurled, pointing out one thing, then darting away to show off something else, and then glancing swiftly at her, to gauge her reaction.

"This is Hartswood Park — three hundred acres and some good shooting, the attorney says. But Galston Lodge is so convenient — right in the village, and only a mile... no, a mile and a half from town. Pollicott Place is the prettiest, I think, although it is the smallest... only five rooms on each floor, but three storeys, and charming gardens, I am told. But we could only

lease it by the year, whereas at Galston we would have a five year lease and Hartswood we could buy outright.”

Rosie looked at each of them, but she had no preference. It was not size or leases or convenience that mattered to her, it was the principle of having her own house. So she walked slowly round the table, pretending to examine each carefully, but saying nothing. As she had hoped, it was Pa who brought his practical eye to bear on the problem.

“You’ll not want to commit to a five year lease, not without knowing more about the place,” he said. “Suppose the cellars flood every time there’s heavy rain? Or the walls are so damp that the paper peels off and needs to be rehung every year? You’d be properly taken in. As for this one...” He stabbed a finger on Hartswood Park. “...do you want to buy outright? There are times when that makes sense, and I did it myself with this place, because I wanted us to be properly settled here. It’s different in your case. You’ve got lots of houses coming your way already. No need for another, I’d have thought. Aye, and it’s a big hole in Rosie’s dowry, too. Unless your father’s going to pay for it.”

Redmond’s face fell a little, but he said defiantly, “No, I shall bear the cost, but if Rosie wants that one—”

“I am happy to take Pa’s advice,” Rosie said quickly.

“Then so am I,” Redmond said. “Which one would you recommend, sir?”

“This one, if the rent is reasonable,” Pa said, tapping a forefinger on the sketch of Pollicott Place. “It’s plenty big enough for a couple just starting out in life together.”

“It is very pretty, too,” Rosie said, feeling it was safe to express an opinion.

“Do you like it?” Redmond’s face lit up in a warm smile. “I am glad — I like it, too. But there is only one small difficulty, for it is but twenty-nine miles by road from Chaseley, not the thirty you stipulated. Could you bear it, do you think?”

His teasing smile warmed her heart. Finally, a jest from him to lighten

his habitual earnestness.

“That’s not a difficulty, Albury,” Pa said. “Look, all you need to do is to lengthen the carriage drive a little. See how it goes directly to the front door? If you simply realign it so that it winds right round the perimeter of the grounds first, why, you would add at least a mile, I dare say.”

“The very solution,” Redmond said, laughing. “Well, Rosie? Are your concerns answered? Will it do?”

Blushing a little, she nodded. “Thank you, Redmond,” she whispered.

Sweeping her hand to his lips, he said in ringing tones, “Then, Rosie Fletcher, will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me and live with me at Pollicott Place?”

Looking shyly up at him, she said, “I will.”

There was cheering and clapping, and above the hubbub, Pa’s voice crying, “Champagne! We must have champagne!”

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*‘To Miss Jupp, St Peter’s Road, Sagborough, West Riding. My dearest and very best friend, it is done. Everything is agreed and I am to marry Redmond in the spring. We are to live near Saffron Walden, at a house called Pollicott Place, and the lease is already signed. In the end he stopped trying to persuade his parents of anything, and simply went ahead with it. He had to take Pa with him to sign things, since Redmond has no money of his own before we marry. It is not a large house, but it will suit us very well. Somehow, with the signing of leases and discussion of furnishings and water pipes, because one cannot discuss houses with Pa without talk of water pipes, it makes everything very real. For all these months I have thought of marriage in a vague and distant sort of way, even knowing the man who would be my husband, but all of a sudden it has become completely real and very, very soon. His family are to come here at Christmas, including his eccentric aunt from Cumberland, who wishes to approve the match of the heir, seemingly, and it will become official on Christmas Eve. There is to be a grand dinner, for our new French man-cook will be here by then, and then an evening party for all our neighbours who wish to venture out, with a Big Announcement and champagne and a great many smiles. And then there will*

*be wedding clothes and a new carriage and servants to hire, including my own lady's maid, and everything that is serious. I feel as if I have been a child for far too long and now at last I am grown up and doing as I should have done long since. I suppose I always expected that when I married, it would be in a great glow of delirious love and would not feel serious at all, but I do not love Redmond. I like him very well, I respect and esteem him, and I have not a shred of a doubt about what I am doing, which will give so much happiness to so many, but I am not in love with him. Now, if I were the heroine in one of those romantic novels from the circulating library, no author would end the book in such a prosaic way. Instead, there would be a dashing hero who would arrive in the nick of time to rescue me, and there would be passionate love and cherry blossom and a Romany man playing a violin, no doubt. But since this is real life, no one is coming to rescue me, and I shall marry Redmond at Easter, so at least there will be cherry blossom. We shall live at Pollicott Place and doubtless be excessively comfortable. It will be strange to be a Viscountess and be presented at court, but Redmond will steer me through it, and when all is said and done, even when my name is changed, I shall still be your very devoted and affectionate friend, Rosie.'*

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Michael settled uneasily into a new routine, and seldom a day went by when he did not see Amelia. Some days he called upon her, and some days she called upon him, and then there were dinners and other evening engagements. Their neighbours quickly learnt that if Michael was to be invited, then Amelia must be, too.

As always, he became tongue-tied in her presence, but happily she was a chatty person, able to dredge up some inconsequential remark, so that conversation never lapsed and he could pretend that he took his full share in it. In that way, she would be a good wife for him, he supposed, for she never made him feel inadequate.

She took a great interest in the Manor, which she had never visited before.

"This is very different from Chadwell Park," she said one day, when Michael had been cajoled by his mother and Lady Frederica into showing Amelia the oldest parts of the house. "Such a historic building! I had no idea

it even existed, yet it has always been in your family, I believe. Why did I not see it when I was here before?”

Before... before the disaster. Michael took a deep breath. “We were living at Chadwell Park.”

“Was the Manor empty then?”

“No... not empty, no. Letitia and her husband lived here, with their children. When we... um, sold the Park, we all moved in here. Come into the library and see our greatest treasure — the battle flag from Agincourt.”

“Agincourt? That was one that we won, was it not?” she said, turning her blue eyes on him.

He chuckled. “England’s most famous victory on land, some would say. *‘For he to-day that sheds his blood with me, Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile, This day shall gentle his condition: And gentlemen in England now a-bed Shall think themselves accursed they were not here, And hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day.’* A day of heroes, Miss Greaves. Of course, it helps that William Shakespeare wrote such stirring words about it.”

“Oh, Shakespeare,” she said vaguely. “And does this door lead back to the great hall? It does! You see, I am beginning to know my way about. Goodness, look at those wooden beams, just like a cathedral.” She tilted back at a precarious angle to view the high, arched ceiling. “How old is the Manor?”

“This part of it is said to be fourteenth century,” Michael said, happy to be on the less heroic but more comfortable ground of the Manor’s history. “The kitchen wing and library are fifteenth, then the parlour wing is sixteenth. The new wing is late seventeenth.”

She chuckled. “The new wing is... oh, well over a hundred years old, or thereabouts. Whereas the whole of Hadlow is newer than that. 1701, the first stone was laid for the Earl of Ansty, after the original house burnt to the ground, and it came into the Greaves family as a dowry in 1743. That was when the orangery was added on, and the tower at the east gate. You will have heard the story of how we entertained the Queen, I presume? That was a great moment in Hadlow’s history. Lord Pinner came back from Brussels

with his bride, and..."

Michael had indeed heard the story before, more than once, but he was quite happy to hear it again if it relieved him of the necessity of speaking beyond an occasional "Indeed?" or "Is that so?" Anything to encourage her to talk on, and if Hadlow Hall was what she wanted to talk about, then so be it.

Whenever the weather was fit they rode together, and a prolonged mild spell permitted an outing almost every day. Amelia was an accomplished rider, for it was one of the few forms of exercise which freed her from the watchful eyes of her guardians in Gloucestershire and her chaperon in Hertfordshire. At home, she had ridden almost every day with only her groom for company, although confined to the bounds of her own estate. Hadlow Hall boasted an extensive park, but it was so familiar that she was happy to explore the fresh delights of Hertfordshire.

Michael was pleased to indulge her love of riding, for it made conversation less difficult. He had never had that easy way of talking that many men have, but when they rode together she exclaimed in delight at every new vista and sometimes asked questions he could readily answer, so little effort was required on his part. She liked to press her horse hard, too, and although her guardians would not permit her to jump, she loved to gallop or canter where the terrain allowed, and then Michael had nothing more arduous to do except to follow her as best he could, and hope that the groom following for propriety was not left entirely behind.

On one of their riding outings of two years ago, her horse had shed a shoe and they had been obliged to seek help from a village smith while they waited at the tiny inn next door. Amelia had been enchanted with her rustic surroundings, having never had an opportunity to visit such places before. She had sat contentedly on a bench overlooking the village green, sipping delicately at a glass of poor quality sherry, smiling at the cottage wives as they passed by and laughing at the antics of the ducks and geese gathered beside the pond. Ever since then, she had expected their outings to include a rest at some out of the way hostelry.

She was quick to resume the scheme once more, and was thrilled when many of the innkeepers and pot boys remembered her from previous visits. One such inn was the Rising Sun at Bellingham Green. It was too cold to sit

outside, but Amelia was happy to occupy a corner of the common room, enjoying the warmth and also, Michael suspected, the admiration of the local labouring men, who were unused to pretty young women in expensive riding habits sharing their inn. Nor did Amelia show any sign of wanting to keep them at an appropriate distance, being as happy to chat to the ogling men with their tankards of ale as with her own class of people.

Michael was content to let her do as she pleased. This, he supposed, was how it would be when they were married, if it ever came to that. She would lead him by the nose, and he would go along with it for the sake of a peaceful life, a life that demanded nothing of him. He would marry her, he decided, and go to Hadlow Hall and live in splendour there as the master of a fine house. There were no close neighbours and little society beyond Amelia herself and her elderly guardians... the parson and his sister, he recalled, a retired attorney, a reclusive widow. Still, it would suit him very well, and he need never again have to compare himself unfavourably with James or wonder if he would ever match his father's exacting standards. He would finally have achieved something.

They emerged from the Rising Sun, therefore, both contented with the day, and remounted for the ride home. They had barely turned out of the inn yard when two more horses trotted smartly into the village, and Michael heard himself being hailed.

“Mr Plummer! It is Mr Plummer, is it not? Do you remember me?”

Michael did not, in fact, immediately recognise the face, for it was not a particularly memorable one, but it was not hard to deduce a name, given the quality of the man's horse and clothes, and the fact that the only house of consequence in the village was the home of Lady Bellingham, aunt to Viscount Albury.

Michael nodded politely to him.

“Have you met my younger brother?” the viscount said, as the other man inclined his head to Michael. “No? Anthony is a Fellow at Cambridge. Anthony, this is Mr Michael Plummer, heir to Sir Owen Plummer of Chadwell Manor.”

“How do you do, sir?” Michael said.

“Delighted to meet you,” Landers said, his gaze flitting to Amelia and back. “We are on our way to call upon the Fletchers. Perhaps if you are homeward bound, we may ride together? If we do not intrude upon you and your fair companion, that is. We should not wish to be *de trop*.”

His eyes rested on Amelia, and she simpered and lowered her eyes under his scrutiny.

“Amelia?” Michael said hesitantly. “Should you like...? Would that be agreeable...?”

“Oh yes, indeed,” she said, raising her blue eyes and looking long and hard at Landers. “Company would be most agreeable, since these gentlemen are friends of yours. Do introduce me.”

His heart sank. He could quite see the attraction, for Landers was everything that Michael was not — handsome, self-assured and effortlessly charming. How Michael wished he had just a little of that charm! But he was the way he was, and there was no changing his essential nature.

“Amelia, may I present to you Viscount Albury, heir to the Earl of Faulkbourne of Chaseley Court in Huntingdonshire, and his brother, Mr Anthony Landers. Gentlemen, this is Miss Greaves of Hadlow Hall in Gloucestershire, who is presently visiting her cousin, Lady Frederica Kelshaw.”

Lord Albury smiled and raised his hat, but Landers murmured, “Delighted, Miss Greaves. Quite delighted. But how is it we have never met in town? We have not, I am certain, for I should not have forgotten.”

“I have never been to London, sir. I live very secluded.”

“Secluded! For shame, to deprive society of so bright a flower. But perhaps you have plans to make your debut there, and I may have reason to visit the Metropolis more often myself. I confess, I have little enough reason at present.”

“I have no plans to visit London, for my guardians think me unsuited to the rigours of such a busy place, but I should love it of all things. The shops, the theatres, the sights to be seen there! I should like more than anything to eat an ice at Gunter’s,” she added wistfully.

“Then I hope your guardians will soon relent and allow you as many ices as your heart desires,” he said gallantly.

She, for her part, simpered again, but her gaze was now turned towards Lord Albury, and as they rode on, she somehow contrived to position her horse beside his. As Michael followed with Landers, he heard Amelia’s happy chatter drifting back, and the viscount’s low murmur in response from time to time.

“Where have you been hiding that little beauty?” Lander said in a low voice. “No, I can guess — secluded in Gloucestershire. Poor child! How old is she, by the by?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Then she is of age,” he said in surprise. “Past the age of needing guardians, anyway. Are they tartars? They sound it.”

“No, merely very careful with her. She was a delicate child, and they are elderly and fret over her rather. They are concerned that she may be drawn in by a fortune hunter.”

“Oh, she has a fortune, does she?”

“She is an orphan with no brothers or sisters,” Michael said. “Hadlow Hall is hers, one of the finest estates in Gloucestershire, together with eighty thousand pounds.”

Landers whistled, long and low, but he was no fool. “And you have an interest there, perhaps?”

Michael hesitated. He knew perfectly well that Landers was a far more suitable husband for Amelia. He was a dashing young man, the scion of a noble family who could introduce her to a level of society that was beyond Michael’s reach. If Michael had been in love with Amelia, his answer would have been different, but he had no inclination to jealously guard her from other men. So he chose to answer honestly.

“Two years ago last summer, when we were up to our ears in debt, I almost married her. That eighty thousand pounds was a powerful inducement. But it came to nothing, and now... now we no longer have the same urgent need for money. We sold Chadwell Park to the Fletchers and all Amelia’s

fortune cannot get it back again. I like Amelia well enough, but...”

“Ah,” was all Landers said, but there was a little smile on his face. He urged his horse forward to ride just behind his brother, and in the business of crossing the ford just a little way further on, he contrived to manoeuvre himself alongside Amelia, and they rode on together, leaving Albury and Michael behind.

Michael found that he minded not at all.

7: Dinner At Chadwell Park

The Kelshaws held the first dinner for Amelia, at Kelshaw House. The Plummers reciprocated with a dinner at Chadwell Manor, trumping the Kelshaws by virtue of the capacious great hall, which accommodated half the parish without crowding. Finally, the Fletchers held a dinner at Chadwell Park, which trumped both the others, partly because of the arrival in a blaze of French glory of their new man-cook, lading the table with mouthwatering delicacies, but partly because Mrs Fletcher contrived to have Lord Albury and his brother staying. Naturally, the presence of a viscount and future earl elevated the evening far above the ordinary. Even Letitia's husband, Lord Charles Heaman and the younger son of a marquess, ranked lower than Lord Albury.

James and Julia had offered to take Michael up in their carriage, to avoid crushing the rest of the Manor party by squeezing five persons into a carriage intended for four. The Manor carriage departed punctually to the minute, leaving Michael pacing restlessly at the entrance, watching the clock and worrying. For twenty minutes he paced, watched and worried until finally the sounds of a carriage could be heard on the drive.

James's head appeared through the carriage window even before the horses had stopped moving.

"So sorry!" he called out. "All Julia's fault — a last minute wardrobe disaster."

"Yes, entirely my fault," Julia said cheerfully, as Michael hastened aboard. "I must have grown considerably since I last wore that gown. I had to scramble about for something else to wear." She patted her well-rounded stomach.

Michael smiled affectionately at her. "Ah, well, allowance must be made for Master Plummer."

"You mean *Miss* Plummer," Julia said, laughing. James laughed, too. They were always laughing. It must be delightful, Michael thought, to be so happy that the joy overflowed into laughter the whole day long.

They were the last to arrive at Chadwell Park, the sounds of many

voices and bursts of laughter drifting from the saloon as they divested themselves of their outer garments in the hall. Michael felt the familiar anxiety twisting his insides. How foolish, for everyone within was known to him, yet large gatherings always rendered him twitchy and tongue-tied.

The doors to the saloon were thrown open, and Keeble announced them.

“Mr Michael Plummer, Mr and Mrs James Plummer.”

The room was full, a roiling sea dancing in front of Michael’s eyes. The men were dark columns, topped with frothy white cravats. The women were pale, jewels twinkling at their wrists and throats, a few dowagers in darker colours. They were all looking at him, watching him. For an instant he recognised no one, and found himself smiling indiscriminately around the room, scanning the faces for... for what, exactly? Or for whom? But *she* was not here. She would never again look up at him and smile as if—

James’s hand was on his elbow. “There is Mrs Fletcher. Make your bow, brother.”

A bow, a few words of greeting... repeat to Mr Fletcher. Everyone smiling, smiling. He looked round the assembled guests again, but hardly anyone was looking at him now. They turned back to their conversations, their attention shifting. It was easier to breathe. But where was...?

Amelia emerged from the throng, beaming happily at him, crossing the room with quick steps. “There you are, Michael! I was beginning to wonder if you would miss the soup.” She tucked her arm into his. “How happy I am that you have arrived at last.”

He was being claimed, he realised. Here in the midst of all their friends, she was laying claim to him, even though he had nothing at all to recommend him above that of other men. Bumbling, shy, ordinary Michael Plummer was who she wanted, seemingly. Even the dashing son of an earl could not distract her for long.

Could it be... was it possible... that she truly *loved* him? What an astonishing thought.

Michael smiled, and patted her hand as it rested on his sleeve. “And I am pleased to be here. May I take you in to dinner, Amelia?”

And in the midst of her happy acceptance, he knew that he was going to marry her.

The meal passed off very pleasantly. Michael hardly knew what he ate or drank, for he was in such a glow of decisive virtue that nothing so worldly as food could affect him. He had decided! For once in his life, he was going to make his father proud of him by doing what was expected of an eldest son. From time to time, when Amelia's chatter died away as she concentrated on her appetite, Michael caught his father's eye across the table and thought he detected an approving gleam there.

When the ladies withdrew and the gentlemen began to rearrange themselves, Michael stayed in his place and after a moment the company split into two groups. The older men collected around Harry Fletcher, and the younger gathered round Michael. Lord Charles hesitated momentarily, before the political talk of the older men drew him into their orbit.

Anthony Landers drew his chair nearer to Michael and said, "I am very much at outs with you, Plummer. I had thought to have a shot at that little Gloucestershire peach, but she has her sights set on you."

"I cannot think why!" Michael blurted. "You are everything that any young lady would look for in a husband."

"You are very kind to say so, but we younger sons must cut our coats according to our cloth, sadly," Landers said. "I have neither title nor great fortune to lay at the lady's feet."

"Miss Greaves would not care about that," Michael said, rather offended on her behalf.

"Perhaps not, for I am sure she is not at all a person to be swayed by material considerations, but her guardians will certainly take them into account," Landers said. "With a fortune like hers, they must be prudent and keep her well away from impoverished younger sons without even a sensible career."

"You are not impoverished, brother," Lord Albury said. "You have a pair of estates in Cumberland, and if you want a career, you might take Holy Orders next year. Father has several livings in his gift."

“Those estates will not be mine while Aunt Hannah lives, and she seems set to outlast us all,” Landers said. “As for the livings, none are available, nor likely to be for many years.”

“Then one could be found elsewhere,” Albury said. “Miss Greaves may not wish to marry a younger son, but there are plenty of women who would be more than happy to take you, if you have marriage in your mind. Spend a full season in town, and see if we cannot find just the wife to suit you.”

“Very well, but I warn you, I shall not take a penny less than a hundred thousand pounds from the lady’s father, for even if I am not the first born, I must outshine you in every other way. And she shall be even more beautiful than your Miss Fletcher.”

“Impossible!” Albury cried, and after that the conversation rapidly descended into brotherly rivalry and jesting, encouraged by Will Fletcher and James, and aided by the liberal provision of an excellent port.

Michael took no part in these discussions, for his mind was fully exercised by Landers’ thought that Amelia’s guardians had a hand in her preference for Michael. ‘*They must be prudent and keep her well away from impoverished younger sons,*’ he had said. Was that why she had returned to Hertfordshire, to make another attempt to secure a future baronet? She would be Lady Plummer, in time, but was she so shallow that that would be a consideration? He could not believe it of her, and yet... it was possible.

He recalled their ride from Bellingham Green, when she had seemed to be drawn towards Landers, then, when she had heard the names, she attached herself to Albury’s side. Naturally she would soon learn that he was already betrothed, and then... what did she do? She eschewed the young son and returned to Michael, and the prospect of becoming Lady Plummer.

Could he marry her, suspecting her of such cold-blooded ambition? The very thought gave him a bitter taste in his mouth, yet he must marry eventually. He could not go on waiting and hoping for a miracle. *She* was gone for ever, and he might as well marry Amelia and be done with it. Everyone would be happy, then.

Except Michael himself. The great happiness he still yearned for would never be his. There was no joy to be expected from the future, only a dreary

existence. No, he could not marry Amelia while his heart still lay elsewhere.

He took this dispiriting thought with him when he re-joined the ladies. The withdrawing room was almost empty, most of the ladies being in the music room next door where the sweet voice of Mrs Will Fletcher rose in song, and some were in the saloon at the card tables. Amelia sat alone in a corner, leafing through a journal of some sort. She looked up, saw him and her face lit up.

Michael felt a burst of pride. This lovely creature looked fondly on *him*, dull, undistinguished Michael Plummer. Of all the men in the world, men of greater wealth and talent, men of consequence, she had chosen him.

Yes, he would marry her, and if what she wanted was to be Lady Plummer, well, there was no harm in that. He was decided... definitely... he would do it. Tomorrow, perhaps, he would propose, when he had had some time to put his thoughts in order. Or the day after... sometime soon, anyway. Definitely. His mind was quite made up... although...

It was so difficult to know what to do.

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Margarita had supposed, if she had thought about it at all, that a winter visit to Chaseley Court would be a monstrous dull affair, the only liveliness being the weekly invitation to dine offered to the local clergyman. Instead, to her delight, she found herself in the middle of a furious family feud, both Lord and Lady Faulkbourne enraged by the heir's behaviour and the various relatives standing in outraged alliance on one side or another, or else attempting to broker peace by offering useless suggestions.

Watching the fracas from her impartial position was infinitely amusing, but there was no fun at all in being the focus of so much anger. She had the utmost sympathy for the young man who had caused such drama. To have fallen out with both his parents at once was certainly an achievement of sorts, especially in one who was undistinguished in the general way, but so it was. Lady Faulkbourne was irate that the marriage to an unworthy girl was, after all, to take place. Lord Faulkbourne was irate because his meek and biddable son had dared to go against him.

Yet Lord Albury himself was unconcerned when he returned from his

successful suit. He drifted through the days in a haze of delirious joy, as a newly betrothed man should do. None of the disruption around him, from whispered discussions through to furious yelling, affected him by one particle. He was in love and was betrothed to the object of his desire, and all was well with his world. Margarita could only envy the bubble of happiness which protected him.

Even at Chaseley Court, however, anger could not be sustained for long. Lord Faulkbourne remembered that he would now be fifty thousand pounds better off, and Lady Faulkbourne remembered that they were now required to spend Christmas in Hertfordshire with the bride's family, and was thrown into a whirlwind of planning, for it was necessary to demonstrate the superiority of the Landers over these upstart mercers.

Margarita had nothing to do but pack the few possessions she and her employer had brought from Cumberland, but she was called away from this task one morning to attend Lord Faulkbourne in his study. He was alone, standing before the window gazing out at the wintry day, the sky heavy and grey.

"We shall have snow before long, I dare say," he muttered, half to himself, "and there we shall be, scampering about the countryside, quite oblivious. Foolish business!"

Margarita waited patiently. The butler had announced her, so there was nothing to do but wait for the great man to acknowledge her.

Eventually, with a grunt, he turned to face her. "Mrs Brookes. Sit, if you please. A glass of ratafia?"

She shuddered. "Thank you but no. If you have wine here, I'd be glad to have a little."

He grunted again, but poured her wine, and then a glass for himself. "I want to talk to you about my brother, Radcliffe."

Margarita's eyebrows shot up. "Radcliffe? My employers' husband? I never met him. He's been dead for six years, my lord, and I've only been with Mrs Landers for two."

"I am aware, but what has she told you about him?"

“Nothing at all. In fact, the only time I mentioned him, she told me roundly that his name was never to be spoken in her presence.”

“Hmpf. I suspected as much. And what did the other servants say of him?”

*Other* servants? Margarita tamped down her displeasure to be lumped in with the maids. “Again, nothing. I asked the housekeeper once, but she merely said, ‘*Good riddance,*’ so I never raised the subject again.”

“And the neighbours?”

“I’ve never seen anyone without Mrs Landers present, and naturally no one would raise a subject so distressing to her. But in truth she has few callers beyond the parson, nor does she pay calls herself. I know very few of the neighbours, except to pass the time of day with at church.”

“Hannah goes to church, then, does she?”

Margarita gave a wry smile. “No, not even for communion, but she allows me to attend. I wouldn’t have accepted the position otherwise.”

“That woman!”

He paced restlessly back and forth, while Margarita waited patiently for him to come to the point. That was her whole life in a nutshell, waiting on other people’s decisions. It was her lot in life, the lot of the impoverished female, to make no decisions of her own, but always to wait on those older and richer and of greater consequence than her.

Abruptly, he sat down again. “What do you know of Brierfield?”

She frowned. “Nothing except that it is a part of Mrs Landers’ holdings. I have never been there, and cannot even say where it is.”

“It is all of a piece,” he said with a sigh. “Brierfield, Mrs Brookes, was where my brother lived. It is near Penrith, in Westmorland, and he described it as paradise on earth. He loved it so well and wanted it so badly that he married Hannah Blackstock to get it, for she was an only child and both estates — Brierfield and Hodgehill — would come to her after her father’s death. He lived at Brierfield and she lived always at Hodgehill, and whether they even met after the wedding is more than I can say, for I never saw him again. She used to visit us occasionally, if I sent a carriage for her, but not

him. For ten years Radcliffe was happy at Brierfield, and I was happy, too, for his sake, and also because it was my money that paid for it and the estate was profitable. He gave me a good reckoning of it every year. But six years ago he died — an accident with a gun, they say, as if he had not been handling guns safely since he was a small boy. Still, however it came about he is dead, and now the estate is no longer producing even one quarter of the income and no one can tell me why. The bailiff says it is for Hannah to keep the accounts, but not a sensible word can I get out of her on the subject. She may do what she likes at Hodgehill, for that is hers until her death, but Brierfield is mine and I want an accounting of it. Detestable woman!”

He drained his glass and refilled it, glowering the while.

Margarita sipped her wine thoughtfully, and waited.

“I suppose you are wondering why I tell you this, eh?” he said.

“I am rather.”

“Ha! Well, you could help me if you have a mind to, young lady. There must be papers at Hodgehill relating to Brierfield — account books, rental receipts, that sort of thing.”

“You want me to go through my employer’s private papers?” Margarita said, her eyebrows lifting.

“Well now, it need not come to that. A few judicious questions to the bailiff, that sort of thing. Or perhaps if she leaves letters lying around, you could—”

Margarita rose smoothly to her feet. “I won’t spy for you, Lord Faulkbourne. If Mrs Landers won’t account for the state of affairs at Brierfield, then I suggest you send someone to investigate. A man of business or a lawyer, perhaps.”

“She would probably point a gun at their heads. No, discretion is what is needed, and that is where you could be extremely useful. Hannah must be sixty-five or six now, an old woman, rising late and taking naps during the day. Plenty of opportunity for you to do a little snooping, you see.”

“No, my lord.”

“Hmpf. Does she pay you well, Mrs Brookes? Does she even pay you at

all?”

Margarita shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably. “My salary is... appropriate for my position, although Mrs Landers is somewhat forgetful about paying.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “Forgetful! Ha! You mean you have not seen a penny piece from her, if I know anything about Hannah. A tighter fisted woman never breathed. Mrs Brookes, I shall pay you a hundred pounds in your hand this very day, and another hundred if you can uncover anything to the point on the question of Brierfield.”

A hundred pounds! *Two* hundred pounds! Oh, the temptation! How inconvenient — how *very* inconvenient it was to have principles.

“I regret that I must decline your very generous offer, my lord.”

“Hmpf. If you change your mind, let me know, eh?”

She bobbed a curtsy, then went to her room and wept for the two hundred pounds she might have had, and all for the very small price of looking through Mrs Landers’ papers. What a disagreeable thing it was to have a conscience. She pulled out her purse and counted her coins, the last remaining residue of her previous salary. Two pounds six and tenpence halfpenny, that was all. That was her entire wealth in the world, apart from her clothes, two necklaces her father had given her which she couldn’t bear to part with and her wedding ring. It wasn’t much for a woman of six and twenty.

But there was no point in repining, so she dried her eyes and went to finish packing for her employer, and preparing for the journey to Hertfordshire to meet Lord Albury’s bride.

*Hertfordshire...*

Yet surely she may enter *his* county with impunity? It was a large county, thirty-five miles by twenty-five, according to the map makers, and he was no longer living there, so there was nothing to concern her. She would go to Hertfordshire and spend Christmas at the home of the bride’s family, and then she would return to Cumberland with her employer and all would be as it was before, without these unsettling reminders.

*Hertfordshire...*

She shivered.

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A good night's sleep restored Margarita to her usual equanimity, a serene pool of calm in the midst of a turbulent sea. For the Landers family was travelling *en masse* to Hertfordshire, and seldom had such an event occurred. There were to be four elegant coaches containing the family. Mrs Landers had no carriage of her own, but had inveigled herself and Margarita places with Lord and Lady Faulkbourne. Behind them were two larger equipages bearing the vast array of luggage together with the many valets and lady's maids. Then there were grooms to convey the riding and hunting horses the party considered necessary to impress the mercer and his family suitably. Rarely had such a procession been seen on the road from Huntingdon to Hertfordshire.

Margarita was breakfasted, packed and ready in good time, finding herself a corner of the Stone Hall, where the monstrous array of luggage was assembling, to watch and wait. Normally she would be required to assist Mrs Landers to dress, for that lady would not put herself to the expense of a lady's maid when her companion could be pressed into service, but there were maids aplenty at Chaseley Court, and all of them more capable than Margarita, according to her employer.

The footmen rushed about, disposing of the luggage. Gradually the piles were reduced and then removed altogether. The valets and lady's maids began to appear, their masters and mistresses now readied for the journey. And finally the family members began to drift into the Stone Hall, assembling into small chattering clusters. Mrs Landers appeared, not as cross as usual, for she was to travel in excessive comfort and at no cost to herself.

"I hope you have arranged for a hot brick for my feet, Margaret," she said.

"The housekeeper assures me there will be hot bricks for everyone," Margarita said. "There are rugs in every carriage, and I've brought a spare one, in case of draughts."

"And my syrup? I must have my syrup to hand."

“Two bottles, Mrs Landers, safely wrapped.”

“Hmpf.”

Finally, Lord and Lady Faulkbourne arrived, and the party began to move towards the doors.

“Papa?” cried one of his daughters. “How long will it take to reach Chadwell Park?”

Chadwell Park? No!

The room spun around Margarita. She took a ragged breath, her heart thundering in her ears. No! It could not be!

Distantly she heard a thin wailing cry, and realised that it was her own. Why did everything sound so far away? She was going to faint...

8: Meetings

Clear inside her head, Margarita heard the words of her nurse from long ago. *‘Now then, Miss Margie, none of that nonsense from a big girl like you. Sit down and put your head between your knees, and it will all pass off.’*

Staggering to the nearest seat, Margarita sat, lowered her head and breathed deeply.

Concerned faces appeared, kneeling in front of her.

“Goodness, she is pale! Lizzie, your smelling salts.” That was Lady Caroline Yardley.

“William, some brandy for the lady, at once.” Lord Albury’s voice, calm, assured.

The smelling salts were waved under her nose, the acrid fumes causing her head to jolt upright.

“There now, she is looking better already.” Lady Caroline’s voice was soft and reassuring. “No, no, do not try to move, Mrs Brookes. Sit quietly for a while, and we shall send for a physician.”

“Pooh! There is nothing the matter with her.” That was Mrs Landers’ cross voice. “Such a fuss over nothing! Pull yourself together, Margaret.”

“Indeed you are wrong, she is most unwell,” Lady Caroline said.

“No, no, I’ll be better very soon,” Margarita said. “A momentary weakness... it will pass... it’s already passing, but I can’t go with you. So sorry... so very sorry.”

“Of course not,” Lady Caroline said. “You must stay here until the physician has seen you.”

“Here, drink this, ma’am,” Lord Albury said, holding out a glass to her. “It will do you a world of good.”

Obediently she sipped, and felt the brandy burn its way down, but it had its effect, and she began to feel more like herself.

“What a great fuss!” Mrs Landers said. “Of course she must come. I cannot travel without her, and she will have nothing to do but sit in the

carriage all day. Hardly an arduous business.”

Margarita bowed her head. “Whatever you wish, ma’am.”

Lady Caroline and her brother exchanged glances.

“Perhaps if I send a rider ahead with a message to Chadwell Park,” Lord Albury said. “That way they will be ready for you, and will have a physician on hand to attend you as soon as you arrive. Mrs Fletcher is a kindly soul, and she will see to it.”

Fletcher! Of course, it was the *Fletchers* with whom they would stay. Relief washed through Margarita as swiftly as a spring flood, leaving her weak with gratitude. What a muddle she was in, to be upset by such a trivial matter. She’d confused the name, that was all. *He* must have lived at some other Park... or if it was Chadwell, then he was there no longer. Anyway, he was long married, wasn’t he? He lived in Gloucestershire now, a hundred miles or more from Hertfordshire.

How foolish she was! So she smiled a little, and assured them that she was indeed well enough to travel with the party.

“But you had better not ride with Mama and Papa and Mrs Landers,” Lady Yardley said. “Come with Sir Hannibal and me instead, for there will only be three of us and you will not be at all crowded. We may stop at any time if you feel unwell, you know.”

“But what of Mrs Landers?” Margarita whispered. “She’ll expect me to be in attendance on her.”

“I shall myself undertake to ensure that Aunt Hannah has everything she requires for her comfort,” Lord Albury said. “I shall ride with her in Mother’s carriage.”

“Her syrup... she’ll need her syrup,” Margarita said.

“Then give it to me,” he said with a smile. “I am happy to play nursemaid for the day.”

“You’re very good, my lord,” Margarita said, for although it was entirely wrong that a viscount should wait upon an irascible old woman, she had not the energy to object.

Somehow she was got into Sir Hannibal and Lady Caroline's well-appointed carriage, a hot brick under her feet, and a thick rug around her knees. Lady Caroline would have given up her own fur-lined muff, but Margarita would not hear of it and kept her hands warm by pulling the rug almost to her shoulders. And in this way, travelling at the sedate pace dictated by Lady Faulkbourne, the procession made its stately way through Huntingdonshire, across a corner of Cambridgeshire and thus into Hertfordshire.

Margarita had plenty of time to consider what might greet her at Chadwell Park. At least *he* would not be there...

No, she would name him. Michael. Michael Plummer, and he wouldn't be there because he'd been married these past two years. Nor would his immediate family be there, for seemingly they'd gone from Chadwell Park, their home given up to these Fletchers. Although... why had they sold the house after all? Michael's marriage was to secure the family against that possibility, after all. Still, it hardly mattered. The Plummers might have left, but there would be many neighbours who might remember the story.

But she had two things in her favour. She herself had never been to Chadwell Park, instead staying in Gloucestershire to look after Hadlow and the elderly Ramsdens when Amelia was courting Michael. Margarita had only met the Plummers when they came to Gloucestershire when the betrothal was imminent. There would be no one in Hertfordshire, therefore, who might recognise her. Nor would anyone know her by name. She thanked God yet again for the amenable Nick Brookes, who had generously given her the protection of his name. Even Mrs Landers had her uses there, calling her 'Margaret' instead of Margarita. Such a common name, and who would guess that Margaret Brookes was the same person as Margarita Aitken?

So very likely she was safe, and her time at Chadwell Park would pass off as placidly as at Chaseley Court. She would sit quietly in a corner somewhere, keeping out of everyone's way, toast the good health and future happiness of the betrothed couple and enjoy a few days of pampered living before braving the mail coach back to Carlisle.

And if she should be found out... she would hold her head high and recall that none of it had been her doing. She had never, ever encouraged

Michael, or thought of him as anything other than the future husband of her friend. And in the end, she had done everything in her power to ensure that they married. What more could she have done? Running away had cost her dearly, but she had come through it safely and it had all been worth it, for Michael and Amelia.

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An express rider brought the black-edged letter to Lord Charles. His brother the marquess had expired from his apoplexy.

“The light carriage will be at your disposal whenever you wish to leave,” Sir Owen said gently. “My poor boy, how you must feel it. Pray accept my deepest condolences. He was far too young to be taken from the world. Do you wish to leave today?”

“Leave? Why should I leave?”

“You will naturally wish to attend the funeral,” Sir Owen said, startled. “Support your family in their grief and so on.”

“Nothing has changed,” Lord Charles said with dignity. “Barrowford was a small-minded and ill-tempered man, and although I hope I always respected the high rank he held, I despised the man himself. I shall not pay him the compliment of attending his funeral.”

“But your mother... your sister-in-law... your grieving nephews and nieces...”

“I shall not go.” Nothing would shift him from this position, and although Letitia donned black in acknowledgement, she supported her husband’s decision.

Michael cared nothing for the deceased Marquess of Barrowford, being heartily sick of Lord Charles talking loftily of ‘*m’brother the marquess*’ when he would not even pass the time of day with him if they met in town. A slight nod was all the notice the two took of each other. And now that he was dead, it would be ‘*m’nephew the marquess*’, he supposed.

Besides, Michael’s thoughts were wholly occupied now with Amelia, with whom he spent almost every evening. When neither of them were engaged elsewhere, he was always invited to dine at Kelshaw House, usually

only with the family, and everyone understood the significance of that. He could feel himself being towed, gently but irrevocably, towards a firm betrothal. He was in exactly the same position as before, where he had not actually made the offer, but everyone understood that it was only a matter of time.

This time, he supposed it would happen. This time, there would be no beguiling green eyes to distract him, no generous mouth smiling at him, teasing him, making him laugh. Amelia's blue eyes and sweet cupid's bow lips were enticing too, but nothing about her pierced him to his very soul.

Amelia liked to play backgammon after dinner, although she played so badly that he suspected it was no more than a ploy to get him to herself. Such thoughts always brought a burst of pride — she was unwilling to share him even at the whist table. At such moments he was quite sure of what he was doing. The next time he found himself alone with her, he would propose.

Yet sometimes her words gave him pause. On one occasion, he tentatively asked about her time staying with her aunt in Bristol.

“Did you have a gay time? Bristol is very lively, I imagine. These port cities always are.”

“Oh, there were a multitude of invitations, to be sure. We were never at home two evenings together, I swear, but I did not enjoy it very much.”

“No? And yet you wish to go to London, which is even more lively.”

“Oh, but London is sophisticated. The gentlemen there are the highest in the land, with the best manners, so they say. Is it not so? You have been in town so much, and it shows. You have... polish.”

“Town bronze, they call it,” Michael said, rather flattered but too honest to accept such a compliment. “However, you mistake the matter very much if you apply such an epithet to me. Mr Will Fletcher... now there is a man with true polish.”

“A mercer's son? He is nothing compared to you, and as for the men of Bristol—! I never saw so many rough-mannered men in my life. Rich, I grant you, with their ships and trading companies, but very uncouth. I could not bear to be amongst them. And as for Hereford — so many sober men in

black. I cannot abide clerics, Michael. A country gentleman, that is my ideal. A man who knows his own worth, with no need to put himself forward or dress like a peacock.”

Mischievously, and because he was curious, he said, “What about Mr Anthony Landers? He has excellent manners, and just that polish of which you speak.”

She made a little moue. “A second son? No, indeed.”

“He is not penniless, or dependent on a career. I understand there are some estates in the north to come to him, in time.”

“What care I for estates in the north when I have Hadlow!” she cried. “Mr Landers has nothing to tempt me. Shall we play again? We may squeeze in another game before the supper tray.”

Michael was left with the uneasy impression that if neither Mr Landers’ agreeable nature, nor his noble family or inheritance tempted Amelia, she must, after all, be interested in a title. It was a dispiriting thought.

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Margarita gazed on Chadwell Park with wonder. It was not Hadlow, true enough, but it was a fine, elegant building in the classical style, and she had high hopes of it. A bath, she devoutly hoped, for Chaseley Court had failed her utterly in that regard.

She followed the others up the three short flights of steps to the front door and into a wide, tiled hall, where a great many of the Fletcher family, she supposed, had gathered to receive them, lines of servants awaited instruction, and there was a great milling about. She found a quiet spot near to Mrs Landers, in case she should be needed, and waited patiently while the more distinguished visitors were greeted and led away to their rooms.

A polite little cough beside her alerted her to a woman of middle age smiling at her. “Mrs Brookes? The apothecary is here to see you. I’m sorry we couldn’t get the physician out, but he’s away in Ware and the apothecary was here anyway tending one of the grooms, but we can send for the physician if you prefer.”

Her accent was strongly northern, and by her subdued clothing,

Margarita assumed she was the housekeeper. “Thank you, the apothecary will do very well, but I fear I have no interesting ailments to excite his professional curiosity. I suffered a momentary weakness just before we left, but I’m perfectly well now.”

“Just as well to let him have a look at you,” she said. “He’s waiting in my room, for it’ll be quieter there. The bedrooms upstairs will be all in confusion for a while. This way.”

She skirted the groups still cluttering up the hall, now added to by piles of luggage and puffing footmen with boxes, and led the way down an inner hall. At the far end, she threw open a door. Margarita immediately revised her opinion of the status of her guide, for the room was a large one, fitted with furniture too elegant ever to grace a housekeeper’s room. There was a large canopied bed, and on the dressing table, two sets of hair brushes.

The apothecary was a tall, spare man of above fifty, who took one look at Margarita, and said, “Mrs Brookes? A little faint, were you? I expect you’re increasing, my dear.”

Margarita laughed. “That would be something of a miracle, sir, considering that Mr Brookes is in India, and has been there for some time.”

“Ah. Then I beg your pardon, madam, although in my experience miracles of that nature are not entirely unknown. Now, will you lie down on the bed, and I’ll take a look at you? Mrs Plummer will stay for propriety.”

Margarita dropped her reticule in sudden alarm. *Mrs Plummer?* Who then was her husband? A cousin of the family, perhaps. There could be any number of Plummers about, after all. Nothing to be afraid of. She would not have any more moments of weakness over the business. She was here at Chadwell Park, and here she would stay until after Christmas — a se’nnight, at least. She would be calm, and not let these odd remembrances disturb her. What was there to fear, anyway? Only one person had the power to disturb her equanimity, and *he* was not here.

Obediently she lay down on the bed, while the apothecary prodded and asked questions and eventually agreed that whatever had occurred, she was perfectly well now.

When he’d left, Mrs Plummer helped her to fasten her gown again.

Margarita would have liked to ask about Mr Plummer, but she couldn't think of a way to introduce the subject without revealing her own knowledge of the family, so she kept her silence.

"Would you like a tisane?" Mrs Plummer said. "I can rustle one up in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Thank you, but no. I must go and find Mrs Landers. She'll need me to unpack."

"I'll see to her. You rest here for a while."

"You're very kind, but I'm used to her ways, and even the apothecary agrees that I'm not ill."

"Will she yell at you if you don't turn up? These old women can be very difficult. We have one in our family, too."

"Oh... she's not so bad. I never take it personally, and it's what I'm paid for, after all."

Mrs Plummer raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "It's a miserable life, being a paid companion, if you ask me. Only one step above slavery. Still, go to her if you must, but sometime we must have a comfortable coze. Then you can explain to me why that husband of yours has gone off to India and left a pretty young thing like you to fend for herself."

Before the evening was over, Margarita had decided that Chadwell Park was the finest house in the kingdom. She had a room of her own, of similar size to Mrs Plummer's and clearly newly decorated and furnished, with a blazing fire and fine views over the lake. It had an adjoining door to Mrs Landers' room, but was vastly different from the closet-like dressing room which had been her lot at Hodgehill. A maid helped her unpack, apologising for not coming sooner, and then uttered the magic words, "When would you like your bath, madam?"

"At any time convenient," Margarita said. "I can't tell you how delighted I'll be to see it, whenever it happens to arrive."

"You can have it now, if you like," the girl said. "Everyone else is going down to the saloon first for cakes and things, but I can bring you a tray up here, if you like, and then you can have a lovely soak, without the footmen

banging on the door wanting to take the tub away for someone else..”

“What’s your name?” Margarita said.

“Polly, madam. I’m the kitchen maid usually, but there’s extra help in the kitchen so I’ve been sent upstairs.”

Margarita laughed. “Polly, you’re a treasure, and would be wasted in the kitchen.”

Within twenty minutes, she was reclining in steaming hot water in front of the fire, a cup of tea resting on a stool within reach. It was bliss. She would wear one of her best gowns in honour of the occasion, she decided.

When she eventually made her way downstairs, she found that Mrs Landers had not even noticed her absence, for she had discovered an Enemy Within the Camp. Mrs Smythe was an aunt of Mr Fletcher’s, as vulgar as she could stare and not afraid to do battle with upstart widows of the nobility like Mrs Landers. After a few trial skirmishes, they had discovered that neither could claim the superiority of age and therefore moved swiftly to outright war, each trying to best the other. Their husbands, their estates, their political views, their taste in music, food, books, newspapers, even candlesticks — all came under review, and each found the other sadly deficient. By the time they moved into the dining room, a room as gracefully proportioned as the rest of the house, there was no holding them back, and they sniped at each other across the table for the duration of the meal.

Margarita barely noticed, for the table was laid with the most luscious array of dishes she had ever seen. She tried everything within reach, and could fault none of it.

“Should you care for a little more of the sweetbreads?” the gentleman on her left murmured.

“I should care very much, but I suspect there will be another course coming, even more sublime than this one.”

He laughed. “Your suspicion is correct, in that there is another course. Whether it is sublime or not I leave to your judgement, but if you mention your approbation to Mrs Fletcher, you will make her very happy. The kitchen is presided over by a very expensive French personage — a man-cook.”

“Whatever he earns, he’s worth every penny. I’m afraid I’ve forgotten your name, sir.”

“Appleby, ma’am. I have the very good fortune to be betrothed to Miss Angela Fletcher. And you are Mrs Brookes, companion to the redoubtable Mrs Landers. Will they come to blows, do you think?”

“A duel? Walking sticks at dawn, perhaps. My money would be on Mrs Smythe.”

That brought another laugh. “A glorious image to savour. One hopes she would not be obliged to flee the country afterwards.”

“Do you live nearby, Mr Appleby?”

“I live in the fine city of Bath, where I am currently engaged in establishing a market gardening business.”

“How fascinating! And is it going well?”

“It is, rather to my surprise. I had not thought myself to have much of a head for business, but happily, Mr Fletcher has been advising me. He told me that everyone needs cabbages, and it certainly seems to be true.”

This was a subject of great interest to Margarita, who had been much involved with the kitchen garden at Hadlow, and they talked contentedly of raspberries and blackcurrants, cabbages and leeks, and the efficacy of various methods of forcing for the rest of the meal.

Afterwards, there were delightful musical performances from the daughters of the house. Apart from the two cantankerous old ladies, everyone was in humour, and Lord Albury spent the evening exuding contentment, his betrothed’s arm tucked into his whenever she could be cajoled away from the instrument.

Retiring sleepily to her room at midnight, Margarita was woken briefly in the early morning by the blissful sound of the maid remaking the fire, and much later by the arrival of a cup of chocolate and Polly to help her dress. Breakfast was another feast, all the better for the absence of the two squabbling old ladies. It was Sunday, but there was no service owing to the imminence of Christmas, so the day passed off peacefully as the occupants of Chadwell Park recruited their strength for the celebrations to come.

The following day, callers began to arrive by noon to pay their respects to the noble guests. First, a son of the house with his recent bride, then the rector and his wife, who was another Fletcher daughter. A couple of twittering ladies in outdated gowns. A Lord and Lady Charles something, the gentleman talking grandly of ‘*m’brother the marquess*’ who had recently died, although he did not seem unduly grief-stricken. The saloon was capacious, but it was beginning to feel crowded. Margarita retreated into a far corner with some handkerchiefs to sew, alongside Mr Appleby, another retiring soul.

The doors opened again.

“Sir Owen and Lady Plummer, Mr Michael Plummer,” the butler intoned.

Margarita jolted into horrified awareness. *Michael!* What was he doing here? And there was nowhere to hide, no way to escape the inevitable meeting. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, waited.

Oh, but he looked so fine! So tall and upright, although his hands twisted restlessly, and his mouth twitched now and then, an endearing tic that brought a rush of affection. His forehead frowned in that anxious way he had that made her want to rush across the room and smooth away all his worries. Poor Michael! He always worried so.

She watched him breathlessly as he worked his way round the room, being introduced to all the great ones, who smiled on him graciously. He was the heir to a baronetcy, so not quite beneath their notice. He tried to smile in return, but somehow his mouth would not quite comply. He looked harassed, poor fellow.

As he moved from one group to another, his eyes roved round the room, looked her way, passed over her... then shot back. He stopped dead, eyes wide in shock. She knew she should look away but she couldn’t tear her gaze from him.

He began to walk towards her, a steady, direct course that cut through the room, causing a footman bearing a tray of drinks to jump aside. He came nearer... even nearer... stopped before her.

“Margarita? What are you doing here?”

She couldn't speak. Simply breathing was enough of a challenge.

“Margarita?”

Still impossible to answer him.

“You know Mrs Brookes?” Mr Appleby said, stepping into the breach.

Michael's eyes narrowed. “Mrs Brookes? *Mrs Brookes?* You married again, Margarita? How could you!”

And then an even worse catastrophe.

“Mr Kelshaw, Lady Frederica Kelshaw, Miss Kelshaw, Miss Victoria Kelshaw, Miss Greaves,” announced the butler.

Miss Greaves? And there she was, as lovely as ever, smiling, smiling around the room, and then catching sight of Michael and Margarita. The smiles vanished as her face reddened in anger. She set off across the room, heading directly for them.

Margarita did the only thing that occurred to her — she retreated. Drawing her dignity around her like a shawl, she rose and marched to the nearest door.

9: Confrontations

Margarita found herself in another saloon, empty, cold, the fire not yet lit. Michael followed her, of course. Naturally he did.

“Margarita, talk to me. Why did you marry again? Surely—”

She headed smartly for the other door, which would probably lead her to... yes! The inner hall, and the stairs.

“Wait! Wait!” he cried plaintively, half running alongside her.

All the way up the stairs, climbing at a fast pace, he matched her step for step, pleading with her, but she had nothing to say to him. How dared he question her? Why shouldn't she marry, if she chose?

She reached the landing, opened the door to her room and when he hesitated on the threshold, she slammed it in his face.

“Margarita!” he wailed, his voice muted by two inches of solid mahogany.

For good measure, she turned the key in the lock.

He knocked on the door. “Margarita, you must talk to me... *please.*”

Then another voice, just as familiar.

“Where is she? In there? What is she doing here anyway? Has she come to spoil everything again? Did you *send* for her, Michael Plummer? You are a despicable coward!”

“No, Amelia, no! I had no idea... this is nothing to do with me. I am as shocked as you, I swear it.”

“I do not believe you! You planned this to humiliate me. You just want a reason to cry off, but I will not be jilted, not again, and certainly not because of *her*, that traitor!”

“Amelia, I—”

More voices, male ones, a low murmur, gentle, placating. Michael and Amelia must have moved away from the door, for their voices became harder to hear. Then silence. For a long time there was silence while Margarita stood, shivering from head to foot, just inside the door. What was she waiting

for — someone to break the door down?

A sudden panic — the second door! The door that connected to Mrs Landers' room... she darted across, saw at once that there was a lock, and the key was on her side. With trembling fingers she turned it, and it settled with a satisfying thunk. She was safe.

That was foolish. Michael would never hurt her, not for the world. He was a gentle soul who would have taken the greatest care of her, if ever she'd been his. But she'd never been that. She'd left Hadlow precisely to dissipate any confusion in his mind and leave him free to wed Amelia.

Yet he hadn't. That was a puzzle indeed. Amelia had cried, '*I will not be jilted, not again*'. So Michael had jilted her, and everything Margarita had done, the whole disaster that had followed, had been for nothing. Foolish, foolish man!

Still, whatever had happened was more than two years in the past, and couldn't be mended. There was still a chance, however, that something could yet be salvaged from the wreckage. '*You want a reason to cry off*', Amelia had said, but that reason would not be Margarita. Michael must do as he pleased, but she wouldn't allow him to use her as an excuse.

Her travel box was small, and no one had bothered to shift it up to the attics or down to the basement. There it sat in a corner, calling to her. She dragged it across the floor towards the press and began methodically to pack.

She was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Mrs Brookes? It is Mrs Fletcher. May I come in?" A long pause. "Mr Plummer and Miss Greaves have gone away. I am quite alone."

Margarita cautiously unlocked the door and peered out. She was indeed alone, a woman of around forty, still rather pretty and pleasingly proportioned, wearing the most delicate lace cap. Honiton lace, Margarita thought enviously.

Mrs Fletcher smiled tentatively, and raised her hands to show the decanter and glasses she held. "A little wine would do you good, I think. How are you, my dear? What a dreadful shock for you. You had no idea that the Plummers still live nearby, I take it?"

Margarita could only stare at her stupidly. A shock for *her*? No outrage on Michael's behalf? No anger at the disruption to her grand party? Nothing but sympathy. Margarita blinked away sudden tears.

"May I come in?" Mrs Fletcher said again, her head tipped to one side like a bird.

"Oh... of course." She opened the door wide, then closed and locked it again.

Gazing around, Mrs Fletcher said, "I am so pleased with how this room has turned out. It was the night nursery, you see, and next door was the day nursery, but Bella is too old for it now. Oh, but..." She noticed the half-filled box on the floor. "You are not leaving, surely?"

"I believe I must."

"Mrs Brookes," she said, setting down the decanter and glasses on the dressing table, "you are a guest in this house, and I will not have you driven out of it. Mr Michael Plummer and Miss Greaves do not live here, and I shall make sure they do not return, if their presence makes you uncomfortable."

"I can't come between them!" Margarita cried. "Not a second time."

"That is for the two of them to settle between themselves," Mrs Fletcher said firmly, pouring wine into two glasses. "If their mutual affection is strong enough to withstand your reappearance, then they will marry, and if it is not, then they had much better not do so."

"You don't understand! Michael is so... so distractable. If I'm here, he'll dither and wring his hands and not know what to do."

"And if you go away, would he suddenly become decisive?" Mrs Fletcher said wryly. "Drink your wine, my dear. Where would you go anyway, at this season?"

"I hadn't thought... to Bath, I suppose. I still have friends there. I can find employment. But I'll need to borrow the money for the stage coach."

"My dear Mrs Brookes," she said, with a smile of gentle sympathy, "I think you have had a hard life. Sir Owen Plummer has told us a little of your history, what he knows of it... of how you met Amelia when you were both pupils at the school in Bath. Then when she left school and you were already

a widow, you were employed as her companion. And now you are companion to Mrs Landers, despite the husband in India. Married twice, and yet forced to work for your living. And now you propose to abandon your present employer and seek work elsewhere. It is not sensible, my dear. Being alone and poor... it is a miserable existence.”

“What else can I do? I’m spoiling your party.”

To her surprise, Mrs Fletcher laughed. “You cannot imagine how grateful I am for this little disruption, for it has given everyone something to talk about. One never knows quite how little one has in common with acquaintances until one spends every hour of the day under the same roof. Some guests are easy and agreeable company, ready to fit in, like yourself, and others... are less so. The Landers family has been here less than twenty-four hours and already we have exhausted the topics of the weather, the children and the state of the roads. They have no interest in books or music or art or travel, we know nothing of country pursuits and one dare not even talk about politics, since no doubt they dine with half the government. I doubt we could have survived a whole week without something exploding. Probably my husband.”

“Mrs Landers and Mrs Smythe are doing their part to keep everyone entertained,” Margarita said.

“Oh yes, and Rosie’s little dog is a great conversation piece, too. When one is completely at a loss, one may always say, ‘*Such a sweet little creature, and so well behaved*’, and tell tales of her predecessor, who was not well behaved in the slightest, the great, evil beast. So you see, this may be a great trial to you, but it is the greatest good fortune to me. You may choose whether to keep to your room for the whole week, taking your meals on trays, the better for the company to talk about you, or you may re-join us so that everyone may pat your hand and ask you in hushed tones how you are.”

Margarita could only laugh and shake her head. “Far be it from me to deprive your visitors of their scandal.”

“That is better. You are so pretty when you smile, and if you wore gowns with a little trimming, and allowed a few curls of that lovely hair to fall around your face, you would put all the ladies’ noses out of joint. Auburn

hair is such a gift. It is the greatest shame to hide so much of it behind that cap. You will stay, then? Shall I send Polly to help you unpack again?"

"I can manage. Thank you... for being so kind." Impulsively, she put her arms round Mrs Fletcher and kissed her.

"What a sweet girl you are! Who could fail to be kind to you? Mrs Landers, I suppose. But you need not worry about her. We will take care of her for you, so all you need to do is enjoy yourself, and when it is time for you to go north again, you will not go in the mail coach, that much is certain. You will go in my carriage, with a man to order everything for your comfort, and that is not kindness, my dear, but simple courtesy, so you need not thank me. Now, I shall leave you in peace. There will be someone stationed outside your door to ensure you are not importuned by anyone, so if you need anything, you have only to ask."

And away she went, leaving Margarita to reflect on her situation with gratitude, and to wonder what Michael was doing and thinking at that moment. Did he hate her for coming back? Or, against all reason, did he still hold her in affection, even after so long?

Not that it made the slightest difference. There had never been any question of marriage between them, and now she had Nick Brookes to protect her from any lingering thought of it.

She was safe from Michael. If only her own treacherous heart would not betray her.

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Rosie watched the confrontation with astonishment and not a little alarm, and was relieved beyond measure when Mrs Brookes rose with quiet dignity and left the room. She had heard something of Mr Michael Plummer's sad story, of how he had been on the brink of a very eligible marriage, but had fallen in love with the lady's companion, a poor widow, who had then run away, leaving him distraught, but to see the same story playing out all over again was beyond anything. And Mrs Brookes seemed like such a quiet, respectable person, not at all the type to provoke such drama.

Yet Mr Plummer had recognised her from across the saloon, gone directly to her and followed her out of the room, with Miss Greaves in

pursuit, and then Pa and Mama, and Sir Owen Plummer, and Mr Kelshaw, and Will had gone, too, to see if he could help. Meanwhile, poor Lady Plummer and Lady Frederica had to try to put a good face on it, while everyone else pretended that nothing untoward had happened at all.

After a while, Mr Kelshaw came and took away Lady Frederica and the Miss Kelshaws, and not long after, Sir Owen came for Lady Plummer. Lord and Lady Charles would have stayed, but Sir Owen spoke to them sternly and they went too. Eventually, all the other visitors left, even James and Julia, and Will and Eloise. Neither Mr Michael Plummer nor Miss Greaves returned. Mama came in to say that Mrs Brookes would stay in her room for a while, and called for tea in her usual calm way, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Except for Mrs Landers. “Well! I always knew there was something odd about that girl. Calls herself Mrs Brookes, and *someone* certainly writes to her from India, but what sort of husband goes off to foreign parts and leaves his wife alone to do as she pleases is more than I can fathom. No decent married woman would be taking paid employment like Margaret does. And now we see the truth of it, that she has been tangled up with another man while her husband is away.”

“It was not like that at all, ma’am,” Morgan Plummer said. “Mrs Aitken, as she was then, was a widow two and a half years ago, and perfectly entitled to receive advances from a gentleman. As it happened, she did not wish to spoil Miss Greaves’ chances of making a good marriage, so she left, but Michael... Michael was upset.”

“You were there, were you?” Mrs Landers said suspiciously. “You know all about her, then?”

“No, I have never seen her before she arrived yesterday, but my brother was there at the time, and he has told me the whole story.”

“Then you know nothing directly, and I may think of her as I please.”

“We all know what to think of her, I dare say,” Lady Faulkbourne said. “Coming here stirring up trouble, as she must have known, but said not a word about having been here before.”

“I do not think—” Morgan Plummer began, but Lady Faulkbourne

ploughed on relentlessly.

“A widow... married... who knows what she is? Any woman may put on a wedding ring and call herself Mrs and claim the respectability of the married state, while pursuing her own wickedness among the virtuous in society. It is devious, and I deplore it.”

“We do not know that there is anything deceptive about Mrs Brookes,” Rosie said indignantly. “She may be precisely what she appears to be, a married woman in reduced circumstances, who came here in complete innocence of Mr Plummer’s presence nearby.”

“Do you set your opinion in opposition to mine, young lady?” Lady Faulkbourne said, drawing herself up stiffly. “That would be very singular in one of your age and inferior rank.”

“I.. I beg your pardon, my lady,” Rosie said, all her indignation collapsing instantly.

“So you should,” Lady Faulkbourne said. “This, you see, is precisely why you should live at Chaseley Court after your marriage, so that I may instruct you in proper behaviour.”

Redmond lifted Rosie’s hand and tucked it around his arm. “There is nothing at all amiss with Rosie’s behaviour, Mother. We may all talk freely amongst family, surely? And we are to live at Pollicott Place, that is quite settled. Rosie, shall we take a walk around the lake now that the callers have left? There is no danger of rain, I believe.”

Rosie smiled up at him, her heart full. He had defended her! His mother had tried to squash her like an ant, and he had stepped in and spoken up for her. Finally, he was learning that his loyalty was to his wife before his family.

A sizeable group donned cloaks and greatcoats and stout boots to walk around the lake, and by ambling rather slowly, Rosie and Redmond contrived to fall behind the others. Hestia bounded happily along beside them, now and then diverting to snuffle through an interesting pile of leaves or investigate a muddy puddle.

“Thank you for speaking up for me against your mama,” she said shyly, both hands wrapped around his arm. He was a little short for a man, but she

was short herself and found his arm most conveniently placed. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am to have such a champion."

"Perhaps when we reach the shrubbery you will be able to show me your gratitude in more tangible form?" he said hopefully, his eyes shining.

"Ah, now I see why you wanted to take a walk. It is an excuse for kisses."

"Of course it is, and you have a magnificent shrubbery here, just perfect for the purpose. Oh, Rosie, Rosie!" He spun round to face her, and stopped, his face aglow with some inner fire. "I love you so much, my sweet Rosie. I wish we need not wait until Easter to wed."

"But there is so much to be done before the banns may be called," she said gently. "My clothes, and Pollicott Place to be made ready. I should not wish to rush things and have everything only half done. We have the rest of our lives to be together, after all."

"That is true," he said, but his face fell all the same.

They moved on again, and soon after entered the shrubbery, where there was no inclination for talking, but nevertheless, the interlude was very agreeable. He was learning to be delightfully affectionate in private as well as standing up for her in public. It was most satisfactory.

They returned to the house in the gloom of early dusk. From the entrance hall, the house was quiet, as if it had fallen into late afternoon somnolence.

"Where is everyone, Keeble?" Rosie said, handing Hestia to a footman to be cleaned up, and divesting herself of her heavy cloak.

"Most are upstairs resting before dinner, madam. Some of the gentlemen are playing billiards in the library. Mrs Plummer is in the kitchen wing. The mistress and some of the young ladies are in the music room, deciding on pieces for the evening. Oh, and Mrs Brookes is in the saloon."

"How is she, Keeble?"

"She appears to be well, madam."

"I must go and see her, but Redmond...?"

“I shall take a look at the billiard players,” he said, raising her hand to his lips in farewell. “I shall see you before dinner, my love.”

Keeble sighed sentimentally at this evidence of devotion.

Rosie entered the saloon, almost in darkness now, apart from a narrow pool of light from a candelabrum near the fire, illuminating the slight figure who sat there with her sewing.

“Mrs Brookes! How are you? We have been concerned for you,” Rosie cried as she flew across the room, and knelt at her feet.

Mrs Brookes smiled. “You’re very good, but there’s no need for concern. I’m perfectly well, as you may observe.”

“Is there anything I may get you?”

“Nothing at all. Your mama’s been looking after me.”

“I am glad. It is such a relief to see you again, and not upset by the events of the day. Truly I felt for you, to meet again under the most trying of circumstances, and it seems to have been a great shock to all of you. But I beg your pardon... I do not mean to make you uncomfortable by speaking of such matters.”

“It doesn’t make me uncomfortable,” she said, laying down her sewing. “I was very shocked at first, I confess, for I’d supposed Michael Plummer and Miss Greaves to be married long since, and settled in Gloucestershire. But to find them both here, and yet unmarried...” She paused, but her voice was steady. Rosie admired her composure.

“It is regarded as a settled thing,” Rosie said gently. “Their betrothal is expected very soon.”

“Oh yes, it must be so,” she said briskly. “I can only hope that Michael won’t allow my presence to interfere with that, as he did before.”

Rosie sat back on her heels, rather at a loss. “Then you are not—? But I have no right to ask such questions.”

“I’m not *affected* by their marriage? Is that what you mean?” Rosie nodded, rather ashamed to discuss so personal a matter. “I’ve always wanted the marriage. It’s such a good match — so eligible on both sides, and they get

along well.”

“But if he is in love with you—?” Rosie cried. “Oh, but you were a widow then, and I dare say the memory of your beloved husband prevented you from marrying him.”

Mrs Brookes smiled sadly. “Ah, you are a romantic, Miss Fletcher, but ‘*my beloved husband*’ as you call him was a man twice my age who wanted a stepmother for his three motherless children, nothing more. I was seventeen, the daughter of a rural clergyman who had recently died, leaving me almost penniless. It was a practical arrangement on both sides, and I was very grateful for my good fortune, I assure you. The children were lovely, Jack was... not unkind, and I had a home and enough money, with care, for meat and coal and shoes for everyone. He was a farrier by trade, and a good one, too, but one day there was a tile awry on the roof of the outhouse, and Jack went up to fix it. The ladder collapsed and that was the end of that. The children went to Jack’s family, and I became companion to Amelia... Miss Greaves.”

Rosie could hardly speak, for her throat was tight and tears threatened to overwhelm her. Such a sad tale, and yet she spoke so cheerfully.

“You must not weep for me, Miss Fletcher,” Mrs Brookes said softly. “I have been fortunate... more fortunate than many in my lowly position in society, and you are fortunate too. Your romantic heart is blessed with a marriage of great affection.”

“On his side, perhaps,” Rosie said. “On mine, however, it is not so.”

“Then why agree to it, when your romantic nature must demand more from marriage?”

“Because everyone wants it,” Rosie said simply. “Because so many sacrifices have been made to bring it about. Because I must marry someone, and this is the best offer I am likely to get. And because—”

Some change in Mrs Brookes’ face made Rosie spin round. Redmond stood a little way off, only his face and the white of his neckcloth visible in the darkened room, a certain tightness in his expression.

He licked his lips. “I beg your pardon. You are exchanging confidences.

I will not intrude.”

Then he spun on his heel and disappeared.

## 10: Of Love And Marriage

Rosie jumped up and hurried after Redmond, finding him standing alone, white-faced, in the hall. He must have heard every word, but she could not read his face well enough to determine what he was thinking. Would he take offence and walk out on her now? His family had never been fully reconciled to the match and he had not yet completely separated himself from them, despite his protestations of love. She was surprised at how much she cared what he would do.

“Are you angry with me?” she said, resting a hand tentatively on his sleeve.

His slight smile reassured her. “Of course not. It is only as I had supposed all along, even though I hoped—”

A footman, alerted perhaps by their voices, emerged from the service stairs. “Is there anything you require madam? My lord?”

It was Rosie who answered. “Nothing, thank you, Anthony.” When he had returned to the nether regions, she went on, “Shall we go up to the gallery? We can talk there without being disturbed.”

On the landing upstairs, she lit a candle and led him past the curtain and into the oddly-shaped gallery. At the far end, she sat down on the window seat and gestured for him to join her. And now that she looked at him more closely, she recognised his expression, one that she had seen many times in rejected suitors.

“You are disappointed,” she said.

“A little... a very little. I never expected... but I did hope that... that if I were so fortunate as to secure your hand, you might hold me in some affection by then. But it was foolish of me. Of course you cannot refuse such an offer... the title... all of that.”

“But I could very easily do so. Pa has told me right from the start that I must consider my own happiness before anything, and even Mama, who has been the instigator of our venture into becoming landed gentry, and thought that only a title would do for me, has softened considerably lately. If I had said at any time that I do not wish for this marriage, they might have been



disappointed but they would not have pressed me. I do this because I want to, Redmond. I should never have agreed to marry you if I had taken you in dislike.”

“But you do not love me,” he said sadly.

“Love is not like that candle there, either lit or not. It is more... a process... a path, if you like, which may be long or short, winding or straight. It is given to few people to fall in love instantly, with a single glance. It happened to James Plummer, who married my sister Julia. The first time he saw her, she was sitting on the gate at High Field, swinging her leg, very likely with her bonnet off and her hair askew, and he knew there and then that he wanted to marry her, although it was an age before she fell in love with him. As for Will and Eloise... they cordially disliked each other at first, and only fell in love much later. It is different for everyone. And admit it, Redmond, you were not bowled over by me at first sight, were you? Not like poor Mr Somerwell who saw me driving in Hyde Park one day, followed me home and then went all over London looking for someone who knew me and could introduce him.”

Redmond gave an embarrassed laugh. “No, it was not instant for me. In fact, I behaved despicably in town, seeking you out solely because I had heard about your dowry, and that you were a quiet, well-mannered girl. I was no better than a fortune hunter.”

“You were never that. You were a future earl in need of money, and I was rich and in need of a good husband. There is nothing wrong with that. Marriage must always be prudent first, and affection may come later, as it has done with you.”

“But not with you,” he said.

She took his hand, lifted it to her lips and kissed it. “Not yet. You are further along the path than I am, that is all, and look how long it has taken you. Even when we met again in Bath, you were very careful to pay me no attention. You were certainly not thinking of marriage then, dowry or no dowry.”

“I was ashamed of myself, having added to the press of suitors thronging around you, and only because of your fortune, or your beauty, or

simply because you were fashionable — this year’s Incomparable. I withdrew from town, and tried to keep away from you in Bath, too, but...” He laughed suddenly, the first genuinely warm laugh. “I discovered that the Incomparable was a wonderful, lovable woman with a mind of her own. I was drawn into your orbit then, and when you returned to Hertfordshire, I could not keep away from you. The more I saw of you, the more I realised I had found what I had always imagined impossible — a woman I could love, deeply and wholeheartedly.”

His eyes gleamed in the candlelight, and Rosie had never liked him so well as she did in that moment, with his heartfelt emotions expressed so simply but with absolute sincerity.

She squeezed his hand, and said, “And I am bound on that same path. Every time you talk to me from the heart like this, every time you stand up for me against your mother, every time...” She blushed, lowering her eyes. “Every time you kiss me, Redmond... I take another step or two along that path. And I am tolerably certain that there will come a day, maybe soon, or maybe later, when I look at you across the breakfast table, or at the crib of our newest child, and realise that I love you with all my heart. Can you wait for that day? You have been so patient with me this year, allowing me to decide in my own time, so will you be patient for a little longer, Redmond?”

“Of course, and I think... once we are married, our lives will be very different and perhaps... it may be that... you will move faster along that path. Do you not think? Marriage is so intimate, Rosie, it cannot help but bring us closer together. Besides, you have given me a very strong hint as to how I may speed your feet on the path to love.”

“Have I?”

“Every kiss, you said.” He bent his head to press his lips to hers. “You have given me the perfect excuse.” Another kiss. “As if I needed one. Such sweet, soft lips you have, Rosie darling.” Again he kissed her. “Shall we just stay here until the dressing bell?”

“What a splendid idea,” she murmured, before his lips silenced her.

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Michael sat numbly in the carriage, his mind running endlessly over those

few shocking minutes... seeing her across the room, going to her, drinking in her lovely face, so vividly alive before him, and not the faded memory of his dreams. And then, those dreadful words — ‘*You know Mrs Brookes?*’

Mrs Brookes! Not Mrs Aitken any more, but Mrs Brookes. Married again, but why? Who was he, this Mr Brookes? Why was he not by her side, for Mr Fletcher had told him that Margarita was a companion to an elderly lady, because her husband was in India. *Why?* What man could marry so extraordinary a creature, and then disappear, go off to the far side of the world and leave her unprotected, unloved? It made not a jot of sense.

Letitia babbled on and on the whole way back to the Manor, but for once it was no irritant, merely a background noise, like the lowing of cattle, although somewhat less melodious. But when the carriage turned into the drive, Father said, “Enough, Letitia. We will speak of this after dinner when we can be private, but say nothing in front of the servants, if you please.”

“They will know of it soon enough,” she said.

“So they will, but not from us. Michael, to my book room, if you please.”

Meekly, Michael followed and dutifully sipped the brandy that was put into his hand. When his father told him to sit, he did so but his mind was still far away, at Chadwell Park, with *her*.

“Do you have any idea what you are going to do?” Sir Owen said, in his implacable military voice that usually reduced Michael to quaking jelly. Today he barely noticed, for the miracle had happened — Margarita had returned to him.

“Do, sir?”

“Yes, do, Michael,” he said testily. “We all thought that dreadful business was entirely behind us, but here we are again in precisely the same position as before. You are on the brink of a most eligible betrothal, and this woman appears and deranges your mind all over again. But there is one very obvious difference between then and now. Then, she was a widow and it was possible for you to consider a future with her. Now, she has a living husband, who may be in India but is as insuperable a barrier as if he were standing beside her. She is not for you, Michael, and may never be for you. You must

treat her as you would any other acquaintance — with the respect due to her as a married woman, but with absolutely no familiarity. And you must settle with Miss Greaves sooner rather than later. She must not be kept in suspense while you contemplate the impossible. Do you understand?”

Michael heard the words, but somehow the sense of them skittered away out of reach. *Margarita was here!* And somehow, whatever the problems that might arise, he could not suppress the joy that welled up inside him. *Margarita was alive and well.*

But he had so many questions. Where had she been all this time? What had happened after she had left on that dreadful morning? And why, why, why had she married again? How *could* she marry, and who was he, this man who had carried off such a prize?

“Michael! Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

“I suggest you go there first thing tomorrow morning, straight after breakfast. She will be expecting you.”

“Yes, Father.”

“I will come with you, if you wish it, to talk to Kelshaw.”

“Yes, Father.” Something jangled in his mind. “Er... Kelshaw?”

“Settlements and so forth. It was all gone over pretty thoroughly last time, but there have been some changes in our circumstances. The Park, for instance. So I can talk to Kelshaw while you see Miss Greaves.”

Now Michael was fully alert. “Miss Greaves?” As if from a great distance, his mind dredged up the memory of Amelia, who had filled his thoughts until an hour ago. “No... I must talk to Margarita.”

“You mean Mrs Brookes, and you have no need whatsoever to talk to her. It is to Miss Greaves that your attention must be given, Michael — your future wife.”

Michael stared at him uncomprehendingly. “That is not yet decided, Father. No commitment, that was the arrangement. She came here with no expectations.”

“And then you spent every day out riding with her or walking in the gardens, and every evening sitting facing her over the backgammon board. Whatever the original constraints, you have gone far beyond that now. “ Sir Owen paced across the room and then back. “Are you a gentleman or are you not?” he said, his voice unusually terse. “Twice now you have raised the expectation of marriage in this young lady, who is eagerly awaiting your addresses. Last time... well, we understood that you were not yourself... you were unwell. Allowances were made. But you cannot expect the same understanding a second time. Mrs Brookes’ reappearance is irrelevant, for you have an obligation to Miss Greaves that cannot be denied. If you have a shred of honour in you, then you must offer for her, and it should be soon.”

Slowly Michael nodded. “I understand you, Father, but I must speak to Margarita... Mrs Brookes before I can settle anything with Miss Greaves. There are too many questions in my mind. Let me but talk to her, and then... then I shall consider Miss Greaves.”

His father paced again, hands held rigidly behind his back. “I will see what I can do, but you must not see her alone, Michael. You must never be alone with her.”

“You do not trust me,” Michael said, stung.

“You are not rational where that woman is concerned. We would all have been better off if you had never met her.”

“Amelia would have been, certainly, and so might you and the rest of the family. But I? No. Margarita was for a brief time the greatest joy in my sorry excuse of a life, and I would not have missed that for the world, whatever came after and may yet come to pass.”

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For Margarita, each hour was as long as a day, and so surely each day must be an entire month. It was unsettling to look out of the window the following morning and see the trees still as winter bare as before, a sharp frost glittering on the lawn like a carpet of diamonds.

On the surface, her life was placid. The Fletcher family treated her with gentle kindness, the Landers family with disdain, ignoring her as much as possible. Even her duties as companion were not needed, for Mrs Landers

was attended like royalty by the family and servants alike, and was besides too much occupied with her feud with Mrs Smythe to care what Margarita did. So she found a quiet corner in which to hide away.

The library was her favourite place. Fully half the room was taken up with a billiard table, and another corner was occupied by piles of books awaiting shelving, but the fire was lit after breakfast and a grouping of comfortable chairs arranged round the hearth enticed her. There were plenty of books already on the shelves, or there was a stack of newspapers and journals to choose from if she were minded to read, and there was always the basket of mending. Despite the house being full, few people ventured into the library. The billiard table drew some of the gentlemen, but they nodded to her and then left her alone, concentrating on their game. It was all very peaceful.

Yet inside, her thoughts churned. Knowing Michael was so close drove her wild. If only she could have run away, as she did once before. She would not — she *must* not distract Michael from his destiny with Amelia. What was he thinking? Surely at this second attempt with Amelia he would be steadfast. Miss Fletcher had told her that a betrothal was expected imminently, and he couldn't walk away now... could he? *'I will not be jilted again,'* Amelia had said, and Michael's gentlemanly honour would hold him to that.

Yet she'd thought that once before. Two years ago last summer the betrothal was just as imminent, and yet it hadn't happened and she couldn't imagine why. Over and over again she tried to guess the reason, and then, inevitably, her thoughts turned to her own behaviour. If only she had been stronger! It must be her fault, on that point she was quite certain.

The billiard players had been and gone, two of the sisters had spent an hour or so sorting books from the boxes and now they were gone, too. Margarita was alone when Mrs Fletcher crept in.

"Sir Owen Plummer is here, Mrs Brookes. He is asking to speak to you, but you need not, if it would distress you."

"It wouldn't distress me in the least."

"I will stay with you, if you wish."

"There's no need, I assure you. I'm quite happy to talk to Sir Owen." At last! Perhaps now she would find out what had happened after she'd left

Hadlow Hall two years ago.

She always felt that she should stand to attention and salute whenever Sir Owen entered a room. He had left the army many years ago, but the army had not yet left him, for he still walked ramrod straight, as if on parade. Or marching to war, perhaps.

“Mrs Brookes,” he said, with a precise bow. “Thank you for agreeing to see me. I should like to talk to you about Michael.”

Straight to the point. She liked that. “Of course. Please sit down.”

He did so, sitting with his knees and feet together. “Michael is a trifle unsettled by your sudden reappearance, Mrs Brookes. It is unfortunate timing, just as he is about to seal his future with Miss Greaves. Might I enquire as to your reasons for coming here?”

No beating about the bush there, but again, it was so much better than sidling round the subject. “I came because my employer, Mrs Radcliffe Landers, is an invited guest. I recognised the name of Chadwell Park, but since it is now owned by the Fletchers, I assumed you and your family had moved away.”

“Ah. Only a mile or so, to Chadwell Manor, which was our home long before Chadwell Park was built,” he said more gently. “So you had no idea Michael and Miss Greaves would be here?”

“Not the least in the world! If I had, you may be sure I wouldn’t have come within fifty miles of the place. Sir Owen, I left Hadlow Hall two and a half years ago in order to leave the way clear for Michael to marry Amelia. Surely the note I left for him was clear enough on the point? I imagined them long since settled in Gloucestershire, and I can’t at all comprehend why it isn’t so.”

Sir Owen sighed almost imperceptibly. “Indeed, it should be so, for they are perfectly suited in every way. Such an eligible match, with everything in its favour. But when Michael found your note and discovered you had fled in the night, he refused to believe it. He ran through the entire house in his nightshirt, screaming for you, and when it became clear that you were indeed gone, he—” He shifted in his seat, and the usually impassive expression trembled. “He collapsed, Mrs Brookes. I can find no other way to describe it.

He was distraught, quite distraught and we were obliged to bring him home at once. He was ill for a long time... many months, and downhearted for even longer. It is only these last few months that he has been more his usual self, and we dared to try again. So you see... you do see, do you not?"

Mutely, she nodded. Impossible to speak, for if she tried she would surely weep and rage at the injustice of it all. Michael collapsing... distraught... ill, and for months. But how could she have known? Her conscience had spoken very clearly at the time, that she must leave and at once, with no indication of her whereabouts so that Michael wouldn't be tempted to follow her. Hadn't she told him, very clearly, that he could never have a future with her, and therefore he should marry Amelia, who loved him? Yet he hadn't.

Michael *ill*, and because of her!

The clock ticked mournfully on the mantel, and then tinged the quarter hour, making her jump. She mustn't wallow in her own misery like this. The past was gone, but the present and the future... there perhaps she could still help Michael.

"What do you want me to do, Sir Owen? I'll do whatever you ask of me."

Another slight sigh. "If it were left to me, I would say that your instincts two years ago were correct, and that once again you should go away and leave Michael to decide his own future. Then, you would not have him even though you were free, and now... now you are not free at all, and he must come to terms with that in his own way. He understands that he must marry Miss Greaves this time. But he will not move forward with his marriage until he has spoken to you."

"I can't talk to him!" she said, in some alarm.

"Not at all? If someone were with you, someone you trust..."

"Even then... it would be... too intimate. I have some reserves of strength, Sir Owen, but I can't withstand Michael when he becomes... agitated. Something pulls me towards him... it is too strong for me to resist."

"Hmm... I understand you, yet he will do nothing until he has spoken to



you and heard from your own lips what became of you after you left Hadlow. I wonder... if it is intimacy you wish to avoid, perhaps one might veer to the opposite extreme. If you were to meet in some public place, with plenty of other people about, the constraints of courtesy would prevent excessive agitation.”

“That might work, but where? How?”

“Lady Plummer is to hold her Christmas ball tomorrow night. You could talk there safely, with so many others present. If not, there will be plenty of rescuers on hand.”

“Amelia will be there, too.”

He nodded. “That is true, but she too may wish to speak to you.”

Margarita jumped to her feet, obliging Sir Owen to rise also. “Heavens, what an evening! You do realise that this could easily be disastrous? Michael may collapse again, Amelia might rage as she did yesterday and poor Lady Plummer’s ball will be remembered for all the wrong reasons.”

“That is a risk we must take,” he said solemnly. “However, if all parties are adequately prepared for the situation, I believe we may anticipate a successful outcome, and move rapidly towards the outcome we all desire.”

## 11: Unexpected News

He would see Margarita again! The thought fizzed inside Michael like champagne, lifting his spirits. He would see her and talk to her, she had agreed to it, and he would find out at last where she had gone and why she had married again and how on earth her husband had left her alone to become a companion for a cantankerous old woman. He had begun to fear that she would disappear once more and he would never see her again, but his father had arranged it all. She would be at the ball and she would talk to him, and at that moment he wished for nothing else in the world.

“Michael, are you listening to me?” his father said tiredly.

“Of course, Father. Dance... I must dance.”

“The first two with Miss Greaves, of course. The two next with Miss Kelshaw, or, if she should be engaged, with Miss Victoria Kelshaw, and if *she* should be engaged with one of the Fletcher sisters. Or anyone not dancing. Then you may sit out the two next with Mrs Brookes, but always bearing in mind that you will not, under any circumstances, indulge in any behaviour which might embarrass your mother.”

“Of course, Father.”

“After that, you will dance with anyone who is not otherwise engaged. Miss Greaves may wish to talk to Mrs Brookes, but you will take no interest in that. Mrs Brookes will leave before supper. You, meanwhile, will lead Miss Greaves into supper, if she has no other escort, and you will dance with her once more before the evening ends. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father. Supper... one more dance.”

But he cared nothing about that, for he would see Margarita. For the space of a pair of dances, he could sit beside her, talk to her, look at her, drink in the uniqueness of her that made him feel... what did it make him feel? Alive! He was never so alive as when he was with her.

He hummed as he changed into his evening finery.

“Looking forward to the evening, sir?” Padwick said, as he helped him into a clean shirt.

“Indeed I am,” Michael said. “Very much so.”

“I’m very pleased to see you in such good spirits, sir, but then you always are when a certain lady’s around.”

Michael froze. “To which lady do you refer, Padwick?”

“Why, Mrs Aitken, sir, naturally. Mrs Brookes, as she calls herself now. There’s only one lady makes you hum like that.”

“Really? I never hum otherwise? No, I suppose I do not.”

“Not since you were a boy, sir. You used to hum a lot then, and sing, too, and run around shouting, as boys do. You were much quieter after you went to school.”

Michael was very well aware of that. It was not school that had made him quiet, but the long talk his father had given him beforehand. He had taken Michael into the library and shown him again the flag borne by a brave Plummer ancestor at Agincourt. *‘This is your heritage, Michael. Remember always that you are a Plummer and a future baronet. You are my heir, as I am your grandfather’s heir, and we must always act in a manner appropriate for the dignity which will be ours one day, for the honour of the family and the kingdom. Much is expected of you, so be sure not to let us down.’*

How those words had resonated with him, and the weight of expectation that had fallen onto his shoulders that day had never relinquished its hold. He had tried so hard, but he had never quite been able to decide which behaviours might constitute letting the family down, and which would be allowed to slide by. He had seen other boys at Eton involved in the most outrageous antics, who were beaten for it or rusticated, and yet returned the next term, quite unperturbed and just as ripe for mischief as before. Nor did their fathers seem to mind it much. *‘Boys will be boys,’* one earl said when called upon to remove his son for the third time in a year.

Michael had never been beaten or rusticated, had never had any but good reports from the masters — *‘Plummer works diligently and complies with all requirements expected of him’* — and had tried to be a good son at home. Even so, at the smallest transgression Father would look at Michael in that sorrowful way he had, or, which was far worse, raise his eyebrows a fraction, as if to say, *‘Really, Michael? Is this the behaviour expected of a*

*future baronet?*’ And Michael would wish for the thousandth time that he were a son to be proud of. Or if that were not possible, at least to go through life not caring, as James managed to do.

For twelve years he had hummed and sung and run around shouting, and then his father had placed four hundred years of history on his shoulders and the burden had squashed all that liveliness out of him. He had not hummed again until that summer two years ago, when Margarita had entered his life and released him from his cage for a brief time. And now, he was— Wait...

“What did you say, Padwick? About Mrs Brookes? *As she calls herself now...* What does that mean?”

“Oh, nothing, sir, I’m sure. It’s just servants’ hall gossip, you know how these ideas take hold. Someone says it’s odd that a married lady works as a companion, and someone else wonders if there really is a Mr Brookes. Mr Jefford squashes that sort of talk right away, sir, you may be sure. He don’t hold with nasty speculation of that nature, not against a lady.”

Michael shivered. If there were no Mr Brookes... but he dared not allow himself to hope. Besides, when she had been free two years ago, she had run away rather than marry him. That was a fruitless line of thought. He could never marry her, but at least for this one night he would *see* her. They would be under the same roof, in the same room, permitted to talk to each other. It was not much, but it was something. It was very much something.

He began to hum again.

Michael made sure to be in the parlour well before the appointed time, for Mother was bound to be in a panic. So unflappable as a rule, a ball seemed to upset her entirely. What was worse, this was not only the first such occasion since Grandfather’s death four years earlier, but the first to be held at the Manor instead of the Park, a setting she deemed far inferior.

“The supper rooms... so small, barely adequate, and then the narrow passage to the retiring rooms,” she moaned. “And the entrance, directly into the great hall, is so inconvenient. Every new arrival will let freezing air in and a single fireplace, no matter how large, will not suffice.”

“The screen will defend the dancers from the outside air,” Sir Owen

said calmly. "The great hall itself is more than adequate for the purpose. There cannot be a larger ballroom in the county, I am sure. However, if we find any deficiencies, we may consider some improvements in the spring. My financial situation will permit it, I believe."

"A new entrance?" Mother said eagerly.

"If you wish it, my dear."

"And we can afford that?"

"So long as it is not too grandiose a scheme, but your taste runs to quiet elegance, so I am sure it can be managed economically."

"Once Michael is married to Miss Greaves, there will be no need for economy," she said, smiling beatifically at Michael.

Fortunately, Jefford arrived to announce dinner, and to Michael's relief, the subject was dropped. The whole family had gathered to support Sir Owen and Lady Plummer for the occasion. Letitia and her husband lived at the Manor, but James and Julia had come from the rectory, and Uncle Morgan and his new wife from the Park. Even Patricia had been drawn, protesting, from her orphanage. No guests from outside the family had been invited, for how was one to choose from amongst all those who might expect such an invitation? Better by far to invite none than to risk giving offence. So it was a quiet meal, or as quiet as any dinner could be that had Letitia at the table.

They had not been in their seats more than five minutes, and the soup had barely been served, when Jefford was called away, returning in some agitation.

"Begging your pardon, my lady, but Mr John Fletcher is here. Says he has urgent business with Lord Charles."

"He cannot have business with Charles, not at this hour and not when we have a ball commencing in two hours," Letitia said. "What nonsense!"

"John Fletcher? Lord Charles?" Mother said, looking bemused. "*John Fletcher? Which one is that?*"

"The one who is married to Lord Charles's sister, the Lady Jemima," Sir Owen said tersely. "It must be an urgent matter, for him to travel at this time of year, and present himself at so inconvenient an hour. Jefford, show

Mr Fletcher into my book room. The fire will still be warm in there. Charles?”

“I have no wish to see him,” Charles said, continuing to drink his soup. “I cannot imagine what business he has with me.”

“You will not know unless you speak to him,” Sir Owen said.

“I am at dinner,” Charles said imperturbably. “Jefford, tell Fletcher to return tomorrow.”

“Very good, my lord.”

“Jefford, enquire whether Mr Fletcher wishes to stay here for tonight,” Sir Owen said. “The Park is as full as it can hold just now.”

“He can stay with his brother at Orchard House,” Letitia said. “He cannot come here, Papa, not when we are holding a ball.”

“It is inconvenient, I grant you, but even a ball should not make us fail in any courtesy to a guest.”

Jefford withdrew, but not two minutes later the door flew open again and John Fletcher stood on the threshold, still in his greatcoat, Jefford flapping his hands ineffectually in his wake. Fletcher was no more than two and twenty, but tall and slender and extraordinarily handsome, and even in his travel-stained attire, he was an imposing figure. Letitia dropped her spoon with a clatter.

“Lady Plummer, a thousand apologies for disturbing your dinner hour, but this cannot wait,” Fletcher said, executing an elegant bow. “Lord Charles, I bring word of the terms of your brother’s will.”

“Left me his pocket watch, has he?” Lord Charles sneered.

“No, he has left you the estate of Attleton Priory and guardianship of his children.”

There was a startled silence, before Letitia whispered in awed tones, “Attleton! Oh, Charles!”

“Guardianship?” Charles said. “Me? Why? Surely Gerard... he is the oldest surviving brother. Or one of the uncles.”

Fletcher laughed. “In the late marquess’s words, as he expressed

himself in the will, *'Charles is an imbecile and a muttonhead and as stubborn as a mule, but he is not as ractory as the rest of the family, he is in a Christian marriage and I trust him not to lead the boys astray. He is also the only person who ever had the strength of character to stand up to our mother. He will need to do that now.'*"

"Good God!" Charles said, throwing down his soup spoon. He gave a bark of laughter. "Well, I never! Rowland biting back from beyond the grave. Stand up to *Mother*, eh? Oh yes, by God, I can do that!"

"Was that how you fell out with them?" Michael said. "Was your quarrel with the Dowager Marchioness, rather than the marquess?"

"Mother insulted Letitia," Charles said with dignity. "I will not repeat what was said, but it was unconscionable in a lady to speak so of her daughter-in-law. I insisted upon an apology, but she refused. So I told Rowland that I would accept an apology from him, on Mother's behalf, and if no apology was forthcoming, then I wanted nothing more to do with any of them, and I have held to that vow ever since. I will tolerate no slight against my wife."

"That is commendable, Charles," Lady Plummer said, "but what will you do now? If you are guardian to the new marquess, you must go there at once, surely."

"Oh yes," Charles said, a slow smile creeping across his face. "At once. At first light tomorrow. May I borrow the travelling carriage?"

"Naturally, dear. Anything we can do to help. Those poor fatherless children... you must go to them at once."

"They have their mother," Sir Owen said mildly. "They are hardly orphans."

"Oh, but Cressy has not the backbone of a mouse," Letitia said. "She is the poorest creature, with no spirit at all. Charles, you must go instantly to rescue Verwood and Lord Marcellus from the dowager's clutches. Oh — he is not Verwood. The boy is Lord Barrowford now. Heavens! A marquess at eighteen! Our duty is clear. I must go and give the orders... Charles? Shall we?"

And off they rushed, although what they expected to do so late in the day was beyond Michael's ability to fathom.

"Mr Fletcher, will you join us for dinner?" Mother said, with a simpering smile.

"I am hardly dressed for company," he said.

"It is not of the least consequence. You were at Barrowsworth for the funeral and the reading of the will, I take it? Do tell us all about it."

Fletcher understood the arrangement — since he had had the temerity to disrupt dinner, the least he could do in compensation was relate all the events of the last week or two surrounding the death of the Fifth Marquess of Barrowford. Being a well-brought-up young man who understood the deal, he divested himself of his greatcoat, and sat beside Mother, telling her a great many colourful details. His wife had been notified of her brother's illness, and Fletcher had gone to Barrowsworth in her stead, in time to see the final decline and death of the marquess, staying on for the reading of the will. When the terms had become known, and the dowager marchioness had exploded at the idea of Charles as guardian, it was the new marquess, just eighteen years of age, who had dispatched Fletcher south to fetch Charles.

"You understand, I am sure, Lady Plummer, why it was necessary to interrupt your meal," Fletcher said.

"Of course, of course," Mother murmured. "What else could you do? Perfectly understandable, and such interesting news. What is this Attleton Priory? A large estate, is it?"

It was Sir Owen who answered. "It adjoins Barrowsworth, and was to have been for Charles and Letitia, but somehow it never came off, and they ended up here, instead."

"And now they have it after all," Lady Plummer said. "Most satisfactory. I could not be more pleased for them, and if they go and live there, then you may have your own book room back, Sir Owen. Yes, I call that a very satisfactory outcome."

"But Letitia will go away," Patricia wailed. "It will not be the same without Letitia, and she will take the children with her."



“True,” Lady Plummer said. “But it is usual for a woman to move away when she marries. We have enjoyed Letitia’s company for longer than we expected, that is all, but now she will take her proper place amongst her husband’s family, as she should. Jefford, we are ready for the soup to be removed now.”

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As soon as the ladies had withdrawn and Fletcher had gone to his brother’s house for the night, Michael, James and Uncle Morgan gathered around Sir Owen to discuss this interesting development over the port.

“It will be very good for Lord Charles to have a purpose in his life,” Sir Owen said. “Lacking a career or the expectation of an inheritance, he was always a little lost, I felt, especially regarding the estrangement with his family.”

“Now he can take his revenge on them as much as he pleases,” James said, grinning. “What fun he will have!”

“I hope he will not be unkind,” Sir Owen said. “This is a new beginning, an opportunity to set aside the differences of the past and start afresh on a more noble course.”

“You are an optimist, Father,” James said, shaking his head.

“Such a change for him... for both of them,” Michael said. “So unexpected a death at only forty-four! And the poor boy who inherits — such a weighty responsibility at his young age.”

“He is eighteen, not a child,” Sir Owen said. “His father will have prepared him for this moment, so he will only require the lightest of guidance.”

“I am not sure that any preparation is adequate for such a change,” Uncle Morgan said thoughtfully. “It must be a great shock, whenever it comes.”

“The human spirit is very resilient,” Sir Owen said. “If life deals one a surprise, even of an unpleasant nature, one accepts it and carries on. Even if it should be bad enough to knock one down, one picks oneself up and gets on with it. None of us can avoid the unexpected.”

Michael understood him perfectly. “I know what you mean, sir, and I realise I have been slow to pick myself up, but—”

“No, Michael, no,” his father said, with a gentle smile. “I was not referring to you at all, although it is true that you have also encountered a shock or two. No, I thought only of myself. I have had three sudden and unexpected events in my life, all of which knocked me off balance in one way or another. The first was when I met your mother. One glance was enough for me, but not for her — she turned me down twice.”

“No!” Michael said. “Why would she do so? But I beg your pardon, this is very personal. I should not have asked.”

“We are family here, so why should you not know? She was not in love with me, you see. It took me a long, long time to convince her, but I knew what I wanted, so I persevered and won my treasure in the end. The second shock was when your Uncle Cecil died. That was a less pleasant shock.”

“You had to leave the army and come home to be the heir,” Michael said. “I can see how that would disrupt your life. But what was the third shock? If it was not my trouble, what was it?”

“Surely you can guess?” Sir Owen said.

It was James who answered. “Grandfather dying, and discovering the extent of our debts. I remember that meeting with the lawyers from London — your face was grey, Father, positively grey.”

“I had had no idea, that was what shocked me the most. We had gone on for years living as if we were rich as Croesus, and all the time the debts were growing. Yes, that was the greatest blow.”

Michael sat choked with misery. He could have resolved that problem if he had only married Amelia. The one task his family had ever asked of him, and he had failed utterly.

“But see how well it has turned out,” Sir Owen went on complacently. “We are snug here at the Manor, our finances are sound and James has taken steps to secure the Plummer line. It is all very pleasing.”

“How can you say that?” Michael said. “We have lost the Park — our home!”

“This is even more our home,” his father said. “I do not regret the Park one iota. It caused us nothing but grief in the end, and the attempt to save it even more so. It was wrong of me to put that burden on your shoulders, Michael, to push you to marry Miss Greaves largely for her dowry.”

“Yet you still want me to marry her,” Michael said.

“For yourself, this time. You have been kicking your heels here for far too long. A wife, a family, to be master in your own home... it would do you a world of good, Michael. And you are not indifferent to her, I think. You like her very well.”

“I like her, but I do not love her, Father.”

“Love will grow,” Sir Owen said firmly. “Once you are married and living at Hadlow Hall, you will be perfectly happy, I assure you, and you will very soon forget Mrs Brookes.”

“No,” Michael said calmly. “I shall never forget her. I understand that she is lost to me forever, but I cannot forget her. She is a part of me now.”

James and Uncle Morgan gazed at him sympathetically, but Sir Owen shook his head sadly.

12: Lady Plummer's Ball

Michael waited without impatience for the ball guests to arrive. He was very calm, which surprised him. How could he be so easy in his mind when he would soon see Margarita again... would *talk* to her? Perhaps it was that very certainty that made him composed. Deep inside him was a tiny ball of warmth, the inner glow that only Margarita brought him. He was happy, he realised. This was what it felt like to be happy, to know that she would come and he would be with her for a brief time.

The Kelshaws were among the earliest arrivals. Amelia simpered as she curtsied to him.

“Miss Greaves, how delightful you look,” he said. Then, remembering his instructions, he added, “Might I be so fortunate as to secure your hand for the first two dances, if you are not already engaged?”

“I am not engaged, Mr Plummer,” she said, with just the slightest edge in her voice to remind him that she was not engaged in any other way, either.

Michael smiled benignly, and she was obliged by a spate of new arrivals to move on from the receiving line.

The party from the Park was late, so late that the musicians were already warming up for the opening dance. Yet they came, and how proud was Lady Plummer then to receive her titled guests — Lord and Lady Faulkbourne, Lord Albury, Lord and Lady Holmeswood, Sir Hannibal and Lady Caroline Yardley, and the young baronet, Sir Constantin Pluckrose.

Last of all came Margarita. Michael’s heart swelled at the sight of her, demure in dove grey, her hair properly dressed for the occasion with a pearl bandeau and ear drops. She looked magnificent, but he could not say so. Impossible to speak at all at such a moment!

Instead, he lifted her gloved hand to his lips, drinking in the sight of her.

“Mr Plummer,” she said, but her eyes twinkled mischievously. Her eyes! How he adored the way they sparkled.

He laughed, relaxing. “How lovely to see you here. We will talk later... I have to dance first.”

That made her laugh, too. “I look forward to our talk. Enjoy the dance.”

Then she was gone, swept towards the retiring room to leave her cloak and then into the great hall. An evening in her company! Such a wonderful treat, another unforgettable memory to store away with the others. He watched her retreating back with the utmost pleasure, the little ball of warmth inside him expanding.

“We will move into the ball room,” Mother said rather grandly, when the last of the guests had arrived.

The medieval great hall had been renamed in honour of the occasion, and transformed, too, the austere stone walls hidden by tall mirrors, silk hangings and swags of flowers, with candles everywhere, masses of them reflecting dazzling light from the mirrors into every corner of the room. Michael stood on the threshold, gazing around. Where was she? Ah, there she was, standing a little aside from the cluster of titled guests from the Park.

He smiled. All was well, for Margarita was there.

Turning his eye elsewhere, he saw Letitia chattering excitedly to Lady Frederica Kelshaw, while Lord Charles puffed out his chest. James had Julia on his arm, standing in a big circle of Fletchers. The Faulkbournes stood a little apart, as Mother introduced some local worthies to them. Lord Albury was talking to Patricia... he must be asking her to dance, for she was shaking her head with that bland smile on her face. His good manners led him to ask the host's daughter to open the ball, but Patricia was no dancer. He accepted his dismissal with good grace, and bowed neatly.

Michael's eye moved on, caught sight of Amelia, stopped. Anthony Landers was standing rather close to her, saying something which made her giggle and blush. Why did girls giggle so? It was a mystery to Michael, but of one thing he was very sure — a wife who giggled would be very tedious to live with. He was glad that Amelia never giggled with him... did she? No, he was sure of it. He would have noticed, certainly, for he could feel his jaw clenching just watching her now.

Landers saw him looking and waved him across, then bowed to him. “Come to collect your partner, Plummer? I hope you do not plan to keep her all to yourself. There are others who would be delighted to enjoy Miss

Greaves' company for a pair of dances.”

“I have secured Miss Greaves' hand for the first two, but she is perfectly free to accept other partners after that.”

“There you are, you see,” Landers said, turning to Amelia. “Now may I have the honour of your hand for the two next?”

“I should be delighted, Mr Landers.” She simpered again as she spoke. So much simpering! Michael sighed.

Someone must have given the signal, for Lord Albury was leading Rosie Fletcher onto the floor, and there was a general movement towards the set.

“Shall we?” Michael said, offering his arm.

She accepted, allowing him to lead her onto the floor, where several couples stood aside for them to take their places high in the set beside Lord Albury. Amelia nodded to him, and smiled broadly when he bowed to her.

“You must introduce me to all these guests from the Park, Michael,” she whispered. “The earl and countess... I should love to meet them. Will you?”

“You would do better to ask Landers when you dance with him,” Michael said. “They are his parents, after all.”

She turned speculative eyes on Landers, who arrived with Veronica Kelshaw just then, squeezing in between Michael and Lord Albury. Below them, the places were taken by various of the Landers and Fletcher families, and then some of the less prominent families, and almost before the set was fully formed, the music began and they were dancing.

The advantage of being so high in the set was that they were dancing at once, so there was little need for conversation. There was plenty of opportunity for flirtation as they mingled with the other dancers, however, and he was able to observe Amelia practising her skills on Anthony Landers. Not that he minded. If she were inclined to bestow her eighty thousand pounds on the second son of an earl, Michael would drink their health at the wedding with sincere good will.

And with that thought, he realised the truth — if she could flirt so outrageously with another man and Michael did not even care, then they were

not suited for marriage. The idea floated away from him and vanished without the slightest struggle in his mind, leaving him as free as a bird. He would not marry Amelia! He had escaped... and then he wondered how he had entertained the idea even for five minutes.

He knew the answer to that — his father had asked him to. Oh, he had appeared to offer the choice. *‘Would you like to see her again, Michael... what do you think?’* But it had seemed like an order, to Michael. What a milksop he had been all these years, cravenly doing whatever he was told, and all to please a father who did not understand him in the least. *‘Once you are married and living at Hadlow Hall, you will be perfectly happy, I assure you, and you will very soon forget Mrs Brookes.’* As if he could ever forget her! Even now, he knew precisely where she was in the room, catching little glimpses of that grey gown or the pearls in her hair as the movements of the dance ebbed and flowed.

Sir Owen had said many times that all he wanted was for Michael to be happy. Well, he would take him at his word, and happiness was not to be found with Amelia, not with a girl who giggled and flirted with other men right under his nose. Was she trying to make him jealous? But he was not. He cared nothing for Amelia. He wished her no harm, and sincerely hoped she would find whatever it was that would bring her joy, but it would not be Michael. He had that little ball of warmth inside him which told him precisely where his own source of joy lay. He had always known it, deep inside, but now for the first time, he acknowledged it openly. Margarita was the true love of his life and no one else would do.

So he danced and smiled and watched Amelia flirting with Landers whenever the turns of the movement brought them within range, and he was entirely happy. When the dance ended, and he returned her to Lady Frederica, Landers arrived with his partner and had no sooner bowed his thanks to her than he turned his attention eagerly on Amelia. Michael walked away without a backward glance.

Margarita was sitting quietly at the side of the room, halfway between the Fletcher family and the Landers, but not a part of either. In all the swirling movement going on around her, as dancers came and went, footmen milled about with trays of drinks and chattering groups ebbed and flowed, she

was a still pool of serenity, her hands neatly folded in her lap. Only her eyes bobbed this way and that, taking in the scene.

Michael could not resist... did not want to resist. She was the sun and he was inexorably drawn to her, to the glorious warmth of her presence. The rest of the room, the music, the dancing, the chatter of scores of raised voices and the chink of wine glasses, all of it faded away and there was only that grey pool of serenity. He sat down beside her.

“The third dance, Mr Plummer,” she said, with a little smile. “Wasn’t that the arrangement for our talk?”

“Was it?” he said. “I can be silent for the second dance, if you like, and then we can talk during the third.”

She laughed and shook her head. “We may talk now, if you have no commitment to dance.”

“I have no commitment,” he said, conveniently forgetting that he was supposed to ask one of the Kelshaw girls.

“Then I am listening,” she said. “What do you want to say to me?”

So calm! She had not always been so, but then he was calm, too. He felt the pull, still wanted to sit closer to her, to touch her, to lose himself in her kisses... but he was in control now. He would not break down. He would say what he came to say... what did he want to say?

A thousand questions spun in his mind. There was so much to ask — he wanted to know *everything*, every little thing that had happened to her from the moment she left Hadlow Hall. He was thirsty for knowledge of her, and no detail was too trivial. But he could not think clearly enough to make a sensible beginning. Instead, the one question that haunted him above all others rose in his mind and burst out of him.

“Why did you marry again?”

She sighed. “Michael, I can’t explain it to you. Such matters are private. The only answer I can give you is that taking another husband was the right thing to do at the time, and I don’t regret it. However, I can’t talk about it. You must accept that.”

Deep breath. Well. She was determined to have secrets. So be it. He

was still calm. How astonishing to be so calm when she was here with him. “Why did you leave Hadlow?”

“Michael! I had to leave, surely you can see that? It was impossible!”

“Why was it impossible?”

“What happened at Hadlow... it was a kind of madness, like being sucked into a whirlpool and being helpless to resist. But it wasn't real! We'd known each other a matter of days, and you'd been courting Amelia for months. That was where your future was, and I was just a distraction. So I left, leaving you free to marry Amelia, and truly I wish you'd done so. It's hard for me to understand why you didn't, after coming so close, but I sincerely hope you will do so now.”

“Do you?”

She turned sharply to face him. “Of course! It's an eligible match, and she expects it. Michael, she loves you! It would be cruel to abandon her now.”

By way of answer, he gestured to the set now forming for the next dance, where Amelia was still giggling at Landers. “Look at her,” he said. “Is that a woman who is in love with me? What she was in love with was the prospect of becoming Lady Plummer, but she has discovered that even without a title of his own, a younger son has certain attractions, in this case, a multitude of titled relations.”

“You think Amelia is dazzled by rank? I can't believe... no, I'm sure...” But her voice trailed off into frowning silence.

“She has spent the past two and a half years being repelled by the merchants' sons of Bristol and the clerics of Hereford,” he murmured. “Then she came here, to try her luck with me again.”

“Because she loves you... surely?” Margarita said.

“More likely because a future baronet will do, failing anything better. But with Landers, she is seeing that she can have something more than a country gentleman of no particular distinction. If she plays her cards well, she can have the son of an earl and spend half the year mingling with the nobility. And he is handsome and personable, too, a great improvement on me.”

Margarita laughed. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Michael. I expect when you look at your countenance in the glass, you frown and make yourself seem very severe, but that’s not how you are in public. You look anxious sometimes, but when you shake off your worries, you’re a fine looking man.”

“Oh.” He could not keep the astonishment from his tone. That he was not handsome was one of the immovable tenets of his life. They were not an especially good-looking family, truth be told, but his father had a military bearing that made him imposing, James had a good-humoured countenance and even Uncle Morgan, before he had acquired a certain stoutness, had been a well-built, muscular man, whereas Michael was too thin, his nose too long, his hair already trying to recede. He had always assumed he was disappointing to his father in looks as well as in every other way.

But perhaps it was merely Margarita’s preference that made her think him handsome. Perhaps the rest of the world saw the undistinguished nobody, and she alone saw something more. She had done so once, of that he had been sure, which was why her betrayal had cut him so deeply. But now? No, for her affections were bestowed elsewhere, so her opinion could not be coloured by fondness. She must truly think him handsome.

While he was still digesting that, she said, “Your father told me you were ill... afterwards. Are you quite well now?”

“Oh yes. I am perfectly well now.” And it was true. The ball of warmth had expanded as they talked, and now it half-filled him, reaching even his fingers and toes, normally so restless but now quiescent. And his mind was quiescent, too — clear and untroubled at last.

“I’m glad of it,” she said. “I never meant... well, my intentions were good.”

“Where did you go to, when you left Hadlow?”

“To friends in Harrogate, Jane and Nick Brookes.”

“Ah. Mr Brookes.”

“Jane was an old friend from Bath. She and her widowed mother were seamstresses, making fashionable gowns for those not wealthy enough to

afford the expensive *modistes* of Milsom Street.”

“So that is where your stylish clothes came from,” he said, smiling.

His words brought another laugh. “No, I was not one of their patrons, Michael. I worked for them, doing fancy embroidery for a few pennies a time. It helped them make the gowns look special and the pennies helped me. I have never been wealthy enough to employ a seamstress.”

“I remember, you always had your embroidery frame in your hand. Do you still embroider? When I saw you the other day, there was no frame to be seen.”

“I cannot afford embroidery thread any more. All those different colours one needs. In Bath, Jane supplied them and Amelia was kind enough to indulge me, but now I can’t replace them once they’re used. I am reduced to shades of grey and brown, and there are only so many mushrooms one can add to a frill or a handkerchief.”

Her eyes twinkled at him. Lord, how he had missed those eyes! Such an unusual colour, a deep green, but so lively and mischievous, sparkling with good humour. And her magnificent auburn hair, uncovered tonight, with a few loose tendrils framing her beautiful face. But she was married... he could not forget that. She was married...

Seeing him struck dumb again, she went on, “Anyway, I caught Jane and Nick at a bad time. I knew their mother had died, and Jane had moved north to care for an elderly uncle who promised to leave his house to them when he died. Which he did, together with a mountain of debts. I had expected them to be very comfortably established, and able to shelter me for a time until I could find work. Instead, I found them in the process of selling up and finding work themselves. It was... a difficult time.” She paused, displaying a little agitation for the first time. “Eventually, Jane took a position as housekeeper in a large establishment, Nick went out to India and I... I became companion to Mrs Landers, where I have been for a little over two years.”

He nodded, not asking but seeing the gap in the story. Somewhere in that brief window between her departure from Hadlow and arrival at Mrs Landers’ door, no more than a few weeks by this account, she had fallen in

love with and married Nick Brookes. That, no doubt, was the cause of her agitation, the memory of that time of courtship, so happy and yet so brief. He was half a world away in India, leaving her to fend for herself, and yet she was bound to him. Her loyalty, her duty, her affection were all for him.

There was nothing for Michael. No, that was not quite true. She could never be his wife, but she could be his friend. She could sit and talk to him, as she was doing now, and fill him with this secret warmth that steadied him and brought him contentment. He was different when he was with her. He could not quite account for it, for although she was beautiful and quick-minded and good-natured, the same could be said of many women. What was it about this one in particular that made him love her so much?

Did love need a reason? Perhaps it just *was*, a thing that happened to one out of the blue, like the Marquess of Barrowford dying and making Lord Charles guardian to his children. Then one simply accepts it and carries on. So Sir Owen had said. *'Even if it should be bad enough to knock one down, one picks oneself up and gets on with it.'*

Michael had — eventually — picked himself up after Margarita had left, even if he had not quite got on with it. But now she was back, and this time, he would do better. This time, he knew precisely what he wanted.

He wanted Margarita in his life. Not as his wife, for that was impossible, but as his friend. He could not tamely let her go back to Carlisle and out of his life. It was unthinkable. He would find a way to keep her close.

He had no idea how he would manage it, but he was determined not to let go of her this time.

13: Awaiting The Carriage

Margarita was astonished at the change in Michael. He sat beside her calmly, arms folded, half turned towards her, conversing like a rational man. If he occasionally ran out of words, that was just his way, or perhaps the shock of seeing her again. There were no impassioned speeches, no grasping for her hands, no attempt to see her alone to press kisses upon her. Kisses which she found irresistible, it must be confessed. Michael was altogether irresistible to her.

Most of the time he was placid and there was only a shade more colour in his face and perhaps a softness in his eye to suggest some heightened feeling within. But at any mention of Nick, the little frown appeared on his forehead and the anxious Michael re-emerged. Poor Michael! But it was impossible to tell him the truth about that. Nick was more necessary than ever to her now, keeping her safe and sane.

The second pair of dances ended, the lines of the set melting as the dancers drifted away in chattering groups. Margarita saw Amelia on Anthony Landers' arm being introduced to Lord and Lady Faulkbourne, and then some of the other Landers, saw her deep curtsies and the excited expression on her face. She was young, and had been little in the world, so she had never managed to mask her emotions.

Margarita had long since learnt to hide her true feelings behind a smiling face. When one was poor and in need, it was necessary to be discreet in dealing with those with power over the lower orders, and the skill was instinctive now. She'd suffered just one moment of weakness when she'd first heard the name of Chadwell Park mentioned — she'd almost swooned, to her shame. Since then, she'd kept herself under perfect control, and no one to look at her would see the turmoil inside, or so she hoped.

Michael stayed by her side through the pause between dances, but when the next set began to form, she said, "Thank you for your company, Michael, but I won't keep you from the dance any longer."

She half hoped and also feared that he would protest, but he rose smoothly and said, "I am glad we talked, but there is much more to say. May I call upon you?"

How she longed to say yes! If only she dared... but it would be madness. He was as good as betrothed to Amelia, and it wouldn't be right. She'd been a distraction for him once, but she'd learnt her lesson.

"That wouldn't be a good idea," she said.

"If you wish to talk, I usually walk in the woods near the west gate of the Park before breakfast... between eight and nine." He bowed and was gone. Not long afterwards, she saw him leading a girl onto the floor, chatting easily to her.

This was a new and very welcome Michael. Their dealings at Hadlow had been characterised by passionate interludes, with endless agonising hours in company pretending that nothing at all was happening, and she was every bit as much to blame as Michael. They had been equally drawn to each other, one of those inexplicable attractions that was impossible to ignore. At the end of a week, she realised that it couldn't go on, and left... or tried to leave.

She exhaled a shuddering breath. The memory of that night still left her weak... but that was more than two years ago, and if her feelings hadn't changed, it seemed that Michael's had. All the intensity had vanished, to be replaced by a tranquillity she'd never seen in him before. It was wonderful that he'd recovered so well. After the first shock of seeing her again so unexpectedly, he'd been perfectly composed. Whatever madness had consumed them once, he, at least, was no longer gripped by it.

Did she have the courage to see him again? And alone, perhaps? One more walk in the woods with him, albeit in the depths of winter, would be the greatest blessing she could take away from her ill-starred visit to the south.

The dancing started again, and Margarita went to find Mrs Landers, to see if she needed anything.

"Not a thing, Margaret," she said cheerfully, looking happier than she had for an age. "Go away, do, so that we may talk about you more freely."

Mrs Fletcher, who was sitting beside her, smiled a little self-consciously. Clearly, she was unused to Mrs Landers' forthright ways.

A circuit of the room to make the same enquiries of the rest of the Landers ladies brought calls on her services, and for a little while she was

kept busy running back and forth for lemonade, a shawl, a missing fan, a glass of punch, another glass of punch, and finally two more shawls, as the draughts in the great hall began to make themselves felt.

By this time the supper dance was under way, and the time was rapidly approaching when she must leave. She sat again, this time in a more conspicuous position, so that she might be easily found when the promised carriage to convey her back to Chadwell Park should be at the door. Sitting watching the dancing, her feet tapped away merrily. She had never learnt to dance at school, for her father had only been able to afford the basic lessons. Amelia had offered to teach her, but it wasn't appropriate for one of her station to put herself alongside her betters. Still, she enjoyed watching very much. Her eyes automatically noted Michael with one of the Fletcher girls — Bella, the youngest, barely fifteen but very composed.

Amelia... where was Amelia? There she was, with Anthony Landers again. That was a worry. Was she transferring her allegiance? Michael would lose her if he wasn't careful, and then all his efforts would be in vain. She checked herself. It wasn't her concern. All she had to do was keep out of the way, and leave Michael free to marry Amelia.

The dance ended and there was a general movement towards the supper rooms. Gradually the great hall emptied, and still Margarita sat on, waiting. Only a few stragglers remained when Sir Owen came in at a trot.

"Mrs Brookes, my apologies for the delay. There has been some confusion in the stables, but the horses are being put to at this moment and will be here in about a quarter of an hour. Will you come and have a bite of supper while you wait?"

"Oh, no, no... I could not. I shall wait here."

"Indeed you will not. Please, do come. You will not encounter Michael. There are three supper rooms, and he is in the furthest one, so you may venture into the nearest without any fear of awkwardness."

She was hungry enough to allow her scruples to be overcome. Sir Owen took her into a pleasant parlour laid out with as many tables as could be squeezed in. The room was crowded, but he secured her a chair beside some people she did not recognise, fetched her a glass of wine and went off to fill a

plate for her.

How pleasant it was to be waited on in this way, as if she were a lady. The people at her table smiled at her, told her the lobster patties were very good and to be sure to try the syllabub. They had local accents, so she guessed they were neighbours but not of the first rank. She felt comfortable with them. A boy of no more than sixteen jumped up and offered to fetch her some patties at once. She smiled back and told him she would be perfectly happy with whatever Sir Owen provided. That was true enough. Ever since that terrifying time after Papa had died and she'd truly thought she would end in the work house, she'd been grateful for every meal, however plain or elaborate. Every day when she was fed and warm and slept in a comfortable bed was a blessing.

Sir Owen returned with two laden plates. "I was not sure what you liked, so I brought a little of everything," he said. "Enjoy your supper, Mrs Brookes. I will return when your carriage is at the door."

She wasn't destined to enjoy it for long. The Landers family had taken several of the most prominent tables, where footmen buzzed around them like bees with dishes of this and that. Since Anthony Landers had secured Amelia's hand for the supper dance, she was there too, laughing immoderately and chattering away, her colour high. It wasn't long before she noticed Margarita, and her face changed, her expression suspicious.

Under the pretext of visiting the table bearing the punch bowl, she drew nearer to Margarita. "Still here?" she said without preamble. Although she smiled, there was a hard edge to her voice. Her eyes skittered over the others at the table, assessing them.

"I'll be leaving as soon as the carriage is brought round. Sir Owen very kindly offered me supper while I wait."

"Oh." She licked her lips, and again glanced at the others sitting there, pretending not to listen but drinking in every word. "I thought you might have changed your mind about... about *things*."

About Michael. That was what she meant. Margarita could set her mind at rest on that score, at least. "No, indeed. Nothing has changed... nothing at all." To emphasise the point, she shifted her left hand, ungloved while she

ate, to a more prominent position. Amelia could hardly fail to see her wedding ring and be reminded that Margarita was no threat to her.

“Well... good,” was all she said. And then, eyes narrowing, she added, “See that it does not.”

She returned to Anthony Landers’ side, leaving Margarita fuming. As if Amelia had any right to tell Margarita what to do! Besides, if Amelia wanted Michael, she needed to stop flirting with Mr Landers.

Margarita had barely taken another mouthful of partridge pie — such a welcome treat! — before Michael came in and looked around the room. There was no time even to turn her head away, before he saw her and started. “Margarita? I thought you would be gone by now.”

“The carriage was delayed. I’ll be leaving at any moment.”

Before he could speak, Amelia was at his side, smiling up at him, clinging to his arm proprietorially. “Michael! Were you looking for me?”

“Just... just wondering if you are being looked after.”

“I am, but I am very glad to see you. Will you come and join us? Lady Faulkbourne is telling a most interesting story of the Queen.”

“Oh, but... I am with... really, Amelia, I only came to see if you were all right.”

But Amelia’s willpower to tow him away from Margarita was stronger than his willpower to resist, and with just one glance behind him, he surrendered to her greater resolution.

Margarita smiled affectionately at his retreating back. When those two were married, Amelia would always have the upper hand. Michael was altogether too compliant.

“She’s very pretty,” the mother of the local family said.

“If you like yellow hair,” the boy of sixteen said dismissively. “Prefer auburn, myself.” His eyes settled speculatively on Margarita.

Clearly, it was time to withdraw. Gathering up gloves, fan and shawl, she said to the local lady, “If Sir Owen looks for me, please tell him I’ll be waiting in the entrance hall.”

She collected her cloak from the retiring room and made her way to the front door. As with many medieval buildings, this opened directly into the great hall, so a carved wooden screen had been erected from the door to shield the room from draughts, and provide a passageway to the inner hall. There were chairs placed along this side of the screen, so Margarita sat and patiently awaited her carriage.

On the other side of the screen, a few low voices emanated from those returning to the great hall from supper, ready for more dancing or heading back to the library for cards. Footsteps passed to and fro, and the chink of glasses suggested that the footmen were tidying up. Then, abruptly, a low male voice just on the other side of the screen.

“It will not do. She is as good as engaged.”

A louder voice replied. “She hardly behaves like an engaged woman.”

“How she behaves is no concern of yours. It is your own behaviour of which I speak. I cannot like it, Anthony.”

“I danced with her, that is all. Is that so outrageous, at a ball?”

“Twice, and one of those the supper dance.”

“She practically demanded I do so, that she might rub shoulders with a titled family for once, and it is not a great deal to ask, is it? A small treat for a girl who seems to have led a very sheltered life.” He sighed. “Stop looking at me in that disapproving way, Red. She is just amusing herself. There is nothing to it, nothing to disturb Plummer, anyway. I have danced with her twice, so that is the end of it, and we shall be gone altogether in a few days, and she can marry Plummer whenever she chooses. It is nothing to me, I assure you. Have you said your piece? Can we stop pretending to look for this scarf, now?”

With that, their footsteps tapped softly across the floor and vanished. Margarita smiled at this brotherly exchange, Lord Albury playing the future earl to perfection and keeping a watchful eye on the younger members of the family. His brother was right, though. Amelia was merely trying her wings, so little tested before now, and taking the chance to enjoy a higher level of society than rustics, shipbuilders and clerics. It was natural for her to be a little distracted, but she loved Michael, and that was where her future lay.

Behind the screen, the number of voices rose and the musicians began to warm up their instruments, but still Margarita sat on. A movement further down the passage caused her to look up hopefully, expecting Sir Owen, but it was Mrs Fletcher's stylish form gliding towards her.

"Still here, my dear? I shall bear you company for a while, if I may." In a whisper, she added, "I am evading Mrs Landers. She is like mustard, a little goes a long way. I cannot imagine how you put up with her. Is she very tyrannical?"

Margarita laughed. "Not at all, or at least no more so than any employer towards a paid companion. I've no complaint to make, I assure you."

"You are very diplomatic, Mrs Brookes, but she is less so, I fear. She has been spreading unpleasant rumours about you."

Margarita's eyebrows rose. "What can she possibly have to say about me?"

"It appears that she wrote to the East India Company to enquire about Mr Brookes — Mr Nicholas Brookes, do I have that right? They told her that Mr Brookes was indeed an employee of theirs, but that he had no wife. Naturally she puts the worst possible construction on that, instead of supposing that a big company like the East India might conceivably not know every last detail of its employees' lives, especially if the wife was left behind in England."

She paused, but Margarita had nothing to say. Let Mrs Landers speculate as much as she wished, it couldn't change anything.

Mrs Fletcher went on, her voice low enough not to be heard by the dancers gathering behind the screen, "Mrs Brookes, I have no wish to pry. Your secrets are your own, but there may be very sound reasons why a single woman, or a widow, as you were, may choose to assume the mantle of marriage. If Mr Brookes left you in a difficult position, with no more than the promise of marriage, then—"

Margarita jumped up and walked across to the window, leaning her forehead against the cold glass. Oh, where was that carriage?

Mrs Fletcher followed her. "I beg your pardon. If your affection is all

for Mr Brookes, then—” She frowned, puzzling it out. Then her face cleared. “Mrs Brookes, let me say one thing and then I shall be done. If — I say only *if* — you happen not to be married to Mr Brookes, whatever the circumstances, then you have every right to marry elsewhere. Being a companion to a woman like Mrs Landers is a precarious career. Better by far to be the wife of a respectable gentleman, and since Mr Michael Plummer clearly loves you and—”

“No,” Margarita said quietly. “He does not love me. Oh, he did once, and perhaps there’s some residual affection there, but the passion is gone. His future is with Amelia Greaves, not with me.”

“But if you were to tell him the truth?”

“That’s the last thing I could do! Oh, pray say no more! Believe me, I’ve gone over every possibility in my mind, and the very best, indeed the *only* option is for Michael to marry Amelia.”

“Does not Michael deserve the right to choose his own future?”

“He’s already chosen it. He’s as good as betrothed to Amelia, and I won’t allow him to be distracted by any sense of obligation towards me. Truly, it’s better this way.”

“I can see that your mind is made up,” Mrs Fletcher said. “If ever you wish to talk, my dear, I am very willing to listen, but you may be very sure that nothing you say will be repeated.”

“Thank you, you are very good,” Margarita said.

At that moment Sir Owen appeared with the news that the carriage was at last on its way round from the stables, and to Margarita’s relief the awkward conversation was at an end.

14: After Supper

Michael escaped from Amelia as soon as he was able, and in truth she was more interested in her new friends than in him. Margarita had gone from the supper room, but discovering from Jefford that she had not yet left, Michael went into the almost empty great hall, and crossed to the far end. Beyond the screens that shielded the room from the front door was a deep window overlooking the moonlit drive, and here he sat, largely hidden by the curtains, waiting for Margarita to leave.

A few people passed by, not seeing him, but two came and stood nearby. He recognised the voice of Lord Albury, as he berated his brother for flirting with Amelia. Not that he was flirting at all, it seemed to Michael, having seen Landers' response when introduced to Amelia. Yes, there had been a very definite and immediate attraction. Now he had danced with her twice before supper, a very clear statement of intent. Landers professed disinterest, but Michael did not believe him.

As for Amelia, Landers had said that she was just amusing herself, and perhaps that was so. Who could tell what went on in her head? If she liked Landers, she may have him with Michael's good will.

The Landers brothers went away again. No carriage appeared on the drive, but gradually, in twos and threes and then in a noisy gaggle, the great hall began to fill again in anticipation of more dancing. The musicians returned and began to tune their instruments, and still there was no sign of a carriage. Michael hoped that Margarita had found a warm spot to wait.

He must talk to her again soon. There was no knowing when she might return north with Mrs Landers. Lord Albury's betrothal to Rosie Fletcher was to become official in two days' time, on Christmas Eve, and they would not travel on Christmas Day, he presumed. But the day after that was Saturday, a sennight since their arrival and that was when they might leave. Three days, then... that was all the time he had to find a way to keep Margarita close to him. He could not bear it if she were to go back to Carlisle! So far away... so desperately far away.

Finally, the carriage appeared, drew up outside and awaited its passenger. She appeared, accompanied by a footman to open the door and Sir

Owen to hand her solicitously in. But just as the door was about to be closed, Jefford came rushing out, and a moment later she descended again and returned to the house.

Now what? But the carriage stayed, waiting patiently. Twice the coachman walked the horses down the drive and back, to keep them warm. Eventually, Jefford and the footman reappeared, and then the reason for the delay could be seen, for Mrs Landers emerged from the house, with Margarita in her wake carrying an assortment of rugs and cushions, then another footman with a hot brick. With much fuss, Mrs Landers was loaded into the carriage and all arranged to her satisfaction. Margarita hopped in beside her and at long last the door was closed and the carriage moved off into the night. Michael watched it for as long as he could, until his eyes were only imagining the receding lamps. Then, with a sigh, he turned his attention back to the ball.

The dancing was well under way again. Amelia was dancing with Horace Bellingham, but she still contrived to flirt with Anthony Landers, whose partner, Angie Fletcher, seemed to be egging him on. Lord Albury was gallantly dancing with the youngest Miss Frye, who was so flustered by the attention of a viscount that she made a mistake on one step in three, and was scarlet with embarrassment.

Standing nearby, a slight smile on his face, was the young baronet, Sir Constantin Pluckrose, his eye fixed on Bella Fletcher. She was dancing in lively fashion with Mr Knight, the future husband of Lady Georgiana Landers, but every once in a while she glanced at Sir Con, and her smile widened a little.

“She dances very well,” Michael said. “The Fletcher sisters have a natural grace.”

“Indeed they do,” Sir Con said. “They are as much pleasure to watch as to partner. I have already had my two dances with Bella, and must shortly do my duty by the other young ladies, but for this one dance I allow myself the indulgence of admiring her from a distance.”

Michael smiled at this openness. “You like the lady, I think.”

“*Like!* Oh yes, I like her, there is no secret in that. I have hopes... strong

hopes, for she is of the same mind.”

“She is very young. You are both very young to be settling your future.”

“That is true. Too young to think of marriage yet. She is barely fifteen — this is her first ball, and I would have her see a little of the world before she ties herself to me, or to anyone. She must have at least one season in London, on that I am determined, and if she finds someone she likes better than me... well, I must bear it as best I can. But if not, then in three years’ time, when I shall be of age and she will be eighteen, then I shall pay my addresses.”

“You are very certain of your own heart,” Michael said, rather envious of a man of eighteen who spoke with such assurance. “Are you not afraid that your affections may waver in time?”

Sir Con turned for the first time to face him fully. “Sometimes one just knows that this is the perfect person to make one’s life complete,” he said, with surprising earnestness. “It is as if I have always known her. When I am with her, I am happy... not merely contented, or lacking any source of unhappiness, but filled with an overwhelming joy. She makes me whole — I cannot describe it any better than that, if that makes any sense at all.”

“Oh yes, it makes sense.” *She makes me whole...* that was precisely it! Margarita made him whole! He had never thought of it in quite that way before, but it was utterly true. “But does it not distress you to wait for these three years to pass? It must seem like a lifetime to you both.”

“It will pass. Every day is a step nearer the fulfilment of all my hopes. So long as I may see her sometimes... that is why we make our attachment known to the family, so that they will understand that we will not do anything foolish. There will be no elopement. I have explained to Mr Fletcher my plans. In February next year I shall be nineteen, and at Lady Day I shall return to Mountsea Hall, my ancestral home. The tenants have been given notice to quit. Over the next few years I shall set myself the task of learning to manage my estates, and preparing the house to receive Bella, if she is still of the same mind. All this I have laid before Mr Fletcher, and he agrees that I may visit Bella three times a year.”

“And that is enough for you — three visits a year?” Michael said

wonderingly. “But at least when you are apart, you know you will soon meet again. That would make the separation a shade easier to bear.”

“Exactly so, and I have an example within my own family. When my father died eight years ago, my mother took me away from Mountsea Hall, which is in County Durham, to live with her family in Worcestershire. There she married my step-father, whose family lived on the adjoining estate. But theirs was not a late blossoming of affection. My mother and step-father fell in love when they were very young, but he was only a third son and ineligible then for my mother, so she was married to my father. For almost thirty years my mother and step-father were apart, but every year in the spring she came south to visit her family and the two met once again. My step-father told me that those annual visits were all that kept him from utter despair. Nothing improper ever occurred between them, not so much as a word was said, but they both knew they were waiting. And now they are together and happy. My situation with Bella is not comparable, for there is no husband in the case, but even if she were to choose another man, I should be able to endure it if I could still see her from time to time.”

Sir Con turned his attention back to his beloved once more, now working her way back up the set, and Michael drifted away, leaving the young man to his pleasant thoughts.

Oh, to be eighteen and have one’s life mapped out with such precision! Michael could only admire such clear-sightedness in one so young. For himself, he knew only that he could not bear to let Margarita go again. Now that she had so unexpectedly returned to his life, he was determined never to lose her again. The little ball of warmth inside him was too precious to be extinguished once again.

Michael’s eye fell on Lady Frederica Kelshaw and her younger daughter sitting nearby, both glowering at him. He had no idea why, although Lady Frederica glowered habitually so there was nothing to be deduced from that. Victoria was probably only cross that she had no partner. The ball of warmth inside Michael still glowed strongly enough to render him unusually magnanimous. He approached Victoria and bowed.

“Miss Kelshaw, might I have the honour of your hand for this dance?”

Her face lit up. "Oh, yes! Thank you... although... might we wait until the next, for this set is well advanced?"

"By all means," he said, sitting in the empty chair next to her. "We may talk until then, and if a more agreeable partner should come along, we shall pretend that you are not engaged, for I should not wish you to miss the opportunity to dance with Lord Albury."

"I have already danced with him," she said, smiling. "I enjoyed it, of course, being at the head of the set and so on, and he is very pleasant, but he is no more agreeable than you are, Mr Plummer."

That was a surprising compliment. "Have you enjoyed the ball so far?"

"Oh, yes! It is all wonderful, and I do not even mind sitting out now and then — well, not a great deal, anyway — because it is so amusing to watch everyone else. Have you seen poor Lilian Frye? She dances perfectly well as a rule, but the viscount's presence has addled her brain. Oh dear, she has gone wrong again and now they are all in a sad muddle. You see, we are better off sitting here watching than being caught up in such disorder. Who do you think is the best dancer?"

"Angie Fletcher," he said at once.

"Oh, of the ladies, certainly, but which of the men? Do you not think Horace Bellingham is the most divine dancer? So light on his feet, and such gracefulness! I love to watch him. He is something very important in the government, you know. Not quite the Prime Minister's office, but something very close to it, although naturally he will not tell me of it. State secrets, you see."

"He is secretary to the Captain of the Yeomen of the Guard," Michael said, smiling.

"Oh," she said disappointedly. "Not close to the Prime Minister? The Captain of the Yeomen of the Guard? Well! That is not very grand, secretary to some soldier or other."

"The Earl of Macclesfield, in point of fact."

"An earl... that is not so bad. And he may progress, may he not? He may move to a higher position in time."

“Indeed he may,” Michael said, adding kindly, “He is sure to, for he is a clever fellow, by all accounts.”

“He is,” she said happily. “He certainly is that.”

Michael was happy to indulge her infatuated chatter of Mr Horace Bellingham, a man he cordially disliked. Horace was heir to Sir Hector Bellingham, the local squire, and fancied himself as a rising man, which made him rather disdainful of lower mortals than himself, into which category he firmly placed Michael.

He had his two dances with Victoria, there being no better offers for her hand, and then, the sunshine of Margarita’s return making him benevolent, he wandered off to where Horace Bellingham was loitering in the crowd around Lady Faulkbourne, and playing the gallant to an uninterested Lady Charlotte Landers.

“Evening, Bellingham. I trust you are planning to dance again tonight, for I have just been advised by a certain young lady that you are the finest dancer in the room.”

Bellingham turned his slightly prominent eyes on Michael. “Is that so?” He preened himself slightly, trying not to look smug. “A young lady, eh? And which particular young lady might this be?”

“Miss Victoria Kelshaw.”

“Oh.” He deflated at once, with a slight shrug of one shoulder. “Victoria Kelshaw... well... that is not very...” But he scanned the room as he spoke, then raised his quizzing glass and ogled the lady for some time. “Finest dancer in the room, eh?”

“‘*Divine*’ was the precise word, as I recall. ‘*Graceful*’ came into it, too.”

“Is it so indeed? A discerning young lady. You will excuse me, Plummer, if I...” And with that, he was gone.

Smiling, Michael moved on round the room, found the Frye family in an inconspicuous corner, stopped to chat for a while and then led the middle sister into the next dance.

And somehow, all this chatting and dancing and being the gracious son of the host and hostess was easy for him, as it had never been before. He was

not tongue-tied or awkward or wondering miserably if he were doing it right. Margarita had sprinkled her magic over him and his world was in perfect alignment. In this glow of enchantment, he could talk to anyone and somehow the simple words flowed out of him without thought.

So he danced and talked and smiled, and was utterly content.

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Mrs Landers was extremely cross. She was tired, since late nights never agreed with her, and her feud with Mrs Smythe had worn her out, but there was not the remotest possibility of her admitting as much.

She grumbled at Margarita for the length of the short carriage drive back to Chadwell Hall, she grumbled all the way through the hall and along the passage and up the stairs, and she positively shouted at the hapless maid waiting there to help her to bed.

“Go away, you useless girl! Margaret will do what I need. Margaret! Is the bed warm? Where is my hot milk? Where have you hidden my syrup? And get me out of this cloak, for heaven’s sake? Oh, why are you so slow!”

By the time everything had been arranged to her satisfaction, she had been undressed and helped into bed, with her hot milk and syrup to hand, and Margarita had read enough from a dry history book to lull her to drowsiness, the carriages could already be heard on the drive below bringing home the Fletcher and Landers families.

Finally dismissed, Margarita found Polly awaiting her, the bed already warmed, and a good fire blazing.

“Goodness, Polly, what are you doing up at this hour? It must be gone three o’clock.”

“It’s my job to look after you, madam. The mistress told me to take good care of you, and that I mean to do. Mrs Sharwell put up a supper tray for you, if you missed supper at the Manor, but can I get you a hot drink? Or shall I help you undress?”

“No hot drink, but you can help me with my hair, if you will. You dressed it so well that it would take me hours to untangle my unruly curls.”

“You have lovely hair, madam,” Polly said with a sigh. “It’s a pleasure

to see to.”

Naturally, the payment for such a service was a modest amount of gossip about the ball, and Margarita was happy to talk of gowns and who had danced with whom, and how many times, and who sat together at supper. Polly listened, nodding, her eyes alight with interest, storing it all away to be related in the servants’ hall later.

Finally, Margarita was left to the delights of the supper tray, an array of bite-sized confections that she suspected were from the hand of Mrs Fletcher’s expensive French man-cook rather than the very English Mrs Sharwell. There was wine, too, and a blazing fire to sit beside. She settled in the high-backed armchair by the fire with a sigh of pure pleasure.

A few minutes later, there was a quiet scratching at the door, followed by Mrs Fletcher’s head, in a very fetching lace cap.

“Are you awake, dear? I saw the light shining under the door, so I—”

Margarita leapt to her feet, scattering crumbs. “Do come in, madam. I’m merely luxuriating in the excellent provisions of your house — a supper tray, wine and a fire in my bedroom.”

“Mrs Landers does not supply these necessities, I take it?” Mrs Fletcher said, chuckling, shutting the door behind her and taking the matching chair on the other side of the fire.

“She doesn’t. My bedroom at Hodgehill is barely big enough to contain a bed, let alone a fireplace. This is such a treat, to be accorded the same comforts as a regular guest.”

“But you *are* a regular guest, my dear, and far more acceptable to me than some of the others. Your mistress, for example. Has she been long abed?”

“Not long,” Margarita admitted ruefully. “She’s not much trouble as a rule, but she does become tetchy when she’s tired, or feels she’s been bested or slighted in some way. Or has had to pay out her own money.”

“Mr Fletcher is tetchy tonight, too, from an over-abundance of civility to strangers. Happily, he will be his usual amiable self in the morning, and I doubt the same could be said of Mrs Landers.”

Margarita laughed. “Will you take wine with me? There’s a full decanter and a spare glass. Clearly Mrs Sharwell expected me to be entertaining a guest.”

“That is my rule,” Mrs Fletcher said. “One should always be able to entertain a guest. Do not think me rude if I forego the wine, for I feel as if I have been drinking all night, but those pastries look delicious. Monsieur Portier is a treasure. Mmm... wonderful, and so much better than Lady Plummer’s supper,” she added with satisfaction, reaching for another. “But you will want to know how the rest of the ball went. Michael watched you leave, you know. He was hidden behind the curtains in the great hall, emerging only when your carriage departed. He talked to Sir Con Pluckrose for a while, then he danced with Victoria Kelshaw, then one of the Frye girls and finally with Lady Georgiana Landers.”

“Saving the best for last, then.”

“I am not sure he saw it that way, for she did not look as if she enjoyed herself at all. The Landers women are so... so *difficult*, I find. Lady Faulkbourne spent the whole evening looking as if she had trodden in something nasty from the stables, and the sisters not much better. And Lord Faulkbourne was very put out because Mr Kelshaw took almost twenty pounds from him at piquet. Harry had to twist about to make sure he won it back at the whist table. They put themselves on such high form, these noble families, and now Rosie is to marry one of them, and it is all my fault. I was so determined to improve our standing in society, pushing her towards anyone with a title, and look what has come of it — she will be tied to these miserable people for life.”

“Lord Albury is a pleasant man,” Margarita said.

“Oh, yes, and his brother too, and Lady Maria, whom we met in Bath — such a sweet creature! But Lord Albury is still one of *them*, and I dislike them so much because of Johnny. Do you know that story?” Margarita shook her head. “When we were staying at Chaseley Court last month, there was... an incident. A young widow, Lady Jemima Corsfield, was attacked by a Lord Tindale one evening. Most unpleasant. Fortunately, Johnny, our youngest son, was on hand to rescue her, but then Lord Faulkbourne and Jemma’s horrid relations insisted that Johnny marry her.”

“That’s despicable!”

“Exactly so, and even though Johnny has decided that he likes being married and Jemma has her sons back from her first marriage, so she is happy too, it is not what one wants. Everyone should enter the married state joyfully, with affection and respect and trust, not pushed into it. Which is why I wonder that you chose not to marry Michael Plummer two years ago.”

That was an unexpected twist of the knife! Mrs Fletcher might look like a mild-mannered creature, but there was a spine of steel beneath the exterior charm.

“It was impossible!” Margarita cried, setting down her empty plate and lifting the wine glass. “Quite out of the question. We barely knew each other. I left Hadlow a week from our first meeting, that was all, and no rational person would alter his life’s course on the basis of a week’s acquaintance. It was madness, a fire that blazed up out of nowhere and would have consumed us all if I’d let it. He was as good as betrothed, and to someone of his own class. He’ll be a baronet one day, and I’m nobody, Mrs Fletcher. My father was a clergyman, but only because the squire saw some merit in him, and sponsored him through school and university. His father was a baker. And my mother was a dairy maid. My husband was a farrier. I’m no fit wife for a gentleman.”

“My dear Margarita, my father was a grocer,” Mrs Fletcher said mildly. “My eldest brother is also a grocer, another brother is a draper and a third is an upholsterer. And here I am, my house filled with the nobility, and a daughter who is about to become a viscountess. A woman can always better herself by marrying above her station, or into great wealth, as you could have done two years ago.” She hesitated, eyeing Margarita speculatively. “As you could now, if there were no Mr Brookes in the case.”

With trembling hands, Margarita put down the wine glass. For two and a half years, she’d ruthlessly shut the door on any thought of marrying Michael, but Mrs Fletcher had swept in like a gale and blown that door clean off its hinges.

Had she made a terrible mistake? Should she have stayed two years ago — stayed and fought Amelia and the Plummers and her own good sense, and

become Mrs Michael Plummer? She would have been happy now —  
wouldn't she?

Was it possible?

## 15: Before Breakfast

Amelia! Amelia was the obstacle, then as now. Realisation flooded in, luckily, or there was a danger Margarita might have succumbed to regret.

“You make it sound so simple, but there is still Amelia to consider,” Margarita said. “She is just as much in love with him now as she was three years ago.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh, yes! I am no longer in her confidence, but then... she talked about him all the time. She came to Hertfordshire three times to get to know him, and each time she came home in raptures about him. Such a fine young man, so tall and distinguished looking, and a future baronet.” That gave her a momentary qualm, remembering Michael’s words. *‘What she was in love with was the prospect of becoming Lady Plummer.’* Was that true?

“Tell me about Amelia Greaves,” Mrs Fletcher said, reaching for the spare glass and pouring herself a little wine. “She is an orphan, I understand, but how did she come to set her sights on Michael Plummer?”

“Her parents both died when she was a baby. Her father was distantly related to the Earl of Pinner, hence the connection to Lady Frederica, and her mother was the only daughter — the only child, in fact — of a Bristol ship owner and merchant. Amelia’s eighty thousand pounds comes mostly from her mother, and Hadlow Hall from her father. She was left to the care of elderly relations from Hereford, the Ramsdens. They were elderly then, and by the time I joined their household were very frail. Mrs Ramsden hardly knew what day of the week it was. But they were quite certain that Amelia was a precious lamb, to be sheltered from every breeze. They could not get a governess to satisfy their requirements in full, so Amelia went to school in Bath from the age of twelve to sixteen, which is where I met her. We were unlikely friends, for I’m four years older than she is, and my father could only afford two years of the most basic tuition, whereas she had four years with all the extras — dance, music, languages, singing, painting and drawing, all the gentle arts. But we liked each other, and when I left at sixteen, we kept in touch. When my husband died, she invited me to be her companion.”

“Not a decision you had to think about for long, I imagine.”



“Indeed not.” Margarita laughed. “Brought up on the edge of poverty as I had been, Hadlow Hall was paradise! Naturally, I tried to repay her hospitality, and the household needed me, for there was no firm hand at the helm. Mrs Ramsden was in her own world, and Amelia had no more idea than a baby of how to manage the servants. But there was no society. The Ramsdens had kept themselves aloof from the neighbours for years, so no one called or issued invitations. The same with relations. I’d expected someone to swoop down and carry Amelia off to London to find a husband, but no one did, and eventually I unearthed old correspondence and wrote to various members of the Greaves family. Lady Frederica wrote back, suggesting Michael. That was how it came about.”

“Then it is as I thought,” Mrs Fletcher said briskly. “Michael was the first personable young man she had set eyes on, and in addition could make her Lady Plummer. No wonder she was enamoured. And she tried Bristol and Hereford, I understand, but found them not to her liking, so she thought to try again with Michael. But now... now she has seen other possibilities. She really ought to have a season in London. She is an attractive girl with an attractive fortune — she would have no trouble finding a score of young men to choose from, and half of them with titles. If she had done so, and still preferred Michael, well, then I should agree with you that she is in love with him. But I do not see it. She stood up with him for the first two dances this evening, and barely glanced at him from then onwards.”

“It’s true that she’s dazzled for the moment by the Landers family,” Margarita said slowly, “but she wants Michael, I am sure of it. That was why she was so angry to find me here.”

“She had not then met Anthony Landers,” Mrs Fletcher said drily. “My dear, I have no intention of pushing you in one direction or another, for you must make up your own mind, but I must take issue with something you said earlier this evening, that it was the best option for Michael to marry Amelia. It seems to me that if you had married Michael two years ago, as it seems he wanted, you could have taken Amelia to London and introduced her into society, with Lady Frederica’s help, and she would have been happily married by now. Michael would have had a charming wife, and you would have had a comfortable home and had wine and a fire in your bedroom for

the rest of your life. You would *all* have been happy. And now the winds of fortune have blown you all together again. Do you see?”

Margarita did see. It was impossible not to see, now that she had allowed herself to consider the possibility of marrying Michael. Was it possible? There were still so many obstacles.

Mrs Fletcher tipped her head on one side, waiting, but when Margarita made no answer, she went on, “Of course, it does depend rather on how you feel about Mr Brookes, and whether waiting for him to return from India and marry you at some unspecified time in the future is more appealing than marriage now to a respectable gentleman of means.”

“You’re convinced, then, that I’m not already married to him?” Margarita said, with a quick spurt of laughter.

“If you were, you would not say ‘*my husband was a farrier*’, my dear. You would talk about your *first* husband or your *second* husband. Having had two husbands myself, I am sensitive to such nuances. I do not judge, you know. God knows that I am in no position to judge anyone. I manipulated both my husbands into marriage, and Harry, in particular, had no thought of it at all. It was almost the first thing he said to me. So whatever happened between you and Mr Brookes—”

“Nothing happened,” Margarita said, making a sudden decision. “Nick has been kind to me, that’s all.”

“Oh. But then... there is nothing tying you to Mr Brookes? In which case...?”

Margarita got up and paced restlessly. There were only two candles lit on the mantelpiece, so her steps took into darkness and then back to the light. It was so difficult! How much could she... should she say? So much grief and loneliness had been bottled up inside her for two long, miserable years, and this woman was so sympathetic. She had shared her secrets with Jane and Nick, but the fewer people who knew the better.

And yet... how much she yearned for a friend! Once Amelia had been her friend, to whom she had told all her secrets. She must never be so foolish as that again. Once more she paced across the room and then back to the pool of light around the fire, where Mrs Fletcher waited patiently. Such a kind

lady...

Friendship won. Margarita sat down with a rush.

“When I met Michael... oh, it was the strangest thing, for it was instantaneous, for both of us. We saw each other and... I cannot explain it, but it was a kind of madness, I think. We were both swept up in it, seemingly powerless to resist. Time after time, we agreed that it could not go on, but the next time we found ourselves alone... oh, nothing immoral, no more than kisses and words... but so many kisses, so many words. It was insanity. We both knew it.”

“And so you left to avoid a greater sin,” Mrs Fletcher said thoughtfully.

“No,” Margarita said slowly. “The greater sin was not in my mind at all, for I confess my thought was all for Amelia. She... *wanted* him, to put it no stronger than that, and she had a claim to him. The betrothal was all but agreed. Michael... poor Michael was torn apart. One minute he was saying calmly that he would marry Amelia, the next he swore he could not do it. Again and again he changed his mind. In the end, the only answer was for me to leave, then he would have no excuse for dithering. That was my reasoning, anyway, but...”

She paused, as all the grief of her leaving came vividly to her mind. Every moment of that week was etched into her memory, but the events of that night would stay with her for ever. Her decision had been made that evening, after a day of terse conversations, firstly with Amelia, then with Lady Plummer and finally with Sir Owen, all of whom had made it very clear that Margarita was not an acceptable wife for the heir to a baronetcy. As if she had any thought of marrying him! Then at dinner, Amelia had been upset and Michael had as good as ignored her. Sir Owen was even more stern-faced than usual, and Lady Plummer looked as if she'd sooner be anywhere than there. As soon as she could escape, Margarita had gone to her room and packed as much as she could into a single portmanteau, planned the precise time of night to leave to catch the early morning stage, then settled down to write the most difficult letter of her life.

But then, a problem. She could leave the letter in her room, with Michael's name on it, but that would be to signal loud and clear the reasons

for her stealthy departure. It would be more discreet, surely, to creep along to his room and leave it there. And then, when she saw him sleeping so peacefully, she could not resist giving him a farewell kiss.

That was when the disaster had happened. The greater sin. He had half wakened, found her kissing him, and pulled her into bed beside him. And to her shame, she had been quite unable to protest in any way. Quite the contrary, for all the boiling desire of the past week had risen to engulf them both. Later, much later, when he was fast asleep again, she had crept away for her rendezvous with the stage coach and made her escape, but her shame had followed her. She had never quite forgiven herself for that moment of madness. Everything that had happened afterwards, however horrible, had been no more than her just deserts for her wickedness.

But of this she could say nothing to Mrs Fletcher, no matter how sympathetic she was. These were secrets she would take to her grave.

“My dear, what courage it must have taken to leave him,” Mrs Fletcher said.

“Was it courage or cowardice? I can’t tell. I only knew I couldn’t face Amelia.” Taking a deep breath, she went on, “It seemed sensible to change my name. If nothing else, it would make it more difficult for Michael or Amelia to track me down. But Michael mustn’t know any of this.”

“But if he does not, he will think you are lost to him as another man’s wife. Surely you must tell him everything, so that he may choose?”

“And have him dither all over again? No! You said something very sensible of Michael and Amelia the other day. You said if their mutual affection is strong enough to withstand my reappearance, then they’ll marry, and if not, they’d much better not. That’s very wise. Michael must decide whether he wants to marry Amelia or not, and I am determined not to come between them again. As far as he is concerned, I am married and so he will decide whether or not to marry Amelia without any consideration of me. I must beg you not to say a word to him, or to anyone, about this.”

“You have no need to ask. I will never betray your secret. I can only urge you to think again, if only to give him the choice. But that is for you to decide, my dear,” she said sadly. “It is your future at stake, too, after all.”

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Margarita woke in a rush of panic, to realise it was only Polly coaxing the fire back into life. The maid tried her best to be quiet, but Margarita was so unused to such attentions that the least sound woke her. Then, of course, she couldn't get back to sleep. So much had happened in the last few days that it was almost too much to take in. Michael, Amelia, the ball, the kindness of Mrs Fletcher... but most of all, Michael's astonishing calmness. He talked so rationally, so unlike his volatile self that she remembered so well — up in the air one minute, resolute the next, then fired with passion. There had been moments of tranquillity — oh, those long walks through the woods, the scent of wild garlic filling the air, and a cuckoo calling in the distance. Such joyful moments. But mostly her memories of those days were of his jittery nerves, his volatility.

After a while, she gave up trying to sleep. A peek through the bed curtains showed her the grey light of dawn already filtering into the room. Restlessly, she rose, threw on a wrap and crossed to the window. Magical patterns of ice decorated the glass, and beyond it the garden lay frosted, sparkling white coating every tree and bush, and lying thickly on the lawns.

The garden! Acres of peaceful beauty to explore, and if Chadwell Park could not boast the grandeur of Hadlow's formal gardens or the rampant wildness of neglected Hodgehill, the air would be fresh and clear, and the greenery soothing to her disordered nerves.

After pulling on an old wool gown and her thick cloak, she made her way downstairs. Two maids sweeping the stairs with small brushes jumped to their feet to curtsy as she went by. A footman carrying two buckets of coal helpfully showed her to a side door. She emerged near the stables, judging by the sounds of brisk sweeping and an occasional soft whicker. A path led in the opposite direction, so she followed it through neat formal gardens, little showing now other than low box hedges, a few topiary urns and bare beds awaiting the warmer days of spring.

She walked briskly to ward off the chill air, her boots crunching on the gravel path, her breath making clouds around her head. Passing through an arch in a high hedge, she found herself looking over a ha-ha, long shadows from isolated trees creating rivers of darkness across the frost-shimmering

grass. In the distance, a group of deer raised their heads to watch her warily.

She had reached a junction, so she turned to the south and then, at the next junction, to the west. She told herself she was only following the shadows, and that it hardly mattered which way she went or whether she found the west gate or not. Michael would hardly be there so early in the day, not after dancing until two or three in the morning. He would be safely tucked up in bed.

Even so, her heart sped up a little as she walked, the path leading her into dense woodland. Between eight and nine, he had said, and although it was after nine, it could not be by much. Would she see him? Perhaps she would turn a corner and there he would be...

He was not there. She reached the gate without seeing another soul, and her treacherous heart plummeted into misery at once. No matter how much she denied it, she longed to see him again, to see that hesitant little smile or the crease of worry marring his smooth forehead. Or perhaps he would sweep her into his arms and... No. That way led only to madness again.

How foolish she was! He had made it perfectly clear by his composure at the ball that he no longer felt that irresistible draw towards her. He was interested in her and all that had happened since they had last seen each other, but they met now only as common acquaintances.

Turning away from the gate, she began to retrace her steps through the trees, the path winding about but always clear, the edge marked with bricks, the gravel free of fallen leaves and other detritus. The gardeners were very efficient. Here and there, where a small space free of undergrowth opened up beside the path, a carved wooden seat had been placed for the weary. In summer it would be charming, but today it was too cold to linger. She hurried on, her thoughts turning to warm fires and the pleasures of the breakfast table. Another twist of the path, a sudden rustling in the bushes and...

There he was, emerging from a narrow side path, just as startled as she was. Then his face lit up in a wide smile.

“You came!” he said, holding out his arms as if in invitation.

She stood uncertainly, her heart pounding. This was a mistake! She shouldn't be alone with him — she should never be alone with him. It was

too dangerous. But even as she hesitated, his arms dropped to his side again.

“I thought you would still be asleep,” he said cheerfully. “I am very happy to be proved wrong on that score. Oh, you must not look so apprehensive, Margarita. I will not touch you, surely you know that. You are a married woman, so you are quite safe from me. I only want to talk to you, nothing more than that. There is so much to say, do you not agree?”

“I don’t think there’s anything to say, Michael. Least said, soonest mended.”

She turned and continued on down the path, but he walked beside her, his breath steaming in unison with her own, their twin clouds merging into one above their heads.

“I still cannot understand it, you see,” he said, the smile gone from his face. “Why you left Hadlow, that is. Those days were complicated, for both of us, but that night... that one, magical night... I thought we had resolved all our difficulties. I thought we would be *married*, Margarita. How could anyone see it any other way? How could I possibly marry Amelia after betraying her so completely? And when I found you gone...” He stopped, his breath ragged. “It was impossible for me to believe it. How *could* you?”

She stopped, too, head down. Stay calm... at all costs she must be calm, when he was so close. “I’ve already told you — so that you could marry Amelia.” Was her voice steady? She hoped so. Lord, he was too close to her! If she reached out her hand, she could touch his sleeve.

With quick steps, she set off again, but he followed her. “No, no, I mean how could you make yourself do it? Were you only pretending to care for me? Did it mean nothing to you? How else could you get up as if nothing had happened and just... just calmly walk away?”

This time it was Margarita who stopped, breath heaving. ‘*Pretending to care...? Mean nothing to you? Just calmly walk away?*’ Oh, if he only knew! That he could even imagine it meant nothing to her was inexplicable!

“This does no good, Michael,” she croaked, one gloved hand angrily pressing away a tear.

He made an exclamation. “Now I have made you cry — forgive me,

dearest. I never meant... oh, I am a monster, to upset you so! And I cannot even hold you. Look, there is a bench just ahead of us. Let us sit for a moment, so that you may recover your composure.”

She agreed to it, sitting at the very far end. He perched warily at the other end.

“See, I shall sit as far from you as possible, so that you will not be unduly disturbed by my presence. Do you like these benches? They are very new. Fletcher has commissioned them from some of the local men, as a winter project. There is not much work for farm hands at this time of year. Whoever makes the best will be commissioned to make a dovecot. They are all different. There is one over towards the northern woods that has deer carved over the back — most attractive. Quite a work of art, one might say. This one is... a little more rustic. There... are you feeling better now?”

“Thank you, yes. You are very good,” she said, smiling, for his genial chatter had done much to restore her to equanimity.

“I shall not tease you about the past,” he said, frowning a little. “I should like to know, of course, but I would not for the world distress you. What we can talk about, perhaps, is the present, and your plans.”

“My plans?”

“Yes. You will not, I trust, stay with that dreadful woman.”

“If you mean Mrs Landers, I do not find her dreadful at all,” Margarita said in surprise. “She is eccentric and demanding, as the rich generally are to the poor, but I am perfectly content with my situation.”

“Once more I must beg your pardon,” he said humbly. “I have offended you again. I will allow her to be no better or worse than the generality of elderly women who employ a companion. But Carlisle! Must you go to Carlisle? Margarita, these last few days have been a revelation to me. For two and a half years I have longed to see you again, and wondered how I would feel, and now... here you are, and it is glorious. To be able to see you and talk to you... Your face tells me you disapprove, but I tell you again, you are safe with me. You are married, and therefore beyond my reach. However, your husband has left you unprotected in England while he is in India. Undoubtedly he has good reasons for that, but I would not see you alone and

friendless. In Carlisle, you have only Mrs Landers, who may be very well as an employer but she is not your friend, and I cannot think she has your best interests at heart. But here, where you *do* have friends... will you not stay here? Oh, I know you have to work... you will not accept charity, but there are elderly ladies looking for companions in the south of England, too, and then you would have friends to call upon if you are in need, and I could see you sometimes.”

“Stay in the south? Michael, this is nonsense.”

“If you think about it, you will see all the advantages,” he said, his face alight with enthusiasm. “A more congenial employer, and friends to watch over you. I want to keep you safe, you see, until your husband returns to claim you.”

Margarita jumped to her feet, rage boiling inside her. “*Keep me safe?* The only person I need to be kept safe from is *you!* Your one magical night left me— Oh!” She almost stamped her foot in frustration. How stupid to lose her temper.

He stood, too, his face ashen, so shocked he could barely speak. “A child? You had a child?”

Her rage drained away as fast as it had risen. When she spoke again, her voice was gentle. “No. I *was* with child, and that was why I needed a husband in a hurry, but I... I miscarried,” she ended in a whisper. She closed her eyes as grief rose up again — would it never end, this sorrow?

“Why did you not tell me?” he whispered. “I would have taken care of you. That is all I wanted, dearest, to take care of you. Why did you not let me? One word and I would have—”

And again she was enraged, anger exploding inside her like a firework.

“Because you were supposed to marry Amelia!” she hissed. “Everything I’ve gone through has been to enable you to marry Amelia. Leaving Hadlow... finding myself with child, and then...” Deep breath. And another. “...losing the baby. You can’t imagine... But I was glad to do it, for you and Amelia. So go and *marry* her, Michael. Stop dithering and do that one thing, because if you don’t, everything I’ve done has been utterly futile.”

16: A Visit To Kelshaw House

Michael stood, shocked and motionless, watching Margarita go. Her brisk steps and a sharp turn in the path soon took her out of sight. With a long sigh, Michael retreated to the bench again, head in hands.

Margarita with child... forced to marry... losing the child... and he, all unknowing, thinking she had abandoned him. Margarita *alone*... he could not bear to think of her going through all that alone, her husband hustled to the altar and then rushing away to India, leaving her to survive as best she could. And it was all his fault, because of that one magical night. If he had resisted... but when had he ever been able to resist her? To wake and find her bending over him, kissing him... how could any man have resisted such temptation? It had been her own choice, after all. She had come to him that night.

There was only one bright spot in the whole sorry story, and it was a small one but it brought Michael a little comfort — his poor Margarita had been *forced* to find a husband. His dark imaginings had led him to suppose that she had calmly left his side and then, within weeks, fallen so deep in love that she had plunged into marriage with a stranger. Now he saw that it was not so. The marriage had been no sudden romantic affair, but a pragmatic matter of scratching around with some urgency for someone — anyone — prepared to take her. And even if she had some affection for this man, still she had married largely from necessity. For him, too, it was perhaps not a union of the heart, and that was why he had gone to India, leaving her alone.

But she must never be alone again. She must not return to Carlisle... where was Carlisle, anyway? Practically in Scotland, he thought. So far away...

Before long, the cold began to seep into his bones, and he set off for home, back to the west gate, across the road and onto the drive of Chadwell Manor.

Two carriages were waiting outside the front door. One was being loaded with boxes under the watchful eyes of the valet and lady's maid, preparing to take Letitia and Charles to the home of Charles's nephew, the new Marquess of Barrowford. Michael's sister Patricia was just rushing out

of the house to the other.

“Off to your orphanage, sis?” Michael said genially. He liked Patricia. At least she was quiet, unlike Letitia, and now that she had unlimited supplies of babies to care for at her orphanage, she was blissfully happy.

Now she beamed at him. “Oh, yes! I could not really spare the time away for the ball, but Mama insisted.”

“At least your babies keep you busy, eh?”

“Oh, yes. Very busy.”

“Better than sitting at home with your embroidery,” he said, persevering.

“Oh, yes.”

Embroidery... that triggered a memory. “Where do you get the thread for embroidery... the good sort?”

“Silks? I have no idea. Mine all came in a box.”

“Oh. I wanted to get some for Mrs Brookes. She likes to embroider, but she cannot afford the materials any more.”

“Give her my box. I have no use for it any more. Highfield knows where it is — ask her. Goodbye, Michael.”

She whisked into the carriage, Michael shut the door for her and gave the office to the coachman to drive on.

Almost at once, Letitia and Charles emerged with John Fletcher, Sir Owen and James, and in a flurry of farewells boarded their carriage and disappeared down the drive in Patricia’s wake.

“I suppose you are left with the children,” James said, as they turned back into the house.

“For the moment,” Sir Owen said with a wry smile. “Once they are settled at Barrowsworth, Letitia is to return to collect young Charles and Seraphina, and pack up any remaining possessions.”

“Better count the spoons, and make sure all the best furniture is nailed to the floor,” James said cheerfully.

Sir Owen raised an eyebrow at him. "Letitia is my eldest daughter, James. I can spare her a few things for her comfort. Are you staying for breakfast, or must you get home to Mrs James?"

"Mrs James was still abed when I left, and is likely to be there all morning. Breakfast sounds wonderful. And where have you been off to so early, brother? A secret tryst?"

"Just a walk in the woods."

"Anyone else happen to be taking a walk in the woods?"

"James," Sir Owen said, in his most forbidding tone of voice. Michael would have been utterly cast down to be the recipient of such a reproof, but James merely laughed, his boots tapping as he crossed the hall.

"I know, I know. I am sure he will tell us if ever there is anything to tell. Good morning, Jefford, Henry. I hope you have a good breakfast prepared for us, for I am famished."

"Good morning, Mr James. I'll tell Mrs Hoskins of your presence, and perhaps she'll have some kidneys to send up for you."

"You are an excellent fellow, Jefford. Father, may I pour your coffee, or do we wait for Mother?"

"Lady Plummer is exhausted after her exertions last night, and will not be joining us today. By all means let us get on with our meal, for we are late already, thanks to Letitia."

The three men settled down companionably to eat, although it felt strange to be so small a group. Breakfast had been for many years one of the unvarying points of the Plummer family's day, but James's marriage had made a small change, Uncle Morgan had gone off to the Hall and more recently Patricia had spent most of her time at the orphanage. Now even Letitia and Charles had gone, and the table in the breakfast parlour had never felt so empty.

James's kidneys arrived, as well as a dish of mutton chops, for Mrs Hoskins knew him well. For some time, there was silence around the table, broken only by polite requests for butter or the coffee pot. Eventually, even James's inexhaustible appetite was sated, and he pushed away his plate with a

sigh.

That was the sign for Sir Owen to speak. “Well, Michael, what are your plans for the day? Shall you call at Kelshaw House this morning?”

A good question. He had almost forgotten about Amelia. “Yes, I had better do so.”

“You will be keen to see Miss Greaves again, but do not call too early. Ladies like to be leisurely after a ball.”

“I must speak to Kelshaw,” Michael said.

“Ah, very proper. Excellent. James, shall we see Julia today? I hope she has not overexerted herself. I thought she looked a little pale last night.”

“She is very well, Father, in the rudest of health and full of energy. You worry too much about her, but the midwife is very pleased with her.”

“One can never be too careful. Your mother always took every precaution when she was increasing, and as a result never had the least trouble, but then she never went scampering about the countryside the way Julia does.”

“Julia is not precisely scampering these days, Father. She is reaching the waddling stage, and never goes far on her walks now.”

“And you go with her? Do insist that she takes the carriage if she wishes to go more than a mile or so.”

Michael quickly lost interest in this discussion, which was repeated with little variation every time Father met either James or Julia. He wondered if it would be the same if he himself had a wife, or whether it was merely that Father held Julia in great affection. If he had married Margarita two years ago

No. That was a foolish thought. What was done was done, however grievous, and could not be changed. It was the future that mattered.

As soon as he could escape from the breakfast parlour, Michael went in search of Highfield, his mother’s maid, eventually tracking her to earth in the servants’ hall.

“Miss Patricia tells me you will know where to find her box of

embroidery silks, Highfield.”

“I do. Does she want it sent over to Froxfield?”

“No, she has no further use for it, so she allows me to send it to Mrs Brookes at the Park, who has need of it.”

“Mrs Brookes,” Highfield said, her lips primming. “I see, sir.”

Michael cared nothing for Highfield’s disapproval. He left her to wrap this item, while he scribbled a brief note. Then, leaving the matter of transporting the box to Chadwell Park to Jefford, he reclaimed his greatcoat, and set off for Kelshaw House. Kelshaw was at home, and received him with every sign of pleasure.

“Well now, Michael, come in, come in. You will take a little wine with me, I am sure... unless you wish to get the formalities out of the way first, eh? And then perhaps you will want to see Amelia, eh?”

He chuckled, patting Michael genially on the back. Michael had an affection for Kelshaw, a down-to-earth country gentleman whose good fortune in marrying the daughter of an earl had never gone to his head, but he was as bad as Sir Owen for making assumptions.

“Not Amelia, no,” Michael said, for there was no need to beat about the bush. “I have come to tell you that I shall not be offering for Amelia.”

Kelshaw’s smile faded away. “Ah. You do not feel that perhaps this announcement might be better made to Amelia herself?”

“I can hardly ask for an interview with a lady and then tell her that I do *not* wish to marry her,” Michael said.

“No, no, but... there is an understanding between you, and if you wish to break it off—”

“There is no understanding. I have never spoken of marriage to Amelia, not even in the most roundabout terms, nor have I given her to understand that I hold her in any greater affection than friendship. I have made no promises of any kind, Mr Kelshaw.”

“Not explicitly, perhaps, but...” He sighed, and rubbed his forehead tiredly. “Your father will be disappointed. Ah well, let us have that glass of

Madeira, and a talk, for I should like to comprehend your mind more fully. This is about Mrs Brookes, I assume?"

"In a way," Michael said, accepting the glass and taking the chair pointed out to him. "And yet, not entirely. She has married again..." He paused, knowing now precisely why she had needed to marry, and fully aware of his own part in that. But that was in the past, and beyond repair. "She is a married woman," he went on in a stronger voice. "There is no future for me in that direction. But her unexpected appearance in Hertfordshire has exposed to me how deeply my affections were engaged two and a half years ago. I had hoped that matter was behind me but it seems not to be so. I cannot marry Amelia under such circumstances."

"But since you cannot marry Mrs Brookes, then why not marry elsewhere? You do not plan to remain unwed for your whole life, I trust? If one door closes, another opens... it is always so."

"I do not wish to marry elsewhere," he said calmly. It was astonishing how serene he felt, even under such questioning, which would have had him tied in knots just a week or two ago. But now, with Margarita living barely a mile away, he was utterly composed. It was extraordinary.

Kelshaw let out a long sigh. Leaning forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees, he said, "Michael, I have known you for a long time. Not quite all your life, but you were still a boy when I set up home here."

"I remember," Michael said. "The house was empty for a long time before that."

"It is a family house, so I chose to live in town until I had a wife and the prospect of a family to fill it," Kelshaw said, his face suffused with a sudden smile of memory. "We have been very happy here, not merely watching our own children grow, but you and your brother and sisters, too. You and James have been almost like sons to me. So I know, you see, that your father has raised you with his own guiding principles, to be a man of honour. It pains me to see you now turn away from your obligation to Amelia in this way, after you have given her every encouragement to become attached to you."

"I agreed that she might visit you so that we could spend time together, to see if an attachment might form, and I cannot say that it has, on either side.

Whatever my feelings in the matter, do you truly believe she is in love with me? Did you observe her conduct at the ball last night?"

Kelshaw frowned. "I was in the card room the whole evening. My wife did mention that she had concerns, but nothing specific."

"I danced the first two with Amelia, and after that I barely saw her. She danced several sets with one or other of Lord Faulkbourne's party, and spent much of the evening in their orbit."

"Even so, at a ball..."

"Of course, it may mean nothing, but it seems to me that a lady who is head over heels in love would not tamely abandon the object of her affections."

"Perhaps she is trying to make you jealous," Kelshaw said with a wry smile. "Some ladies are full of such strategies, I understand."

"It makes no difference," Michael said. "Even if it were so, I cannot marry her now. She deserves better than a half-hearted husband such as I should be. She should marry a man who adores her. If Lady Frederica were to sponsor her in town—"

"Her guardians will not permit it," Kelshaw said. "They feel she is ill-suited to the hurly-burly of the season."

"She seemed to enjoy last night's hurly-burly," Michael said. "Besides, she is of age and is not in need of her guardians' consent any longer. A season in London would allow her to find a better husband than the unpolished son of a baronet. The world is full of personable young men of good family but modest means who would be thrilled to pay court to her."

Kelshaw was finally silenced, perhaps realising that Michael was not to be turned from his objective.

Michael rose, gazing down at Kelshaw's troubled face. "I will leave it to you and Lady Frederica to find the best way to inform Amelia of my decision. And now I must bid you good day, sir. My best regards to her ladyship and the Miss Kelshaws, and to Amelia, naturally. I wish her well, as always."

He bowed and withdrew, his dignity intact. The butler showed him out

imperturbably. Outside, the chill air slapped against Michael's face. He stopped, raised his face to the skies and laughed.

He was free at last!

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Rosie was unsettled. The ball had exhausted her, yet she had lain awake for hours, and then woken far too early. It was the strange bed and different room, she decided. They had all had to move out of their regular rooms, since the influx of important visitors had been given the best rooms on the first floor. The sisters had been moved up to a room on the upper floor, tucked under the eaves, on a corner where the wind seemed to sigh constantly. Beside her, Angie slept peacefully, and on the other side of the room, Bella lay curled up on her truckle bed. Even Hestia was asleep, whiffling slightly, in her basket. Rosie, however, was wide awake.

Lying in the dark, her mind spun with an erratic collection of thoughts. The ball... yes, the ball had gone well. She had danced three times with Redmond — the first two, the supper dance and the Roger de Coverley at the end. Three dances! But everyone knew they were on the brink of a betrothal... were already betrothed, for had he not asked her in front of everyone and had she not, very publicly, said yes? And the rest of the evening had passed off pleasantly enough, and there had been such a crowd at supper that she had not had to say a word. Even Johnny had been there, an unexpected addition, although he did not stay long and was to leave again at first light to return to Warwickshire with Lord and Lady Charles.

Now only one day remained before the evening party that would mark the engagement officially. All their neighbours would come, Pa would make the announcement, there would be champagne, everyone would be pleased about it. Everyone loved a wedding, after all. And then all the business of preparing — new clothes, the carriage, servants to engage, even her new cards to print. Mama had a multitude of lists, for although there had been several weddings that year already, the transformation of Miss Rose Fletcher of Chadwell Park into Viscountess Albury of Pollicott Place called for even more effort in the matter of list creation.

As soon as the weather was fit, Redmond had promised to take her to

Pollicott Place to look at the house.

“Shall we all go?” she had said. “Pa will want to poke around in the basement and examine the water supply, and Mama will want to measure everything.”

“We shall certainly want their advice in the future,” he said, “and my family will want to see it, too, but might we leave that for another time? For this first visit, I should like us simply to walk from room to room, not measuring, not tapping walls for damp, not doing anything practical, just imagining ourselves living there. We may take one or two of your sisters with us, for propriety. Angie, to find out the best room to dance in — that is most important, for I will not allow you to give up dancing. And Bella, perhaps, for she will say nothing but will report it all sensibly to your Mama and Papa. What do you think?”

Pollicott Place... her own house! It was not large, but it would be hers, to manage as she saw fit. She would be able to order her own dinners, supervise her own staff, decide for herself which room to sit in each morning, and which to use after dinner. Redmond had already sent for catalogues from three of the best London dealers in pianofortes, and told her she would be able to choose whatever she liked.

Redmond... she would have to take his wishes into account, too. Men could be quite determined in some ways, yet so compliant in others. Look at Pa, who had happily uprooted the whole family because Mama wished it, yet wanted mutton on the table for dinner every night, winter and summer alike, and had insisted that he and Mama share a bedroom, even though Mama wanted her own room.

She shivered. What would *that* be like, sharing a bedroom with Redmond? But no, he would want separate rooms, certainly. That was how matters were arranged in families like his. Still, he would want to share her bed, and she could not quite imagine that.

It was too much of an unknown, so she turned her thoughts back to Pollicott Place. Five formal rooms... a drawing room and dining room, a music room, she hoped, and a parlour, as well as a book room or library for Redmond. Would she have room for a full sized pianoforte, that was the

question.

Oh, would morning never come?

With the first light of dawn, she crept out of bed. Throwing a robe over her nightgown, and then a warm wrap over that, she dashed across to the little dressing room the sisters shared, where she could light a fire without waking the others. Sarah had not yet appeared to clear the ashes, for the guests were to be dealt with first, she understood that, but she knew how to make up the fire, and it was not long before she had a blaze going. Then she curled up in the big armchair and, lulled by the flames, went back to sleep.

## 17: The Embroidery Box

When Rosie woke again, stiff from sitting in the chair, it was to the surprised face of Sarah, all set to clean and tidy the fireplace, only to find the fire already established.

“Were you cold, Miss Rosie? Should’a rung the bell. I’d’ve come up and fixed it up, and got rid of all that ash, too.”

“You have enough to do, with all these extra guests in the house,” Rosie said, stretching. “Will you help me dress? Is anyone else up?”

“Some of the gentlemen. Oh, and Miss Paton... I mean Mrs Plummer. So difficult to remember! She’s always about early, even when she’s been out all night. What will you wear? The blue or that pretty green with the frill?”

“The green is for tomorrow. The cream muslin with the little roses all over it, I think. And the red velvet spencer. And a woollen shawl.”

Sarah laughed. “Aye, these big houses are never properly warm, to my mind. Too many draughts. The Sagborough house was so cosy, wasn’t it? Proper snug in winter, it were. Will your new house be as big as this one? I ’spect it will, him being a viscount an’ all. So grand you’ll be, Miss Rosie. I wish I could go with you, but you’ll have a fancy lady’s maid,” she added wistfully. “You’re all going away, all you young ones. Master Will and Master Johnny and Miss Julia already gone, and you next and Miss Angie next summer, and even Miss Bella’s set to wed that fine baronet of hers, and then there’ll be no one left. Just the master and mistress, rattling round in this great big house.”

“And Aunt Madge,” Rosie said.

“Oh, aye, there’s no shifting her, even now she’s wed. But everyone else will be gone, and how we’ll miss you all.”

“And I shall miss you, Sarah — all of you.”

For an instant, Rosie’s heart quailed at the prospect. She would have her own house at Pollicott Place, but there would be no one there she knew, no family, no familiar servants, no one to chaff her for things she did as a girl, or remember how she liked her chocolate served or her gloves arranged in the

drawer. She would have to teach them, she supposed, but the prospect was unexpectedly daunting.

Redmond would be the only person she knew.

Breakfast cheered her up enormously. Almost all the gentlemen were there, with the exception of Lord Faulkbourne, and virtually none of the ladies. Apart from Rosie, only quiet Mrs Brookes was there, working her way steadily through a hearty breakfast in polite silence, unless anyone addressed her directly.

Rosie thought Mrs Brookes was looking rather well. She always dressed appropriately for a companion, wearing a neat cap and a simple round gown, very plain, and no jewellery apart from her wedding ring. Yet having seen her looking so lovely at the ball, Rosie could not help thinking it a shame to conceal her beauty. Even a paid companion might dress to advantage, one would suppose, but perhaps her husband admired such an unadorned style.

The absence of the ladies and perhaps the earl, too, rendered the breakfast party unusually merry and unrestrained, and although nothing improper was said, the atmosphere was freer than usual. Almost it was like being one of the men herself. Was this how they talked after dinner, when the ladies had withdrawn and the port was flowing freely? And yet, their high spirits made Rosie a little uneasy.

A riding expedition was under consideration. After an evening devoted to the polite intercourse of the ballroom, the gentlemen felt the need to gallop away their restlessness, and there was much enthusiasm for trying out Will's string of hunters.

"Will you ride with us?" Redmond said to Rosie. "I know you are not a keen horsewoman, and perhaps all that dancing disinclines you for further exercise, but I should enjoy your company and that mare in the stables looks like a gentle creature."

She could not fault his manners to ask with such sincerity, when it was clear that the others were planning a hard, fast ride with as many hedges and ditches to jump as they could find. "Indeed she is very gentle, but I confess, riding is a more acceptable exercise to me when the sun is warm and there are flowers to admire."

“Then I shall stay here with you,” he said gallantly.

“No, no! Go and have your ride. You must not be always in my pocket, you know.”

“You are very good,” he said, but she saw relief in his eyes. He would always want to enjoy exclusively male company from time to time, she understood that. Was that not why gentlemen had their clubs in London? They had their own lives outside the home, whereas women were confined to the domestic sphere.

She had a dispiriting vision of herself at Pollicott Place, sitting alone all day with her needlework, or practising at the instrument, while Redmond was out riding, or talking estate business with... whoever one talked to about such matters. A bailiff or steward. Or perhaps he would be constantly tearing off to London on important business with lawyers and bankers, or even political figures, since he would one day have a seat in the House of Lords.

Aunt Madge dashed in, snatched a hasty breakfast, then dashed out again.

“Do you need any help?” Rosie called after her.

She paused, hand on the doorknob. “Heavens, no, child. Plenty of servants to do the work. Half the village is in the kitchen, and half of Froxfield Green in the stables and gardens. They just need watching, that’s all, and that’s my job. Yours is to sit and rest your feet after all that dancing you did last night, and be gracious to our guests, like the lady you are. Leave the work to me.”

Rosie sighed. “I feel very useless,” she muttered to Mrs Brookes, as the men began to drift away to prepare for their ride. “I have nothing at all to do.”

“You will have enough to do when you are married,” Mrs Brookes said, with her wide smile. “You will wonder how you ever found the time to sit and rest your feet. Servants to train, meals to be ordered, children to be raised, calls to receive and make, the sick to be visited, that worn rug in the back parlour to be seen to, the household accounts to be kept up to date, the gardeners—”

“I take the point,” Rosie said, laughing. “You mean that I should enjoy

it while I can.”

“Certainly you should. But I suspect your Mama has taught you well.”

“Oh, yes, keeping house... I know how to do *that*. Yes, Keeble, what is it?”

“Beg pardon, madam, but there is an item in the hall just arrived for Mrs Brookes.”

“An *item*? For me?” Mrs Brookes cried. “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, madam. It’s come from the Manor. One of the grooms brought it in the gig.”

“A large item, then. What on earth can it be?”

She sounded so bewildered that Rosie could not help laughing. “But how exciting! I do love a mystery. Shall we go and investigate?”

The item was indeed large, about half Rosie’s height, wrapped in several layers of cloth tied up with stout twine. Two footmen, the housekeeper and the groom from the Manor clustered around it, watching. Tucked inside the twine at the top was a note, inscribed, ‘*To Mrs N Brookes, Chadwell Park*’.

“Goodness me!” Mrs Brookes said, staring helplessly at this unexpected arrival.

“You had better read it,” Rosie said, plucking the note from its resting place and pushing it into Mrs Brookes’ hands.

“Oh. Yes. I suppose... well, but how very strange. Why would anyone —?”

“Read it,” Rosie said, laughing.

She unfolded the note, and her face changed, confusion colouring her cheeks. But she laughed merrily. “How kind! How very kind.” Passing the note to Rosie, she went on, “Read it, do. Now, who can unpick these knots for me?”

While Anthony willingly wrestled with the twine, Rosie read the note.

*‘Mrs Brookes, I cannot have you without the means to create your*

*wonderful embroidery. This box was Patricia's but she has no further use for it, and would like you to have it. I hope it gives you many hours of pleasure. Michael Plummer.'*

Unwrapped, the box was the size of a small table, the wood delicately inlaid with a Greek pattern. The lower half, set on little wheels, contained drawers full of carefully wrapped silks. The upper half was a conventional box, with a tray of needles, bodkins, scissors, beeswax and tape measures, which lifted out to reveal an embroidery frame, still holding Patricia's abandoned piece of work.

The box was so pretty that Rosie clapped her hands in delight. "How charming it is! Look at all these little drawers. It is a pity the needles have rusted."

"I can clean them up," Mrs Brookes said.

Voices from afar told Rosie that the ladies of the house were beginning to stir. "Quick! Let us take it somewhere quiet so we can examine it properly. The blue saloon — no one goes in there."

Keeble nodded to Anthony and John, who lifted the box up bodily and carried it across the hall and down the passage to the blue saloon. After lighting the fire, the servants withdrew and left the two ladies to open drawer after drawer, and unwrap the delicate contents of each little package of thread.

"Do you enjoy this sort of fancy work?" Rosie said, as they knelt side by side on the rug. "You have been mending shirts and Mama's caps since you arrived, I think."

"I like to have a needle in my hand, but I cannot afford good quality thread like this any longer, so I sew whatever needs sewing. I shall work on this piece of Miss Plummer's while I am here. It is meant to be a rose, so I can use some of the pretty pink silks." She sighed, running a hand reverently over the polished exterior of the box. "How I wish I could keep it!"

"I cannot see why you should not," Rosie said stoutly. "It has been given to you freely, and Miss Plummer will not care a bit. All that interests her is babies."



“Is she married?”

“She has no thought of ever marrying. She occupied herself with looking after her sister’s children, and my oldest sister’s three, when they were here in the summer, but now she has her orphanage and she has no interest in anything else. So keep the box, Mrs Brookes, and welcome. I am sure that is Mr Plummer’s intention.”

Mrs Brookes flushed slightly, lowering her eyes, but almost at once she composed herself, and began to talk about the engagement party the next day.

“How excited you must be, Miss Fletcher. You’re always so composed, but you must be thrilled to know that it will all be official, and nothing now can disrupt the progress of your engagement.”

Rosie pondered that. Thrilled? Not exactly. Quietly pleased, perhaps, that the objective so long sought was now in view. And yet... anxious, too.

“Were you thrilled to be engaged?”

Mrs Brookes’ head shot up, eyebrows lifted in surprise. “My case was very different. I had no home, no dowry, no idea how I would survive, so I was very grateful for the offer.”

That was an unexpected response. Was she talking about her first marriage or the second? “But... you liked being married? You must have done, for you married a second time.”

Mrs Brookes looked at her rather strangely. “Is that something that bothers you? Being married? Your mother will explain all that to you.”

“Oh... no, not that.” Rosie blushed crimson. “I have some idea what happens, and two of my sisters are married, so... No, not that. But... were you close to your husbands? Were they like friends to you?”

“Like friends? Not exactly. A man can never be a friend in the same way as a woman, can he?”

“Exactly!” Rosie said eagerly. “That is what troubles me. All my life, I have had my family about me... my sisters, in particular. We have always been close... well, Bella is a little younger, so perhaps not so much, but Allie, Julia, Angie and me... we could not have been closer. Allie and I shared a room for years, and when she married I moved in with Julia and Angie. I

have always had my sisters about me, in the nursery, in the schoolroom... oh, everywhere! We do everything together, and now I shall marry and go away to Pollicott Place and I shall be quite alone. Even my best friend from Sagborough, Belinda Jupp, is left behind and she has not even *written* to me. She used to write two or three times a week and now it has been ten days... no, *eleven*, and not a word! I cannot tell you how much I long to hear all the news from home... our old home, that is. So many friends left behind, but Belinda and her brother, Ricky, are my oldest and dearest.”

“Ah, I see,” Mrs Brookes said. “As to your friend, the roads are always bad at this time of year, so there’s nothing in that, and letters do go astray, after all. But your sisters... I’ve always wished I had sisters! How lucky you are. Will you go on a wedding tour with his lordship?”

“I have no idea. It has not been mentioned,” Rosie whispered. A wedding tour! Weeks alone with Redmond... what would that be like?

“Whether you do or not, there’s no difficulty there. It’s perfectly unexceptional for a young married woman to have one of her sisters with her for female companionship.”

“But they are all married, or soon will be. Only Bella... but she is too young.”

“One of your husband’s sister’s, then?” Rosie pulled a face. Mrs Brookes laughed. “Then hire a companion. Your friend from the north, perhaps.”

“No, not Belinda. She would not be comfortable in such elevated society. Her father is an apothecary, and Ricky, too. She stayed with us in Bath, and she was not at all easy about it.” Rosie sat bolt upright. “But you would be perfect!”

“Me? No!”

“But you would. You are always so... so *serene*, Mrs Brookes. You make me feel serene, too. And I can talk to you, as has just been demonstrated. If I cannot have any of my sisters with me, I had sooner have you than anyone else in the world. What do you say? Does the idea appeal?”

Mrs Brookes seemed to have trouble catching her breath, for her chest

heaved several times. Then she laughed. “Does it appeal? Oh, Miss Fletcher, I can’t tell you how much I’d love to accept your so generous offer, but I can’t. I must go back to Carlisle with Mrs Landers.”

“But why? Have you signed a legal document binding you to her employment?”

“Not that. I can’t stay in the south of England because of Michael. You know about my previous acquaintance with him?”

“Oh yes!” Rosie said softly. “So romantic, that he was so smitten the instant he met you, and could not marry Miss Greaves. And now, here you are again, by the purest chance.”

“By chance, yes. I wouldn’t have come here, not for a kingdom, if I’d known he’d never married Amelia. While I’m here, he will be distracted and that mustn’t happen, not again. I must go as far away from him as possible, and then he’ll settle down and do what’s right for him and for Amelia. You do see, don’t you?”

“I do!” Rosie breathed. “I am very sorry for it, for I should have loved to have you as my companion — you are so *restful*, Mrs Brookes, and so sensible. I am sure that if ever I were uncertain what to do for the best, you could advise me, and better than Mama, because she is so much older than me and... and she sees things differently. And you have been married, so you know all about... well, that sort of thing. Johnny’s wife, Lady Jemma, has been married before, but she is far too grand for me ever to talk to her about such things, whereas you... you are not grand, and I feel comfortable with you.”

“Miss Fletcher... Rosie... are you perhaps having second thoughts about marrying into an earl’s family?”

“Not at all, I assure you. I am very certain of what I am doing, and I shall grow accustomed to my new station in life. But just at first, while I am learning, and Redmond is still a relative stranger, and a man moreover, and even the servants at Pollicott Place will be unfamiliar to me... it would be so pleasant to have a female friend of my own age, someone who is not starchy, with whom I can be wholly myself. But your reasons for declining are honourable, and I shall not press you further. And now, I hear the ladies next

door, so I had better do my duty as a daughter of the house to entertain the visitors, but please stay here with your embroidery if you wish. I will keep an eye on Mrs Landers, and see that she has all she needs. Your duties in that regard will recommence all too soon.”

## 18: Making Plans

Michael walked down the drive from Kelshaw House lost in thought. He was free of any lingering ties to Amelia, and she was now at liberty to look for a more suitable husband elsewhere. But what to do about Margarita, that was the question. She was insistent that she would return to Carlisle with Mrs Landers, and then she would be gone from his life. How on earth could he persuade her to stay?

He was about to turn in through the gates of Chadwell Manor when he noticed a gaggle of people at the gate of one of the cottages further into the village. Two of the Fletcher sisters, he thought, from their expensive clothes. Miss Angie and Miss Bella, and with them Angie's Mr Appleby, from Bath, and Bella's Sir Con Pluckrose. Michael walked on to join them, and to greet Tom Green, whose cottage it was, who had come to the gate to see them, a cluster of small children about him. Green was still a young man, no more than thirty-five, but a bad fall had broken his arm and left him unfit for all but odd jobs.

"Well, 'tis my day for visitors," Green said, raising his good hand in greeting. "Good day to you, Mr Plummer, sir. Will you come in an' take a drop o' tea? Or some o' Molly's elderberry wine? We 'ad a good 'aul this year."

Michael agreed to it, and after the others had left to go on to the Manor, he followed Green into the house, the children bouncing around them like puppies. The eldest daughter, a girl of about ten, herded her brothers and sisters into another room, and Green took Michael into the kitchen.

"There now, we can 'ave a bit o' peace. What'll it be, sir, the tea or the wine?"

"Oh, wine," Michael said. "Mrs Green's elderberry wine is the best in the parish."

"She'll be pleased to 'ear you say so, sir, I'm sure. She's up at the Park today, 'elpin' in the kitchen. All 'ands to the pump, with the place as full as it is."

"And a bit of extra money for you," Michael said. "How are you

managing, Green?”

“We do pretty well, all things considered, sir. This arm’ll never be right — I just can’t grasp anything tight like I used to — but there’s plenty I can still do. Mr Fletcher pays me five guineas a year just to wind all the clocks at the Park, an’ Toby earns another five as a kitchen boy, so what with the casual work I do, an’ Molly doin’ a bit ’ere an’ there, we’ll ’ave fifty pounds this year, I reckon.”

“And you manage on that, do you?” Michael said in wonder, thinking of his own allowance of two hundred a year, which had only to put clothes on his back and a few sundry expenses, whereas Green fed his large family on only fifty pounds.

“Aye, it’s not a problem. We’ve got the garden, you see, sir. All the fruit an’ vegetables we can eat, an’ chickens for the eggs an’ a bit of meat. We raise a pig if we can get a piglet. An’ folk are very kind. Mr James brings us rabbits an’ a bit o’ fish now an’ then, your lady mother sends us cheese an’ beef jelly, the Fletcher ladies just brought us an ’am an’ a leg o’ mutton for our Christmas. Mrs James brought a whole pound o’ tea the other day. And Mr Fletcher filled the coal store for us this winter. Said ’e’d ordered too much, but ’e was just bein’ kind. We’ve got such good neighbours.”

“There is not much land with this cottage,” Michael said. “Can you really grow enough to feed you all?”

“Aye, easily, apart from potatoes. We need to buy some o’ them, and bread o’ course. You’d be surprised ’ow much can be grown in a small patch. That Mr Appleby that’s to wed Miss Angie, ’e’s got a market garden near Bath, an’ ’e grows all manner o’ things. We ’ad a good chat about it.”

Michael left with new-found respect for his neighbour, who remained cheerful in adversity, and even thought himself well off, on fifty pounds a year and the kindness of others. When he returned to the Manor, he found the party from the Park just on the point of departure, a lengthy business for Father was always punctilious in the civilities, and Mother was delighted to play the gracious hostess to another baronet, even one so young as Sir Con.

Michael found himself a little apart from the others, beside Appleby. “I have been talking to Green,” he said. “He manages very well on so small an

income, but he seems to grow a great deal.”

“These country people have a great deal of skill in such arts,” Appleby said. “I know something of the business myself, but Mr Green is most knowledgeable, at least where everyday items are concerned, but then he has no need to cultivate pineapples. His knowledge, too, is in his head, whereas I have a small book to guide my sowing and pruning efforts. Abercrombie’s Journal. I could not manage without it. He is also weather-wise, assuring us that we shall have snow before the week is out.”

“Snow? In these still, frosty conditions?” Michael said.

“Mr Green declares that the wind is changing, and I believe him,” Appleby said solemnly.

“Well, we shall see,” Michael said, unconvinced.

The two lapsed into silence, watching the Fletcher sisters and Sir Con Pluckrose still caught up in conversation.

“We are to enjoy your company for a while longer, I understand?” Lady Plummer said to Sir Con.

“Another two weeks, but then I must go home for a while. I shall be back before too long, however. I look forward to seeing Miss Fletcher wed the viscount.”

“Ah, you cannot keep away from Hertfordshire, I believe,” she said, with an arch glance at Bella Fletcher.

“I am very fond of the county, it is true,” Pluckrose said blandly.

He did not look at Bella, but it was clear that she was very much in his thoughts as he spoke. Had he not said that he could be happy, if only he could see her two or three times a year? Would that not work for Michael too — if he could see Margarita now and then, just to reassure himself that she was well and nearby, he would be entirely content.

Happiness bubbled up inside him. If she were determined to go to Carlisle, then he would go there too! Twice a year, or three times, he would go and assure himself that all was well with her... that would content him.

As soon as the visitors had left, Sir Owen turned to Michael. “Well?

Have you news for us?"

"News, sir?"

"You have just come back from Kelshaw House. Did you see Kelshaw?"

"I did. I told him that I shall not be offering for Miss Greaves."

A long silence greeted these words, then, with a heavy sigh, Lady Plummer turned on her heel and retreated to her parlour.

Sir Owen's expression did not change by one iota. "My book room."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as the door was closed, he said tersely, "I understood you to be going there to offer for Miss Greaves."

"I did not say so. My objective over these last weeks has been to determine whether I wish to marry Miss Greaves. My decision is that we should not suit at all."

"And do you think it proper to encourage her to believe that an offer is forthcoming? Do you feel that your behaviour has been beyond reproach?"

Michael straightened his spine. "I have done nothing improper, sir. I have not spoken to Miss Greaves of marriage or affection or anything that might encourage her to harbour an expectation."

"This is all the fault of *that woman*," Sir Owen said, his eyes narrowed. "You have never been rational where she is concerned, and here you are, caught in her toils again."

"*Her toils!*" Michael said, outraged. "You make her sound like some devious siren, sending out her lures to entrap me. And pray do not speak of her as '*that woman*'. Mrs Brookes is a respectable married woman who has done nothing — *nothing*, I say — to ensnare me. Her appearance here is pure coincidence, but for me it is very timely. It makes me understand that no other woman will satisfy me, and surely, in all honesty, you would not have me marry Amelia or anyone else, when my heart belongs to another? I cannot do it, Father. I can never marry Amelia, and it is better she should understand that at once than to cling to hope, if that is what she does."



“You are determined, then, to deny your obligation towards Miss Greaves? You will selfishly abandon her after all this?”

“Is it selfish to wish her to marry a man who loves her wholeheartedly? Is not marriage the one state wherein one might reasonably be selfish? I do not believe I could make Amelia happy, and I am very certain that she could not make me so, therefore it is better that we do not attempt it.”

“Michael, you disappoint me. I had hoped you knew better than this.”

“I am sorry you are disappointed, Father, but I cannot marry Amelia, and that is an end to the matter.”

“But you cannot marry *her* either.”

“That is true. Mrs Brookes is lost to me, in that way. But that does not mean I can put her entirely out of my mind. If I may just see her sometimes...”

“Michael, this woman almost destroyed your sanity once before. You must not let her do so again. It is unthinkable. *Then* it was understandable, to an extent, because she was a widow, but *now*, she is married, and you must not think of her.”

“I am fully aware of that. There can be nothing of that nature between us, not ever. But we may still meet... I may still see her... I *need* to see her. This is not the madness that overtook me two and a half years ago. I am not the same person I was then. Margarita makes me calm and contented as I have never been before. She makes me *whole*, Father. I need to be near her. She is determined to return to Carlisle with her employer, but if I could just go there... perhaps two or three times a year.”

“Michael, are you insane? You must let this woman go from your life.”

“I cannot. I must see her, sometimes. I ask nothing from her, and she need not fear me, for I shall do nothing to compromise her reputation, but I cannot live without her in my life. If she is in Carlisle, then I must go to Carlisle, too.”

“What happens when her husband returns? Have you thought about that?”

“Of course. If he is a sensible man, he will be glad that his wife had a

good friend while he was obliged to leave her alone and unprotected, and even if he is not, he will find that his wife's reputation is undamaged. I shall certainly give him no cause for concern. I have no intention of seeing Margarita without a chaperone."

His father paced twice across the room, then came to a halt before him. "Michael, let me be very clear about this. I am happy to make you an allowance as my son and my heir, to finance you without too many questions asked. But this is too much. I cannot permit you to dishonour the family name in this way. If you persist in chasing this woman — a married woman, let me remind you — from one end of the country to the other, then you will not do it at my expense. There will be no further funds forthcoming until I have your assurance that you have put all thought of this woman out of your mind. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Father."

Michael bowed composedly, and left the room. After retrieving the newest version of Paterson's itinerary from the library, he retreated to his bedroom to study it. Padwick found him there, rigid with shock, some little while later.

"Are you quite well, sir?"

"Three hundred miles, Padwick. Three hundred and twelve, to be precise, from London to Carlisle. Forty-seven hours and three quarters by mail coach at... what is it now, fourpence a mile? Something of the sort. What is that in pounds? I cannot work it out. A shilling for three miles, so a pound for sixty miles. That must be... I cannot *think*, Padwick."

"Are you going to Carlisle, sir?"

"Yes, yes, of course I must go. Three times a year. Five pounds, that is it. And the same back, three times, is thirty pounds. Yes, yes, and that is all well and good, but there will be hotels at Carlisle, and tips and who knows what. But I cannot take you, Padwick. I cannot afford it. I shall have to learn to manage for myself. Three trips a year, perhaps a sennight each time for hotels, and food... I must eat, after all. But there will still be my tailor's bills and your salary, and I do not know how it can be done. And Green lives well on fifty pounds a year."

“Tom Green? He’s a labourer, sir, not a gentleman like you.”

“True, but he manages to keep his family fed and clothed on fifty pounds a year.”

“I thought Sir Owen was full of juice now, sir. Not in the basket, is he?”

“No, no, but... the thing is, Padwick, that I am determined to go to Carlisle. I must, I absolutely must or I shall run mad again. She keeps me sane, so I have to see her, but Father will not have it and swears he will stop my allowance if I go.”

“Oh Lord, sir, that’s bad,” Padwick said, sitting down on the edge of the bed with a thump, the starched neck cloths he was carrying slithering to the floor. “Never knew you to quarrel with the old man before... or anyone, come to that. Not the quarrelsome sort, are you?”

“No, but I must go. If Mrs Brookes goes back to Carlisle, then I must go there, too, sometimes.”

“But how, sir, without money? Do you have something saved up?”

“I do! That is a good thought, Padwick. Let me see...” A quick check of his accounts revealed the sum. “Two hundred and twenty pounds and a few shillings. So I shall have that, and I have eighty pounds a year from Aunt Thomasina.”

“So you have, sir. That’s a good amount.”

“But it’s not enough, not if I have nothing at all from Father. I cannot live as a gentleman on eighty pounds a year and two hundred in savings.”

“Not if you’re trailing up and down to Carlisle, no,” Padwick said thoughtfully. “But travelling’s expensive. If you were living in Carlisle—”

Michael’s head shot up. “A cottage! I could live on eighty a year in a cottage. Green manages it, after all. Rent... what would the rent be?”

“My uncle pays two bob a week for his cottage,” Padwick said. “He’s an under gamekeeper at Bellingham Green. My da’ pays ten bob a week, but that’s his bit of a shop and rooms above. He’s a tailor, if you remember, sir.”

“In Ware, yes. Is that the whole house?”

“No, just the ground floor and the first. There’s a cobbler in the

basement and a couple of widows in the attic rooms.”

“But I should not need a house in town, just a small cottage with a bit of land. Chickens, Padwick... I shall have to keep chickens, and grow carrots. I know nothing about growing carrots, but Green knows. And Appleby... he keeps a journal... no, not his, somebody’s journal, that tells him how to do it. I must get a copy. Goodness, so much to think about!”

“Are you... are you serious, then, sir?” Padwick said in a small voice. “You’d really leave me behind, that’s been with you since you were twelve years old and first learnt to tie a neck cloth like a gentleman?”

“I cannot afford you, Padwick,” Michael said gently. “Your salary would be a quarter of my annual income.”

“But I don’t want your money, sir! I’d be happy to come with you for nothing. I know a bit about digging a vegetable patch and keeping chickens, and I can mend fences and roofs and the like, which I’ll wager you can’t. I can do a bit of tailoring work, too, to earn a bit of extra money.”

“That is an excellent point,” Michael said thoughtfully. “We could both earn a bit extra. I could do some tutoring, perhaps, or someone might need a secretary. Would you... would you truly come with me, Padwick? Even if I am unable to pay you for a few years... or perhaps at all, if Father disinherits me.”

Padwick’s intake of breath was audible. “He’d never do that, Master Michael! Why, he can’t, can he? The title has to come to you, doesn’t it?”

“The baronetcy, yes, that cannot be changed, but the Manor, and all that goes with it... it is not entailed, so he might well decide to change his will and leave it all to James. And who could blame him? I doubt I shall ever marry now, so everything will go to James and his son in the end.”

“And you’re content with that, sir? You’d cut yourself off from your family and your home, and all for a woman who’s married to someone else?”

“It sounds crazy when you put it that way, but yes, that is precisely what I intend to do.” Michael laughed. “What an adventure! And if any of my family wish to see me, they will be welcome to visit me in Carlisle.”

## 19: The Day Before Christmas

The day before Christmas there was a change in the air. Outside, the frost was lighter, and heavy grey clouds obscured the sunshine. Inside, there was a mood of anticipation, for this was the appointed day when the betrothal of Lord Albury to Miss Rose Fletcher would become official. After dinner, there would be an evening party for such neighbours as chose to brave the winter conditions, with an announcement and the drinking of champagne and a deluge of good wishes for the happy couple. Rosie would blush and lower her eyes demurely, Lord Albury would look proud and their families would look thrilled or resigned or indifferent, according to their natures.

The breakfast parlour was as full as it could hold, and Margarita, who had been one of the first down, felt obliged to take her plate and cup of coffee away to make space for later arrivals. The difficulty was finding a quiet place to sit. Every room in the house was in turmoil, for they would all be pressed into service that evening. The ladies' parlour and breakfast parlour were to be retiring rooms, the dining room and library would house the supper, the blue saloon was to host the card players, and if the younger guests should care for impromptu dancing, the withdrawing room would stand ready. The footmen were rushing about with candles and coals, chairs were being carried hither and thither, and the little dog had picked up everyone's excitement, and was rushing about barking her head off.

Margarita found a corner of the library less frenetic than elsewhere, and by skilful deployment of plum cake, managed to entice the dog in there, too, where she promptly curled up in front of the fire and went to sleep. Margarita finished her breakfast in blissful peace, only twice interrupted by harassed footmen and once by the housekeeper checking the sconces were all filled.

She fetched her embroidery box from the blue saloon and settled down to work on Patricia's rose. The piece was intended to be the front of a cushion, she decided, but she couldn't afford any more material even for the other side, let alone to complete a set, as she'd have liked. However, it would do very well to replace a moth-eaten fire screen in the library at Hodgehill. After that, she'd only be able to use strips of material salvaged from old sheets and curtains.

Still, she wouldn't repine. Here she was with warmth and light and leisure enough for the task, not to mention enough silk thread to create any number of fire screens. She had good food to eat and pleasant gardens to take her exercise, she had friends about her and several days more before she needed to brave the mail coach back to Carlisle. Mrs Fletcher had said she'd send Mrs Landers in her own carriage, but it was as well not to take such generosity as certain, then she wouldn't be disappointed. Expect nothing, and be pleasantly surprised now and then, that was her motto.

Best of all, she was within a mile of Michael. Had he gone to the west gate again today, hoping to see her? She hadn't dared to go herself — she shouldn't be alone with Michael! She'd known it for a long time, and she wouldn't forget again. It was too dangerous. He was the only man who had ever offered her physical affection. She had not been unloved as she grew up, but no one had ever *touched* her. Her father had been a practical man, not a man who ever displayed his feelings, and Jack Aitken the same. She'd had no close friends, or not close in the way the Fletcher sisters were, always arm in arm or heads together, whispering. No one had ever touched her, and she never thought anything of it. But then there was Michael, a man with an insatiable desire to touch her. He touched her hair, her hands, her face... and he had kissed her. At every opportunity he had kissed her. And she had responded with desperate need. Now that she knew her own weakness, she would never again be drawn in.

Just as long as she was never alone with him.

Still, it was a quiet delight inside her to know that he was so close, and very likely he'd be here tonight for the evening party. Oh, the thrill of seeing him! In all this time — thirty long months — she'd never forgotten his face, the way he stood and moved, the intense way he spoke. And his endearing little habits — the worry lines on his forehead sometimes, the way his hands twisted this way and that when he was nervous. But her memories, faded and imperfect as they were, couldn't compare with the real Michael, this new, calm Michael who made her feel calm, too. A little calmer, anyway. She would never be completely easy in his company. There was always a thrumming of excitement when he was near.

Mrs Fletcher came in, unruffled despite the turmoil in the house. "Mrs

Brookes, would you be so good as to come into Mr Fletcher's office? Sir Owen Plummer wishes to speak to you."

"Of course. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

She hesitated long enough that a frisson of fear sent icy tendrils down Margarita's spine. "No illness, or anything of that nature. A concern... that is all."

No illness... a concern. There was nothing to be gleaned from such scant information. Margarita packed away her work swiftly and followed Mrs Fletcher next door to the office. Mr Fletcher was standing to one side of the fire, brandy glass in hand, while Sir Owen paced about, hands behind his back.

"Here she is, Sir Owen," Mrs Fletcher said. "Please sit down, Mrs Brookes."

Margarita took the indicated chair and Mrs Fletcher another, then they all looked expectantly at Sir Owen, whose pacing came to a halt in front of the fire.

"Mrs Brookes," he began, then immediately stopped again, with another pace across the room. He held his hands in the small of his back, but one flapped restlessly against the other.

She had never seen him like this, almost nervous. He was rather a stern man, and always disapproving of her, not without some justification. Her behaviour at Hadlow had not been as it ought. She'd been swept off her feet by a torrent of unfamiliar emotions, quite helpless to resist, and Michael just the same. But now she had herself under control, so she sat quietly, waiting for him to compose himself.

"Michael is... not himself," he began again.

Now Margarita was thoroughly alarmed. "He is agitated?"

"No, that is the strangest part of it. He is completely calm, very composed and yet... quite irrational. He says you are determined to return to Carlisle with Mrs Landers. Is that so?"

"It is. Once I'm gone, Michael will settle down and marry Amelia Greaves, I'm sure."

“He says he will not. He has talked to Kelshaw, and told him quite openly that he has no intention of offering for Miss Greaves. Kelshaw put all the usual arguments to him, as I have done myself, but he is unmoved.”

“He’ll change his mind,” Margarita said. “You know what he’s like, Sir Owen. He shifts about with the wind.”

Sir Owen shook his head. “Not this time. He is different, Mrs Brookes, with a determination I have never seen in him before. He will not marry her.”

Margarita felt herself shaking. If Michael would not marry Amelia... foolish man! He didn’t know what was best for himself. But if he could look elsewhere... was it possible? No, she dared not even begin to hope.

Sir Owen rubbed his face tiredly, and sat in the chair facing her. “And now he says... I can scarcely believe I am saying this, but he tells me that he intends to leave Hertfordshire... leave his home... he plans to move to Carlisle.”

“To Carlisle!” she cried. “He mustn’t do that!”

“Exactly so!” he said eagerly. “You see it as I do. It is madness, utter madness. He wished to visit you there... three times a year, he said... but I refused. I told him that I would cut his allowance if he tried to do any such thing. So then he said he would uproot himself entirely and move there altogether. He has a modest inheritance from an aunt — eighty pounds a year — and he thinks he can live on that. He plans to keep chickens, if you please.”

Margarita couldn’t help laughing at the image this created in her mind. “No! He’ll never do so.”

“I do not find this amusing, Mrs Brookes.”

“I beg your pardon, sir, but surely this isn’t as serious as you suppose. Carlisle’s not exactly the far end of the earth. Why not let him try? He’ll tire of chicken meat soon enough, and come running home.”

“That is very much what Fletcher said also, yet I cannot believe it. If you had seen Michael last night after dinner, talking so dispassionately of his plans. He spent all afternoon yesterday talking to Tom Green, taking notes on his management, and he has a book that Bath fellow gave him — Appleby,



that is his name. A book on when to sow vegetable seeds for the best crops, and how to manage the growing of them. Michael even has a budget worked out — so much for rent for a cottage, this much per week for sugar and tea, so much for coals. He talks of taking tutoring work to earn extra money, and his man goes with him, so between them they can work the garden and do extra jobs, and he is never coming back, Mrs Brookes. He has said so. He will no longer be a gentleman, but a common labourer, his hands in the dirt to put food on the table. He will be exiled from all good society, and he speaks of it in the most complacent manner... he talks equably about James inheriting, if you please. If he leaves, the breach will be permanent. I am about to lose my son, and I cannot bear it.”

He put his head in his hands with a groan.

“There’s still a chance he will change his mind,” Margarita whispered. “When he begins to understand the enormity of his proposals, he’ll surely think again. If you can keep the door open for his return...”

“He will be lost to me,” Sir Owen said, raising his head with a fierce look of despair. “Michael is... special to me, you see. Not just because he is my first born, although there is something of that, but he has always needed me more than the others. The girls... well, their mother is the best person to advise them, and James has always had a sunny nature. He was a sturdily independent soul, even as a child, and as a man he was sufficient unto himself, at least until he met Julia. But Michael... he was my little shadow, always asking my advice, always trying so hard to please. He reminds me of my mother in some ways, for she was a timid creature, quite overawed by my father. She never stood up for herself, or took a stand. But that is what makes Michael’s present path so shocking, that he would throw away everything, his whole life, for a woman, and one who is already married.”

Mrs Fletcher shifted restlessly at these words, but to Margarita’s relief she said nothing.

Sir Owen went on, “If he had married you before, when you were a widow... well, it would not be precisely what we wanted for him, but we would have made the best of it. But this... pursuing a married woman... it will not do. It is wrong in every way, as I am sure you agree.”

She nodded, quite unable to say a word, and fully occupied in avoiding the speaking expression on Mrs Fletcher's face.

"Mrs Brookes," Sir Owen said, "I have no right to ask anything of you, but will you not help me? Is there any way you can think of to turn my son from this course on which he is set? I have tried everything to dissuade him, but if you go back to Carlisle, he will follow you there and I do not think he ever intends to come home again."

"What do you think I can do, if your pleas have been ineffective?" she said.

"I have no power over him, not any more, it seems, but you do. I am begging you, madam, if you care at all for Michael, to prevent him from setting out on this ruinous path."

Margarita rose and walked across to the window. Beyond the reach of the fire, the air was cool and she pulled her shawl closer about her. She couldn't be unmoved by Sir Owen's appeal, yet what could she do? If the claims of duty to his family couldn't deter him, then her words would be equally ineffective. Nor was she sure that she wanted to interfere. Michael determined to follow her to Carlisle? Her heart sang at the thought. Surely he must love her, if he would give up everything to follow her. Still, the split with his family was to be deplored.

Turning, she said, "Sir Owen, I agree with you that Michael moving permanently to Carlisle would be a very bad idea. Why not, then, relent and allow him to visit occasionally? Two or three visits a year when he spends the rest of his time quietly at home wouldn't materially disturb his life, or yours."

"How can I? That would be to condone his behaviour in chasing after a married woman. He will destroy his own reputation and yours, madam, if he is not stopped."

"Then let me talk to him," she said, resignedly.

His face at last relaxed into something approaching a smile. "Thank you! You are all goodness, Mrs Brookes. May I send him to you at once?"

She agreed to it, and Mr Fletcher went to show him out, the murmur of

their voices still audible after the door was closed.

“Well?” Mrs Fletcher said with an arch smile. “You know what you can do now, I take it?”

“Do I?”

“Of course! All you need do is tell Michael that you are not married at all, he will offer for you and all will be well. A very satisfactory ending.”

“That is precisely what I can’t do,” Margarita said tiredly. “I know you mean well, Mrs Fletcher, but you must see that it’s impossible. If I tell him the truth, then of course he’ll offer for me, but from obligation.”

“And if you do *not* tell him, then he cannot offer for you at all, because he believes you to be married. Would it not be better to tell him everything? A man may feel an obligation as well as affection, after all.”

“Oh, he’ll tell me that he loves me, I have no doubt, and perhaps he’ll believe it for a while, but if I marry him, then he may in time come to realise that he’s made a terrible mistake. We barely know each other — a week under the same roof two years ago, less than that now. That’s no foundation for marriage, were we as deep in love as two people can well be.”

“And are you not?”

Margarita shifted uncomfortably. “Who can say? We’re drawn to each other, certainly, but I’m equally drawn to the prospect of a comfortable home, with no need to work for my bread, which would be stepping quite outside my class. As for Michael — I can’t say what draws him to me. Clearly he has no liking for women of his own class. He thinks so little of his own good qualities that he may feel someone lowly like me is all he deserves.”

“Then you would be two of a kind,” Mrs Fletcher said acidly. “Look at yourself in the mirror, my dear, and then tell me that Michael Plummer sees only your humble roots. If I could have the dressing of you, I could make you look as fine as any lady in London.”

“You can dress me up all you like, but you’ll never make a lady of me,” Margarita said with a smile.

“Not like me, you mean?” she said, smiling back. “The grocer’s daughter? At least your father was a clergyman, which is perfectly

respectable. Even Sir Owen said he would be happy for you to marry Michael.”

“No, he said he’d have made the best of it,” Margarita said. “That’s not a ringing endorsement.”

“True, and it was very impertinent of him, considering that Lady Plummer is not precisely from the top drawer herself. She was a quartermaster’s daughter, you know, so if ever she puts herself on too high a form with you, just you remember that. She has moved up in the world, and so could you.”

“But I don’t want to. Oh, I’ve loved staying in this magnificent house, and it would be wonderful to live this way always, but I could never fit in the way you do, and Lady Plummer, too. You both look like ladies, and sound like it, too. I’m not sure I’d want to do that. It would be like trying to be something I’m not.”

“And perhaps that is the right attitude,” Mrs Fletcher said pensively. “I worked hard to dress above my station and to remove all trace of Yorkshire from my accent, but my gentleman husband never made me as happy as my lovely mercer. Harry has never tried to be anything he is not, and look how at ease with the world he is.” She sighed, an affectionate smile on her face. “So, what will you say to Michael?”

“I don’t know. In some ways, I’d like him to go to Carlisle and try living in a cottage and keeping chickens, just to see how long he lasts. Not long, I’d wager! It’s a hard life, even for those who are born to it, and not raised as gentlemen. But I don’t want him falling out with his family. He’s lucky to have them. But there is an alternative... has Rosie talked to you... about me?”

“Rosie?” She seemed startled. “She is concerned about you, as we all are.”

“She asked me if I would like to become her companion.”

“Her *companion*? She feels the need for a companion?”

Margarita nodded. “She’s grown up in a large, happy family, and she’s realising that once she marries she’ll have no familiar faces around her at all,

apart from Lord Albury. Naturally she can't talk to him about female concerns, and he will have his own interests to pursue. I think she's afraid of being lonely."

"And she told this to you, and not her mother?" Mrs Fletcher said, her voice unsteady. "I know I am only her stepmother, but I had thought we were close enough to talk about anything that concerns her."

"I'm her own age, Mrs Fletcher," Margarita said gently. "That makes a difference. And perhaps it was just the impulse of the moment. Besides, I said I couldn't possibly accept a position with her, so I dare say she's forgotten all about it now. But it occurs to me that it might provide a solution that would satisfy everybody. I'd be closer than Carlisle, so Michael could call from time to time, but he wouldn't need to leave his home and keep chickens, so Sir Owen would be happy. And I'd find out what Michael really wants... what I really want, too. We'd have the time to get to know each other better, and work out whether this... this *thing* that nearly destroyed us two years ago is strong enough to carry us through a lifetime together."

"The *thing* that is most likely to destroy you, Margarita," Mrs Fletcher said crisply, "is the deception that lies at the heart of your dealings with Michael. There cannot be love without trust, believe me, and how can he trust you when you keep such an important piece of information hidden from him? If you are ever to marry Michael, as I believe you both want, then sooner or later the whole world will have to know the truth, and you had far better confess at once than leave it to come out later."

"But the last thing I want is for him to marry me from a sense of duty!" Margarita cried. "I must know how he feels first. I have to be sure that he loves me, and if he does, he will forgive the deception."

"And how are you ever to find it out?" Mrs Fletcher said. "So long as he believes you to be a married woman, he cannot honourably reveal his feelings to you. Would you have him betray his own principles? Tell him the truth, Margarita — the whole truth, mind — and let him decide for himself."

But she was not ready for that momentous step. "I can't, not yet. It's all too overwhelming. I feel as if I'm hurtling downhill at a faster and faster pace, and I can't think... I can't *breathe*. I need more time... to know myself

and to know Michael. I must be *sure*... for his sake.”

“I understand you,” Mrs Fletcher said, “but do not take too long or the moment may escape you altogether, and that would be a tragedy.”

## 20: A Disagreement

Rosie sat contentedly at the instrument, practising a new piece that Eloise had written. How charming it was to have a sister-in-law capable of creating music out of nothing, so that there was always a new piece to learn, a new melody to linger in her head. It was a moment of tranquillity now that all the turbulence was finally behind her. Within a few hours her betrothal would be announced to the world, and she could begin to make plans for her new life, and not merely as a married woman, but as a viscountess. She would be presented at court in the spring, and then the society in which she would move would be very different. The Fletchers were barely gentry, but Rosie would be part of the nobility.

Mama was already making plans, of course. She had lists of all that would be needed for the marital home, the linens and pillows, the plate and glassware, the servants and carriages, and, most important of all in her eyes, the clothes. This was the culmination of all her hopes, the one outcome she had desired above all things, that Rosie should marry a lord, and now it was coming to pass. Although Mama had seemed to have second thoughts these last few weeks. Poor Mama! She had a huge influx of visitors to cope with, and in the depths of winter, too, without the usual possibilities for outings and entertainments. She looked tired, as if the cares of the world pressed upon her.

Angie and Mr Appleby were also in the music room, discussing a book they had read, on theology, of all things. It was astonishing how love had changed lively and light-hearted Angie into a much more thoughtful and serious person. Or perhaps that side of her character had always been there, but her own family had never managed to draw it out.

Was that always the case, that love made one different, somehow, more multi-faceted? Julia had not changed a bit since her marriage, for she was still the same scatter-brained, accident-prone Julia as always. And Will was still slightly arrogant and demanding, except that now his concern was all for Eloise rather than himself. Aunt Madge — well, she would never change! Johnny was the one who had changed the most. He had been deep in his books at Cambridge, wanting nothing else from life, not in the least interested in women, but he had stepped into the rôle of husband and father without a

second thought, and then fought like a tiger for Jemma and her sons.

How would marriage change Rosie herself? She shifted uneasily at the thought. It was difficult to imagine herself married at all. She was crossing a threshold into a different world, and she could not yet see clearly how it would affect her. It was like her first assembly at York, for even though Allie had described it to her, and she had attended assemblies at the King's Head in Sagborough, nothing could have prepared her for the magnificence of the Assembly Rooms, or the number of people crowded in, or the overwhelming heat and dazzling light and smells and noise. Marriage, too, would be a strange and unsettling experience, but she would get used to it in time, and Redmond would be beside her, to guide her through it.

Redmond had surprised her at breakfast with a neatly wrapped package.

"A small gift to mark our betrothal," he had said, with that little smile that was just for her.

It was rubies, a parure of obviously venerable heritage, for the florid style was antiquated and not at all to Rosie's taste. She said all that was proper, however, passed the box around for the ladies to exclaim over and promised to wear a part of the set that evening.

"These were my mother's," Redmond said, "a gift for her own betrothal. She wore them a great deal when she was herself Viscountess Albury. She wishes you to enjoy them now."

"How very kind of her," Rosie said politely. "I shall think of her every time I wear them."

He had smiled more broadly, obviously pleased by this idea, while Rosie thought sadly of the simple garnets she had planned to wear that evening. The rubies were appropriate for her new status, she supposed, and perhaps in time she could discreetly have the stones reset into something more restrained.

Now Redmond sat near the pianoforte and watched her play in silence, not interrupting or demanding her attention, simply listening. He was restful company in that way. He never put himself forward. At dinner or afterwards, when the company were gathered together, he would exert himself to make conversation, and he never raised difficult subjects. It was all light and easy,



and she could join in comfortably. He never made her feel awkward. When she played, however, he was content to sit quietly nearby, his eyes never leaving her face. She could play for hours with such silent admiration.

Mama's head appeared round the door. "Ah, there you are, Rosie." She bustled in, and as Redmond jumped up and bowed to her, she sat down with a sigh in the chair that he had just vacated. "I have been talking to Mrs Brookes, and she says that you offered her a position as your companion. Is that so?"

"It is, but she refused. She prefers to return to Carlisle with Mrs Landers."

"She is thinking again, to oblige Sir Owen. So I may tell her you are still of the same mind?"

"Of course," Rosie said.

It was only when Mama had bustled out again, that Rosie noticed a certain stoniness in Redmond's expression.

"A companion?" he said, brows drawn sharply together.

Rosie looked at him in surprise. "Do you dislike the idea?"

"I wonder why you need a companion, that is all. I wonder also that you do not think it necessary to inform me of this change to our domestic arrangements."

The coldness in his tone was frightening. "I... I beg your pardon... it was... I did not think... and she said she would not, so I saw no need to mention it. I should have told you if... Shall I tell her it was all a mistake?"

"You must do as you see fit, naturally, but if you must have a companion, I cannot see that Mrs Brookes is a suitable candidate. She is from very humble stock, I understand, and cannot advise you on the requirements of your new position."

"I am from humble stock myself," Rosie said, stung. "Nor do I expect her to advise me on anything of that nature — you will do that, or your mother, when it should happen to be necessary. The only advice I would expect from her is which bonnet I should wear."

“I should have thought your lady’s maid would advise on bonnets.”

“Undoubtedly, but a lady’s maid cannot sit with me in the drawing room, or accompany me when I pay calls. Do you expect me to do all that alone?”

“No, for I shall be with you, Rosie.”

“So I shall never pay calls without you, is that it? If I go shopping for buttons, will you go with me? Will you sit with me in the drawing room every morning, while I sew? Of course you will not! So you must allow me some female company when you are occupied with your own affairs.”

“Certainly, but is it too much to ask that you consult me before making such arrangements which, let me remind you, affect me also? We shall have Mrs Brookes living with us, after all, so do I not have a say in the matter?”

Rosie became aware that Angie and Mr Appleby were silent, staring at them in horrified fascination. Redmond must have realised it, for he fell silent too, then added in milder tones, “We shall speak about this another time.”

“Shall I tell her I have changed my mind?”

“No, it is done now. If you have finished at the instrument, perhaps we may join the others next door. I hear my mother’s voice, I believe.”

Miserably, Rosie nodded.

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Margarita waited in her room until Michael arrived. Mrs Fletcher came herself to fetch her.

“I shall stay with you, for propriety,” she said.

“Is there no one else could do that?” Margarita said. “You must have a thousand and one things to do today.”

“Actually, I shall be very glad of a quiet sit down, away from all the bustle. I have brought my work bag, you see. My sister-in-law Madge is taking care of all the domestic details, and I am supposed to be playing the gracious hostess to the Landers family. Believe me, it will be a pleasure to escape them for a while. They quite wear me down.”

Michael was waiting in Mr Fletcher’s office. Mr Fletcher diplomatically

disappeared, and Mrs Fletcher took her work bag to the window seat and sat half turned away. Margarita sat beside the fire, and Michael took the chair opposite, smiling at her so gently that Margarita was almost undone. He should not smile at her that way! It was not fair to test her willpower so much.

“What’s this I hear about you going to Carlisle?” she began, her voice not quite steady. “Your father said you plan to move there altogether.”

“I do!” he said eagerly. “I have decided, you see, that my life is incomparably better when I am near to you. Oh, you need not worry that I will importune you in any way. You may reassure Mr Brookes that I mean you not the least harm, and will do nothing to damage your reputation. You are quite safe from me. But I must be *near* you, you see. I shall find out where you go to church, and I shall attend there also. Oh, not every week, no, no, no! Just now and then, and you need not even speak to me. I shall not expect it, nor will I approach you. It will be enough for me to be under the same roof as you, just for a while... to hear the same collect, the same sermon. That is all. So you may go back to Carlisle without the least concern. And if it should happen that you need a friend, a protector, there I shall be, you see.”

She could not but be moved by the eagerness in his face, his eyes alight with happiness. Such a good, sweet man, yet she couldn’t read his innermost thoughts. He spoke only of being close to her, but nothing of what he felt for her. He had said, *‘My life is incomparably better when I am near to you’*, but what did that mean? That he loved her or simply that she had a soothing effect on him? He’d felt something for her once, that was beyond doubt, but whether it was love, she couldn’t say. He’d never once said so. But whatever emotion was buried deep inside him, she had to know!

While she gathered her thoughts, he went on, leaning forward a little and speaking more quietly, “Ah, I see the uncertainty in your eyes, but you must not doubt me, Mrs Brookes. You see, I am adopting a formal tone with you, to show you my determination to treat you with the utmost propriety. I asked Mrs Fletcher to chaperon us, for I do not want there to be the least hint of improper behaviour between us. It was wrong to meet you alone in the Park yesterday, I realise that now. You were upset and it would have been so

easy... but I am determined not to touch you. You are married, and I respect that absolutely. But I must be near you, I *must*. For my own peace of mind. You keep me calm, Marg— Mrs Brookes.”

“You’ve decided irrevocably not to marry Amelia, then?”

“Oh, I cannot marry her, not now. It was madness even to meet her again. I can never feel for her the affection that a husband should feel for his wife, and so it would be wrong. We should both be unhappy. I have told Kelshaw, so that there is no misunderstanding, and to leave her free to pursue other possibilities. That is all finished, and I shall make my life in Carlisle now... or wherever you choose to go. All I ask, Mrs Brookes, is that you do not disappear from my life altogether. If you leave Mrs Landers, will you tell me where you go? Of course, when Mr Brookes returns from India, things may change, I realise that. You will not need me as a protector, not when you have your husband to take care of you. But I shall still want to be near you... if he will permit it.”

For the first time he looked unhappy, for a husband, even one so negligent as to leave his wife alone for many years, might well look askance at a single man taking such an interest in his wife. Margarita could have set his mind at rest, but she had no wish to discuss Mr Brookes or his return from India, which she sincerely hoped would be many years away. Instead, she said, “It will grieve your father dreadfully if you move so far away, especially if you plan to live like a working man in a cottage, and keeping chickens.”

His expression became solemn. “It grieves me, too, but what alternative do I have? He will stop my allowance if I go against him, and I cannot blame him for that. I have only a very modest income of my own, and may not be able to improve it by paid work, for I cannot dig ditches or build houses. I have not been brought up to such work. There is very little employment for which I am suited. So I must do the best I can with my eighty pounds a year, and that means keeping chickens.”

“Michael, you asked me if I’d stay in the south of England and not return to Carlisle. If a way could be found for me to do that, would you be content to please your father and stay quietly at home?”

“Would I be able to see you sometimes?”

“I don’t see why not. Rosie Fletcher has asked me to become her companion, so I’d be living at Pollicott Place. It’s not very far away. Saffron Walden.”

“Oh...” His face was alight with hope. “That is not far at all. I could come to your church, just as I planned at Carlisle.”

“But no chickens,” she said.

He laughed. “No chickens. I confess, that is a disappointment. Keeping chickens seems like such a delightfully rustic occupation. A little seed and very little work, providing all the eggs one can eat, and meat for the table every Sunday. I am very partial to roast chicken.”

“But there’s the constant problem of keeping their coop stout enough to protect them from the ravages of foxes, and remembering to get them into it each evening before they decide to roost in the trees, because once they’re up there, believe you me, it’s the devil’s own work to get them down again.”

“I never knew you once kept chickens,” he said, chuckling.

“All my life, until Papa died and I had to leave the parsonage. They were nothing but trouble, trust me, and an egg-laying hen isn’t good eating by the time it’s ready for the pot. Not enough meat to be worth roasting. Now ducks... they’re a lot less bother, and geese keep the foxes away. Well, they keep everyone away, truth to tell.”

He laughed again, and they parted on the most amicable terms, he to tell Sir Owen that he would be staying at home after all, and she to inform Mrs Landers that she would have to find another companion.

It was an irrevocable step. Now she was committed to having Michael in her life, and perhaps, one day, far in the future, she could tell him that her marriage was a sham and then...

For the first time, she dared to think what it might be like to *marry* Michael.

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Rosie had got through the morning somehow, but her disagreement with Redmond haunted her. So when he quietly suggested a short walk in the gardens, she accepted with alacrity.

Almost as soon as they were out of the house, she began, “Redmond, I must apologise for—”

He spun round, his hands on either side of her face, the leather of his gloves soft against her cheeks. “No,” he said at once. “You have nothing at all to apologise for, dear Rosie. It is I who must apologise to you. I was an absolute bear this morning, and I deeply regret it. I should never have spoken so to you. Your female companionship is entirely a matter for you to decide, and I had no right to question your wishes in the matter. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course, but I should have discussed it with you first, I realise that now.”

He laughed. “It is not of the least consequence. Oh, Rosie, I hate being at odds with you. It makes me feel like the lowliest worm, especially today of all days. I want everything to be perfect for you today.” They walked on again, quite briskly, for it was too cold to linger. “I am sorry about the ruby set. It is not at all what I would wish for you. I asked Father for some funds — only an advance on my allowance, nothing more — so that I could buy you something, but he said, ‘*We have a safe full of things that are never worn. Take whatever you like.*’ I chose the least hideous, for the rest were worse, believe me. And then Mother objected because it was one of her favourites, she said, and they had a row about it. But once we are married and I have money of my own, I shall buy you something much prettier, I promise.”

“May I choose it myself?”

“If you wish,” he said, in surprised tones. “I shall take you to Rundell and Bridge, then.”

“Would you mind if we were to go to Barantine’s? Miss Barantine is a friend of mine... Mrs Bartholomew Tranter, as she is now.”

“Oh... well, Barantine’s is an excellent jeweller, too, so I have heard, although I have never been there myself. My father always shops at Rundell and Bridge when he buys gifts for my mother.”

“But I am not your mother, and you are not your father,” she said.

“That is very true,” he said, with a quick laugh. “How wise you are, Rosie.”

They were in the shrubbery by this time, and suitably hidden from the world, so he at once took her in his arms, as she had known that he would. ‘*A short walk in the gardens, for some fresh air*’ was an easy request to interpret, and she always made sure to wear a suitable bonnet for such occasions, one which would not hinder a man who wished to snatch a few kisses.

“Oh, Rosie, Rosie,” he murmured in her ear as they eventually surfaced for air. “We are going to be so happy, are we not? You and me together at Pollicott Place... and Mrs Brookes,” he added with a gurgle of laughter.

“Who will discreetly find plenty to do in another room, whenever we wish it,” Rosie said. “She will not disturb you, I promise.”

“I am sure she is an admirable woman, who will keep you good company when I have to leave your side. Which will not be very often, just at first, my darling.”

He bent his head towards her again, but this time he kissed her cheek, very softly, and then her neck, and then just behind her ears, so gently that she shivered a little at the delicate touch of his lips. So soft, so warm...

“Sweet Rosie,” he whispered, pulling her tighter against him. “My darling, most beloved Rosie...”

Rather breathlessly, she said, “What do you think about the end of February... for the wedding?”

His head shot up. “Two months! Eight weeks. Fifty-six days. That would be wonderful, my love.”

Then he kissed her with such fervour that Rosie was left rather flustered, and almost embarrassed. She was quite relieved when he suggested returning to the house.

“We shall have to run, for it is coming on to snow,” he said.

So it was, and she had not even noticed. He grabbed her hand, and, laughing together, they ran back to the house.

## 21: A Christmas Betrothal

Michael walked home in deep contentment. He had been fully prepared for the privations of life on eighty pounds a year, but this was far better. He would be able to stay quietly at home, not scandalising the neighbours and upsetting his parents by uprooting himself in pursuit of a married woman — he could quite see why the idea distressed his father. And he would still be able to see Margarita — Mrs Brookes — now and then. Lady Albury would naturally visit the family home from time to time, and would naturally bring her companion with her, so he would not even need to go to Saffron Walden.

A few flakes of snow were starting to fall as Michael reached the front door of the Manor. Inside, his father was waiting for him.

“Well?”

“I shall stay here,” Michael said.

“Thank God, thank God!” his father cried, and to Michael’s utter astonishment, threw his arms around his son and drew him into a fierce hug. “I was dreadfully afraid I should lose you, Michael. Come into the library and have a brandy with me to calm my nerves. I have been on tenterhooks all afternoon.”

The library! This was a momentous event, then. Willingly, Michael followed him, to find the fire blazing high and Mother sitting wanly beside it.

“It is all right, Sarah. He is not to go away after all.”

“Oh, thank heavens! What a fright you gave us, Michael. Your father— Well, I shall leave him to tell you about it. I am so glad you have seen sense. Chickens, indeed!”

“I was rather looking forward to the chickens,” he said quietly, as the door closed behind Mother.

Father chuckled and pushed a brandy glass into his hand. “So how was it done? What made you change your mind?”

Michael was tempted to say that he had not changed his mind at all, he was still just as determined to have Margarita in his life, somehow, but perhaps that was too brusque. Instead he said, “Mrs Brookes has been offered



a position as companion to the future Viscountess Albury, so she will live at Saffron Walden, not Carlisle.”

“Shall you move to Saffron Walden?”

“No, I shall live here, if you permit.”

“Michael, this is your home, always, and will be yours entirely one day. I hope you never leave it.”

“Yet you would have had me marry Amelia and move to Gloucestershire,” Michael said, puzzled.

“True, because I am not so selfish as to keep you tied here when you could have your own estate. At Hadlow, you would have lived the life of an independent gentleman, and you would have been able to travel to Hertfordshire whenever you liked. You would probably have been in town for the season, too, and I could manage that journey now and then, although town does not agree with me. But Carlisle... I could not have seen you at all.”

“It is not so far... still in England, after all. Or is it the moral aspect that bothers you, sir?”

“The morality of it... that should bother *you*, Michael, but I can forgive that. I can even understand it, to some extent. She is a fine looking woman, after all.”

“It is not that!” Michael said sharply. “That would be tawdry, to admire her solely for her looks, as so many do with Miss Fletcher. Such behaviour disgusts me. No, it is something deep within Mrs Brookes that draws me, some facet of her character. I feel complete when I am with her... she makes me feel that the world is not the difficult challenge it so often seems to be. She brings me certainty.”

“Are you in love with her?”

“That is irrelevant,” Michael said with dignity. “She is a married woman, and it would be inappropriate to speak of love or affection. She is my friend, that is all I ask of her, and if I can see her now and then... not often, an occasional sighting, at church, say, or in passing somewhere... that would be enough.”

Sir Owen nodded, sipping his brandy thoughtfully. "Michael, you have asked me why I objected to Carlisle, and I have not yet given you an answer. There is something you do not know. I have been... a trifle unwell recently. Oh, nothing terribly concerning, but my physician suggested I talk to an eminent fellow doctor in town, which I did in the spring. He suggested that I should not travel more than is absolutely necessary, and it is true that travel exhausts me, I cannot deny it. So you see, if you had gone to Carlisle, I could not have travelled there to see you, and you could not have returned here, not on eighty pounds a year. You would only have come home to take up your inheritance, after my death. So—"

"But why did you not tell me this?" Michael cried, jumping to his feet, and pacing restlessly about. "I should never have gone to Carlisle if I had known you were ill."

"And that is precisely why I could not tell you," his father said. "To have you tied here, purely because of an occasional malaise? No, I could not do it. You must live your life as you feel best, Michael. But Carlisle! I confess, the prospect of never seeing you again overwhelmed me. That I could not bear. Michael, I am not given to displays of emotion, as you know, but you are my first born, and my heir... and you will forgive me if I say you are the neediest and also the most precious of my children. Just as you cannot bear to let Mrs Brookes move far away from you, so it is with me and my dearest son. My life would be desolate without you, and I am grateful beyond measure to you and Mrs Brookes for making it possible for a fond father to keep his beloved son close to him in his declining years. I hope you will always be able to stay here... or nearby, where I can see you sometimes."

"Father..." Michael said, almost too overwhelmed to speak, "I hope I shall always be near you. I respect and admire you more than any other man I have known, and I would not for the world hurt you."

"I know that," Sir Owen said, his voice trembling. "But you must follow your heart as well, I understand that. All I ask is that you do not leave us entirely behind. We are your family, we will always love you unequivocally. Do not abandon us."

"I shall never do so," Michael said. "Now that I know all, I promise you that. But you must make me a promise also, that you will never keep such

important information from me again.”

“I promise,” Sir Owen said.

And perhaps the fire was a little too fierce, for they both found the smoke troublesome at that moment, and causing their eyes to water.

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Margarita had some difficulty finding an opportunity to inform Mrs Landers of her change of circumstance. The lady was either to be found deep in battle with Mrs Smythe, or else grumbling about the feud with one or other of the Landers ladies. If she happened to be in the same room as Lord Faulkbourne, she would immediately begin a diatribe against unfeeling kinsmen who would deprive a poor widow of her rightful inheritance, for she was fully convinced that both Hodgehill and Brierfield were hers. No matter how many times Lord Faulkbourne explained that the properties were her dowry, and had passed to her husband on her marriage, and after his death to the earl, she would not believe that she had only the right of abode at Hodgehill, and no rights at all over Brierfield.

While Margarita was very grateful to be spared the bulk of Mrs Landers’ outrage, it was awkward when she had a matter to raise, and one which could not easily be discussed in front of other family members. So it was not until Mrs Landers had retired to dress for dinner that an opportunity arose. Margarita dressed herself first, with Polly’s help, and then went into Mrs Landers’ room. Mrs Fletcher’s own maid had been assigned to look after her, but Margarita had no concerns about speaking in front of her. Lady’s maids were very discreet, as a rule.

“Well, what do you want?” Mrs Landers said, as soon as Margarita entered the room. “I have hardly seen your face these past few days, girl. You have been up to mischief, I make no doubt.”

There was no use in prevaricating, so Margarita said at once, “I should like to inform you that I shall not be returned to Carlisle with you when you leave, madam. I regret to inform you that I have been offered alternative employment, which I have accepted.”

“Alternative employment! What alternative employment? Who would ever employ *you*?”

“Miss Fletcher has asked me to be her companion when she marries Lord Albury.”

“Has she indeed? Ha! Well, you have got your feet under the table here, and no mistake. Very sly. Well, you need not think I shall give you a reference, my girl. Nothing but trouble, you have been. What about working your notice, eh? You need not think I shall pay you a penny piece if you just walk out like this.”

“You have not paid me a penny piece at any time, Mrs Landers,” Margarita said equably. “I bid you good day, madam.”

“Wait! You cannot just walk out like this. What am I supposed to do now? Where will I find another companion at such short notice? Come back, Margaret! Come back, I say!”

But Margarita, back straight and head high, walked out of the room and closed the connecting door softly behind her. Then, just in case Mrs Landers decided to follow her, she turned the key in the lock.

She was free! At least, she was free of her obnoxious employer, and more than ready to be a friend to Rosie Fletcher. And she would see Michael sometimes. Oh, the joy of knowing that he would be a part of her life from now on, and the best of it was, that she was only complying with the request of his father. It was not her own desires that drove this change in her circumstances, but Rosie’s kindness and Sir Owen’s love for his son. Now she could get to know Michael better, settle her own turbulent emotions, and perhaps, in time, he would reveal his true feelings and she would know what to do.

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Rosie was almost finished dressing for dinner when Mrs Graham knocked on the door. “The mistress would like to see you in her dressing room, Miss Rosie.”

“What have you been up to, Rosie?” Bella said, with a grin, but Angie hushed her.

“I expect it is just about the arrangements for this evening,” Rosie said.

“We have gone over it a hundred times already,” Bella said.

“You know Mama — once more never hurts,” Rosie said, as she followed Mrs Graham out of the door.

Mama was fully dressed and alone, but she looked pale and tired. “Are you all right?” was Rosie’s first thought.

“Of course. I shall be glad when all this is over, however, and I can have a lovely long rest. Rosie, dear...”

“Yes, Mama?”

“Angie tells me you quarrelled with Lord Albury today over Mrs Brookes. Is that so?”

“Only a little difference of opinion, but he made me a very handsome apology afterwards, so no harm done.”

“Thank goodness! We do *not* want any trouble at this stage, not with everything going so well. And is he happy for you to have Mrs Brookes with you? For I have to tell you, it would be very awkward for her if not, for she has already given notice to Mrs Landers.”

“He is happy about it.”

“Good. I had it in mind to talk to you about having someone with you, for company. It is very usual, you know. I had my sister with me when I first married, although that did not answer very well. She was very broad Yorkshire, and not inclined to moderate her language or her opinions just because she happened to be living amongst the gentry. I stood it for three months, that was all. By that time, I had made friends amongst the neighbouring ladies, so I was not so much in need of female companionship. You will find that when you are first married, you will be very much the centre of attention for all the families near Pollicott Place. A bride is always special, whether her husband is a viscount or a mere gentleman, so you will certainly make friends very quickly, especially with your sweet nature, Rosie. Now, are you quite sure this disagreement is behind you?”

“Oh yes.” Rosie blushed. “Mama, he is becoming... quite ardent. I have suggested the end of February for the wedding. Will that be all right?”

“Certainly. You have the house, and Lady Faulkbourne has said you may have one of their carriages, for they have seven, seemingly. That leaves

only your clothes, and two months is more than enough time. You will not need a great deal just at first, and you can get more in town in the spring. Well, this is most satisfactory. You are learning to manage him beautifully.”

“Does he need to be managed?” Rosie said, in some surprise.

“All men need to be managed to some extent,” Mama said complacently. “Just a little nudge here and there, to make sure he is moving in the right direction. Once you are married, of course, you will not be able to set yourself in opposition to him, but a woman has a multitude of subtle ways to achieve precisely what she wants. We will speak more of this in the days to come. Go and finish dressing, dear. I suppose you will have to wear the rubies? Not that monstrous necklace — perhaps just the bracelets, and then you can wear your pretty little diamond pendant.”

“Redmond apologised for the rubies, too, and said that as soon as he has his hands on my dowry, he will buy me something prettier. Is that not kind of him?” She chuckled, then kissed her stepmother’s cheek. “I shall see you downstairs, Mama.”

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Margarita went down as soon as she had left Mrs Landers. No one else was about except the servants, making their final checks that all was prepared for the evening. All three saloons were lit up as bright as day, with candles in every sconce and great fires blazing in the fireplaces. Trays of drinks and sweetmeats were set out ready for the two families gathering before dinner. The doors to each room stood welcomingly wide open.

She bethought herself of her embroidery frame, but as she left the saloon, there was an imperious rat-a-tat-tat on the front door. A footman scurried to open it, and a snow-clad figure hurried in. Despite the huge scarf and snowy hat, she recognised the eyes beneath.

“Michael?” she said, stepping forward uncertainly. “What are you doing here? You’re not supposed to come until after dinner, for the evening party.”

“Oh, I shall be back for that, never fear,” he said, unwinding the scarf. “No, do not come too close! It is foul out there, and I am soaked. I came to bring you this... for the evening. My father sends it to you, in gratitude. Anthony, will you unwrap it and hold it out for Mrs Brookes to take? She

must not get that lovely gown damp.”

The footman took the small package Michael held out, and gingerly unwrapped it. Inside was a long, thin box, and inside that, on a bed of silk, lay a single white rose.

“But how lovely!”

“There are very few flowers in the hot house just now, but this one has survived almost to Christmas,” Michael said. “I took the thorns off, so it is safe to hold.”

He smiled at her, and she was struck by the ease in his expression. Michael looked serene, as Margarita had never seen him before. Gone was the indecision, the anxious, hounded look that was so familiar to her. She had seen flashes of this relaxed Michael once or twice in the past, when they had fallen into deep conversation and he had temporarily forgotten all the worries heaped on his shoulders, but this quiescent state, his countenance composed, his demeanour calm, that little smile hovering about his lips whenever he looked at her, was new. This was the real Michael, the way he should always have been.

“I shall see you later, Mrs Brookes,” he said, making her a formal bow. He smiled again, this relaxed smile that was such a revelation, and then he was gone, out into the snow again.

“Was there a carriage out there, Anthony?”

“No, madam.”

“A horse?”

“No, madam.”

Michael had walked from the Manor to the Park through the falling snow to bring her a single white rose, and although he said it was from his father, it was as much his gift as Sir Owen’s. She returned to her room to pin the rose to her gown, and then went down to the saloon again, her heart singing.

The gathering before dinner was one of high good humour, everyone in the best of spirits. Apart from Mrs Landers and the irrepressible Mrs Smythe, the two families mingled with a degree of affability. The Fletchers and the

Landers. New money and nobility. A betrothal to seal the connection. Rosie looked charmingly demure in shimmering white silk. Lord Albury's face shone with happiness.

He made a point of coming to talk to Margarita. She had taken care to wear one of her better gowns, a green silk that was not especially fashionable but she was well aware that it flattered her colouring. The rose sat snug against her breast and gave her confidence. She was no longer the helpless widow scrabbling for some vestige of respectability after a disaster, accepting any position, no matter how unrewarding. This time, she had been chosen by a future viscountess to be her companion. She would be moving in a very different level of society, and it was necessary to look the part. Nothing had been said about salary, but it would certainly be more than she had been promised by Mrs Landers and it would be paid on time, too. She would be able to replenish her wardrobe suitably, once she had some money in her hand. Until then, she still had the vestiges of her wardrobe with Amelia, and the green silk was part of that legacy.

"Mrs Brookes, I am delighted to hear that you will be joining our household at Pollicott Place," Lord Albury said, bowing to her. "It pleases me greatly that Rosie will have company during those inevitable times when I am obliged to be absent. I hope you will be very happy with us."

Margarita could not fault his manners, at least. She had not taken a great deal of notice of him before, except to feel sorry for him, caught as he was between the wishes of his future wife and the objections put up by his family. In the end, his betrothed had won, and Margarita approved very much of a man who considered his future wife before anything else. If only Michael had done so with Amelia, how much simpler life would have been! But that ship had sailed a long time ago. He had not married her, and now it seemed that he was determined never to do so.

And *that* was what had changed in Michael. His father was right, he was different now. The dithering was quite gone, and in its place was a man who knew exactly what he wanted. And what he wanted, it seemed, was for Margarita to be part of his life. Not marriage, not love, not the intimacy that they had once shared, albeit briefly and accidentally, but the closeness of friends, perhaps. Was that enough for her? It seemed it would have to be, for

now...

She made some response to Lord Albury, although she hardly knew what, for her head was full of Michael, and then the viscount moved on, Rosie on his arm, sharing a few words with everyone as they joined the gathering.

Eventually, everyone was present. There was no formality about the betrothal, not amongst the families. No one made a speech or proposed a toast, but champagne was poured, the happy couple stood a little aside, bathed in the glow of Lord Albury's joy and the future bride's blushing acknowledgement, and one by one everyone went up to them and offered their felicitations. It had been a long courtship and a difficult one, but this was a satisfactory ending in every respect.

The hands on the clock were inching towards the hour, and conversation had fallen into a lull in anticipation of the move to the dining room, when there was a strange rattling sound outside the windows. It sounded like hailstones, but how could that be possible, when it had been snowing steadily all afternoon? Eyes turned in that direction, waiting to see if it recurred.

Silence.

Then a voice, faint but clear. "Rosie! Rosie Fletcher!"

More rattling.

"What on earth...?" muttered Mr Fletcher, striding over to the windows with a candelabrum and throwing back the curtains. A dark shape could dimly be perceived in the light thrown out into the night.

"Mr Fletcher? Is that you? Let me in, for God's sake, sir, before I freeze to death."

With an exclamation, Mr Fletcher set down the candelabrum and fiddled with catches on the French doors until he got one open, and the dark shape, liberally coated with snow, stormed into the room, dripping profusely.

"Rosie? Where are you?" His eyes scanned the room until he found her, hands to mouth, her eyes wide.

"Ricky?" she whispered.

“I’ve come to rescue you,” he said grandly.

For an instant there was nothing but a shocked silence. Then, with a cry, she raced across the room and hurled herself, oblivious of the snow coating him, into his arms.

Lord Albury gave a groan of despair.

Mrs Fletcher slumped silently to the floor in a dead faint.

22: Afterwards

For a moment, all was pandemonium. A group clustered around the fallen Mrs Fletcher, clucking in anxious dismay. Another group gathered around the snow-coated arrival and Rosie.

Margarita was standing beside the taciturn Mr Appleby.

“Who is he, do you know?” she whispered.

“Mr Ricky Jupp, from Sagborough,” he whispered back, adding in an even lower tone, “An apothecary.”

On his other side, Angie Fletcher watched, wide-eyed, hands to mouth, but she made no move towards either her sister or her step-mother.

“What should we do?” she said to Mr Appleby.

“Nothing,” he said. “Your Aunt Madge is taking care of Mrs Fletcher, and your father is dealing with the apothecary problem. There is nothing you can do in either case. I shall see if I might be of assistance to Mrs Fletcher, however. She might need the aid of a man.”

It seemed he was right, for after some minutes of confusion, he was seen to lift Mrs Fletcher into his arms and carry her from the room, two or three ladies in attendance. The apothecary and Rosie seemed to have disappeared too, along with Mr Fletcher. Those who remained separated into two groups, the Landers and the Fletchers.

Bella Fletcher sidled towards Angie.

“That has put the cat among the pigeons and no mistake,” she murmured, grinning. “Ricky Jupp! I wager Rosie will throw over his lordship now.”

“Nonsense,” Angie said, but she sounded uncertain.

“But imagine him coming all the way here in this weather! And what did he mean by saying he had come to rescue her? What else would he rescue her from but Lord Albury and this betrothal?”

Sir Con Pluckrose joined them, tucking Bella’s arm into his. “Let us not speculate, shall we, Bella? I am more concerned about your mama. She has

not been looking at all well lately. She seemed in the pink of health when I was last here, but this time she seems tired. Has she been overexerting herself?”

This successfully diverted the sisters’ thoughts, and they whispered together for some time. On the other side of the room, the Landers family sat in relative silence, only the low rumble of Mrs Landers and Mrs Smythe, still at war but enjoying a temporary truce while they loudly berated the bad manners of young men who arrived unannounced in the middle of a snowstorm, and could not even ring the doorbell in a civilised fashion.

Margarita sat down again, and took up her embroidery frame, working steadily for some time. The pink rose was almost finished. She would add a white one next, she decided. That would set it off very well. The thought made her smile.

The butler and a footman came in to tend to the fire.

“You there! What is happening?” Lord Faulkbourne called out.

“I’m afraid I have no idea, my lord, except that dinner’s been delayed.”

“How is Mrs Fletcher?” said Lady Caroline.

“I understand she is much recovered, my lady. She is resting in her room.”

“Who is this... this *person* who has so disrupted our evening?” said Lady Faulkbourne. “Some disreputable northerner, to judge by his uncouth mode of speech.”

“He is not known to me, my lady,” the butler said with dignity, before withdrawing.

The Fletchers could have enlightened Lady Faulkbourne, but no one seemed inclined to do so, nor did anyone ask them. All the superficial affability of the evening had been swept away, and the company had fractured into its constituent parts, the nobility on one side of the room, and the remaining Fletchers on the other. Margarita had no idea which grouping was now hers, but she felt comfortable with the Fletchers so there she stayed.

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“Well now, Rosie love, this is a to-do and no mistake,” Pa said. “Ricky’s given us all a shock, eh?”

They were in Pa’s office, Redmond pale and silent, Ricky huddled over the fire, the snow still dripping from his coat. Rosie drooped miserably in a hastily-found shawl, her evening gown damp and mud stained. She was trying not to cry, but a few tears trickled down her cheeks despite her best efforts.

Why was it that she could not go rejoicing to matrimony like so many others of her family? Why was it so difficult for her? She had thought herself so calm, her decision made, her future settled, but when Ricky had arrived, her heart had leapt with joy and now she had no idea what was to happen.

Silently, Redmond passed her a handkerchief before stepping away from her again. She understood that. He no longer wanted to be near her. What on earth was to become of her?

Pa busied himself pouring brandy. “There, Ricky, get that inside you, to warm you up a bit. Lord Albury? Will you take a glass?”

“Thank you, I will.”

“What I don’t understand,” Pa said, “is why you were out on the terrace, Ricky. Why can’t you come through the front door like anyone else?”

“No one answered,” Ricky said tersely. “I rang and knocked for an age, and having walked from Ware—”

“From Ware!”

“Aye, and it’s a fair step, I can tell you, but there was nothing coming out this way, and no horse to be hired in such weather, so I walked it. The snow was not so bad, at least, I’ve seen far worse. I borrowed a lantern from a farm when dusk fell. It got me to the front steps before it went out. When no one came to the door, I blundered about in the dark for a while. I found the stables, but no one was about and then, eventually, I saw lights and heard voices. So I threw gravel at the windows until someone heard.”

“But why? Why have you come? You said something about rescuing Rosie, but what made you think she needed rescuing?”

“Why, this letter,” Ricky said, in surprised tones, reaching into a pocket

of his greatcoat. “Rosie wrote to Belinda and said something about... where is it? Ah, here it is. *‘If I were the heroine in one of those romantic novels from the circulating library, there would be a dashing hero who would arrive in the nick of time to rescue me, but no one is coming to rescue me.’* So I thought I’d do the rescuing... if she wants to be rescued, that is. And if she doesn’t, well, I’ll go back to Yorkshire, but not tonight, if it’s all the same to you, sir. It’s right miserable out there just at the minute, and I don’t fancy walking all the way back to Ware in this snow.”

“Of course you must stay here until the weather is fit, but I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted journey, Ricky. Rosie is engaged to Lord Albury and however pleased she is to see you, as we all are, nothing changes that. She doesn’t need rescuing.”

“Doesn’t she?” Ricky said, lifting his chin a little.

“No, she doesn’t,” Pa said. “This engagement is her own free choice, no one’s twisted her arm or pushed her in any way. Lord Albury’s given her all the time in the world to make up her mind, and now she has and she’s given me her word she’s happy with the marriage. We’re happy with it, too, Ricky, and that has nothing to do with you being an apothecary and him a lord, but because he’s a good man who loves her and can keep her in comfort for the rest of her life.”

“Well, I can do that, too,” Ricky said. “Aren’t I a good man, Mr Fletcher?”

“Of course, but—”

“And I love her, too. I’ve loved her for years, and never said a word to anyone about it, because I was only an apprentice apothecary and she was the most beautiful woman in Yorkshire, and what’s more, she had an enormous dowry. Away out of my reach. And even when you took her away from Yorkshire, even though I knew I’d soon have my own shop and be able to afford a wife, I still said nothing because she deserved a chance to do better for herself. And I kept my mouth shut all through the spring when she had men swarming round her in London, and all through the summer and autumn when his lordship was courting her, because I *still* wanted the best for her. But the best for Rosie is what she wants for herself, sir, and it seems to me

that if a woman on the brink of marriage is talking about being rescued, then there's something badly amiss somewhere. So I've come to do as I've wanted for years, to tell her I love her and to ask her to be my wife, and whatever her answer is, I'll accept it, as long as it's what she truly wants. But I won't stand by and see her hustled into a marriage she's not happy with, and that's a fact."

"And nor will I." Redmond's words were softly spoken, but they resonated in the room like the vibrations of a church bell. "I thought we had reached a point where Rosie was indeed happy with her choice, but when you entered the saloon, Mr Jupp, there was such a look of joy on her face that I can no longer sustain the fiction. If she had ever looked at *me* that way... but she never has. I recall now her animation when you were together in Bath. At the time, I set it down to your sister's influence, for Rosie was always more lively in Miss Jupp's company, but on reflection, I can see that her happiness lay in *your* presence. Am I not correct, Rosie? That you love Mr Jupp just as he loves you? And if that is so, then our engagement must end, and you must be free to marry him, if you choose."

Was it possible? It was hard to breathe, suddenly. For all these months, she had felt as if the walls were gradually, inch by inch, closing in around her, but now a door had been thrown open. She could step through it and be free at last... free of the burden of expectations, of trying to be what everyone wanted her to be.

Could she?

"Pa?"

"I want what I've always wanted, Rosie love, for you to be happy. If Ricky is what you want, that's fine with me." But he sounded sad, all the same.

"But Mama! What will she say? She always wanted me to marry a lord, and now I have made her ill!"

Surprisingly, Pa laughed. "No, that's my fault. I won't deny that the shock of Ricky's arrival overwhelmed her somewhat, but that wasn't why she fainted."

"Then why?"

“She’s increasing. You’ll have another brother or sister come the summer.”

“Oh... but how lovely!” In all the turmoil in Rosie’s mind, that was the first gleam of pure pleasure. “I never guessed.”

“But that’s nothing to the point. It seems to me, Rosie love, that Lord Albury may be right. You’ve always been close to Ricky, even as a girl, and maybe there’s more to it than mere friendship, who knows? And maybe that’s why you’ve been so resistant to every other man who’s courted you, and why it’s taken so long to get you to the point with his lordship. There’s clearly some reason for your reluctance.”

Rosie nodded. “We talked about it. Ricky and I, we talked about getting married but... I thought it was just... a childish thing. He was comforting me. Do you remember my twelfth birthday, Pa, when we went up to the Fessells’ manor on the moors, and Sir William flirted with me?”

Pa chuckled. “Aye, who could forget? You slapped his face, as I recall.”

“Well, I had not the least idea how to deal with it, not then. I know better now, of course, but then I was upset about it, and Ricky... Belinda was ill with the chicken pox, so she was not there, so Ricky was the one who comforted me. He said that he would marry me when we were grown up, so I need never worry about horrid men like Sir William. After that, Ricky protected me whenever I was in company. And when I was fifteen... Ricky, do you mind me saying this?” With an affectionate smile that warmed her heart, he shook his head. “It was my first assembly, and I was terrified, so Ricky took me outside and calmed me down. He said again that he would marry me whenever he could afford to, and... and...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “We kissed. But you see, I thought he was just saying it to cheer me up. We were nothing but children, and I never thought it meant anything. But ever since then, every man I met was measured against Ricky and... and most of them fell short, it has to be said.

“But he never spoke again, and so I thought that perhaps it was nothing but a childish whim, spoken to comfort me but not... not a serious declaration. I assumed that if he *were* serious, eventually he would make that plain, one way or another. When he came to Bath this summer, with his own



shop set up at last, I thought... perhaps I hoped. It felt almost as if I had been waiting... maybe that was why I was so reluctant to settle for another man. But he said nothing and went away again, and I realised it was silly to wait any longer. He was my very good friend, but I never thought of it as *love*.”

“But you need to think of it now,” Pa said. “You have to decide what you want, Rosie, once and for all. Is it to be Ricky or Lord Albury?”

“Or neither,” Lord Albury said softly. Setting down his brandy glass, he knelt at Rosie’s feet and took one of her hands in his. “Rosie, you know how I feel about you. It would make me the happiest man on earth to lead you to the altar, but not if you are in love with another man, or even if you have doubts. Marriage is a huge step to take, so you must be absolutely sure of your own heart. On no account must you commit yourself until you know precisely what you want.”

Such a good man. A kind, lovable man who would have made her a wonderful husband.

“I know what I want,” Rosie said quietly.

“Ah,” he said, leaning back on his heels, and she could see in his face that he understood.

“I want to marry Ricky and go back to Sagborough where I belong and be an apothecary’s wife, and not have anyone to please but him. I have always tried to do my duty and be an obedient daughter and not disappoint anyone, and that should be easy, should it not? But this past year, being paraded around London and then Bath and expected to marry well for the good of the family, it felt like walking uphill against a stiff breeze. Not impossible but... difficult, somehow. Such a great effort. But being with Ricky is never like that. With him, everything is easy and smooth and... and it just feels right and makes my heart sing, and that is how it should be, I think. So that is what I want and I am very, very sorry to disappoint everyone, and I hope you can forgive me in time, but I cannot marry you, Redmond. I thought I could... I *wanted* to, but I cannot.”

“You could have said something sooner, Rosie love,” Pa said sadly.

“But I could not, for Ricky had not spoken, so I chose the best of those who are *not* Ricky. But now he has spoken. Pa, you have always said you

want me to be happy, and I believe that Redmond would have made me so. Once we were married, and there were children, and I had grown accustomed to the different level of society and my place in it... I *believe* I should have been happy. I should, in time, have grown to love him. Truly I believe that, and that is why I agreed to marry him. But with Ricky I *know* I will be happy. There are no doubts, no reservations, no hesitations. I am not afraid of a future with him, and I can give him my hand with joy in my heart.”

“Then that settles the matter, as far as I’m concerned,” Pa said. “I wish you joy, Rosie love.”

“And I too,” Redmond said. “With all my heart I wish you happy, Rosie, and Mr Jupp—” He rose gracefully to his feet. “Will you shake my hand, sir, and allow me to wish you joy, too?”

“Indeed I will, my lord,” Ricky said, suiting the action to the words. “I won’t apologise for depriving you of your future wife, but I wish you well and hope you may in time find the happiness you deserve.”

## 23: A Change Of Circumstances

The occupants of the saloon were growing restless, for there was no information as to what might be happening, and, perhaps more importantly for some of the company, there was no sign of dinner, either.

But eventually, the door opened, and Mr Fletcher appeared, with Lord Albury in his wake. Gone was the glow of happiness that had lit up the room earlier in the evening. The viscount's face was ashen and he looked bewildered, as if a great tragedy had befallen him, but he had no idea what to make of it or how to go on.

It was Mr Fletcher who held up a hand to subdue the buzz of conversation that had arisen. "My lords and ladies, everyone, I beg your pardon for keeping you all in the dark for so long, but now I can tell you what's happened. I'm very sorry to inform you that Rosie will not now be marrying Lord Albury after all. He'll explain the details to you. We'll leave you to talk it over."

Mrs Morgan Plummer, the lady Margarita had once mistaken for the housekeeper, had crept in behind the two men. Now she moved amongst the Fletchers, murmuring, "Best if we withdraw to the parlour."

She looked hard at Margarita, then said with brutal frankness, "I'm not sure whether you're one of us or one of them, now. You'd better choose, I suppose."

But any possibility of choice was taken from her by Mrs Landers, who looked at Margarita from across the room and laughed. "So much for your fine new position, Margaret. Well, you need not think you can come running back to me. Off you go with your new friends."

Meekly, Margarita followed the Fletchers from the room, although she had no idea what was to become of her now. The last thing she heard as she left was Mr Fletcher saying to Lord Albury, "Are you all right, lad? Better sit down before you fall down."

Then the door closed behind Margarita with a soft clunk. She had her embroidery and work bag in her hands, so as everyone filed into the parlour, she found a footstool in a corner beneath a sconce, and settled there with her

work while the chatter went on around her. Questions were hurled at Mrs Plummer, but she answered brusquely.

“Rosie’s decided to marry Ricky Jupp, that’s all there is to it. Excuse me, I’ve much to do if we’re to eat at all tonight.”

Margarita had no idea what to make of it. She had never heard of Ricky Jupp before that evening, but it seemed he was well known to the Fletchers.

Mrs Smythe was outraged. “If Rosie thinks I’m going to give my thirty thousand pounds to an *apothecary*, of all things, she has another think coming. A viscount... yes, that I could accept, but an apothecary? She can whistle for it. Good grief, the girl is mad, quite mad. What is she thinking, to be taking this nobody when she could be a lady and curtsy to the Queen, if you please? Ungrateful child!”

At which several members of the family took umbrage, and began to defend Rosie. It would have been amusing, if Margarita had the least idea what she herself was to do now. Her old position had gone beyond recall, and her new one had vanished in a puff of snow-laden smoke, in the person of the apothecary, magically appearing through the French doors out of nowhere. Now there was no Viscountess Albury in need of a companion, no house at Saffron Walden where she could have lived in some luxury until she had determined what Michael really wanted.

Now she was in limbo.

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Pa and Lord Albury left the office to tell everyone what had happened, and Rosie found herself alone with Ricky.

“Thank you,” she said, gazing up at him shyly.

“What for?” His smile warmed her to her very toes.

“Rescuing me. I did not even know I needed rescuing until you walked into the saloon, dripping snow everywhere. I was quite sure that marrying Redmond was the right thing to do. Did you truly walk all the way from Ware?”

“Aye, all eight miles of it, and it got dark before I was even half way. But the snow wasn’t so bad. I’ve been out in a lot worse, up on the moors.

Old man Smedley always had his funny turns when there was snow on.”

“And he was always better by the time you arrived with his remedy,” Rosie said, laughing.

“Well, he knew a better remedy, but his daughter wouldn’t let him touch a drop unless he put on a show of being ill. Folk are funny, sometimes. Rosie...”

He took a step towards her, hands raised to her face, but the door opened just then and Pa came back in.

“That poor fellow! I hardly liked to leave him alone with his family, for they look as if they’ll eat him alive,” he said, with a shake of his head. “Well, you two, we’d better go and tell your mama the news.”

“She will be so upset,” Rosie whispered. “I am so sorry to disappoint you all.”

“Aye, but the sooner she knows, the sooner you can stop apologising, Rosie love,” Pa said, smiling at her. “You mustn’t feel guilty about this. Imagine if you’d married Lord Albury and struggled to fit into his world and then found out years later that Ricky had loved you all that time and you never knew. Just think how you’d feel then. Much better to have it all out now. So why don’t you go and get out of that muddy dress, and I’ll find a room for Ricky. Did you leave your luggage at Ware, Ricky?”

“No, it’s on the front step, probably half buried in snow by now. I came on the mail, so I only brought a small bag. I’ll need to borrow evening things.”

“No need to worry tonight, but we’ll talk to Will about it in the morning. He’s much your size. Rosie, meet us on the landing in ten minutes, and we’ll brave your mama, eh?”

Mama was in her dressing room, stretched out on a sofa, with Miss Hathaway, her formidable lady’s maid, standing guard.

“No more than five minutes,” she said sternly. “Madam’s not well, and mustn’t be agitated.”

“Nonsense, Hathaway,” Mama said. “I am perfectly well, but that room was so *hot* and I have been so busy I forgot to eat anything since breakfast.”

“Not that you ate much of that,” Pa said ruefully.

“True enough,” she said, “but Hathaway has brought me some tea and biscuits, and that is more use to me than smelling salts or burnt feathers. Now go away, Hathaway, do, and let me talk to Harry and the children.”

The children. That made Rosie feel twelve years old again, caught out in some misdemeanour. “Oh, Mama, Mama! I am so sorry!” she cried, rushing across the room to kneel beside her in a storm of weeping. “I am so very sorry, but I cannot marry Redmond after all. I am going to marry Ricky. Can you ever forgive me?”

Mama actually laughed. “Hush, child, hush. There is nothing to forgive, I assure you, and certainly nothing to cry about. This is a happy occasion, after all. Yes, come in, Ricky. No need to loiter by the door, as if you are looking for the first opportunity to escape. This is a relief, to be honest. Rosie, it seemed to me that your reluctance to marry might have a deeper reason than just not meeting the right man, and after Bath... something changed. When we went to Epping and I was making my list of eligible gentlemen, you did not say ‘*No, no, Mama!*’ as you normally did before that. In fact, you even suggested one or two things to add to my notes. Was that about Ricky? It was obvious how well you got on in Bath.”

“But then he went away again without speaking, so I decided I would look about me seriously for a husband.”

“Ah. I see, and there was Lord Albury. I have been fretting about him for weeks, if you want to know the truth. Ever since we went to Chaseley Court and I saw what the nobility is truly like, I have been worried about it. They despise us, you know. Oh, they hold their noses for the sake of the money, but they would always have despised you, Rosie. You would always be the mercer’s daughter to them, no matter how much renovation they squeeze out of your dowry and no matter how many sturdy sons you give them. You would always be an outsider.”

“Not to Redmond,” Rosie said in a small voice. “He is different.”

“Even Redmond,” Mama said firmly. “Oh, he wants you now, and he is unfailingly polite to us, but in ten years’ time — what then? It will always be there at the back of his mind, no matter how well you fit in with his world,

that you are only one step away from trade.”

“I don’t see that at all,” Pa said. “He’s head over heels in love with her, and once a man’s married, his wife and family is everything to him. Rosie would have made him very comfortable, you may be sure, and I can’t see that he’d have the least regret in the world.”

“Oh, not regret, no. Nothing so tangible as that. It would just be a vague feeling... every time Rosie talked about her relations, or he bumped into us in London, as is bound to happen, it would remind him that her antecedents are, as he would see it, inferior to his own. He would never be so crass as to cut us, but he will be *aware* of it, nevertheless. My first husband was like that. His family were nothing terribly special, only lower gentry and they never gave themselves airs, and not once said or did anything to make me feel uncomfortable, but I could see it in their expressions. They never forgot that I was a grocer’s daughter.”

“Lizzie love,” Pa said gently, “is it possible that it was you who couldn’t forget you were a grocer’s daughter?”

She laughed. “Well... there was something of that, too, and Rosie would have felt the same, as if she had no business moving in the same circles as all those lords and ladies. Perhaps we should all stay in our proper sphere, and not aspire to better ourselves. Certainly I feel a great deal more comfortable with my mercer husband than I ever did with my husband who was born a gentleman.”

“I expect having more money to spend makes a bit of difference, too,” Pa said, smiling affectionately at her. “But I can’t quite agree that we should stay in our proper sphere, as you put it. Look how well Johnny and Will have turned out after all that fancy education my pa insisted on, and both of them married above their station. Julia’s married into the gentry, too, and even though Lady Plummer’s a bit sniffy about us, Sir Owen’s very happy about it.”

“He is a *true* gentleman, that is why.”

“And so’s Lord Albury,” Ricky said. “He was a lot more understanding about losing Rosie than I would have been. I would have been making the most almighty fuss.”

“He is so *good!*” Rosie wailed, with another burst of tears.

There was a knock on the door, and Aunt Madge’s head peered round. “Are you feeling better, Lizzie? Well, I can see you are. I’ve told Keeble to set dinner back by an hour, but we can’t all sit round the same dining table and pretend nothing’s happened. The cover’s on the billiard table ready for supper, so one family can eat in there, and the other in the dining room. Is that all right?”

“Oh, Madge, what would we do without you!” Mama said. “I had not even thought of that. But is everyone in the saloon still?”

“Our family’s all gone to the parlour, for now. I suggest we leave the saloon and the library to them, and we can have the dining room and parlour. That way we won’t cross paths at all. Same for breakfast, if they’re still here then. I imagine they’ll want to leave at first light, Christmas Day or not.”

“Madge, you’re a treasure,” Pa said. “I’d better go and explain the arrangements to them.”

“There’s just one other thing,” Aunt Madge said. “Aunt Petronella’s taken umbrage. Says she’s not giving a penny piece for Rosie to marry an apothecary.”

“I don’t need her money,” Ricky said at once. “Nor yours, Mr Fletcher. I can well afford to keep a wife now. The shop’s doing very good business.”

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll be getting Rosie’s twenty thousand from me whether you like it or not,” Pa said, “and I’ll expect you to buy her a proper house with it. She could have been a viscountess, after all, so I’ll not see her living over the shop. She’s been brought up as a lady, and I want her to spend her days in her own drawing room receiving callers, as a lady should.”

“Oh, Pa, I have no objection to living over Ricky’s shop,” Rosie said. “I can still receive callers there.”

“No, your pa’s right,” Ricky said. “It’s not fitting. I had it in my mind to rent a little place down Mill Road for you, or maybe one of those pretty new villas out past the Carrbridge Arms, just till I can afford better, but if I have money enough to buy, we could live in St Ethelreda’s Square, and be neighbours to Allie and Jack.”

“Oh, I should like that!” Rosie said. “I should like that very much.”

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Margarita had finished the pink rose and begun on the stem of the white one before Rosie and the apothecary finally joined the rest of the Fletchers in the parlour. Rosie looked rather sheepish, and for a while every third sentence was some sort of apology, but her easy-going family held no grudge and seemed delighted for them.

All except Mrs Smythe.

“If you think, young lady,” she said to Rosie, “that I put up a dowry of thirty thousand so that you could marry an apothecary, no matter how handsome and personable he is, then you have another think coming. Not a penny piece you’ll have from me, nor a wedding present, either. I am most seriously displeased.”

“I am very sorry to disappoint you, Great-aunt,” Rosie said, kneeling at her feet like a penitent. “I was very grateful that you offered, for it opened doors to me that would otherwise have remained closed, but it also attracted a great deal of unwanted attention in London. I was beset with fortune hunters, or at least, I could not tell which were fortune hunters and which were sincere. In some ways your thirty thousand pounds was as much a hindrance as a help, and Ricky has no expectation of anything of that nature. We shall live very comfortably on the income from his shop. Save your money for someone more deserving than I am.”

“Indeed I shall, for I intend to settle it on that poor viscount that you jilted.”

“On Lord Albury?” Rosie said, astonished. “But he is not even family!”

“No, he’s not, but when my own family is so treacherously deceitful and sly, I shall have to look elsewhere to bestow my wealth. What’s he to do with himself, now that you’ve jilted him, eh? No career, no life of his own, totally dependent on his father’s whims, and it’s not right in a man like that, a good, honest man, who deserves better treatment than he’s got from *you*, young lady. I can give him a little independence, and perhaps in time he’ll find a more grateful recipient for his affections than you. I shall eat with him tonight to show my opinion of your behaviour, madam.”

And so saying, she heaved herself up from her chair and sailed from the room. Her companion, Miss Elinor Paton, did not move. Her nose was in a book, and even when a harassed Keeble came in, to say that Mrs Smythe wished her to join her in the saloon, she merely answered, "Tell her I am quite comfortable here," without even looking up from her book.

It was only after this exchange that Rosie finally looked across the room and saw Margarita. With a gasp of dismay, she rushed over to her.

"Oh, Mrs Brookes, I am so very sorry. I promised you a place at Pollicott Place, and now..."

"No, you didn't, Miss Fletcher. The future Viscountess Albury promised me a place, and since she's no more, there's nothing more to be said. Please don't apologise."

"But you must come with us to Sagborough. Ricky will not mind."

Ricky looked as if he might mind very much, but Margarita laughed. "No, no! You've got family up in Yorkshire, you don't need a companion. I'll find something else, don't worry."

"Could you go back to Mrs Landers?"

"No, she doesn't want me, and frankly, I don't much want her, either. I've said I'll stay in the south, so I'll look about me for another position. Something's bound to come up."

*But not without a reference*, she thought miserably. No reference, no connections, no money... she had no idea what she would do.

Still, for the moment, there were the comforts of Chadwell Park to be enjoyed.

Dinner was an oddly efficient affair, considering there were twenty-four to be fed, split into two groups and an hour later than expected. There were still two full courses, no shortage of footmen and no one seemed flustered. Margarita could only admire servants who could cope with last-minute changes with such aplomb.

There was something of a festival atmosphere amongst the Fletchers, for although one betrothal had ended, another had begun and there was also an announcement of unalloyed happiness, for Mrs Fletcher's swoon was

attributable to her delicate condition and not to anything more sinister.

The meal was not restful, however. Every few minutes, Mr Fletcher was called away to greet some hapless arrival for the evening party, and explain the abrupt change of circumstances. The weather was unfit for carriages to be brought out, for the snow was still falling steadily, so none of the ladies had ventured forth. However, several gentlemen had braved the conditions, so sometimes a snow-clad figure would put a head round the dining-room door to congratulate the newly-betrothed couple. Amongst these were Will Fletcher, James Plummer, Mr Kelshaw and Michael.

Margarita dropped her knife with a clatter when she saw him. At first he didn't notice her, but then, as his eyes roved over the diners, he spotted her, his eyes resting on her a long moment. He nodded to her, a little smile touching his lips, before making his farewells.

Such a brief moment of connection, but it swept all her worries away. What did it matter that she had no employment, nor any means to obtain any? She had Michael nearby, so nothing could trouble her.

Michael. Whatever happened to her, she must stay close to him.

## 24: Christmas Day

Christmas Day dawned clear and dazzlingly bright, the sun turning the newly fallen snow to a carpet of diamonds. Rosie could look down from her bedroom window and still see the slight traces of Ricky's footprints leading to the terrace. She glowed inside when she thought of him racing south from Yorkshire to rescue her and then walking — *walking!* — all the way from Ware in the snow and tramping round the house trying to find his way in... and he *had* rescued her. She had not realised until he burst into the saloon, frozen and snow-covered, how badly she had wanted to be rescued from her marriage to Lord Albury.

Now all her doubts and worries were swept away. She would marry Ricky and go back to Sagborough and not have to struggle with being a viscountess and mingling with Lord This and Lady That. She would be an apothecary's wife and raise a string of children with Ricky's dark eyes and warm smile. Even though she felt guilty about poor Redmond, he would now have the chance to marry someone far better suited to his level of society.

Breakfast passed in the same manner as dinner the previous night, with the Landers family in the library and the Fletchers in the dining room. The only exceptions were Mrs Brookes, who had transferred to the Fletchers, and Great-aunt Petronella, who was still in high dudgeon and had found common cause with the Landers.

Not only did she dine with the Landers, but her feud with Mrs Radcliffe Landers was swept away by their united outrage at Rosie's behaviour. They were now the best of friends, and when Lord and Lady Faulkbourne and their entourage left in a great flurry of carriages directly after breakfast, Great-aunt Petronella left with them, her carriage also conveying Mrs Landers, as well as her imperturbable companion, Miss Elinor Paton.

"Well, that's that, then," Pa said, as they saw the last of the visitors away and shut the front doors firmly. "Shall we go to church for the second service, since it's Christmas Day?"

"Must we, Pa?" Rosie said. "It will be awkward, when everyone will be expecting to see the Faulkbournes."

"Best to let the world know what's happened at once, Rosie love."

So they donned warm clothes and stout boots, and walked through the snow to St Hilary's where it was obvious that the world already knew of Rosie's change of mind, or at least as much of the world as was contained within the parish. At first Rosie kept her head down, glad that her bonnet hid most of her face, but Ricky held out his arm for her.

"Chin up, and smile, lass," he said. "Let's show them how happy we are."

So she walked into church on Ricky's arm, smiling, and with her head held high. There was whispering, of course, but with Ricky beside her, she could bear it very well. And afterwards, as everyone clustered around to hear the story — "Rosie made a little mistake," Pa said, "but all's well now." — Rosie was too full of emotion to worry if a few people were shocked or censorious. She was going to marry Ricky and go home to Sagborough, and she no longer cared what people thought of her.

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Margarita didn't go to church with the others. Polly brought word that Mrs Fletcher would like Margarita to bear her company during the morning, for she would not venture downstairs until late in the day. Margarita suspected she wanted to avoid the Faulkbournes, which was understandable, but she had no objection to playing companion to Mrs Fletcher for the day. As soon as she was dressed, therefore, she hurried to Mrs Fletcher's dressing room, where that lady was stretched out on the chaise longue in an elegant wrap, looking pale but undaunted. A plate of dry bread sat on a table beside her.

"Does it help?" Margarita said, smiling.

Mrs Fletcher laughed. "It helps a little. Madge recommended it, and it worked for Julia, seemingly. Do sit down, my dear. There is chocolate in the pot over there if you would like some. I cannot face it, so you will have to pour your own."

Margarita would have liked some chocolate very much, but she could not inflict the smell on someone whose stomach was already in open rebellion, so she professed herself uninterested.

"When do you expect to be confined?" Margarita said, pulling over a footstool and sitting beside Mrs Fletcher.

“July, but we will not talk about that, for it cannot be a pleasant subject for you, since your marriage was never blessed with children. I want to talk instead about you, for Rosie’s change of heart has left you in the lurch, rather.”

“I’ll find something else to do,” Margarita said. “There must be other ladies in need of a companion, who will not be too particular about references.”

“References! I suppose Mrs Landers did not—? No, of course not. You are well out of that situation, in my opinion. But surely you need not worry about that, for is this not the perfect opportunity to explain to Michael that —?”

“No, no, no!” Margarita cried. “Surely you can see—? Mrs Fletcher, if he offers for me, I couldn’t possibly refuse.”

“Because you are head over heels in love with him,” she said in a softer tone, smiling.

“No! Well... yes, but that has nothing to do with it. He is *rich*, you see, and could keep me in comfort for the rest of my life.”

“And what is wrong with that?”

“It’s a terrible reason to marry anyone!”

“I would have to disagree with you on that point. I was fond of my first husband, and I am more than fond of my second, but I would not have married either of them if they could not keep me in comfort. Although frankly Alfred was a disappointment in that regard. A younger son with no career is not a good prospect for marriage. But Harry... I set out to marry him because of his money, and for a woman with no other resources, what else is one to do? A woman cannot decide to become a barrister, or join the navy. Would you marry Michael if he were a clergyman on a few hundred a year, like his brother?”

“Of course, without a second thought.”

“Well, then, I fail to see the problem. Tell him you have no husband, he will instantly offer for you, and there you are — a happy future for both of you.”

“I could not bear him to marry me from obligation,” she cried. “I must know how he feels about me, once and for all, and if it is merely some strange fascination, and not love, then we had much better not marry. But if, in time, it becomes clear that his feelings are deeper, that will be the time to tell him that there is no obstacle.”

“How can you doubt his love for you?” Mrs Fletcher said gently. “It is in his face... in the way he looks at you... in his eyes.”

“But he has never said so, not even... when we kissed.” And not even during the greater sin, either, and surely a man who felt love would say so, at such a moment? “It cannot be assumed, so I must wait until he tells me explicitly... however long that takes. I know you think that honour will hold him back from any declaration while he believes me to be married, but I am certain that, in time, we will reach such a degree of intimacy that he will open his heart to me.”

Mrs Fletcher sighed. “Very well, dear. I will not press you further. It will be necessary to find you employment somewhere nearby, and I have an idea or two in that direction. I am never short of ideas.”

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It was late in the afternoon, dusk already casting unlit corners into darkness, before Rosie and Ricky were able to creep away to be alone. Rosie took him to the gallery, lighting a whole candelabrum so that she could see his face clearly. It was the first time she had seen him since the summer, in Bath, and she wanted to be aware of every little change in his expression.

There was another reason for bringing him there, for it was a place she had shared with Redmond, the place where he had talked so openly to her, the place where they had first kissed. She was afraid there would be so many echoes of Redmond that she would be swamped with guilt.

But it was not so. Redmond seemed now to be no more than a gentle memory, already grown hazy and not quite real. Had she truly betrothed herself to a viscount? It had never been officially acknowledged, so there was no awkward notice to send to the *Gazette* that ‘*The marriage between the Right Honourable the Viscount Albury and Miss Rose Fletcher will not now take place.*’ Almost it was as if it had never happened.

“Are you content, Rosie?” Ricky said, his voice gentle, as they sat side by side in the window seat. He took her hand and gazed down at it. “Is this truly what you want? You’re not just using me as a way to wriggle out of marrying his lordship?”

“No! Oh, no, not at all. I *wanted* to marry him... but only because I had given up hope of you. I thought when you came to Bath... if ever you were going to speak, it would be then. You had your own shop at last, and I was so sure you would say *something*, but you did not. You went away and I decided that I could not wait for ever. Why did you not speak? If you felt that way all along, why not tell me so?”

“I meant to,” he said. “I went to Bath fully intending to put it to the touch, once and for all. But then I saw the house... the Royal Crescent, Rosie! And there you were with your fancy London clothes and even your hair cut, and you looked just like Lady Craston and she’s going to be a marchioness one day. I saw you differently, you see. Not that *you* were any different, but I saw the difference between us. I saw that you belonged there, in your fine house and mingling with all those grand people in the Pump Room, and playing cards with them of an evening. I’ve always thought you were above my touch, to be honest, but when I saw you there, I knew you were far above me, too far for me to dream about.”

“That is such nonsense, Ricky Jupp!”

“It’s not nonsense. That’s what all those governesses were for, after all, and the dancing masters and painting masters and I don’t know what else. You were being trained for greater things than being an apothecary’s wife. Even now I feel guilty about it, that I’m depriving you of the life you should have had.”

With a sigh, she laid her head on his shoulder. “I never wanted it. Mama was the one who wanted me to marry a lord... and Great-aunt Petronella, of course! I wanted to make them proud of me, and help to lift the family up in society a little bit, but I never, ever wanted to be a titled lady myself. If Pa had not married again, we should have stayed in Sagborough and you would never have hesitated to propose as soon as you could afford it, would you?”

“Aye, that’s true enough.”



“There would have been no nonsense about me being above you, would there?”

“A little, because your pa’s one of the richest men in the West Riding, and I’m still only an apothecary, Rosie. Even if I were the best apothecary in the world, an apothecary is still only an apothecary.”

“Ah, but now you are *my* apothecary,” she said happily. “Nor do you have to be *only* an apothecary. Perhaps you will be the apothecary who invents some astounding new medicine that cures every known disease and makes everyone good-tempered and hard-working and honest, and you will become vastly wealthy, even richer than Pa. Or you could become Mayor of Sagborough, as your pa hopes to do, or you could stand for Parliament and become Prime Minister one day. There is no such thing as *only* an apothecary. Oh, I am so glad you came to rescue me, Ricky. I shall be glad every day for the rest of my life.”

“Will you? No regrets about that lord of yours?”

“None at all. I feel sorry for poor Redmond, but I am utterly sure of my decision. I *love* you, Ricky, even though I never understood it until you came bursting through the French doors into the saloon, covered in snow. My heart leapt for joy.”

“Darling Rosie, the love of my life,” he murmured. With one finger under her chin, he gently raised her face a little. His smile widened and those dark eyes of his gazed down at her tenderly. With infinite slowness, his lips met hers, softly... so softly... Rosie sighed with happiness and melted into his embrace. And when the kiss deepened and became more heartfelt, there was no flustered awkwardness, no embarrassment, only a great warmth that filled her whole being. *This* was where she was meant to be, in Ricky’s arms and in his heart, as he was in hers.

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Margarita spent the day quietly with Mrs Fletcher in her dressing room. Mrs Plummer, the indispensable Madge, came and went in an unruffled way, to discuss household matters or bring pots of tea. Several of the daughters came and sat with their stepmother, their liveliness making her laugh and putting colour back in her cheeks. Mr Fletcher came, too, but was quickly informed

by his wife that she was perfectly well and sent away again.

“Men do fuss so,” Mrs Fletcher said. “There is nothing much wrong with me that dry bread in the mornings and a few days without the wretched Faulkbournes will not cure. I was quite worn down with trying to abide by their fancy ways. It is such a relief that we have Ricky to deal with now.”

“Do you truly mean that, Mama?” Rosie said, laying aside the journal she had been reading aloud. “Are you just trying to make the best of it?”

“Not at all. One knows where one is with Ricky, whereas with Lord Albury, we would have been walking on eggshells for the rest of our lives. Ah, Julia, come in, dear, but you should not have walked through the snow, not in your condition.”

“Oh, pooh! There’s nothing of it, no more than a few inches,” Julia said, plonking herself down on the chair Margarita had vacated for her. “I’m glad to see you’re not over-exerting yourself, Mama, not in your condition.” She laughed merrily at her own jest. “I can’t tell you how delighted I was to hear your news. Now my own baby will have an uncle or aunt younger than him... or her. Such fun! We can compare teething remedies.”

In this cheerful way, the morning drifted away, and apart from breakfast, when she was dispatched downstairs to join the others, Margarita stayed in the dressing room with Mrs Fletcher, fetching this and that, listening to the conversations going on, or simply sitting quietly with her embroidery.

Around the middle of the afternoon, Mrs Plummer came in with another tray of tea and cakes. Sitting down with a heavy sigh, she said, “Well, that’s everyone back from church and all in train for our dinner. There’ll be two full courses whether we like it or not, because that fellow in the kitchen got very French when I suggested a plain dinner with no removes. Beneath his dignity, seemingly.”

Mrs Fletcher laughed. “Harry will be pleased. He is not fond of a plain dinner. I hope you gave Monsieur my message? He was superb yesterday, given the delay in dinner and having to cope with two dining rooms.”

“Aye, I told him, and Mrs Sharwell too, because it wasn’t all down to the Frenchie. They both earned their money yesterday, and all the rest of our

lot, too. The only delay in serving was in the library, and that was their manservants, not ours. Harry's promised everyone a bonus, did he tell you that? We scraped through well enough, but I'm glad to see the back of our visitors, I can tell you, not excepting Aunt Petronella. Good riddance."

"It is very pleasant to have the house to ourselves again," Mrs Fletcher said. "Now we have only our most agreeable guests remaining." She smiled at Margarita. "But how are you bearing up, Madge? You have borne the brunt of it, these last few days. You must be sure to have a good rest. I shall be up and about again tomorrow, so you can put your feet up for a change."

"No time for that," Mrs Plummer said. "I've been spending too much time here, and really I've got to get back to the orphanage at Froxfield Green and see what Patricia Plummer's been up to. That girl's not fit to be left on her own. She takes in every stray babe that comes her way, you know, with no thought of seeing if there's family who might cope, with a bit of help. I don't hold with taking them away from their kin like that. And she's got three girls there still waiting to be confined — taking the babes before they're even born!"

"I expect they have nowhere else to go," Margarita said, caught up in the story. "A girl in service, making a mistake, too ashamed to go home... so she goes to Miss Plummer's orphanage, knowing her kind heart. She can make herself useful until the babe is born, then she can leave him there when she goes back to work. It seems a good solution to me. If only there were more such places, where a girl in difficulties might turn. Too many of them end up friendless and desperate," she added. She knew only too well how that felt.

"True enough," Mrs Plummer said, "but all these bits of girls need watching and I'm needed here, all the more so now Lizzie's in a delicate condition. Then there's Julia to keep an eye on, and Eloise asked me to look into the cellars at Orchard House. There's damp, seemingly, and some rearranging to be done. I can't be in two places at once, and someone needs to be at Froxfield Green to manage the orphanage."

"Perhaps you could find someone else to help out there," Mrs Fletcher said thoughtfully. "Someone with experience of running a large establishment, say. Someone presently looking for employment. Someone

who could manage the orphanage while you look after this place... and Julia and Eloise and all the myriad other jobs you do to keep us on an even keel, Madge.”

“Someone else?”

They both turned and looked at Margarita. She put down her teacup, her hands rather unsteady. Employment! Not as a companion, but *something*.

“Managing the orphanage? What does that entail, precisely?” Margarita said.

“Only domestic matters,” Mrs Fletcher said hastily. “Nothing to do with the children. Patricia takes care of that side of things. If you could manage Hadlow Hall, I hardly think you would have the least difficulty managing Froxfield Orphanage.”

“Oh. Domestic matters. Sheets. Supplies of oats. Coal and candles.”

“Precisely.”

“And watching the maids,” Mrs Plummer added.

“I could do that. This would be... a regular position? With a salary? Or... or just helping out?”

“Fifty pounds a year, your board included, for you will live here, naturally, so that we may enjoy your company in the evenings.”

“How kind you are!” Margarita cried. “How very, very kind.”

“Pft! It’s hardly kindness to employ you as a housekeeper, when you’ve been used to better,” Mrs Plummer said. “I’ll take you over there tomorrow, so you can see what you’ll be getting yourself into before you commit yourself. You might take one look and run a mile, who knows?”

“It can hardly be worse than acting as companion to Mrs Landers,” Margarita said happily. “I’ll never again be shouted at because *she* broke her pen.”

25: Saturday

Rosie found that dinner that evening was a relaxed affair. Great-aunt Petronella and all the Landers had left, but Angie's Mr Appleby was still there as well as Sir Con Pluckrose, never far from Bella's side. Will and Eloise had driven up from Orchard House, and Julia and James had walked from the rectory. It was not quite the celebration that had been planned for Christmas, but it was still a celebration, both for Rosie and for Mama, and it was family, everyone at ease.

Into this comfortable atmosphere, Ricky fitted perfectly. Rosie remembered the many times Redmond had stayed, and how everyone had been a little on edge to have a viscount at the table. Mama had chatted brightly to him, but with a hint of brittleness to her voice. Pa had been unusually quiet, unsure how to talk to him. And Rosie herself had felt uncomfortable, although she could not quite say how or why. With Ricky, there was none of that. Everyone teased him gently for leaving things to the very last minute, and he laughed good-naturedly at himself.

"Aye, I've been a real slow-top, haven't I? Nearly missed the boat altogether, and completely messed up your Christmas plans, Mrs Fletcher. Can you forgive me?"

"I can do better than that," she said, smiling at him. "You have my undying gratitude for ridding us of the obnoxious Lord and Lady Faulkbourne. Now I can stop pretending to like them. Lord Albury was perfectly amiable, and one or two of his brothers and sisters, but his parents—! No, I could not like them, and I shall never forgive them for what they did to Johnny. I am glad you came, Ricky, and glad that Rosie will be truly happy at last. Shall you marry soon? A licence, perhaps?"

"Heavens, Lizzie, all Sagborough would be outraged not to have the banns read in the regular way," Pa said. "You know how folk gossip when there's undue haste about a wedding."

"I should like to marry in the spring, just as I planned with— Oh Pa! Pollicott Place! You signed the lease for that, and now you will have to pay for it to stand empty."

"Trust me to manage the business a little better than that, Rosie love,"

Pa said. "The whole arrangement was conditional on the marriage taking place."

"Did you have a... a *premonition* that it would not?" Rosie said. "How clever of you."

"No, no. It's merely good business practice — never commit to anything until you're absolutely certain. I agreed to pay monthly from Christmas until the wedding, so I've already paid the first month, but the annual lease and the quarterly rental were only for after the wedding. So the loss is negligible, and since I've paid for it, Will and James can go and shoot things there for a few weeks if they want to. I like to have my money's worth. Well, a spring wedding will be very pleasant, Rosie, and then Angie in the summer. What with Julia's baby, and my Lizzie making me a father again, this is going to be a year to remember. *Another* year to remember."

"I wish I could be married in Sagborough," Rosie said wistfully. "Not that it matters where it is, and it will be lovely to have James officiate in the church here, but I did so enjoy Ted and Allie's weddings, with all our oldest friends present."

"Aye, and everyone came back to the house afterwards for a drink and a bite to eat," Pa said. "It was fun, wasn't it? But you can be married in Sagborough if you want, Rosie love. I'll take you up there as soon as the weather's better, if that's what you'd like. At least you'll have the best warehouses for your wedding clothes, eh? None of this London nonsense, you can choose from the finest that Fletcher's has to offer."

"Truly? You would not mind?" Rosie said.

"And if you want me to marry you, I can do that just as well in Sagborough as here," James said. "If your parish clergyman is agreeable to the idea, that is. It is very common when there is a parson in the family. Julia will be too near her confinement to travel, but I can certainly come to Yorkshire in the spring."

"That would be wonderful," Rosie said happily. "Allie will not mind if I stay with her."

"Or we could all stay for a while," Pa said, startling the company into silence. "Well, why not? The country is all very well, and I like it here, truly I

do, but in the depths of winter when the weather's too foul even to leave the house and there's no one to see but the same three or four families, over and over... well, I miss Sagborough then. Pavements swept clean, shops handy, market days, all my friends to meet at the King's Head and the Carrbridge Arms, being able to walk round the corner of an evening to a dinner or a card party. And I miss Ted and Allie and the bairns. Those boys of Ted's need their grandpa."

"This would be... just for the winter?" Lizzie said tentatively. "Not permanently?"

"Heavens, no. We're settled here now, aren't we? Will and Julia are here, so we'll not give up this place, but if we could spend the winter in Sagborough, that would be perfect. Come the spring we can be in London, so you can mingle with the great ones. Then the summer here, and anyone who wants can come and visit us and get some clean, fresh air for a change. How does that sound, Mrs Fletcher?"

"That sounds... very agreeable," she said, laughing.

"That's what I thought, yes," Pa said smugly.

"Allie will not have room for all of us," Mama said.

"No, no," Pa said. "I wouldn't inflict so many of us on Allie, not when she's just got her own place. No, I thought to rent somewhere. Allie mentioned that house where Lord and Lady Craston used to live... Harlington Terrace. That's very handy, and Lady Craston will have decorated it to match even your high standards, Lizzie. We can take our own servants, including that fancy French cook of yours, since he's proved himself capable of roasting a piece of mutton satisfactorily, and we'll be very comfortable. Madge, you and Morgan will be welcome to come too."

"We've got this orphanage of Patricia's to keep an eye on," Aunt Madge said. "Mrs Brookes can't do it all herself. Besides, if you're all away enjoying yourselves, someone's got to look after this place."

"So that's agreed," Pa said with satisfaction. "I'll write to Ted and see what he can arrange for us. Ah, it will be good to get back to Sagborough for a while — just long enough to see Rosie wed and settled, then back south in time for the good weather. The best of all worlds."

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Froxfield Green was some three miles distant from Chadwell Park, and an easy walk in the summer, Mrs Plummer told Margarita, but because of the snow they took the carriage. Mr Morgan Plummer went with them, for he had a rôle at the orphanage too, as the financial advisor. He kept a close eye on the accounts, and also visited certain prominent gentlemen or men of business who could be relied upon to find ten or twenty pounds now and then to support the project.

The Froxfield orphanage was situated in a dilapidated mansion known locally as Brimstage House, after the Brimstage family who had occupied it for many years. The last relict of the line had died some ten years earlier, since when the place had stood empty and decaying until Mr Fletcher had bought it two months ago. It still had a vaguely abandoned air about it, for although the lawns and overgrown bushes had been trimmed, the carriage drive was still weed-infested, moss clung to the front steps and ivy coated the walls.

They entered by a side door into a small lobby, where a severe woman with iron-grey hair emerged at once from an office of some sort.

“Ah, Mrs Plummer,” she said, her face softening slightly. “You’ve been sorely missed, I can tell you. I hope you’ll explain to Miss Plummer that I can’t have my girls kept up all night, just because one or two of the babes might be teething. They have their work to do during the day and they need their sleep. The little ones will cry themselves to sleep if no one fusses over them.”

“I’ll talk to Miss Plummer, you may be sure,” Mrs Plummer said soothingly. “Mrs Brookes, this is Mrs Kemp, our head nurse. Mrs Kemp, Mrs Brookes may be joining us to help with the housekeeping. That will take a load from your shoulders when I’m not here, I’m sure. Are the books ready for Mr Plummer to examine?”

“Well, if I’d known you were coming today...”

Mrs Plummer left her husband to deal with the books and the ruffled feathers of the nurse, and led Margarita through the house. On the ground floor, several rooms were full of painters and plasterers and carpenters, the



sound of hammering echoing. Upstairs, however, all was calmness and order. Three rooms were given over to cribs and small beds, while one larger room was a day nursery, the floor alive with crawling infants, while nurses sat amongst them rolling balls to them, or helping them play with wooden toys. One nurse was walking slowly around the perimeter holding the hands of a tottering child, his chubby face wreathed in smiles as he practised the complicated art of walking. Two wet nurses sat in rocking chairs beside the fire, crooning their babes to sleep. And in the midst of all, Patricia Plummer sat, painstakingly feeding milk, spoonful by careful spoonful, into the unwilling mouth of a whimpering child.

“Poor little mite,” she said as soon as the two ladies entered the room. “His gums hurt so much he can barely take his milk. But he will be better directly. I shall take him out for some fresh air and that will do him good.”

Mrs Plummer explained Margarita’s presence to Patricia, who nodded with a benign smile, then said, “Have you seen Charlie over there? See how much he is grown already, and such a contented child now.”

Mrs Plummer expressed her admiration, and then made a judicious retreat. “You see how she is?” she said, as soon as they were out of the room. “Nothing exists for her beyond her precious babies.”

“But they *are* precious,” Margarita said quietly. “Every child is a gift from God, however difficult the circumstances.”

“Amen to that,” Mrs Plummer said, eyeing her thoughtfully. “You never had any yourself, though? That’s a pity. It won’t distress you, being surrounded by babies?”

“I think it’s lovely,” Margarita said. “My husband was a widower with three young children, and I miss them dreadfully.”

“What happened to them?”

“They went to Jack’s brother, a farmer, with a dozen of his own already. I could have gone there too, but Amelia made me a better offer than being the downtrodden drudge in a farm kitchen.”

Mrs Plummer laughed. “Aye, although you’d have made the best of it, I’m sure. If it hadn’t suited, you could have found yourself another husband

in the twinkling of an eye, with your looks.”

Margarita hardly knew what to say to that, so she enquired about the linen cupboard, and that directed Mrs Plummer’s thoughts into safer channels.

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That evening, Mrs Fletcher had invited the Kelshaws for dinner.

“We have all this food in the house ready to feed the Faulkbournes,” she said blithely, “so our neighbours may as well have the benefit of it.”

Margarita was quite happy to have the benefit of it, too. Perhaps in a month or two she would tire of so much rich food and would develop as dainty an appetite as the Fletcher ladies, or perhaps she would simply let out her gowns and carry on eating. She hoped she fell short of the sin of gluttony, but such a spread every evening was a rare treat to one accustomed since birth to economy. Even at Hadlow Hall, there had been a degree of frugality in the kitchens.

Now that Amelia was no longer expecting to marry Michael, Margarita was rather curious to see her again, and learn how far Anthony Landers’ courtship had progressed. She hadn’t seen Amelia since the night of Lady Plummer’s ball, which was only four days ago, but so much seemed to have happened since then. Margarita’s own plans had been thrown into disarray not once but twice, and even now she felt as if her employment at the orphanage might be overturned at any moment. It was an odd feeling. She hadn’t cared much for Mrs Landers, but after the first few weeks at Hodgehill, when she’d realised she wasn’t about to be thrown out, she’d been very settled.

Now she was unsettled again, and she knew why. For the first time, she was wondering whether it might be possible for her to marry Michael after all. Two years ago it had been out of the question, because of Amelia. But now, if he had made up his mind not to marry Amelia, then why should he not look elsewhere? And why should it not be Margarita? All it needed was a little time — time for her to settle into her new position at the orphanage, and time for Michael to get to know her properly, and for both of them to decide in their own minds what they wanted.

After Polly had helped her to dress for the evening, Margarita sat on at the charming little walnut dressing table, running her hands appreciatively over its smooth surface. Would she one day be able to furnish her own bedroom with such elegant pieces? Perhaps there would come a time when she lived at Chadwell Manor with Michael... she was breathless at her own audacity in even contemplating such a future. To be Mrs Michael Plummer... and in time, Lady Plummer...

Oh, it was impossible! She could never be a lady! But then she remembered that the present Lady Plummer was a quarter-master's daughter, so perhaps a country parson's daughter was not so unacceptable, after all. She quailed at the thought of her mother, for a dairymaid was certainly *not* a respectable forebear. Still, it was the father who mattered, after all.

At Hadlow, it had been made very clear to her that she was not an acceptable wife for Michael, but Sir Owen had become more conciliatory. *'If he had married you before, it would not be precisely what we wanted for him, but we would have made the best of it.'*

She shivered. The door that she had thought was forever closed might perhaps be open just a crack. Taking a deep breath, she rose, smoothed her skirts, took a final look in the glass to ensure her hair was behaving and then went down to the saloon.

The Kelshaws were already there, in the throes of noisy greetings, so Margarita crept in and found her usual corner, where she had left her sewing box in preparation, and settled down to work on her white rose, unnoticed in the excitement. More guests arrived, and the room filled up, but no one came near Margarita. When they went through to dinner, she hung back behind the other ladies, and took whatever seat was offered her. She found herself between Ricky Jupp, the apothecary, whose attention was entirely taken up by Rosie on his other side, and the younger Miss Kelshaw, who had nothing beyond the commonplace to say.

Amelia was positioned between Mr Fletcher and James Plummer, and seemed well pleased with her position. Whenever Margarita looked at her, she was chattering away in lively fashion, enjoying herself. She never once glanced at Margarita.

When the ladies withdrew, Margarita immediately resumed her solitary position in the corner. Several of the younger ladies went through to the music room to play and sing, and the older ones got up a game of whist in the blue saloon, so the saloon was almost empty when Amelia came in. She almost passed through without noticing Margarita in her corner, but at the last minute her steps slowed.

“Margarita? What are you doing here? I thought you had gone back to the wild north with the Landers woman.” Her tone was level, only a slight wrinkle on her forehead showing her puzzlement.

“I’ve parted company with Mrs Landers,” Margarita said. “I was offered a position with Miss Fletcher’s household after her marriage, but...”

Amelia’s frown lifted. “So you will go back with her to... wherever it is. Northumberland... Durham.”

“Yorkshire, but no. The Viscountess Albury might have needed a companion, but Mrs Ricky Jupp doesn’t. I’m going to be helping Miss Plummer and Mrs Morgan Plummer at Froxfield Orphanage. Housekeeping, that sort of thing.”

“Froxfield Orphanage? Where is that?”

“The nearest village from here, about three miles west.”

“West? Which way is west? Oh, where the Wheatsheaf is? I remember now, but... so close! You will be living only three miles away.”

Three miles away from what? But Margarita knew the answer to that — three miles away from Michael.

“No, I’ll be living here. Mrs Fletcher very kindly lets me stay on here, but I’ll be working at Froxfield, for three days a week, alternating with Mrs Plummer.”

“Margarita, you are still trying to take him away from me! Go away, go far away, before— Oh! I wish you had not come here. I would be engaged by now.”

“To Michael? You can do better than that, Amelia,” Margarita said. “Anthony Landers was very taken with you.”

“Anthony Landers, Anthony Landers,” she cried impatiently, “who has gone away without a *word*. He was only amusing himself with an innocent country girl, I suppose. No, my future is with Michael Plummer, if you will only stop interfering.”

Margarita carefully pushed her needle through the fabric to secure it, and laid aside her embroidery frame. “Amelia, I have *never* interfered between you and Michael, never. I left Hadlow two years ago to leave the way clear for you, remember? I took myself off to the far end of the country and hid away, so that Michael would marry you. I would never have come to Hertfordshire if I’d known he was here, and still unmarried. If he has irrevocably decided not to marry you, that is his decision and nothing to do with me. After all, how can he marry *me*?” She held up her left hand to show her wedding ring.

Amelia’s pretty face curled into a sneer. “Oh, yes, the mythical Mr Brookes. I know all about *him*. The Landers woman wrote to the East India Company, you know, and found out that he is unmarried. So whatever you are, Margarita, you are no wife, and if Michael knows that—”

“He doesn’t know any such thing,” Margarita said sharply, “and please God he won’t hear such talk from idle tongues. Amelia, we used to be friends, so let’s not fall out over this, or anything else. I’m sorry Michael has decided not to marry you, but I don’t believe you’re heartbroken over him. Go to London in the spring and meet Anthony Landers again, or any number of other eligible young men — you could take your pick, you know. You’d be much better off than with Michael.”

“You *do* want to marry him!”

“Well, if he’s not to marry you, then why shouldn’t he marry me instead, if he wants to?” Margarita cried, stung.

“Do I have to explain it to you again? Your parentage, Margarita, your parentage is enough to render you ineligible to marry a gentleman. I am sorry for it, but there it is.”

“My mother may have been of lowly birth, but my father was respectable. A clergyman is always respectable.”

Amelia laughed, she actually laughed. “My dear friend, I believe you do

not know. Your father was not a clergyman.”

“Of course he was! I grew up in the parsonage, Amelia. I watched him take the services every Sunday.”

“But *he* was not your father. My lawyers looked into all this when you first came to Hadlow, but it never mattered to me. It will matter to Michael, though, and it will matter very much to Sir Owen and Lady Plummer.”

Margarita went cold, her stomach churning in terror. “Tell me,” she whispered. “Who was my father?”

“You have no father. You are illegitimate.”

She laughed again, and Margarita thought she had never heard such a cruel, merciless sound in her life.

26: Sunday

Margarita crept away to her room, too shocked even to cry. Illegitimate... of course. All those odd comments that she had never fully understood. The strange looks sometimes when she had talked about her father, and how like him she was. His prevarication when she had asked about her mother, or wanted to see her grave. She was not buried in her father's own churchyard, that much was certain, for Margarita had walked endlessly up and down it, reading every headstone in vain. Her family had taken her, that was all her father had said when she asked directly.

Her father... but he was not, of course. A kindly but distant man, his detachment was obvious now. He had been fond of her, in his way, but it was the impartial fondness of a clergyman to one of his parishioners. An obligation, perhaps — duty rather than affection. It all made sense now.

Without Polly to help her, she had rather a job to escape from her evening gown. It dated from her days at Hadlow Hall when she had enjoyed the services of a maid, so the buttons were tricky and mostly out of reach. Eventually, she managed it, and after a final tussle with her unruly hair, she scrambled into the nightgown left warming in front of the fire and climbed into bed.

Sometime later, Polly tiptoed in, tidied up the discarded garments, drew the bed curtains more neatly and crept away again. Margarita lay still and kept her eyes closed until Polly had gone away again. And then she lay miserably in the dark and thought of her unknown father and Michael and the marriage that now could never be. Sir Owen and Lady Plummer might be prepared to *'make the best of it'* with a clergyman's daughter, but an illegitimate girl was quite beyond the pale. Such a lovely dream, but gone in the way of all dreams, unable to withstand the bright dawn of reality.

The morning brought a visit from Hathaway, Mrs Fletcher's rather intimidating lady's maid.

"Madam's sent me to enquire after you, since you retired early last night," she said. "She wishes to know if you are quite well."

"How kind of Mrs Fletcher. Please tell her that I'm perfectly well, I just had a little headache last night, that's all. I'm sorry to worry her."

“You don’t look well,” Hathaway said, her voice softening slightly. “Shall I prepare a tisane for you?”

“Thank you, that would be very kind... if it doesn’t take you away from your duty to Mrs Fletcher.”

A twitch of the lips which the charitable might call a smile. “Mrs Plummer is with her, so she doesn’t need me just now. I’ll be back very soon with the tisane.”

Whatever was in the tisane, it refreshed Margarita enough to face the day with something approaching equanimity. It was Sunday, and so she had the comfort of the liturgy to look forward to, when she could once again plead with the Almighty for forgiveness of her great sin. The greater sin, as Mrs Fletcher called it. Each Sunday she entered church in grieving penitence, and left it uplifted in spirit once more, if only temporarily.

Today she would have an extraordinary trial of her fortitude to endure, for not only would Michael be there, reminding her of all that she had hoped for which was now snatched away, but also she would see Amelia, a living reminder of the cause of her loss. But it must be got through somehow.

She pulled on her gloves, picked up her prayer book and made her way downstairs. Usually the Fletchers walked to St Hilary’s, but the remains of the snow necessitated the carriage for the ladies. Margarita had stout boots, and clothes that would survive a few splashes of mud unscathed, so she walked with the gentlemen. She hesitated momentarily when Mr Fletcher ushered her into the family pew, for surely she was unworthy of such an honour? Especially now... But she was fairly certain that Mr Fletcher would contest the point vigorously, and church was not the place for an argument, so she meekly took her seat.

To her horror, the Plummer pew was directly opposite, so she had the pain of seeing Michael’s face every time she dared to look up from her prayer book. The first time their eyes met, he gave her a smile and a little wave, which almost undid her. Thank heavens for her prayer book, which could keep her eyes safely down-turned.

Afterwards, Mr Fletcher was again punctilious in holding the pew door open for her to leave, so there was no possibility of holding back. Outside,

she kept her head down and lurked at the edge of the graveyard, where a giant yew half hid her from view.

“There you are, Mrs Brookes,” came Michael’s cheerful voice. “Are you avoiding company? If so, pray forgive me for disturbing you.”

If only she could avoid *him*, for his society could only give her pain. But he would know the truth about her soon enough, and then he would want nothing to do with her. Until then, she would enjoy his presence.

“I am not avoiding company.”

He beamed happily at her. “Are you well? You were not in church on Christmas Day and at first I was afraid you had gone away with Mrs Landers as you planned. For a few hours, I wondered if it might be the chickens for me after all.” He chuckled, quite at his ease. “Fortunately, I saw Will Fletcher at the second service and he assured me you had not left.”

“I stayed with Mrs Fletcher that day.”

“Ah, of course. And is she quite recovered? She looks very well today. But what of you? It is a setback, this business with Rosie Fletcher. Is it quite certain? She will return to Yorkshire now, I assume, but you need not go, surely. You will stay in the south?”

There was an eagerness in his tone that distressed Margarita greatly. If only she had not given her word to stay nearby! All she wanted now was to creep away and pretend that she’d never met Michael, but it was the one thing she couldn’t do. So she answered his questions as best she could and told him about her position at the orphanage.

“Oh, Froxfield? You will be at Froxfield? That is excellent news, Mrs Brookes. But I see my mother is preparing to depart. You will forgive me...”

With a little bow, as between friends, he shot away, and Margarita couldn’t decide whether she was pleased or sorry for it. She stayed in her spot, out of the way of the many groups mingling on the path, who chatted and laughed happily, watching them with envious eyes. If only she could be one of them, and share news and exchange well-wishes with her neighbours, as they did. But she could never be one of them. She had no business here, amongst these good, kind people. If they knew her secret, they would shun

her, for what right had any natural child to mix with the righteous?

She had never felt more alone.

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There were no more leisurely mornings spent sitting about with her embroidery. At first every day saw Margarita at the Froxfield orphanage, as Mrs Plummer showed her how things were done there. Then she began to alternate her days of work, so that Mrs Plummer could spend some time at the Park, or dashing down to the rectory, where her niece Julia lived, or to Orchard House, where Will Fletcher's wife was, to help out or just to offer advice. Mrs Plummer was always bustling about.

"Is she always so busy?" Margarita asked Mrs Fletcher one day. "She never stops for a moment."

Mrs Fletcher laughed. "True enough. It is exhausting to watch her sometimes. I have discovered that it is far better to sit back and allow her to do whatever she wants." She laughed, for she was reclining on a chaise longue, a pile of the latest journals at her side. "When Mr Plummer is here, he manages to slow her down a bit, but since he is in London on business just now, there is no one to rein her in."

"How pleasant to be a gentleman," Margarita said. "Whenever the countryside palls, off to town you go for a few days of enjoyment. And when that becomes boring, back to the country, where your wife is patiently waiting."

"I am not sure that visits to banks and attorneys and the like would be my idea of enjoyment," Mrs Fletcher said.

Margarita shook her head. "I dare say that's all done in an hour or two, and after that, they visit their clubs, go to the theatre and strut about with their friends."

"Or visit their mistresses," Mrs Fletcher said darkly. "Oh, not Mr Plummer, or Mr Fletcher, either! I have no worries on that score, but when we were at Chaseley Court in November, there was a lot of talk amongst the ladies. These fine lords, with their supercilious manners, think themselves so wonderful, but their morals leave a vast deal to be desired. I cannot tell you

how glad I am to be rid of them. The thought of Rosie in such society made me go cold, truly it did.”

Even when Margarita was not required at the orphanage, there were to be no peaceful hours hidden away in the library, for she was set a more prosaic task than embroidering roses. Mrs Fletcher had examined her wardrobe minutely and determined that it was sadly lacking.

“Is this all you have? Is there more up in Cumberland?” she said, kneeling on the floor to rummage through the sad contents of Margarita’s box.

“Nothing there, no. I left a great deal at Hadlow when I left, since I could only carry two small bags.”

“We will send for your things whenever Miss Greaves returns there, but in the meantime, I have a great many gowns and so forth that I shall never wear again. I fear I was a little profligate when I was first married, from the excitement of having such an outrageously large allowance, and purchased many items rather injudiciously. I have several gowns that would suit your colouring much better, and you are woefully short of evening gowns.”

“You’re very good, ma’am,” Margarita said. “I won’t refuse the offer of a gown or two, since I have so few.”

“How splendid,” Mrs Fletcher said. “There is nothing more tedious than someone refusing a gift through pride or some such foolishness, but you are all good sense. Most refreshing.”

“I take into account that you can easily afford such benevolence,” Margarita said. “How lovely to be so rich! But I should like to know, all the same, why you’re so kind to me, for I have no claim on your notice whatsoever. You should have sent me packing, and instead you’ve offered me nothing but generosity.”

Mrs Fletcher sat back on her heels. “Does there have to be a reason, beyond the obvious — that I enjoy your company, and would like to see you display your beauty to greater advantage?”

She looked so conscious that Margarita laughed and said, “Are you still matchmaking, ma’am? I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Now, you must not suspect me! I have promised I will not tell Michael Plummer your secret, and I shall not break my word, but I still hope for a happy outcome for the two of you. All this past year, I have been hoping for a match for Rosie, and one by one all the others made their own matches — Julia, then Will, Angie, Johnny and even Madge, bless her. And then Rosie chose her own match, which means I cannot claim a single success on my own account. And now here are you and Michael, clearly made for each other, and I should so like to see you married, whether or not I can claim any credit for it.”

“But it’s not possible,” Margarita said quietly. “I can never marry Michael.”

“Are you going to start talking about your dairymaid mother again?” Mrs Fletcher said. “Because that is of no consequence—”

“No.” Her voice was low, but she was quite still, all her agitation ruthlessly suppressed. “It is my father who is the problem. You see, I am illegitimate.”

“Ah.” Mrs Fletcher stood up and sat on the edge of the bed. “That is more of an obstacle. You did not mention this before.”

“I didn’t know. Amelia told me the other evening.”

“When you disappeared after dinner. Yes, I quite see. And... is it quite certain? I know Amelia is a friend of yours, but she does not strike me as a completely reliable source of information.”

“I believe her. There were things said... when I was a child... oddities that I didn’t understand at the time, but they make sense now. Yes, I’m sure it’s true. You see the difficulty, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes! Not that illegitimacy is an absolute bar to anything. Mr Fletcher has a natural son of his own, born before his marriage. Ted, his name is, and Mr Fletcher has always acknowledged him and treated him exactly like the others. In fact, when Ted’s mother died, Mr Fletcher took him in, and he grew up with his brothers and sisters. Now he owns the Fletcher mercery, and has a wife and four children of his own.”

“A man... yes, a man can leave the stigma behind, but a woman...

There were a few natural children at the school at Bath, and... and they were not precisely ostracised, but they were never chosen, if you understand me. If a girl's parents came to take her out for some reason, and she could take a friend, it was never one of the base-born. Or if some of the girls were taken to the theatre, they never went. A man may learn a trade and become respectable that way, but a woman cannot mix with anyone from good society. She cannot *marry* into good society."

"It is more difficult, certainly, but not impossible. It is not every man who would marry a natural child, but Michael might."

"But his parents would never countenance it!" Margarita cried. "He's heir to a baronetcy — he can't marry the bastard daughter of nobody!"

"Well, he can marry whoever he likes, legally speaking, and his parents have nothing whatsoever to do with it," Mrs Fletcher said robustly. "So we shall wait until he gives you some sign of his feelings, and then... then you will have to tell him, my dear. And at that point, you will find out what sort of man he is. But until then, let us at least get you into some prettier clothes and a smaller cap. It grieves me beyond endurance to have such a glorious head of hair concealed under so much linen. Wicked, that is what it is."

So whenever she had a little free time, Margarita sat and stitched Mrs Fletcher's unwanted gowns, taking them in to fit her slighter frame, and glorying in the softly rustling silks and the fashionable details. The three sisters helped, too, for their men had all, one by one, departed. Ricky Jupp left first, fretting rather about his shop, then Angie's Mr Appleby departed for Bath, and finally Sir Con Pluckrose set off for Worcestershire. With the return of Mr Morgan Plummer from London, the excitement of Christmas and the arrival of the new year was over, and the house settled into its usual occupations.

There were social occasions, too, when neighbours dined with the Fletchers, or they were invited elsewhere to dine, and generally Margarita was included in the invitation. Only to Kelshaw House, where Amelia was still a guest, was she pointedly excluded. But there was a dinner at the Park for the Plummers, and then a reciprocal dinner at the Manor for the Fletchers, so Margarita had two evenings in company with Michael. He neither said nor did anything to distinguish her beyond the calls of politeness, but it was

enough to be in his company, however bitter-sweet. One day, he would discover the truth of her parentage and that would be the end of all association between them, but until then, she would enjoy every minute she spent with him.

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One day, Margarita was in the parlour working on a pomona green gown of such splendour that she could hardly imagine an occasion grand enough to warrant it. It was one that Mrs Fletcher had had made in London by a very fashionable mantua maker, and then decided that the colour made her look ill.

“I have been at my wit’s end wondering what to do with it,” she said, “for Rosie is too dark to show to advantage in it, and Angie and Bella are too young for such a very decided colour. Eloise has her own ideas, and Julia — No, not Julia, not with these fiddly sleeves. But it would suit you to perfection, dear.”

Margarita could not truthfully deny it, and so she accepted the gift even though she never expected to wear it. It would be a lovely thing simply to keep in the press — something she could take out now and then, just to feel the silk sliding through her fingers and admire the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons and the embellishments around the bodice where the surplus fabric was gathered into swags of delicate little leaves. She was adding more of them from the excess she had cut away from the skirt, which would hide the alterations. It was so lovely that she sighed over it as she worked.

The sisters were working on projects of their own, Rosie embroidering Ricky’s initials onto handkerchiefs as a modest gift, and Angie and Bella leafing through the journals for ideas for Rosie’s wedding clothes. Mrs Fletcher was making one of her multitude of lists.

This peaceable scene was disturbed by a horseman riding fast up the drive, and shouts of, “Hoy there! Express! Halloo — anyone there?”

“An express!” Mrs Fletcher said in some alarm, as Angie and Bella rushed to the window.

“Keeble has gone out to him,” Angie said. “He cannot leave his horse. May we go and find out what it is all about?”

“It will be for your father,” Mrs Fletcher said, but she got up and went to the window herself. “It is just a letter, by the look of it. Some business matter. Perhaps it is for Mr Morgan.”

But a minute later, Keeble came into the room bearing a silver salver. “An express just brought this, madam.” His face was white. “For Mrs Brookes.”

“For me?” Margarita said in astonishment. “Why would anyone send me a letter by express?”

“It is from the East India Company, madam,” Keeble said, turning sorrowful eyes towards her.

He held the salver out to her, and now she saw that the thin letter was neatly edged in black, and sealed with black wax.

It could only mean one thing — that Nick Brookes was dead.

27: A Letter

Margarita shook from head to toe. She could not take the letter from the salver, not if her life depended on it. She found Rosie beside her, an arm round her waist.

“Come and sit down. Bella, bring the letter over here. Thank you, Keeble.”

“Yes, thank you, Keeble,” Mrs Fletcher said. “Please bring some brandy, and tell Mr Fletcher what has occurred.”

“Thank you... such a shock,” Margarita murmured. “Mrs Fletcher, would you be so good as to read it for me, for I can’t... I don’t want to... I know what it contains, I don’t need to read it.”

“Of course, dear.” She broke the seal and unfolded the sheet. “Ah, yes, the East India Company... send their deepest regrets... their doleful duty to inform you...”

“He is dead, then? Nick is dead?”

“He is dead. *‘...was so unfortunate as to contract a high fever, of a nature all too common in this hostile land, and despite the strength of his constitution, succumbed after an illness of seven days.’*”

Mr Fletcher came in just then, followed by Keeble with the brandy, and then Mr Morgan, and the tale had to be told over and over. It was all just meaningless noise to Margarita. Nick was dead! And in all the grief of his death, and her sorrow for Jane, the sister who would now be left without a relation in the world, Margarita’s main thought was that she no longer had the protection of a supposed husband. Her defence against Michael had vanished into dust.

Bella’s clear voice broke through her abstraction. “How did they know to send it here?”

It was an excellent question. How *could* they know, when they had no record of Nick having a wife at all? Mr Fletcher answered Bella sharply, pointing out that it would be a very negligent company which failed to know the whereabouts of an employee’s next of kin, and the conversation moved

on, but Margarita heard none of it. Her eyes flew to Mrs Fletcher, and the guilty look she saw there confirmed her suspicion.

Margarita stood, and at once everyone turned to her, falling silent.

“I shall go to my room,” she said quietly.

“We will all go,” Rosie said at once, jumping to her feet. “You must not be alone at such a moment.”

“Thank you, but if Mrs Fletcher would be so kind as to come with me, that will be company enough for now.”

“Of course, dear,” she said gently. “The brandy... Morgan, pour a brandy for Mrs Brookes. Do you need my arm to lean upon, dear?”

“I believe I can manage.”

They left the room in silence, walking past the shocked and anxious faces of the others. Margarita was shocked, too, but not for the same reason as the others.

As soon as they reached her bedroom and the door was closed, she rounded on Mrs Fletcher. “This is your doing, I take it? Very clever, madam, I must say. How did you do it? Who did you have to bribe to get this letter?”

“No bribe. I paid a lawyer to write it. Morgan arranged it all. Margarita ___”

“How dared you! You promised not to interfere, you *promised*, and now ___”

“Well... not exactly.”

“—my one protection has gone! I thought you understood.”

“I do understand, very clearly. You had got yourself into a rare muddle, with no possibility of escape. How did you suppose you would lose your imaginary husband? You would have to kill him off at some point, or would you want to admit to the world that you invented the whole thing? That you *lied*? And then the suspicious world would want to know why you felt the need to invent such a story... why you felt obliged to seek the protection of the married state. As I do, if truth be told. On the other hand, if you do nothing at all, you are tied to Mr Brookes just as surely as if you were truly

married, living a lie for your whole life. Do you see what a tangle it is? This way cuts away all the nonsense and leaves Michael free to marry you if he chooses and you free to accept him if you choose, with no censure from the world.”

“But he will offer from obligation, and now there is nothing to prevent him from speaking out.”

“Why should he feel any obligation?” Mrs Fletcher said crisply. “No, you need not answer that. Keep your secret, Margarita, but you need not fear that he will beat a door to your path as soon as he hears this news, for you are a woman in mourning, remember? You will put on black gloves, and naturally he will have too great a sense of propriety to make any approach. Your state of mourning will protect you until you are ready. I am very sorry you are unhappy with my actions, but it was done for the best and cannot now be undone.”

“I could deny it all, you know,” Margarita said, anger making her reckless. “I could tell everyone that you’re an interfering woman who arranged for this letter to be sent.”

“You could,” Mrs Fletcher said, straightening her spine a little. “Do that, if it would make you feel better, but be prepared for even more questions.”

Margarita deflated at once. “I should leave,” she said despondently. “You’re right, it’s a dreadful tangle beyond all unravelling, and the best thing I could do is to take myself off to a distant part of the country where no one knows me, and start again.”

“Without friends or even a reference? Madness. Margarita, you are far too prone to run away. That solves nothing. Far better to face up to the past. Look it straight in the eye and reach out for what you want. If you are ever to have a future with Michael, you have to meet him halfway, and not meekly wait for him to find a way past the defensive wall you have built around yourself. You may be cross with me now, but this letter has achieved two things. First, it has confirmed in the eyes of the world that Mr Brookes does indeed exist, is in India and was your husband. Mrs Landers spread some very nasty rumours, and such things fester, if not robustly squashed. And

second, it has set you free from a marriage that may have been necessary once, but is become nothing but a hindrance. And now, I shall send the girls to bear you company, while I look out a black gown for you.”

Her anger largely dissipated, Margarita’s nerves were still too jangled to think clearly about her new situation, as false as the last one but throwing up a different array of problems. Savagely, she picked up the brandy glass and downed half the contents in a gulp. The liquid burned her throat, and made her gasp, but the resultant coughing fit brought her to her senses. She had always made the best of whatever situation she found herself in, and so it would be here. She would be a grieving widow for a while, just until she had decided what to do for the best.

And there was one shining moment of happiness in the whole sorry mess — at least Nick Brookes was not dead after all, but alive and well half a world away. That was something to celebrate. She drank the rest of the brandy, although more circumspectly, and awaited the arrival of the Fletcher sisters to comfort her.

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It was Uncle Morgan who brought the news to Chadwell Manor. Michael was in the gun room with James, trying to emulate his brother’s neat way of cleaning his gun, when the door opened and a head peered round.

“Ah, there you are at last, Michael. I have been all over the house looking for you. There is big news from the Park — Mrs Brookes’ husband is dead.”

Michael almost dropped his gun, although James put out a steadying hand to catch it, just in case.

“Dead?” Michael said hoarsely. But the word that rose in his mind was very different — free, it cried exultantly! His beloved was free at last.

“Dead of some horrid fever. An express came a couple of hours ago from the East India Company. I thought you would want to know at once.”

“Yes.” He swallowed, almost too stunned to take it in. “Is she... is she all right?”

Uncle Morgan shrugged. “Seems to be. A little shocked, naturally, but

not overset. Very composed.”

“Mrs Brookes is always composed,” Michael said, lifting his chin. “I must go and offer my condolences.” He laid his gun aside as he spoke. “James, will you finish this for me?”

“You are going today? Now?” James said, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“This very minute.”

“Then I shall come with you. Lock the guns away for now, and we can deal with them tomorrow.”

All three of them walked through the dusk to the Park, entering by the west gate and then through the woods to the house. Keeble received them with a slight smile, as if he had expected them.

“We are here to convey our condolences to Mrs Brookes,” Michael said.

“Of course, sir. This way, if you please.”

Margarita was in the saloon, already clothed from head to toe in black, which caused Michael to stop dead on the threshold. She looked so young, so defenceless there in the vast open space of the saloon, the Fletcher ladies in their pale gowns only emphasising her sorrowful state. For the second time in her life she was bereft, left alone by cruel chance, and even if she had grasped this second husband in some desperation, yet she must feel his loss deeply.

It was James who crossed the room first, who bowed before her and expressed his sympathy in simple words. Michael did not know what to say. He followed James and then stood silently while his brother talked to Margarita, and said all the things that Michael should have said.

Eventually, when James at last faltered, she turned her lovely eyes on Michael.

“I am so sorry,” he said. Yet it was not true. Even as he spoke the words, his heart was singing — she was free! Now there was no obstacle, no mysterious husband to bar the way. Now at last he could tell her all that was in his heart. Not yet! Her bereavement was too close. But soon... a few months... weeks, perhaps, if he dared. Perhaps he might even hint to her sooner than that... but he dared not consider such a thing, not yet.

So he bowed over her hand and said all that was proper, and she inclined her head graciously and thanked him for his concern, and assured him that, no, she was not overset, since she had very good friends to support her in her dark hour. The Fletcher sisters twittered over her, sitting protectively on either side of her.

And before he knew it, James was bowing his way towards the door, and there was nothing for it but to do the same, trying to fix her face in his mind as he retreated to the door. Was she prostrate with grief? He could not see it. She was pale, certainly, but she had never had a high colour, so there was nothing to be gleaned from that. She was not crying, though, and that was something.

But when he asked himself if she was pleased to see him, he could not honestly say that she was. There was no softening of her face, no lingering glance in his direction, no words that could be taken as encouragement. Uncle Morgan had described her as composed, and so she was — very composed. Her demeanour told him nothing.

He walked back with James by the main drive, silently side by side, both of them lost in their own thoughts. Their steps slowed in harmony as they approached the gates to the rectory, and then halted.

“Well?” Michael said. “No advice for me? No words of warning?”

“No.” James smiled as he spoke, his face shadowy in the oncoming dusk.

“You will not tell me to keep away from her?”

“No.” The smile broadened. “You know your own mind, I think.”

“I do.”

“Then you need no advice from me or anyone else. Michael, I know how unhappy you were after... well, after what happened two years ago. I know how unhappy *I* was when I believed Julia was out of my reach. I never want you to suffer like that again. If I have one wish for you, it is that you might one day be as happy as I am now. And that is all I have to say on the subject. Good night, brother.”

He walked off up the drive to the rectory, his steps quickening as he

hurried home to his wife. Would Michael ever hurry home to Margarita? He could only hope that one day it might be so. But honesty compelled him to admit that at present he saw no sign of it.

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Margarita hardly knew which way was up. Her life had been a succession of horrid shocks causing unspeakable turbulence, interspersed with periods of relative calm. Having thought she was entering a period of calm, she now found that turbulence had the upper hand, after all.

The Fletchers were very sympathetic, surrounding her with gentle affection, like a flock of guardian angels, never leaving her alone for so much as a minute. Within twenty-four hours she was provided with a full wardrobe of blacks, from gowns to bonnets and gloves and an elegant little jet necklace of Mrs Fletcher's. Margarita accepted everything with gratitude, for what was the point of fighting people who were determined to shower her with kindness?

A steady stream of visitors came to offer condolences, the ladies to dab their eyes delicately and the men to look stern, and talk disparagingly of the unforgiving Indian climate. The letter was produced time after time to be sighed over, the words memorised to be transcribed, no doubt, into letters to far-flung relations. It was a very convincing letter, Margarita decided, written as it was on the Company's own headed paper, and how that had been arranged she had no idea, and didn't care to ask.

Amelia came, of course. Margarita should have expected that, but still she started when Keeble announced her. She came with Lady Frederica and her daughters, entering the room only a pace behind Lady Frederica and in front of the Miss Kelshaws, which was rather forward of her. She said nothing at first, allowing Lady Frederica to speak for all of them, but when the Kelshaw ladies moved away to gather around Mrs Fletcher, Amelia leaned forward to whisper in Margarita's ear.

"You might think you are safe now, but remember that I know everything about you."

"Why do you hate me so much?" Margarita said quietly. "We used to be friends."

“Friends? We were never that. You were my paid companion, that is all. You forget your place in the world, Margarita. Try to remember that you are nobody. Even though you mingle with persons of consequence, you are not one of us and never will be. Do not forget it or I shall be obliged to reveal your nasty little secrets.”

Bella Fletcher moved closer just then, so there was no more opportunity for intimacy, but Amelia had said enough. It was clear that if Margarita had any thought of marrying Michael, Amelia was determined that she would not, even though she could not have him herself.

Margarita was rather shaken by this encounter. Long after the last visitor had left, she sat on in the darkening saloon, her hands motionless in her lap, barely noticing when the footman came in to light the candles. Four years she had spent in Amelia’s house, four contented years when they had lived in perfect amity, or so she had thought. Yet it was all an illusion, just like Margarita’s reputation. Amelia was not her friend, and she herself was not the poor but respectable daughter of a clergyman. She was base born, and therefore unworthy of a place at the table of decent people.

And eventually, Michael would know it and then she would lose him for ever.

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Margarita was quite willing to go to the orphanage as usual, but the Fletcher family would not hear of it.

“However stout-hearted you may be, you have sustained a great shock,” Mrs Fletcher said. “You must stay quietly at home for a fortnight, at least. After that... well, we shall see. But I shall be very glad of your company in the mornings, my dear, when I am feeling so out of sorts, and unable to contemplate the least exertion. It would be of the greatest help if you would assist me in compiling my lists for this move to Sagborough, for poor Madge is already doing the work of three.”

So it was that Margarita was in the parlour, pen in hand, when Keeble came in with a card on a salver.

“A Mr Hambleton to see Mrs Brookes, madam. A legal gentleman. He wishes to speak to her alone on a personal matter. I have shown him into the

office, since the master's out at the moment."

Margarita picked up the card. "Oh, he's from the East India Company, so it will be about Nick, I expect." But she frowned, all the same, glancing across at Mrs Fletcher, who looked equally puzzled.

"A pension!" Mrs Fletcher said. "Perhaps there will be a pension."

"I don't think so," Margarita said. "Well, I had better see him, I suppose."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Mrs Fletcher said uncertainly. "I know he wishes to see you alone, but—"

"There's no need," Margarita said. "Keeble would tell us if there was anything disreputable about him."

"There's nothing of that nature, madam," Keeble said at once. "A very fine gentleman, dressed London style."

It was an accurate description. Margarita guessed that Mr Hambleton was not yet forty, although with the pampered, softened looks that made it difficult to judge. He was as fashionable as any dandy, with a decided air of assurance in his manner.

"Mrs Brookes?" He made her a florid bow. "How good of you to see me, but I must confess at once that I am not John Hambleton, and I am not from the East India Company. Here is my real card."

*'Mr Pettigrew Willerton-Forbes, of Markham, Willerton-Forbes and Browning, Inner Temple, London'*, she read. "You are a lawyer, then? That part was true?"

"A barrister, mostly, although with interests in other areas of the law. Mr Morgan Plummer engaged my services about ten days ago to arrange for a letter of a very specific nature to be sent to you, but believe me when I say that neither I nor Mr Plummer would have agreed to participate in this deception if we had not believed you to be party to it. He wrote to me in some agitation, after discovering that all of this was at the behest of a third party. That is so, is it not?"

"It's true. I knew nothing of the scheme until your letter arrived, Mr Hambleton... I mean Mr Willerton-Forbes." Margarita gave a sudden bark of



laughter. “We have all been deceived, it would appear. But I’m not sure what you mean by coming here. The damage is done, after all.”

“Yet there is still a possibility to undo that damage,” Mr Willerton-Forbes said softly. “That is the whole purpose of my deception today. I am believed to be from the East India Company, and we are quite private here, madam. I could tell you, in my disguise as Mr Hambleton, that a dreadful mistake has been made. I could tell you that the person who so tragically died of a fever in Madras was not Mr Nicholas Brookes after all, but Mr Nigel Brookefield. A clerical error, you see. Your Mr Brookes is still alive and well, and you are not a widow after all. Or I could merely offer the condolences of the Company, elaborate on the tragic death of the ill-fated Mr Brookes, and leave you a widow still. I am entirely at your disposal in the matter, madam. You may instruct me however seems good to you. You may be free of your husband, if you wish, or you may resume the mantle of marriage. Which is it to be?”

## 28: Shocking News

Margarita did not hesitate. “Leave things as they are. I am not and have never been married to Nick Brookes, so it is best to be rid of a marriage that no longer serves any useful purpose.”

Mr Willerton-Forbes chuckled softly. “If only genuine marriages could be shrugged aside so easily. There are many who would wish that *‘till death us do part’* were a shade less literal. But tell me, Mrs Brookes, is there in fact a Mr Nicholas Brookes in India, or is he an invention, too?”

“He exists, and he is in India, although I have not the least idea where.”

“And is he aware that he has — or rather *had* — a wife in England?”

“Yes, indeed, he was very willing to be party to the scheme. He even writes to me from time to time — oh!”

“Precisely so. Those letters will have to stop. One or two, perhaps, might be set down as the vagaries of the mail from such a distance, but more than that would raise some very awkward questions. But you may be easy, Mrs Brookes. If you will write a letter to Mr Brookes informing him of the change in your situation, I will convey it to the East India Company myself to ensure that it is sent. One could not send such a missive by the general mail, naturally.”

“Of course, I can’t be seen to write to my dead husband,” Margarita said, laughing. “Lord, how complicated it all is! I wish I’d never started on this foolish deception.”

“I imagine it was an urgent necessity at the time,” Mr Willerton-Forbes said with gentle sympathy. “And now the necessity is to dispose of the unwanted husband to leave you free to pursue a different future. A better future, one must assume, and all your friends must wish you well in that endeavour.”

“I don’t think that endeavour will ever come to fruition,” she said sadly. “There are circumstances... one circumstance in particular. I’d thought, you see, that it was possible because although I’m not at all his equal, my birth was at least respectable. But now I discover that I’m illegitimate, and so you see...”

“Illegitimacy is not in itself a bar to marriage,” Mr Willerton-Forbes said slowly.

“No, but the shame!” Margarita cried. “What respectable family would wish to form so low a connection? I know nothing of my parents, except that my mother was a dairymaid, and that doesn’t lead me to suppose my father was any better than a common labourer who abandoned her when she was in trouble. Such tainted blood can’t be joined to anyone of standing in society.”

“Your father need not be a labourer. If he were, a natural child would be no grief, merely another pair of hands to help on the farm or in the smithy. He was more likely to be someone with a position in society, and a reputation to be protected.”

“He can’t be an honourable man, though, or he wouldn’t have deserted my mother.”

“Perhaps he did not. He made provision for you, after all, so perhaps she was well cared for, too.” He smiled at her, eyes twinkling gently. “Would you like to find out who he is?”

“Is that possible?”

“Perhaps. I know a man who would be very happy to try. He likes nothing better than unravelling such mysteries, and he has had some success in the past. Shall I ask him to put his talents to use on your behalf?”

“I can’t pay him.”

“No, no. It would be some compensation for my presumption over the letter, and very much a project of pleasure for my friend, I assure you. He is very discreet, so if your father should happen to be a duke, he will not rush into any revelations which might be disruptive. He will make delicate enquiries and report his findings to you. Or to me, if you prefer, and I can convey them to Mr Morgan Plummer. That would not attract comment. Do you wish to have time to compose your letter to Mr Brookes? I can find an inn and return for it tomorrow, if you wish. Fold it, seal it and add the direction, then enclose it in a second sheet, folded, sealed and addressed to me — to Mr Hambledon, that is. That way, no one will accidentally see the real direction.”

“You consider everything, sir,” Margarita said in genuine admiration. “I would never have thought of that.”

“Ah, that comes from years of underhand dealings,” Mr Willerton-Forbes said, in a matter-of-fact way, leaving Margarita wondering if it could even be true, despite the twinkle in his eye.

She accompanied him to the door warily, very grateful for his thoughtfulness but rather nervous of a man who talked so glibly of underhand dealings and a friend who took pleasure in unravelling mysteries with delicate enquiries.

“Where is the nearest inn?” he said politely.

Fortunately, Margarita was not required to answer such a question, for Keeble stepped into the breach.

“The Wheatsheaf at Froxfield Green, sir, three miles west of here,” he said, as he helped the lawyer into his many-caped greatcoat. “Perhaps a trifle rustic for a gentleman of quality like yourself. You could try the Bull or the Saracen’s Head in Ware.”

“It would be inconvenient to drive to Ware and all the way back here tomorrow. I am sure the Wheatsheaf will do very well. I have my man with me, after all, and if there is no parlour, the common room can be quite amusing.”

“It’s not as rustic as all that, sir,” Keeble said, affronted. “There are three private parlours for the quality.”

“Excellent. Ah, I hear my carriage outside now.”

Keeble escorted him reverently to his vehicle, for a man of the law who travelled in his own equipage, with four horses, a footman and an outrider was a person of consequence by any measure.

Margarita was merely amused by anyone who travelled in such unnecessary style for a simple business call on a woman of no account in the world. She skipped up the stairs to her room, smiling all the way. Such an odd sort of man! And yet so very kind and understanding.

There was a pretty little davenport in her room, in walnut to match the dressing table — oh, the joy of an entire room of furniture which matched!

She settled down to compose the very awkward letter to Nick, but had not got further than chewing the end of her pen before a delicate knock on the door heralded the arrival of Mrs Fletcher.

“I just thought to look in and see if you are all right, dear,” she said tentatively.

Margarita knew perfectly well what she wanted, but she couldn't resist teasing her a little.

“Quite all right, thank you, ma'am.”

“Your meeting with Mr Hambledon was successful?”

“Very. He was very kind.”

“Yes, I see. There was... no difficulty? Nothing awkward about it? Because... the East India Company, you know. I thought they knew nothing of your existence.”

“Nothing awkward at all.” Margarita focused all her attention on mending her pen. There was nothing wrong with it, but it stopped her from laughing at Mrs Fletcher's artless questions.

“Oh. Well... that is a good thing. And... is there any outstanding business? I believe Mr Hambledon is to return tomorrow. Or so Keeble said, but he does sometimes get muddled.”

“He is to call tomorrow to collect a letter from me, that's all,” Margarita said, dipping her pen into the well and beginning to write.

“Ah. I see.” She paused, then, seeing that no further information was to be had, she added, “I shall leave you to your writing then.”

She'd reached the door before Margarita took pity on her. Without looking up from her writing, she said, “He's not from the East India Company.”

“Oh!” Mrs Fletcher stopped dead, and although Margarita was industriously bent over her letter, out of the corner of her eye she could see her dithering, torn between respecting Margarita's private business and her burning curiosity.

Laughing, Margarita wiped her pen and laid it down. “He's not even Mr

Hambledon. It's all a hum."

"Goodness! But he had a card."

"I imagine that's not hard to arrange. After all, he managed to send me a letter on East India Company paper. His name is Mr Willerton-Forbes and he came here to ask if I wanted him to pretend that the Company had made a dreadful mistake, and Nick was still alive."

Mrs Fletcher squeaked, her mouth open with shock. "But... but..."

"It's all right, I told him no."

"Oh, thank goodness! I should have been so cross if you had, because how else are you ever to marry Michael Plummer?"

Margarita shook her head sadly. "You are such a sweet lady, and I wish you were my mother... or my older sister, perhaps, since you're not old enough to be my mother, and I'm not sorry you've turned me into a widow again, but I wish you'd give up this idea of me marrying Michael. It will never happen."

"We shall see," was all Mrs Fletcher said with an eloquent smile.

But Margarita knew better. Once the news of her birth was revealed, she would be shunned by all good society, including Michael.

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Three days was all it took for the news to be broadcast. It was church that sealed Margarita's fate, for even though she stood aside by the yew, as before, Michael found her there and this time it was not a few words of polite enquiry. This time he stood beside her for many minutes, and after the usual greetings, his voice became low and intimate.

"Mrs Brookes, I am glad to have this opportunity to talk to you, for you are never alone these days when I call, and naturally you will not be out visiting much just now. Such a dreadful time for you, and I would not for the world add to your distress, but there is something I must say to you..."

"Mr Plummer, I don't think—"

"No, pray let me say this, just once, because you may be considering your future at the moment... you may be forming plans... and I should not

wish you to be in any doubt. Before you make any irrevocable decisions, know that you are very much in my thoughts, and I hope... I very much hope that you will be a part of my life in time. Oh, not yet! It is far too soon, and I will not press you, not for the world, but perhaps at some point in the future..."

"Mr Plummer, it is impossible, quite impossible. You must not think along these lines."

"It is too soon, I know that, but—"

"No, it isn't that. There are... family reasons why you must not think this way."

He frowned. "Family reasons? *Your* family? And are these reasons insuperable?"

"I believe they are. You must not pursue this path, sir."

Michael nodded. "I shall say no more today. Perhaps in time you may feel able to confide in me, so that I may understand the nature of these family reasons, but that is for you to decide. I beg your pardon if I have offended you."

"No, no," she murmured, for she could feel tears threatening, and already curious glances were being cast their way.

"We shall meet again very often, I hope," he said, with a little smile that made her heart turn over in anguish. How she longed to return that smile and say that she received his assurances with pleasure, but there was only pain, pain and grief.

Then, to her dismay, he raised her gloved hand to his lips and kissed it firmly with an expression there was no mistaking, as good as declaring himself there in the churchyard in front of everyone. No one spoke of it, then or later, but that kiss burned into her hand like fire. It was her doom, she knew it.

She had not long to wait.

Mr Kelshaw arrived while the Fletchers were all still at breakfast the following day to give them the shocking news — Amelia had informed them that Margarita was not the daughter of a clergyman at all.

“It makes no difference to me, or to most people, I imagine,” Mr Kelshaw said, “but my wife is a daughter of the Earl of Pinner, and naturally she is sensitive to these distinctions. I am afraid the invitation to dine with us on Thursday will now be withdrawn, Mrs Brookes.”

“I understand,” Margarita said. And she did, of course she did. She had expected it.

“I am so very sorry,” he said. “And I am afraid that Lady Frederica is set upon informing all her acquaintances of the situation.”

Margarita bowed her head. This, then, was the end.

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James and Julia had come to call, and Michael and the rest of the Plummer family had gathered in the parlour to admire Julia’s burgeoning promise of a future heir. Father never missed an opportunity to see Julia, his fondness clear to see, a contrast to Mother’s calm demeanour. It was strange to see Mother sitting alone on her usual sofa, without Letitia by her side. The two had been inseparable for so many years, yet Mother was quite composed. She was always composed, regally serene, as befitted a baronet’s wife. As Margarita was, appropriately enough. She would make a splendid Lady Plummer, when her time came.

Michael never minded seeing James and Julia, separately or together. Their easy-going nature always made him feel inadequate, but he liked to see their open affection for each other. The little looks they exchanged, the way James would touch Julia’s hand now and then, as if he could not bear to be disconnected from her for long, and the air of blissful satisfaction they exuded — all of this Michael understood and hoped, one day, would be his, too.

The door opened and Jefford came in. “The Lady Frederica Kelshaw and Miss Greaves, madam.”

That was curious, that Lady Frederica would call with Amelia, but not Veronica and Victoria. And the expressions on their faces... anxiety on Lady Frederica, but barely suppressed triumph on Amelia’s. Michael felt a frisson of alarm. Something bad was coming. And Lady Frederica’s greeting was hasty, barely polite.



“I am glad that Michael is here, for what I have to say concerns him most nearly, I believe,” she began.

Yes, it was something very bad. Michael braced himself.

“Amelia has told me something of a very grave nature,” Lady Frederica went on. “It concerns Mrs Brookes, as I am sure you will have guessed. Naturally, one would not repeat such information, as a general rule, but in this particular case, I fear that the shocking truth must be exposed before... well, one would not wish it to be discovered later.”

“You are very mysterious, Lady Frederica,” Sir Owen said tersely. “Pray tell us this information at once, if you feel it to be necessary.”

“Very well,” she said, rather huffily. “It is this — Mrs Brookes, as she calls herself, is not the daughter of a clergyman, as she has allowed the world to believe. She is the daughter of nobody — a natural child of unknown parentage.”

Michael almost laughed. Was this it? This was the information of a very grave nature? He had supposed it would be such as to raise an insuperable barrier between them, but this... it was nothing!

It was not nothing to others. Mother gasped and clutched the arm of the sofa, her gaze falling on Michael. “Then she has deceived us! But thank goodness you were able to alert us to this dreadful news before... well, before an irrevocable step was taken. Such a timely intervention, for Michael’s sake.”

“That is as we thought,” Lady Frederica said, almost purring in satisfaction. “We wished you to know at once. Amelia’s delicate sense of propriety kept her from mentioning it before, but now... we agreed it must be done.”

“And I thank you for your thoughtfulness,” Mother said. “Michael, this has spared you a most imprudent match, which I am sure you have been contemplating. Are you not deeply grateful to Lady Frederica and Miss Greaves?”

“Everything about Mrs Brookes is of interest to me, so certainly I am grateful for this information,” Michael said politely.

Mother nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes, and you must see now that the alliance, if you are indeed so careless of the family's honour as to consider it, cannot proceed, not with a base-born woman."

"Why do you imagine that matters to me?" Michael said with dignity. "I care nothing for Mrs Brookes' ancestry. She is above such trivial considerations, so wonderful a person as she is. She is a shining star of all that is good and warm-hearted and generous and beautiful."

"Do not speak of her in such terms!" his mother cried, clutching her hand to her breast.

"Must I not? But I speak only the truth. Mrs Brookes is not her father, she is her own glorious self. She has been in my heart since the first moment I saw her and will never be dislodged. After all, it is a family tradition to fall in love instantly. It happened to Father, and then to James, and it happened to me, too."

"You *cannot* love a woman of such degenerate heritage," Mother moaned. "Will you take no notice of the wishes and feelings of your parents? Are we to be entirely disregarded?"

"No, indeed. That would be undutiful of any son," Michael said calmly. How calm he was! Margarita's influence cast a mantle over him even here in his own home, even when he stood in direct conflict with his parents. "I shall always listen to your advice, but in the end, I must live my life as I see fit. No man should ever live entirely to please his parents, however wise and good they may be. I have felt myself to be worthless and inadequate for many years, as if life is too difficult. Mrs Brookes — Margarita — makes it easy for me to be the man I ought to be. I cannot give her up, no matter how much it grieves you."

"You are determined to marry her, then?" Mother said.

"If she will have me, yes. And now, if you will all forgive me, I have business to attend to. Lady Frederica, your servant. Miss Greaves."

James held the door for him as he left, murmuring, "Bravo, brother. Good luck," as he passed through it.

Michael walked serenely to Chadwell Park, entering through the west

gate and passing with a smile the bench where he had sat with Margarita just two weeks ago. There was a chill dampness in the air, but it affected him not one jot, for he was going to see Margarita and the thought warmed him.

The Fletchers were still in the breakfast parlour, their meal abandoned, all in earnest conversation with Mr Kelshaw.

“Oh, Mr Plummer, how good of you to come!” Mrs Fletcher cried. “Mrs Brookes will be very happy that you have come, I am sure.”

“She is not here?”

“No, not at present. In her bedroom, I expect. Rosie, dear, will you run up and look?”

“Miss Fletcher, will you ask her if she would honour me with a few minutes of her time?” Michael said. “If she does not wish to see me, I shall write her a note, but pray tell her I come as a friend.”

“Of course.” She smiled at him as she passed by on light feet and left the room.

The others gazed at him, but he could not read their faces. Was it sympathy or embarrassment?

“Well, Michael, this is a bad business,” Kelshaw said. “Amelia Greaves is a tiresome chit, but one cannot ignore this. One could only wish she had spoken earlier.”

“Is it true, then?” Michael said.

“I’m afraid it is,” Mr Fletcher said. “The lady herself confirmed it. Not that it makes the slightest bit of difference to *us*. I’ve a natural son myself, so I see no need to make a song and dance of it. But not everyone sees it that way.”

“Of course it makes a difference!” Kelshaw snapped. “How many of your acquaintances will be willing to dine here if they have to share a table with Mrs Brookes? My own wife will not do so.”

“Then we’ll be sorry to miss her company,” Fletcher said, lifting his chin. “I judge people as I find them, Kelshaw, by their actions and their characters, not by who their father was. It’s served me well all these years.”

Kelshaw reddened slightly, but he was saved from having to reply by Rosie returning.

“Mrs Brookes will see you, Mr Plummer. You will find her in the gallery.”

Michael smiled. She would see him! And he would see her, and the day was incomparably brighter suddenly. He turned for the door.

## 29: Friends And Relations

Margarita had withdrawn from the breakfast parlour as soon as she decently could. She had intended to shut herself away in her bedroom — her lovely, elegant bedroom with its wonderful view and abundant coal and candles — but Polly and another maid were chattering away in there as they made the bed and tidied, so she slipped into the gallery instead.

There at the far end, unable to escape further, she sat on the floor and buried her face in her knees. She didn't cry. The situation was too dire for tears. Not only would Michael turn away from her now, but no doubt the Fletchers would withdraw the hand of friendship, too. It had always seemed an unlikely association, a woman of no account and the wealthy and rising Fletcher family, and now it was over. They would not toss her out immediately, but in a week or two the managing Mrs Fletcher would come to her with a proposal — a position as a companion, or a governess, perhaps. No, not a governess, she wasn't qualified for that. But some position far away, and an offer to write a glowing reference. Then she would pack her bags and...

She would not think of that. It was enough to enjoy the luxury of Chadwell Park while it was available to her, and when she had to move on—

A tiny cough told her she was not alone. Rosie Fletcher gazed anxiously at her. “Mr Michael Plummer is here. He begs the favour of a few minutes of your time, but if you prefer not to see him, he will write you a note instead.”

Margarita's heart turned over. Prefer not to see him...! Of course she wanted to see him, but... could she do it? Was he not lost to her?

But clear as if she were there in the room with her, she heard Mrs Fletcher's words. *‘You have to meet him halfway, and not meekly wait for him to find a way past the defensive wall you have built around yourself.’*

“I will see him.”

And then she waited. What would he say? That all was at an end? But she knew that, so why—?

He crept in, treading softly, but she could not be unaware of him.

“Mrs Brookes? Forgive me for intruding upon your grief.”

She could not speak, for her heart was too full and her nerves too much on edge to say a word.

He came a step or two closer. “It makes no difference. Your father — it makes no difference at all.”

Her head came up sharply. Such innocence! “Of course it makes a difference!”

“Not to me,” he said sharply. “You are still my Margarita, just as you always were.”

And that was what broke her, utterly and finally. *My Margarita...* Oh, if only she were! If only it were possible! With her entire body, heart and mind and soul, she yearned to be *his* Margarita, for the long, long nightmare of grief and loneliness to be over at last. Yet he was further out of reach than ever.

She buried her face in her skirts and wept for all that might have been, for all that would never, ever be. Her sobs filled the little gallery, yet she couldn't stop, all the sorrows of the last two years pouring out of her unstoppably, her skirts damp with her tears. She was aware of him moving down the gallery, his steps soft but unmistakable. Then a shuffling sound as he sat down, but after that there was only her own weeping.

When her tears slowed a little, he said quietly, “Margarita.”

It was not a question, nor an exclamation, more a gentle reminder that he was there. She raised her head a little to see him sitting cross-legged on the floor, leaning against the opposite wall. The gallery was not wide, so he was no more than a few feet away. If they had both stretched out a hand, their fingers might just have touched.

He made no effort to touch her, simply watching her, sympathy written on his face. “I hate to see you cry,” he said. “I wish I could comfort you... hold you... but I dare not. One day, perhaps, if I am very fortunate... but let me say nothing of that. It is too soon to speak in such terms. Your grief must run its course. If it helps, know that I am your friend, always. You may command me as you will, and I will never hurt you. I ask nothing more from

you than you are willing to give, if you will only allow me to be near you.”

So difficult to speak! Her throat was tight, as unshed tears threatened to choke her. Yet she *had* to speak. She could not allow the lies and half-truths and misunderstandings to stand between them any longer. But how to form the words? And what did *he* want? She suspected, but she couldn't be sure...

“No,” she croaked, her voice hoarse from weeping.

His face was awash with sudden fear. “You do not want me near you?” His voice was high with panic.

“Not too soon,” she said. “Not grieving.”

It was all she could manage, but it was enough. His face was alight with joy, and in his excitement he pushed himself halfway across the floor. So near! Now she could reach him.

Her hand rose as if to stroke his cheek, then hovered uncertainly. With a quick laugh, he took hold of it and pressed her fingers to his lips. “Margarita. My dearest love...”

“Truly?” she whispered. “You love me? This is not... obligation?”

“*Obligation?* Oh, my darling, I love you so much I hardly have the words. You are *everything* to me, my darling.” He shifted nearer still, touching her damp cheeks with one finger. “You must not cry, my love. One day, when you have mourned your husband enough, the tears will stop, and you must never cry again, not from unhappiness. You may shed a few tears on our wedding day, if you must. You may cry when you hold our firstborn in your arms, or when he takes his first steps. You may cry when our eldest daughter dances at her first ball. I will permit that, but not for any other reason.”

That made her cry all over again, even as she smiled, so he took her in his arms and held her tight until the tears subsided once more and she could talk. And talk she did, telling him everything about her supposed marriage, and all that had come of it.

“So you were never married to Mr Brookes?” he said eventually, sounding bewildered.

“I never even met him. He'd already gone to London when I reached

Jane in Harrogate. It was her idea, since I had a child to explain away, but Nick agreed to it. We none of us considered how we'd escape our unwanted marriage in the end, so it's just as well Mrs Fletcher extricated us."

"Then... he is alive still? And you are not in mourning?"

"I'm not, although I shall have to stay in black for a while yet."

"Unless you marry again," Michael said softly. "No one would expect it then."

She turned her head to look him full in the face. "So quickly? When I've only just been widowed?"

"If a man dies in India, especially in the interior, it can take weeks for word to reach the authorities and then months more for an official notification to reach England. Your husband, if he had been so, could have died almost a year ago."

"Oh. But... no one will see it that way. Society will be outraged."

"Society will be outraged anyway, but what is that to us? Margarita, you are the shining light of my life. Will you make me the happiest man on earth for the rest of my days and be my cherished and much beloved wife?"

"Michael, are you sure about this? Do you really want to marry a base-born woman?"

"Dearest Margarita, you are the same wonderful person, whoever your father was. Marry me, and you will see how little your parentage matters to me. Will you? Please?"

"Of course I will. How can I possibly refuse you, Michael? Do you remember that day at Hadlow, when we first met?"

"As if I could ever forget. You wore a dark blue gown, high to the neck, with little frills round your throat and wrists, and I thought I had never seen anyone so lovely."

"And you wore a brown greatcoat and a wide-brimmed hat, which you swept off and made such an elegant bow to Amelia."

"And then I saw you," he said.

"But I'd already seen you. That was when I fell in love with you,



Michael, with that anxious little smile of yours, and your brow slightly furrowed, as if life were a bit of a challenge to you. I wanted to kiss those lines away and make you smile properly.”

“You could do that now, if you wish,” he whispered.

“There are no lines any more,” she said, one finger tracing the place where they used to be. “And your smile isn’t anxious now.”

“You could kiss me anyway,” he said with a hopeful expression.

How could she resist? Slowly, inch by inch, she leaned towards him. He closed his eyes and waited patiently as she delicately patted little kisses all over his face — his forehead, his cheeks, his nose, even his chin, which made him laugh. Then, with great precision, she brought her lips to his.

It was like returning home at the end of a long, dreary day, of entering a place of light and warmth, safely cocooned against the world. The sweetness, the absolute rightness of being held in his arms, kissing him, being kissed, never wanting it to end. He must have felt the same, for he made no move to pull away from her. Sometimes they shifted a little, heads tilting first one way, then the other, but after each brief adjustment, they surrendered to the wonder of being together at last. Only when a clock struck the hour nearby, making them jump, did they finally part, laughing, although his arms were still tight around her, as if he never wanted to let go.

There were no words. They had said all that needed to be said and had gone far beyond mere words. Now they could speak in the language of lovers, with their eyes, with blushing cheeks and joyful smiles, with the touch of hands and the enchantment of lips, with little sighs and bubbling laughter and the radiance of their countenances.

Margarita saw all her own happiness reflected in Michael’s expression. And one day soon, not too far distant, she hoped, they would be together like this for ever. The prospect was blissful.

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Michael told his father everything, not excluding his own behaviour on that ‘magical night’, and the consequences thereafter.

“Father, I cannot expect you to tolerate this breach in the principles you

expect of me. I have failed you, just as I failed Margarita, but our marriage will at least set right some of the wrong I have done her. I should like to marry as soon as it may be arranged, so that we can set this whole sorry episode behind us and begin afresh, but she feels that there must be a decent interval. What is your opinion?"

They sat in Sir Owen's large book room, in Michael's view the finest room in the Manor. It had not the size or grandeur of the library or the great hall, but it was elegantly appointed, the furniture heavy and solidly masculine, while the high ceilings allowed the display of a number of large paintings which had been in storage ever since the move from the Park. Now that Letitia and Lord Charles were settled in Warwickshire, the room had been reclaimed for Sir Owen's use, and he and Michael sat in matching chairs, one on either side of the marble fireplace.

"I agree it would be best to have the business settled sooner rather than later."

Michael's eyebrows rose at this unexpected response. "Truly? So you think we should call the banns at once?"

"No, I think you should get a bishop's licence and get married as soon as possible. Letitia refurbished her rooms only five years ago, at vast expense, so you and Margarita could move in straight away."

"Good heavens, Father," Michael said, laughing, "I thought you would disinherit me, or banish me, at the very least. Is there not some far-flung county where you have a house of some sort, suitable for the exile of a reprobate son?"

"Are you thinking of the Leicestershire hunting lodge? That was almost the first thing to go after your grandfather's death. I will not banish or disinherit you."

"That is a disappointment. I thought I might have my chickens at last."

Sir Owen gave a bark of laughter. "I like this new Michael, always smiling and jesting. I am very sorry to disappoint you, but I shall be very glad to have you settled at the Manor, and raising your children here. They will brighten my remaining years, however many are allotted to me. The greatest disadvantage of a marriage to Miss Greaves was always that you would be

settled so far away, although I believe you had a fortunate escape there. Your instincts were better than mine in that regard. You never quite took to her, and now we see her for the vicious snake in the grass that she is. There was no need at all to tell tales about Margarita's heritage. Such disloyalty is despicable. You have done far better, Michael."

"Is that truly your opinion? Obviously, it is mine also, but I should be glad to know that you approve of Margarita."

"I do indeed approve of her. Look at all the trials that have been thrown at her. A very difficult childhood, even if she knew nothing of her origins then, and early marriage to a man who showed her no affection, and then — Michael, I was at Hadlow two years ago, and I saw the affection you felt for each other. Given the terms on which you parted and her friendless, impoverished state, it must have taken extraordinary strength of character to walk away that night, and then not to go back when she discovered her condition. There is a dignity about her, a composure, that makes her a true gentlewoman, despite her antecedents. I do not think you could have done better for yourself, and it is clear to me that Margarita will make a fine Lady Plummer whenever you step into my shoes."

"Those shoes will be very hard to fill, Father."

"You will do admirably, my son. When I see you now, standing up to me and to your mother, fighting for the woman of your heart, and holding steadfastly to your chosen path, I no longer have any fears for you. You have become a fine gentleman, Michael, and I salute you."

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Margarita was astonished to learn that she was to be married within a week. Michael posted off to London to obtain a licence and talk to the lawyers, Sir Owen showed her around the beautifully appointed suite of rooms that she would share with Michael, and the Fletcher ladies threw themselves into the business of dressing a bride in a great hurry. Needles flew with unprecedented speed at the Park, for within a few days she and Polly were driven to the Manor, a large box strapped behind, to unpack her newly extended wardrobe.

They were engaged on this agreeable task, together with Mrs Howard,

the housekeeper, and Alice, the maid who was to look after Margarita after her marriage, when Jefford knocked on the door.

“Begging your pardon, Mrs Brookes, but there is a Lord Petherton to see you.”

“Lord Petherton? I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“There is another man with him, a Captain Edgerton. Perhaps you know him?”

“No, never heard of him. What do these people want?”

“His lordship didn’t say, and I didn’t like to press him, with him being an earl. The master and mistress are entertaining them in the parlour.”

Margarita smoothed her skirts and tugged at her sleeves, wishing she’d put on one of her better ones, but she’d only come to unpack clothes, not to meet an earl.

He was a pleasant-featured man of around forty-five, with a merry smile that Margarita liked instantly. Lady Plummer clearly responded to his charm, too, for she was leaning towards him, laughing, in a light-hearted manner that Margarita had never seen from her before. The laughter faded as she saw Margarita enter the room, and her expression settled into its usual resigned composure.

“Lord Petherton, this is Mrs Brookes.”

She had barely risen from her curtsy before he had crossed the room with quick steps and lifted her hand to his lips. “My dear... but you are so like your mother!”

This was so unexpected that Margarita gasped. “You knew her... my mother?”

“Why, certainly. Lady Plummer, my wife awaits me in the carriage outside. Might I bring her in? She would be so happy to meet Mrs Brookes.”

“Of course. Allow me to extend the invitation to Lady Petherton personally.” She jumped up and sped from the room. If there was anything better for Lady Plummer than a noble personage in her home, it was two noble personages.

“Mrs Brookes, may I present to you Captain Edgerton, formerly of the East India Company Army? He is responsible for bringing us here today.”

He indicated a small man, rather flamboyantly dressed and incongruously wearing a sword, who made her an expansive bow.

“Is this, then, something to do with Mr Brookes?” Margarita said uncertainly. She had had enough surprises purporting to be from the East India Company, and she wanted no more. Her mind skipped over the possibilities, the worst of which was the appearance of Nick himself.

But her fears were allayed immediately by the earl. “Our interest is entirely with you, my dear. I ask only that you wait until Lady Petherton is with us.”

This was mysterious enough, but fortunately, there was not long to wait for the answer. As soon as Lady Petherton entered the room, Margarita cried out in amazement. There before her were her own green eyes, perhaps a shade more vivid but the shape, the lashes, the brows exactly as she saw in her own mirror. The heart-shaped face, the mouth and the hair... her own auburn hair, although showing some grey, peeped out from beneath a very stylish bonnet.

Lady Petherton cried out too and tears sprang to her eyes. “Oh, my dear child, we have found you at last!”

“Mother?” Margarita said, although she could scarcely believe it.

“Yes! And Charles here is your father.”

“My father is an earl? But... I thought my mother was a dairymaid.”

The earl and countess burst out laughing. “Is *that* what you were told?” she said. “Well, I suppose there is some truth in it. My father managed the home farm for Petherton Priory, and I *did* milk the cows sometimes. Heavens, I wish I *had* been a dairymaid, and Charles something less exalted than heir to an earldom, for then we might never have been separated. But let us sit, and we can tell you the whole story.”

It was a common enough tale — a boy and girl in love, but he was of high rank and she was, if not quite a dairymaid, not much above that level. His father had refused to countenance a marriage, and forcibly separated

them. The girl was sent to a distant cousin, a rural parson, to have her child and thence to relations elsewhere, and her father was too terrified of his overlord to protest. As soon as the earl came into his high estate, he set out to find his love, bring her back home and marry her.

“We’ve been wed these fifteen years now,” the countess said, looking fondly at her husband. “We were both pressed hard to marry elsewhere, but I’m so thankful we resisted.”

It was Sir Owen who asked the obvious question. “And you have other children now, since you married?”

“We have five, two boys and three girls, fine healthy children,” the earl said proudly. “It would bring us great joy to introduce their sister to them. Will you perhaps visit us, Mrs Brookes? Oh, but we cannot keep calling you Mrs Brookes. What is your Christian name?”

“Margarita.”

The countess exclaimed in delight. “It is my name, too, although everyone calls me Margot. I embroidered my name on a shawl for you when I had to leave you behind. I am so glad the parson chose to bestow it on you. Oh, this is such a happy day! They told me you had died, my dear, so we never tried to find you. I am so grateful to Captain Edgerton for seeking us out on your behalf.”

“Did he? Oh, you are Mr Willerton-Forbes’ friend, the one he said enjoys solving mysteries.”

“And so I do,” the captain said, with a small bow. “Although it has to be said that my ingenuity was not tested to any great extent in this case. I went to the parsonage where you were left, and the housekeeper remembered you very well. She had merely been a kitchen maid when you arrived, but she had helped to look after you when you were a baby, and so she kept the shawl as a remembrance. She showed it to me, embroidered with the name ‘*Margarita Shepley*’. She knew of a family by that name some thirty miles away, so I went there and asked after dairymaids who might have left their employment abruptly some twenty-five years ago, where my enquiries came to his lordship’s ears.”

“You may imagine our delight to hear of you after all these years,” Lord

Petherton said. “Our eldest child, whom we thought lost to us, and here you are, the very image of your dear mother. But there is so much we want to ask you. We want to know all about you. Will you come and stay with us? You will be more than welcome.”

Then she had to explain about Michael and her imminent wedding, but they took that in their stride, asking no awkward questions about why a widow still in black was rushing into matrimony again, but asking very humbly if they might attend the wedding, since they had such a close interest in the bride.

“That would be such a privilege, would it not, Margarita?” gushed Lady Plummer. “We would be delighted to accommodate you here, for there is no suitable inn nearer than Ware. And how convenient that you have been reunited just at this time, for now you will be able to give your daughter’s hand in marriage, Lord Petherton.”

“No, indeed, I have no right to claim such a privilege,” he said at once. “I am a stranger to Margarita, and it would be abhorrent in me to push my way into her life in such a forward manner. I shall be very happy to watch, however.”

“But if I were to ask you — would you give me away, my lord? Since you are in truth my father, I... I should like it very much. My first wedding was a dull, scrambled affair, and I’d so like this one to be better, for Michael’s sake.”

“My dear daughter, it would be the honour of my life. I thought I would have to wait for Elizabeth to grow up to have such a pleasure, and she is but thirteen and will not need my services at the altar for some years yet. It will be very fitting to give my eldest daughter in marriage, just as I will the younger girls when their turn comes.”

The visit devolved into a flurry of bustle as rooms were prepared, orders for dinner given, notes sent to the rectory and the Park informing them of events, and in the midst of all, Michael returned from London with the licence in his pocket, and everything had to be explained all over again.

Margarita couldn’t honestly say whether she enjoyed those strange days or not. So much had happened, and at such speed, that she couldn’t take it in.

She had bounced so fast from misery to the happiness of Michael's love that she was dizzy, and now came the unexpected joy of finding not just her father, but her mother too, whom she'd long thought dead. She had brothers and sisters — a family! She had noble blood in her veins, if unconventionally acquired, and even Lady Plummer now smiled approvingly at her, and called her '*dear Margarita*'. Lady Frederica Kelshaw, so insistent that she could not be acquainted with an illegitimate person, found that she could make an exception for the acknowledged daughter of an earl, calling to congratulate Margarita and sending a wedding present. Even Amelia deigned to be polite to her.

Astonishingly, Margarita had a settlement of fifteen thousand pounds from her father. "I must do the same for all my daughters," he'd said, and she hadn't protested. She made no fuss about any of it, simply drifting through the unreality of it all.

Her wedding day was just another dreamlike experience, her mind too overwhelmed to take it in. Afterwards, only one memory stood out from the rest, that of Mrs Fletcher smiling at them as they walked down the aisle, man and wife. Outside, as they sheltered under the lychgate awaiting the carriage, she saw Mrs Fletcher nearby, and impulsively went to her and hugged her tight.

"Thank you for everything," she murmured.

Mrs Fletcher only smiled, patted her arm and said, "My pleasure, Mrs Plummer."

And Margarita started at the name, then laughed for sheer joy. Mrs Plummer! It was almost impossible to believe.

"Is this real?" she whispered to Michael after the service, as the carriage splashed through the rain towards the Manor.

"*This* is real," he murmured, pulling her into his arms and kissing her with ardent thoroughness.

Somehow, that steadied her more than anything else. Whatever the future held for them, however wonderful or difficult life might be, she would always have Michael by her side.



“Michael Plummer, I love you with all my heart.”

He pulled away from her a little to gaze into her eyes. “We have both been tested with great trials, have we not?” he said quietly. “And yet we have come through them, not entirely unscathed, but stronger and more determined to be true to ourselves. We are united now, and free to make of our life whatever we will. I am entirely yours, Margarita, as I have been since the first moment I saw you, and now you are mine, too. I promise you I shall never let you go again, my dear love.”

As he held her tight and gently pressed kisses over every part of her face, she wept tears of joy for Michael and for herself and for their joyful future together.

# Epilogue

HARLINGTON TERRACE, SAGBOROUGH, THE WEST RIDING OF  
YORKSHIRE

MARCH

Harry Fletcher gazed at his reflection in the cheval mirror with a frown.

“It’s no good, Lizzie love,” he said to his wife, who was waiting patiently for him by the door of his dressing room, “that French fellow in the kitchen will have to go. I’ve only had this waistcoat for six months, and it’s already getting tight. Too many rich sauces, if you ask me.”

“No one forces you to eat them, Harry,” she said, laughing. “Are you nearly ready? It would be shocking for the bride to be kept waiting by her own father.”

“It would be even more shocking for the bride’s father to pop his waistcoat buttons at the altar rail. Have I time to change it?”

“No. You look very fine, Harry, as you well know. I will tell Keeble to keep the richest dishes at the far end of the table in future, but do come on. Rosie went down ten minutes ago. Even Angie is ready.”

“Pity Julia isn’t here. She’s always late. Mind you, that babe was in a bit of a hurry, wasn’t he? Three weeks early! People will be bound to talk. Yes, yes, I’m ready. Let’s get ourselves to church, shall we?”

It was but a short step from Harlington Terrace to the church of St Luke’s, and the weather crisp and clear enough for the entire bridal party to walk. A little cluster of neighbours waited outside the house to admire the blushing bride and cheer her on her way, the crowd growing by degrees as she made her way down the main road on Harry’s arm. Then into the church, which was already almost as full as it could hold. All of Sagborough, it seemed, had come to see the girl who had almost married a viscount instead plight her troth to a humble apothecary. And Sagborough approved, for everywhere there were smiles of delight at the return of one of their own to her rightful place in the world.

Harry watched his daughter carefully as James began the service. Rosie

was the most enigmatic of his children, her every emotion hidden behind a calm face, and throughout the last year, when she had been courted and admired and fêted as if she were royalty, he'd had no idea whether she was happy or unhappy, revelling in the attention or wishing she could curl up into a ball like a hedgehog.

Now he saw something new in her. As she looked into Ricky's face, speaking her vows with quiet sureness, there was such joy written there that Harry was entirely satisfied. No doubt she would have been contented enough with Lord Albury, for Rosie was not one to repine, but her heart had always been Ricky's and now they would walk through life side by side, and be utterly, blissfully happy.

As he was, he decided, reaching for Lizzie's hand and giving it a little squeeze.

"Richard *Thackeray*?" she whispered. "Did you know that was his name?"

He shook his head. "Never heard him called anything but Ricky," he whispered back. "Might have guessed Richard, but Thackeray...!" He pulled a face, and she giggled, then put a hand over her mouth, dropping her prayer book in the process. Will reached down and picked it up for her with a little smile that suggested he was trying not to laugh, too.

As they left the church, Harry noticed a familiar face on the strangers' benches.

"Sir Con? What brings you to our little town? I needn't ask, I suppose."

He laughed, quite at his ease. "I came to see Miss Fletcher married, sir, but if I had another motive, I am sure you will forgive me. I am not so far from you now that I am settled at Mountsea."

"It's still a fair step from County Durham, I'd have thought, but we're very pleased to see you — all of us, and not just Bella. Come on back to the house for a bit of wedding breakfast."

They walked in a long, straggling train back to Harlington Terrace, where the much reviled French man-cook had prepared a wedding breakfast of such unsurpassed wonder that even the chattering tongues of the Fletchers

and their closest friends could not do more than utter little noises of delight.

“He is an excellent cook, you must agree,” Lizzie murmured to Harry.

“Aye, I suppose he is. These little pastries are quite tasty, I’ll give him that, except they’re so small you need half a dozen at a time. Otherwise, they just slip down before you have time to chew them.”

Their appetites sated, some of the neighbours began to drift away and eventually only the Fletchers and a few Jupps were left, a big, noisy group filling the drawing room with excited chatter, the ale and wine and brandy still flowing freely, the children running round squealing and Rosie’s little dog in the mêlée, barking wildly.

Harry sat on the window seat where he could see them all, his three sons and four of his five daughters, only Julia left behind in Hertfordshire with her new babe. Eloise had brought a sketch of the happy mother and her son, so that was propped up on the mantelpiece for all to admire.

Johnny’s wife, Lady Jemma, had brought miniatures of her two sons, and they had been passed from hand to hand, every feature of their little faces pored over and commented upon. She, too, was expecting an interesting event in the summer, and the bloom on her cheeks and constant smiles left no doubt of her happiness in her marriage. She was never far from Johnny’s side.

“It’s good to have everyone together,” Harry said with satisfaction. “Well, except Julia, of course, but that just means nothing will get broken or spilt. Poor Julia! Eloise says she’s terrified of dropping the babe, but she’ll get used to him. They’re so tiny when they’re new, but they’re not as fragile as all that.”

“Did you hold your own babies much?” Lizzie said, putting down her glass of champagne and wrapping one arm around his. “I cannot quite imagine you dealing with a squalling infant.”

“I used to like cuddling them, and I plan on cuddling yours, Mrs Fletcher, so don’t think you can keep him all to yourself.”

“Him? Do you want another boy?” she said.

“I’m not bothered either way. As long as it’s healthy, that’s what

matters. After all, I've got three sons already."

"I like the way you always include Ted. You never made any distinction between the illegitimate son and the legitimate children."

"Ted's special," Harry said fiercely. "Not just because he was my first, but because he's Hannah's. He's all I have left of her now, and it's not much, because he's not very like her in looks or in ways, but he's still special to me. I loved Hannah *passionately*, Lizzie, and there's no feeling on earth as desperate as young love that's not allowed to have its head. That's why I was relieved when Rosie shied away from Lord Albury at the last, because she'd always have had that yearning for Ricky tucked away deep inside."

"Was it like that for you?" Lizzie said. "When you were forced to marry Edith, did you have that yearning for Hannah?"

"A little, yes. Oh, I was contented enough with Edith. We got along well enough and she never gave me any grief, but you know, when she was first increasing, I used to think, '*What if she died? What would I do if Edith died?*' I never wanted her to, I never wanted the least harm to come to her, but I used to wonder. Because then I could have married Hannah and it would have felt right, somehow. But in the end it was Hannah who died, and perhaps that was as well for my peace of mind, but I never forgot her, and I never loved any woman half so well until you came along."

She sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. "Ah, Harry, I am so lucky. I thought you might be cross with me, after all the trouble I have caused you. And the expense! Chadwell Park, Grosvenor Square, Orchard House, our time in Bath and now here — so much money spent. Are you quite in the basket?"

He chuckled. "I can afford it, never fear. The houses are investments, and I've been working with Kelshaw on a few other things that are looking quite handy for the future. Water closets and gas lighting and such like. Mind you, the girls' dowries will make a bit of a dent in my capital. So many weddings! Julia, Will and Johnny last year, Rosie and Angie this year, and even Bella seems to be settled. I like young Sir Con. He'll do very well for her. I never thought she'd marry at all, to be honest, what with that business about Dorothea, but that all seems to be over and she's growing up to be just

as fine a young lady as her sisters.”

“And do you realise why her imaginary friend Dorothea disappeared? It happened almost precisely at the time Sir Con arrived and started paying attention to Bella. I think perhaps we will take her with us to London this spring so that she can get a feel for the society there before she formally comes out.”

“And I dare say Sir Con will find a reason to be there as well.”

“I dare say he will,” she said complacently. “Very likely he will come to Chadwell in the summer, too. It would be an excellent match for her. One would not like to throw any rub in the way.”

“Are you matchmaking, Lizzie love?”

“No, merely allowing them to make their own match, as they all have. Whatever ambitions I might have had for them, they chose for themselves. Except Johnny,” she added, her face darkening.

“That still bothers you, doesn’t it?” Harry said.

“Of course it does! It was unconscionable what happened — *forcing* them to marry in that horrid way, when they had done nothing at all wrong, and it makes no difference that they are billing and cooing like turtle doves *now*, because they were dragged to the altar against their will. Lord and Lady Faulkbourne have a lot to answer for, and I am exceedingly glad that we are no longer to be connected to them in any way. I like the Jupp family much better.”

Harry laughed. “Ah, Lizzie love, you’ve changed your tune a bit! You always thought the nobility were so much better than the rest of us.”

“Well, I thought they had a sense of honour, at least, but they can’t even muster an ounce of common decency. Rosie is well out of that family. It all ends for the best.”

“Except for Lord Albury,” Harry said thoughtfully. “That poor lad looked so lost. I wonder what will become of him?”

“He will marry a duke’s daughter who will think she has quite gone down in the world by becoming a viscountess, and have a dozen plain children,” Lizzie said at once. “And in time he will be an earl and very rich

and powerful, and will forget that he once almost married a mercer's daughter."

"Do you think so? I wonder. Well, whoever he marries, I hope he is even half as happy as I am now, and lives to see his dozen plain children all married and contented. Lizzie love, are those bairns of Ted's still eating plum cake? They'll be violently sick if they go on like that. Shall we go and rescue them?"

## THE END

That is the end of the Fletchers' stories, now that all the sons and daughters (and an aunt!) have been satisfactorily paired off, and the family has, we hope, found its new place in society.

But wait, I hear you say... what about Redmond, poor Lord Albury, who courted Rosie so patiently over the course of several books? Is he to be left broken-hearted? What will become of him? Don't worry, his story will be told – click [here](#) to find out more.

The next series will be very different! It opens with the murder of an earl's chaplain, and when Captain Edgerton and his friends investigate, they discover a dreadful secret. You can read a sneak preview after the acknowledgements.

# Thanks for reading!

If you have enjoyed reading this book, please consider writing a short review on Amazon. You can find out the latest news and sign up for the mailing list at my [website](#).

**Family trees:** Hi-res versions available [here](#).

**A note on historical accuracy:** I have endeavoured to stay true to the spirit of Regency times, and have avoided taking too many liberties or imposing modern sensibilities on my characters. The book is not one of historical record, but I've tried to make it reasonably accurate. However, I'm not perfect! If you spot a historical error, I'd very much appreciate knowing about it so that I can correct it and learn from it. Thank you!

**The great houses:** Most of the houses I describe in the books are creations of my imagination, or 'generic' styles of a particular era, but sometimes I base them on real houses. These are the principal houses of this series:

**Chadwell Park, Hertfordshire:** based on two separate designs from Vitruvius Britannicus and Georgian Architectural Designs.

**Chadwell Manor, Hertfordshire:** invented.

**Grosvenor Square, London:** based on several designs of real houses.

**Royal Crescent, Bath:** based on plan of no 20.

**Chaseley Court, Huntingdonshire:** based on Fountains Hall, near Ripon, Yorkshire, but I added a couple of wings and a gallery.

**Isn't that what's-his-name?** Regular readers will know that characters from previous books occasionally pop up, or are mentioned. The redoubtable Captain Edgerton and Mr Willerton-Forbes have been helping solve murders and other mysteries since *Lord Augustus*. The house in Harlington Terrace in Sagborough where the Fletchers moved for Rosie's wedding was the home of Ferdy Makenham in *The Seamstress*.

**About the series:** A family grown rich in the wool trade. The landed gentry they've displaced. And the gentle daughter whose beauty will open the door to an even greater prize - the nobility.

The Fletcher family is moving from Yorkshire to a mansion in the south of England. After generations in trade, can they escape their roots and be



admitted to the leisured world of the gentry?

Their new home is Chadwell Park, in Hertfordshire. **The Mercer's House.**

**Book 0: The Mercer:** the rich merchant and the poor widow. (*A novella, free to mailing list subscribers*).

**Book 1: A Winter Chase:** the wild daughter and the reluctant clergyman.

**Book 2: A Spring Dance:** the flirtatious son and the prim paid companion.

**Book 3: A Summer Game:** the mischievous daughter and the strait-laced gentleman.

**Book 4: A Michaelmas Truce:** the cross bachelor and the even crosser spinster.

**Book 5: An Autumn Courtship:** the intellectual son and the flighty widow.

**Book 6: A Christmas Betrothal:** the beautiful daughter, the unhappy son and the lost lover.

Any questions about the series? [Email me](#) - I'd love to hear from you!

## **About the author**

I write traditional Regency romances under the pen name Mary Kingswood, and epic fantasy as Pauline M Ross. I live in the beautiful Highlands of Scotland with my husband. I like chocolate, whisky, my Kindle, massed pipe bands, long leisurely lunches, chocolate, going places in my campervan, eating pizza in Italy, summer nights that never get dark, wood fires in winter, chocolate, the view from the study window looking out over the Moray Firth and the Black Isle to the mountains beyond. And chocolate. I dislike driving on motorways, cooking, shopping, hospitals.

# Acknowledgements

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Last, but definitely not least, my first reader: Amy Ross.

# **Sneak preview: Book 1 of The Chaplain's Legacy: Disinheritance: Chapter 1: Murder In The Night**

CORLAND CASTLE, IN THE NORTH RIDING OF YORKSHIRE

IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

JUNE

The screams echoed through the castle. Walter, Viscount Birtwell, dragged himself reluctantly from sleep, at first puzzled, then scrambling in alarm from his bed. Instantly he tripped over something, cursing roundly. Where was he, anyway? The principal guest room, of course, not his own room.

It was already light enough to see, although not yet full light. Perhaps four o'clock. Still the screams continued, high, piercing, terrified. What on earth was happening?

Without waiting to light a candle, he hauled open the heavy wooden door and stumbled out into the corridor above the stairs. Dark, but not impossible to see. One hand against the wall to guide him, he half ran towards the screams, tripping only once over a chair, and avoiding just in time a heavy marble topped table.

Aunt Alice's room... that was where the noise was. The door was closed, but there was no doubting that the screams emanated from behind it. In the distance, he heard voices approaching from the other direction... his father, he thought, and his brother, Kent. A light flickered far away down the corridor. Unlike Walter, they had waited to light a candle.

The screams stopped. Without hesitation, Walter pushed open the door and went inside.

What he saw within chilled his very bones. In the middle of the room, Aunt Alice stood in her nightshift, liberally drenched with blood. In one hand, she held an axe, blood still dripping from it. And on the large bed which dominated the room, a mound of torn sheets and blankets, and more blood — so much blood! A few feathers from a ripped pillow floated here and there. And from beneath the blood-drenched mound of bedding, one arm

dangled, motionless.

Uncle Arthur. And he was dead, very dead.

“Who is it?” Aunt Alice’s voice was high with alarm. Her eyes were turned towards Walter, but she could not see him, having been blind since a childhood illness.

“It is I, Aunt Alice.”

“Walter! What has happened here, Walter? What has happened to Arthur? Is this blood?”

She held up one red hand.

“It is blood. Where did the axe come from, Aunt?”

“Axe? Is that what it is? I found it on the floor. What has *happened*, Walter? Is Arthur...” Her voice broke on a sob.

Walter took two quick steps into the room, so that he could see the bed more clearly, but he had to avert his eyes hastily. It was too horrible for words.

“He is dead, Aunt.”

She uttered an unearthly wail, dropping the axe and falling to her knees, with a high, “No! No! No!” of despair.

Behind Walter, his father arrived with Kent. The Earl of Rennington was fifty-five, already stout and wheezing slightly now from the exertion of running. Walter’s youngest brother, Kent, was twenty-two, with his mother’s slender frame and dark eyes, wide now with the excitement of a night-time alarm.

“What is going on?” he hissed at Walter, grinning, but Walter merely stood aside to let them through. The sight would soon wipe that grin from Kent’s face.

Then he saw Olivia and Tess following them into the room.

“No!” Walter cried, jumping forward to block the girls’ way. “Out, both of you. At once!”

They would have bridled at this cavalier treatment, but he pushed them

roughly through the door and closed it behind him, muffling the shocked exclamations of the men as they saw the devastation within.

“You should not see what is inside that room,” he said, firmly.

Several of the servants now began to appear, and Walter saw with relief his mother’s lady’s maid amongst them.

“Jaynes, please take Lady Olivia and Miss Nicholson to Lady Rennington at once, and make sure they stay in her room.”

“Her ladyship will be asleep,” the maid said, frowning.

“Then wake her, tell her there has been... an incident. She is to stay in her room with my sister and Miss Nicholson until my father sends word. Understood? That is an order, Jaynes.”

She bobbed a curtsy. “Yes, my lord. Come along, Lady Olivia, you heard your brother. Miss Nicholson? This way, if you please.”

Leaving several footmen on guard outside the door to prevent anyone else from entering, Walter went back inside. Aunt Alice had not moved, but at least she was silent now, as tears cascaded down her cheeks. Kent was patting her shoulder awkwardly.

“Ah, Walter,” his father said, with obvious relief. “The girls...”

“I have sent them to Mother and told them to stay there.”

“Good. Tess, in particular, should not see this. But what can have happened here? This is quite dreadful!”

“It is not for us to determine what happened, Father. This is a matter for the magistrate.”

“Ah, of course. Strong will know what to do. We must send for Sir Hubert at once.”

“The most urgent matter is Aunt Alice,” Walter said firmly. “Kent, pray get her out of this room... to her sitting room, perhaps, and send for her maid. And someone must go to the village for Little.”

“Yes, yes, the apothecary,” his father said, distractedly. When Aunt Alice had been led away, unresisting, by Kent, Lord Rennington turned to his son and heir. “This is very bad, Walter. How could someone break in and

*murder* Nicholson in his bed like this? He was an inoffensive man, I should have thought — the chaplain, too. A man of God. Who would want to kill him?”

Walter hesitated, then said firmly, “Father, you should know that when I first arrived here, Aunt Alice was standing beside her husband’s dead body, that axe in her hand and, as you saw, coated in her husband’s blood. We do not need to concern ourselves with intruders, I believe.”

“Alice? *Alice* murder her husband? Nonsense, boy. She adored him, and she would never hurt a fly. Besides, how could a blind woman wield an axe? No, it was an intruder, it must have been. I hope I know my sister well enough to say with absolute conviction that she did not murder her husband.”

“I agree it is unlikely, but I only report what I saw. It will be for Sir Hubert to determine the truth of it.”

His father’s face brightened. “Yes, Strong will unravel this mystery. He is very dependable. We must send for him at once.”

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Sir Hubert Strong was a sensible man, only two years younger than Lord Rennington but in somewhat better condition. He brought with him his younger brother, Alfred Strong, a genial man who held a government office. He had also brought the coroner, a physician called Ashbridge, from Helmsley.

The three men pored over the body, gradually lifting away the remnants of the bedding to examine the wounds more fully.

Walter could not bear to look. He, Kent and their father huddled in a corner of the room, looking at the window, their feet, the clock on the mantelpiece — anything but the desolate remains of Arthur Nicholson, aged fifty-five, ordained clergyman and chaplain to the earl and his family at Corland Castle. Nicholson had lived at the castle for thirty years, and had become a member of the family when he married the earl’s sister, Lady Alice Atherton. He was generally well liked, had no vices, kept no low company, had no known enemies. It was incomprehensible that anyone would want to murder him, and especially in such a violent way.

Eventually, the magistrate and coroner had finished their examination of the body and they all withdrew to the library to discuss their findings. Walter explained all that he had seen, and Sir Hubert immediately denounced the idea as impossible.

“Lady Alice murder Nicholson? Absolutely not,” he said robustly. “Undoubtedly she found the axe on the floor, just as she said.”

“But how could she have seen it?” Walter said. “I like the idea as little as you, Sir Hubert, but I can only report what I saw.”

“And that is very proper of you, Lord Birtwell,” Alfred Strong said. “However, we are all too close to the persons involved to judge impartially what might have happened here. I think this is a job for outsiders.”

“Not Bow Street Runners!” the earl said, in horrified tones.

“No, no! Nothing so public,” Alfred Strong said. “There is a man who has some experience of such matters, very discreet, who might be able to help us. He has a group of people who devote themselves to such cases. Do you remember the Hartlepool Hat-pin Murder?”

“I do!” Kent said. “A very clever piece of deduction. Edge... something.”

“Captain Edgerton,” Alfred Strong said. “Now known as Edgerton, Alexander and Associates. Very well known amongst my friends in town. May I make enquiries as to whether he would be willing to assist us?”

“Please do,” the earl said wearily. “If he is discreet. It is the least we can do for poor Nicholson. By all means send for this captain, and let us see if he can work out what happened here.”

“Excellent,” said Ashbridge. “I know of him by reputation, and he is a stickler for detail. I must be sure to meet his exacting standards. I shall review the body once more, and make a thorough analysis of all the wounds, with diagrams and measurements. Everything must be analysed and recorded.”

He went off happily, spending the rest of the day at the castle, measuring and making notes.

Late in the afternoon, Walter’s other brother, Eustace, arrived. Eustace was two years younger at twenty-seven, but he had had the good fortune to

inherit a modest estate from his godfather, and now had his independence. Walter's inheritance would be far greater, and include the earldom, but still he envied his brother his freedom.

Walter, Kent and their father were huddled in the earl's study when Eustace walked in.

"Eustace? Were we expecting you?" the earl said distractedly.

"No... no, I was just passing." His gaze passed from one to the other, puzzled. "The servants are all of a twitter... has something happened?"

"The most damnable thing," the earl said. "Nicholson has been murdered in his bed."

"*Nicholson?* The chaplain?"

"It is unaccountable, is it not?" Walter said. "Who under the sun would want to murder Nicholson?"

But Eustace was speechless. The four of them sat round the brandy decanter, sunk in gloom and despondency, with only the faint hope that a captain from Hartlepool might be able to help.

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Miss Winifred Strong was watching from her bedroom window for her father and Uncle Alfred to return. As soon as she saw their horses plodding wearily up the drive, she ran lightly down the stairs, and had the front door open even before Maynard got there.

"Well, Papa? Who is it? Who has died?"

Sir Hubert gave a little smile. "The chaplain. Nicholson."

Mr Nicholson! Thank God it was not... anyone else. She was very sorry for it, naturally, and desperately sad for poor Lady Alice, for whatever would she do without him? But at least another person was quite safe.

"Mr Nicholson... oh. Then... a sudden illness? An apoplexy? His heart? Although he seemed fit enough."

"Would that it were so simple. Come into my book room, Winnie. And you, Alfred. You need a drink... at least, I do, and I'm sure you must. Such a sight as we have seen! No, Maynard, we can see to ourselves. Tell Lady

Strong that we are returned, will you.”

“What will you have, Papa?” Winnie said, crossing to the table where the decanters stood ready.

“Brandy. A large one, and the same for your uncle.”

Winnie’s eyebrows rose, but she swiftly poured the drinks and handed them round.

“What a day!” Sir Hubert said, downing half his glass in one gulp. “Winnie, I shall tell you all, because there will be no possibility of keeping it quiet, but you must not make idle chatter of it. Not that you are at all an idle chatterer, but you know what I mean. No talking about it in front of the servants, and if anyone calls on your mother, do not mention it unless they do.”

“Papa, this is serious indeed. You are alarming me! What on earth happened to poor Mr Nicholson?”

“He was murdered in the middle of the night by a man with an axe. His body was—you may imagine the state of it, for I shall not describe it to you. It was too horrible for words.”

Whatever Winnie’s fears had conjured up, this was far, far worse. She sat down suddenly on the nearest chair, her head spinning. *Murdered!* And with an axe!

“But who would do such a thing? And why? And will he murder anyone else?”

Uncle Alfred said calmly, “Well! That is a possibility we had not considered. We should have, of course. What is your opinion, Hubert?”

Sir Hubert frowned. “It seems unlikely to me. The axe was left behind, after all, and whoever wielded it has disappeared.”

“Yet such a frenzied attack is surely the work of a deranged mind,” Uncle Alfred said.

“All the more likely, then, that his lust for blood has been sated for the moment,” Sir Hubert said. “One such murder is fantastic enough, without anticipating a whole series of such events. Until we know the reason for this

murder, we cannot speculate on whether there will be a repetition. So long as all the doors are locked at night, the residents of Corland Castle should be safe enough.”

“That did not protect them last night,” Uncle Alfred said in subdued tones.

Silently, Winnie refilled the glasses, and as her mother came in just then with her younger sister Lydia, and were told a somewhat milder version of events, the most interesting elements of the discussion had to be left to another time. At that moment, Winnie wished with all her heart that she had been born a boy, for then she would have lingered over the port with the gentlemen after dinner, and heard all the details that she craved.

However, when dinner came and went, she had not been in the drawing room with Mama and Lydia for long when Maynard came in.

“Beg pardon, my lady, but the master wishes to know if you can spare Miss Strong for a few minutes. He’d like to see her in the dining room.”

“Oh... of course, for I have Miss Lydia to bear me company. Run along, Winnie.”

With eager steps, Winnie ran along. It was not that she had any ghoulish interest in poor Mr Nicholson’s terrible death, for she had heard all she wanted to about that. Rather, she had a great interest in the earl’s family, with whose estate their own more modest park abutted, so that the two sets of children had grown up together. When Walter, Eustace and Josie, the three eldest of the earl’s offspring, had roamed free, they had as often as not found their way to the boundary with Birchall House, while Winnie, Hebe and Mabel were as much on Corland ground as their own. And both sets had regarded the Strongs’ tree house, so close to the boundary that branches reached across it, as common territory.

And what Winnie wanted to hear more than anything just then was how Walter was taking the news that the chaplain had been murdered. Walter... all her thoughts at that moment were with Walter, as they so often were. Not that she could ever tell anyone that. It was her Great Big Secret, never to be spoken of. Only Mama knew of it, and she had promised never to tell.

Papa and Uncle Alfred still sat at the dining table, a glass of port apiece,

the decanter unstoppered. They rose as she entered.

“Ah, Winnie, there you are. Come and sit down, my dear,” her father said, holding the chair next to his own for her. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“I should like to try the port, if I may,” she said, and the two men laughed. Uncle Alfred poured a small amount into a glass for her, and she sipped it cautiously. It was rather pleasant, strong but not fierce, as brandy was.

“Now, Winnie,” her father said as he resumed his seat, “your uncle reminds me how useful you have been to him in the matter of taking notes and writing them up in a fair hand, and so we thought to ask if you would do the same for us in this affair at the castle.”

“Of course, Papa, if I can. What would you wish me to do?”

“Nothing unseemly or distasteful to you, I assure you, merely to help us to arrange— No, let me explain properly. Normally, as magistrate, I would investigate any crime within my area, but in this case... so brutal a murder, and knowing the family intimately, as I do... as we all do, it is impossible for me to be entirely impartial.”

“I am sure you would not let your friendship with the earl influence your duty, Papa.”

“Certainly I would do my best not to, but it cannot but intrude. My every feeling rejects the notion that any member of the family could conceivably be responsible for such a heinous crime, yet the possibility must be considered. Therefore, your uncle has recommended calling upon the services of a man with some experience in dealing with such events.”

“Murder? There are men who are experienced in the matter of murder?”

“In solving them, yes, and other mysteries, too,” Uncle Alfred said. “Lord Rennington has written to secure the services of this man and his colleagues, but it may be some time before he can arrive, assuming he is even able to accept the commission.”

“Exactly,” Sir Hubert said. “Meanwhile, I must do what I can to record everything of importance in the matter before he arrives, before memories

fade or evidence is destroyed.”

“Like the footprints in the flowerbed when someone broke into Highwood Place?”

“Exactly so! It will be a huge undertaking, but your uncle has agreed to help me. Will you assist us, Winnie? Be our taker of notes, and point out to us the obvious details we might have missed?”

“I should be delighted to do whatever I can, if it will help the family at the castle.”

“There! I knew you would! You are a good, sensible girl, Winnie. We shall set out at eight tomorrow, so breakfast early and wear your riding habit.”

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