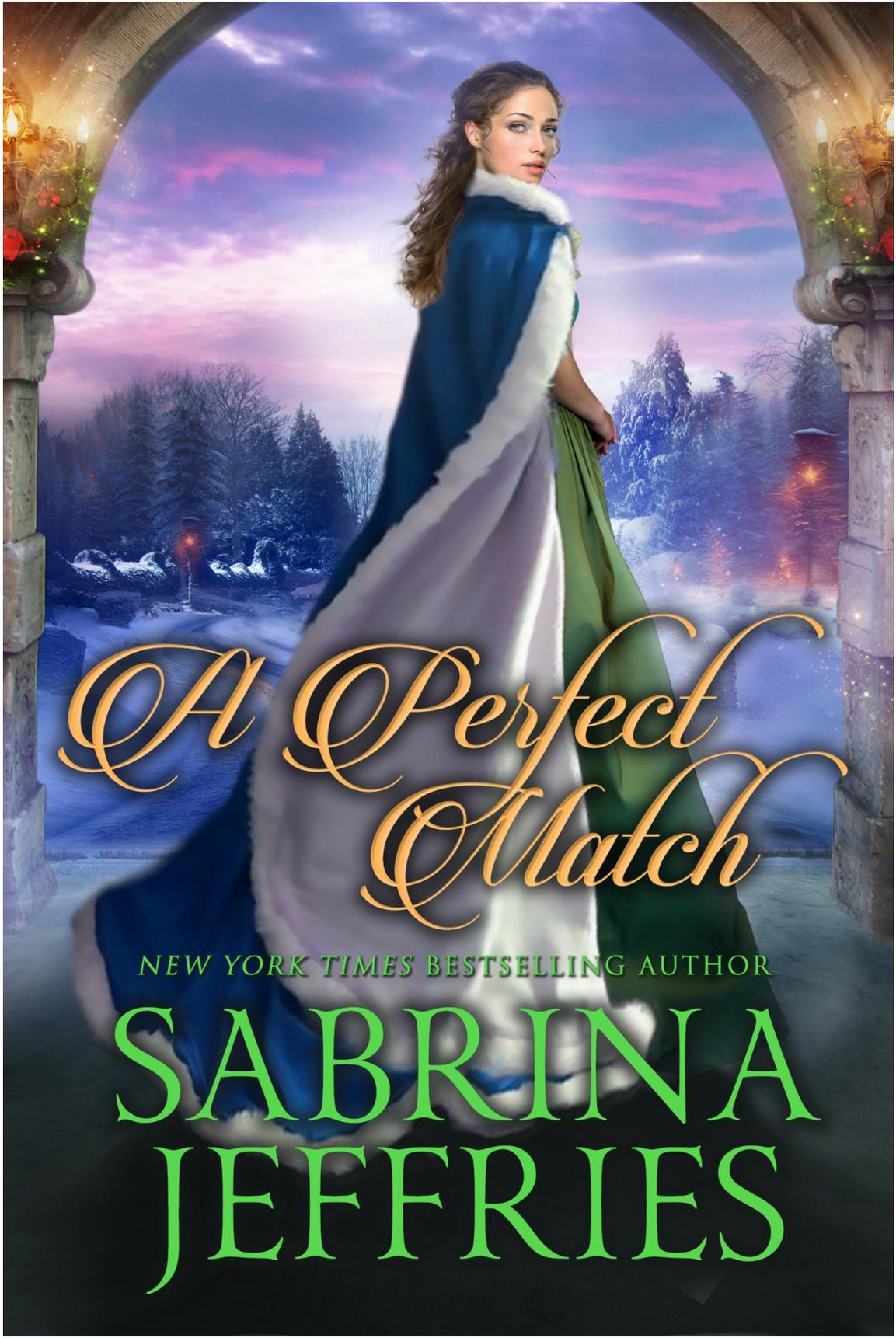




A Perfect Match

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SABRINA
JEFFRIES



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A PERFECT MATCH by Sabrina Jeffries

Whisked away from a wintry ball by the officer she knew only through letters, Cassandra Isles struggles with her feelings for the commanding Colonel Lord Heywood. For he, secretly a fortune hunter, must marry for money to save his estate—and Cass, secretly an heiress, will accept nothing less than love . . .

Books by Sabrina Jeffries

PROJECT DUCHESS
THE BACHELOR

A Perfect Match

SABRINA JEFFRIES



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A Perfect Match

SABRINA JEFFRIES

*To my parents, who both love the Christmas season so much, and always
made sure we had a good one, even in Thailand.
I hope we have many more Christmases together.*

Chapter 1

Yorkshire
December 1808

The ballroom at Welbourne Place was so crowded that despite the winter weather, ladies' fans were flapping as vigorously as wings of doves in flight. Miss Cassandra Isles sympathized. Even the scent of evergreens in the festive decorations—kissing boughs of mistletoe, rosemary, laurel, and holly—didn't help. If she didn't escape the stuffy room soon, she might scream! But she didn't dare leave until Captain Lionel Malet stopped prowling about in search of her eighteen-year-old cousin, Katherine "Kitty" Nickman.

Cass sighed. On the surface, the captain possessed everything a woman would want in a husband. As the youngest son of a viscount, he had rank and connections. And he certainly was good-looking for his age, with his casually disordered black curls, his blue eyes, and his manly demeanor.

But he still repulsed Cass. Was it his calculating mannerisms? His brittle smiles? The way he admonished Kitty at every turn?

Perhaps it was just *him*, period.

Unfortunately, with Kitty lingering in the retiring room, he was now heading for Cass, probably to probe her for any information he'd been unable to pry out of her and Kitty and Aunt Virginia when he'd brought them here in his carriage.

Once he reached Cass, he barely bowed, as if recognizing her lack of approval. "I see you've already lost your pretty companion."

"I'm sure she'll return shortly. You *were* speaking of Kitty, weren't you?"

"Who else?"

"I have no idea, sir. How many rich women are you courting at present?"

His icy gaze sharpened. "I'm interested in your cousin for herself."

She stared at him. "If you say so."

Ignoring her barbed comment, he glanced about the room. "I hope Miss Nickman hasn't wandered onto the terrace. There are men at this affair who

roam the dark, hoping to force a kiss on an unsuspecting maiden.”

Men like you? Cass nearly said. His possessiveness worried her. It wasn't as if he and Kitty were betrothed.

“I hope you're not describing yourself,” she said. “If you think to gain my cousin by compromising her, that would be foolish.”

He stiffened. “You misunderstand the situation, madam. I love Miss Nickman.”

Love? She doubted the man even knew the meaning of the word.

Not that Kitty couldn't make men fall in love with her. She was gorgeous, with wheat-blond hair, clear green eyes, and a perfect figure. Indeed, every woman in the room would hate her if she didn't also have an amiable temperament, a big heart, and a winning way with everyone she met.

Then there was her petite figure that made her look like a fragile flower in need of a big strong man to guide her, which, unfortunately, she was. Because she was also a naïve heiress to an enormous fortune. That complicated every courtship.

“If you love her,” Cass told the captain, “you can have no objection to waiting a few months before making an offer.”

When annoyance flashed in his expression, it reconfirmed her conviction that he merely wanted to get his hands on Kitty's dowry. But he masked his reaction swiftly enough. “Doesn't every young lady aim to find a husband with all due haste?”

“Not before having her London season. Given the size of Kitty's inheritance, I think—”

“Forgive me, Miss Isles, but what you think doesn't matter as long as her mother approves of me. And I happen to know that she does.”

“I beg to differ.” When her words seemed to surprise him, she added, “I know my aunt very well—she will never agree to a suitor with nothing to commend him but his connections.” Cass *hoped* that was the case, anyway. “She's determined to give her daughter a proper season in London, and you must surely be aware that once she does, Kitty will easily snag a wealthy and titled husband.”

Cass wasn't about to tell him that Aunt Virginia was actually dazzled by Captain Malet's rank, his silver tongue, and his dashing uniform. No amount of cautioning her would get her to listen to Cass's opinion of him.

It would be one thing if the captain truly did love Kitty, but Cass didn't believe he did, and she was equally uncertain about Kitty, who'd been

secretive about her interest in the man. One moment Kitty was flirting with him, and the next she was disappearing to go Lord knows where.

Until Kitty said unreservedly that she was in love with the captain, Cass had to keep the two apart as much as possible. Cass refused to see her beloved cousin suffer the same heartache Cass had once endured over a gentleman in Bath.

She crossed her fingers behind her back. “My aunt will also bow to my opinion in the matter, as will my cousin. They trust me to look after them.”

The captain leaned close. “Ah, but neither will trust you when I mention your spinsterish jealousy over Miss Nickman’s success in attracting a potential husband.”

A laugh erupted from her. Spinsterish jealousy? Was “spinsterish” even a word?

She ought to reveal her age. Or inform him of her own sizable inheritance. But she meant to make sure that any suitor showing an interest in *her* wanted her only for herself. That was why she was keeping quiet about her dowry for the present and why she’d demanded that her aunt and cousins do the same.

After all, she had plenty of time to marry, and for now she didn’t care one jot if everyone in society assumed she was the poor relation. Her late parents had married for love, and so would she. She meant to get Kitty settled in a love match before concentrating on her own happiness. There were to be no fortune hunters for her *or* Kitty.

“Well, sir,” she said, “it seems we’re at an impasse. So I shall search for my cousin, and you may do whatever you please.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said.

“Into the ladies’ retiring room? I think not.”

She marched off, annoyed when the man followed her at a discreet distance. Why *was* Kitty taking so long? She’d never been the sort to primp and preen. And when Cass entered the enormous parlor fitted out with comfortable furniture, a mirror, a washstand, and a screen behind which sat a chamber pot, she could find no trace of her.

Cass hadn’t seen her in the ballroom either. The captain’s comment about the terrace leapt to mind. Lately, Kitty did have a tendency to wander off.

So Cass headed out herself, relieved to find that the captain had disappeared. But once through the French doors, Cass realized that the terrace encircled the house, and sets of stone steps led down to the garden itself. Kitty could be anywhere.

Cass rubbed her arms. She should have brought her shawl. Her aunt had predicted it would snow before the night was out, and Cass began to believe it. The air felt frozen, and it smelled like . . .

Burning tobacco. The scent of a cheroot hit her from somewhere close by. She whirled to see a man leaning against a pillar, watching her from the shadows.

There are men at this affair who roam the dark, hoping to force a kiss on an unsuspecting maiden.

How ridiculous. She would *not* let Captain Malet's remarks strike fear in her. "You might announce yourself, sir, before frightening a lady half to death."

The stranger chuckled. "Do forgive me, madam. That wasn't my intent." He pushed away from the pillar and came into the light from the ballroom. "But I admit to being curious about the lucky fellow you were hoping to meet out here."

He lifted an eyebrow rakishly, rattling her generally impenetrable armor. She couldn't imagine why. Just because he was handsome—with brownish hair, a charmingly crooked smile, and a muscular build—was no reason to let him beneath her defenses. After all, he smoked cheroots, which only proved he wasn't her sort.

Then he dropped his cheroot and stubbed it out with his booted foot, bringing her attention to his attire. He was decidedly *not* dressed for a ball. He wore a many-caped greatcoat over what appeared to be trousers rather than breeches. If she had to guess, she'd say he was dressed for travel. He still had his hat on, for goodness' sake.

Alarm bells rang in her head, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm looking for a lady, actually. She's blond and fair, shorter than I, and is wearing a coquelicot gown with primrose accents. Have you seen her?"

"A coque-what? You might as well tell me the gown is made of cheese. But other than you, no one has come through that door since I arrived."

That explained his travel clothes, although it did *not* explain why he was lurking about out here instead of entering through the front door to be announced. She should probably go back inside. "I see. Then you're of no help to me."

When she placed her hand on the door handle, he put his against the door to keep it shut. "Perhaps you could be of help to *me*. I'm looking for Miss Katherine Nickman."

“Kitty? That’s who *I’m* looking for! Do you know her?”

A veil descended over his features. “Not by sight. Might you be willing to introduce us?”

Good Lord. The fortune hunters were coming out of the stonework now. “And who will introduce you to me?” she asked tartly. “That should come first, don’t you think?”

His gaze skimmed her form with decided interest. “Since we’re already acquainted by virtue of sharing this stretch of terrace, I was hoping we could dispense with formalities.”

The droll remark made her smile in spite of herself. “You’re very cavalier about introductions, sir.”

His eyes gleamed at her. “So are you. If you’ll recall, you spoke to me first.”

He was flirting with her, of all things. In her role of poor relation, she rarely found herself the object of interest from such a good-looking fellow. “And I begin to think that was a mistake.” She cast a critical glance over his attire. “You are obviously not dressed for the occasion.”

“Something I’m already regretting.” His rumbling voice sent a jolt to her senses, which was utterly unwise.

“Were you even invited to the ball?” she pressed him.

He crossed his impressive arms over his equally impressive chest. “That’s a rude question. Were you?”

She laughed outright. “I don’t generally push my way into social affairs.”

“Why not? You fit in beautifully. Much better than I.”

“We’ve already established that,” she said dryly. “Although it hasn’t stopped you from lurking about out here like a thief.”

He drew himself up with mock pride. “I’ll have you know, madam, that I’m only a thief where lovely ladies are concerned.” He leaned just close enough to give her a whiff of his bay rum scent. “I do steal the occasional kiss.”

A thrill shot down her spine before she squelched it. “Then you should go inside. You’ll find plenty of kissing boughs to serve your purpose. Of course, if you were not invited—”

“Can’t you vouch for me?” he teased.

She eyed him askance. This mad flirtation had gone on long enough. “Not I. I must find my cousin.”

His amusement vanished. “Miss Nickman is your *cousin*?”

“She is. And what is it to you, sir?”

He seemed all business now. “I have an important message for her from her brother.”

Cass started. “Douglas?”

“Unless she has another brother,” he said sarcastically. “Of course Douglas.”

Any friend of Douglas’s was a friend of hers and Kitty’s, assuming that this man wasn’t feigning the connection. A few gentlemen eager to marry a fortune *had* misrepresented themselves to Kitty in the past. “How do you know Douglas?”

“I’m a colonel in his regiment, the Twenty-Fifth Hussars, here on leave of absence.” He bowed. “Colonel Lord Heywood Wolfe, at your service.”

The floor melted away beneath her feet. This handsome fellow was Douglas’s boon companion? Who’d joined him in any foolish escapade, whose witty remarks Douglas had often repeated for effect in his letters, keeping her and Kitty vastly entertained?

If so, then heaven help her. The colonel was even more intriguing in person than on paper. Aside from his droll manner, he towered over her like a hawk over a swallow, though she wasn’t short for a woman. And his eyes assessed her with far too much interest. Good Lord.

But what if he was lying? After all, Douglas would surely have written to tell them that his friend was on his way to England. This man could claim to be anyone he wanted. She was alone out here with him, and she’d be wise to proceed with caution.

“Now,” he went on, “will you please do me the honor of telling me your name?”

Chapter 2

Heywood had clearly gone about this all wrong. That's what he got for rushing over from the Nickman estate once he'd heard about Malet accompanying the women to Welbourne Place.

Not that Heywood could have entered the ball anyway. Aside from the issue of his travel attire, Malet would immediately know why Heywood was there: to prevent the man from marrying Miss Nickman. Heywood had made a promise to Douglas on that score.

And if, in the process of rescuing Miss Nickman, Heywood ingratiated himself with the young heiress? That wouldn't be bad either. Douglas had already given his blessing to such a marriage, provided that Miss Nickman found Heywood appealing.

Unfortunately, all he'd done so far was put Miss Nickman's cousin on her guard, which he regretted. He would need the cousin in his camp to gain Miss Nickman's approval of the courtship.

Besides that, he liked the cousin. A friendly sort, she had a keen sense of humor and wasn't bad looking either. Although he generally preferred blond women, her light brown hair suited her coloring and she had a peculiar attraction all her own.

She stared back into the ballroom, a frown forming on her smooth brow. He followed her gaze. The crowd seemed to be thinning out, possibly going off to supper. Any minute now the lady would realize the impropriety of their private encounter. Then she would hasten inside and he would lose his opportunity to speak with Miss Nickman.

"Madam—" he began.

"I'll tell you my name if you answer one question, sir." She stared him down. "Where were you and Douglas posted before Portugal?"

Ah. Not just pretty, but smart and cautious. "Hanover. Where we fought a battle at Munkaiser."

When relief showed on her face, he let out a breath. "Dare I hope the interrogation is over?"

“How did you find us?” She smiled thinly. “That’s not part of any ‘interrogation,’ mind you. I’m just curious.”

“I followed the directions Douglas gave me to his home, and when I found no one there, the servants told me where you’d all gone.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

When she said nothing more, he quipped, “Should I keep calling you ‘madam’ or do you prefer to be addressed as ‘Miss Nickman’s cousin’?”

She chuckled. “Forgive me. I’m Miss Cassandra Isles.”

Right. Miss Nickman had mentioned Cass Isles in her delightful letters to Douglas. Those letters had made him long to meet Douglas’s sister.

“You know,” he said mockingly, “I have only your word for it that you’re Miss Isles. You *could* be leading me on. So now you must answer a question for me.”

She uttered an exasperated laugh. “Of course. Ask me whatever you like. I have no secrets. Indeed, I’m probably the dumbest female you’ll ever meet.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” He sifted through the little he remembered about her. “Since Christmas is nearly here, tell me, what’s your favorite Christmas dessert?”

“That’s easy. Syllabub.”

Not the answer he was expecting. “Syllabub is a drink, not a dessert.”

She tipped up her chin. “Anything with cream and sugar in it is a dessert.”

“Even coffee?”

“Well, not coffee. Unless the coffee is in ice cream.”

He couldn’t resist teasing her again. “You have a complicated definition of dessert.”

“At least I don’t call mincemeat pie a dessert.” She made a face. “Beef suet, ugh.”

“But Christmas isn’t Christmas without mincemeat pie.”

“Then you’re out of luck by coming to our neck of the woods at Christmastide. Everyone around here serves only plum pudding. Which you hate.”

He burst into laughter. “And you love. Only two people in England, other than my family, know I hate plum pudding—Miss Nickman and you.” He thrust out his hand. “You’ve met my challenge admirably. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Isles.”

“Likewise, I’m sure,” she said, sounding breathless as she took his proffered hand.

The contact caught him off guard, making him wish she wasn't wearing gloves. That he wasn't either.

God, what was wrong with him? He was a practical man. Fetching as this chit might be, he couldn't allow her to distract him from his purpose. He reluctantly released her hand. "You are not at all how I pictured you. The few times Miss Nickman wrote about her 'older' cousin, I imagined someone . . ."

"Spinsterish?" she asked with a decided edge to her voice.

"That isn't a word."

"Exactly! It's not a word in the least. I'm so pleased that you agree."

"Good," he said, her reaction bewildering him. If he'd learned anything from his own sister, it was that women did *not* like to be considered "spinsterish." "I didn't realize your cousin was describing a woman of your age. Which is . . ."

"I'm twenty-two, sir, and not on the shelf yet."

Younger than he'd thought, given her poise. "You're just old enough to know your own mind and clever enough to question the claims of shabbily dressed strangers who accost you on terraces."

That made her laugh, thank God. "You were privy to those letters?"

"Of course. Douglas is my friend as well as compatriot. We often read our correspondence from home to each other. Surely you and Miss Nickman did the same. If I remember correctly, you live in the same household."

"Yes, and we're as close as sisters."

"Well, Douglas and I are as close as brothers. Kitty's letters and those of my own family were all that kept us sane during the long weeks between battles."

With a secretive smile, she stared back into the emptying ballroom. "You enjoyed Kitty's letters, did you?"

"Indeed we did. Sometimes laughter is difficult to come by in an armed camp."

"I'm sure that's true, Colonel," she said in a melodious voice.

God help him. That voice would charm thieves.

Remember why you're here.

Right. He should press her again on the subject of her cousin. "Now that we've dispensed with the formalities, would you be so kind as to introduce me to Douglas's sister so that I may pass on her brother's message in person?"

She blinked, as if startled out of some reverie. "Of course. If you'll just

follow me inside, we'll go look for her.”

“I'd rather not.”

“Why?”

Because he didn't want to encounter Malet before he could warn Miss Nickman of the man's true intentions.

Not that he could tell *Miss Isles* that. He wasn't sure where her loyalties lay. “I'm in mourning.” For emphasis, he tugged on his black armband. “Joining the ball would be grossly inappropriate.”

“Do forgive me, sir. I forgot . . . That is, I temporarily didn't remember. . .” She dragged in a steadying breath. “Please accept my condolences on the recent death of your father.”

“Thank you,” Heywood said, not sure what more to say. Though he hadn't lived at home in years—hadn't even been able to visit his family for more than brief stretches—he nonetheless felt the loss of his father like the ache of a phantom limb. The idea that Father was beyond his reach plagued him.

Still, he'd seen a great deal of death since Father had bought him a commission in the Hussars at sixteen, so he'd learned how to shove his pain inside his box of memories so he could continue his missions.

“In any case, if you wouldn't mind finding your cousin—” he began.

She colored. “Of course. She can't have gone far. Shall I fetch my aunt as well?”

“If you wish. But the message is primarily for your cousin.”

“I see. Well then, I'll just bring Kitty.” She cast him a rueful smile. “Aunt Virginia doesn't like being pulled away from the whist table. She gets to play in company so rarely.” Miss Isles opened the French doors. “I'll return shortly.”

He peered inside, watching as the lady passed the massive hearth with its merrily burning Yule log and then disappeared through a door. Now he could only wait.

There were no stars, and the air felt thick with the promise of snow. He hoped it held off until he spoke with Kitty Nickman and possibly her mother. He very much feared that the women might already have fallen prey to Malet's sly flatteries.

If that was the case, Heywood would lay out what he knew of the man and pray that they trusted his and Douglas's judgment. He felt fairly certain he could at least convince Miss Isles. She seemed sensible enough to recognize, once the facts were presented to her, that Malet was the worst sort of

scoundrel.

A murmur of voices below the terrace caught his attention. "When you bring my rig around," a man said, "park it here, below the terrace. The moment I come down these steps with Miss Nickman, you must be ready to leave."

Heywood scowled. Speak of the devil. That was Malet's voice.

"Yes, Captain," said his coachman. "What about her mother and Miss Isles?"

"Don't worry about them. Just make sure you do your part. There's some fellow sniffing around her here, and I'm not taking any chances. I've worked too hard and spent too much blunt trying to gain the chit's affections, only to have some stranger whisk her away."

That confused Heywood. Had Malet seen him somehow? But then why talk as if he didn't know who the "fellow" was?

"Shall I assume we're not returning to the Nickman estate, master?"

"You're correct," Malet said. "But don't worry. You'll be paid amply for transporting me and my fiancée to Gretna Green in record time."

"Thank you, sir."

Fiancée? Gretna Green? Had it progressed as far as that?

Heywood peered over the railing in time to see Malet stalk back into the house and a coachman hurry along the line of carriages parked along the drive until he came to the one that must be Malet's.

Damn it all to hell. Malet and Miss Nickman were eloping. Heywood may have arrived too late. Either that or he was arriving just in time.

Regardless, Douglas would never forgive him if he did not find a way to keep Miss Nickman from marrying this blackguard. So that's what Heywood must do.

* * *

It took Cass longer than she'd expected to find Kitty. First she looked for her in the card room. There Aunt Virginia was so intent on winning at whist that she merely waved her hand in a shooing motion when Cass approached her.

Next Cass passed through the supper room, but neither Captain Malet nor Kitty was there, which alarmed her. If that dratted fellow had coaxed Kitty into being alone with him, Cass would have his head! The longer Cass

peeked into the other rooms without finding Kitty, the more worried she got.

Then she glimpsed the young woman marching down a hallway and muttering to herself, obviously in a temper—Kitty, who so rarely got angry at anything.

“Are you all right?” Cass asked.

Kitty blinked. “I’m fine. I was just . . . having an argument with a friend.”

“Is it anyone I know?”

A panicked expression crossed Kitty’s face. “Certainly not. Why *would* you? Know them, I mean.”

Kitty was behaving oddly, to be sure. “Where did this argument take place?” Cass demanded.

“In . . . um . . . the retiring room.”

“I was just in the retiring room,” Cass said. “You weren’t there.”

Wrapping her arms about her waist, Kitty murmured, “I left there, and *I* . . . decided to see what the rest of the manor looked like.”

When she followed that outrageous remark with a weak smile, Cass rolled her eyes heavenward. Kitty had always been terrible at lying. Normally, Cass would wait her cousin out until she admitted the truth, but after traipsing up and down Welbourne Place, Cass didn’t have the patience for that. And did it really matter who the friend was? Kitty had a number of casual female friends.

“Well,” Cass said, “right now I need you to come with me.” Taking Kitty by the arm, Cass stalked toward the ballroom. “Colonel Lord Heywood Wolfe is here with an important message from Douglas, so I told him I’d bring you onto the terrace to talk to him.”

“Why in heaven’s name is he outside?”

While they headed for the terrace doors, Cass explained. But as they neared them, she pulled Kitty to a halt. “Promise me you won’t tell him that I too am an heiress.”

“Why would that come up in a conversation about a message from Douglas? I mean, it’s not as if—” Kitty halted as the significance of Cass’s words apparently hit her. “Wait. I thought you *liked* the colonel! You’ve said it many times—that you think he’s as clever as a bear.”

“Not a bear, dearest. A fox. Clever as a fox.”

Kitty had a tendency to mangle well-known phrases. But she never took offense when anyone corrected her. It was one of her most endearing qualities. Because Kitty was corrected a *lot*.

“ ‘Bear,’ ‘fox,’ ” Kitty said with a wave of her hand. “What difference does it make?”

“Well, foxes are known for being crafty whereas bears—” Cass shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. The point is, it’s precisely *because* I like him that I don’t want you to tell him I’m an heiress.”

“Ohhh. Because you want him to marry you for love.”

“Exactly.” She colored when she realized what she’d said. “Not that he’s interested in marrying me. I mean, he barely knows me. I suppose you could say he knows me from the letters, but—”

“Cass!” her cousin said. “I get the point.”

“Right. Sorry.” Even she acknowledged she had a tendency to go on and on sometimes.

“And you are far too prickly about your inheritance.” When Cass started to protest, Kitty held up her hand. “Not everyone is after you for your fortune, despite what that fellow you fancied in Bath told his friends.”

“It’s not about him. I’m just not ready to marry yet.”

“Hmm,” Kitty said, clearly not believing her protest.

Time to change the subject. “By the way, Colonel Lord Heywood mentioned how much your letters entertained him. Apparently Douglas always read them to his friend.”

“Of course he did. You write very amusing letters.”

“You told me what to say,” Cass said. “They’re still *your* letters.”

Kitty snorted. “You chose all the words and put them into sentences. My telling you to describe our visit to some assembly hardly makes what’s written in them mine. All the droll remarks and lovely turns of phrase are yours.” Kitty’s shoulders drooped. “I suppose we ought to tell the colonel the truth. That I’m stupid.”

“Don’t say that. You aren’t stupid.”

“If I weren’t, you wouldn’t be writing my letters. I get words mixed up all the time, I *hate* reading, Captain Malet chides me for telling stories wrong, and—”

“Don’t you *dare* listen to that scoundrel!” Cass looped an arm around her cousin’s waist. “He doesn’t know anything. You merely have different abilities.”

“That’s what Mr. Adams always says.”

Mr. Adams? Cass examined Kitty’s face. How odd that she would mention her mother’s solicitor. As a widower with two small children, he seemed like

someone beneath Kitty's notice. But he did have a kind heart, and his earnest features were quite handsome.

Still, Kitty had to know that her mother would never countenance such a marriage to a man of trade.

Cass smiled. "Mr. Adams is quite right. You draw well, you sing like an angel, and your needlework is exquisite. You have plenty of qualities men prize in a wife."

Looking glum, Kitty pulled away from her. "Like my fortune."

"And your beauty and kindness and sweet temper. Any man would want to marry you. So I doubt your future husband will be disappointed that you can't pen entertaining missives or tell a good tale."

"But I do so wish I was clever like you." A heavy sigh escaped Kitty. "That's why I'd prefer that Douglas not find out I can't even write him a decent letter." She lifted her gaze to Cass. "Do you think you might promise not to tell the colonel about that? Because he'll surely tell Douglas."

How could Cass resist that sweet, anxious face? "I promise. You keep my secret and I'll keep yours."

It wasn't as if she was likely to see the colonel after tonight, anyway. His family lived all the way over in Lincolnshire, almost forty miles off, and she lived here. Besides, he was only on a leave of absence. He'd be gone back to Portugal by the time she and Kitty even had their season. Then it wouldn't matter what he thought of her letters.

"Now, dearest," Cass told Kitty, "let's go find out what message was so important that Douglas sent his friend to deliver it personally."

But when they went out to the terrace, it was to see the first snowflakes drifting down . . . and no sign of Colonel Lord Heywood.

"Oh, no!" Cass cried. "It's snowing!" And apparently he was gone.

Then his voice came out of the gloom. "It's about time you two showed up. You can both shelter under this." He stripped off his greatcoat, which he handed to Cass, and she draped it over the two of them. "But we can't stay out here," he went on, "or you'll be wet through. My coachman is bringing my carriage around now. We can traverse the drive while we talk."

He led them down the steps and around to where a carriage with a ducal crest pulled up in front of them. The crest reassured Cass that they were safe with him. He would hardly be riding in a ducal carriage, probably his brother's, if he were some fortune-hunting scoundrel.

After they got in, Kitty handed him his greatcoat. "Your equipage is

lovely,” she said, as soon as they were headed off down the drive. “Ours isn’t nearly so roomy.” She pointed to the carriage lamps shining through the windows. “And we don’t have bright lanterns like these, to be sure.”

“I can’t take credit for it, I’m afraid. The rig belongs to my brother Sheridan.” He uttered a self-deprecating chuckle. “I mean, His Grace, the newly minted Duke of Armitage. I can’t get used to Sheridan’s being a duke. I don’t think he can either.”

“Well, tell your brother that I think it’s very fine,” Kitty said. “I wouldn’t mind traveling anywhere in a coach like this.”

“Forgive me, sir,” Cass interrupted, “but we must discuss—”

“Right.” He pulled a letter out of his pocket. “This is from Douglas.”

Cass lifted an eyebrow. “You couldn’t just have given it to me to give Kitty?”

“No,” he said flatly. “Douglas wanted me to put it into her hands personally so I could explain the contents in more detail as well as answer any questions. Since I was returning to England anyway, I was happy to undertake that mission.”

“How intriguing,” Cass said as Kitty took it from him. “I’m dying to know what’s so important that it constitutes a ‘mission.’ ”

She and Cass read the letter together by the light of the carriage lamps:

*Dearest Sister,
My sincerest hope is that this finds you well, and that you
have not yet met Mr. Lionel Malet—or succumbed to his false
blandishments. He is—*

“I thought it was *Captain* Malet,” Kitty whispered to Cass. “And what does ‘blandishments’ mean?”

Cass said, “It means ‘flatteries’ or ‘smooth talk.’” Cass shot His Lordship a furtive glance. “And there’s no point to whispering. I’m sure Colonel Lord Heywood can hear you perfectly well.”

The man smiled faintly. “Please call me Heywood. I feel as if I know you both already through Douglas. And through Miss Nickman’s entertaining letters, of course.”

Cass winced. It was harder than she'd expected not to be able to acknowledge her authorship of the letters.

"Then you must call us Kitty and Cass," Kitty said with a knowing smile for Cass.

"Kitty!" Cass protested.

"Why not? We know *him* already through letters, too."

Heywood tipped his hat to Kitty. "To answer your question, Malet was indeed a captain until he was cashiered for 'conduct unbecoming the character of an officer and a gentleman.' "

Kitty leaned up to whisper in Cass's ear, "Even *I* know that's very bad."

Cass nodded. If she remembered correctly, cashiering was when a soldier or officer was stripped of his rank so that he couldn't sell his commission and then was discharged from the army or navy. Thank heaven for Douglas and his sense of responsibility. Kitty might actually heed her brother's warnings about Mr. Malet.

Kitty and Cass continued reading, but the rest merely confirmed what the colonel—Heywood—had said:

I am sworn to secrecy on the matter that has destroyed Malet's reputation among those who know him, but I assure you it is a serious charge. He is not the gentleman he appears to be. So avoid him or you may find your own reputation ruined. At the very least, you may be forced to marry a man who will treat you ill.

My friend Heywood will answer your questions and make sure that Malet does you no harm. Please show Heywood the utmost courtesy as my emissary.

With much affection,

Douglas

"Well!" Cass sat back. "That is quite a letter. Not that it surprises me one whit. I didn't like Mr. Malet from the first moment I met him."

Kitty gazed out the window. "It seems to me that Douglas is being overly cautious. I mean, why would Mr. Malet fix on *me* to ruin? Or to marry, for

that matter? Why not Cass, for example?"

"He's a fortune hunter, Kitty." Cass suppressed a sigh. She should have known Kitty would have trouble keeping her secret. "He doesn't fix on ladies like me, *who have no dowries*. Just ladies like you who do."

Heywood frowned. "It's more than that. Douglas and I are the ones who discovered his perfidy and brought charges against him. In return, he threatened to get back at us by stealing away one of our sisters, both of whom are heiresses."

Cass's stomach sank. How horrible!

"Mr. Malet really said such a thing?" Kitty said, clearly as shocked as Cass.

"He did." Heywood rubbed his jaw. "I'm not worried about my sister, Gwyn—she and my brothers can hold their own against a regiment of Malets. But Douglas feared that you weren't so well protected."

Kitty was no longer paying attention to him. "Where are we going?"

When she leaned forward to gaze out the window, Cass did the same. She saw nothing but dustings of white over dark shapes of bushes and trees—no lights from the house, no flat contours of the lawn.

They were decidedly not making the circuit of the drive at Welbourne Place. What was more, the coach had picked up speed now that it had reached the main road.

Cass stared hard at Heywood. "What are you about, sir? We are leaving Welbourne Place entirely!"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Forgive me, ladies, but I felt it best to whisk Miss Nickman away from Lionel Malet as quickly as possible and by any means at hand. The man is dangerous."

Kitty just sat there incredulous, but Cass couldn't stay silent in the face of such blatant male arrogance. "You're *abducting* us? *Now*? In the middle of a ball?"

"Not 'abducting.' Rescuing. Malet was planning to carry Kitty off to Gretna Green just as soon as he could get her into his waiting carriage. Tell me, Cass—under the circumstances, what would *you* have done?"

Chapter 3

Heywood figured he was about to get an earful, judging from how Cass was curling her hands into fists in her lap.

“I wouldn’t have abducted a couple of ladies, to be sure,” Cass bit out.

“I’m not abducting you!” he practically shouted. “I am intervening. Malet gave me no other choice. The conversation I overheard between him and his coachman made it clear that Malet planned on leaving with Kitty as soon as he found her inside and could lure her into his coach. Indeed, Malet’s plan was only foiled because I got my equipage into position sooner than he did.”

That seemed to stun both ladies into silence. The fact that Kitty in particular said nothing made Heywood even more cautious. Kitty might actually fancy herself in love with Malet. And though the woman might not know much about Malet’s true character, it had not escaped Heywood’s notice that she hadn’t sensed the man’s perfidy the way Cass seemed to have.

Then again, Kitty seemed nothing like Cass. Hard to believe they were cousins. In appearance, Kitty reminded Heywood of every debutante he’d ever met—cut from the same cloth as their mothers. With her honey hair and perfect posture, she had that porcelain-doll fragility that most men wanted . . . as if she might shatter if someone so much as touched her. In his youth, he’d been certain he wanted that sort of woman: the kind he could protect, the kind that made him feel like a man.

But years on the battlefield had taught him to appreciate a woman who could stand at his side and hold her own with the enemy, who had some flesh on her bones and some fire in her eyes. Like Cass, actually.

Except that Kitty had been the one who’d written the letters he had so enjoyed. That was the main reason he was interested in her. Besides, Cass had just made it clear she wasn’t an heiress. And he had to marry one if he was to stay in England and nurture the small, run-down estate Grandmother had bequeathed to Father and which he had left to *him*.

Heywood was eager to give it all the work it needed. He was ready to leave the Hussars, to marry and start a family. Despite his success at soldiering, he

didn't actually *like* it. The pain and death seemed endless—Britain had been fighting the French for as long as he'd been in the army, which was going on eleven years now.

Besides, it had been Father's wish, not his, that he advance in the Hussars. Now that Father was gone . . . He shook off the pain of that.

Cass released a heavy breath. "So your plan was to abduct Kitty yourself in order to avoid having Mr. Malet abduct Kitty? And I'm merely along for the ride?"

When she put it like that, it did not sound like the best plan he had ever come up with. "Can we please stop calling it an abduction? It's a rescue, an *intervention*. You were with her, so I had to take you both. Besides, I couldn't travel with her alone without ruining her reputation. With two of you, the matter is less critical."

"You think so, do you?" Cass said, clearly irate. "Once my aunt realizes we're gone, she'll enlist people to find us, which in itself will ruin us."

"Yes, exactly!" Kitty cried. "I can't be ruined . . . I just *can't* be! What will Mama say? What will our *friends* say?"

Great. Now Cass was stirring up her cousin's ire. "Your mother won't say anything to anyone until she knows for certain what happened. And I made sure Malet's coachman knew my name, so she'll hear the truth before anyone can alert the other guests."

"And what truth is that?" Cass asked.

"That the two of you are with me. That Douglas sanctioned my intervention. That she has nothing to worry about. I'm sure she'll recognize my name the moment the coachman tells her of it."

Cass rolled her eyes. "Then what's to keep Malet from riding after us once he realizes that you're behind this so-called intervention?"

He ignored her obvious skepticism. "First of all, he won't realize it right away. I gagged his coachman and tied him up. Then I found an unattended carriage near the end of the line and deposited the coachman inside. I figured the last to arrive at the ball would also be the last to leave."

"How quick-thinking of you," Cass said with an arch smile. "Clearly you have experience at kidnapping women."

"Beginner's luck." He refused to correct her yet again on the subject of his *rescuing* Kitty. "My point is it could be hours before the coachman is found. By then we'll be safe at Armitage Hall."

Kitty sat up straight. "You're not taking us to Gretna Green?"

“Of course not. I’m trying to prevent an elopement, not perform one.”

“Oh, thank heaven!” the young heiress exclaimed. “Then that’s no skin off my back.”

Cass murmured, “ ‘Off my nose,’ dearest.”

“ ‘Nose,’ ‘back,’ ” Kitty said. “What difference does it make?”

“It makes a big difference, especially when you’re using it incorr . . .” Cass paused when she spotted his raised eyebrow. “You’re right. It makes no difference.”

“No, indeed,” Kitty said. “As long as the colonel isn’t carrying us off to Gretna Green, I don’t care.”

Hmm. He was having a hard time reconciling this Kitty Nickman with the writer of all those entertaining letters. But perhaps she required a pen to be witty.

“Glad you approve,” he said.

“Well, *I* don’t approve, Colonel,” Cass put in. “Why didn’t you just give us Douglas’s letter and then threaten to trounce Mr. Malet if he came near us again?”

“Because I know how seductive Malet can be. And I assumed Malet was having his carriage brought around because he’d already gained her cooperation.”

Kitty huffed out a breath. “He had *not*, I assure you. I wasn’t party to any elopement plans he spun on his own.”

“He called you his fiancée,” Heywood pointed out.

“Fiancée!” Cass glanced at her cousin. “You agreed to marry him?”

“Of course not. Mr. Malet is quite mistaken.” Kitty fiddled with her skirts. “I don’t know why he would say such a thing.”

When Heywood snorted, Cass tipped up her chin. “If Kitty says Mr. Malet mistook her interest, then he did. That wouldn’t surprise me. The man is a snake in the grass.”

“I thought it was ‘snake in the woods,’ ” Kitty said.

“No, dearest,” Cass said, avoiding his gaze.

“But snakes are bad no matter where they are,” Kitty persisted.

“Excellent point,” Cass said with a thin smile.

Something was odd here. The woman who’d written the letters he’d admired should have known such common turns of phrase.

“Anyway,” Heywood said, “whether in woods or in grass, his snakelike nature is precisely why I had to act quickly. And it sounded as if Kitty had

given him reason to believe she would welcome the abduction—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Kitty said warily. “No one *wants* to be abducted.”

“Well, something must have encouraged him to act,” Heywood said.

Silence fell on the carriage. Then he heard a distinctly unladylike oath. It must be coming from Cass. Kitty didn’t seem the sort to make oaths.

“I know what encouraged him,” Cass said. “Just this evening, I told him I’d oppose any attempt he made to marry Kitty, and that Aunt Virginia and Kitty would heed me. Perhaps that pushed him into taking reckless action.”

Heywood crossed his arms over his chest. “Or perhaps Kitty had already agreed to run away with him.”

“I told you, that’s absurd!” Kitty cried.

“Sadly, I don’t believe you.” He fixed her with a hard look. “I know how convincing Malet can be with a lady.”

“Oh?” Cass said. “Do you often come behind him to clean up his messes?”

“Often enough to recognize when he’s about to create another one,” he snapped. “With your cousin, who is clearly hiding something.”

“You are a very rude fellow,” Kitty said stoutly.

“And to think that I liked you.” Cass sniffed. “You’re not the man I thought you were.”

“A man of action? A soldier always prepared to battle the enemy?”

“An arrogant lord.”

He cast her a dry smile. “I *am* a duke’s son and a colonel. I’m entitled to a certain degree of arrogance, don’t you think?”

“And how does that characteristic separate you from Malet?” Cass asked.

The accusation grated on him. “My intentions are good. His are not.”

“How can you be sure?” Kitty asked.

“I know him and his antics,” Heywood said. “Trust me.”

Cass shot him a long look. “All right, I’ll concede that, but still you could have consulted us or at least shown Douglas’s letter to my aunt.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You said yourself that she ‘doesn’t like being pulled away from the whist table.’ The matter was urgent. I couldn’t wait for her cooperation.”

“He has a point, Cass,” Kitty said. “Mama likes Mr. Malet. She would probably have ignored your warnings.”

“I realize that!” Cass retorted. “Why do you think I felt the need to frighten the man off? I had no idea his response would be to attempt a kidnapping.”

Heywood kept his gaze on Kitty. While protesting the idea that she’d

encouraged Malet she acted as if she wished to give the man the benefit of a doubt. Something wasn't right in her reactions, if only he could put his finger on it.

Cass, however, was perfectly straightforward—she detested Malet. Heywood felt an odd relief that Cass wasn't the kind of woman to fall for that arse.

Not that it mattered, since Malet wouldn't dare to treat her as he had Valeria in Portugal, anyway. He'd only preyed on Valeria because she'd had no family to defend her. But Kitty had Douglas and her aunt and probably innumerable other relations.

They rode a long while in silence . . . until the sound of snoring filled the carriage. It came from Kitty, the delicate debutante.

"My cousin is quite tired," Cass said, her tone apologetic.

"I can tell."

That made Cass bristle. "You have the audacity to be snide that Kitty is exhausted when you're whisking us off against our will?"

Heywood wished he could see her better. Because he suspected that Cass in a temper would be quite a sight to behold—all passion and storm and biting wit. No doubt she was fighting to keep that storm at bay, to be a lady.

What was she like when she was *not* being a lady?

He shook off that line of thought, or tried to. What the devil was wrong with him? Given his circumstances, his attraction to Cass didn't matter. He must concentrate his efforts on Kitty. Yet he couldn't keep from asking, "Why did you say earlier, 'And to think that I liked you'? You hardly know me."

Rubbing condensation from a portion of the window, she stared out. "I-I knew you from your letters."

"The ones Kitty read to you."

"We share everything," she said warily.

"Then tell me, how does Kitty really feel about Malet?"

For a moment, Kitty's snoring seemed to diminish, but perhaps he only imagined it.

"I wish I knew," Cass said. "But she doesn't confide in me about him. Or about any man, really."

"So why did you say you never liked him? Did he ever try to court you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not the sort of woman Mr. Malet notices."

"Then he's a fool."

Damn. He hadn't meant to say that. He wished they could escape the stagnant air of the carriage, to where the frosty temperatures could clear his mind.

A long silence ensued. She gazed out the window, and the glow of moonlight on snow turned her profile into a study in alabaster and ivory.

Alabaster and ivory . . . what maudlin nonsense. What was next, the sun turning her profile into fire opals and rubies? It was Kitty he should be gazing at, if he meant to live up to his responsibilities. But his eyes stayed on Cass's silhouette.

"Anyway," she said after a moment, "it wouldn't matter if he *was* interested in me. I'd never choose him."

"I'm glad to hear it. A woman of your caliber would be wasted on Malet."

Judging from her sharp intake of breath, that was another remark he should not have made. But he wouldn't take it back.

She cleared her throat. "Is your family at Armitage Hall?"

"My mother, brother, and sister are, at the very least. So you needn't worry about you and Kitty not being properly chaperoned."

"Thank you. I wouldn't want to see Kitty ruined."

He stared hard at Cass. "You're not worried about your own ruin?"

"I learned long ago how to keep myself out of the line of fire."

Her uneasy laugh gave him pause. "Interesting choice of words."

She shrugged. "I'm a soldier's cousin. Besides, no one cares enough about a poor relation to attempt her ruin." Her eyes glimmered in the dark. "Even you, sir."

That told him all he needed to know. Cass wasn't nearly as immune to him as she pretended. It shouldn't affect him, but it did. Because he wasn't remotely immune to *her*.

Damnation. She was a complication he did not need.

She folded her hands at her waist. "At least we don't have to worry about Mr. Malet for the moment," she said in a throaty voice.

"What do you mean?"

She nodded toward the window. "The weather outside is frightful. If he doesn't depart until later, he'll have trouble following us."

Heywood frowned as he looked out. "Or even leaving Welbourne Place at all. It's a good thing we're headed south."

"Indeed it is," she said. "Though if we don't reach Armitage Hall before long, we may yet find ourselves stranded on the road."

“I doubt it. Let it snow. The horses are equipped with frost nails, and the estate isn’t far. Besides, Malet thinks I headed north to Gretna Green, so he’ll go in that direction first.”

“Why on earth would he think that?”

“Because that’s what I told his coachman I was doing. I figured it would buy us some time before we have to deal with the man again. The weather will be far worse up north. And when he finally does show up at my brother’s estate, we’ll be ready for him.”

“That’s assuming your mother will give refuge to two unannounced and unmarried ladies in our situation.”

He’d already considered that. “You can trust me to handle my mother’s questions to our mutual satisfaction.”

Cass tipped up her chin. “In other words, you intend to lie.”

“Would you rather I reveal all to Mother and risk being overheard by our servants? I’ve already had to buy our coachman’s silence—the fewer people who know the truth, the better. Once the gossip gets out, you’ll never repair the damage to your reputations.”

A heavy sigh escaped her. “In any case, I’m more worried about my aunt. I hate to think of her frantic over not knowing why Kitty and I have disappeared.”

“That will teach her to pay her daughter more mind. If I had not stepped in when I did, Malet would be off with Kitty and *you* and your aunt both would be frantic to know what had happened to her.”

“I realize that.” She yawned, quickly covering it with her hand. “Still, I don’t approve of your high-handed methods for forcing the issue. Nor, I suspect, would your mother if she knew of them.”

“Feel free to tell her. There’s no going back for us now. The road to your home will already be impassable. We have no choice but to take shelter at Armitage Hall until the snow melts. Look, why don’t you stop worrying and try to sleep a little?” He grinned at her. “I swear I won’t ravish you or Kitty until we reach Armitage Hall.”

She glared at him. “That isn’t remotely amusing.”

“I suppose not, under the circumstances,” he drawled.

A big yawn escaped her. “My goodness. Clearly I shouldn’t have had that last glass of negus at the ball.”

If he remembered correctly, negus was made of watered-down port with lemon juice and sugar. Who in God’s creation got drunk on that?

Apparently Cass did.

He chuckled. “No matter.” Covering her and Kitty with his greatcoat, he murmured, “Just sleep. It will be a few hours before we arrive.”

She laid her head against the squabs. It wasn’t long before he could hear her even breaths between Kitty’s snores.

He shook his head. The two women were so different. Kitty, on the one hand, was as insubstantial as champagne. Hard to believe she could have written all those clever and witty letters.

Cass, on the other hand, was as bracing as brandy, an interesting woman he couldn’t help liking.

He sighed. A pity she had no money. If he couldn’t marry an heiress whose dowry would help him save the estate his father had left him, he’d have to sell it for a song, then continue in the army for however long it took him to make enough to support a family.

Those were the simple facts. He could not afford to marry for love.

Chapter 4

When the carriage turned onto the gravel drive, Cass awoke. Her foggy brain struggled to take in where she was and why she and Kitty were covered with a voluminous greatcoat that smelled of cheroots and bay rum.

Then Heywood said, “We’re here,” and everything came flooding back. They’d been abducted by the only man who’d ever really interested Cass, at least on paper.

And apparently he’d carried them off to fairyland, because the snow-dusted mansion at the end of the drive bore all the marks of an enchanted castle. Twice as large as Welbourne Place and probably four times as large as Aunt Virginia’s manor, it had turrets and towers crowned with cupolas and windows that reflected the waning moon in ever-changing slices of light. Good heavens.

As soon as the coach halted in front of a massive ornamental door, Kitty jolted up in her seat. “Where are we? What are we doing? What’s wrong?”

When Heywood chuckled, Cass rolled her eyes at him and took Kitty’s hand. “Nothing’s wrong, dearest. We’ve merely arrived at Armitage Hall.”

Kitty blinked twice, then looked out. “Oh. I see.”

A footman had already come running out to put the step down and open the carriage door. Heywood reached under his seat and handed them pattens to buckle around their ballroom slippers, thus protecting them from the snow.

“How considerate!” Kitty exclaimed.

“And fortuitous,” Cass added, eyeing Heywood closely.

“My sister and mother use them regularly. That’s why they’re always in the coach.” He climbed down and turned to help each of the ladies out in turn. “Truly, Cass, you seem to be suspicious by nature.”

“She *is*,” Kitty said. “Let’s not beat around the brush—Cass always assumes the worst about gentlemen.”

Cass threw her shoulders back. “Are we going to stand out here in the cold discussing my faults or are we heading inside where it’s warm?”

With a laugh, he offered each lady an arm. “Shall we?”

The carriage pulled away, and Cass glanced back toward the drive. She caught her breath to see the snow already coming down in sheets of white. “It appears we made it here in the nick of time. It doesn’t show signs of stopping.”

“Yes.” His rumbling voice resonated clear to her toes. “We should be cut off from Malet for a few days at least.”

Thank goodness. Perhaps Mr. Malet would *finally* realize he’d picked the wrong heiress to intimidate.

They went inside. Despite the late hour, a woman in her fifties dressed in a nightgown and wrapper descended the stairs. Her graying red hair fell to her waist and she was closer to Kitty’s height than Heywood’s, but other than that, she and Heywood bore a decided resemblance. It was in the shape of her jaw, her high cheekbones, and her aquiline nose. So this pretty woman must be Heywood’s mother.

“My goodness, what have we here?” she asked, taking in Cass and Kitty with a curious gaze as Heywood gave the footman his greatcoat and hat. “I heard the carriage drive up in front and couldn’t believe you would return from your visit to Douglas’s relations in such bad weather.”

“I’m glad I did. These are two of the ladies I went to visit. On my way there I found their coach bogged down in the snow as they returned from a ball. The weather was already much worse there than it is here, so I dared not go farther north to take them home or else risk all of us becoming stranded.”

Cass barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the outrageous untruths, but his mother merely murmured, “How very wise of you.”

“I dropped their coachman off at the nearest inn and brought the ladies here. I didn’t think they should be left alone at an inn, and it wasn’t entirely proper for me to remain there with them. I hope you don’t mind.”

His mother raised an eyebrow at him. “You know I don’t, though I suspect there’s more to this story than you’re saying.”

“Would I lie to you, Mother?” he asked, cool as the snow they’d tracked in.

“If it kept you from getting into trouble? Absolutely.” She swept a weary hand over her face. “But let’s delay this discussion until tomorrow. I’m sure the ladies would like a hot cup of tea and a soft bed right now. So, be a dear and introduce me.”

Cass tried not to laugh as Heywood, suitably admonished, did so.

When he was done, Cass said, “We’re sorry to drag you from your bed so

late, Your Grace.”

“Nonsense. I love having guests, even when my son has come by them in a most unconventional fashion.”

Cass had to bite her tongue to keep from informing his mother just *how* unconventional a fashion it had been. But Heywood was right—it would serve no purpose to let his mother in on the secret.

Just then the butler stumbled in, still wearing his nightcap. “There you are, Mr. Fox,” the duchess said. She conferred with him a few moments in hushed tones.

As he hurried off, she faced them all with a smile. “It’s settled. We’re putting Kitty in my son Thornstock’s bedchamber and Cass in my son Greycourt’s old one. Neither Thorn nor Grey is returning from town until Christmas Eve, and I was planning to put Grey and his new wife in a bigger room upon their return, anyway. Thorn can take one of the other rooms. He’s not picky about such things.”

“If it helps matters,” Cass said, “Kitty and I don’t mind sharing a bedchamber or even a bed.”

“Nonsense,” the duchess said, most firmly. “We want you to be comfortable in case you have to stay through Christmas.”

Kitty’s face showed her chagrin. “Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but I hope we don’t impose upon you as long as all *that*.”

“It’s no imposition, I assure you, though I do understand. There’s no place like home for the holidays.” The duchess patted Kitty’s hand kindly before turning to Cass. “Fox is fetching the maids to make fires in your rooms and put fresh linens on the beds as well as help you change your clothes. I can loan both of you nightdresses and all the gowns, reticules, et cetera, that you might need. Since Gwyn and I are still in mourning, we aren’t using much of our wardrobes at present.”

“We’d be most grateful for anything you could provide, Your Grace,” Cass said. “As you might imagine, we came here with only the gowns on our backs.”

The duchess cast her son a look of pure mischief. “Yes, how odd that you ladies left a ball with no cloaks or capes or any sort of protection from the weather.”

“That’s my fault,” Heywood said blandly. “We were in such a hurry to outrun the storm that the ladies forgot their cloaks in the stranded carriage.”

Cass eyed him askance. The fellow lied with amazing aplomb.

But apparently he couldn't slide just any old tale past his mother, for she turned to stare at Cass. "Is that really what happened, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, Your Grace," she gushed, "we were so overcome with gratitude at the sight of your courageous son rushing to save us from certain death that we quite forgot our wits. We left everything behind in the coach—our reticules, our cloaks . . . our senses—in our eagerness to be rescued by our very own knight in shining armor."

To Cass's surprise, the duchess burst into laughter. "More like a knight in tarnished armor, knowing my son."

"Good God, Mother," Heywood grumbled.

"Oh, dear, am I embarrassing you?" his mother said with what sounded a great deal like glee. "I didn't think anything shamed you, Son. Before you became a colonel, you were, shall we say, as eager as your older brothers to sow your wild oats. Though it's been a few years since that was the case."

"At least you acknowledge that." Heywood arched an eyebrow. "And in my defense, Cass has a tendency to exaggerate."

"She does indeed, sir," Kitty said brightly. "How did you know?"

"I'm good at deducing things," he said, but he kept his gaze on Cass, as if trying to figure her out.

Which made her uncomfortable. Or perhaps it was just her inability to breathe around him that was making her uncomfortable.

"In any case," the duchess said, "please excuse our havey-cavey household. We've been short of staff for some time. So I'll have to take Kitty up to Thorn's room myself." She nodded to her son. "Would you mind showing Cass the way to Grey's bedchamber? The maid should already be there."

"Of course," Heywood said, with a furtive glance at Cass.

While Cass was still trying to read his look, the duchess said, "Thank you, Son. I'll have Fox send someone up with tea as soon as it's ready." She held out her hand to Kitty. "Now, come, my dear, let's go to your room before you fall asleep on your feet."

But Kitty was engrossed in observing Heywood and Cass. "You're standing under the kissing bough," she pointed out. "You know what *that* means."

Heywood looked up and smiled. "I do indeed." Then before Cass could so much as think, he bent to press a kiss to her lips.

It was perfunctory and chaste, meant to appease their audience. Yet it sent

a frisson of excitement down her spine. And when she drew back to stare into his face, she realized he'd had a similar reaction to that brief contact, because his eyes glinted with something that looked like desire.

Nonsense. She must be imagining things. A duke's son could have his pick of the ladies in society; he'd hardly be interested in a gentlewoman of no rank like her.

The duchess was watching them now with interest. When Heywood cleared his throat, the woman quickly turned back to Kitty. "I'll see you in the morning," she said to Cass and Heywood as she ushered Kitty up the stairs.

Heywood bowed to Cass. "After you, madam. Grey's room is upstairs, too, but on the floor above Thorn's bedroom."

They followed the duchess and Kitty up.

Feeling the silence weigh on her, Cass said, "I notice that your mother takes seriously the custom of wrapping greens around the banister rails for Christmas."

"My mother takes seriously any sort of Christmas celebration. That comes from having lived for nearly thirty years in Prussia, where they decorate large fir trees for the holiday. Father was ambassador there, you see, so we've become accustomed to having a household full of greenery during the season."

"Including the fir trees?"

He nodded. "The British don't practice the custom, but I'm told that Queen Charlotte always has one in the palace."

"How very interesting."

"You have no idea. At some point, Mother will surely have us making the tiny gifts that go on the tree. Since none of us have children yet, Mother invited the servants to bring theirs for Boxing Day, and she's making sure there's a gift on the tree for each child."

"Oh, how kind of your mother. That sounds lovely."

As they ascended the next flight, Heywood said, "It's a great deal of work. This place is massive, with plenty of rooms. Mother keeps most of them closed up, but the ones that are open she decorates with sprays of holly at the very least." He looked at Cass. "Incidentally, Gwyn's room is up here, too, so you'll have female company."

"Gwyn is your sister, right?" she asked, hoping that idle conversation would keep her mind off their brief kiss.

“Half sister. She and Thorn are twins by Mother’s previous husband, whose death enabled my father to court and marry our mother. Poor Gwyn and Thorn were left fatherless before they were even born. And Grey, whose father was married to Mother before the twins’ father, was left fatherless at a year old. So my father was the only father any of us ever knew.”

“And now he’s gone, too. Your poor mother, to be widowed three times.”

He slanted another glance at her. “Do I remember correctly that you lost both your father *and* your mother when you were young, which is how you ended up living with your aunt and cousin?”

“Yes. My parents died in a fire when I was nine. My aunt and uncle took me in without hesitation and looked after me from then on. So Kitty is more like a sister to me than a cousin.”

“And you’d do anything to protect her,” he said.

“Of course.”

They’d reached the next floor. He led her down a dimly lit hallway, then paused outside a closed door. They could hear noise from inside.

“The maid is still setting your room to rights.” He leaned against the wall. “We should let her finish.”

“Finish what?” she said archly. “Unpacking my nonexistent trunk and setting out my nonexistent clothes for tomorrow? I can handle that myself—I’m quite accomplished at managing imaginary tasks.”

Amusement glinted in his eyes. “But surely you wouldn’t want to change your own linens or build your own fire if you didn’t have to. And by the way, thank you for not telling my mother what was really going on.”

“There was no point.” She smirked at him. “Besides, I suspect she will get the truth out of Kitty before my cousin’s head even hits the pillow. Kitty is the worst liar I know.”

“I suppose that speaks well of her character.”

“It does. Kitty also has the best *character* of anyone I know.”

He searched her face. “Better than you?”

“Oh, yes. I’m much too cynical,” she said lightly. “While Kitty thinks well of everybody until they prove themselves to be bad, I think well of nobody until they prove themselves to be good. It’s my greatest fault.”

“I knew it!” he said, startling her.

“That it’s my greatest fault?”

“That you were the one who actually *wrote* all those letters to Douglas.”

Oh, no. She scrambled to formulate an answer. “I-I have no idea what you

mean.” She stifled a groan. What a brilliant response. She would have to do better than *that*.

“Don’t be coy,” he said. “We both know your cousin could never manage such deft prose.”

She wished she could revel in the compliment, but she still hoped to keep her promise to Kitty. “Why would you assume that?”

“Because in one of your missives to Douglas you used the same line about how you—or rather, you pretending to be Kitty—thought well of everybody until they proved themselves to be bad, et cetera, et cetera.”

Oh, dear. He remembered that? She didn’t know whether to be alarmed or flattered. “I was merely recalling what Kitty originally wrote.”

“I doubt that. Between the two of you, you’re the more clever by far. I daresay Kitty would never come up with such a bon mot, much less write it.”

A pox on him. Why must he be so observant? Kitty was going to be *terribly* hurt that Cass hadn’t kept their secret well enough to fool him. “How can you know that about my cousin? You just met her. You just met *me*, for that matter.”

“True, but I’ve seen enough to notice the differences between you. So why don’t you admit it? Kitty’s letters to Douglas were really your words. Your tales. Your witticisms and observations.” He loomed over her now, his face darkening. “And all the years I was imagining Douglas’s sister, Kitty, as being so sharp and interesting, it was really *you* I was thinking of.”

She swallowed hard. He sounded angry, though she couldn’t think why he would be. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters! Until I met you, I had no interest in Miss Isles . . . only in Miss Nickman, the lady who wrote fascinating letters. And now you tell me that the woman who intrigued me was *you*?”

His words made her heart clamor in her chest, which was pure madness. “I . . . The writer of the letters intrigues you?”

“Can you really be that oblivious?” He caught her chin in his hand. “Of course she does. And now I know why.”

“Why?”

His eyes shone, even in the dim light of the hallway. He kissed her then, not as he had under the mistletoe, but as she’d always imagined a husband kissing her . . . with a warmth that enveloped her and made her want more.

When he broke it off, his hungry expression made her shiver deliciously.

“That’s why,” he bit out. “Because of this . . . this *attraction* between us.”

He kissed her again, hot and hard, and she discovered there was so much more to kissing than she'd *ever* imagined. His mouth not only covered hers but parted her lips so he could slip his tongue inside.

Oh. Good. Lord. The feeling was beyond *anything*. Especially when he began to court her mouth with his tongue, sliding it in and out in silken strokes that made desire pool in her belly.

Eager for more, she looped her arms about his neck and pressed into him. He took that for what it truly was, an invitation to insanity, and pushed her against the door so he could kiss her with abject abandon, his hands roaming the sides of her and his body flush against hers as if he wished to absorb her into him.

She understood, since she wished the same. No kisses she'd ever had were so all-consuming—the few pecks on her lips by suitors dulled in comparison. He managed to convey such exquisite intensity that it made her ache and want and need anything he would give her. *Everything* he would give her.

All too soon he dragged his mouth from hers to stare down into her eyes. “Admit it, you wrote those letters. I already know the answer, but I want to hear you say it.”

Still trembling from the force of his kisses, she murmured, “Of course I wrote them.”

“I knew it,” he said, sounding fierce in his satisfaction.

She would have made some hot retort, but then he bent to kiss her again, blotting out her thoughts about anything but the taste of him and how masterfully he held her. He was conquering her like the bold officer he was, and she wasn't even trying to resist.

Lord save her.

* * *

Heywood realized what he was doing was wrong. Even knowing that Cass had written the letters didn't change that. Kitty was the one he needed to court, so the last thing he should be doing was kissing Cass.

Then why couldn't he stop?

Because her lips made him ache and burn. Because he'd spent years wondering about the woman who'd made him laugh countless times. The woman he had thought was Kitty. But it had been Cass all along. Now, despite the late hour, he wanted to keep on kissing her. He didn't care why.

He just wanted to explore every inch of her luscious mouth, to revel in its sweet taste, to soak in her scent—something flowery that made him harden.

Or perhaps his reaction was fueled by the sensation of her soft body against his.... Damn, but it felt amazing.

He tugged on her lower lip with his teeth and relished the moan she uttered.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” she whispered.

“You’re right. And yet I don’t want to stop. Do you?” He went back in for more, wishing he could kiss her for hours.

Suddenly, the door behind her was opening. She pushed him away, and he backed up to allow the door to open.

He was still fighting for control over his impulses when one of the maids peeked out. “Beg pardon, my lord,” she mumbled, her face reddening. “I-I wasn’t sure if the young miss was downstairs or—”

“I’m here.” Cass smiled soothingly at the maid. “His Lordship was just telling me about the Christmas traditions of the household.”

“Ohh!” The maid’s face brightened. “It sounds as if it will be very lovely, Miss Isles. The family brought back some interesting Prussian customs. You will enjoy your holiday here, I’m sure.”

“So our customs aren’t too foreign for you?” Heywood asked curtly, frustrated at having his interlude with Cass interrupted.

“Oh, no, my lord. I mean, we haven’t had a chance to do the Christmas part of it yet on account of your family not living here a year ago and being in mourning for your father this year, God rest his soul. But with your brother and mother in charge, it should still be very nice. Or so the duchess promised.”

“Then I know it will be so.” He smoothed his features into nonchalance. “Now, if you would give us a moment, I have a few more things I must tell Miss Isles.”

“Of course, my lord.” The maid retreated into the room, although he noticed she didn’t close the door.

“In the morning,” he told Cass, keeping his voice low, “I want to hear all about how you came to be writing letters to Douglas while pretending to be Kitty.”

“You are very nosy,” she said with a hint of rebellion. “And what business is it of yours, anyway?”

“As Douglas’s closest friend, at the very least I should be looking out for

his interests,” he said. “Am I right that he had no idea?”

“Of course he didn’t. Nor do I see why that requires you to be ‘looking out for his interests.’ ”

“Because knowing how sisters behave with their brothers, I assume you two were pulling the wool over his eyes all these years as some grand joke.”

“Don’t be absurd. We would never play a ‘grand joke’ on Douglas when he’s off fighting for his country.” She crossed her arms over her bosom. Her very attractive bosom. “I suppose you’re just angry that *you* were fooled, too. But we didn’t know you had anything to do with it, or perhaps we wouldn’t have continued it for so long. In fact, I’d greatly appreciate it if you would keep our subterfuge secret now, too. And not tell Kitty that I revealed it to you. I promised her I wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“I can’t discuss it tonight.” She looked back at the maid and lowered her voice. “I’m exhausted, and thanks to a certain individual, I won’t even get to sleep in my own bed. So I hope you’ll forgive me, my lord, if I retire.”

“Of course, my lady,” he said, matching her tone as he made an exaggerated bow. “By all means.”

A ghost of a smile crossed her lips before she squelched it. “Thank you.” Then she curtsied and went into the bedchamber, closing the door behind her.

He stood frozen a long moment, shaking his head. Never had he met a more infuriating female. Or a more fascinating one.

Cursing himself for that unwise thought, he marched downstairs to his own bedchamber. Bad enough that the woman he desired—the one with smoky gray eyes and golden-brown curls escaping her hairpins—was the one who wasn’t an heiress. But now that he’d let himself get carried away kissing Cass, he would have a hard time settling for Kitty.

He would have to start to put some distance between himself and Cass. And start focusing on Kitty. He would do that tomorrow.

Too bad he couldn’t stop thinking about those kisses.

Chapter 5

Cass awoke very late, no surprise there. With a certain gentleman's kisses filling one's head, it was hard to fall asleep. By the time she'd slipped into slumber, it had been near dawn. Now she felt like a slugabed.

All of a sudden, she sensed someone watching her. She turned her head to the door and saw Kitty peeking around the corner of it.

"Oh, thank heavens you're finally awake!" Kitty cried. "I thought you were going to sleep all day. I've looked in on you half a dozen times at least!"

Cass sighed. There were days when her cousin's boundless energy wore on her. This was one of those days.

She rolled over to put her back to the door. "Go away," she mumbled.

"Don't mind her," Kitty said. "She's always grumpy in the morning. She doesn't mean it. Come on in."

The realization that Kitty was talking to someone else made Cass bolt upright in the bed and catch the covers up to her neck. What the devil?

Then, with a mixture of disappointment and relief, she realized the person Kitty was ushering in wasn't Heywood but a young woman holding a breakfast tray. Of course it was—even Kitty wouldn't be so foolish as to usher a *man* into Cass's bedchamber. And Cass wasn't disappointed that the person wasn't Heywood. Not in the least.

Liar.

Kitty plopped down on the end of the bed. "Gwyn, this is Cass. Cass, this is Gwyn, Heywood's half sister."

She'd already guessed that. Gwyn was a younger version of her mother, only taller. And with green eyes instead of blue. But she had the same jaw as her mother and Heywood, the same crooked smile, and the same nose.

Gwyn was gazing on Cass with a bemused expression. "Lovely to meet you. I would apologize for having been party to your cousin's waking you from your slumber except that Kitty has spent the past two hours singing your praises and making me positively eager to meet you."

“Kitty has a tendency to gush about the people she loves,” Cass said. “Don’t get her started on her brother, Douglas.”

“Too late,” Gwyn said with a smile. “But we already knew about Douglas, since Heywood sings his praises, too.”

Cass would have remarked on that if not for the welcome aroma that had captured her attention. “You wouldn’t by any chance have coffee on that tray, would you?”

“I would, indeed,” Gwyn said as she set the tray on the table next to the bed. “Kitty made it clear that you prefer coffee to tea. Just like Heywood, as a matter of fact, although he claims that his preference comes from serving in the army for so many years. You aren’t by any chance a secret member of the Twenty-Fifth Hussars, are you?”

Cass laughed as she poured a cup and then added cream. “No.” She could see she was going to like Gwyn. “And if I were, I wouldn’t admit it. How could it remain secret otherwise?”

Gwyn chuckled, but Kitty was not amused. “Hurry up and eat your breakfast,” she said. “Heywood has invited us to go dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh!”

“Where on earth is Heywood getting a sleigh?” Cass asked.

“Papa brought ours from Prussia,” Gwyn explained as Cass ate a slice of buttered toast and sipped coffee. “Sleighs are common there, so Mama tried to talk him out of bringing it here by pointing out that it never gets cold enough in England to use one. But he swore that Lincolnshire had plenty of winter weather.” She gestured to the window. “Apparently he was right.”

Cass took her coffee over to the window so she could look out. “Heavens,” she whispered. “That’s quite a wonderland of snow, isn’t it? Almost as much as we get farther north.”

“Yes,” Kitty said, her voice trembling, “so we can’t go home anytime soon. It’s quite concerning.” Then she brightened. “But it’s lovely weather for a sleigh ride together with you. So get dressed.”

“In what? My ball gown and dancing slippers?” Cass asked, though she too would love a ride in a sleigh.

“No need to worry about that,” Gwyn said. “Mama and I have pulled together some clothes for you two, since we’ve pretty much got both heights covered. And if neither of you shares our shoe sizes, we’ll borrow boots from a servant who does.”

With that, Cass and Kitty had two maids trooping in and out, bringing

riding habits and walking gowns and whatever the well-dressed lady might need for a jaunt outdoors.

Before long, Cass, Gwyn, and Kitty were dressed in riding habits as they headed downstairs to the coat closet to find warm outer garments. As soon as they'd chosen cloaks and scarves, they were joined by Heywood and his brother Sheridan, the Duke of Armitage. Cass would have known the duke anywhere since he was a thinner, more serious version of Heywood, with greener eyes and browner hair. Heywood performed the introductions, though it seemed to Cass that the duke was too distracted to pay them much mind.

Heywood, however, seemed cheerful, and he *looked* quite different in daylight. Now she could see that his brown hair was actually sun streaked and, like his tanned skin, spoke to his long sojourn in Portugal. Last night it had also been too dim, even in Armitage Hall, to see that his eyes were of a hazel so warm it mirrored his smile.

So warm that it made her heart race, which couldn't possibly be healthy.

"I trust that you ladies slept well?" Heywood asked, though he was staring right at *her*, turning her insides to mush.

Before she could answer, Sheridan snorted. "I'm not sure how *anyone* sleeps well during an abduction."

Her gaze narrowed in on Kitty, who blushed. "I-I know we weren't supposed to say anything, but I was tired and the duchess was so kind. . . ."

Heywood gave a rueful shake of his head. "Turns out you were right, Cass. Mother got the truth out of her. This morning the entire family threatened me with bodily harm if either of you finds yourself embroiled in scandal as a result of my actions."

"But they know the situation, right?" Cass asked, unaccountably disturbed at the idea of his family criticizing him.

"We do," Sheridan put in. "And we're more than happy to support the tale that you and your cousin were coming home from the ball when you were caught in the snowstorm." He stared at his brother. "Are you *certain* Malet won't ruin their reputations by revealing the truth?"

"Not until he's sure he's lost any chance with Kitty. And since he knows by now that I took them, he also knows that I will tear him apart publicly if he even attempts to smear them. I know *his* secrets, too, after all."

Kitty smiled weakly. "At least we'll get a sleigh ride out of this mad affair, right, Cass?"

"Indeed."

“The two of you are far too forgiving,” Gwyn said. “If it had been me, I would have entered this house screeching bloody murder.”

“We know, Sis,” Heywood said dryly. “You screech bloody murder if Thorn cuts your allowance by a single guinea.”

“Not true!” she said in mock protest. “It has to be two guineas at the very least.”

Sheridan rolled his eyes. “On that note, I believe I will go.”

“You’re not joining us for the sleigh ride?” Gwyn asked.

“Afraid not. I have too much work to do. The sleigh only fits two, anyway, and Heywood is more than happy to carry each of you around one at a time.”

Gwyn sniffed. “I don’t need Heywood to drive a sleigh. I can drive one of our guests around myself.”

“Ooh, take me!” Kitty cried. “You said you would show me the ruins.”

Cass stifled a groan. That left *her* to ride with Heywood alone. What the devil was her cousin up to now?

“If we’re going to the ruins,” Gwyn told Kitty, “we’ll need much warmer outer garments than we’d planned.”

“In that case, while you and Kitty paw through the closet some more, Cass and I will take the first go-around.” Heywood looked at Cass. “That’s assuming you didn’t have your heart set on touring the ruins, too.”

“I merely want to see how the snow looks in sunlight. And to test your sleigh’s mettle, of course. I don’t care about the ruins.”

He grinned. “That’s good, since I have no clue how to find them. After all, I’ve only been at Armitage Hall a few days.”

“Why, sir,” Cass teased him, “I believe you’re the first man in England to admit that he gets lost occasionally.”

“Oh, don’t let him fool you!” Gwyn called out from the coat closet. “He’s as irritable as any other fellow when his navigational prowess is challenged. He used to drag us all over Berlin—on foot, mind you—while insisting he knew where he was going.”

“I *did* know where I was going,” Heywood said, sparing a wink for Cass. “You lot simply couldn’t appreciate the value of taking the scenic route in order to tour the city.”

Gwyn emerged from the closet with a fur muff in one hand and a wool scarf in the other, which she held out to Cass. “You’ll probably need these, too, especially if Heywood decides to take any ‘scenic routes’ in the sleigh. It’s cold outside.”

As Cass wrapped the scarf about her neck and put her hands in the muff, Heywood snorted. “You’re just jealous that I’m a better driver than you, Gwyn.”

“In your dreams,” she said gaily. “You’re only saying that because we don’t own a second sleigh. If we did, I’d race you and make you eat those words.”

“Don’t listen to her,” he murmured to Cass as Gwyn returned to the closet. “She can’t drive a gig, much less a sleigh.”

“I heard that!” Gwyn called out.

He was still chuckling as he led Cass out the door. She was smiling herself. His banter with Gwyn made her wish she had an older brother. Her cousin Douglas wouldn’t suffice—he was her age and hadn’t been home in years. But she could tell from watching the duchess’s children that they were comfortable with one another. *Loved* one another. It made her wish she’d had siblings of her own.

Then Heywood placed a hand in the small of her back to help her into the sleigh, and all thought vanished into the ether. Goodness. She was glad she’d chosen a very thick cloak for their jaunt. Otherwise, the warmth from his hand would melt her clear to her toes.

Her reaction to him was foolish, really. He couldn’t possibly have any real interest in her, those kisses notwithstanding. Why, he probably kissed women like that all the time. But still, the thought of riding beside him left her breathless.

That would not do. The last time she gave her heart to a man, she’d had it badly battered. So this time she must take better care of it. Which was difficult when Heywood joined her in the sleigh, his hard body right up against hers. Had his brother said that the sleigh only fitted two? He’d lied. It only fitted one and a half, particularly when one of the people was a heavily muscled army officer. She and Heywood were squeezed so tightly together that she didn’t know where he ended and she began.

Good Lord. Her blood was pumping just at the sensation of being pressed to him, no matter how chastely.

He must have felt it, too, for he refused to look at her as they glided down the drive between two snow-covered lawns toward a line of birches that separated the estate from the main road. The sleigh bells jingled merrily and the horse trotted sure-footedly along the drive.

“Where are we going?” Cass asked as they neared the main road.

Now that they were alone together, he looked somber. “You’ll see. It’s not far.” He dragged in a heavy breath. “So why don’t you tell me how you came to be writing the letters from Kitty to her brother?”

Devil take it. She’d hoped he’d forgotten. “It’s . . . um . . . rather complicated.”

“All the best deceptions are,” he said coldly.

“It wasn’t like that.” Cass debated how much to reveal. But if she were to convince him to keep the secret on Kitty’s behalf, she should probably tell him all of it. “Back when Douglas first left home, Kitty was only eight. She’d had trouble learning to read and write as it was, but she desperately wanted to correspond with her brother, to cheer him up.”

Cass stared down at the muff encasing her hands. “She tried to do it herself, but her handwriting was illegible, her grammar was abominable, and she didn’t know what to say.”

“Douglas would have understood, I’m sure. She *was* still a child, after all.”

“A child whose father had rigid standards for his children that she couldn’t meet. Since I was four years older than she, I sort of took over the duties of a governess.”

“At *twelve*?”

She shrugged. “I convinced him that I was perfectly capable of schooling Kitty. That way she and I could hide the fact that she . . . had problems with learning.” Realizing she sounded disloyal, she added hastily, “Kitty is the sweetest, most generous woman you could ever meet, but I’m sure you’ve noticed that she’s not, well—”

“Very bright.”

Cass sighed. “The trouble was, she was still terrified of disappointing her father and mortified by her difficulties with writing. She always had to give the letters to him to be franked, and he always took the liberty of reading them.”

“So you took over her correspondence to make sure she appeared to be clever.”

“Exactly.”

His face showed none of what he was thinking. “But Squire Nickman has been dead now for two years. Surely you could have explained all of this to Douglas.”

“And have him know that it wasn’t really his sister writing him so faithfully? Have her suffer the humiliation of having her flaws discovered? I

couldn't do that to her. After her father died, she started to blossom. Where she would hardly speak in his presence, she now voices her opinions readily to anyone who will listen."

"Rather like you."

She eyed him balefully. "My point is, she has become a different woman since her father's death. She's not nearly as self-conscious. Besides, once we'd embarked on that scheme, it was difficult to go back. It didn't seem necessary to trouble Douglas with the depth of our deception while he was away fighting for our country." She shifted to look up at him. "Why does it matter to you? Why do you act as if *you* have somehow been betrayed?"

"You'll understand shortly," he said, though his expression gave away nothing.

They pulled onto the main road instead of touring the estate as she'd expected. Unencumbered by ruts or other carriages, the sleigh fairly flew along. A short while later, they turned down a different drive, headed for another house.

Heywood drew up in front of the smaller, run-down home as if he knew it well. Crumbling cornices, missing roof tiles, overgrown ivy tipped with snow, and front steps in disrepair were signs that its owner had deserted it.

"What is this place?" she asked. "It isn't the ruins Gwyn was referring to, is it?"

He gave a choked laugh. "No. Those are just manufactured to look that way. These ruins are real—the manor house of my estate, Hawkcrest."

"*Your* estate?" she said, hardly able to credit it.

He gazed upon the house as if torn between pride and despair. "My father left it to me after his mother, my grandmother, left it to *him*. It was always the property given to the second son, and as such was unentailed. I'm told it used to be quite fine." Drawing a folded paper out of his greatcoat pocket, he handed it to her. "You can get some sense of how it looked then from this."

Wary of his solemn mood, she opened the sheet of paper to find a sketch of a lovely Palladian home, with pretty gardens nearby and ivy growing up its walls of red brick. "How different it was!"

"Years of neglect have reduced it to a shambles. Uncle Armie was supposed to be taking care of it for my father while we were abroad, but clearly he chose to ignore it." He faced her, bitterness etched in his features. "Of course, he didn't mind pocketing the rents he was supposed to use in maintaining the house."

“Rents? It has tenants?”

Dragging in a heavy breath, he nodded. “He neglected to repair their homes as well. Bloody arse.” He caught himself. “Excuse my language. It’s just that each time I look on it, I’m hit by anger and despair all over again.”

“I can understand that,” she said. “It’s unconscionable for anyone to neglect a pretty place like this.”

He smiled at her. “Would you like to see the inside?”

“Oh, yes!” She paused. “As long as timbers won’t rain down on me, that is.”

“It’s in a better shape inside, though not by much.”

He helped her out of the sleigh and tied off the horse. As they climbed the steps, he pulled her here or there to keep her from treading on the crumbling bits.

Once they entered the house, she was struck dumb by the quality of the marble floors and the wood paneling on the walls.

Not to mention... “Look at that stunning staircase!” She stared up at the carved oak balusters and banister of the once-beautiful piece. The steps needed to be redone, to be sure, but the staircase still had an elegance all its own. She ran a hand over the intricately carved newel post. “Such craftsmanship should never be neglected.”

“I agree,” he said, his voice hoarsening. “It’s my favorite part of the house. How did you guess?”

“Perhaps I can read your mind.”

He stared at her hand, which was still stroking the newel post. “I doubt that. If you could, you would *not* approve.”

His eyes glittered in the dim light, sending a sweet frisson of anticipation down her spine. “Oh?” she choked out. “And why is that?”

“Because my mind is wondering what it would feel like to have you touch *me* as tenderly as you’re touching that post.” After drawing off one of his gloves with his teeth, he took her hand in his and drew *her* glove off.

Oh, dear. She should make *some* protest to that, shouldn’t she?

Instead, she stood there like a ninny, waiting to see what he would do next. And when he pressed her palm to his warm, whisker-rough jaw, a tremor of pleasure shook her.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“Yes.” It wasn’t entirely a lie, was it?

Unbuttoning his greatcoat, he pulled her close so he could wrap it partly

about her. When she raised an eyebrow at him, he said, “It works better than if I take the coat off and put it on you. This way we can share our bodies’ heat.”

“It will make it awfully hard to continue touring the house,” she teased.

He tipped up her chin with one finger. “Is that what you want to do?”

The intensity in his gaze made it impossible for her to look away or even speak. She shook her head no, perfectly aware of what he was really asking.

He proved that by kissing her, gently at first, then with more fervor. Her response was to slide her hands inside his open morning coat and about his waist, a gesture that apparently encouraged him to deepen the kiss.

They stood there several moments while he plundered her mouth, softening her resistance with every plunge of his tongue. Then he kissed a path to her ear, where he rasped, “You are too damned tempting by half.”

“I don’t . . . mean to be.”

“I know that.” He tugged on her earlobe with his teeth, firing her blood. “I also know I have no business kissing you like this.”

“That’s true.”

“Shall I stop?”

“No,” she breathed. Oh, she *did* like to live dangerously.

With a growl, he unwrapped her scarf, then kissed down her cheek to the small amount of her neck showing between her cloak and the ribbons of her borrowed quilted bonnet. Then he kissed and tongued the hollow at her throat, turning her to mush.

“Is this why you brought me here?” She clung to his waist. “To have your wicked way with me?”

“Oh, trust me, if I’d intended that, I wouldn’t have brought you to an ice-cold manor house with no furniture.”

“Saved by the weather,” she said lightly, then pulled his head back up so she could meet his gaze. “But just for the sake of argument, how *would* you . . . go about having your wicked way with me? Assuming we were somewhere warmer. And more comfortable. And *if* you were even to do such a roguish thing.”

Fire sparked in his eyes, so hot that she wondered if she should have spoken those impulsive words aloud. Then he shifted her so her back was against the staircase balusters.

Oh, dear. Any other woman would panic. But she knew in her bones that he was a gentleman. That she could trust him.

“First,” he said hoarsely, “I would strip all these layers of winter clothing from you . . . leaving you in your shift and naught else.”

The image he conjured up set her heart pounding in her chest. “That sounds *quite* wicked.”

“Oh, I’m just getting started.” He pressing a lingering kiss against her temple, where her pulse beat madly. “Next, I would take down your mass of unruly curls and run them through my fingers.”

“H-How did you know my curls were ‘unruly’?”

“No matter how you pull them up and tuck them in with hairpins, they’re still going to rebel.” Lowering his voice to a bare whisper, he said, “And I *like* rebellious, unruly curls. They’re particularly appropriate for rebellious, unruly ladies.”

“I’m not rebellious and unruly,” she said stoutly. But sometimes she was, and they both knew it.

“Once I had us both aroused and eager, I would slide your shift off over your head and stand back to get a good look at you in all your naked glory.”

Her breath dried up in her throat. “Do I get to have a good look at *you* naked?”

He blinked. “Do you want one?”

“Of course.”

“Yet you’re not rebellious and unruly *at all*,” he teased.

She thrust out her chin. “It’s merely that I’ve never . . . seen a man undressed. It follows that I would be a little curious.”

“Just a little, eh?” He bent close to her ear. “For you, sweetheart, I’d take off every stitch of my clothing until we were naked . . . together.” His breath came fast and hot against her cheek, already warm from the blushes he was provoking. “Then I’d begin the touching.”

“The touching?” she squeaked.

He took one finger and oh so lightly ran it down her neck and then over the curve of one breast. “I’d caress your breasts with my hands and mouth until I had you swooning in my arms.”

His finger circled her nipple, making her breath come in quick gasps. She fancied she could actually feel his bare finger circling her bare nipple, though that was highly unlikely since she was fully clothed.

“And then . . .” he said, his thumb now rubbing her nipple, making her yearn for more.

When he paused, she prompted him with, “And then?” Good Lord, she was

swooning in his arms already. How much more could there be?

He shoved away from her abruptly, his breath coming in hard gasps. “We should stop talking about this. Before I do something I regret.”

The swift change caught her off guard. “But you wouldn’t.”

“I might. You have no idea how easy it would be for me to . . .” He huffed out a breath of frustration. “Unfortunately, that wouldn’t be right. Not with you.”

“I see.” She did. He was being the sensible one. And somewhere deep inside she appreciated it.

Very deep inside. Because she still couldn’t get past the idea of his caressing her breast with his mouth. She wanted to try that with him. Desperately.

Then the rest of his words hit her with brutal force. “What do you mean, ‘Not with you’? Because I’m a maiden? Because you don’t actually know me very well?” She swallowed hard. “Or because you want someone else?”

He raked his hair away from his forehead. “None of those. Though it *should* be all of those.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.” He released a heavy breath. “Earlier you asked why I act as if *I* had somehow been betrayed. So I’m going to tell you why.”

He began pacing the foyer. “When I agreed to help save Kitty I had an ulterior motive. Until then I’d had an idea in my head of who she was, what she was like. Her letters—*your* letters—had sustained me through many a battle. Douglas knew that about me, and we’d discussed whether I would have his permission to marry Kitty if I liked her and she liked me.”

Her stomach began to churn. “But Kitty wasn’t who you thought she was, thanks to me.”

He nodded. “Unfortunately, my reason for needing to marry her hasn’t changed.”

A chill swept through her. She could see where this was going. Especially since Heywood wouldn’t look at her. “You need Kitty’s fortune.”

With a wave of his hand to indicate their surroundings, he said, “I want to do right by my inheritance. But the manor and the tenant farms are so run-down that repairs will cost more than I have, since the army doesn’t allow the sale of a colonel’s commission. And it will take a large sum indeed to set the estate to rights.”

She resisted the temptation to tell him about her own fortune. It was too

important to her to know whether he truly wanted her for herself and not for her money. If she told him now, she would never, ever be sure. She just couldn't take that risk.

"So you mean to court Kitty then?" she asked, fighting desperately to keep the jealousy out of her voice.

He rounded on her. "Don't be a fool. Of course I don't mean to court Kitty. Not now, not ever."

Oh, thank goodness. She wasn't sure she could bear that. "Why not? Because she isn't clever and witty?"

Stalking up to grab her by the arms as if he meant to shake her, he said, "Because I cannot wed one woman while I'm lusting after her cousin. If I were to marry Kitty, you would always be near. She's your closest relative. Anytime she and I went to visit her mother, we'd see you. *I'd see you.*"

Fighting to hide how those words had wounded her, she pulled away from him. "Not if I marry, too. I could, you know. I'm not some pathetic woman who can't attract a man. When I have my season—"

"I've no doubt of your ability to find a husband, trust me," he said in a hollow voice. "But you'd still be in the same family. At least if I marry some other woman—one not related to you—I could arrange matters so I'd never see you again." He stiffened. "But not if you're still in Kitty's life, which, of course, you would be."

The truth suddenly dawned on her. "That's why you're so angry that the Kitty of the letters isn't Douglas's sister, the heiress."

"Not angry, exactly," he said. "Just . . . discouraged by my dearth of choices. I can either marry an heiress so I can retire and concentrate on setting my estate to rights. Or I can sell the estate at a substantial loss, continue to serve in the army, and try to support a family on an officer's pay, which isn't that much."

"But in the latter case, you would at least be happily married," she ventured.

"Ah, but I wouldn't have much opportunity to enjoy that, would I? I couldn't—*wouldn't*—take my wife with me to war. It's no place for a woman. Or children, for that matter. So I'd have to put up with seeing my family every few years, whenever I could get leave. What kind of life is that? Not one I relish, I confess."

"Perhaps you could get a better posting," she said. "One where you could take a wife with ease."

“I don’t want a better posting. I want to begin my *real* life at Hawkcrest. It was my father’s dream that I serve in the army, not mine. With Mother getting older and Sheridan needing help with the ducal estate, I want to be here. For them. For myself.”

She forced a smile. “That’s why you need to marry an heiress.”

“Yes.”

“Then you should marry one,” she said, and headed for the door, now desperate to get back to Armitage Hall before she did something or told him something she would always regret.

Chapter 6

The snow didn't melt for a whole week, or rather it melted just enough to freeze into a sheet of ice at night, which still made the roads impassable. The day of Christmas Eve was the first time they saw any real thawing.

Heywood had never liked being cooped up inside for most of the day, but he hated it when it meant spending time with the one woman he couldn't have. Especially when Cass—and Kitty—had charmed his family so thoroughly, though in different ways. Kitty's sweet nature had won their hearts, while Cass's sensible ways and witty retorts had won their minds. Meanwhile, he'd spent the last week avoiding mistletoe, avoiding sleigh rides, and avoiding *her*.

But with the snow thawing, he'd come to the drawing room late in the day in search of her. He'd put it off as long as he could, but now they had to consult about how to handle Malet so as to do the least damage to the ladies' reputations. Still, he took a moment to stand in the doorway and watch as Gwyn, his mother, Cass, and Kitty debated the merits of various schemes for constructing a gingerbread house.

Cass looked like a bachelor's dream this morning. She wore another of Gwyn's gowns—some frothy chocolate-brown confection-looking thing—that was a bit tight on her, which meant it showed off her figure to great advantage. He imagined he could even see her cleavage beneath her lacy fichu. Her hair was messily put up into a loose knot he just wanted to undo, and her cheeks and lips were rosy as cherries from the fire.

He liked cherries. He liked to lick the juice as it ran down his fingers. He'd be happy to lick anything off of Cass, off her bosom or her plump lips or her

Devil take it! How much longer must he endure this torture? That interlude at Hawkcrest had damned near killed him—her coyly encouraging him to describe what he wanted to do to her while he struggled to keep from letting her see how aroused he was. Many more encounters like that and he'd be begging her to marry him and to hell with the consequences.

Thank God that at that moment Gwyn spotted him, jumped up, and hurried over to pull him to the table. “You have to break the tie. Kitty and Mama want to make our gingerbread creation look like Armitage Hall. Cass and I think it should be a fairy-tale castle.”

“I can easily resolve your problem.” He picked up a slab of gingerbread and bit off the end.

The ladies gasped, and Gwyn swatted his hand when he reached for another piece.

“What?” he asked. “Once you don’t have enough gingerbread, your dispute is settled.”

“You are such a *man*, Heywood,” Gwyn grumbled.

“If you’re trying to insult me, Sis, you’ll have to try harder.” He grinned at her unrepentantly. “And to be fair, you ladies are such *women*, to be fussing over what kind of pretend gingerbread house to make.”

“His Lordship is right,” Kitty said. “We’re making mountains out of molars.”

“Molehills,” Cass gently corrected her as she stirred a bowlful of a white substance.

“Now, see? That’s what I mean.” Kitty sniffed. “What does it matter if it’s a molar or a molehill? It’s all the same.”

Stifling a laugh, Heywood picked up another piece of gingerbread, broke a piece off the edge, and popped it into his mouth while the ladies were distracted.

“Heywood Wolfe, stop that this minute!” his mother said. “So help me, if we have to get Cook to bake more gingerbread when she’s already busy preparing tomorrow’s feast I shall ban you from Christmas dinner!”

“No, you won’t,” he said. “You would never ban your favorite son from anything.”

“You’re not her favorite son,” Gwyn said. “Thorn is.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” their mother snapped. “I don’t play favorites.”

Heywood grinned. “Pretend all you like, Mother. I’ll keep your secret in front of the others.” He lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “But you and I both know the truth.”

“I dare you to repeat that in front of Thorn and Grey,” Gwyn said. “They’ll be here any minute, and I rather fancy the prospect of watching them beat you in a battle of wits.”

“Beat me!” Heywood said. “Not a chance.”

“There will be no beating and no battles this Christmas,” his mother said firmly. “For the first time in years I’ll have all my children together for Christmas, and I mean to enjoy it.”

Though Kitty was giggling at the interplay, Cass was ignoring it.

Cass was ignoring *him*, which he found annoying. He walked over to stand beside her chair. “What’s in the bowl?”

“Icing.”

“Aren’t you going to gild the gingerbread?” He remembered the gingerbread houses of his childhood, golden and shining and so enticing for a boy.

“No gilding,” Gwyn said firmly. “It’s dangerous for the children.”

“How so?”

“Because we can’t afford real gold leaf, only Dutch foil. And there are many reports that the copper in Dutch foil is bad for children.”

“Ah.” Money. It was always about the lack of filthy lucre. Even for him. He peered into Cass’s bowl. “What flavor is the icing?” he asked, though he already knew from having helped Mother with countless gingerbread houses as a child.

“Vanilla, of course. But I’m not sure it’s stiff enough to hold the pieces together. I may need more sugar.”

Before she could stop him, he scooped up a dollop with his finger, then licked it off. “Hmm. I agree. Definitely needs sugar.”

Cass’s smile caught him off guard. Her smiles were like watching the sun peek from behind a cloud, giving him hope that the day might be fine after all. Why must she have such a lovely smile?

His mother snatched the bowl and put it out of his reach. “Will you stop that? If you keep eating all our hard work, we’ll have nothing left. Go make yourself useful, and fetch your brother. The footmen are already setting up the tree in the ballroom. I was thinking of waiting to decorate it until Grey and Bea—and later, Thorn—arrive, but with the snow only partly melted, that might be quite late. So I suppose it’s best that we at least get a start on it. Tomorrow, we won’t have time, and I hate to disappoint the children on Boxing Day.”

“Boxing Day. Right.” He vaguely remembered his parents handing out boxes to the servants on the day after Christmas, adhering to the English custom, though the family was living in Prussia. But once he’d left home, he’d thought no more about it, and the practice had faded into the recesses of

his memory. “Will these children be eating the Armitage Hall made of gingerbread?”

“They’ll be eating a gingerbread *castle*,” Cass chided him, though her eyes were dancing. “Assuming you don’t eat all the parts of it first.”

“Just one more . . .” he said, and reached for another piece of gingerbread.

His mother slapped his hand. Hard.

“Ow!” he said, rubbing his hand with a frown. “You’d think the stuff was actual gold from the way you ladies protect it.”

“If it were gold, you wouldn’t *have* to fetch Sheridan,” Gwyn said mildly. “He’d already be in here calculating its worth and figuring out which bills to pay off with it. ’Tis a pity it’s *not* gold.”

Heywood’s gaze shot to Cass. “If it were, Sheridan would have to fight *me* for it,” he said.

A blush rose in Cass’s cheeks that made him ache everywhere. Then she shifted her gaze from him, leaving him feeling bereft. God, but he hated this. It wasn’t fair. He *knew* what he wanted. He just had no right to claim it.

Frustrated now, he left to find Sheridan. Any conversation with Cass about Malet would have to wait. Because if Heywood got her alone, he couldn’t be responsible for his actions. Then he’d have no choice but to marry her. Unlike Malet, he would never seduce and abandon a woman, no matter how much he desired her.

Shaking off the memory of poor Valeria’s lifeless body, he went in search of his brother. It took him only a short while to unearth Sheridan from the stacks of papers upon the desk in the study, which had once been their uncle’s and then their father’s. How strange to be in a place that by rights was home, yet didn’t feel remotely like home to Heywood.

“Mother wants you,” he told Sheridan.

Looking haggard, Sheridan pushed his chair back from the desk. “For what?”

“The tree has been erected in the ballroom. Though if you need me to tell her I couldn’t find you . . .”

“No, I’ll go.” Sheridan rose. “I need a break from poring over numbers that I can’t make work to my satisfaction.”

As they strode down the long hall with its picture windows, Sheridan paused to look out at the ice-crusting lawn and the melting icicles under the eaves. “You realize that Malet will be here as soon as the roads are passable. If his aim is revenging himself on you and Douglas, he will at least try to

regain Kitty. Or have it out with you.”

“True. But it should take him a bit longer to come here. He’ll have headed north.” He’d told Sheridan everything after his brother had badgered him for the truth. Almost everything, that is. Sheridan didn’t know about his dilemma with Kitty and Cass.

“Have you a plan for dealing with him if he does show up here?” Sheridan asked.

“I do. When he comes to the door, my plan is to shoot him through the heart.”

Sheridan eyed him askance. “And then you will hang.”

“Ah, yes,” he said dryly. “I still haven’t worked out that tiny flaw.”

“In other words, you have no plan.”

Heywood shook his head no. “My original plan was to court Kitty myself, then marry her to keep her out of Malet’s reach. But now that . . .”

“Now that you’ve discovered Kitty is . . . shall we say . . . a bit . . .”

“Dull witted?”

“I was going to say ‘naïve,’ ” Sheridan said sternly.

“That, too,” Heywood said. “And truly, I could accept a certain amount of naïveté in a wife.” Though he liked Cass all the more because she wasn’t one of those wide-eyed innocents who didn’t know men even had urges. That was refreshing to a rough-and-tumble soldier who’d spent as much of his life in armed camps as in the rarefied atmosphere of society. “But I’m not sure I want to marry a woman lacking in the good sense to run a household.”

“I didn’t realize you were looking for a wife,” Sheridan said.

“Aren’t *you*? We both have estates in need of wives with sizable fortunes. Indeed, you ought to marry Kitty yourself. I’m told she has quite a large dowry.”

Sheridan searched Heywood’s face. “Perhaps I don’t want to marry an heiress. Perhaps I find Kitty’s cousin, Cass, more attractive.”

A surge of jealous anger shattered Heywood’s calm. “Do you?”

Sheridan burst into laughter. “I wish you could see your face right now. You look downright murderous.”

Heywood turned to walk ahead of him down the hall. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You stare at Cass like a wolf eyeing a lamb. She stares at *you* like a—”

“Lamb fearing a wolf?” he bit out, disliking Sheridan’s characterization entirely.

“More like a lamb eyeing a shepherd. She trusts you. I can’t imagine why,

considering how she ended up here, but she does. So if your intentions aren't honorable—”

“What are you, her guardian? Cass is none of your concern.”

He said it so forcefully that Sheridan stiffened. “Forgive me. I meant no insult.”

Damn. After years apart, he and his brother had begun to forge a new relationship this past couple of weeks. Heywood didn't want to damage that.

“I know.” Heywood dragged his fingers through his hair. “You mean well. But I'd prefer you stayed out of it.”

“All right. Just don't damage our family's reputation. It's hard enough for Mother to weather the gossip about her three dead husbands. If you do anything untoward, it will reflect badly on all of us.”

Though Heywood bristled at the warning, he knew his brother was right. “I won't. I swear.”

“One more thing. I know you're set on marrying an heiress and Cass isn't who you think you need. But happiness should be one of your criteria as well. If you wouldn't—*couldn't*—be happy with any other woman, you must take that into consideration. Because, to paraphrase a certain scripture in the Bible, what does it profit you if you save your estate but lose your soul?”

Heywood gritted his teeth. “I never took you for a religious man.”

“I never took you for a fool. But you're making me re-examine that supposition.”

Halting in his tracks, Heywood turned on his brother. “So you think I should shirk my responsibilities. That for the sake of my . . . urges, I should abandon the tenants and property that Grandmother entrusted to me.”

“No, not if your 'urges' are all there is to it. But if you feel something more . . .”

“Like what? Love?” He snorted. “I'm not foolish enough to be a slave to that. And you shouldn't be either, given that Mother and Father were more friends than lovers.”

“That was *their* marriage. You must forge your own.”

Heywood didn't want to forge his own. Keeping his heart protected was safer. He remembered only too well how it had felt to be sent off to war as a lad. Yes, it was the way of the aristocracy, but he refused to take that path with his own children.

His own children? Now he was thinking ahead to having children? What kind of madness was that?

They'd reached the drawing room, but no one was there with the half-constructed gingerbread castle. "Damn. The ladies have gone," he told Sheridan.

"To the ballroom, probably."

"Right."

They both headed there.

But Heywood's mind teemed with scattered thoughts. What was it about Cass's effect on him that made him take leave of his senses? And why couldn't he be lusting after Kitty instead of her fetching cousin?

Because, as usual, he wanted an illusion. Nothing was ever as it seemed. As a boy, he'd imagined that the army would be an exciting profession. But what he'd taken for excitement was really a morass of boredom and battle and long periods of yearning for family. He'd imagined Kitty as the perfect wife for him, capable of funding the revival of his estate. Instead, he'd discovered she was very different from the woman he'd imagined her to be.

He and Sheridan entered the ballroom to find three of the ladies already hanging presents on the tree set up in the corner. Kitty must have gone to fetch something, for she alone was absent.

Cass brightened as they walked in. "Oh, good, you're both here. I want to put this one on the very top." Gazing right at him, she held up an ornament made of tinsel wrapped around twigs that gave it the shape of a star. "I figure even tinsel stars belong somewhere they can shine above us."

"I agree." *And you belong in my arms.* A pity he had no right to say it.

"Would you mind putting it on top of the tree for me?" she asked, with a glow about her that made his heart clench.

"Better yet, I'll help you place it up there yourself." He dragged a chair over to the tree, then took her by the waist and lifted her up onto it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her eyes warming as she gazed down at him from the chair.

He couldn't seem to release her waist—her pleasingly shaped waist that made him think of taking her into a bedchamber somewhere and . . .

"Heywood," his mother chided in a low voice.

Right. Of course. Cass wasn't for him.

He released her and stepped back, hoping neither Cass nor his mother had seen the longing in his face. Still, what would he do when Cass was gone? After the past week, he couldn't imagine never seeing her again.

She stretched up to place her star at the top of the tree, and his blood

heated. He could see her trim ankles and even a bit of shapely, stockinged calf. Good God, he had to get control over these obsessive—highly unwise—urges.

“So Cass,” his mother said, “do you have some suitor at home whom you fancy? Who might be looking forward to your return?”

He tensed, waiting to see what she would say. It hadn’t occurred to him that she might have suitors.

Cass avoided his gaze. “Not at present, no. But I’ll be having a season in London alongside Kitty, so I’m hopeful I’ll attract a suitor then.”

“I daresay you’ll attract more than one,” Sheridan said, taunting Heywood with a smile.

Heywood ignored him. “I daresay you will.”

“You’re both too kind.” Cass met his gaze with a heart-wrenching look of her own. “Would you mind helping me down, sir?”

“Of course not.” He clasped her waist and lifted her off the chair and onto the floor. But once again, he couldn’t seem to let go of her. Her waist seemed to fit perfectly in his hands, and her eyes were a fetching shade of smoky gray that—

“My lord,” she murmured, “you can release me now.”

“And if I don’t wish to?” he asked gruffly, though in too low a tone to arouse the suspicions of the others, who were busy across the room, making more gifts to hang on the tree. “What will you do then?”

She regarded him with a clear-eyed gaze. “I’d wonder why you dally with a woman like me,” she said, her voice as low as his, “when you need a woman like Kitty.”

“Don’t tell me what I need,” he whispered. “I know that better than you.”

And in that moment, he realized the truth. He had found the woman who suited him, his perfect match. So to hell with what he thought he needed for Hawkcrest. If Cass proved willing to follow the drum and live on his paltry income, he would take her as his wife, even if it meant giving up his own dream for the future.

Because the thought of living without her was simply more than he could bear.

Chapter 7

Something was different about Heywood today. Cass couldn't put her finger on it, but he seemed more . . . earnest. More intent on flirtation.

It intoxicated her, even though she knew that desiring him was foolish.

"How else can I help you ladies?" Heywood asked, his gaze fixed on her.

"I suppose someone should go fetch Kitty," Cass said, "or at least find out how far she's coming along on the gingerbread house."

Heywood narrowed his gaze on her. "You mean the one in the drawing room?"

Sheridan glanced from Cass to his mother. "We were just there. We saw no sign of Kitty."

How odd. Anxiety gripped Cass. Surely Malet could not have sneaked in and carried Kitty off? It seemed unlikely.

"She's probably just resting in her room," the duchess said.

Heywood looked at Cass, apparently understanding at once her concern. "Perhaps we should make sure of that."

Gwyn, being a very discerning soul, said, "I agree."

At that point they split up to search for Kitty. Cass went up to Kitty's bedchamber, only to find she wasn't there. The others scattered about the mansion, looking for her. When Cass was nearly at her wit's end and was staring out at the snow, wondering where else to look, Heywood came to her with an envelope in his hand.

"I found this behind the gingerbread house in the drawing room," he said.

The envelope bore Cass's name. With her stomach churning, she opened the letter. There were crossed-out words and plenty of mistakes, but she was used to that from Kitty:

Dearest Cass,

I hope you can forgive me, Cuzin, but I have ~~run~~ ran away

with the man I love. I've been in love with Mr. Adams For Ever. At least two years. He's very swete to me. So we're gone to ~~Grentab~~ Grenta Green to be wed. Please tell Mama I'm happy and will write to her as soon as possbile. And please don't follow us. I am delited to be with my own dear Mr. Adams at last.

*With much ~~afce~~ affecshun,
Kitty*

P.S. Tell his Grace that we borrowd his slay on account of all the snow. We'll bring it ~~write~~ rite back after we marry.

Heywood had apparently been reading over her shoulder, for as soon as he was finished he murmured, "I can see why you needed to write letters for her."

"And we can be sure that her 'love' didn't write them for her since Mr. Adams is a well-educated solicitor." Despair gripped Cass. "Oh, Aunt Virginia will be furious with me!"

"Why? It's not your fault, and I shall make that clear to her. If anything, it's mine for getting her away from home where this Mr. Adams could prey on her more easily."

Just then the others came in. "We can't find her anywhere," the duchess said.

Wordlessly, Cass handed over the letter. They read it and were kind enough not to comment on Kitty's poor writing ability.

"Who is this fellow, anyway?" Sheridan looked at Cass. "Is he at least a decent chap?"

Cass explained who Mr. Adams was to her family. "Kitty actually mentioned him in passing the night of the ball. I should have realized she found him appealing. He always treated her kindly, and she always asked after his children. He's a widower." When Gwyn lifted her eyebrows, Cass added, "A young, handsome widower."

"Thank heaven," Gwyn said. "Otherwise, I'd drive the sleigh up to Scotland myself to save her."

"You couldn't," Heywood said. "They stole the sleigh, remember? And

how did they manage that, anyway? You'd think a servant would have noticed."

The duchess wore a pained expression. "I sent a couple of the men out with it to cut down the fir tree and haul it in. Kitty and her beau must have seen it in the drive and taken it while the footmen were bringing in the tree."

"Then let's hope they don't run afoul of Malet on their way to Scotland," Sheridan said. "And how did this Adams chap know to look for her here?"

Heywood rubbed his jaw. "I imagine that after Malet's coachman told his master that the ladies had gone off with me, Malet took Mrs. Nickman home. Once there, he would have heard that I'd left my card, and he would have known I was in England, bent on protecting Kitty from him. This Mr. Adams could have insinuated himself into the search. Perhaps he offered to come down here while Malet took the road up to Gretna Green? Mind you, I'm just speculating."

"It doesn't really matter *how* he found out, just that he did," the duchess said. "Something must be done about the elopement."

"If we leave now, we might catch up with them," Sheridan said.

"I doubt it," Heywood said. "Besides, they might decide to travel by ship to Scotland. The coast isn't that far from here. I don't know if we could get there before they embarked. Or, once we did, find them in Grimsby or Boston or whatever port town they ended up in."

"No one is going after them," Cass said. "If they're in love, then that's enough."

The duchess looked shocked. "But my dear, if he's a fortune hunter—"

"He's not. I know Mr. Adams very well. His father was solicitor to my aunt and uncle before the young Mr. Adams took over. For the first two years he worked for the Nickmans, he stammered every time Kitty entered the room. Now that I think about it, he was clearly smitten even then. He's about ten years her senior, just enough to be a settled fellow who will give her a respectable life, but not so old that she won't find him appealing."

Gwyn stared at her. "You're sure he's not after her money?"

"I'm not *sure*, but I don't think so. He has money of his own. His father's business is well established, and he has picked up the reins admirably."

Heywood glanced around at the group. "Then I suppose we must bow to Cass's greater knowledge of what Kitty might want." The others nodded in acknowledgment.

"Thank you," Cass said. "At least she'll be safe from Mr. Malet. Which, I

suppose, means that it's time for me to go home."

"Nonsense," the duchess said. "It's very near dark and far too dangerous for you to travel, even if Heywood and Sheridan go with you. You might as well stay here tonight and tomorrow. You won't want to travel on Christmas. Every coaching inn will be closed."

"Yes, you should remain here," Heywood said in a low rumble that tugged at her heart.

"Very well." But there was a catch in her throat. She wasn't at all sure she was doing the right thing. She might just be setting herself up for more misery.

Still, it made her think. Perhaps she *should* tell Heywood about her fortune. Kitty had given up everything to be with the man she loved. There was no guarantee that Aunt Virginia would approve of her choice after the fact, and if she didn't the couple might not be given anything—no dowry, no inheritance. Yet Kitty had risked it.

Meanwhile, Cass was hedging her bets, asking Heywood to give up all his hopes in order to be with her. Was that fair? *She* wasn't giving up anything. Perhaps she should follow Kitty's lead and go after the man she loved.

Loved?

Yes, she loved Heywood. She loved his protectiveness and his many kindnesses. She loved that he appreciated her wit. She loved that he had first become attracted to her through her letters.

By expecting him to be willing to give up his future for her, was she being too exacting? Perhaps. It was probably as unfair as it was to expect Mr. Adams to wear sackcloth and ashes because he wanted a woman who happened to have a fortune.

Well, no more. She would do her best to gain Heywood. And if it meant telling him everything? Then she would do that, too. Because even if he did want her fortune, she would still rather be married to him than anyone else.

She wanted Heywood. And that was that.

* * *

It was nearly midnight when Heywood headed up the stairs, intending to go to bed. He'd hoped to find a moment alone with Cass, but that hadn't happened. First, there'd been the tree decorating. Cass had seemed very enamored of the custom and had thrown herself into it with great enthusiasm.

Not wanting to lose a single minute with her, he'd stayed to watch, though he could have bowed out.

Normally they would have opened their presents next, but with half the family having still not arrived, Mother had commanded that the gift giving be done on Christmas morning. That suited him just fine. He still hadn't had the chance to talk to Cass alone, which dictated whether he gave her a ring or something less significant. He could almost believe that his mother, half sister, and brother had conspired to keep him and Cass apart, but that seemed very calculated, even for his family.

His other siblings, who were supposed to be traveling from London, had sent word by a footman that they would be at Armitage Hall in time for Christmas dinner tomorrow but couldn't promise better than that because the roads still made for slow going.

To his surprise, however, as he passed Thorn's room he spotted Cass standing in the middle of it, staring at nothing. The fire had been lit, probably by some servant who hadn't heard that Thorn had been delayed, but no candles were burning. Still, he could see that Cass wore only a nightdress and a wrapper.

God help him. How was he to endure *that* temptation? "What are you doing?" he asked from the doorway, not wanting to spook her.

She faced him with a dazed expression. "I don't know. I was trying to sleep, but I couldn't get Kitty out of my mind. So I came here, hoping to find another letter from her. Or something to explain why she would sneak out without even telling me."

Ah, yes, Heywood had forgotten that Kitty had been sleeping in Thorn's room. Mother had planned to move her today, but her elopement had put an end to that.

Cass flashed him a rueful smile. "I think it has just sunk in that she's gone off with Mr. Adams."

He walked into the room. Cass needed someone to listen. Surely he could be that person, no matter how flimsy her gown and wrapper. No matter how gorgeous her hair, now that it was tumbling from beneath her mobcap and down over her shoulders like froth in a bowl of syllabub. "I doubt she purposely left you out of the decision. Adams probably didn't give her much opportunity. They saw we were preoccupied and took their chance to elope."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. Kitty and I tell each other everything. Yet when she made the most important decision of her life, she

didn't confide in me."

"Your cousin doesn't strike me as the sort to think through decisions. She just leaps."

"That does sound like her." Cass tucked an errant curl up under her mobcap. "But how is it I never even guessed that Mr. Adams was . . . in love with her? Or she was in love with him? Perhaps if I had—"

"You would have stopped her from eloping?"

"I suppose I might have, before. But if she loves him . . ."

"That's your only criterion, isn't it?"

Cass stared at him. "Yes. Though I know it isn't yours."

A harsh laugh escaped him. "Until I met you, I would have said that was true."

She blushed. "What do you mean?"

It was now or never. Kitty wasn't the only person who liked to leap sometimes.

Closing the door behind him, he headed for Cass. "I'm tired of fighting what I feel. Tired of pretending I could marry any heiress just to save Hawkcrest. I can't. I won't. I want *you* as my wife. No matter how that affects my future."

Her eyes widened. "First, there's something I must tell—"

"No. No more words." He slipped his arm about her waist and pulled her close. "I'm done with talking. I want to show you how I feel."

"But—"

He kissed her, probably harder than he should have, but he hoped not. The thought of losing her for any reason was too much. This, *this*, was what he needed. He would prove to her that he wanted her, poor relation or no, and then hope that any resistance she had would fade away.

When she kissed him back with great fervor, his satisfaction was so powerful he wanted to crow it aloud. But that would require tearing his lips from her, so instead he pulled off her wrapper and tossed it aside.

"What are you doing?" she whispered against his mouth.

"Making you mine, assuming that you want that, too." He drew back just enough to see her face shining in the firelight and her lush body nicely outlined by her linen nightdress. God help him if she said no. He might combust. "I may have abducted you, darling, but I'm no scoundrel."

She looped her arms about his neck. "I know that. And I do wish to be yours."

“Now? Here? Because if you want to put it off—”

“Certainly not. I don’t think I could wait even one more day.”

“That’s all I needed to hear,” he growled.

Then he slid both hands up to cover her breasts, reveling in her gasp. And when her sweet nipples hardened as he swept his thumbs over them, he thought he would explode right then and there.

She was so lush, so eager. Her breasts fit his hands perfectly, which made him want to just toss her down on the bed and ravish her. But he wanted her first experience with lovemaking—their first time together—to be special. And that meant taking things slow.

He could manage that, right? Surely he wasn’t so far gone, so smitten, that he couldn’t keep control of his urges.

Perhaps what he should do was increase *her* urges. Dropping his hand to below her belly, he caressed her through her nightdress, exulting when her breathing quickened, and her nightdress dampened.

Ah, yes, she was his. She would *be* his. His heart soared at the thought.

Apparently he had a heart and it knew what it wanted. Her. Only her. And the money be damned.

Chapter 8

Cass knew she shouldn't be doing this, especially since she hadn't told him about her fortune yet. But now that he was here and wanting to marry her in spite of everything, she didn't wish to ruin this moment. Being in Heywood's arms made her happy, and having him say he wanted her for his wife made her even happier. So she would take her chances.

Now that she'd agreed to his madness, he turned thrillingly fierce, which should have alarmed her. Instead, it delighted her. Between rough and thorough kisses, he fondled her breasts through her nightdress so deliciously that she could hardly think.

"Heywood," she whispered.

"Yes, dearling."

The endearment thrilled her. "I want to see *you* undressed."

"Right." He grinned wickedly at her. "I remember."

Her cheeks flamed as she thought of all the naughty things she'd said the last time they were together, but it didn't stop her from wanting to act on them. She pulled at his coat, and he slid out of it. His waistcoat and cravat quickly followed, giving her a glimpse of his tanned throat before he tore off his shirt, revealing far more skin.

She gulped. *That* was interesting. His chest seemed sculpted from marble, with muscles that clearly came from his being a soldier. And he had dark blond curls on his chest! She hadn't expected hair in such a place, having never seen a man half-dressed, in art or otherwise.

She lifted her hand, then paused with it midair. "Can I touch you?"

"Oh, God, yes," Heywood rasped.

As she swept her hands over his chest, she felt his muscles clench. His jaw tautened, too, and the very thought that she could affect him so profoundly made a surge of wanton heat rise in her belly and lower.

But when she ran her thumbs over his nipples the way he'd done hers, he growled, "Enough, you teasing wench. It's *your* turn."

"That's hardly fair," she said lightly. "If I take off my nightdress, I'll be

naked. And you're still partly clothed."

"I can easily remedy that." He unbuttoned and stripped off his breeches and stockings, then kicked off his shoes, leaving him in only his drawers.

His prominently bulging drawers. He reached for the buttons, then grinned at her. "Shall we disrobe together?"

The sight of his mostly naked legs, so sinewy and hairy and *male*, already overwhelmed her, but if she undressed and he backed away in disappointment, then having *his* body to look at might keep her from dwelling on that too much. "Yes," she breathed. "Together."

He unfastened his drawers; she unfastened the buttons on her nightdress. Then together they stripped their undergarments off.

Unfortunately, she didn't at first notice what *he* looked like down there because she was so focused on watching his reaction. It was most gratifying. He scoured her with a look that flamed every part it touched.

"God help me, Cass, you're a soldier's dream come true." With a purely wondering expression, he skimmed his hand from her shoulder to her breast to her belly and then to the curls between her legs. "So soft, so delicate . . . and all mine." When he cupped her, sending her heart into a pounding rhythm, she started.

"Wait!" she cried.

He groaned. "Dearling, please don't make me stop."

"That's not what I mean." She backed up a few steps. "I-I forgot to look at *you!* Let me see."

His frown cleared, and his smile turned cocky. "Ah, now that's different."

"Different" was the word, all right. He looked nothing like her down there. He had a reddened rod of flesh between his legs, a bold fellow that thrust itself out from its nest of curls with outrageous impudence.

Her mouth went dry. What was she supposed to do with that . . . that *thing*?

But he gave her no time to worry over it before he took her in his arms, kissing her deeply as he backed her toward the bed. Then he tumbled her down upon it before kneeling beside her. "I'll do my best to make this pleasant for you, Cass, but you'll have to tell me what you like."

"I don't know what I like."

He chuckled. "Not yet. But you will. Indeed, it might take a lifetime of practicing together to determine the many things you like. But we can start with this."

Lying down next to her, he leaned over to suck her breast.

“Ohhh, I like *that*,” she said. “Very much.”

“I like it, too.” He sucked the other breast, and she thought she might die of pleasure.

Her breath seemed to have stuck down deep in her throat, and she couldn't help arching up for more of his attentions. He obligingly gave them to her, caressing both breasts in turn with mouth and tongue and teeth. Just as she wondered if she could take much more of the thrilling sensations coursing through her, he slipped his hand down between her thighs to stroke her where he'd briefly stroked before.

My oh my. That felt *magnificent*. The man was a magician at rousing her need and then satisfying it, in an ever-heightening circle. He slid one finger inside her, then another, while with his thumb he rubbed the spot that ached for him. A jolt of desire lofted her even higher. Who could have imagined that mere fingers could offer such delicious ecstasy?

“How about that?” he asked raggedly. “Does *that* feel good?”

“Ohhh, yes,” she breathed. “So . . . very . . . good.”

“Close your eyes. You'll like it even more.”

When she did as he bade, she discovered he was right. She *did* like it even more. Until something larger than fingers edged up inside her.

Her eyes shot open. “Heywood?”

Then she realized what she was feeling. Heywood had moved to kneel between her legs and was putting his . . . disturbingly large member inside her.

“Is this really necessary?” She wanted to go back to the pleasurable part.

“To make you mine?” His eyes glazed over as he paused inside her so he could meet her gaze. “I'm afraid it is. But if you want me to stop—”

She stared up at his strained expression. “No, please don't.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and then began to move again. At first it was uncomfortable and not at all what she'd expected. Their bodies were so entwined, so intimate, that she felt he could see to her very soul. But the deeper he thrust inside her, the more she adjusted to it, and soon she was undulating against him, trying to find . . . exactly what she needed.

As if he guessed what that was, he pulled her knees up, and she felt a stirring between her legs that had her nearly swooning. Then he reached down to finger her in the same place as before, and the caress catapulted her into a new realm of enjoyment.

“Heywood,” she whispered. “Oh, goodness, *Heywood*.”

“Do you like that, dearling?” he choked out.

“Very . . . much.”

He did both for a while—stroking her while also driving into her with his rather large rod of flesh. Briefly she wished her aunt had prepared her for such an . . . unusual act, but she soon forgot about anything except the feel of him inside her, the sweet bliss of him touching her down there.

“Dearling,” he said, “are you . . . all right?”

She choked out a laugh. “That’s an . . . understatement for . . . how I’m . . . feeling.”

Her response seemed to make him swell inside her. “Good,” he bit out.

Then they were too caught up in pleasuring each other to say more. He fondled her in every part he could reach, and she clung to his shoulders as a butterfly clung to a flower. He made her *feel* like a flower—pretty and feminine and oh so worthy of his desires.

He drove into her over and over, rousing her blood, making her wish to climb ever higher. Then, as if a lightning bolt from the sky had hit them both, she felt a deep keening down there, which was answered by a coarse oath from him.

Soon they were sliding into oblivion, reaching a pinnacle of ecstasy. She cried out, which spurred him, too, somehow, and then they were vaulting into a world of glorious physical sensation.

“My love,” he whispered as she went over the edge with him. “My dearest love.”

It was the sweetest thing he’d said to her. “My love,” she replied.

Then they fell into that place where only lovers go—that perfect happiness of needs fulfilled and love requited.

There was no going back now. She was his. And Lord save her if this proved to be the end of it. Because now that she’d put her trust in him, she could never return to the life she’d led before.

* * *

Heywood dozed off. When he awakened, he realized that Cass lay beside him, sleeping blissfully. He sighed. Their union had been everything he’d hoped for. He couldn’t and wouldn’t regret it. Still, having decided to marry, they must now deal with Hawkcrest. He was going to have to sell it.

She must have sensed his gaze on her, because she opened her eyes to stare

at him with that sultry look that made him want to ravish her again and again.

“Merry Christmas,” he said.

She snuggled against him. “Is it here already?”

“It is indeed. Christmas Day in the morning. The very early morning, that is.” He brushed a kiss to her lips. “And apparently you’re my present.”

“As you are mine.” She gazed up at him with a trembling smile. “Is what we just did . . . you know, before we fell asleep . . . always like that?”

“Not for me.” He shifted to lie on his side, facing her. “But then I never felt anything for the women I was . . . er . . . with.”

“I can’t imagine doing something so intimate merely for pleasure.”

“Nor can *I* . . . *now*. It certainly pales in comparison to what you and I just shared.”

Her eyes darkened. “But I suppose you were ‘with’ a great many women before we met.”

He winced. “Not as many as you’d think.”

“At the very least I assume one of them was involved with Mr. Malet and that’s why you despise him so.”

“Actually, that’s not why.” He supposed it was time he told her. Otherwise, she would assume all manner of incorrect possibilities. “I despise him—Douglas and I both despise him—because of what he did to a woman even younger than Kitty.”

Her eyes went round. “What was her name?”

“Valeria. She was the orphan of one of the English soldiers and his Portuguese wife. Both Douglas and I missed our families, so we treated her like a little sister. She had no brothers and was a bit of a tomboy, so she would follow us around the camp as a little sister might.”

Idly he twined one of Cass’s curls about his finger. “At fifteen, she turned secretive. We assumed she was growing into a woman and tiring of our company.” His voice hardened. “But that wasn’t it at all.”

“She was following Malet about,” Cass said.

“Precisely. She’d fallen in love with him. And like the scoundrel he was, he took advantage. No one knew of their . . . affair, if that’s what you could call a union between a girl and a man twice her age. Apparently he’d insisted that she keep it quiet, and she did.”

“So how did you learn of it?” Cass asked.

“After he’d had his fun, he discarded her, as was his wont. It broke her heart. She languished away, refusing to eat or drink, refusing to say what was

wrong. By the time she finally told us about it, she was on her deathbed, and naught could be done for her. We confronted him, but he laughed at us. *Laughed*. Said we were just angry that we hadn't had her first."

"No wonder you hate him."

Heywood was glad she understood. "I thought Douglas was going to kill him then and there. But I stopped him, knowing it would ruin Douglas's life, too. There were better ways to avenge her. So I went to our commanding officer and told him the whole story. With Douglas and me as witnesses—and Malet's less-than-stellar reputation—the general was more than ready to have Malet cashiered."

"What a blackguard he is! Now I'm glad you had the good sense to carry me and Kitty off. I shudder to think what might have happened to Kitty if you hadn't been there."

"So do I." He brushed a kiss to her lips. "Besides, I wouldn't have met you."

She swallowed hard. "So you don't mind so much that you gave up a fortune for me?"

"You're the one who will suffer," he pointed out. "We'll have to sell Hawkcrest at a loss, then decide whether you wish to live on my—"

She stopped him with a finger to his lips. "No more." Oddly enough, she looked guilty. "You've been honest with me, and now there's something I must tell you. I wanted to tell you before, but you wouldn't let me, and I was enjoying what we were doing, so . . ." She dragged in a heavy breath. "Kitty isn't the only one with a fortune. I have one, too."

Heywood narrowed his gaze on her. "What do you mean?"

"I-I have an inheritance that's nearly equal to Kitty's. My father left me a large dowry."

"Douglas never said anything about it," he pointed out, unable to keep the suspicion from his voice.

"I asked him not to. I asked the same of Kitty and my aunt."

He rolled onto his back to stare up at the ceiling. He couldn't believe this! "So why couldn't you at least say something to *me* about it?"

She laid a hand on his chest. "Because I didn't want you—didn't want any man—choosing me for my fortune."

"Even though you knew it was important to me." Anger built in him, a nasty drug that poisoned his enjoyment. "Even though you realized that if I didn't marry a woman with money, I would lose my own inheritance."

“I would have told you eventually. I just . . . wanted to be sure that you cared for *me*, not my dowry. I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

“Of course you don’t,” he said bitterly. “You’ve been pulling the strings of all of us mere mortals.”

The blood drained from her face. “What on earth do you mean?”

He faced her again, fighting to ignore her shocked and hurt expression. “For one thing, you kept Kitty’s secret about her not writing the letters.”

“What does that have to do with anything? I did that because she asked me to. Because her lack of writing ability embarrasses her.”

He could understand that, although at the moment he didn’t wish to. “You made sure I didn’t know you could save my estate.”

“I told you why. And there was another reason, too. I wanted Kitty to be settled before I let it be known that I had a substantial dowry. I knew she would require all my attention to make sure she didn’t marry a fortune hunter herself.”

“Like me,” he growled.

“I didn’t say that. But yes, when you told me that you needed a fortune, I did consider you might marry *her* for it. As you might realize, that made me rather reluctant to reveal my true situation. Then you said you couldn’t marry her, wouldn’t marry her as long as it meant being near me, and everything changed.”

“Exactly. And at that moment, you should have told me the truth.”

“Really? Why? Did you expect me to accept your attentions, fearing that they were only borne of your need for my money?”

The logic of her assertions perversely infuriated him. “I expected you to be honest with me. I expected that if you cared about me, you wouldn’t have let me believe I was losing everything by marrying you.”

“I tried! Last night, I said I wanted to tell you something, and you said it didn’t matter.”

He dragged in a breath. She was right. She *had* tried to tell him. So he shouldn’t complain. But part of him was still furious. She’d known he was worried about their future. About their income. She could have relieved his fears at any time.

Yet she’d chosen not to. “It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. I will act as I must, independent of what you believe or think about me.”

“Heywood, please . . .”

“No, I won’t listen.” He slid from the bed, his face stormy. “You are not

the woman I took you for. I don't want a wife who sees me as some . . . fortune-hunting scoundrel. Keep your dowry. I can go on perfectly well without it."

Heywood expected her to beg. To express a suitable remorse for having hidden the truth from him. Then he would take her into his arms, say that he loved her, and graciously accept her money. And all would be well.

But he hadn't reckoned on Cass's pride. She rose from the bed and said, as if she weren't standing there without a stitch on, "I understand. Thank you for setting me straight about what you feel for me." Then she drew on her nightdress and wrapper and left.

He stood there, not sure what had just happened. Cass had walked away from him, even though he'd taken her innocence.

Cass had refused him.

Very well. If she wanted things that way, it was fine by him. Let her put some other hapless fellow through her test or whatever it was she was up to. He would not have his strings pulled. No, indeed. Not *him*.

He left the room, intending to find his own room and sleep. But by some strange alignment in the stars, he ran into his mother. Damn.

"You're up very early," Mother said.

"I find it hard to sleep when my life is in turmoil."

"You mean, when the woman you love is bereft and confused."

He tensed. "What are you talking about?"

His mother stared at him. "You know perfectly well. I happened to glimpse Cass, that lovely young lady who adores you, going up the stairs to her room and looking quite upset. Can you truthfully say she was not with you?"

A pox on it. How was it that his mother always knew everything going on in their house? "It's none of your concern."

"Oh. So you mean to cut me out of the matter the same way you cut *her* out of it."

"I didn't . . . I wasn't . . ." Damn his mother for knowing how his mind worked. Feeling a need to defend himself, he said, "She has a fortune. Did you know that? All this time . . ."

"I see," his mother said. "You're angry because she didn't tell you."

"Yes! I have a right to be angry."

His mother regarded him steadily. "Why? Because if you marry her, you'll gain everything you wanted and needed? Which she took her time about revealing?"

The way she put it, he sounded selfish. “She should have told me sooner.”

Mother nodded. “She should have, yes. But she wasn’t sure of you. Kitty told me that Cass was courted by a fellow in Bath when she was younger, a gentleman she fancied . . . until she overheard him telling his friends he only wanted her for her fortune. So you can hardly blame her for being skittish. After all, when you first met her, you were bent on marrying Kitty.”

Heywood stared at his mother, laid low by her revelation. Now every word he’d said to Cass seemed cruel. “That was only because . . . I mean, I truly thought . . .”

“I am not telling you what you should do, Son. But I think you should consider matters from *her* point of view. She is wary of fortune hunters, and rightfully so. How can you blame her for that?”

He hated it when his mother made sense. “I’m not a fortune hunter.”

“I imagine you made that perfectly clear when you rejected the woman you love.”

He winced. He had indeed. So he had a choice. Either he could set everything straight between them, or he could figure out what to do without her in his life.

The latter sounded very unappealing. So it was time for him to figure out how to make amends.

Chapter 9

Cass had barely kept from collapsing into tears as she'd fled Kitty's—no, Thorn's—bedchamber. Heywood had dealt her a terrible blow, and it had left her reeling.

She'd gambled at love and lost. She wanted to be angry at *him* for it, but how could she? The truth was, she hadn't trusted in his character. She hadn't believed in his affection for her. And now she'd spoiled everything.

Sick at heart, she went to her borrowed bedchamber, intending to try to sleep, but that was impossible. She lay there replaying their argument, wondering what else she could have said to prevent his manly pride from being damaged.

Normally, she would have confided in Kitty about these feelings. But Kitty was gone, and there was nothing she could do about it. Now the sun was coming up over the horizon, and it seemed pointless to lie in bed going over what she should have said or done.

So she got up, called for the maid, and then let the young woman help her get dressed in a lovely forest-green gown that she hoped made her look pretty. It was Christmas morn, after all. She should at least *pretend* to be joyful.

She headed downstairs, not surprised to find that no one else was awake. Peeking out the window, she noticed that a great deal of the snow had melted. There were only patches here and there now. She could do with a walk. So she found a cloak in the coat closet and headed out to the garden she'd seen from her window.

The weather wasn't as cold as it had been, and there were a few blooms that had survived the snow—Christmas roses, for one. As she wandered the garden, she heard a coach approaching. She ignored it. Doubtless it was some friend of the Wolfes' from town, come to make sure all was well with the duchess and her family after the snowstorm. So Cass continued to roam about, trying not to think about Heywood while taking note of what grew and what had perished in the snow.

After a while, a voice arrested her. “Well, well, I see you’re not exactly suffering from being abducted by a scoundrel.”

Mr. Malet? Her stomach roiled. Good Lord, he’d found them. Or rather, he’d found *her*.

Forcing herself to appear calm, she faced him. “Not suffering at all, to be honest. The Wolfe family has been very kind to us.”

Standing at the entrance to the garden, Malet looked as polished and despicable as ever. “And where is your lovely cousin?”

“Out of your reach, sir. She’s found herself a husband who actually wants her for herself and not her fortune.”

He dropped all pretense of politeness. “I should have known that bloody arse would marry her to get back at me. But the colonel will come to regret that, I swear, because—”

“Not the colonel, actually. It was Mr. Adams.” She smiled. “She eloped with him yesterday. I’m afraid you’re too late.”

That seemed to surprise him. “So *that* was who she was talking to at the ball. I didn’t get a look at him, so I assumed it was the colonel once I heard he’d taken Miss Nickman. That Adams fellow told me he would come this way to find Miss Nickman for me while I headed to Gretna Green. Damned schemer. That’s what I get for trusting a solicitor.”

“A solicitor with more character in one finger than you have in your whole body.”

That clearly angered him, for she could see him ball one hand into a fist. “You’ll be wishing you’d gone off with that solicitor yourself when I’m done with you, Miss Isles. I know precisely who turned Miss Nickman against me.”

Her heart stilled. “I can’t imagine who you mean.”

He came nearer. “Don’t pretend to be stupid. You’re a clever, conniving wench who knows how to turn matters to her advantage. Which is why I mean to make you my whore. It’s the least you owe me for ruining my plans.”

“*What?*” Her blood turned stone-cold. “You’ve lost your mind.” She turned to go back to the house.

But he caught her arm in an iron grip. “When *you* go missing, everyone will assume you ran off with a man, too, though no one will guess that *I’m* the culprit.” He started dragging her toward the entrance to the garden. “I’ll place you in suitable London lodgings, where I can visit you at my whim . . .

once I've taught you the appropriate respect, that is."

"That's ridiculous!" she hissed, struggling against him. Where was everyone?

She kicked at him, and he loosened his grip on her arm with a grunt of pain. Pivoting away from him, she ran for the door to the house.

"You *bitch!*" he cried. "I'll make you pay for that!"

Suddenly, Heywood loomed up in front of her. Pushing her behind him, he launched himself at Mr. Malet with a roar.

As the two men rolled around in the garden, she hesitated at the door, wondering if she should get help. But it rapidly became apparent that Heywood didn't need any.

He had Mr. Malet pinned to the ground and was pummeling him. "This is for Valeria," he growled as he punched him in the face. "This is for Kitty." He punched the man again.

Then he rose and dragged a staggering Mr. Malet up with him. "And this is for *daring* to touch my fiancée." He gave the scoundrel a third punishing blow, and Mr. Malet crumpled at his feet.

Fiancée? Did he mean it?

Heywood kicked Mr. Malet. "Get up, you coward. Next time you'll think twice about picking on my woman." He spat on the ground. "You come here again, you arse, and you'd better bring an army with you because I swear I'll kill you."

A new voice came from the entrance to the garden. "He did bring an army, Brother. Fortunately, they were no match for me and Joshua. I needed the exercise after being cooped up in a coach all morning, and Joshua needed someone upon whom to vent his spleen."

Cass looked over to find two of the handsomest fellows she'd ever seen—except for Heywood, of course. One had wavy black hair and eerie bluish-green eyes while the other had long and straight black hair and hazel eyes. It was only after the latter fellow moved closer that she realized he had something wrong with his leg and was using a cane.

But apparently that was his only deficit, for he shoved a rough-looking blackguard ahead of him, as did the first man. Both blackguards looked rather the worse for wear.

"Grab your master and get out," Heywood told Mr. Malet's henchmen.

Grumbling to themselves, they took one arm each and hauled Mr. Malet out of the garden.

Cass flew to Heywood's side. "Are you all right?" She took out her handkerchief and dabbed away blood from his split lip.

Heywood gazed down at her with his heart in his eyes. "I should be asking you that."

"No," drawled the fellow with the blue-green eyes. "You should be asking what has possessed her to agree to marry a rascal like you."

Looping an arm about her waist, Heywood pulled her close. "Cass, this is my older half brother, the Duke of Greycourt, and that fellow there is my cousin, Joshua Wolfe, who lives on the estate. Grey and Joshua, this is Miss Cassandra Isles, my fiancée. If she'll have me."

"You mean you haven't *asked* her yet?" Grey said.

"Not the way I should have," Heywood admitted.

"That doesn't surprise me," Joshua said. "Your family has a disturbing tendency to stumble into your proposals of marriage."

"Ah, but even stumbling proposals of marriage work in the end," Grey said. "Just ask my wife."

Heywood groaned. "I suppose you two are going to plague me about my marrying."

"Not me," Grey said. "Beatrice would have something to say about that if I did."

"I would indeed," a woman's voice answered him. "Fortunately, you know better."

The woman who came through the garden entrance was strikingly tall and brandished a pistol. "They're all gone."

Grey frowned. "I told you to stay in the coach."

"I did. Until I saw a fellow you two missed, who was trying to sneak into the woods." She shrugged. "So I told him to get into his master's coach. And apparently my pistol convinced him that he should."

"You gave Beatrice a loaded pistol?" Joshua snapped at Grey. "Are you mad?"

"Not that mad," Grey answered.

"But he didn't know it wasn't loaded," the woman interrupted. "Nor did the other three who came out looking decidedly disheveled." The woman smiled at Cass and held out the hand *not* gripping a pistol. "Good morning. I'm Grey's wife, Beatrice. I'm also Joshua's sister, and before you ask, Grey and I are not related in the least except by marriage."

Which made this pistol-wielding female the Duchess of Greycourt. Good

Lord. “Lovely to meet you. I’m . . . um . . . Heywood’s fiancée?”

“Miss Cassandra Isles,” Grey said to his wife while also extricating the pistol from her. “Whom he hasn’t yet asked to marry him.”

“But whom he still wants us to consider as his fiancée,” Joshua said. “Personally, I’m not convinced. For one thing, she’s far too pretty for Heywood. And for another—”

“If you lot would just go inside,” Heywood bit out, “I’m sure Mother has some task or another for you to perform, involving the tree and its many ornaments and baubles and whatever else she has in store for the day.”

Beatrice brightened as she gazed up at her husband. “You were right! There *is* a decorated tree!”

“I told you. We had one every year when I was a boy.”

“And you can see it right inside,” Heywood said, making a shooing motion at his relations. “Move along now. That way to the tree.”

“Not without you,” Grey said, mischief in his eyes. “Why don’t you come with us?”

“And look what your mother has done with the garden, Grey,” Beatrice said. “She managed to get some winter roses going.”

“I see that,” Grey answered. “It’s very—”

“Out of the garden, all of you!” Heywood shouted. “Now!”

Beatrice blinked. “Well! You don’t have to be rude about it.”

“Apparently, I do,” Heywood grumbled under his breath.

His relations must have realized they’d overtaxed his patience, for with a laugh and a few backwards glances at her, they finally went inside.

“I thought they would never leave,” Heywood said testily.

“You certainly have a much more colorful family than I do,” Cass said.

He eyed her askance. “Really? Your cousin ran off with a solicitor, and your aunt can’t leave the whist table. So I’d say your family would fit in with mine very well.”

A lump stuck in her throat. “Is that . . . what you want? Because last night —”

“Last night I was a fool, darling.” He cupped her face in his hands. “I let my pride prevent me from recognizing the tremendous gift you were offering me. But when I saw Malet trying to steal you away, it solidified what I already knew—that I could never bear the absence of you.”

“Oh, Heywood, neither could I.”

“And once I heard about that fellow in Bath and how stupidly he behaved .

..”

Her cheeks flamed. “Who told you about that? No, wait, I know who. It was Kitty, wasn’t it? I swear, my cousin is incapable of keeping a secret.”

“Ah, but she knows when to keep one when it benefits the people she loves. After all, she kept the secret of who wrote all her letters. Of whom she *really* wanted to marry. Of the fact that you were an heiress. Without those machinations, you and I might never have met. I certainly would never have carried the two of you off, and you would never have accepted me as a suitor because I knew of your fortune.”

“Without those machinations, you might be preparing to marry Kitty instead of me,” she said archly.

“Doubtful.” He chuckled. “I fell in love with you the moment I heard your letters read aloud. Every word made me burn to meet the woman who wrote them. I would never have settled for Kitty when I knew in my gut she wasn’t that woman. Because once I did find that woman, I was lost forever. It was merely a matter of time before I came to my senses.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a jeweler’s box. “I know I’m supposed to wait until the fifth day of Christmas for this gift, but I’m too impatient for that.” He opened the box to reveal four thin gold rings and in the center of them a wider ring with a beautiful ruby set into it. “On this first day of Christmas, dearling, will you do me the honor of agreeing to become my wife?”

“Yes,” she said, tears welling in her eyes as he slid the five golden rings onto her finger. “Oh, yes, my true love.”

She leaned up to kiss him, and he caught her to him for a much more thorough kiss, so thorough that it was some time later before they broke apart.

She glanced back at the hall and sighed. “I suppose we should go in and look at the tree we all worked on so laboriously.”

“Or,” he said, “we could take a sleigh ride over to Hawkcrest and see if a couple of blankets on the floor and a fire in the hearth might make it more suitable for that private demonstration you were craving the first time we went there.”

“We don’t have a sleigh,” she reminded him.

“Ah, right. So we’ll simply have to sneak upstairs to your bedchamber. Or mine.”

She began to grin. “And then?”

“We’ll have ourselves a merry little Christmas.”

“Now?” she asked.

“Now.”

Epilogue

March 1809

Their wedding day was exactly six months after Heywood's father had died. Heywood's mother had requested the date, since by then she would at least be in half mourning and the rest of the family no longer in mourning. She'd been forced to miss the wedding of Grey and Beatrice because of society's rules, and she said she didn't intend to miss Heywood's.

Now he was here at his wedding breakfast, with his new wife at his side. He smiled down at her. Cass's lovely face was awash with wonder at the magic his mother and the rest of the family had wrought at Hawkcrest, just for their celebration. The dining room had been repainted and the wood floors repaired. They'd even replaced the chandelier with a much finer one, fitted with costly beeswax candles.

"It's magnificent, don't you think?" Cass said.

"Yes." He gazed at her beautiful features. "Magnificent."

She caught him staring at her and blushed. "I missed you. I thought you might not make it home."

After Christmas, he'd returned to his regiment to arrange for someone to take his place so he could retire from the Hussars. Then he'd had a devil of a time trying to get back, with the war raging on the Continent.

"Ah, darling," he said, with his heart in his throat, "I would have been here if I'd had to row across the English Channel."

Kitty approached, her face wreathed in smiles. "Who's rowing across the channel?"

"No one, I hope." Heywood thrust his hand out to the fellow accompanying Kitty. "You must be the lauded Mr. Adams."

"I don't know how lauded I am," the man said as he shook Heywood's hand, "but yes, I'm that gentleman."

Kitty tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow. "My husband's being modest. He's opening a new concern in London and has already attracted

twenty clients.”

“It’s a fine start,” Heywood said. “I’ll introduce you to Grey. He always has need of a good solicitor.”

“I’m more interested in your other talents,” Cass said, her eyes gleaming. “The ones that enabled you to whisk Kitty away to Gretna Green before we even realized you were here. And how *did* you find us, anyway?”

He flushed a bright red. “I confess I had to be duplicitous.”

“That means he had to lie,” Kitty said, clearly delighted that she knew the word. “He had to be duplicitous to see me at the ball, too, on account of Mama telling him all about how she just *knew* Captain Malet would offer for me that night.”

“Knowing Aunt Virginia,” Cass said, “that was her way of warning Mr. Adams off.”

“Precisely,” Adams said. “So I slipped into the ball to warn Kitty about Malet since I didn’t trust him, and she told me that as long as I refused to offer for her, she would do as she pleased.”

“*That* was the friend you’d been talking to who upset you so?” Cass asked.

“Yes. And he *still* didn’t offer for me. He thought I could do better.” Kitty laughed. “Can you imagine?”

“You deserved better,” Adams said indulgently, his eyes shining with love as he gazed down at her.

Heywood knew the feeling only too well. He still couldn’t believe he’d found a wife as special as Cass. He covered her hand with his.

She smiled up at him before looking back at Adams. “That doesn’t explain how you found us in Lincolnshire, sir.”

“Ah, yes, I’m getting to that. You see, as Kitty stormed off, I noticed Malet slip from the room. He’d apparently heard us talking. And when Kitty disappeared, I assumed he’d taken her. So I made sure to go to your aunt’s house, and when Malet showed up there with your aunt, and they’d already learned from Malet’s coachman that you and Kitty had been carried off by Lord Heywood . . . well, imagine my relief to learn that it was His Lordship. I knew Lord Heywood was a gentleman, and besides, he’d taken you, too, and you would watch over her.”

“I tried,” Cass said. “But how—”

“Lord Heywood had left his card at your home with his address, but Malet was convinced that you three had gone to Gretna Green, so he wanted to go there. I hoped that His Lordship was merely looking out for Kitty, so I took

the chance that you might have come here. I was slowed down by the snow, unfortunately, but—”

“He asked to see me, said he was my solicitor,” Kitty put in, clearly too impatient to let him finish, “and the servant went to fetch me. But then my dear love spotted me in the drawing room, and the sleigh was unattended outside and—”

“We took it and ran,” Mr. Adams finished.

Heywood blinked. “That is quite a tale.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Kitty said, then glanced across the room and froze. “Oh, no, Mama has spotted us, and I can’t abide another lecture. Come, my dear, let’s go have some champagne.”

Adams happily let himself be pulled away.

“It’s like that ‘babes in the wood’ tale,” Cass said with a laugh. “Kitty always manages to land on her feet.”

“Not quite,” Heywood said. “She had you and your mother, and now she has Adams. We can only hope she appreciates him.”

“I’m sure she does. The same way I appreciate you.” Cass beamed at him, and his heart skipped a beat.

“And I appreciate you. Because I would never have had the humility to tell you I wasn’t good enough for you. Even though it’s true.”

“It is indeed,” she said lightly. When he blinked at her, she burst into laughter. “I’m teasing you. You should know me better by now.”

“Trust me, it will take me years to know you well enough.” He bent to whisper, “And I should really like to start now, upstairs in our newly refurbished bedchamber.”

“No, indeed, sir. There will be no sneaking around for us. Once I have you to myself, I mean to enjoy it and not have to worry about getting caught by your mother or sister or brothers.” When he groaned, she added, “But trust me, once everyone is gone, I will make it well worth your while.”

As his blood rose, along with another part of his body, he realized she was never going to be wide-eyed and demure like her cousin.

Thank God.

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Chapter 1

*Armitage Hall, Lincolnshire
April 1809*

Lady Gwyn Drake paced the ornamental bridge like a tigress in a crate. What did it mean when one's blackmailer was late? It certainly didn't bode well for the negotiations she hoped to initiate.

Perhaps she was at the wrong spot.

She drew the man's note out of her pocket and read it again:

To Lady Gwyn,

Tomorrow at 4 PM, bring fifty guineas to me on the Armitage estate near the bridge that crosses the river if you wish to guarantee my silence. Otherwise, I will feel free to tell such Secrets about you and me as will ruin your good name. You know that I can.

Captain L. Malet

Not the wrong spot then. This was the only bridge over a river on the estate. Did he realize that the house occupied by the estate's handsome gamekeeper, Major Joshua Wolfe, was a short distance away? Or did he just not care?

She scowled. When she'd last seen "L." Malet, ten years ago, he'd been only an ensign in the army and she'd been only twenty. But if he was expecting to meet that same wide-eyed, foolish girl, he was in for a surprise.

Balling up the note, she tossed it into the river. Then she slid her hand into her muff to touch the pocket pistol she'd lifted from the bedside table of her

twin brother, Thorn, otherwise known as the Duke of Thornstock. Though the pistol wasn't loaded—she had no clue how to fire a gun, much less load one—the feel of the carved ivory stock beneath her fingers was reassuring. It should look impressive enough to hold off the likes of a coward like Lionel Malet.

She heard the crunch of wheels on gravel just in time to see him descend from a phaeton. He probably owed money on it, but you wouldn't know it to look at him, sauntering down the hill to the bridge without a care in the world.

Hard to believe that she'd risked everything years ago for a pair of blue eyes, a smug smile, and a head of raven curls. Even in a mere ensign's uniform, Lionel had looked incredibly appealing to a woman surrounded by her stepfather's aging friends—or her teasing brother and half brothers.

Today, dressed even more impressively in gentleman's attire, he lacked the power to move her. How could she not have seen the truth back then, that he was debonair and slick, the kind of man who slithered his way into a naïve woman's life, then poisoned her and her future with one bite? If she'd just recognized . . .

It didn't matter. She recognized his true character now. So as he approached, looking utterly sure of himself, she drew out Thorn's pistol and aimed it at him. "That's close enough, sir."

He laughed at her, blast him. "You mean to shoot me, do you?"

"If I have to."

"But you don't." He cocked his head rakishly. "You merely need to pay my price. Fifty guineas is a reasonable amount for my silence, wouldn't you say?"

Her hands shook. She hoped he couldn't see that. "I'm surprised you ask so little, considering what you'd get if you married me."

"Are you still interested in that?" When she merely glared at him, he shrugged. "I didn't think so. What a pity. A marriage would suit both of us."

"I'm sure it would help your finances, but in what possible way could it benefit *me*?" she asked coldly.

He let his insolent gaze trail down her. "You're by no means as youthful as you were at twenty. It won't be long before you're considered an out-and-out spinster, and then no one will marry you."

"Good. That suits me perfectly." Oddly enough, it was the truth. "I'm afraid you have soured me on men, sir." That, too, was the truth. Or part of it,

anyway. “Nor am I some green girl to fall for your machinations anymore.”

“So why do you need the pistol?”

“My brother fears you might try to abduct me as you tried to do with Kitty Nickman at Christmastide on this very estate.”

Mention of his failed plan seemed to spark his temper. “I considered it. But I know Thornstock. If I kidnapped you, he would cut you off, and then we’d both be poor. Indeed, he threatened as much years ago.”

The memory of that betrayal settled into her chest like a bad cold. That it still had the power to wound infuriated her. “He was trying to protect me, as any good brother would.” Still, it rankled that her twin had read Lionel’s character so well when she’d been oblivious to it. “And judging from your attempt to blackmail me, he was wise to do so.”

“This is not an attempt.” He took a step forward. “I mean to get my money.”

She steadied the pistol on him. “I don’t have it.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Then I suppose I’ll be telling the world about us, starting with your brother.”

A sick fear gripped her at the thought of Thorn—or anyone at all—hearing the truth. “I promise I’ll get you your funds once the family goes to London for the season. That’s only a few days away. Surely you can wait *that* long.”

“Ah, but why should I?”

“Because if I ask Thorn for fifty guineas here in the country, he’ll find the request suspicious and demand to know why I want it. There’s no plausible lie I can give him. And if I answer him truthfully, he might just murder you.”

Lionel chuckled. “You mean you haven’t told your arse of a brother what we did?”

“Of course not. And I know you didn’t tell him, either. Because you wouldn’t be here trying to blackmail me if you had. Thorn would have killed you years ago.”

“True.” The amusement faded from his cruelly handsome face, leaving only the cold glitter in his eyes. Now *that* was the Lionel Malet she knew and hated. “Fortunately,” he went on, “I am better prepared to fight your brother these days. Not for nothing have I trained as a soldier. And Thornstock has undoubtedly grown soft with age.”

“If you believe that, then you haven’t had much dealings with him recently.”

“In any case,” he said, brushing off her comment, “I have no intention of

waiting for my money. If you can't pay me today, I'll just have to take something else by way of payment."

He stalked across the bridge toward her, and though she backed up swiftly, he was on her before she could get very far. Only when he snatched the gun from her did she realize it wasn't her he was after.

"You can't have that!" she cried, her heart sinking. "That's Thorn's! It's not mine to give!" It was Thorn's most recent purchase, and he was inordinately fond of it. Her brother would never forgive her if she let it be taken.

"I don't care." Lionel examined the pistol, then snorted as he realized that it wasn't loaded. "This will fetch a pretty penny in London while I wait for the rest of my money." He shoved the gun in his greatcoat pocket. "Oh, and the price for my silence has just gone up. It's a hundred guineas now."

When he turned to walk away, she grabbed his arm, trying to prevent him from escaping with Thorn's gun. "I'll get you your dratted money, but you can't have the pistol!"

She'd managed to wrestle it halfway out of his pocket before he gripped her upper arms and shook her. "I will have whatever I want of you, make no mistake. So if you wish me to keep your secrets—"

A shot sounded over their heads. Startled, she and Lionel both looked toward where it had come from, up on the rise behind her where the dower house sat.

Its tenant, Major Wolfe, now swiftly reloaded his own gun, then aimed it at Lionel's heart. Honestly, she'd never been happier to see the gruff former soldier in all her life.

"Step away from her ladyship," Major Wolfe called out as he made his way down to the bridge, somehow keeping his weapon trained on Lionel while maneuvering the uneven surfaces of the riverbank path with his cane.

Lionel sneered at him. "Or what? A mere gamekeeper wouldn't dare to shoot a viscount's son."

Gwyn frowned. "How did you know he's a game—Oh. Right." She'd forgotten that Major Wolfe had helped thwart Lionel during that abduction at Christmas. Not that it mattered. "The major is a duke's grandson and a crack shot, besides. Not only would he dare to shoot you, but he wouldn't miss."

Major Wolfe's gaze flicked to her. He seemed surprised by the remark, though she couldn't imagine why. She'd flirted often enough to make it clear what she thought of him. Then again, she'd ended that after getting a surly

response time and again.

The major steadied his aim on Lionel. “Besides, you’re standing on *my* land, trying to assault a member of the family *I* work for. So you’d best release the lady, or I swear I’ll make you regret it. Not a magistrate in the county would blame me for shooting an armed man on my own property.”

Lionel started. “I’m not armed.” When Major Wolfe nodded to Lionel’s coat pocket, where the ivory handle of Thorn’s pistol still hung out, Lionel paled. “The pistol isn’t loaded,” he said, though he had the good sense to release her.

“Not to mention that it doesn’t belong to you.” She met Major Wolfe’s gaze. “It’s Thorn’s. Mr. Malet took it from me.”

Major Wolfe arched one dark eyebrow at her. “And what were *you* proposing to do with an unloaded pistol?”

“Never mind that. I’m merely saying I want it back.”

“Ah.” Major Wolfe gestured to Lionel with his firearm. “You heard the lady. Give it to her.”

Lionel’s eyes narrowed, and Gwyn’s heart nearly failed her. What if he chose to reveal her secret to Major Wolfe? It would be just the sort of thing he’d do to revenge himself on her. And she would die of mortification, which was saying something, since there was little that mortified her these days.

She edged closer to Lionel. “Hand it over.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I promise you’ll have your money once I reach London. But not if you say one word to *him* about our past together.”

Lionel glanced from Major Wolfe’s weapon to her ashen face. “I’ll hold you to your promise,” he murmured, then gave her Thorn’s pistol and backed to the end of the bridge and then onto the path that led to where his phaeton was waiting.

Major Wolfe, who’d been watching their exchange intently, thankfully didn’t ask what they’d talked about. She was fairly certain he couldn’t have heard them over the roar of the river below, but she still shook from the knowledge of how narrow an escape she’d made.

And would continue to make as long as Lionel was about.

“I wish you’d killed him,” she muttered as Major Wolfe approached her, keeping his eye on the retreating Lionel.

Once Lionel climbed into his phaeton and drove away, Major Wolfe relaxed his stance and unloaded his firearm. Then he shoved his large pistol into the capacious pocket of the ragged greatcoat she’d always seen him wear

when working on the estate.

“I’ll accompany you back to the hall.” When she opened her mouth to protest, he added, “Just in case Malet is lurking nearby, waiting to get a chance at you again.”

Oh. That was certainly a good point. “Thank you for coming to my rescue.”

He nodded, taciturn as always, and gestured for her to go ahead of him. They crossed the bridge and climbed the hill some time in silence, with her casting him furtive glances every few steps. Lord, but the man was handsome—unfashionably so, with his long black hair tied in a queue by a simple leather string—but handsome nonetheless.

Some would say his jaw was too square and his mouth too thin to be called attractive, and that might be true. But it was his hazel eyes that distinguished him from every other man she’d met, even Heywood, whose eyes were also hazel. The major’s were actually brown in the middle with green ringing the outer edges. In some lights, the green predominated, in others the brown.

Those eyes were endlessly changing—she could stare at them all day. Not that she’d had many chances. When his sister Bea had been on the estate, Gwyn had seen him more often, but once Bea had married, he’d seemed determined not to associate with anyone who lived in Armitage Hall.

That didn’t keep the maids from whispering about him—how he looked, what he said, what he did. One had even stated that she would marry Major Wolfe in a heartbeat, lame leg or no. Yet he seemed to have no idea of his appeal to the female sex, or surely he’d have taken a wife by now. Why, he was already thirty-one!

“What did Malet want?” Major Wolfe finally asked.

Thankfully, she had a plausible explanation ready for him. “To make me go with him. That’s why I brandished the pistol.”

Major Wolfe searched her face. “Since when do you carry a pistol with you on Armitage land?”

“Since Mr. Malet told Heywood that he meant to kidnap me in revenge for something Heywood and his friend did abroad,” she snapped.

“Malet made that threat four months ago,” Major Wolfe pointed out. “It’s odd that he waited until now to attempt it.”

“Perhaps he was waiting until our guard was down,” she said dryly. “Or perhaps he had tried courting an heiress who wouldn’t know all about his wicked intent, and she didn’t prove viable, so he fell back on his old ways.”

“And you just happened to be roaming the estate with your brother’s unloaded pistol when Malet came looking to kidnap you.”

She knew perfectly well that Major Wolfe wasn’t credulous enough to believe *that*. Then an idea struck her. “Thorn heard that Mr. Malet was nosing around in Sanforth, so he warned me to keep an eye out.”

“Your brother is presently in residence at the hall?”

“Yes. And he gave me his pocket pistol for protection.”

“A valuable, unloaded pistol that he didn’t teach you how to load or shoot? That seems reckless of him, and your twin has never struck me as the reckless sort.”

“You’d be surprised,” she muttered. A pox on Major Wolfe and his military mind. This was not going well.

“What’s more, you and Malet seemed to know each other, at least well enough to be exchanging confidences.”

“Confidences! Don’t be silly. Whatever you think you saw isn’t what you’re implying.”

“Hmm. If you say so.” Major Wolfe moved along the path through the woods at a surprisingly good pace. “Why is your brother here anyway? Doesn’t he have an estate of his own to run?”

“Of course, but he decided to accompany me and Mama to London for the season. I am to be presented at court and have my debut in society, you know.”

“I’m well aware,” he said tensely.

What was *that* supposed to mean?

Oh, he must be thinking of his sister Bea and the fact that she was being presented as well, but as Grey’s new wife, the Duchess of Greycourt.

“Thankfully,” he went on, “today’s incident will impress upon Thornstock the need to keep a closer eye on you and your suitors in London.”

The statement was so typically male and arrogant that she was about to blister his ears over his presumption when the greater implications of his words hit her. “Surely you don’t mean to tell Thorn about this.”

Major Wolfe lifted an eyebrow. “Of course I mean to tell him. He needs to know so he can make arrangements to accompany you everywhere.”

She hurried her steps so she could stand in front of him, blocking the path. “But you can’t! I don’t want Thorn mucking about in my personal affairs. I had enough of that growing up with him in Berlin.”

In the darkness of the forest, the major’s eyes looked as brown as oak and

just as hard. “You cannot expect me to keep silent on this matter.”

“Why not? It’s none of your concern. I’m a grown woman. I can handle the likes of Mr. Malet in good society, where I will never be alone.”

“*Never?* Even in the Armitage town house? Or going out onto a balcony at a ball for a breath of air? Or—”

“I will be careful everywhere, I assure you. And anyway, there won’t be nearly as many situations in which he could effect a kidnapping without drawing attention to himself.”

And there’d be even less of them if the major told Thorn about Lionel, and her twin decided to dog her heels wherever she went. Then she’d never get the chance to meet with Lionel privately and give him his money.

Nor could she tell *Thorn* about the blackmail. He would either kill Lionel outright and end up in gaol or challenge Lionel to a duel and end up in gaol. No, Thorn could never know what Lionel was up to.

“Please, Major Wolfe, you must not tell my brother—”

“Your brother may heed your pleas, Lady Gwyn, but I know better than to do so. Either you tell him in my presence, or I will tell him myself. But one way or the other, he is going to hear what Malet attempted. That’s the end of it.”

Good Lord, he was like a dog with a bone. And now, thanks to him, her ability to pay Lionel his money and put an end to this madness had just become ten times harder.



Jessica Blakely for Tamara Lackey Photographs

Sabrina Jeffries is the *New York Times* best-selling author of more than fifty novels and works of short fiction (some written under the pseudonyms Deborah Martin and Deborah Nicholas). Whatever time not spent writing in a coffee-fueled haze is spent traveling with her husband and adult autistic son or indulging in one of her passions—jigsaw puzzles, chocolate, and music. With over 9 million books in print in more than twenty-one languages, the North Carolina author never regrets tossing aside a budding career in academics for the sheer joy of writing fun fiction and hopes that one day a book of hers will end up saving the world. She always dreams big.