

A man and a woman in Regency-era clothing are shown in a romantic embrace, nearly kissing. The man is on the left, wearing a dark coat and a light waistcoat. The woman is on the right, wearing a red dress with a lace collar. They are positioned in front of a window that looks out onto a garden. In the top left corner, there is a circular gold emblem with a red center containing the text 'REGENCY ROMANCE COLLECTION'.

REGENCY
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Christmas IN CUMBRIA

TAMMY ANDRESEN
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CHRISTMAS IN
CUMBRIA

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A CHRISTMAS BLESSING

TAMMY ANDRESEN

A Lords of Temptation Novella



A CHRISTMAS BLESSING



CHAPTER ONE

Emily cocked her head to the side, staring at the tree that now filled the entry of her and Ace's Cumberland home.

The thick evergreen branches covered the broken plaster in the two-story foyer quite nicely.

By all rights, she and Ace ought not to have a party at their country seat. His marquessate had been riddled with problems, financial and otherwise. Problems he was only beginning to dig out from under.

Ace, a man of discipline and hard work, had managed to remove their debts in the last two years and was now building a prospering seat for his title.

But they were only beginning to acquire the funds needed to complete tasks such as repairing the broken plaster or replacing the spindles on the grand stair. Every room needed care, which required money, which meant the renovations had been slow.

At least they'd managed to fix the leaking roof and broken windows. That was a start. But with little to do besides clean the massive house, Emily wasn't certain she was living up to the role of a marquess's wife. Not only could she do little to

restore their home, she could hardly entertain being so far north and with a house in such disrepair.

And then there was the other job a wife was supposed to fulfill as a lady...and this was the thought that always made her stomach erupt in worry.... She should have already provided her husband with an heir.

She covered her stomach, trying to calm the fluttering butterflies that beat about her insides. This was Emily's job and she tried not to think about the fact that after nearly three years of marriage, she'd not been so much as one day late with her monthlies.

Waving her hand in the air to push these thoughts aside, she returned to the task at hand. Decorating.

She wished they had returned north sooner. Emily might have at least been able to re sew curtains, but she'd not even managed that task. Because of the family business Ace ran, and the villains who had plagued them, they'd had to remain in London far longer than planned. Emily sighed, wishing they were further along in every part of their life.

Or, at the very least, that they had somewhere else to host this party. But this property was the only one they owned large enough to hold all of Ace's six siblings, their spouses and children. Even Ace's brother Fulton was travelling from Italy to spend time with the family.

Rush, Ace's next oldest brother, had offered to have this gathering at his home, which was far closer to London.

But Anna, Ace's youngest sister, and her husband also lived in Cumberland, and they'd just had a baby six weeks prior who was far too young to travel long distances. Besides...Emily ought to contribute something to this family, even if it was just a Christmas gathering.

"It looks beautiful," Ace's deep voice rumbled from behind her.

She turned to look at her husband, drinking in every detail of his chiseled features and broad shoulders. Even after three years, he still took her breath away. Tall, dark, and exceedingly handsome, he still had that air of mystery that had attracted her from the moment she'd seen him across that crowded ballroom three years ago. "I know Christmastide Eve isn't until tomorrow. I just wanted the tree to be up when your family arrives."

Most of the siblings had gone to Anna's house first. The youngest Smith sibling, she'd married the Duke of Upton two years prior and the two had hardly left their home in Cumberland since travelling there before their wedding. Which meant Anna had been missed in London. The family had been eager to see her and the new baby she'd added to the family.

Emily's gut twisted again. She was so happy for Anna and Rath. And she could hardly wait to meet her new nephew. And the fact that Anna had given the duke a boy, a rightful heir, made Emily swallow a large lump. She'd very much like to do that for her husband.

In fact, many of the Smith siblings had had children.

Gris, had a girl, now almost four, and another baby boy. Rush and Abby had also welcomed a daughter who was about to turn one. All the darkly handsome Smith men had married, and all were having children.

Emily nipped at her lip.

Was she actually ready to hear this place filled with the pitter patter of little feet? It would be bittersweet for certain.

“What’s wrong?” Ace’s brow drew together as he started toward her, his long strides eating the ground between them.

“Nothing,” she murmured, looking back at the tree. She’d cried on his shoulder too often lately, and she was trying to put on a happier façade.

“Are you upset the children are coming?” His arms circled her torso, pulling her close, his nose dropping into her hair.

“No,” she shook her head, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder, her hands sliding down the thick, corded muscles of his arms. “They are our nieces and nephews. Our family. I’m excited to see them all.”

“Always so kind,” he whispered just behind her ear, placing a soft kiss on the sensitive spot of her neck.

She shivered at the touch, her fingers tightening on his biceps. “I just...”

“I know,” he murmured kissing lower along the sensitive skin of her neck. “But try not to worry, my love. We’re happy with just us two. We don’t need more.”

“I am a marchioness, Ace. It’s my duty to provide you with an heir.” He was a man of duty and family, he should understand better than anyone.

He stilled, his lips reaching the collar of her gown. “I have four brothers, Emily. I don’t need a son to be an heir. Any one of them could run the marquessate as well as myself. All I have ever needed or wanted is you.”

His words both soothed her and somehow made her ache with sadness. She was so glad that he loved her so much but in giving her unconditional love, she somehow felt even worse about not giving more to him.

But that was not a problem she should focus on today. Or maybe not at all. She had a wonderful husband who loved her very much.

“I need you too,” she whispered, sliding her nose up his neck and along his jaw even as doubt lingered, tightening her chest. Would he always feel about her the way he did now? Would he always love her or would he grow tired of the woman who didn’t give him the one thing a wife was supposed to give?

Her hands slid into his hair, her mouth meeting his as she pushed these worrisome thoughts aside.

His kiss was hungry, urgent, and demanding, and she met him with a passion all her own. Two years of marriage had only fed her need for him and as she’d grown more comfortable with his body and hers, their lovemaking had grown...interesting.

Delightfully so.

His hand traced the curve of her back, settling on her behind and pulling their hips together in a possessive grip that had made her ache with need even as his tongue pillaged her mouth.

She moaned into him, wanting, as usual, more.

He dipped down, wrapping his other arm around her legs and then her feet were off the ground, her body plastered to his.

She lifted her mouth from his, giving him a playful smile, her worries forgotten in the passion of his kiss. “Where are you taking me, my lord?”

“Our chamber,” he growled, starting for the stairs.

But Emily had something else in mind. A cozy room with a burning fire and a desk... “How about your study—”

His eyes gleamed with appreciation, the curve of his smile wicked as he changed direction toward the back of the house. But they hadn’t made it three steps when the front door banged open, a deep male voice booming through their foyer. “Are we interrupting?”

Emily’s head snapped up to see Ace’s third brother, Triston, a former boxer and forever a disturber of the peace, striding into the house. He was a giant of a man with overlong dark hair and thick muscles that scared most people away. Not his wife, Emma. The redhead seemed anything but frightened by her husband.

“Triston!” Ace called back, lightly setting her down on her feet. “You made it!”

And just like that, the foyer filled with people. Behind Triston and Emma came Anna’s delicate frame, her blonde hair and blue eyes shimmering in the candlelight. She was followed by her fierce-looking duke of a husband, a tiny bundle wrapped tightly in his arms.

Emily raced to Anna and Rath even as Ace hugged Triston. “This is him? Little Douglas?” Emily gushed, peaking into the nest of blankets. Her heart filled with joy even as the slightest pang of envy rushed through her.

“You know we don’t live far, but Rath insisted on carrying him the entire way, I haven’t held him once. Rush claims that he creates far more heat for the babe.” Anna embraced her, whispering in her ear. “I do believe he’s right on that front. He’s an inferno of heat that makes Cumberland winters bearable.”

Emily felt her cheeks warm. She knew about husbands who kept their wives cozy all winter long.

Looking over at Ace, she watched as he hugged Rush and his wife Abby at the same time. Abby, another beautiful blonde, laughed as she squeezed Ace back.

“You’re early,” he declared, moving onto Gris, his wife, their baby, and their daughter Rose.

“Wanted to surprise you,” Gris chuckled. “Life has gotten boring now that we’re not fighting villains at every turn. Thought we’d help liven it up with a surprise entrance.”

Everyone laughed at that. The family had spent a year trying to keep two powerful men from stealing the gaming hells that sustained them all. “I’ll take boring. Thank you,” Ace replied, though his eyes glowed with pleasure to see his siblings.

Triston slapped the back of Fulton, the youngest of the brothers. “I jest. Fulton caught the wind on our journey north, and he made the trip a full day ahead of schedule.”

“It’s the most wonderful surprise,” Emily announced, holding her arms wide. “Everyone, come in from the cold.”

The parade of Smith family entered, followed by footmen and trunks. Emily drew in a deep breath as the house filled with people and noise.

The festivities had begun.

CHAPTER TWO

Emily lay beneath the covers, staring up at the canopy of their massive four-post bed with its thick velvet curtains.

This evening had been too busy to sleep, and her mind wouldn't stop turning over how wonderful it was to see everyone. But also...the ache of failure and want had sharpened and tightened as the family's beautiful children filled the house.

Ace lay next to her, still and quiet as she shifted again, her legs unable to be still so that she might fall asleep.

"Em," he murmured, turning on his side and reaching over to her to pull her close. "You should be exhausted after today."

Warmth flooded her chest. He was always concerned for her. "I should." He settled her against his side, the warm, hard length of him quieting her thoughts but awakening her body.

She trailed a hand down his chest, sliding her fingers over the rippling muscles of his abdomen.

"But..." he quietly murmured into her hair.

She shook her head, not wishing to discuss her feelings again. It didn't help and if she were honest, it only hurt him

that she wasn't content. He'd repeated over and over that he didn't care if they had children, it was her that was bothered, and he was paying the price with her unhappiness, which wasn't fair at all. "But..." she whispered close to his ear, "I've not been alone with my husband all day."

And then she let her hand drift lower...

He chuckled low and deep, his arm tightening about her as his other hand came to her hip. "My sweet love," he whispered against her lips before he kissed her mouth, pressing her lips open so that his tongue might plunder hers. He pulled just far enough back to look into her eyes, the dark depths of his filled with passion. "My little vixen."

Emily kissed him again, this time, opening her mouth, the passion between them quickly building as their tongues tangled together. With a flex of his arm, she was on top of him, her legs settling on either side of his hips. Their bodies ground together, the apex of her legs rubbing against the stiffness of his manhood.

He tugged at the hem of her night rail, the night air dancing over the skin of her backside, causing her to shiver.

Or was that her need?

Either way, Ace was yanking the covers up over her bare skin. "Cold, my love?"

She pushed up with both hands against his chest, causing them to grind together even as she pulled her night rail over her head. "Not cold enough to stop." This part of their relationship never ceased to work between them. The desire

they shared not only burned bright, it bonded them together in ways she'd never imagined.

He chuckled again, his large hands skating up her sides to cup both her breasts in his hands. She arched into his touch, her head falling back, her nipples stiffening as his thumbs brushed over the peaks.

She'd left her hair undone and it streamed behind her now, brushing his thighs as she rolled her hips again.

“So beautiful,” he rumbled, sliding down her rib cage to grab her hips and grind their bodies even closer. “It never ceases to amaze me how perfect we are together.”

“Perfect?” Emily teased. “It would be even better if someone wasn't wearing clothing,” she said, continuing the undulation of her hips.

He gave her a wicked grin, and with his arm around her back, he flipped them around so that he was on top. Rising above her, he shucked his own night clothes, the power of his body making her mouth gape open, her eyes roving over every inch of him as she stared. “I'm still not used to it.”

“Not used to what?” He looked down at her, his chest and neck flexing as his gaze drank her in as well.

“How gorgeous you are naked.”

He growled, as he lowered his chest to hers. “Me? Emily, I can barely get through a day without wishing to hold you like this. Sometimes, you're all I think about. The joy of our union, of our marriage...”

She wrapped her arms about his neck, threading her fingers into his hair, as their mouths came together again.

He reached for her leg, hooking it around his hips as he pushed inside her, making them both cry out in satisfaction.

“So good,” she gasped, pulling at the hair near the base of his neck.

“It’s better than good,” he rumbled against her mouth, seating himself all the way into her channel. But rather than pull out, he held inside her. Lifting his head a few inches he looked down into her eyes. “Em.”

“What,” she asked even as her hips wiggled to feel him move against the sensitive walls at her apex. She ached for the mindless bliss of their bodies moving as one. Holding still like this was sweet torture.

“I need to know that you know what you mean to me.”

She stilled, despite the pleasure rippling inside her, demanding she chase more of him. “I do.”

“Before you...” He held her jaw in his hand, cupping her face, as he gave her a hard, demanding kiss that stole her breath. “I was lost. For the longest time, I only existed, with no hope for the future. My whole life gained meaning when you entered. I am found in your arms.”

Her chest tightened. “Me too.”

He shook his head. “Not like me. I faced a bleak future, my only hope to provide for my siblings. You are the light in my life that fills the darkness.” And then he pulled out,

pushing back in so that she gasped out at the intensity of the pleasure rolling through her.

“I have loved you since the moment I saw you across that ballroom.”

“Love at first sight?”

“Absolutely,” she answered meaning the sentiment with all her heart.

“And I love you with every ounce of my being. With every bit of my strength.” Again, he pulled out, pushing back in until she cried out her pleasure. “I don’t need more than that. Not now. Not ever.”

She jerked her chin in agreement, sure in this moment that their love was enough. “I need you too. So much.” Her fingers plucked at his back, wanting him to move harder, faster, as their tongues twined together again.

Ace had always been her heart’s greatest joy, and she felt that way still. She’d never love another, nor did she wish for any life but this one. She was so grateful for all they had but somehow, her heart still ached for what she didn’t have. What she wanted to give him. It was her duty, her role...

But those thoughts drifted far away as they climbed higher and higher. When Emily could barely stand another second, the tension so tight, she broke apart, gasping for breath as she shattered.

Ace followed close behind her, dropping his forehead to hers as he filled her with his seed.

They stayed locked together for minutes, just breathing as they stared into each other's eyes.

And when Ace finally rolled to the side, pulling her body close, she snuggled her cheek into his chest and hooked a leg over his hips.

He was right.

This was enough.

It had to be. All the wishing in the world wouldn't force her to become pregnant. It was a waste of energy, and it was hurting them both.

Tomorrow, she'd focus on loving her beautiful nieces and nephews. And giving her to her husband who needed her love as much as she did his.

CHAPTER THREE

Emily woke late the next day, the winter sun already streaming through her windows as she opened sleepy eyes. Her head felt muddled from sleeping late and she swiped a hand over her face trying to clear her thoughts.

She stretched, trying to shake the grogginess, noting that Ace was already gone.

Pushing up from the bed, she stumbled to her dressing table. She'd had trouble falling asleep, but it wasn't like her to sleep late, even if she'd been up half the night.

Nor did she normally have such trouble waking. It must be the stress and the business of yesterday that had affected her so.

With that in mind, she walked toward the door to pull the cord that would summon her maid. She didn't always use her, considering that the woman had duties beyond helping Emily. Staff was still limited. But this morning, she'd need all the help she could get.

Moving as quickly as she could, they dressed her hair in a simple fashion, pulled back and twisted at the nape, and then she donned a plain wool gown. It would be a busy day with

activities both inside and out on the grounds and she'd need to be warm.

Giving her reflection a quick check, she slid a hand down the flat of her belly and then made her way downstairs.

The family had all assembled for breakfast, the noise making Emily stop to admire the Smith clan.

Six siblings, each had married and now had a spouse and then there were the babies...they were a crowd unto themselves.

Having lost her parents, Emily's brother had raised her. It had been quiet for most holidays, and she loved all the noise now.

What was even better was that her brother had married Mirabelle Smith, making them both part of this large clan. Another blessing to be certain.

Ace moved from his spot at the head of the table to come to her side. "All right, my love?"

She gave him a glowing smile. "I'm wonderful."

But his brow remained furrowed. "You slept late, which is unlike you."

"It's just all the activity, I think."

"And the noise?" His gaze slashed across his family. "We've always been loud, but the family has grown so much, we're a cacophony now."

"The noise fills my heart." She gave his arm a squeeze, wanting him to understand. Any tiredness was her own doing,

not the fault of his family.

He laughed even as he quirked a brow, leaning close to her ear. “Really? I like our quiet.” His breath tickled her ear. “Though you should feel free to be as loud as you need at any time during any activity.”

She blushed at his words even as several other family members rose from the table to join them. Before she knew it, she was holding Anna’s baby as Gris’s little girl clung to her leg.

Her heart filled with a special joy as breakfast was forgotten. The baby settled into the crook of one arm as she used to other to stroke back little Rose’s hair.

“What are our plans for the day?” Her brother, Ken, called, rising from his spot next to his wife, Mirabelle.

“We’ll decorate the tree,” she softly bounced the baby as she spoke. “Cut bows for the mantel and mistletoe for the doors—”

A cheer rose up from the group.

And then laughter followed at the spontaneous reaction. She laughed too. “There are presents to place under the tree and I’ve planned a grand dinner for us all for tomorrow.”

Ace’s arm was about her waist still and he gave her a small squeeze. “Sounds wonderful, Em.”

“Oh good,” she answered as she stared down at little Douglas, sleeping in her arms. She’d bought a sweet silver rattle for the little boy, and she could hardly wait to give the gift to him.

“Shall we begin?” Violet, Gris’s wife called, placing her hand over her rounded stomach. Though trim still, it was obvious that Violet was expecting. Again.

Emily nipped her lip as she looked back down at the babe in her arms. If she wasn’t to be a mother, she could be the best auntie. Gently, she brushed her lips over the babe’s forehead. Douglas was going to be spoiled with all the love and affection she could give. All the children would be.

Mirabelle stood from the table and joined her and Anna. Ken’s wife and Ace’s sister, the petite brunette had been Emily’s best friend before Emily had even met Ace. “Isn’t he beautiful?” Mirabella asked with a sigh

“He is,” Emily breathed as the baby stirred a bit in her arms. “What a miracle.”

Mirabelle drew in a shuddering breath, leaning close. “I can hardly wait to be a mother myself.”

Emily tried not to wince. Ken and Mirabelle had yet to have a baby either. “Are you worried at all? You’ve been married for more than two years now.”

Her gaze strayed to Ace.

But Mirabelle’s husky laugh brought her attention back to her best friend, a sinking feeling pulling at her stomach as her gaze met her best friend’s. “No. I’m not worried. These things take time.”

Emily nodded, hoping that what Mirabelle said was true. And also feeling the smallest bit of relief. If Mirabelle and

Ken hadn't had a baby but still had hope, there was hope for her too.

And she could also confess, at least in some tiny corner of her heart, that it was a relief to have the company of another woman who hadn't conceived either.

Her friend's hand came to her arm. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Emily swallowed down a lump, her eyes widening even as she leaned closer. She had a sinking feeling that she knew where this conversation was going, and she attempted to fortify herself against the hurt. She swallowed down a lump before she spoke. "Of course. Always. What is it?"

"I missed my monthlies last month," Mirabelle whispered back, her head bent close even as her fingers tightened on Emily's arm. "I've been to the doctor and he's confirmed. I am with child."

Emily felt the blood drain from her face. She was so happy for her friend, but... "That's wonderful news."

"Thank you," Emily gave her arm a final squeeze before she let go. "We're very excited but it's so new, we haven't told very many people."

"I understand," Emily answered, trying to breathe normally. Ridiculous tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. "Your secret is safe with me." She truly was happy for Mirabelle. And she tried to hold on to her feelings from last night. Ace was enough. Their love was enough. He'd be content with her even if they did not have a child.

But not being in his arms, the words rang hollow as her chest tightened with a painful ache.

Handing the baby back to Anna, she waved everyone forward. There was no point wallowing. Best to keep busy. “Shall we start by dressing the tree with candles and strings of berries?”

Another cheer rose from the group as everyone left the table and rushed toward the entry. Emily had a moment to draw in a deep breath before she followed. Today would be about making everyone’s Christmastide the best that it could be.

She’d worry about her own feelings later...

CHAPTER FOUR

Six hours later, Emily thought she might pay all her pin money for a nap. They'd dressed the tree, tromped about the property cutting bows, holly, and mistletoe, and now, singing, they went about transforming the house.

It was wonderful and exhausting, and she felt herself wilting on her ladder she stood upon to attach the mistletoe to the entrance of the music room.

"Let's sing 'Adeste Fideles' again!" Emma, Triston's wife called, her gorgeous red hair glimmering in the candlelight as she clapped her hands.

Emily finished tying the green leafy branches decorated with berries and started down the ladder.

"Yes," Mirabelle cheered with a giggle. "Let us."

Emily smiled, hoping that she'd be able to sit while they sang. Her back ached and her head still swam. She'd never managed to clear that fog in her mind.

Belatedly, she realized she'd also skipped breakfast and she'd only managed a few small sandwiches between activities. Perhaps a cup of strong tea would revive her.

“Emily,” Mirabelle called. “Come join us!”

She waved them away, sinking into an empty chair. “You go ahead.”

Mirabelle wrinkled her nose even as all the other women gathered around the pianoforte to start singing.

Ace strode across the room, squatting next to her chair. “All right?”

“Fine,” she sighed. “I’ve never seen the house look more beautiful.”

“I know,” he looked about, admiring all the decorations. “It’s come a long way since we first saw it.”

There was a great deal still to be done but even shoring up the roof and cleaning away the dust and grime had helped a great deal.

“It will be our great masterpiece,” she said glancing about the still-dingy plaster. Someday, they’d make this house truly shine. It was one way she could be a proper marchioness. “Though we might never convince your family to travel this far for Christmastide again.”

His fingers laced with hers. “When we’ve enough funds, we’ll buy a London townhouse so you can host there. You’re doing a marvelous job.”

Pleasure filled her at his words of praise. She wanted to be the best wife she could. Leaning over the side of the chair, she rested her cheek on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

The women finished singing, the last notes of the pianoforte filling the room. “Another,” Tris called where he sat with his son in his arms. “This little lad sleeps best with noise.”

“Emily,” Mirabelle called again.

Emma waved her hand in Emily’s direction, the women clearly not taking no for an answer. “Join us.”

With a sigh, Emily lifted her head and began to push up from the chair. But the moment she did, her head gave a lurch, her vision blurring as she swayed on her feet.

She’d never been one to swoon but as darkness crowded the edge of her gaze, she thought she might. Her knees weakened and she felt herself falling...

Ace’s strong arms were around her in a moment, pulling her tight to his chest. “Em?”

She couldn’t answer as she leaned into him, closing her eyes.

“Emily?” he called again, this time, alarm making his deep voice sharp.

“I’m all right.”

“No, you’re not,” he rumbled and then he was folding her into his lap as he sat down with her still in his arms. “You’ve run yourself ragged.”

She shook her head, keeping her eyes closed, as she rested her cheek on his shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“Hogwash,” he rumbled. She didn’t have to open her eyes to feel the family crowding around them and she grimaced into his chest, thinking of the scene she’d caused.

Drat. She’d not meant to do that. “Really. I just need a moment and a cup of tea. I’ll be fine.”

Ace grumbled. “She needs tea, she says. Ring the bell. Quickly.”

Emily heard the rustle of skirts and tears pricked at her eyes again. Another oddity that shouldn’t be happening. Her hand swiped at her eyes. What was wrong with her? She was not a crier either.

But here she was, useless and incapacitated. She was supposed to be the hostess. The one wifely duty she could share with his family and instead... Shame at her failure washed over her as her fist curled into Ace’s chest. “I’ll get it myself. I’ll be ready for dinner in just a few—”

“Absolutely not.”

“Ace.” She sat up, pushing away the dizziness. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You’re going to bed.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

She huffed, pushing at his chest. “When did you become so bossy?”

He snorted. “When my wife nearly fainted in the music room. You’re overtaxed.”

“It’s the eve of Christmastide. I’m not going to bed now.”

He growled out a protest. “Emily.”

She unfolded herself from his lap, forcing herself to stand with steady feet. Her stomach pitched again but she ignored it. “There is dinner yet and presents to wrap. I’ll be fine.”

He stood too, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t like it.”

Behind her another male snort filled the silence. “Don’t mind him, Emily,” Triston called. “He’s always been bossy.”

“Bossy,” Fulton called back. “Doesn’t even begin to cover what Ace is.... He’s a tyrant.”

Ace scowled at his brothers. “Don’t think I don’t know how either of you would act if it was your wife who’d nearly fainted.”

That made silence fall again as Emily shook her head. “Thank you all for your support and concern. But truly, I’m fine.”

Mirabelle walked back in with a tray of tea in hand. Setting on the side table, next to the chair, and then she poured Emily a cup.

Deliberately, Emily took the chair again and picked up the cup. “I shall sit for the next half hour, sipping my tea and doing nothing if it will help you to feel better, my love.”

“Fine,” Ace grunted. “But we’re going to bed after dinner.”

“Ace.”

He wagged his finger. “Don’t Ace me, you need your rest. Tomorrow will be another busy day.”

She could hardly argue with that. And if she were being honest, going to bed sounded wonderful.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Emily woke early, a blanket of snow covering the ground outside. She grinned to herself. Cumberland, on the border of Scotland, regularly received snow and she'd secretly hoped for a white blanket to cover the ground for their Christmastide scene.

Ace was still asleep, and her smile slipped from her face to see him. They'd hardly spoken when they'd gone to bed last night, the tension still thick between them.

Once they'd been alone, not only had he refused to make love, but he'd not even been willing to talk.

He'd insisted that she go straight to sleep, which had further irritated her. She wasn't a child and she'd wished for a few moments to speak with him after a tense day between them.

Or a tense evening, anyhow.

He'd glared through dinner, not speaking to anyone, and insisted they leave the festivities the moment the meal had ended.

Slipping on her dressing gown, she moved through their room and into the smaller, adjoining room, where they stored their clothes and readied themselves for the day.

She'd stashed her presents there and because they'd retired so early, she'd not had a chance to wrap them or place them under the tree.

Working quickly, she covered each in burlap, tying bright ribbon around them until she came to the rattle she'd purchased for Douglas.

Its silver finish caught the light, and Emily paused, brushing a finger over its smooth surface.

It gave a faint jingle.

"What's that?" Ace called behind her, frightening her enough to make her jump.

"A rattle."

"For whom?" If anything, he sounded less content and more irritable than he had the day before. She turned to him, wrinkling her nose. "Douglas. Who else?"

His features softened a bit, and he came to stand behind her before squatting down so that his knees were on either side of her back as she sat on the floor. "I thought for a moment..."

"What?"

"That you'd bought it for our baby."

Weight, like a brick, settled low in her gut. "We don't have a baby."

“I know that. But you’ve made no secret that you wish we did.”

She shook her head, turning the rattle in her hand. “It’s my duty.”

“And I’ve told you repeatedly that it’s a duty I do not wish for you to fulfill.”

“You don’t wish it?” she turned back to look at him then. Saying he was content without a child was different than wishing they never had one.

“Not really,” he answered with a small shrug.

“You wouldn’t be happy if you found out I was pregnant?”

He rose up again, crossing his arm. “I raised my siblings, Emily, through poverty, no less. And now I’m saddled with a marquessate that was on the brink of failure, fighting to bring it back. I don’t want more responsibility. Please understand, I’ve had an excessive amount already. I only want you.”

She looked back at the rattle. She knew all of this. But hearing him say it, she had to confess, it made her ache.

If she were being honest with herself, providing an heir was not the only reason she’d wished for a child. “I had almost no family growing up. I don’t feel the way you do. I want children and a house full of love, and laughter, and activity.” And there it was. The baby was not just about being a good wife. It was about her own happiness. A longing deep within that she cried out to fill.

Where did that leave them?

He scrubbed both his hands down his face. “Good thing the decision is not up to either of us.”

She looked back at the rattle. It was not. He was correct there. And she’d have to find a way to be content regardless of whether or not they had a family of their own. Taking out another small bag of burlap, she placed the small gift inside and tied a red ribbon around it. “Good thing.” Her voice crackled not with tears but anger. It wasn’t his fault he didn’t want children but some part of her couldn’t help but think his lack of enthusiasm was part of the problem.

It was a dangerous thought that pulled at her gut. Surely, it wasn’t true. Men fathered unintentional children all the time. But still...

She heard Ace hesitate then. “Emily, I didn’t mean to offend.”

“I know,” she answered quietly, rising to her feet, and handing him a small package. She would banish these thoughts and focus on the holiday. On all their many blessings. “Happy Christmastide.”

He took the gift, unwrapping the small pocket square that Emily had painstakingly embroidered with his initial and some edging.

He held the gift in his hand, studying it for a long time. “How long did this take you?”

Emily’s embroidery had only grown to adequate and so the work took her a great deal longer than most. “I don’t know. I worked on it...” For months.

But he was pulling her close, into his chest, both his arms about her. “I’ve a gift for you too.” But he didn’t let her go for several more seconds. The last of her anger melted at his embrace.

Finally, he loosened his arms and stepped back. Pivoting toward his wardrobe, he opened a drawer at the bottom and pulled out a small box.

Then, prying open the lid, he extended the box to her.

She gasped out loud as a pink stone winked up at her. “Ace.”

“It’s a diamond, the jeweler said. I chose it because it’s the color of your lips and I...” But she crashed into him, wrapping her arms about his waist and nearly knocking the box from his hand.

He wrapped her in his embrace once again, even as she turned her face up to his, their kiss leaving them both short of breath.

When he finally lifted his head, Emily held his gaze. “It’s beautiful.”

He gave her that one-sided grin that never failed to make the butterflies flit about her chest. Then he reached for her hand and pulled the ring from the box, slipping it onto her finger. “Not as beautiful as you.”

They kissed again, one touch turning into two and then three. Emily finally tore her mouth from his. “Should we not dress?”

His gaze smoldered with passion as he gathered her closer.
“Good idea. I’ll help you slip off your night rail first.”

She laughed until his mouth descended over hers again. It didn’t seem like they’d be making it to Christmastide breakfast anytime soon...

CHAPTER SIX

The day passed in a whirlwind of activity that had Emily gasping for breath and singing with joy.

They'd had a wonderful breakfast, tromped about in the snow. Told old family stories, and then as the sun began to set, began to open gifts.

Emily had gotten something for each of the children. A doll for Rose, compass for Fulton's oldest son, blankets for the babies, and then it came time for Douglas's gift.

She handed the package to Anna, waiting as the mother opened the small rattle for her son.

The jingling noise the package made as Anna pulled it from the cloth had Douglas's attention before Anna had even removed the item and his little hands emerged from his blankets reaching and grasping.

Laughing, Anna took the small handle and placed it in his tiny fingers until they closed about the toy.

He swung it in the air and then, to her complete dismay, he knocked his own head, letting out a whale of a cry.

Everyone laughed, and Rath took his son, propping him up on his much larger body so that the little babe half sat and half reclined against his father. “How long until they sit on their own?” he asked, wrapping a protective arm about the little babe.

“A few more months,” Gris answered. “Before you know it, they are walking and talking and making messes all over your house.”

“Wait until they’re thirteen and only use the word *no*,” Ace added coughing into his hand. “Fulton.”

Everyone laughed.

Fulton covered his son George’s ears. “Don’t listen to them, lad. Your Papa was an angel.”

George, nearly nine, gave his father a playful swat on the stomach. “Even I know better than that.”

Another roar of laughter filled the room as Douglas gave another wave to his rattle.

Rath covered the babe’s head with his large hand and as the baby jerked his little arm about, he finally managed to get the rattle close to his mouth.

Emily half sighed and half giggled to see the baby holding her gift with such rapt attention. Love and tenderness tugged at her chest and her hands came up to cover her mouth.

Ace grunted next to her. “You’re watching that little lad like you used to watch me.”

She shook her head, still not looking at her husband. “Not true. If anything, I look at you more now than I used to. You were intimidatingly handsome.” She still couldn’t believe that Ace belonged to her.

But there was something so special about the way Rath held his son. Or Fulton protected George or...

She dipped her chin, staring at her lap. Ace had been right yesterday. Whether or not they had a child was not in her control.

Or his. She’d have to content herself with the gifts they had, which were many.

“Next year, I’m getting them all ponies,” she whispered as she leaned close to Ace.

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“I have not.” Her chin snapped up. “If we’re not to have children of our own, then our nieces and nephews will want to be with us all the time. We’ll build a pen and whenever they come to see us, it will be like a fairy tale here.”

Ace grunted, as he rose from his seat and crossed over to Douglas and Rath. “May I?” he asked, Rath nodding his approval before he lifted the baby and settled him into Ace’s arms.

Something inside Emily melted at the sight of her strong husband holding the tiny bundle.

His arm created a protective cradle for Douglas as his body curled around the baby.

With his other hand, he stroked Douglas's head, staring down at the babe.

Emily pressed her cool fingers into her overwarm cheeks trying not to think too much about how wonderful Ace looked holding the child or how much she wished to see him hold their child...

She turned away, averting her gaze as the family continued with their merriment, talking and laughing all around them.

"Emily?" Violet quietly asked from her spot next to her. A willowy brunette, Violet had a gentle nature that was so endearing. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she answered with a weak smile. "Douglas fills my heart, as does your beautiful baby boy. May I hold him?"

Violet handed over Christopher, now approaching a year old. He sat on Emily's lap, his head bobbing around to look up at her. Which made her laugh and broke the tension that had been building inside.

She lifted him under the arms so that he might stand on her legs, talking gibberish back to him as he bent his knees and pushed up again over and over as though he were bouncing on his legs.

Leaning forward, she kissed his forehead, breathing him in. "Sweet boy," she whispered against his skin. "Auntie has a present for you too."

And then she placed the babe back on her lap, handing him the little bundle she'd prepared for him.

With her help, he opened the carved wooden horse, a gift she'd bought from a local artisan, and she laughed again when Christopher instantly stuck the horse in his mouth. "I should have gotten you a rattle as well," she murmured.

"He's getting teeth," Violet answered for her son. "Everything goes straight into his mouth."

She brushed back the baby's dark hair, kissing him again before she handed him back to his mother.

She was fortunate that Anna and Rath lived so close, and Ace had promised that they could purchase a London townhouse. That would mean they could stay in London to be near the rest of the family.

Ace handed Douglas back to Rath and walked around the circle to her side, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder. She laced her fingers through his, content as the children each played with their new gift.

What a wonderful day it had been.

"Auntie," little Rose called. "Auntie. Pudding?"

Emily laughed. She'd promised Rose pudding earlier. "After dinner, love," she replied, then she remembered that she'd purchased a bit of sweets for the children to share. Squeezing Ace's hand, she pushed up to go and fetch the candy she'd stashed in her wardrobe when the world gave another spin. She swayed, her hand coming to her forehead as she tried to right the world.

"Emily?" Ace's voice sounded far away, as though she were underwater. She tried to lift her chin and look at him to

answer but instead, the world went black...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emily opened her eyes, confusion making her blink several times. Where was she?

Her head lifted, the warmth of several blankets making her body feel even heavier as she tried to make sense of where she was and how she'd gotten there. "Ace?"

"I'm here, love." His large hand swiped down her face, cradling the back of her neck in his large palm.

She blinked again, realizing that she was in their chamber. How had she gotten here? "Where is everyone?"

"The ladies are just outside. They wanted to attend you, but I insisted..." He sat on the edge of the bed, his face drawn in tight lines of concern. "I've sent for the doctor."

"But it's Christmastide," she cried, forcing herself to sit up. "We'll interrupt his festivities."

"That's of little concern to me."

She knew Ace was worried, but the man likely had a family too. "Surely this could wait until tomorrow."

"It can't." He used that tone that left little room for negotiation.

She ignored it, not the least bit intimidated. “It can. I’m fine. Just a bit overtired or perhaps getting sick.”

His jaw hardened. “In the three years since our marriage you have never fainted and now twice in two days...” He gave his head a shake. “I insist that you be seen.”

“And I insist that you listen to me.”

“You’ve worked yourself into a frenzy over this baby topic, which is ridiculous.”

His words stung. “My feelings are not ridiculous.” Her hands clenched into fists. “And my reasons for wanting a child are as sound as the reasons you don’t.”

He leaned back then, his brow drawn down into tight, angry line. “The reasons don’t matter. We don’t have a child.”

The tears that had been living just under the surface welled up into her eyes. “No. We don’t.”

His shoulders seemed to wilt then. “Should I allow the ladies into the room while we wait for the doctor?”

She gave a terse nod, watching his back as he disappeared through the doorway. Why did the fact that he didn’t wish for a baby hurt so much? Would it be better or worse if he was disappointed with their barren status as well?

Her sisters-in-law filed into the room. Mirabelle and Anna, followed by Emma, Violet, and Sophie.

She let out a long rush of air, sinking deeper into the mattress. Would they see the tears that had just been shimmering in her eyes?

“Emily,” Mirabelle started, sitting next to her friend.

Violet came to her other side, sitting too. Each of them took one of her hands. “This is a conundrum to be certain,” Violet said giving her hand a squeeze.

That was just about the right of it. “A conundrum. Yes, indeed.”

“How are you going to tell him?” Emma asked, sitting by her feet.

But those words only confused Emily. “Tell him what?”

Emma and Violet exchanged a raised brow glance, some communication she didn’t understand passing between them.

“Emily,” Emma started, patting her knee. “Have you been more emotional lately?”

Gads, had she ever.

“Dizzy?” Sophie asked in her lilting French accent.

“Tired?” Violet followed up.

“I don’t understand either...” Mirabelle stared at all of the other women. “Is she sick?”

Violet chuckled, running a hand over her growing belly. “It’s different for every woman, but as I’m on my second pregnancy, I can tell you that I am ridiculously tired, rather ill, and prone to fainting for about a month.”

“Pregnancy?” Emily asked, a wave of shock travelling through her.

“But I haven’t experienced any of those things,” Mirabelle cried.

Which in turn, caused Anna to gasp. “Mirabelle, are you with child?”

Emma let out a giggle. “Oh my. What a Christmastide this is turning out to be.”

“Wait,” Emily held up her hand. “I don’t want to diminish Mirabelle in any way, but are you all saying that you think the reason I’ve been acting so odd is because I am with child? But I haven’t even…” And then she began to count back in her head. Because when was the last time she’d bled?

Mirabelle shook her head. “Does this mean that we’re going to have babies at the same time?”

Joy bubbled up inside Emily. Did it? Did it mean that? But her feeling of excitement was short lived. Because Ace...

“Did you hear Ace and I talking?” she quietly asked the group.

Silence fell around the women as Emily pushed herself up a little more in the bed. Was her joy his sorrow?

Somehow that hurt as much as when she’d been so sad about not having been pregnant. She didn’t wish for her husband to be miserable.

Biting at her lip, she looked about the worried faces.

“Perhaps you’re just ill?” Emma asked. “I thought I was pregnant once. Turned out, I’d eaten bad fish.”

Triston and Emma didn't have children yet either. "Are you sad about that?"

Emma shrugged. "Not really. Sometimes a bit. But honestly, Tris and I have a wonderful life. When I think about the horrid man I might have married, I'm grateful for the many blessings I have being Triston's wife."

Emily blew out a long breath.

Because that was very true and something she ought to keep in mind if it turned out she'd just eaten bad fish.

Ace appeared in the door. "The doctor is here."

The ladies all rose, Emily's heart beginning to beat wildly in her chest. It was the moment she'd waited on for a very long time. But now that it was here, she didn't know how to feel.

Did she want her own joy or Ace's? She clutched the blankets around her chest as she called to Ace. "Send him in."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ace sat next to her on the bed as the doctor gave her a thorough examination that included looking into her eyes, feeling her pulse, looking at her throat, and finally feeling her stomach.

The longer the silence stretched, however, the more nervous she became until she felt like the tension might break her in two.

Ace reached for her hand, holding it in his as the doctor worked. As he pressed on various parts of her lower stomach, she closed her eyes, drawing in several deep breaths.

“Well,” the doctor eased up to standing, “Good news, my lord.”

Ace straightened up, his hand still in hers. “She’s not ill?”

“No,” the other man chuckled. “Not ill.”

“What then?” Ace’s fingers laced through hers.

“The marchioness has conceived. She’s with child.”

Ace’s fingers went slack in hers. “I see.”

The doctor nodded, giving them both a smile as Emily's heart climbed into her throat. Her wish had come true. Joy fluttered through her chest as she smiled back at the doctor. "That's wonderful news."

"It is," the doctor nodded. "But I recommend during these tenuous first days that you rest. You've clearly overtaxed yourself, my lady, and your care should come first."

"Of course," she answered, glancing at Ace. His face was an emotionless mask as he sat listening. "I will make certain to rest more."

"You may experience some sickness. All normal." The man patted her knee. "I'll be back to check on you next week. How long are your guests staying?"

"Several days," Ace answered. "They've come from all over England and beyond to be here."

"I understand. Many of the roads are closed with the weather," the doctor said. "It might be longer."

"Less of a concern for us. My brother brought them in his shipping vessel, the *Second Chance*, and that's how they'll return when the weather is favorable for the journey."

"Oh good," the doctor had turned toward Ace, speaking almost exclusively to her husband. Which was fine. Some happy bubble had settled around her. "But again. Make certain her ladyship isn't overtaxing herself entertaining. She needs her rest while she makes her way through this initial stage of pregnancy."

“I’ll see to that,” Ace answered, standing. “Can I see you out?”

“Please,” the doctor replied, the two men walking toward the door. It was only then that Emily realized her husband was going to leave the room without a word.

“Thank you, Doctor Miller,” she called from the bed.

The doctor turned back toward her. “You’re very welcome, my lady.”

Ace barely looked at her as he raised his hand in invitation for the doctor to continue to the door.

The bubble of joy that had made her feel light and hopeful burst and she sank back into the bed. Was Ace upset?

“Of course he is,” she said to the room, since no one was with her. But tears filled her eyes again. He didn’t want children.

Would this come between them? Would he still love her? Love the child? Fear had a little sob escaping her lips even as Mirabelle slipped back into the room. “Emily? What’s wrong?”

“I...” she started, not knowing what to say.

“Are you not pregnant?”

“No. I am.”

“Then what?” Mirabelle gasped, crossing the room. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Ace. He doesn’t...he doesn’t want the child.”

Mirabelle's brows drew together. "That's absurd. He's a marquess. Of course—"

But Emily shook her head. "No. He told me. He already raised a family. And he has brothers to succeed him when the time comes."

"Emily..." Mirabelle sat next to her. "I know my brother. He loves you with all his heart and he'll love your child. His child."

Would he really? She wasn't so certain. Laying back, she closed her eyes. Hadn't she learned that dreams always came with a price. What was this one going to cost?



ACE SAT BEHIND HIS DESK, not returning to the party or to his room where Emily surely still lay in bed.

Perhaps he ought to go to her, but he needed a moment. He and Emily shared a passionate marriage. It was always a strong possibility they'd have children.

But lately, he'd thought they might not. It had been three years...

And he'd been just fine with that. The responsibility of providing for so many brothers and sisters had worn on him, and he'd only just come out from under the burden. It had been a refreshing change to not have to provide for so many and to just enjoy his life and his wife. A wonderful oasis in a difficult life.

He knew the burden of responsibility was his issue and his alone. It was the same one that had caused him to hesitate before courting Emily.

A wife was a commitment. A person to care for.

Of course, she'd ended up being the greatest joy of his life but...

"Ace," his sister Mirabelle appeared in the door, hands on hips, face set in hard lines.

He sighed. He was about to receive a lecture. That much was for certain. "Yes?"

"Tell me that Emily is misguided."

"How is that?" he winced, standing to cross to the buffet where he poured himself a liberal snifter of whiskey.

"That you don't want your own child."

His hand slipped, whiskey spilling onto the freshly polished wood. "I didn't say that."

"What did you say?"

"That I'd be just fine without a child."

"So that is why you've not been back to the room to say *thank you*, or *congratulations*, or even, *I love you* to your wife?"

His jaw clenched as he turned to his sister. "Mira." He didn't want a lecture.

"Don't Mira me. Emily is sensitive. And it's a good thing because you completely lack even the smallest shred of

emotional intelligence.”

His mouth dropped open. How had he managed to forget how abusive his siblings could be? “Really? That’s what you have to say to me?”

Mirabelle’s nose lifted in the air. “You’re a good man, Ace. Strong. Hard-working. Stubborn as hell. It’s that last one that pulled us out of the gutter. I know that. But it will also be your undoing if you’re not careful.”

And then, skirts swirling, she spun to leave the room. He slumped in relief, glad to have the room back to himself.

But as Mirabelle sailed from the room, she called over her shoulder. “This isn’t over. I’m just going to get reinforcements.”

Ace cursed under his breath and then, grabbing his drink, started for the door. There was only place he’d be safe from a sibling onslaught. His chamber.

And, though he didn’t wish to admit it, Mirabelle was right. He and Emily ought to talk.

Damn it all to hell...

CHAPTER NINE

Emily willed herself to fall asleep. She was clearly exhausted, but the excitement of the last few hours and the worry kept her mind turning, even when she longed for the blissful quiet of sleep.

Though her eyes were closed, she heard the door open. She squeezed her eyes tighter, hoping whichever maid had entered would quickly leave again.

“I know when you’re not sleeping.”

Her eyes flew open, and she turned her head to meet Ace’s near-black gaze. “You came back.”

He grimaced, sliding a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“I...” She’d been about to say that it was all right, but it wasn’t. “It hurt my feelings that you didn’t return.”

His jaw tightened, his mouth turning down into a frown. “Emily.”

She pushed up, tossing the covers back. She’d have this conversation standing instead of lying down. It somehow made her less powerful to be in the bed like an invalid.

But Ace was at her side in three long strides, pulling the blankets back over her. “Stay.”

“I don’t want to.”

He sat next to her. “Please, love. I’ll lie next to you if it makes you feel better.”

She gave a tentative nod, and he did just that, on top of the covers, fully clothed. Some of her anger ebbed at the gesture though she tried to hang onto it. He deserved her ire, she ought to give it to him. “Here we are.”

He quirked a small smile. “Here we are.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she plucked at the covers before asking the question that she both dreaded and needed answered. “We need to talk.”

“We do,” he answered with a clear grimace of discomfort.

But she’d not hesitate this time. Their family was too important. “Why didn’t you come back to the room after the doctor left?”

“I...” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I needed a bit of time to think.”

“About?”

“When we courted...” He rolled toward her, his hand sliding down her stomach. “I was afraid I couldn’t give you much of a future.”

“I remember.”

“But I was also worried about taking on more responsibility. I’ve had my share.”

She winced at that, her head leaning to the side to press against his. Because she understood. “More than your share.”

“And babies are so much responsibility, Em.”

“I know.” There was a part that wanted to make promises. She’d do the work. But that wasn’t right either. A baby needed a father. “From now on we could use those things they have for keeping a child from occurring. French letters, I think they’re called.”

His face tightened in disgust. “No.”

She leaned back. “What do you suggest then?” Would their physical relationship stop? The idea made her ache. It was a great joy and a point of connection for them both. She was sure of it.

His hand had settled on her hip, and he pulled her closer. “We’ll have as many children as you and the powers that be see fit.”

She blinked in surprise. “But...”

He kissed her then. Long and slow and full of the love that had her floating once again, all her irritation forgotten. “You are my greatest joy, Emily. But it took a leap of faith.” He kissed her again. “I’m going to leap again and trust that wherever you are, is where I should be too.”

Tears once again spring to her eyes but these were not worry, fear, or sadness. They were pure joy. “Really? You’re certain?”

“Certain.”

She swallowed down a lump of emotion and then leaned in for another kiss. This one was not sweet or tender, it was filled with her need. For him, for their love, for their future together.

He responded by pulling her closer, his hands sliding down her back. The intensity of their embrace built until Emily was drowning in her need. “Did the doctor say anything about needing to abstain?”

“Nothing,” she said as she looked deep into his eyes, her hunger making her nip at her lip.

He was up in a moment and shucking off his clothes. “Should we ask him first?”

“No.” The answer was a certainty. She wanted this baby more than anything, but this little life was built on her love for Ace. And that would be honored for everyone’s sake. “I love you.”

He stopped midway through pulling off one of Hessians. “I love you too. With every breath.”

Emily stared into her husband’s eyes knowing that that they were lucky beyond compare. They had each other and now they would have a child of their own.

EPILOGUE

*E*ight months later...

EMILY STARED at the bundle of blankets held by the midwife as another woman wiped the sweat from her brow.

She'd done it.

She'd birthed her first child.

Ace came charging into the room. She'd heard him yelling for the last hour. As she'd pushed the baby from her body her husband had been yelling that he ought to be let inside.

It was Anna who'd kept him out. Only his sister could have pulled off such a feat. "You won't help," she'd heard Anna say.

Emily wasn't so certain. She could have used his strength.

But it was done now and as the baby let out its first wailing cry, she gave an exhausted laugh. "Ace," she waved her arm toward the doorway where he now stood. "I did it."

"You did it," he answered, crossing the room in few long strides and kneeling next to the bed to kiss her brow. "Thank

the lord.”

Her eyes drifted closed. “I told them not to tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Whether it was a boy or a girl. I told them not to tell me until you were here.” He kissed her again, his arm coming around her back.

“I told you it doesn’t matter to me.”

“You don’t hope for a boy?” she asked, nestling her cheek into the warmth of his neck.

“No,” he settled her deeper into his embrace. “I love whatever gift has been given to us.”

“Truly?”

He chuckled. “Mostly. Though I may wish for a girl. Who wants to risk that we’d make another Fulton?”

She laughed at that. She secretly hoped for a dark-haired little lad who grew into a strapping man like his father.

But the midwife, settled the bundle into her husband’s arms. “Congratulations, my lord. Your request has been granted. Here is your daughter.”

“Daughter?” Emily cried, looking into the blankets at the tiny face that barely peeked out.

“Daughter,” Ace crowed, wrapping his large arms about the tiny bundle. “What a perfect little blessing.”

Emily slumped back on the covers. She was. A perfect little blessing. “What shall we name her?”

“Well,” Ace stared down at the babe in his arms. “We did learn of her on Christmastide day. How about Christina?”

Christina. It was perfect. Just like her new baby daughter...

LORDS OF TEMPTATION SERIES INFO

Note to readers: Thank you so much for reading *A Christmas Blessing*! If you'd like to see where Ace and Emily's romance started, you can get *Marquess of Fortune* for FREE on major retailers!!

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CHAPTER ONE

December 1820

Lady Ophelia Aston was bored out of her mind. It wasn't an irregular occurrence for her to feel this way, especially during the obligatory social functions her family forced her to attend. She had tried coming up with excuses ever since she'd found out that the debutante life was not for her—from the moment she had made her debut—and sometimes, she'd been successful. Other times, she'd been forced to mingle and carry out less than scintillating conversations with the gentlemen of the *ton* under the eagle eye and stern looks from her father. And he was getting more and more annoyed by her lack of enthusiasm and inability to capture a suitor with every passing moment.

It didn't help that all of her close lady friends were successfully married off, spending most of their time at their estates procuring heirs for their husbands and caring for their children.

Thus, currently, the only friend she had was a young busybody, Bertha, who befriended everyone—Ophelia assumed—for the purpose of feeding the rumor mill. Even so,

Ophelia was grateful to have Bertha around. Otherwise, she would have fallen into an abyss of despair.

“Viscount Frampton is looking this way,” Bertha whispered and elbowed Ophelia in her side.

“Hm?” Ophelia glanced at the viscount, and noticing her regard, he quickly said something to his friends and turned to walk toward her.

Viscount Frampton was a gentleman in his mid-thirties, and he was one of Ophelia’s father’s business partners. She did not know the details or what the partnership even entailed. All she knew was that he was one of the few people her father trusted fully.

Bertha’s fan started fluttering incessantly. “Oh, he is coming this way.”

Ophelia blinked at her friend. “Since when do you harbor an interest in the viscount?”

Bertha threw Ophelia a coy glance before adopting a calm demeanor. “Young, wealthy, successful—who would be interested in such a creature? Of course, not you, who have already thwarted his advances twice.”

Ophelia let out a scoff. “I did not thwart his advances. He withdrew them after finding me frightfully boring.”

Bertha’s smile turned melancholy. “Oh, my dear, he needn’t adore you. Rumor has it your father has sweetened your dowry once more, and that should be incentive enough.”

Ophelia narrowed her eyes at her friend. “How do you know such things? Even I don’t know such things, not that I

believe it to be true.”

“I know everything, dear. And I am rarely wrong,” Bertha murmured under her breath as Viscount Frampton reached their side.

“Lady Ophelia,” he said with a slight bow, ignoring poor Bertha’s presence. “What a pleasure to see you once again.”

“I’m glad you’ve graced our house party,” Ophelia returned with a curtsy. “Have you been introduced to Miss Bertha Godfrey?”

His eyes settled on Bertha just as she dipped into a perfect curtsy. He looked her up and down before bowing low. “Yes, absolutely.” Then he turned back to Ophelia. “My family and I are deeply grateful for the gracious invitation your father extended to us all to attend this house party. And I would love to repay him the favor by escorting you to dinner tonight.”

Ophelia blinked at him, dumbfounded. Had he just insinuated that he would do *her*—a duke’s daughter—a favor by accompanying her to dinner?

Oh, God! Bertha was right. He *was* trying to court her again. Except that Bertha did not know everything, after all. It seemed that her father was the one pushing the viscount into courting her, as could be attested by the approving smirk on the duke’s face as he watched them.

“I would enjoy it immensely,” Ophelia lied. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak to my mother.”

With a hurried curtsy, Ophelia rushed from the room, abandoning Bertha to entertain the datted viscount on her

own.

How humiliating! Her parents often tried meddling with her affairs but pushing a man to court her—especially a man who had never even fancied her or found her agreeable—was going too far.

Ophelia had nearly slipped out the open door when she collided with an exquisite lady in a daring coral dress that left little to the imagination.

Her mother.

“And where do you think you are going?” the duchess asked softly as she played with the curl by her temple.

She was shorter in height and smaller in stature than Ophelia, yet she commanded attention with her presence. At the age of five and forty, she could still be mistaken for a debutante. With golden-brown locks that framed her face perfectly, glittering blue eyes, and an easy smile, she had always been the belle of the *ton*. She was a diamond of the first water during her debut and snagged into marriage by a wealthy duke only a month later—a duke who was twenty-seven years her senior.

“Away?” Ophelia’s answer had a cowardly questioning lilt.

“You can’t possibly be going away when we just gathered in the parlor ten minutes ago. Be a darling and spend at least an hour with the guests.”

“An hour is torture, Mother. Especially when Father is pushing Frampton into courting me again.”

The duchess nonchalantly fanned her cheeks. “You don’t need to marry Frampton. It could be anyone else. We have purposefully curated a list of wealthy, affluent bachelors and invited them to this house party, so you are free to choose anyone present. However, your father leans toward Viscount Frampton as he shares business dealings with his family.”

Ophelia’s mouth slackened. “You knew about this. You and Father plotted this behind my back!”

“Really, Ophelia, plotting? We are your parents, and we want what is best for you. Do you want to stay a spinster forever? You are three and twenty. If you don’t marry this year, you shall be forced to live with Aunt Diedre forever. Is that what you want?”

Ophelia crossed her arms over her chest. “That sounds heavenly, actually.”

“Do not be ridiculous.” Her mother waved her words away.

“Oh, so you want me to be in a loveless marriage like you?” Ophelia spat.

Her mother straightened her spine. “I have done my duty. And you shall do the same.”

Just then, the duke stepped beside Ophelia and glared at her. “Were you trying to leave again?”

“I wasn’t,” Ophelia lied.

“Please, talk to your daughter,” her mother said with a heavy sigh and glided away and into the crowd of eagerly awaiting gentlemen.

Ophelia turned to face her father, anger coursing through her veins.

The duke stood a few inches taller than Ophelia, thanks to the heels he had tailor-made for his boots, so she had to tilt her head back a little in order to look him in the eyes. He had dark brown eyes, just like Ophelia's, a straight nose, and a soft, rounded chin. His balding head was sprinkled with gray hair, and his lips were pressed into a thin line.

Ophelia would not call him handsome or generous or kind. She loved him, of course, as he was her father, but she couldn't help but feel sorry for her mother for having been forced to marry him. They were cordial at home, and Ophelia had never questioned their relationship before. But the longer she remained on the marriage mart, the more she realized that a marriage like theirs was the norm, and she was being pushed into a similarly loveless but advantageous union.

“How many gentlemen have you talked to today?” her father asked in his low, croaking voice.

Ophelia stared directly at him, her gaze unflinching. “I suppose since I've talked to Viscount Frampton, whom you've sent to escort me to dinner, I do not need to talk to anyone else.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I am hoping Frampton will do the right thing and offer for you, but he seems hesitant. So, you need to apply yourself and find yourself a suitor by the end of this house party.”

Ophelia froze for a brief moment in shock. “Why? Why do you suddenly need to pawn me off—”

“Mind your tone,” he growled low. “It is not your business to ask why. It is your business to comply. Your mother and I have waited for five years for you to marry. You’re almost on the shelf. So, you either pick your suitor by the end of this house party, or we shall pick one for you. Now, you’re not to leave the parlor until you speak to at least three more gentlemen.”

Ophelia’s fingers curled into fists by her side. Her father was never gentle with her, but he was rarely as commanding as he was now. “Fine!” she gritted through her teeth and turned away. “As you wish.”

Three gentlemen. She needed to find three gentlemen who would not detain her for long. He hadn’t clarified that they had to be young gentlemen, had he? She scanned the room and approached the old Marquess of Roth. “How are you faring, my lord?”

He turned to her with a smile. “Oh, how nice for you to approach me. I don’t believe we’ve spoken for quite some time.”

“We have not,” she agreed.

“Well, I have to say, this weather is rather beautiful for once, don’t you think?”

“It truly is,” she agreed. It had started snowing early this morning, covering the earth with a soft, white carpet. But this was talking about the weather, was it not? She needed to change the topic. “How is your granddaughter? I hope she is happy in her marriage?”

“Oh, she is blissful.” He nodded, fondness shining in his eyes. “She just had her second son.”

“How lovely!” Ophelia smiled politely. There, they’d talked. “Well, I always enjoy catching up with you. Perhaps we should talk more during dinner?”

He let out a hoarse laugh. “You really should be getting younger men to escort you to dinners. We are all hoping to see you at the altar sooner rather than later.” He winked, and Ophelia managed a strained smile before exchanging pleasantries and leaving him to his own devices.

That quickly reminded her why she was avoiding conversations with the older generation. After a brief chat, it always circled back to her unmarried status.

She skirted through the crowd, seeking out anyone else she could have a conversation with. When approaching gentlemen, she purposefully laughed loudly and stood where her father could see her. Then, after a brief chat, she flitted away to talk to another man.

Even though she still found the entire ordeal taxing, she also enjoyed the fact that she was on a mission to outsmart her father. She spoke to four men, even going a step further than her father had asked her to before she finally tiptoed away, keeping an eye on her parents to make sure they would not catch her leaving.

She hurried into her room, and with a deep sigh, settled behind her writing table, a stack of books ready for her to dive into. She looked at them, then back at the door, and tapped her fingers against the desk in thought.

Once her father noticed she was gone, he was sure to come and pester her again. And the first place he would look for her would be her bedchamber. Which meant she needed to find another hiding spot.

She collected all her belongings in a pile, wrapped her arms around them, and stood, reeling lightly from the weight. She opened the door carefully and slinked away, swaying as she walked down the corridor.

Where should she go? She paused on the staircase landing.

If she went straight, she'd find herself in the library. But her father would know to look for her there after her bedchamber.

She couldn't hide in the parlor or any of the drawing rooms as they were occupied by guests.

That's when a brilliant idea struck her!

She knew exactly where to go! Nobody had been using the room for years aside from extremely important business dealings! Why had she never thought of hiding there before? Absolutely giddy at her stroke of genius, she twirled around in glee. Only once her foot lost its purchase did she realize how close she was to the edge of the staircase, but it was too late. Gravity pulled her down, and the next moment, she was toppling over with an unladylike yelp.

CHAPTER TWO

Eugene had never anticipated one day stepping inside the Duke of Cavendish's house, but here he was.

His eyes glided over the vast entryway that could fit a few families from his village comfortably. The glittering light twinkled and bounced off the crystal chandelier that hung in the center, then spread across the hall, dancing along the polished marble floor. The walls, paneled in rich, dark wood, were adorned with intricate carvings as if they were pieces of art, not just a structure to keep the occupants warm.

His gaze drifted toward the grand staircase, his feet taking him up the steps as he admired what he could only describe as an architectural feat. Two curved staircases swept upward, meeting at a landing lit by a dazzling stained-glass window. Intricate carvings of angels graced the balustrade, and lush crimson carpets lined each step.

He'd never anticipated hearing his mother's voice as he walked farther into the house as if she was whispering in his ear all the stories she had shared with him growing up about this place. Somehow, he'd always imagined it would be

painful to see this place in real life, but it felt like a fairytale, a dream. Although his guts tightened and twisted from within.

But more than that, he could never have anticipated a strangely alluring woman twirling on the landing of the staircase in glee, and as a result of such foolish, impulsive behavior, missing a step and hurtling down with a scream.

Lucky for her, he had already traversed halfway toward her, and it only took him one leap to catch her in his arms.

She looked up at him with wide brown eyes, reminding him of a fawn, her beautiful, lush lips forming an “O” of surprise. She clutched a couple of her books close to her heart while the rest tumbled down the stairs with loud thuds.

He felt her pulse beating rapidly against her skin and reverberating against his body, and for a moment, the entire world froze.

And then she said in a beautiful, angelic voice, “My books!”

She shot upright and without thanking him or addressing him in any way, started collecting her books and a little journal that had tumbled farther away. Before he could bend to help her, she seemed to notice someone approaching their way and rushed upstairs, shouldering him on her way past.

Eugene blinked and watched after the mysterious woman in shock as some other feeling crept inside his body and warmed his heart.

What the devil?

Rapid footsteps approached him from behind, and a pleasant feminine voice inquired, “Mr. Evan Williams?”

Ah, yes, that’s the name he had given to the butler.

Eugene spun on his heel to find himself face-to-face with a beautiful, petite woman with golden-brown locks and light—dare he guess blue?—eyes.

She wore a glittering coral gown with a revealing bust, pearl-white gloves, and a gauze shawl. She was covered with jewelry of unimaginable worth.

The hostess of the house, he presumed.

He sketched a low bow. “Your Grace.”

“Were you looking for someone?” she asked with a smile and stepped closer, her eyes darting farther up the stairs.

Eugene feigned a timid smile as he made it down the stairs. “No, I just ran into someone. Actually, someone ran into me, and I had to catch them so they wouldn’t fall...” He stumbled on his words and grimaced, trying to seem uncomfortably flustered.

Her smile widened, just as he’d presumed it would.

She was confident, beautiful, and quite wealthy. Women like her often found joy in watching people become flustered in front of them. And this time, he didn’t miss his mark as she stepped even closer and started eyeing him from head to toe, biting her lower lip.

Eugene was aware of his charm. He was tall, taller than most—at six feet five, he towered over most men. He had

striking facial features, a strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, a straight nose, and full lips. Many women had described him as handsome in the past. And since he had labored since he was a young boy, his muscle definition was quite obvious even under the layers of clothing.

To top it off, he had a light Scottish brogue. For reasons he could not understand, English women often despised a strong Scottish brogue, but they loved the little lilt that he had.

All of this was a magical combination that allowed him to flirt his way through life, charm his way into expensive houses, and then do his job without anyone being the wiser.

A few other little things had allowed him to stay undetected all these years. One of those things was that he always flirted exclusively with married women, and he never actually spent the night with them.

That way, they were too embarrassed to talk about it with their friends. But if they did speak about him... Well, he never used the same name twice.

“I have to admit, we were not expecting your visit,” she said, moving even closer, her eyes now running down his body, no doubt picturing him naked.

“I did not plan on imposing upon your generosity. My distant cousin, Pastor John from Allonby, had recently lost his earthly father. I am bringing him the letter from his deceased sire, with some very important information. But with this snow, my travel has been prolonged, and I must beg for food and shelter for the night.”

She waved a careless hand and let out a little laugh. “No need to beg. It is our pleasure to welcome stranded travelers, especially ones on such a noble quest. I merely mentioned my surprise because, you see, we are in the middle of the Yule house party, and most of our guest rooms are occupied. Luckily, there’s one available right next to mine. Isn’t there?” She turned as she addressed the last question, and only then did Eugene notice that a rotund woman in a housekeeper’s attire stood behind her.

The woman was stealthier than the best of thieves. Although, he had to admit he had been rather distracted by the gorgeous duchess.

“Yes, Your Grace,” was all the woman said.

The duchess waved a hand for the woman to proceed and turned toward Eugene. “Mrs. Edgeworth is going to show you to your quarters. You shall join us for dinner and afterward, yes?”

Eugene sketched a polite bow. “I would be delighted,” he lied. He was here for one thing, and one thing only. And once he got it, he would be out of this nightmare and into his real life.

But he had to admit to himself, as he turned away from the beautiful woman and followed the housekeeper, that he would have enjoyed a hot meal and a nice, warm bed. Perhaps he could ask for the food to be brought to his room? And then he could do his business and disappear into the night.

He heaved a sigh and turned the corner, the opposite way from where the mysterious woman from before had

disappeared.

Eugene entered the room allocated for him in the Duke of Cavendish's mansion with sure steps. He thanked the housekeeper, and as soon as the door closed behind her, he looked around.

The room was spacious and decorated with warm colors. He tried not to think that his current home was smaller than this single room. He tried not to think that his mother had never had a chance to sleep in a room such as this for all the time she'd spent in this house. He tried not to dwell on the fact that his mother would never see that he was finally here. And he would take revenge—true, unintentional, nonetheless, quite gratifying—for the way she had been treated by the master of this house.

He walked farther into the room before leaping onto the bed and spreading his arms, feeling the softness of the covers against his hands. *Perhaps, I should spend the night here...*

Eugene shook his head and sat up, simultaneously pulling out a piece of paper from the inside of his jacket. He spread it on the bed and revealed a carefully drawn layout of the mansion. His finger followed the path he'd just taken from the hall to his chamber as he tried to map out his path to the duke's study.

It was rather cathartic to realize that the job at the Cavendish mansion would be his last. That the place where his journey had begun, the place responsible for his current lifestyle—hell, his life—would be the place responsible for him leaving said lifestyle and achieving his dream.

Eugene noted every entrance and exit, every room that could be occupied by the guests, and then traced the path from his chamber to the duke's study without encountering any of those rooms.

Seemed easy enough. Then his eyes drifted to the corner of the map where the sketch of a gorgeous, bejeweled tiara was drawn with a giant ruby in the middle.

A note by its side read *Metal safe in the study*.

He didn't know exactly where in the study the safe was, but it didn't matter to him. He'd find it.

Rumor was, that the duke almost never used the study, preferring to carry out his business in the comfort of his bedchamber. He only used the study for the most important business dealings. His safe, however, was supposed to house all family jewels that were not in day-to-day use. And it was rumored to have the hardest locks to break. Not for Eugene, of course.

He glanced out the frost-covered window to a view of a beautiful dance of snowflakes. It had snowed all day, and the wind had started picking up its pace closer to the evening. If it continued this way, it would soon be difficult to leave in such deep snow.

His gaze scanned the cozy room filled with candles, an armchair by the hearth, a soft rug on the floor... Perhaps the place itself wasn't terrible, just what it represented.

With a sigh, he jumped out of bed. Whether or not this place was evil didn't matter. He had a job to do. And the

sooner he did it, the better.

Eugene shed his coat and rearranged his cravat. He hated that thing. It was suffocating him. But he needed to look presentable should he get caught on the way to or from the study. Then he checked his tools, hid them in a special pocket inside his waistcoat, and set out on his mission.

When he got to the staircase, he heard an audible gasp, followed by female whispers. The murmur grew louder, and he was able to discern a few phrases, such as, “Look at that man! So gorgeous. On the staircase. A lovely display of manly physique.”

He glanced over the railing only to see three ladies huddled together, hiding their mouths beneath their fans, although their eyes were adoring his form. Eugene, needing to pass the ladies to get to his destination, decided to acknowledge their presence. As he reached the first-floor landing, he sketched a bow.

“A pleasure to meet you, ladies. Mr. Edward Wilson, at your service.”

They gasped once more, their fans moving faster. They quickly introduced themselves, with names Eugene would never remember, and asked when he had arrived.

“I arrived yesterday,” he lied. “I was on my way to visit my uncle, the Baron of Salesbury, but fell a bit under the weather and decided to recuperate here for a bit.”

“Oh!” and other exclamations left the ladies’ lips.

“Glad to see you are feeling better. And I hope we get to see you tonight at dinner.”

“Absolutely,” he murmured, sketched a bow, and turned away.

The ladies continued their hushed whispers behind his back, talking about some grave faux pas he had committed. Eugene didn't know what they were talking about, and he didn't care, continuing on his way.

However, as the ladies descended the stairs, their voices grew louder, their tone bolder.

“A baron's nephew barely deserves an introduction,” one of them said.

“Oh, how I hoped he was the Marquess of Rivendale! Wouldn't that be a lovely surprise,” another one chimed in.

“With our luck, Rivendale probably looks like a beast or a cripple. Otherwise, why hide for all these years?”

The voices grew quieter and quieter until they disappeared entirely. Eugene just snorted and shook his head. He wasn't surprised at all that the women of aristocracy were this vain. But their dialogue still amused him.

At least, he was enjoying himself at this house party. He turned into the corridor leading to the study and ducked behind the corner. Pulling out a map, he made certain he was in the right place. One... Two... Three... Door number four would lead him to his treasure.

He slowly walked through the dimly lit corridor, counting the doors.

One... Two... Three...

Here it was. The thick oak door of the duke's study.

He jangled his tools just to convince himself that he actually had them with him before trying the door.

People were creatures of habit. And from the stories he'd heard, the duke had never locked his study.

So, when the handle turned, and the door opened, he didn't question it for a moment.

The doubts started assailing him when he saw that a few candles were lit... somewhere. He couldn't see exactly where, but the light was definitely present. The scope of his view did not detect any living creature in the area, though.

That was until a head popped up from behind a chair that was blocking the view of the hearth, and a pleasant female voice blurted out, "I did talk to three gentlemen just as you asked; it just took me less time than—" She paused, probably realizing he was not who she initially thought him to be, her demeanor changing. "Oh, who are you?"

CHAPTER THREE

Ophelia stared at the tall, gorgeous specimen of a man blocking the door of the study, looking like a real-life version of the gods from Greek myths. She had just leafed through some sketches of such creatures in her quest to understand the Greek words that had found their way into the English language.

She had to admit, her mind wasn't entirely on the book at hand. Half the time, she had been daydreaming about the man who had easily caught her against his chest when she fell down the stairs and right into his arms.

And there he was, standing right in front of her, reminding her how it felt to be in his arms, surrounded by his heat and masculine scent. For a moment, she questioned whether she had fallen asleep and this was a dream.

"I'm a..." He paused and glanced back into the corridor before stepping inside and closing the door behind him, looking fierce. Was he mad? "Apologies, I think I got turned around. I was looking for the library. Is this it?"

Ophelia frowned. The beautiful cadence of his voice and the slight Scottish brogue on his tongue did not distract her

enough to keep her from being suspicious of this gentleman's actions. What sane man would lock himself in an empty room with an unmarried woman? If they were caught, they'd be compromised, and he'd have to marry her. Unless that was exactly what he wanted. Instead of courting her like many others had tried and failed, this man was taking fate into his own hands!

"No," she said icily. "This is my father's study."

He frowned in surprise before stepping closer and peering into her face. "Your father?" She imagined he couldn't see her features well because she was not illuminated by candles at this moment, and the fire from the hearth was casting a shadow onto her face. So, perhaps, he didn't plan to trap her in marriage. He didn't even seem to know who she was.

"Yes, the duke is my father. And you are?"

He shifted from foot to foot. "I don't imagine it's proper for us to be introduced under such circumstances."

That was true. Someone else needed to introduce them, preferably in a crowded room, but it was too late for that now.

"Not proper at all," she confirmed. "Just as it is not proper for us to be locked in a room together."

He glanced back at the closed door and shrugged. "I thought it better that people don't hear us and come barging down."

Ophelia finally stood and dusted off her skirts before stepping into the light. He bristled a little as she did so, his eyes studying her face intently, almost rudely so. "I thought I

knew everyone invited to our house party,” she said. “I do not recognize you from the list.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, while his gaze drifted across the room. “I was passing by, and your mother was kind enough to let me stay until the storm passed. I am traveling on a visit to my father, Dr. Jones.”

Ophelia’s frown deepened. “Dr. Jones from Carlisle? I don’t believe he has any children.”

He cleared his throat. “No, not from Carlisle, from Penrith.”

“There is no Dr. Jones from Penrith.”

He scoffed and licked his lips, the moisture somehow making them more enticing than before. “And you know every doctor in Penrith?”

She lifted her chin. “As a matter of fact, I do. My aunt Diedre lives there, and I visit her every summer.”

His gaze stopped at some point behind her, and Ophelia tried to follow his gaze, but she couldn’t understand what he was looking at. His lips quirked in a smile, distracting her. Why was she staring at his lips? “I concede my defeat against your wit, my lady. I did not mean to waste your time.” With a shallow bow, he backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Ophelia stood, dumbfounded, staring at the place that gorgeous specimen of a man had just occupied, wondering if she had indeed dozed off and that was just a dream because none of what just happened made any sense.



IT WAS HER.

Eugene hadn't thought he'd ever see her again, and even more than that, he hadn't imagined what seeing her would do to him. For some unfathomable reason, his insides twisted, heat traveling up his neck and to his face.

Surely that must have been from the glow of the firelight.

She hadn't fawned over him or flirted with him like most women did. She'd been reserved and even guarded, although he'd felt her fawn-brown eyes drifting to his lips once or twice.

She was attracted to him; it was obvious.

But she kept her head and didn't let go of her suspicion even for a moment. And somehow that made him admire her even more. Coupled with the memory of how she felt in his arms, fitting perfectly within his embrace, Eugene's blood had inevitably pooled away from his face and down to his crotch.

She was an alluring woman; he could not argue with that. But he'd stilled himself, as he was always able to curb his impulses to chase after women based on just their looks.

Furthermore, she was the daughter of the duke! That right there should have been enough to stop him in his tracks. It wasn't all, though. She was also the daughter of a man he loathed! A man who had ruined his mother's—and, as a result, his—life!

He could not be attracted to that. Knowing that the duke's blood ran through her veins should have made him ice-cold.

Yet it didn't.

Eugene shuddered, trying to dispel his thoughts and feelings, and proceeded to go back to his temporary room. He would wait for dinnertime before trying to enter the study again. That way, there was a better chance of him finding the study empty.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ophelia joined the dinner in hopes of seeing the handsome stranger again. She hoped to finally figure out who he was or perhaps even be introduced to him officially.

As her luck would have it, he didn't join the party for dinner. So, she resolved herself to spend the evening being courted by Viscount Frampton, although her mind kept drifting toward the mysterious man, nonetheless.

"I didn't notice you earlier in the parlor or during the musicale the Godfrey sisters put on," the viscount said.

"Mm? Right." She nodded. "I had a bit of a headache, so I opted to sit by myself and read."

"Hm? What did you read?" He didn't seem even the least bit interested.

Ophelia turned toward him, giving him her full attention. Perhaps, the dinner didn't have to be so dull. "I am reading an Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek language and linguistics and it is fascinating. Do you know how far back we can trace some of the English words? Or how the words have changed their meanings over time? It is rather exciting. Makes me want to learn more languages and trace their ancestry."

He scoffed lightly. “You speak French and Italian, do you not? Why would you need to learn more languages?”

Ophelia blinked up at him. *For the reason I have just relayed...* “Because I am interested in mastering new skills. Because it would open up unimaginable worlds of knowledge. Can you imagine reading a book about a culture completely different from ours? It could unlock so many doors to understanding the views of people on social issues in other countries!”

He chuckled and patted her hand lightly, before resuming his meal. “Social issues and politics are not for a lady to worry about. And I thought you were interested in... sea monsters,” he added with a smirk.

“Marine biology,” she corrected. She had been quite fond of this topic last year, spending months reading about it and tittering about it to anyone who would listen. “How sweet of you to remember, nevertheless.”

“Why have you changed your interests all of a sudden?”

Ophelia raised a brow. “A person can have more than one interest in their lifetime, can they not?”

His lips twitched as if he was stifling a grimace. “A lady truly should not have too many interests. It deters from her main purpose in life.”

“Which is?” Ophelia asked coldly, although she already knew what he would answer.

“Marriage, of course. And everything else that comes with it. I dare say, you spend so much time locked up with your

books that you have no time for courting anymore.”

She swallowed. *I do this on purpose.* “I quite enjoy my time with my books.”

“How about instead, we go out for a ride tomorrow? I remember the view from Torpenhow Hill is mesmerizing.”

A smile lit Ophelia’s lips as she remembered the catalyst for her interest in linguistics. “Do you know,” she asked playfully, “that according to historian John Denton, the name Torpenhow is made up of three elements—‘tor’ meaning hill in Saxon, ‘pen’ meaning hill in Breton, and ‘how’ meaning hill in Old Norse. So, the whole name means Hill-hill-hill!” She chuckled and was met with a stern gaze.

He turned away and sighed something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, “Am I to marry that?”

Ophelia looked down at her food with a frown. Offended, but not on her behalf.

This simple-minded man would be her betrothed by the end of the fortnight if she didn’t find herself a suitor—the man who thought that a woman’s sole purpose was to serve as an accessory to her husband and be his brood mare.

Was she to marry that?

Her stomach twisted, and she could not eat another bite.



EUGENE’S PLAN TO steal the tiara during dinner had failed once more. For some unfathomable reason, that was the time a maid

was rearranging things in the study. She'd brought a quilted blanket, a few pillows, some more books, and other things. She also dusted, stoked the fire, and prepared a tea tray.

It seemed like she was building a guest room for someone. Who would want to live in the study?

Eugene hoped that whoever all that was for would leave during the night. So, at half past two, he snuck out of his room and tiptoed his way back to the study.

The door was half open, and he could clearly see the light streaming from the room.

He stifled a groan.

The snow had only intensified, and if it continued this way, the roads would get impassable quickly. He needed to get out of here, or he risked getting stuck at this house party and even getting caught! However, he could not burgle an occupied room.

He turned to leave, when he spied a shock of chestnut hair bobbing around this way and that.

He recognized the dark brown curls immediately. It was the duke's daughter, Lady Ophelia Aston, whose name he'd learned from gossip earlier.

Perhaps, it would be quicker if he waited for her to leave rather than going from his room to the study and back again all night long. She was bound to leave, wasn't she?

She raised her head then, stared right at him, and squinted. "Father? Is that you?"

Eugene decided there was no point in hiding. He might as well come out and try to get her away from the study so he could do his job and leave. Although a part of him quivered in excitement.

He stepped into the line of candlelight, and her eyes widened in surprise.

“You?” She sat up and straightened her spine. “May I ask what you are doing here?”

He stepped farther into the room. “To be honest, I am not quite certain. I was... hoping to see you again for reasons I can’t seem to explain to myself.” He tried to seem nonchalant, and his tone of voice was calm and steady. He didn’t think this woman appreciated outright flirtation. How he came to this conclusion was uncertain. Perhaps it was the way she communicated. Direct and to the point. She didn’t seem to enjoy coyness.

“If you wanted to see me, you should have come to dinner and escorted me to my seat, not come to my father’s study in the middle of the night.”

Direct.

A small smile tugged at his lips. The fact that she’d looked for him during dinner also did not escape his notice and made him feel rather warm inside.

“I have to be honest...” He lowered himself to the floor next to her, occupying the bare wooden planks as he sat cross-legged. “I dislike crowded places. And I’d rather eat in peace. However, the thought of you hasn’t left my mind all day, and I

hoped my luck would take pity on me. Obviously, it did exactly that.”

Her features softened. “I have to admit I am not an admirer of crowded places myself. However, this is most inappropriate.”

“Yes, well, I have never been known to act with proper decorum. Have you?” He raised a brow and watched emotions change in her face in rapid succession.

Finally, she let out a chuckle. “No, neither have I, I am afraid.”

Emboldened, Eugene continued, “Honestly, I find the rules of our society quite superficial. How is one supposed to court another based on their social status, the size of their coffers, and physical appearance?”

“Courting?” she asked with a raised brow, and to his surprise and delight, a curious twinkle lit her eyes.

“Yes,” he agreed readily. “If, for example, I were to court you, would you rather know my family connections, my title, and the value of my estates or... whether we have similar interests?”

She let out a chuckle at that, a beautiful sound that warmed his heart. “Similar interests? Did you not know that ladies and gentlemen are not supposed to have similar interests? Ladies should be interested in needlework, keeping the house, birthing children, pouring tea, and hosting balls.”

He raised a brow and made himself more comfortable beside her on the floor. “And what should gentlemen be

interested in?”

“Hunting, politics, horse racing, and financial endeavors.”

He mock-frowned. “How are we to find a common ground?”

“Impossible.” She laughed and scooted away from him, waving at the free space on the rug beside her. “But we can find a common rug, perhaps.”

Eugene let out a laugh and moved to sit closer to her, extending his long legs in front of him and leaning back on his arms. “So, if I were to court you...”

She bit her lip, her eyes dancing with laughter. “I wouldn’t need to know your title or your family name. However, I would need to call you something.”

He nodded eagerly. “Eugene.”

Her face lit up in the most beautiful smile he’d ever seen, and his heart started racing. “Eugene,” she repeated tentatively, his name on her tongue sounding sweeter than any endearment.

“And your name, my lady?” he asked with a slight bow.

She studied him with narrowed eyes, chewing her lip for a moment before saying, “Ophelia.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Heat spread through Ophelia starting in the middle of her belly and slowly taking over her entire body the moment Eugene—it felt strange, yet oddly exhilarating to think of him using his Christian name—scoted closer to her on the rug. He was large and intimidating, with a fierce frown that occupied his face any time he wasn't smiling. But when he was smiling... Well, it felt like the room was spinning and fireworks shot all around them.

He was handsome; she couldn't deny that. His low, gravelly voice was definitely alluring. But it wasn't that which tugged at her heartstrings. Something about him just made her soul yearn for his closeness.

It was a ridiculous thought. She had never felt this way in her three and twenty years of existence, and she could not understand why this man was the one to make her feel these things.

His gaze dropped to the book spread open before her, and he raised a brow. "Are you reading in Greek?"

Ophelia's cheeks pinkened. "Yes, I am reading about ancient languages and picking out the words that might have

become root words in English. It is quite fascinating. I've been wrong many times. But when I am correct, it is quite exciting." She lowered her gaze and wrinkled her nose. She always rambled when she was excited about a topic, and people always ended up changing the subject, making her realize she was being overbearing.

"And then what?"

"Hm?" Ophelia raised her eyes to his.

"Once you find the root words, what do you do next?"

She gently fingered the pages of her journal. "I have a language tree, which shows how and where we got certain words from. I really do not have an end goal for this, I suppose. I just find it interesting and educational. And hopefully, it will help me learn other languages once I understand where they are coming from. A lot of languages have the same roots, you understand. And many borrow words from each other. Apologies, I am rambling."

"No." He shook his head and lowered to his side, setting his elbow on the floor and propping his head against his palm. "Go on."

Ophelia licked her lips. He was probably humoring her. But nobody had ever shown an interest in what she had to say before, so she continued. "You know the story of the Tower of Babel? How people were supposedly working on a common goal, a tower to reach the heavens, and then God scattered them around the world and made up different languages so they wouldn't understand each other?"

“Yes?” He looked quite amused.

“Well, I think this story is told in reverse.”

He shifted to lie more comfortably on his side, his brows knitted in a frown. “How so?”

“Well, this is an argument of two parts,” she started eagerly. “First, in the story of Babel, it tells us that people were speaking one single language and then they were separated into hundreds. Well, for this part, I believe the reverse is that we started with hundreds of languages, but we shall soon all speak just one. It is common for English people to speak French and Italian, and I think it will be more and more common for people in other countries to learn a second language. When people from different countries collaborate, new words are born, and other words are borrowed. So, I believe the more the world is connected, the more we shall create a single world language.”

He scratched his jaw. “You think in a few years, there will be a single language in the world?”

Her cheeks burned, and her lips felt dry, so she moistened them. “Not in a few years... Perhaps a few hundred years? And I do not necessarily think that there will only be one language. Perhaps there will be many different languages and dialects because societies will continue to come up with their own rules and colloquialisms, but overall, we will all be able to understand each other. Which brings me to the second part of my argument. When the people of Babel all spoke the same language, they were able to work on a common goal, their stairway into heaven, because they understood each other. So,

I think when the language barrier is dropped, people will be able to communicate their issues freely. If a person from one side of the world understands a person from another side, they would perhaps be willing to work together on a common goal. For example, we can already read in other languages. But those are from countries closest to ours. What about other countries? And what about the struggles they face? We are not able to know because we literally can't understand." She stopped her little tirade and watched his thoughtful grimace.

"I have to admit," he said after a brief pause, and she was ready for a change of subject to follow his next words, as all of her previous conversationalists had done in the past. But he continued, "I have never thought about this even for a brief moment. And I find it rather refreshing that you have."

Ophelia's stomach flipped inside her, as gooseflesh covered her skin. Was that a compliment?

"However"—there it was—"I think your view of the world is rather idealistic if you truly believe that."

Ophelia matched his fierce frown. "How is that idealistic?"

He chuckled. "How is that not? According to your belief, language is the only barrier to the ideal world when it clearly is not. Peasants and lords speak the same language in this country yet there is no unity. You say we can read in different languages when by 'we,' you mean the aristocracy."

Ophelia was quite taken aback by this argument, not because she disagreed, but mostly because not only had he listened to what she was saying, but he'd also thought her ideas through and didn't immediately dismiss them as rubbish

and undeserving of his time. If he truly found her ideas refreshing, she found his interest in her ideas almost exhilarating.

“Most people in this country cannot even read in their own language,” he continued. “I think people are divided by more than just language. Traditions and views on the world will continue to divide us, no matter how many languages we speak and how easily we can communicate with each other. Even if society becomes more equal in their ability to get education and even travel, which I doubt very much, there will always be more to divide us than unite.”

She bristled in mock offense. “Why, you are being quite pessimistic, good sir. I would rather look into the future with hope.”

He chuckled and looked up at her with the warmest of smiles that, like the fire from the hearth after a long chill, sent shivers all over her body. “Like I said, idealistic. And I have to admit, I find that quality quite charming.”

Her heart slammed against her chest with his every word. This man, whom she’d only known for the past few minutes, seemed to break through every wall she had built inside her to keep herself from falling into the trap called love.

Idealistic, indeed.

“Perhaps,” he said thoughtfully, “Language in that story is not supposed to be taken literally. It doesn’t mean actual words we speak, but rather it talks about finding a common language no matter the differences.”

She tilted her head to the side. “So, the language in that story represents empathy. In that case, it isn’t told in reverse, it is just teaching another kind of lesson.”

“Still quite idealistic if you believe that humanity will ever learn this lesson.”

She bit her lip. “We are quite different, you and me. Yet, we have found a common language, have we not?”

He nodded. “That is true. Perhaps it’s not too idealistic to believe that others can too.”

Ophelia let out a chuckle. “I suppose it would have made our point more valid if one of us was a peasant.”

A charged silence fell upon the room, and something unfathomable flickered in his eyes. But before she could wonder what it was, he dipped his head and pressed his lips against hers.

CHAPTER SIX

Eugene didn't know what had prompted him to kiss her. Her entire being called to him, and he felt desire, admiration, and affection. But that wasn't why he'd kissed her.

When he'd entered the study, he'd just wanted to engage her in conversation before skillfully maneuvering her into leaving so he could do what he came here to do—steal the tiara.

But as they started conversing and her eyes lit up like two brilliant stars when she talked about her ideas, he forgot all of his intentions. She was charming, witty, incredibly clever, and just a joy to be around. He never wanted to leave this place. He felt safe and cozy, the way he hadn't felt in a long time.

As their conversation progressed, however, a thought kept nagging in his mind: this was the only time they would ever speak to each other. This was the first and only time he would ever be around her.

And that thought devastated him.

So, when she made the comment about neither of them being a peasant, he took a leap. Partially to stop that line of conversation, and partially to not have to leave her just yet.

Because not only was he a peasant, he was a thief.

And he had come into this house with the specific purpose of stealing one of Ophelia's father's most prized possessions.

In retrospect, perhaps what had pushed him into kissing her were all of those feelings combined: lust, admiration, adoration, guilt, self-loathing, desperation.

Yes, that was it.

Desperation.

He expected her to push him away. She was a proper lady, after all. Instead, her hand moved to touch his jaw, then crept up to his neck, until she clasped his nape, her fingers playing with his hair as she parted her lips with a sigh.

Eugene immediately swept his tongue inside, savoring her taste, reveling in the warmth of her mouth. She started returning his kisses, shyly at first, her tongue tentatively stroking against his. But as his arms wrapped around her waist, she grew bolder in her passion, plunging her fingers into his hair, scraping his scalp with her nails, nipping and biting at his lips.

When he pulled away, they were both panting. Her eyes were hazy, her lips nice and swollen from his kisses. He wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to never stop.

But that would be as far as he went.

He glanced at the safe behind her father's desk. That's where the item he came for lay. It was so close now, almost within his reach. All he had to do was escort Ophelia to her room, come back, take it, and leave.

Instead, he pressed another kiss to her lips, savoring her taste, and whispered against her mouth, “It’s better for me to leave.”

She blinked up at him, a mixture of pleasure, confusion, and desire in her eyes. “It is?”

Eugene licked his lips and nodded. “I am afraid if I don’t leave now, I won’t be able to stop with one kiss.”

Shock flickered in her gaze before she looked away. “Perhaps we shall see each other tomorrow?”

Eugene swallowed and nodded. “Perhaps.”

He stood and readjusted the bulge in his breeches with a hiss. Ophelia looked at him with concern, but he just winked, while everything in his body screamed for him to stay, to take her in his arms, spread her beneath him, and plunge himself into her depths.

Damn. He was getting hard again.

Before he did anything stupid, he turned on his heel and walked away.

As the door closed behind him, he leaned his back against it with a sigh. *What in the devil am I doing? Go back there and kiss her again*, a part of him screamed. Another part urged him to go back and steal the tiara.

But he did none of the above.

Instead, he pushed off the door and strode back to his room.



OPHELIA SPENT the next couple of days in a blissful daze. She spent breakfasts and afternoons appeasing her parents and chatting with random gentlemen and dinners sitting next to Viscount Frampton. But afterward, she always slipped away to the study to spend her nights in Eugene's arms.

They had a tacit agreement to not acknowledge each other in public. He was barely a presence during the house party. But when he was, they would pretend they did not know each other. From time to time, she would see him scowling at a gentleman she was conversing with, or shooting daggers at a man who brought her a drink, but as she raised her gaze to meet his, he would have already disappeared. He was like a ghost, one moment there and gone the next.

She could not even discuss him with anyone because she didn't know the proper way to address him. She couldn't very well talk about her new friend, Eugene. And they had never discussed this fact during their quiet conversations in the study, either.

They talked about everything else, however. She could freely express her ideas and talk about her passions, and he always took everything she said seriously, putting a lot of thought into his replies.

“Is it true?”

Ophelia jumped at the familiar female voice and turned to face her friend. “Is what true, Bertha?”

Bertha fanned her flaming cheeks. “Do you truly not know?”

Ophelia let out a sigh. “Bertha, dear, you need to actually ask me a full question before I can answer.”

Bertha rolled her eyes. “You’re always in your own little world. Everyone is talking about it!”

Ophelia threw out her hands. “What is everyone talking about?”

“That the Marquess of Rivendale is here!” Bertha whispered loudly.

Ophelia frowned. “I know that he was invited. But he never comes anywhere.”

Bertha nodded frantically. “Exactly! But I heard that he arrived three days ago or so and is now recovering in his room.”

“Recovering?” Ophelia’s frown deepened.

“From the long journey. Ladies have asked your mother, but she is being coy. I hear she just wants everyone to see him when he makes a grand entrance. Or she is just stoking the fires of the rumors if he isn’t actually here. However, nobody can prove the rumor true or false because nobody even knows what he looks like! He might be dining with us every evening, and unless he screams his name at the top of his lungs, nobody would know.”

“That is silly.” Ophelia waved the notion away. “Surely, he would be introduced.”

Bertha sipped on her drink and nodded once more. “Unless he doesn’t want to be. Come now! He is the most eligible bachelor of the *ton*. A young and wealthy marquess. Surely, he wants some reprieve after the long journey before he becomes accosted by a bevy of marriage-minded young ladies.”

“I don’t think that’s—” Ophelia paused and thought over her friend’s words. “How do you know he is young?”

Bertha shrugged. “I might have delved into *Debrett’s* and other literature, looking for the late marquess’s family connections.”

Ophelia let out a chuckle. “You are quite the investigator!”

“Yes, and I spend my talent on what matters.” She leaned in closer. “Can you ask your mother if he’s truly here? I don’t want to waste my charm on Baron Tisdale if the marquess is truly here.” Although her gaze darted toward Frampton, not Tisdale.

Ophelia had not noticed it earlier, but Bertha’s interest in Frampton seemed to have grown. Unless, of course, she simply hadn’t noticed that before. “I think my mother would have told me. As it is, my parents are pushing me toward Viscount Frampton, as they always have. If Rivendale was here, I think they would prefer the marquess to a viscount, too.”

She would also be a lot happier if Frampton directed his interest toward Bertha. Ophelia let out a huff, her fingers restlessly playing with her skirts.

Something about what Bertha had said about the marquess nagged in the back of her mind. “You learned everything you could about the marquess?”

Bertha nodded proudly. “Mm, yes.”

Ophelia chewed her lower lip. “Do you know his full name?”

Bertha’s gaze turned calculating. “I do. Why?”

Ophelia shrugged. “I met a gentleman—”

Bertha interrupted with a loud gasp. Then she apologetically smiled at the people around them, grabbed Ophelia by her arm, and tugged her into the farthest corner of the room. “Is that where you have been hiding every evening? With a gentleman? I thought you were lost in your books as usual, but this is so much better!”

“Bertha!” Ophelia stopped her friend’s ramble with a hushed whisper. “I have been doing both. We talk... about books.”

“Mhmmm...” Bertha’s eyes were narrowed, her lips pursed together, conveying her disbelief.

“But since we weren’t properly introduced—” Ophelia continued carefully, but Bertha interrupted once more.

“He didn’t tell you his name! Oh my, this is like in one of the gothic novels... Or fairy tales!”

“He didn’t tell me his *full* name,” Ophelia confirmed. “But he told me to call him Eugene.”

Bertha's eyes widened, and she started rummaging in her reticule before pulling out a crumpled piece of paper from an old book with only one sentence:

Lord Nathaniel Eugene Blake, the heir presumptive to the Marquess of Rivendale.

"It's him!" Bertha whispered loudly. "He was the heir presumptive and now he is a marquess!"

It's him! Ophelia's mind screamed. Somehow, knowing his identity made it all the more... real? And exciting.

She didn't know the reasons why he had not told her the truth. Perhaps, Bertha was right, and he was trying to shield himself from money-hungry, marriage-minded young ladies.

Perhaps, he wanted to establish a connection before revealing who he was.

Either way, she was going to respect his wishes.

A footman approached them and handed Ophelia a note. "Lady Ophelia, a note from a gentleman," he murmured before rushing away.

Ophelia and Bertha exchanged wide-eyed gazes.

Meet me at the stables at four. In a riding habit.

E.

"Is that the marquess?" Bertha asked, her mouth split in a grin.

Ophelia nodded, stifling her own grin, although her heart thumped so fast, she was afraid everyone could see it beating against her chest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eugene knew he was playing with fire when he kissed Ophelia in the study. He knew he was inviting trouble when he continued seeing her instead of doing his job and leaving as fast as he could. And now that he had invited her for a ride around the estate grounds... Well, he was out of his damn mind.

Sooner or later, his lies were bound to catch up to him. Either someone would call him by one of the other names he went by, or she'd ask her parents who he was. Or she would demand an explanation herself.

They'd only known each other a few days. But the more time they spent together, the more chance there was that he would trip on his lies.

And once that happened, he risked not only losing Ophelia's affection but also his livelihood. Somehow, the former hurt more.

Yet, he couldn't help but stay, and he could help even less his desire to see her—to make her smile.

She appeared like a queen in a light green riding habit with red buttons and patterns, red gloves, and a black hat,

surrounded by dancing snowflakes, and Eugene's heart leapt in joy.

"I am glad you accepted my invitation," he said as he bowed over her hand.

She smiled with a tiny curtsy. "How could I have not?"

Eugene helped her saddle her mare before they ventured out for a joyous ride.

The wind was picking up its pace, and the snowflakes pelted in their faces, but they raced around the fields, laughing and chatting as they did so.

She stopped at the base of the hill about an hour later and gave him a coquettish glance. "Do you know the name of this hill?"

He watched her face light up as if she was about to tell him a big secret. "I don't believe I do."

She straightened in her seat and pronounced proudly. "Torpenhow."

"I can already tell that the name is very important to you."

She let out a giggle. "It's the hill that opened up my interest in etymology."

He raised a brow. "Why is that?"

"Because of its name. Torpenhow is made up of three elements—'tor' meaning hill in Saxon, 'pen' meaning hill in Breton, and 'how' meaning hill in Old Norse. The story is that when Bretons asked the Saxon what this hill was called, they said Tor and the Saxons assumed it was the name of the hill.

So they called it Tor pen. The story repeated with the Vikings, so they ended up calling this hill Torpen how. And now when we say Torpenhow hill, we are basically saying Hill-hill-hill-hill!" She stifled a chuckle before adding, "It sparked my interest in finding out how the words came to be and if I could find similar patterns in other words."

Eugene scratched his jaw in thought. "So, it's a Torpenhowhill cnoc?" She looked at him with a question in her eyes, and he smiled. "Cnoc is a hill in Scottish."

Ophelia laughed outright at that, and Eugene couldn't help but stare. A woman of odd enthusiasm she was. And he loved every moment of it.

The wind picked up just then, the snow intensifying in its thickness, making it hard to see a foot before one's face.

"Are we too far from the manor?" Eugene asked over the howl of the wind.

"Quite," Ophelia said, looking around. "Follow me, I know where we can go!"



EUGENE COULDN'T SEE a thing in the blizzard until they were a few feet away from some sort of a structure. It had a small enclosure at the side where they left the horses and then entered the main wooden building.

The house consisted of only three rooms: the main area, the bedroom, and the kitchen. The kitchen and the main hall

shared a giant stone hearth, and all the rooms were sparsely but very conveniently furnished.

Overall, the house was small but cozy and reminded Eugene of the house he used to live in with his mother.

Eugene helped Ophelia shed her riding habit, hat, and gloves, leaving her in her undergarments. But her clothes were icy and covered with snow, so he had no choice but to get rid of all the outer layers. Then he ignited the hearth and sat her down on the rug in front of it to help her get warm. Her teeth were chattering, and her hands were ice-cold.

Rubbing her hands together, he warmed them with his breath and pressed a kiss against each of her fingers before letting go.

She smiled, looking at him with a strange but rather pleasant look in her eyes. He slowly undressed to his shirtsleeves under her glowing gaze, resting their clothes on the chairs by the hearth to dry.

“Sit closer.” He tugged her closer to the hearth and went to the kitchen in search of food. Lucky for him, he found some stale bread, cheese, and wine in the cupboards.

“What is this place?” he asked as he settled next to her and handed her the pieces of food.

She took the bread and cheese gratefully and bit into them. “It’s a gamekeeper’s cottage.”

“Someone lives here?” Eugene looked around the tidy but rather sparsely furnished room. There were no paintings, no tapestries, no books, or any decorations on the walls. It was a

nice accommodation with all the necessities, but it didn't feel lived in.

“Not really,” she said after swallowing a healthy sip of wine. “The gamekeeper has a lodge with his family on the other side of the estate. But he has to travel. Taking care of the vast lands is not easy. So, he stays here a few days out of the week so as not to travel back and forth daily. That's why there's always food and all the necessities. I often use this place to get away from the house.” She smiled wide at the last sentence.

“It must be quite small for your liking,” he teased, as the entire cottage was the size of her father's study.

To his surprise, she shook her head. “I enjoy it here. If I could bring all my books, I would gladly live here all alone.” She wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips. “And if I could live off stale bread and cheese.”

He let out a laugh, although an image of her living in a cottage like this with him filled him with warmth. “I am certain you can learn to cook.”

She looked at him with horror in her eyes. “Cook? I wouldn't even know where to begin.”

He chuckled. “I promise you, it's not that difficult.”

“You can cook?” She seemed rather shocked, and Eugene wondered if he'd just given away his peasant background.

He decided to be vague about it and shrugged. “I am a man of many talents.”

She smiled at that. “I have no doubt.” Then she placed her head on his shoulder and nestled closer.

Eugene immediately wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Burrowing his nose in her hair, he inhaled the flowery scent of her soap.

“Tell me more,” she prompted, without looking up as they snuggled before the crackling fire. The wind howled outside the room, rattling the thick oak door, keeping the outside world at bay.

It felt almost magical, them being here, just the two of them. And it felt... right.

Eugene took a deep breath. “What do you want to know?”

She shrugged, her fingers restlessly caressing his forearm. “Tell me about your parents. Was theirs a love match?”

Eugene grimaced and was glad she couldn't see his face. “No, it was not. My mother was very young. My sire—for I cannot call him father—was not a good man. He hurt my mother, and my mother had to leave her home before I was born.”

“Leave where?” Her voice was full of worry.

“She left for Scotland. That's where I was born and where I spent most of my life. I've never met my sire. He didn't care about me or my mother after she left. All I know is that he died about a decade ago in a carriage race.”

“Hmm... What about your mother?”

“She died from fever when I was young.”

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "I am sorry."

He nodded and rested his cheek on the top of her head. "It was a long time ago."

She shifted in his arms and turned to look at him, her face only a few inches away from his. "Do you think love matches are possible for people like us?"

His heart squeezed at the question.

People like us.

He briefly closed his eyes and swallowed.

I am not like you, lassie.

Instead of answering, he gently caressed her cheek and kissed her on her lips.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eugene's warm lips against hers ignited the fire within her veins. Ophelia parted her lips and welcomed his tongue as sighs and moans escaped her mouth. Her hands tangled in his hair, and her body pressed and molded to his. His hands stroked her skin, his fingers tightening on her chemise. Somehow, it wasn't enough. She wanted more of his touch, everywhere.

Ophelia pressed her breasts tighter against his chest, urging her hips closer to his body.

Eugene chuckled against her lips and pulled her even closer until she was straddling his hips. They both struggled with her petticoats and the skirt of her chemise until she settled comfortably on top of him. Their gazes met, and perhaps it was the reflection of the fire in his irises, but his eyes glowed with passion and need. There was an almost animalistic hunger present in his gaze.

She licked her lips, and his eyes dropped to her mouth before he captured it in a raw and uninhibited kiss.

Their tongues stroked and danced, their heaving chests rubbing against each other, intensifying the feelings of desire.

Her nipples grew sensitive and tender, sending a pang of longing with every movement.

Ophelia had never known that kisses could be so... intoxicating.

Her mind was foggy, and the only thing she knew for certain was that she never wanted him to stop whatever he was doing. His hands on her body, his mouth on her lips, the hot hardness pressing between her legs through his breeches.

She could feel it all, and she wanted him to continue, wherever it led them.

The night wind keened a melancholy tune as it swirled outside the cottage. A few miles away, the gaiety, no doubt, carried on in the brilliantly lit Cavendish manor. The wider world faded away, yet inside the humble refuge of a gamekeeper's cottage, time itself seemed to pause. With Eugene and Ophelia clasped in a passionate embrace, lost in their own private world.

Her hand tugged at his shirt, her fingers seeking any piece of flesh she could touch, needing to feel more of him, wanting to rip all the clothes off his body.

He obviously thought the same, as his calloused fingers roamed her arms, her neck, her chest.

His mouth traced a line down her jaw until he reached the base of her neck and swirled his tongue around.

With a sigh, Ophelia tilted her head back, giving him more access to her body, allowing him to do anything he pleased.

He eagerly accepted the invitation, his lips, tongue, and teeth working together in a ravenous kiss. Meanwhile, his nimble fingers skillfully undid her stays and petticoats, undressing her until she was left in a single chemise.

Pausing for a moment, he traced the neckline of her chemise with his fingers and looked into her eyes. Ophelia met his gaze, seeing her own desires reflected in his eyes. With that, she dropped her head back, surrendering herself to him completely.

Eugene hooked his fingers inside the edge of her bodice and pulled hard, freeing her breasts. As the cool air brushed against her exposed skin, she felt a heightened sense of vulnerability. Her sensitive nipples became hard and erect, and all she could do was breathe quietly while observing the expression of awe on his face.

If she had ever wondered what it felt like to be worshiped, she had her answer now. It felt... empowering.

Dipping his head, he took one of her nipples into his mouth, circling his tongue around it. Ophelia's hips moved involuntarily, her back arching as she pushed more of her breast into his mouth. A gut-wrenching sob escaped her lips, and he may have chuckled at her reaction, as warm breath briefly touched her skin, before he continued his onslaught of kisses, licks, and bites.

His hands roamed down her body, then slipped under the skirt of her chemise and made their way up.

Ophelia wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. One of her hands plunged into his hair, guiding him to

bring her even more pleasure.

He moved his mouth to her other breast and resumed his tantalizing kisses, driving her to the brink of madness. His hands now rested on her bare thighs, his rough fingers scratching against her sensitive skin.

Releasing her breast, he looked up at her, his eyes dark and wild, his mouth glistening from their intimate kisses. “Would you like me to stop?” he asked.

Stop? No! She was prepared to beg him to continue, but something in his eyes warned her that if she gave in, there would be no turning back.

And she didn't want to turn back. She wanted it all. And she wanted it all with him.

“Please,” she said instead. She didn't know what she was begging for, but he seemed to understand because he nodded and kissed her soundly.

They were both panting when he released her mouth. He squeezed her hips tightly before returning his lips to her nipple. He teased her a little with tiny flicks until she whimpered in frustration, tugging on his dark locks. Then he closed his lips around her nipple and sucked.

The moan that left her lips was the scream of her soul. She didn't know if anything could feel better. Just then, as if to prove her wrong, his fingers moved to the juncture between her thighs before slowly, gently spreading the seam of her feminine lips.



WHAT A PASSIONATE CREATURE SHE WAS: wild, uninhibited, and alight with an intensity that could not be extinguished or contained. He didn't want to restrain it; he wanted to set it free.

Set *her* free.

She deserved so much better. She deserved to share her passion with someone of her own social status, someone with a title. Someone who could provide her with an estate and a generous annual income. Someone intellectual enough to discuss her passions without bringing up his own misfortunes. Someone who didn't have to steal from her father to secure a better life for himself.

He wasn't worthy of breathing the same air as her, let alone hearing her lovely sighs of pleasure, touching her silky hair, and tasting her sweet mouth. She whimpered, rocking her hips in a suggestive manner, and Eugene lost his train of thought.

She was aroused.

He could feel it in the desperate way she clung to him, the way her tongue stroked against his, the way her body heated as she moved closer and closer to him, as if she wanted to get under his skin—though it was he who desired to be inside her, to move within her as he explored every inch of her body, bringing them both to new heights of pleasure.

He could feel it on the skin of his fingers as he parted her feminine lips and came away with slick evidence of her desire.

He could feel it in her alluring scent.

With a groan, he moved his mouth to her other breast, while his fingers traced along her slit and up to her pleasure button. She jolted as he reached the peak of her sex, and he tightened his grip around her. He swirled his tongue around her nipple, sucking gently as he circled her sensitive spot. Ophelia moaned, drawing him closer as her hips moved, yearning for more of his touch.

Eugene let out a ragged breath and pressed his forehead against her chest, his lips grazing the mound of her breast. “Would you like me to stop?” he asked again, his voice hoarse, almost unrecognizable.

“No,” she immediately replied, her voice shaking. “Please, don’t stop. Never stop.”

He tilted his head back to gaze into her beautiful face. She stared back at him, her gaze unfocused, her lips swollen and puffy from his kisses, her cheeks rosy, and her chestnut waves of hair cascading down her shoulders.

If he ever wondered what a Goddess of Love might look like, he imagined she looked just like this.

Just like her.

“Are you certain?” he asked. “Because if we continue—”

“I am certain,” she whispered, then she moved her hips again, forcing his fingers to press against her clitoris, and moaned.

Eugene's eyes fell closed.

He couldn't bear this sensual torment any longer. His arousal strained against his breeches, begging to be let out. Begging to penetrate the hot, wet, and oh, so inviting depths of her being.

Her scent clouded his mind, while the sounds she made and her movements only fueled his desire further.

He wanted her.

He wanted her so much, he'd rather die than let her slip from his grasp.

And she wanted him too. He could feel it.

But the truth remained, he could not have her.

He could not corrupt her any more than he already had with his touch. He could not violate her body with his primitive needs.

Yet, he could not deny her pleasure, even if he could deny himself.

He tightened his grip on the back of her chemise, kissed her tender lips, while his fingers continued to explore her center.

He pressed his palm against her and broke their kiss. "Ride me," he whispered hoarsely. "Use me for your pleasure."

She whimpered and kissed his lips before moving her hips, grinding her wet core against his palm. With the thumb of his other hand, he continued to stimulate her swollen nub, igniting the flames of her climax.

Incoherent whimpers escaped her mouth, and he eagerly swallowed them with his kiss. She moved against him with wild abandon until a final cry of pleasure left her throat, and she froze, her fingers painfully gripping his hair.

They remained in that frozen tableau for a few eternal seconds, then she eventually settled onto his lap.

Eugene hissed as her warm, wet entrance met his throbbing erection.

She jerked in response, her eyes widening. “Did I hurt you?”

Eugene chuckled, his voice strained, and held her tightly, burying his face between her supple breasts. “Yes. But not in the way you think.”

He kissed each breast before lifting his lips to meet hers.

She immediately melted in his arms, and Eugene cursed his honor—*cowardice?*—that prevented him from claiming her fully.

She was willing, even insistent, that he possess her.

And if he did, he would have everything he desired in this world. He would find bliss in the embrace of this beautiful, passionate woman. And he would exact revenge on her father for all his wrongdoings.

That thought halted him in his tracks.

He pulled away from Ophelia’s sweet lips, and she sighed in contentment.

Good Lord. He was a weak man if a single sigh was enough to undo him.

He gently moved her aside and kissed her forehead. “I will bring water and towels for you to clean up.”

He stood and made his way to the kitchen, her puzzled gaze following him until he disappeared around the corner.

What in the devil am I thinking?

CHAPTER NINE

What had just happened?

Ophelia's hands shook as she cleaned herself in the little nook in the bedroom. Eugene had brought her some warm water and a towel and disappeared into the kitchen again, while she tried and failed repeatedly to pull herself together. What she'd experienced in Eugene's arms was bliss the likes of which she could never have imagined before.

She wasn't versed in matters of a romantic nature that happened between men and women, but she knew enough to realize that he had not experienced the same bliss. And she wanted him to. She wanted him.

All of him.

How was she to tell him that? Could she even do that? And what did that imply? Her head was aching, her skin was tingly and sensitive, and her entire being was buzzing.

When she finished cleaning up, she joined Eugene in the kitchen only to be surprised by the view of him cooking. She had never seen a man cook before. As a little girl, she used to spend some time in the kitchen with the cooks, but that was different. She had never seen a *gentleman* cook before.

Eugene rolled back his shirtsleeves, exposing his finely sculpted forearms to Ophelia's roving eyes. Her gaze traced along the rugged contours of his arms as they flexed in the firelight, following each sinewy cord, every taut muscle. His fingers conveyed elegant strength, yet she couldn't help but remember the gentleness with which he'd touched her just a few moments earlier. Her cheeks burned at the memory, and he chose this exact moment to look up at her.

"Would you like to help?" he asked with a playful smile on his lips.

Ophelia pulled up a chair and shook her head. "I would rather watch. I find I enjoy watching you work with your hands."

He let out a chuckle. "I quite enjoy working with my hands."

"Hm... I can tell." She did not mean to say it in a suggestive manner, yet that's exactly how it came out, and Eugene let out a laugh while Ophelia proceeded to burn from shame. To her delight, he leaned in and kissed her soundly.

Dinner was ready a few minutes later, and they enjoyed coal-roasted potatoes with smoked meat, toasted bread, and cheese. When they were done with their admittedly tasty meal, they settled in front of the hearth with a couple of glasses of wine.

"So, what else do you do with your hands?" Ophelia asked after a brief lull in the conversation.

He threw her a side-eyed glance, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, but answered seriously. “Various things.” He cleared his throat as though the next sentence was difficult to say. “As a child, I apprenticed as a locksmith.”

Her brows shot up in surprise. An odd interest for a gentleman. However, she had been criticized for her interests her entire life, so she could not let herself do the same. Instead, she smiled. “You are indeed a man of many talents.”

He laughed merrily, and Ophelia found herself lost in that happy sound. If she was truthful with herself, she found both his honesty and his interests quite admirable and even exciting. She also had to admit that she rather enjoyed the rough feel of his tender hands on her skin.

“Show me your hands,” she commanded with a lifted chin.

He looked confused but complied. She took his one big hand into her small ones and caressed the rough ridges of his palm, tracing every callous, every scar she could find. Then she brought it to her lips and kissed his knuckles.

He chuckled and, in one quick motion, he brought her to the floor. He twined his fingers through hers and pressed her hands to the floor on either side of her head before lowering his head and kissing her deeply.

“I want to see you,” Ophelia whispered against his lips. “All of you.”

He let go of her hands and sat up. Then, slowly and carefully, without taking his eyes off her, he pulled his shirt over his head and threw it onto the chair. His skin glowed red

in the light of the fire. Shadows and light worked together to accentuate every line of his body. His muscles shifted and bulged with every movement, the firelight bouncing off his skin. He stood elegantly and swiftly undid his breeches.

He paused, and for a moment, the entire world stopped. Ophelia's entire being hummed with anticipation and trepidation.

Then he took off his breeches and smalls in one swift movement, before discarding them and straightening before her in all his naked glory.

Ophelia swallowed, unable to take her eyes off him, unsure where to look, her eyes hungry for every inch of him. And there were... many inches.

"Come," he commanded gruffly, and Ophelia couldn't help but obey.

She stood and approached him slowly until she stood less than a foot away from him. Then she took one more step closer, bringing them toe to toe, standing close enough to feel the heat of his skin, to see the irises widen in his eyes.

She raised her hand and touched his shoulder. His skin jumped, and Ophelia retracted her hand in reaction.

He smiled.

She chuckled.

"Touch me again," he whispered.

This time, Ophelia put both hands on his body, tracing his topography, learning every bulge, every dip, every scar. When

her fingers grazed his nipples, his eyes fell closed, and he groaned.

Ophelia's eyes widened as she realized she had the same effect on him as he did on her. Emboldened by the thought, she let her hand move lower and lower until... Eugene caught her fingers just before she reached her destination.

“Lassie, if you're going to continue—”

“I want to continue,” she said, surprised by the hoarseness in her voice. “I want to make you feel the same way you made me feel before.”

He met her eyes, and there was shock evident in his gaze. “If you do, there will be no turning back. You will be mine.”

She nodded. “I am already yours.”

His eyes fell closed again as if it pained him. “You don't know me well enough to say that.”

“I know everything that matters.” When he didn't reply, she leaned forward and kissed his chest. She continued peppering her kisses up his body until she reached up on her tiptoes and licked the hollow of his throat.

He chuckled and released her hands, wrapping his arms around her waist and holding her close. She traced his arms with her fingers, enjoying the feel of his muscles and the heat of his skin beneath her fingers. “Let me prove it to you,” she whispered.

He dipped his head and caught her lips with his.

She was too lost in their passion to register what happened next. All she knew was that her clothes were off and somehow, she was lying on her back, with Eugene's comforting weight on top of her. He was kissing her deeply, his hands roaming her bare skin.

He traced her waist, squeezed her bottom, caressed the back of her thighs, then expertly hooked her legs behind his hips. His cock pressed against her core, the velvet-covered steel nudging at her most sensitive spot.

Moisture seeped out from her as an ache formed at her center, craving to have him there.

Ophelia reached her hand between their bodies and encircled her fingers around his throbbing length. They both moaned as she squeezed him firmly. How lovely it felt to hold him, to have him at her mercy, to feel his pulse beat within her hand.

"Inside," he gritted through clenched teeth.

"Inside?"

"Guide me to your center. I want to be inside you."

Ophelia's eyes widened at the explicit words, but they didn't sound crude. They sounded right and sweet, as if she had waited for him to say this her entire life.

She did as he asked and pressed his tip against her wet entrance.

"Hold on to me," he whispered, and she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

Then he kissed her deeply, his tongue sweeping into her mouth, robbing her of any coherent thought as he thrust inside.

A moan escaped her lips, and Eugene swallowed it with his kiss. With another thrust, he was deeply seated within her.

Ophelia's fingers dug into his back as she grimaced both in pain and pleasure.

Her muscles contracted and released, trying to accommodate his swollen length.

He kissed her jaw, her neck, and then lightly bit her shoulder, causing her to chuckle. She had never felt this vulnerable and safe at the same time. He was passionate and playful, rough and gentle all at once.

And she couldn't have wished for the moment to unfold any other way.

As she relaxed, the ache faded, slowly replaced by desire. She moved her hips to chase that blissful feeling again.

He smiled and nipped her lower lip. "Feeling better?"

"Better than I've ever felt."

His smile turned wicked, and he shifted his hips, his body teasing her most sensitive spot, sending pleasure coursing through her veins. "How about now?"

"Eugene!" she cried out before he robbed her of her breath with his kiss. Without taking his mouth off her, he shifted once more, withdrawing his length.

"No!" She gripped his back, her hips rising, seeking contact.

He chuckled before thrusting inside again.

“Please,” she sobbed, her emotions uncontainable. Her mind raced, her entire being focused on one thing: the place where they were joined.

He continued moving in and out, each motion touching depths of her she had never known and arousing senses she didn't know she had. The cries that escaped her throat were unrecognizable, and all she felt were waves of pleasure crashing together, blurring the boundaries of time.

Then she heard an animalistic growl, and the warmth of his release filled her just as she returned to earth from the heaven he had taken her to.



EUGENE CARESSED the chestnut locks strewn about the pillow while Ophelia's warm and soft form lay peacefully in his arms. Her chest rose and fell with even breaths as she slept, trusting him to keep her safe.

She'd promised him she was his in the throes of passion. He'd essentially tricked her into it by not telling her the truth of who he was. A part of him hoped she would still accept him when she found out the truth. A part of him hoped she meant what she said when she'd said she knew everything she needed and the rest didn't matter.

I am an idiot. And an idealistic idiot at that.

For a moment, a vision of a possible future flashed before his eyes. A little cozy home in Scotland, a fire blazing in a

large hearth. Ophelia lying on her stomach on the rug before the fire, leafing through books and telling him all the exciting things she'd read about that day as he prepared dinner. After dinner, they would go to their bedroom and make long and passionate love together. And then he'd wrap her in his arms, hold her close to his heart, and watch her as she slept. And then the next day, they would do it all over again.

A lovely future.

An impossible future.

There were two paths he could take out of the Cavendish estate. First, would be to steal the tiara as he was supposed to, receive enough money to build a nice and cozy future for himself—a future that would never be enough for a duke's daughter—and alienate her in the process by revealing he was a thief.

Second, would be refusing to steal the tiara and going back to his locksmith business in Thornhill—a future even he wasn't content to live—and alienate her by revealing he was a peasant.

In the second option, he would also go back on his word and let down his long-time friend Smoke. The one who'd taken him into the thief-ring when he was too broken to do anything else.

It didn't escape his notice that in either option, Ophelia would never accept him for who he was. Yet that didn't make it any easier to choose.

CHAPTER TEN

The snowstorm ended sometime during the night. Now, the snow was deep and packed nicely, leaving clear impressions of hoofprints as they trotted toward the Cavendish manor.

Eugene had been quiet all morning. He had prepared her breakfast, surprising her once more with his cooking talent. He'd utilized eggs, meat, bread, and cheese into a very tasty meal. Then he saddled both horses, and now they were moving back to the house.

Ophelia wasn't certain if anyone had noticed she was missing. Were her parents looking for her at all? And as much as it worried her, she was more worried about Eugene's morose mood.

The night they had spent together was the definition of bliss. He'd claimed her as his, and she had hoped he meant it. But the closer they got to the Cavendish manor, the more she wondered if he'd meant anything he had said the night before.

What if he refused to marry her?

There was a possibility she was pregnant with his child!

Ophelia's heart was stuck in her throat, and she was not able to voice any of her concerns.

As they reached the main entrance, a groom ran down to take their horses, but Eugene stopped him with a sharp gesture of his hand.

He jumped down, helped Ophelia to the ground, and spoke for the first time since they'd left the gamekeeper's cottage. "I shall take the horses to the stables myself. You should go inside."

Ophelia was stunned into silence. He didn't want to risk being seen with her. All the blood left her face and settled somewhere at her feet because she felt lightheaded.

Was all of this a lie?

She didn't have the strength to ask the question before he bowed lightly over her hand and left, leading both horses away.

A footman ran down and offered his arm, and Ophelia took it absently.

What in the devil was going on? Her entire world felt off-kilter.

She entered the hall into the buzz of conversation and the festive yuletide atmosphere that felt simply wrong in the aftermath of everything that happened. What she felt inside her soul was anything but festive.

She didn't want to see or talk to anyone. She couldn't even look at all the greenery and bright red bows around the house that she happily helped decorate just a few days prior.

She dashed up the staircase and locked herself in her room.

She needed to come to terms with her feelings before she could speak to anyone or confront Eugene. Before demanding marriage, she needed to figure out whether she wanted to marry him because of the night before or because she'd fallen completely and irrevocably in love with him.

And she needed to figure out what she would do if he refused.



THE DOOR to Ophelia's room burst open, and her mother rushed inside. "Ophelia Annabelle Aston! What are these rumors I hear?"

Ophelia raised her head from the pillow, realizing that she'd fallen asleep. "Wh..." She had to clear her throat and try again. "What rumors?"

"About your escapades with the Marquess of Rivendale! The entire house party is abuzz with the tale. Everyone says that you spent last night in his rooms!"

Ophelia blinked the remnants of her sleep away and sat up.

Bertha! It must have been Bertha who'd skillfully maneuvered the rumors in such a way that no one knew where they came from. And, of course, Bertha could not have known where Ophelia truly had spent the night before, but since neither she nor the marquess was present at dinner or any of the evening activities, it probably was not hard to believe.

“Well?” her mother asked, her fists pressed to her waist.

“I didn’t spend the night in his rooms,” Ophelia said truthfully.

“Well, you shall have to tell it to your father!”

“Father?” Ophelia jumped out of bed and rushed toward her mother, her arms outstretched. Her father had never participated in rumors. But she would have been naive to believe that the rumors about his own daughter would not reach his ears. “Please, tell me he hasn’t heard yet.” *Then, perhaps, I can talk to Eugene first.*

“Of course, he heard! I told him everything. Every little word. And he asked for you to join him in his study in half an hour.”

Ophelia’s eyes widened even more. “In his study? But he never goes to his study.”

“Only to conduct his most important deals.” Her mother paused, her chin lifted, and her eyes glittering with something akin to pride. “Like the marriage of his only daughter.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ophelia dressed hastily, had her maid collect her hair in a tight bun, and rushed toward her father's study.

She had to beg him not to force Eugene into marrying her. She needed to speak to him first. He had to know that she didn't want him to marry her out of duty.

She reached her father's study and dashed inside without so much as a knock, only to stop short a few steps in.

Her father stood as he saw her enter, so out of place in his own study. But more out of place was the strange concoction of an armchair standing on the other side of the desk. It moved and swayed lightly as a man slowly rose to his feet. He turned just as slowly toward Ophelia and sketched a bow.

He was tall, taller than her father but not as tall as Eugene, and handsome if not for a strange scar or deformity just under his left cheek. His eyes were cold though, almost as if he was looking right through her.

"Ophelia, darling!" her father exclaimed. "I would like to officially introduce you to the Marquess of Rivendale."

Ophelia reeled backward. *The Marquess of Rivendale.*

It was not Eugene at all. This was a man she had never met before. How could she have been so wrong?

“He insists that you haven’t met before although the rumors say otherwise,” her father continued as if her world hadn’t just imploded.

Ophelia’s breath was caught in her throat, and she lost all power of speech.

“Lady Ophelia, my pleasure,” the marquess said in a deep baritone. *The marquess!*

The world spun around her, so Ophelia took a couple of steps and plopped into the chair beside Rivendale without taking her shocked gaze off him.

He lowered himself into the seat, just as slowly, carefully leaning on the arms of his chair, and that struck Ophelia as strange, but she had enough strangeness to get through.

“Well?” her father asked as he settled in his chair as well.

Ophelia cleared her throat. “We haven’t met.”

The duke leaned back and crossed his fingers on his round belly. “Is that so? Then why is everyone telling me that you spent the last twenty-four hours in his room?”

“I didn’t. I went out for a ride and got caught in a snowstorm,” Ophelia said in a dazed voice. “I spent the night in the gamekeeper’s cottage.”

Her father narrowed his eyes. “With whom?”

Ophelia swallowed. “Alone.”

Her father watched her with his eagle-eyed gaze, but all Ophelia could do was replay every conversation she'd had with Eugene in her head.

As a child, I apprenticed as a locksmith.

“I don't believe you.” The duke slashed the air with his hand in a dismissive gesture. “And neither will anyone outside this room.”

I am a man of many talents.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” the marquess spoke evenly. “Would you mind giving your daughter and me a moment to speak?”

The duke raised a brow. “Alone?”

Rivendale nodded. “With an open door, if you please.”

The duke stood without more prompting. It was obvious that to him it was a done deal. Ophelia and the marquess were betrothed. No matter what Ophelia said. That was why he was leaving them alone.

“Lady Ophelia,” the marquess said without so much as looking at her. “I realize that we are in difficult straits.”

Ophelia let out a sound that was something between a scoff and a nervous laugh.

“I've heard rumors about our involvement, although we haven't met until now—”

Ophelia couldn't stay silent any longer. She had to interrupt. “I apologize. This is entirely my fault. I mistook a gentleman for you, and my friend must have spread my

misinformation, embellishing the details to the point that we are here now.”

He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, then tugged on his cravat as if it suffocated him. “I must admit that it came as a surprise, but also a bit like the grace of God.”

Ophelia raised her wide eyes to his. *What?* “Pardon me?”

“I am here for the sole purpose of finding myself a bride. For reasons I cannot tell you, I am not able to participate in the marriage mart the way other men can. So, this rumor has given me the perfect opportunity to ask for your hand in marriage without any trouble.”

Trouble? Ophelia frowned. What was he talking about?

“I will not be an easy person to be married to, but I won’t be an unfair husband. I shall not be going to social events, and I shall not be visiting museums, parks, or the theater with you. But you will be free to do as you please. I spend most of my days in my study or conservatory. A life as my wife will be quite... lonely. However, I need an heir. And once that job is done, I shall leave you to your own devices.”

Ophelia’s mind hastened to catch up to his words as she was still having trouble processing what was going on.

What the marquess proposed was a perfect arrangement. If he had approached her with this offer a week ago, she wouldn’t have even thought twice about it. This was exactly what she wanted—to be left to her own devices, to skip social functions and be locked in her own room, learning about something new every day through her books. She always

thought she wanted to live independently with her aunt Diedre, but this way she would have the same freedom but also the security of being a marquess's wife.

If only this offer had come a week earlier...

Her gaze drifted to the rug by the hearth, where a few books were stacked on the floor from the day before as she had asked the maid not to touch them.

Her heart stuck in her throat, and all she could see before her was Eugene's laughing face.

No. She could not marry the marquess. Not when her thoughts were solely occupied by another man.

It wouldn't be fair to the marquess, it wouldn't be fair to her, and it would not be fair to Eugene, either.

This was a huge mess, and it was all her fault! Why had she thought Eugene was the marquess? What had led her to believe he was even a gentleman? He had never said he was.

Peasants and lords speak the same language in this country, yet there is no unity. You say we can read in different languages when by we you mean aristocracy.

Ophelia frowned. He hadn't said he was a gentleman. In fact, everything he'd ever said pointed to the contrary. He spoke like an educated man. The words he used and the way he held himself allowed him to walk among nobility undetected, yet she should have known that his ideas and his background spoke of a man with a hidden past.

He was not born into the aristocracy at all.

“I am already yours,” she had told him the night before. And his response should have alerted her to the truth.

You don't know me well enough to say that.

Ophelia stood. “Thank you for your generous offer, my lord. I am afraid I cannot accept it.”

“What?” her father shouted from the corridor before storming into the room. “What in the devil are you talking about?”

“I can't, Father. I am sorry,” Ophelia repeated.

The marquess hauled himself out of the chair, swaying slightly on his feet. “Please know that you have the option to reconsider.”

“There is nothing to consider,” her father fumed. “You shall marry him, and that's that!”

Ophelia simply shook her head. She dropped a quick curtsy toward the marquess and rushed out of the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ophelia didn't know where to look for Eugene. What if he'd left, convinced she would never choose him over an aristocrat?

How did he even get into the house party and why? There was only one person who could give her some answers.

Ophelia ran into her mother's room to see her kissing a young gentleman by the bed. *Baron Tisdale?*

This wasn't the first time Ophelia had caught her mother during an indiscretion, so she wasn't particularly surprised. "Mama, I need your help."

The duchess covered herself with her shawl and shooed her suitor away. "Why didn't you knock, my dear? It's only polite."

"Mama, there was a very tall, gorgeous man with a slight Scottish brogue present at the house party. He was not invited."

"Mr. Evan Williams? I haven't seen him in a while, but his rooms were next to mine."

Ophelia immediately dashed out of the duchess's chambers and flew into the next room only to find it empty. The bed was made, and no trunks or any other items indicated that anyone lived there.

“What is going on, my dear?” her mother asked from behind her.

Ophelia's chest heaved, and she was about to cry. “It wasn't the marquess I spent last night with. It was Eugene.”

“Who is Eugene?”

Ophelia turned toward her mother, tears burning at the back of her eyes. “The man who was staying here. His name is Eugene, and he is a locksmith.”

“A locksmith? I thought he was the nephew of a priest.”

Ophelia waved her hand. “It doesn't matter. I thought... I thought I fell in love with him.”

Her mother's brows knitted together. “Dear, you're not a young and foolish girl to come by an infatuation like this with a drop of a hat.”

Ophelia let out a chuckle. “And what about you? Aren't you too old to be infatuated with other men?”

The duchess drew the ends of her shawl closer together. “It's different. I am a married woman, and I am not ruining my prospects in life by frolicking with other men. You are. This man you claim to love is a commoner. You have a marquess willing to marry you.”

Ophelia nodded silently, chewing on her lip before asking, “Do you ever regret marrying Papa?”

The duchess let out a scoff. “Of course not. I am a duchess.”

“Is that the only thing that matters to you? Do you never wish you lived your life with a man you love? Admire? Ache for? Do you not wish you could turn back time and choose a man who makes your stomach flutter?”

Her mother turned away with a flinch, and Ophelia’s mouth slackened in surprise. She had always wondered if there was someone her mother used to love, someone she had lost in order to marry an old duke. And her mother’s reaction told her that was the truth.

Her mother’s voice was hard when she said, “He is not here, is he?” Then she turned to face Ophelia once more. “Your locksmith. So, your love must not be reciprocated. Get this foolish notion of love out of your mind, Ophelia. You’re three and twenty, and you’re a duke’s daughter. You shall marry appropriately.”

Ophelia didn’t answer. She just walked past her mother and kept walking down the corridor.

Once she reached her room, she shut her door and leaned against it, her eyes closed.

“Ophelia.”

Her eyes flew open at the sound of Eugene’s dear voice. And there he was, standing by the window, looking dashing in a simple coat over his shirt, no waistcoat or cravat in sight. His

hair was disheveled as though he'd repeatedly run his fingers through it in agitation, and there was a worn sack in his hands which he held on to tightly.

“Eugene!”

She jolted toward him but he put up a staying hand. “Wait, please. I need to tell you something. Something you do not know.”

“I know, Eugene—” she started, but he cut her off with a shake of his head.

“I am not a gentleman, Ophelia.”

Ophelia stared at him, determined not to interrupt. But he looked at her strangely. “You’re not surprised?”

A small smile crept onto Ophelia’s face. “I figured it out. It took me longer than it should have, but I blame Bertha for that.”

“Bertha?” Eugene frowned.

“Never mind, go on.”

He was taken aback once more. “You do not care?”

Ophelia shook her head. “Not in the least.”

“Well,” he cleared his throat, “you might still change your mind.”

I doubt it. “Why did you come here? To this house party? Was it a coincidence?”

He shook his head, his fingers tightening on the worn sack in his hands. “My mother used to be a maid in this house, in

your father's house.”

Ophelia's eyes widened. This, she didn't expect. “She was a maid here? When?”

“Before you were born. Before I was born. She was violated by one of your father's friends—an earl—during a house party such as this. And instead of protecting her, your father threw her out on the streets once she found out she was with child.”

Ophelia's stomach churned, and her eyes fell closed.

“She crossed the border and was welcomed into a Scottish village by wonderful people, and that's where she raised me. She taught me to cook, I apprenticed with a locksmith, and we led a good life.

“When she died, I was inconsolable. I left the only people who cared about me and thought I needed to find myself on my own. So, I went to London and lived in squalor. I used my knowledge of locks to steal things. There were a lot of hardships in those years and many things I am not proud of. But I was taken in by a group of thieves. Some of them could read, so they taught the rest. And that's how I spent my youth. Being a criminal. Once I realized my mother would have been ashamed of me, I returned. But the past hasn't left me alone. A few weeks ago, I received a note from one of my thief friends, Smoke, the most prominent thief to grace England. And I was asked to steal something from your father for a very generous price. A price that would make sure I lived a quiet, happy life and was able to help everyone in my village as well.”

Ophelia licked her lips. “What were you asked to steal?”

“This.” Eugene opened the worn sack and pulled out a diamond tiara. A tiara that every bride in the Cavendish family wore on their wedding day. “I stole it. Easily. And I could have given it to the person who hired me, but I won’t. Not because I am an honorable man; I think it is obvious I am not. But because I entered your home with the intention to steal from you. Instead, you managed to steal my heart.”

Ophelia’s pulse drummed so violently in her ears that she was afraid she’d misheard him. “What?”

“I love you,” he said simply. “You are a duke’s daughter, and you deserve more than I can ever offer. You deserve to live in a grand estate, to have a titled husband and all the wealth in the world.

“All I can offer you is a small cottage in Scotland, even smaller than the gamekeeper’s cottage. All I can offer you is a man with an honest job because I will never steal again. And all I can offer you is my love. When we were in the gamekeeper’s cottage, you said you could live in a place like that. You said if nobility and peasants could find a common language, then we would be closer to heaven. And right now, I am praying that you truly meant what you said. Because I love you. And if you come with me, right now, I shall take you to Scotland to marry you, and I will cherish you till my last breath.”

Ophelia walked up to him slowly. She took the tiara from his hands, her fingers brushing his skin, and gently set it aside on the table. Then she rose on her tiptoes and kissed him on his lips.

His eyes widened in surprise before he pulled her closer and kissed her soundly. “Is that your answer?” he asked when she finally pulled away.

Ophelia nodded with a smile. “Yes, my dear Eugene, a locksmith, a thief, a maid’s son. My love. Let’s go to Scotland. Make me your wife.”

“Your parents won’t approve,” he said with a worried frown.

Ophelia pursed her lips in thought. “I don’t think I approve of them either.”

Eugene chuckled, took her hand, and led her away.

EPILOGUE

A year later...

The savory aroma of roasted meat and herbs filled the cozy little cottage. Ophelia stacked some papers on her table as she finished looking over her students' work. She had started teaching the local youth at a library, and she enjoyed it immensely.

Eugene glanced over his shoulder, a wooden spoon in hand. "Dinner is almost ready, my love."

Ophelia smiled and stood, her growing belly straining against the simple frock she now wore. She had to admit it was more comfortable than the fashionable gowns she used to wear. She waddled over to Eugene and wrapped her arms around him from behind. "Smells delicious," she said, kissing his back.

A knock sounded at the door. Ophelia and Eugene exchanged curious glances, although it wasn't that rare for guests to visit them.

Ophelia went to open the door and found her mother standing there, dressed in a fine cloak with the hood drawn up.

“Mama?” Ophelia exclaimed in surprise. She hadn’t seen her mother since she’d left with Eugene.

Her mother looked at Ophelia’s rounded belly, and tears sprang to her eyes. “My darling!”

They embraced and stood like that for a long while.

“Come in, Mother, please.” Ophelia welcomed her mother into their little cottage, and the duchess looked around before glancing at Eugene uncertainly. He bowed. “Your Grace.”

She smiled, then turned back to Ophelia. “I’ve missed you. And I wish I hadn’t lost the time with you by staying away.” She held out a small sack of coins. “Consider this reparations?”

Eugene wiped his hands and joined them, putting his arm over his wife’s shoulders. “We thank you, Your Grace, but we want for nothing here.”

Her mother’s face fell and her lips quivered. “I did not mean to offend, I just wished to bring a gift for my grandchild.”

Eugene pressed a kiss to the top of Ophelia’s head before addressing the duchess once more. “How about you join us for dinner?”

Ophelia looked at him gratefully. What else did she expect from her generous husband. “Yes, Mama. Please, join us. I’ve missed you so much. I would love to hear the tales from our home.”

Her mother’s eyes misted over. “I would love that.”

“Come.” Eugene offered the duchess his arm, but instead of taking it, she enfolded him in a tight embrace.

Eugene chuckled and led both women to the table. “I’ve made beef stew. I hope you won’t find it too simple for your liking.”

The duchess looked from Ophelia to Eugene in surprise. “You cook?”

Ophelia laughed merrily as she settled at the table and waited for her husband to serve them food. “He does, and quite deliciously.”

Ophelia’s mother clasped her hands together in delight. “Then I am most excited to try this meal.”

Laughter and conversation filled the room as they enjoyed the dinner. As Ophelia watched her husband interact with her mother, she became even more convinced that she’d made the right choice over a year ago, not that she’d ever questioned it.

She was happy. And her heart eased at the thought that their little babe would have at least one grandparent present in their life.

The End.

How Scot Stole Christmas serves as a prequel novella to two series:

A Series of Unfortunate Rakes and *Inglorious Scoundrels*.

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ABOUT A MISTLETOE MISHAP

Miss Emma Crosthwaite is a spinster. But not just a spinster. She was abandoned at the altar while her betrothed eloped with her very jealous younger sister. Now, seven years later, she is an object of pity and even scorn in their small Cumbrian village or Glynneden. Until one fortunate mishap at a Christmas party changes everything.

Playing parlor games, widower Devlin Barrowcliff felt like a fool chasing young ladies about while blindfolded. And then, at the last second he catches one. Except it isn't one of the young ladies who'd been playing the game. It's Emma who is escaping a potentially unpleasant encounter. Immediately, he is entranced by her.

But not everyone wants Emma to have a happy ending. In fact, some people will stop at nothing to ensure that Emma will never know a moment's happiness in life... But Christmas miracles come in many shapes and forms.

CHAPTER ONE

Emma Crosthwaite stood at the periphery of the ballroom and wished, with terrible desperation, that she could be anywhere else. She was seven and twenty, had never been married, had no great fortune and no prospects for a husband, and every guest gathered for the St. Nicholas Day celebration that would open the holiday season, was well aware of it. There were whispers. There were pitying looks. There were smug, superior smiles. But there was no denying that everyone present was well aware of the history that existed between the hosts of the gathering and herself. *It should have been her.*

At that rather bleak thought, she found herself glancing across the ballroom to where her sister stood. Next to her was Thomas Windemere, the man she would have married. *No, the man who had asked her to marry him.* There had been a proposal and a betrothal ring. The banns had been read. And on the eve of their wedding, he had eloped with her younger sister.

In the years since, she had come to realize that not marrying Thomas had been a blessing. He was not the man for her. But as it didn't appear there was any man for her, that

wasn't surprising. Still, they would not have made one another very happy. He needed a woman like her sister. Alice, on the surface at least, was uncomplicated and sweet. She never questioned anything or anyone and was perfectly willing, at least in public, to be led by him in all things. But Alice was also a master at manipulation. There was little doubt that she had set out to take Thomas away from her sister and that at the end of it all, Thomas had felt it had been his idea.

That had never been Emma. She was incapable of telling a lie. If she did, her chest and neck would get red and splotchy and she'd stammer over the words like an actor with stage fright.

But at that moment, standing once more on the edge of the ballroom, she felt conspicuous. It wasn't that she was alone or that she was clearly an unwanted spinster. It was that, for eleven months out of every year, minus the Sundays where they were all in church together, her life was completely satisfactory for her. She only ever felt that something was missing from it during the Christmas season when she was forced to attend countless social events where everyone looked at her as if she were an object of pity. And then alternately looked at Alice and Thomas as if their ability to tolerate her presence entitled them to sainthood.

“Has it been awful?”

Emma looked up to see her aunt standing beside her. Since her father's death, when the house had been inherited by a distant relative, she had been taken in by her widowed aunt, Margaret Churchill. They got on well enough. Margaret

certainly seemed to understand the difficult position Emma now found herself in. But then Margaret was a shrewd woman, despite her innate kindness. She had an uncanny knack for reading people accurately, whatever face they put on. And she'd understood Alice long before any of the rest of them had.

“It hasn't been pleasant. In truth, I do not envy Alice. Nor do I begrudge her the happiness she has found with Thomas. I would not have been happy with him, I think. Not for long at any rate. But I detest being an object of pity or curiosity, which I invariably am whenever the three of us are in company together,” Emma explained. “If I can forgive and forget that Thomas left me at the altar, why can't anyone else?”

Margaret clucked her tongue in sympathy. “I cannot answer that with any certainty, my dear, though I can hazard a guess. It may be that someone else will not let the gossip die, but resurrects at every possible—and strategic— opportunity. But I might offer a solution, albeit a temporary one.”

“Anything would be preferable to this,” Emma said sourly.

“There is a smaller gathering of young persons in the drawing room where they are indulging in parlor games. Young enough perhaps that they may not even remember what happened seven years ago as they were only children themselves then. Perhaps you'd enjoy that more than the dancing?”

“You mean watching others dance,” Emma corrected.

Margaret smiled, ducking her head. “Just so, my dear. Just so.”

A refusal was on the tip of her tongue. After all, being the elder in the room made her something of an outcast, as well. But as Emma glanced around the room once more, she saw something that immediately made her change her mind.

Mr. Winslow Appleton was eyeing her with the same leering gaze she had, sadly, grown accustomed to from him. How many times must one woman reject a man’s advances? Advances that could never be anything but improper as he already had a wife. The poor woman had been an invalid for years following a terrible fall. And since that time, or possibly even before, Mr. Appleton had been attempting to engage in some salacious way or other with Emma.

She shuddered with distaste. Putting even a room’s distance between herself and her sister, could provide her some much needed anonymity. It would also allow her to escape Mr. Appleton before he could corner and trap her into a conversation for an hour as he ogled her bosom. “Are the parlor games very silly?”

Margaret’s laughter trilled from her. “They are parlor games. Silly is the point.”

Emma glanced over her shoulder and saw Mr. Appleton coming straight for her. “Naturally. What was I thinking? As I have no dignity to preserve, I might as well enjoy them.”



DEVLIN BARROWCLIFF BIT back a curse as his knee bumped the sharp corner of a table. The chorus of barely stifled giggles was enough to make him cringe. He was a grown man playing idiotic parlor games with a gaggle of girls that were too young and too silly to even be interesting much less marriageable.

When he'd informed his mother that he intended to take a wife, she'd quite literally thrown herself on the floor to weep with gratitude. Then she'd thrown herself, with equal enthusiasm, into the matchmaking process. Thus he found himself attending the annual St. Nicholas celebration in Glynneden and making an absolute fool of himself in front of what amounted to a half dozen school girls.

The dinging of a bell from the far corner of the room told him he was running out of time. The object of the foolish game he had found himself participating in was to capture one of the ladies. *While blindfolded.* In an unfamiliar room crowded with people and furniture. It was a bit of a risqué game as groping about blindly for a woman could lead to very improper touching of said lady. But that was rather the point wasn't it?

There was a game designed to create or flame attractions between the participants. The other gentlemen present—if they had a young lady whom they were courting—could shield the lady of their choosing, thereby becoming their 'heroes'. And all the ladies, ladies who did not have a serious suitor, could move about freely and sometimes even put themselves directly in the path of the person who was stumbling about in the blindfold. It didn't appear that any of them were particularly

desirous of being captured by him as no one had yet put themselves in his path.

If he didn't catch someone within before the bell rang again, he would be eliminated from the game. Perhaps that wasn't the worst thing that could happen. After all, did he really want to 'catch' any of the ladies currently playing?

Another thought came to him then, unbidden and unwelcome. If Hannah had lived, he would not be playing the wretched game. He'd be happily ensconced in his new home with his wife of many years and perhaps even a few children. But life in the city, with all the dirt and coal smoke, had taken a toll on her already weak lungs. And when she'd caught a chill, seven fateful years earlier, she hadn't the strength to fight it off. He had not seriously considered marriage since. But it was different now that he was a landed and wealthy country gentleman. There were expectations that had to be fulfilled.

At the very last second, just as the bell had begun to ding for the last time, he turned around. With his outstretched hands, he felt a whoosh of air. There was no conscious thought as he lunged forward, closing his arms around the source of that movement. The shape he found himself holding was a decidedly feminine form. Peals of laughter and a few gasps could be heard from behind him. All he cared about was that he could finally remove the blasted blindfold.

Hooking one finger beneath the fabric, he tugged it free and then found himself looking down into a truly lovely face. But not the painfully young and childlike face of a barely out

of the school room debutante but an actual woman, fully grown and far lovelier than he could have imagined. He hadn't a clue who she was. And he was fairly certain she wasn't a participant of the game.

"You've caught Miss Crosthwaite!" One of the young ladies all but squealed. It was immediately followed by laughter that seemed, at least to his mind, to be slightly mean spirited. The blush that stole over the cheeks of the woman in his arms told him that he was correct in his assumption.

"My apologies, Miss Crosthwaite," he said. "But the rules of the game are clear. I've caught you and now you must offer a forfeit."

"I have nothing to forfeit," she replied softly.

"But you do. The pleasure of your company. You could keep me company through the next round."

More giggles and then one of the young men called out with enthusiasm, "And you must grant him a kiss! He caught you under the mistletoe."

Devlin glanced up just as Miss Crosthwaite did. There was indeed a kissing bough hanging directly over their heads. He lowered his gaze to her face. It struck him how very pretty she was. *And how very not a child she was.* There was no silliness in the woman in his arms. Just cool competence and composure. The idea of kissing her was becoming more appealing by the second.

Unbidden, the thought of kissing her until that cool composure was replaced by heat and passion soon followed.

But it was neither the time nor the place for such things. And she would not appreciate anything that made her more an object of everyone's attention. Of that, he was entirely certain.

Leaning in, he waited until the very last second to turn his head so that the kiss would land on her cheek. At the same moment, she turned her head, trying to avoid what she'd thought would be a kiss on the lips. And in so doing, their lips brushed. It was the lightest of touches. No more than a whisper of contact. But it stoked the fire already burning in his blood. Damned inconvenient in the middle of a room full of giggling infants.

"Pardon, Miss Crosthwaite. I did not intend to take such a liberty," he said. He stopped short of saying he was sorry for it. He wasn't. Not in the least.

"It was a mishap... of no consequence," she said. "But if you would be so good as to let go of me."

CHAPTER TWO

It was of consequence. Significant consequence. She felt positively breathless from that brief contact. It had been ages since she'd been kissed. And when she had been, it had certainly never felt like that. Heavens, he'd barely touched her and quite robbed her of the ability to breathe properly!

Looking up at him, she took stock. He was quite handsome, but in a rugged way. He did not have the patrician features that one often associated with the aristocracy, of which he was clearly a member. At the very least, based on his dress and bearing, he was among the gentry or he would never have been invited to the assembly. But it was him—not his title, wealth or associations—who drew her gaze and held it. With his squared jaw and broad forehead, she simply could not look away.

“If you would permit me, I should like to have our host make a formal introduction.”

It took her a moment to even comprehend what he'd said. It took longer still to formulate her answer as her mind whirled with it. She wanted to refuse. It had nothing to do with how appealing she found him or even with the fact that they had

shared a kiss, albeit inadvertently. It was that she detested being the center of attention and every eye in the drawing room was trained upon them. Which created another quandary. If she did refuse him, everyone present would witness it and make their own assumptions—namely that she was still pining for Thomas, the man who'd left her at the altar in order to marry her sister. Why, she wondered, did it all have to be so very convoluted?

“Of course. A proper introduction would be lovely,” she agreed with a tight smile.

He let her go then, stepping back from her. It bothered Emma to no end that she found herself immediately missing the warmth of his arms surrounding her. It was foolishness on her part and nothing more. She knew better than to set her hopes or her feelings on a man. Flirting was one thing, and often a pleasure in and of itself, even if one long forgotten. But to think it might ever be more than that was simply creating opportunities for disappointment.

“Ah,” he said. “Our hostess, Lady Bancroft. Would you be so kind as to perform an introduction for myself and this lovely lady?”

The aging Lady Bancroft approached them then. “How delightful it is to see you here, Miss Crosthwaite. May I present to you Mr. Devlin Barrowcliff? He is only recently relocated here after inheriting Woodcrest Hall from a distant cousin, was it?”

“Indeed, Lady Bancroft. He was a distant cousin to my late father,” the gentleman confirmed.

“And Mr. Barrowcliff, allow me to present to you the lovely Miss Emma Crosthwaite. She is the elder sister of Mrs. Thomas Windemere.” The last was uttered in a whisper that hinted at scandal. No doubt the woman was gleefully waiting to inform Mr. Barrowcliff of her past romantic tragedies. Nothing labeled a woman as more fundamentally undesirable than being jilted repeatedly.

Emma’s polite smile became pained. Why was it necessary to introduce her based on how she was connected to her younger sister and her younger sister’s husband? Why couldn’t she be the niece of Mrs. Margaret Churchill or the daughter of the late Mr. Edwin Crosthwaite? Or just simply Miss Emma Crosthwaite? Why did it always have to come back to Alice? And the fact that Emma was still the unmarried one. The older one. *The unwanted one.*

“Alas, I am not acquainted with the Windermers. Nonetheless, Miss Crosthwaite, it is lovely to meet you. Might I escort you into the dining room for some refreshment? I find it to be quite warm in here following the exertions of our little game.”

Did he really have no idea who her sister was? If so, he was more of a novelty than she was. “Thank you, Mr. Barrowcliff.”

“Lady Bancroft?”

Their hostess waved a hand dismissively. “I am quite well, thank you. I shall stay here and supervise these young people lest they get up to mischief. The two of you go ahead.”

When Mr. Barrowcliff held out his arm for her, Emma couldn't refuse it. Placing her hand tentatively on his forearm, she immediately felt that same frisson of awareness, that slight tingle that mimicked all she'd felt when he kissed her.

Ignoring those very unhelpful thoughts, she allowed him to lead her from the drawing room into the dining room where a buffet had been laid. Spread with cold meats cheeses, bits of bread and a bevy of desserts, candied fruits and sweets, it was a truly decadent affair.

“How is it that you are acquainted with Lady Bancroft?” she asked.

“My mother is a distant cousin to her,” he explained. “Another distant cousin—no relation to the former owner of Woodcrest.”

“With so many family connections in Cumbria, did you always know you would one day be residing here one day?” She asked the question with genuine curiosity and also as a way to engage in the necessary small talk. Awkward silences drew attention, after all.

“Not at all. My distant cousin had two sons who sadly passed away before him. I never knew the man or his sons. So my inheritance came quite unexpectedly. Though I must say Woodcrest Hall is lovely and I think I will be quite content to remain there. Are you familiar with it?”

Emma blinked in surprise. Everyone was familiar with Woodcrest Hall. The house was Tudor in style, its red brick facade ornate and quite imposing. But it was the owner, or former owner, who had been such an object of curiosity. The

man had been notoriously reclusive. So much so that she wasn't aware of a single person in Glynneden who had ever met him.

“Yes. I confess to being familiar with its location and having seen it from a distance. And it is, indeed, quite lovely and the surrounding parkland is beautiful,” she managed.

He nodded. “It is. I am unaccustomed to country life. Prior to this unexpected change in circumstance, I had always been a London man.”

“And how are you finding life in Glynneden?” It was inane conversation. The sort of small talk one engaged in at social gatherings for the sake of politeness. Why then was she so fixed on his answers? Why should it possibly matter to her if he loved it in the wilds of Cumbria or if he wanted to flee back to London at his earliest convenience?

He smiled at her, his gaze warm and fixed on her face. “Until recently, I confess to a certain degree of ambivalence. Suddenly, and quite unanticipatedly, I find that life in Glynneden has much to recommend it.”

Emma felt a blush stealing into her cheeks. Was he truly flirting with her? It had been so long since a gentleman had that she found herself quite uncertain. Was she imagining it simply because she wanted it to be true? “Oh. Well, that is—that is lovely then. I am glad you are finding it pleasant here.”

There was no mistaking the flare of interest in his eyes. “As of five minutes past, Miss Crosthwaite, I would call it much more than simply pleasant.”

Definitely flirting, she thought. Oh, dear heavens. Did she even remember how?

Their gazes locked and for the longest moment they just stared into one another's eyes. Emma forgot to breathe.

“Do you live near here, Miss Crosthwaite?”

Clearing her throat, Emma finally managed to turn away. But she felt breathless and trembly. How did he affect her so?

“I live in the village... across from the church. With my aunt, Mrs. Margaret Churchill.”

“And do you accept callers at Mrs. Margaret Churchill's home?”

Emma dared another glance at him. “I haven't, but I see no reason why I should not.”

“In that case, Miss Crosthwaite, might I call on you tomorrow afternoon after church?”

Once again, Emma considered refusing. But that was fear. Fear of being hopeful. Fear of being hurt. Fear of once more being an object of pity or derision. But it was not in her nature to be a coward. And she did very much hope to see him again. “I would like that very much, Mr. Barrowcliff.”

CHAPTER
THREE

Devlin wasn't typically the sort to attend church. As his carriage pulled up in front of the small, gothic structure, he reflected on that. In London, he had almost never gone. But things were different in the country. In their small Cumbrian village, his absence would be noted. Attending at least sporadically was a requirement. And he'd chosen to attend that morning for a very specific reason—it would allow him to maximize his time with Miss Emma Chrosthwaite. After all, her attendance was almost assured. Barring serious illness or injury, to miss church when living directly across the street from it would be quite scandalous.

Disembarking from the vehicle

“Good morning, sir!”

Devlin looked up to see a smallish man with thinning ginger hair and stooped shoulders. “And to you, sir. Have we met?”

“No, we have not, though I daresay we should. I am Mr. Winslow Appleton... and also the local magistrate. I feel it is my duty to welcome you to the area, Mr. Barrowcliff, and to say that we are most happy to have you here.”

The words were polite, pleasant. The man smiled as he spoke them. And yet, Devlin was fairly certain there wasn't an iota of sincerity in them. The man was clearly not happy he was there. Not in the least. "Thank you for that very warm welcome, Squire Appleton. It is much appreciated."

"I couldn't help but notice you were in attendance last night at Lady Bancroft's soiree," the man continued.

"Indeed. It was a most pleasant event."

"And you made the acquaintance of Miss Crosthwaite," the squire observed.

There it was. The crux of the matter. "Indeed, I did. And found Miss Crosthwaite most charming."

Appleton nodded. "She is a charming young woman. Pity about the scandals."

He didn't take the bait. Devil was well aware that if there were scandals in Miss Crosthwaite's past, it was likely insignificant to their acquaintance. He was also fairly certain that the Mr. Appleton would skew the matter in his favor, whatever his ultimate goal was. "I'm certain if it warrants discussion that Miss Crosthwaite will bring it up when I call upon her later today."

The squire's somewhat beady eyes bugged out slightly. "You've been invited to call upon her?"

"I have."

"Miss Crosthwaite does not entertain callers!"

Devlin smiled. There it was. She'd refused the magistrate's attentions. He'd been correct in assuming one thing about Miss Crosthwaite—she was clearly no naive fool. "Perhaps she found me as charming as I found her. I'll bid you good morning, Mr. Appleton. I must find my seat before the service begins."

Stepping away quickly, before the man could latch on to some other reason to continue the conversation, Devlin entered the church. Immediately, he stopped short. Miss Crosthwaite was there. Standing at the end of the pews, she wore a soft blue dress with a bonnet trimmed in matching ribbon. She made quite the charming sight.

As if she'd felt his gaze upon her, she turned her head. Catching sight of him, she smiled before shyly ducking her head and looking away. It wasn't a consciously flirtatious gesture, he was certain, but that did not make it less impactful.

The peeling of bells halted any further study of her as Devlin made his way to his seat. But his awareness of her never wavered.



EMMA'S PULSE WAS RACING. It had been from the moment she'd seen him as he entered the church. All through the service, she hadn't heard a word of the vicar's sermon. Had it not been for her aunt offering a well placed nudge during the parts of the service that required some action on her part, heaven knew what might have happened.

“Whatever is wrong with you?” Margaret demanded in a low whisper, just as the vicar closed the church service. “Has someone said something to bother you?”

She hadn’t told Margaret about Mr. Barrowcliff coming to call. The humiliation if he hadn’t arrived as planned or simply had a complete change of heart would have been unbearable. But now, she had to confess.. “I met a gentleman last night at Lady Bancroft’s assembly... and he asked to call this afternoon.”

“And that’s why you’re so distracted?”

“I’m distracted because he is here,” Emma replied in a low whisper.

At that Margaret’s head came up. “Where? Where is he?”

“Shhh! I do not wish everyone in the church to know that we are discussing him. I am gossiped about enough... And I certainly do not wish for him to know we are discussing him.”

Margaret nodded sheepishly. “Forgive me, Emma. But it is so exciting. A gentleman hasn’t called on you in ages.”

Her aunt was hardly making it better. “I am aware. Part of that is by design. I have never permitted anyone else to call because if I did, I’d also have to permit Mr. Appleton to call, and frankly, I’d rather scrub every stone in this church with tooth powder and a brush.”

Margaret suppressed a giggle by masking it with a cough. “Good heavens, Emma. I know the man is detestable, but this church is deceptively large.”

There were times when her aunt circled the point of a conversation like a hound preparing to sleep. Round and round, and eventually winding up just where they started with no progress made at all. “I didn’t really expect him to keep our engagement. We had a very minor flirtation and I had expected that, after we parted ways, someone would have taken him aside and explained everything to him. Then he would have gone the way of every other man who has expressed an interest in me... elsewhere.”

“Perhaps someone did,” Margaret insisted. “And perhaps he does not care. Which, if I am to be honest, would be a point in his favor. Now, you should take this opportunity to speak with him again. Perhaps take a walk with him. And I shall go home and prepare some refreshments for when the pair of you arrive.”

With that, Margaret rose and exited quickly. And just at the end of the pew, she could see Mr. Barrowcliff waiting to speak with her. Oh, he was so terribly handsome with his dark hair sweeping over that strong brow, and the thick fringe of dark lashes surrounding his green eyes.

“Miss Crosthwaite, how lovely to see you here,” he said.

“And you, Mr. Barrowcliff.”

“It’s a fine day,” he continued. “There is a slight chill to the air, but it is bright and clear. Would you take a walk with me?”

It felt as if a dozen butterflies were taking flight in her stomach. “That would be delightful.”

She rose and placed her hand on his arm. All eyes were on them as they exited the church. It jangled her nerves and left her feeling terribly self-conscious, but she ignored that in favor of being in his company. Still, she would have to tell him why everyone watched them with such interest.

As they exited the church and began walking down the lane in front of it, Mr. Barrowcliff was the first to speak. “Miss Crosthwaite, I must confess to you that I have marriage in mind. My goal is to find a wife. If you have some romantic interest in Mr. App—”

Her shocked laughter cut him off and she realized how rude that was. “Forgive me, Mr. Barrowcliff. The entire reason I entered the drawing room last night at Lady Bancroft’s was an attempt to avoid him. I cannot imagine where you would have gotten the notion that I... well, suffice to say I have no interest in Mr. Appleton, romantic or otherwise. Also, Mr. Appleton already has a wife. A poor creature who has suffered endlessly as an invalid while he—well, suffice to say is not a devoted husband.”

“Ah, I see. So his intentions are quite nefarious. I had suspected as much when he attempted to dissuade me from seeking your company.”

Emma’s steps faltered and her heart stuttered in her chest. “I see. And did he tell you all about my past?”

“No. I didn’t allow him to. And as for your past, Miss Crosthwaite, it is just that. The past. And I mean to look toward the future...I should inform you, Miss Crosthwaite,

that I do have a romantic interest in you. I very much wish to court you formally,” he confessed.

Emma sighed. “I am not opposed to that, but before you make any decisions at all, I must confess something to you. It may not change your opinion or your objective, but I would not knowingly keep such a thing secret.”

He surveyed her face with an expression she could not read. But then he gave a curt nod. “Very well, Miss Crosthwaite.”

“I know that you have taken note of how *interested* others are in our interactions,” Emma began.

“Yes. I have.”

“I was involved in a scandal some years back... through no fault of my own and through no improper behavior on my part. I was betrothed to Thomas Windemere.”

His steps faltered. “Mr. Windemere who is now married to your sister?”

“Quite so,” she admitted. Oh, how she detested this part. She did not want this handsome, eligible man to look at her with pity. “On the morning of our wedding, he—well, he did not come to the church as planned. Instead, he and my sister had eloped to Gretna Green the night before. It was not discovered by anyone until I was here at the church, waiting for him for hours.”

There was no longer any pretense of walking. He simply stopped in the middle of the road. But it wasn't pity she saw in his face when she glanced back at him. It was fury. “He simply

left you without a word? And your sister... Miss Crosthwaite, you have been treated very badly. That the blatant disrespect they have shown you has left you the object of gossip is only adding insult to injury. I am deeply sorry for what you have endured.”

In all the years since, no one had ever been angry on her behalf. They had clucked their tongues sympathetically. They had lamented on her behalf that she might never find someone who loved her so dearly as Thomas loved Alice. She was told how good it was of her to have forgiven them for falling in love while he was betrothed to her. But not once had anyone said they were wrong for doing what they did.

“Thank you, Mr. Barrowcliff. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

Devlin felt like a fool. Walking through the village to the afternoon gathering at the Squire Wilton's home, he carried with him a single rose that he had plucked from the hot house at his own home. Having spent the afternoon with Miss Crosthwaite the day before, he found himself more enchanted with her than he had been even at the ball the night before. And he hadn't thought it possible.

When he finally reached the squire's home on the opposite side of the village, there were several gentleman standing about outside. They were smoking—a habit much frowned upon by the ladies.

Several of them looked at him as he approached, noted the rose in his hand and smirked. So be it. What if he was a man closer to his fortieth year than his thirtieth? There were men twice his age who were constantly on the hunt for a young bride. At least, he thought, he was in pursuit of a woman who was old enough to know her own mind in the matter.

As he approached the house, the doors were swung open wide. The sound of revelry and merriment poured out into the yard and he was simply ushered inside by the throng of people

He saw her immediately. Yet again, she was off to the side, on the edge of the party—present but excluded. Breaking away from all the others who were trying to pull him into an exuberant country dance, he made his way to where she stood.

“Miss Crosthwaite,” he said.

“Mr. Barrowcliff,” she acknowledged.

“I had hoped to see you here today,” he murmured, standing close enough to her to be heard despite the crowd.

“Is that why you are carrying a rose? Because you hoped to see me?”

There was no coyness in her. Just direct and forthright in a way that he found refreshing. “Indeed, it is.” He held the bloom out for her and she accepted it. “There are no thorns. I removed them.”

“Personally?”

He sensed that it was important to her, so he said, “Yes, I did. I chose it myself and prepared it for you myself. It is meant, after all, to be a token that represents just how extraordinary I find you to be.”

She blushed prettily. “I do not think anyone has told me that I was extraordinary... well, ever.”

“That is a travesty, Miss Crosthwaite, and should be rectified... daily.”

At that moment, a somewhat inebriated Squire Wilham came barreling through the room, holding a long stick. Attached to the end of it was a kissing bough, not unlike the

one from the ball two nights passed. The spritely man, with his slightly protruding belly and ruddy cheeks, danced wildly about, spinning in circles. When he stopped, the kissing bough was directly over the head of Jess Stanford and his new bride, Elizabeth. Gamely, the pair of them exchanged sly smiles before Jess kissed her soundly. A loud cheer resounded from the assembled guests and the Squire, with a whoop of laughter, began twirling once more.

Devlin tensed with anticipation. Surely he would not be so lucky as to be given another opportunity to steal a kiss. But no sooner had the thought occurred than the Squire spun one last time and nearly fell over. Gamely, he caught himself at the very last second and the kissing bough now dangled over Miss Crosthwaite's head.

“This is beginning to become a habit,” someone called out. Clearly they had been in attendance the other night.

“Miss Crosthwaite?”

She didn't speak, just gave him a slight nod. With her consent, he leaned in, tipped her face up ever so slightly and fitted his lips to hers. The contact was far too brief— a mere taste of something he wished to sample at leisure. But it was enough to confirm for him that his response to her had not been a fluke, but something much more certain and possibly lasting.



EMMA HAD FELT breathless and trembly the moment that the Squire had begun to twirl about with his famous kissing bough. It was a trick he pulled on the partygoers every year, but she had never fallen prey to it. But then she'd always been standing alone or with her Aunt Margaret at every party. She had never been in the company of a gentleman when he began his shenanigans.

As Mr. Barrowcliff gave her that questioning look and spoke her name, Emma steeled herself. She had no wish to make a fool of herself. Making a spectacle of herself by refusing or by appearing too eager was not something that would be easily forgotten by all those present.

As his fingertips touched her chin, tipping her face up to his ever so slightly, she drew in a deep breath. And the first contact, that gentle brush of his lips against hers, before the settled more firmly, for just a brief second. It was the same as it had been two nights past.

Her heart pounded, her blood raced in her veins, and it felt as though her lungs could not fully expand because her whole body was tense. How did he do this to her? Why did this man have the ability to strike her utterly senseless?

When he drew back, he wore a slightly bemused expression. "These are indeed the most enjoyable parties I have ever attended, Miss Crosthwaite. I am eternally grateful that I have found my way to Glynneden."

Emma couldn't meet his warm gaze any longer. With a shyness that was somewhat unlike her, she ducked her head and looked away. The Squire began dancing about again,

taking his kissing bough to gift another couple with permission to be, at least momentarily, scandalous. But the two of them stood there together, the party swirling around them, but there was a tension between them—an awareness of one another that made it seem as if they were the only people in that room.

“I would like to escort you to the recital at the church tomorrow night... if you would permit me,” he said.

Emma finally looked back at him. She felt strangely hopeful. Perhaps he would finally be the man who could not be dissuaded from her. “I should like that very much, Mr. Barrowcliff. Very much, indeed.”

CHAPTER FIVE

It had been three days since he'd seen her at church. Three days since she had told him the harrowing tale of her betrothed's abandonment of her in favor of her sibling. And in that time, he'd been inundated with callers at Woodcrest Hall. Every matron with a marriageable daughter, from eighteen to an age more in line with his own mother's, had descended upon him. And all of them had spoken of Miss Emma Crosthwaite as though she were some pitiful, hideous creature who was forever unloved and unwanted. It was eye opening to say the least. In the wake of it, he had a much better understanding of precisely what Miss Crosthwaite's life had been like. Ultimately, she had been wronged by far more than simply her sister and brother in law.

Now it was a matter of finding time to pay court to her while fielding all the other young women who were attempting to throw themselves in his path. But, he was now traveling to the holiday celebration at the Windemere's home. That invitation had been much welcomed, despite his feelings about the couple. Indeed, his arrival there was imminent and he could not stop the rush of excitement at the thought of seeing

her again. It stood to reason she would be there, so he had accepted their invitation readily enough.

Devlin was considering doing something quite rash. Something that, to others, might seem quite mad. But he was certain that he and Miss Crosthwaite would suit one another. He was equally certain that if he did not act quickly, some well meaning person would interfere in a way that would prevent that from happening. So he meant to propose to her that very night. If she accepted, they could announce their betrothal before the end of the ball and hopefully halt others' attempts to interfere.

They needn't marry immediately, he reasoned. They could have a long engagement until she felt comfortable with the idea of it, before proceeding. Though he'd be happier if she wished to marry immediately. The sooner they could begin building their life together, the better off they would be. And the sooner he would be able to kiss her again. Kiss her and so much more.

That brief brush of their lips beneath the mistletoe had haunted him. Every night, he'd lain in his bed, staring up at the ceiling and thinking of what it had felt like to have the weight of her pressed against him.

She was an undeniably beautiful woman with her thick chestnut hair and bright blue eyes. Her lushly curved figure was a revelation to him. He'd never been especially attracted to women of any given size or shape. Before he'd married, he had been far from a monk. Yet the women he'd been intimate with had been as varied from one another as women could be.

Hannah had been slight, with a petite frame and pale blonde hair. She'd been lovely, but fragile and delicate in a way that had often made him feel like a brute. The physical aspect of their marriage had faded dramatically, even before she'd become ill. And afterward, it had become nonexistent. Despite that, he'd been faithful to his wife during their marriage. He'd loved Hannah, perhaps not that all-consuming love that poets spoke of, but he was fairly certain that was a myth. If it wasn't, he did not think he was a man capable of it. Some men, he had reasoned, were simply not given to strong emotions.

There had been no one else since Hannah's death. Instead, he'd thrown himself into his work. Then suddenly, he'd become a gentleman of leisure—with a fortune and a country estate at his disposal. And time. So much time. Time to fully realize just how lonely his life had become. And for needs long ignored to reawaken with a vengeance. But he had no interest in bedding a dozen different women. Instead, he'd set his mind to finding one. Just one. A woman that he might share his life with in a way that would lead them both to contentment... and, he hoped, to shared passion.

As he had no intention of having a mistress once he was married, a certain degree of attraction was necessary. What he felt for Miss Crosthwaite was significantly more than that. He'd never met another woman who stirred his blood so, and did so instantly. A pang of guilt assailed him then. He'd loved Hannah. Loved her dearly. And he accepted to some degree that she was the great love of his life and that he would likely never feel that way again. In truth, her death had left him so

hollow he wasn't certain he could love again. But love was not a requirement for contentment. And contentment could certainly be had between them.

He'd taken the carriage to the Windemere's that night, and when it rolled to a slow halt before their home, he was too eager to wait for the driver to let him out. Instead, he opened the door himself and jumped down without even the benefit of the steps. He was too eager to see her.

As he traversed the drive to the Windemere's front entrance, he straightened his waistcoat and coat. He wanted to look his best, to look respectable when he asked her to marry him after less than a week's acquaintance. It would still seem positively mad to anyone on the outside looking in, but Devlin just knew. He *felt* it. There had been few occasions in his life when following his instincts, specifically those that came with such certainty, had ever steered him wrong. This was the right course. The *only* course.

Miss Crosthwaite seemed an imminently pragmatic sort. An offer of marriage from a man whom she was attracted to, compatible with and who was in possession of both a home and fortune, was not something she could easily refuse. It also had not escaped his notice that she was in an unenviable position socially. While his vanity and pride was not so great that he felt he was doing her a service in offering for her hand, there was no denying that marriage would only aid her in eliminating that particular unpleasantness in her life.

As he neared the door, he forced his steps to slow. It would not do to go rushing in wildly and make a spectacle of himself.

Instead, he waited with barely leashed impatience for the Windemere's butler to permit him entry. He was announced then with a very small degree of fanfare and found himself being greeted by his hosts.

"Mr. Barrowcliff, how kind it is of you to grace us with your presence tonight," Mrs. Alice Windemere gushed.

She did not look at all like her sister, he thought. Oh, she was pretty enough, but there was a delicacy about her that Miss Crosthwaite did not possess—not that he found that to be a flaw. Mrs. Windemere looked as though a stiff wind would blow her over, as if she were perpetually succumbing to some ague or other. There was no vitality in her. But he imagined she was stronger than she appeared. That perhaps she relied on her delicate appearance as a way of controlling those around her. She would not have been the first to do so. "Indeed, madame, your invitation was very kind and most welcome. I confess that I have never known the hospitality that I have been greeted with here in Cumbria."

"Indeed, sir," Mr. Windemere said. "We are a warm and inviting lot!"

"Mr. Barrowcliff, there is someone here whom I must introduce you to," Mrs. Windemere insisted. "Or perhaps you've met her already! Miss Sarah Collins?"

"I have not had the pleasure. Is Miss Crosthwaite to attend tonight's festivities?"

Mrs. Windemere's face took on a pained, tight expression. "I'm certain that my sister will be here at some point. It is difficult for her to be much in society. Given her advanced age

and lack of prospects, I think social gatherings often remind her of her unfortunate circumstances.”

He hadn't really spoken to the Windemere's before, but now, having done so, he could see things much more clearly. It was not some accident, or some unexpected development of romantic feelings that had resulted in Miss Crosthwaite being left at the altar. It was very apparent to him that her sister had schemed to make that occur. And now she lorded it over her with superior glee while making her an object of curiosity and pity for others. The deceptively delicate creature before him was quite diabolical.

“Miss Crosthwaite is not so lacking in prospects as you might imagine. Pardon me, but I'm afraid my introduction to Miss Collins will have to wait. I see someone I must speak with most urgently,” he lied. All he really wanted was to get away from her and the venom she directed at her sister.

As he walked away, he noted that the butler entered once more. This time, his announcement of the guest's identity was decidedly less enthusiastic. But when Miss Crosthwaite and her aunt, Mrs. Churchill, entered the room, he wasted no time in approaching her.

“Miss Crosthwaite, might I have moment to speak with you? Perhaps a turn about the room?” He suggested.

“Certainly, Mr. Barrowcliff,” she agreed. “It is very good to see you here this evening. I was not certain you would be in attendance.”

As they stepped away from her aunt, he asked very pointedly, “Were you hopeful that I would be?”

Instantly, she blushed scarlet. “Naturally. You are very good company, sir.”

He smiled. “What a diplomatic answer. I will confess, Miss Crosthwaite, that I came here tonight only in the hopes of seeing you. I would have been terribly disappointed with your absence.”

Her blush deepened. “Mr. Barrowcliff, you flatter me. I cannot imagine that my company would provide such a lure.”

“Then you would be mistaken. And, if you would permit me, I have a very particular question that I would like to put to you.”



EMMA KNEW that whatever he wished to ask her would likely not be the thing that she wanted most. In the days since they had first met, she had allowed herself to indulge in the fantasy that he might actually be interested in her. Even though their acquaintance was brief, she knew that there was something quite unique about him. And about the way she felt when she was in his company.

Her fantasy was a simple one, that he might, given enough time, propose marriage. It was surely nothing more than wishful thinking on her part as she had little doubt that some other young woman in the parish had likely already ensnared the handsome Londoner. If he wished to ask her anything, it was likely for an introduction to some other young woman who had struck his fancy. And it would wound her to her soul,

but she would provide the introduction, shelve her hopes and go on about the business of being a spinster and cautionary tale to other young ladies.

“Of course, Mr. Barrowcliff. Please, ask what you will.”

“Miss Crosthwaite... Emma, if I may?”

She could feel her cheeks heating with embarrassment. “I would be most please for you to have the liberty of my given name.”

“Thank you... Emma, I am a very practical sort of man. And I can only surmise from the interactions that we have had that you are a very practical sort of woman.”

“I like to believe that is true,” she said softly. It was only a matter of time until he essentially told her she was too old for him to seriously court her and while he liked her well enough, would require a younger bride. After all, men wanted to wed young women who could give them children. Not withered old spinsters gathering dust on their shelf. And while she was certainly still within her child bearing years, they were more limited than those of a young bride.

“It may seem very sudden, but I have given the matter a great deal of thought. And I should like very much to ask you to be my wife.”

Emma’s steps faltered. So much so that she would have tripped over her own feet, had he not caught her. “I beg your pardon.”

“It is a proposal of marriage, Miss—Emma. I am asking you to marry me,” he repeated.

She blinked rapidly, staring up at him as she willed the words to make sense. They were, of course, precisely what she had wished to hear from him. They were also the last thing she'd truly had any expectation of. "If this some sort of terrible prank? Are you making fun of me, Mr. Barrowcliff?"

"No. And it pains me greatly that people have been so unkind to you that you could even consider such a thing. I mean every word that I have said to you. I need a wife. And I'd prefer her not to be young enough to be my own daughter and not so silly that a conversation with her will make my head ache."

"Is that why you wish to marry me? Because I am the least objectionable woman you've met?"

"I am doing this very poorly, I fear. I confess, I have not proposed to a woman in many years... I like you. I find you to be incredibly lovely. I enjoy spending time with you. I cannot help but think that, the more time we spend with one another, the deeper those feelings will become—Unless I have misread your interest. If I have, then please forgive me for being impertinent."

Her heart was pounding in her chest. So much so that it was a wonder she could even hear his words. But enough of them had penetrated the fog in her mind that she knew there was only one answer she could give him. "You have not misread my interest. Yes, Mr. Barrowcliff, I will marry you."

"Devlin," he corrected. "My name is Devlin."

"Devlin," she parroted, her voice little more than a whisper.

“If you are amenable, I thought we might announce our engagement tonight. With so many people assembled here, I cannot think of a better opportunity.”

It was all moving very swiftly. But at the same time, it simply had to. There was little doubt in her mind that if they did not see to the matter expeditiously, someone would find a way to sabotage their betrothal. It seemed to her that any time she had a hope of securing a better future for herself, someone would intervene and put a stop to it.

Mr. Devlin Barrowcliff was not the first man to express an interest in her, after all. Simply the first in a very long while. The few others before had found themselves suddenly in a romantic understanding with someone other than her. Or, worse, they had simply stopped calling. They didn't speak to her events. They didn't ask her to dance. And while none of them had given her the cut direct, they had certainly maintained the illusion that they were nothing more than acquaintances. Surely her luck was not that bad? Surely there was not something so intrinsically wrong with her that every man who spent more than a few hours in her company would suddenly find that he would rather be anywhere else than in her company.

She didn't want that to be the case with the man before her. Not simply because he had made her an offer, but because there was something about him which drew her. A kindness and a capability that only enhanced his handsomeness. There was also the fact that she would have a home of her own. *And children.*

Emma felt her blush growing hotter. She was not so naive that she did not understand, at least in the abstract sense, what transpired in the marriage bed. She also was very cognizant of the fact that, if she wanted to have children, that she would have to permit him to exercise his husbandly rights. Everything that had ever been said to her by her few married friends implied that it was something of a chore, something unpleasant that had to be done, like laundry or polishing the silver. But surely it wasn't that terrible? If it was so awful, how did women ever find themselves seduced?

“Emma?”

She glanced up, realizing that she had been lost in her own thoughts. “Forgive me. I—well, I was just a bit overcome by everything. Yes, I am quite amenable to an immediate announcement. But, might I suggest that we marry by license instead of a posting of the banns?”

He surveyed her quizzically. “I am not opposed. But I am curious as to why you would wish to rush. I had assumed that you would want more time to become acclimated to the notion.”

“It would simply offer a longer span for the gossip. And there will be gossip, Mr.—Devlin. I am a confirmed spinster. There are crones who are not considered to be so firmly on the shelf as I am. We will very much be an object of curiosity and I'd prefer, if possible, to mitigate that.”

“I shall ride into Rochester and obtain a common license. Do you wish to marry in the village church?”

No. She did not. After all, it was the very church where she'd been left standing at the altar once before. The very thought of it invoked fear in her heart. Every Sunday in attendance was a test of her resolve. But there was nowhere else and it was the most expedient choice. "Yes. That will do very well for me."

CHAPTER
SIX

Devlin cornered Thomas Windemere in the billiard room. “There you are, sir. I must confess that I have been hoping to speak with you,” Devlin began.

“I am happy to oblige. Is aught the matter?” Mr. Windemere asked.

“No. In point of fact, everything is remarkably well. I should like it if you could make an announcement tonight of a betrothal.”

Windemere smiled broadly. “Oh? And who is the lucky couple?”

“Myself and Miss Emma Crosthwaite,” Devlin answered. The whole while he watched the man for his reaction. He was not disappointed. Windemere flinched.

“Mr. Barrowcliff, may we speak frankly... and privately?”

Devlin nodded. “Of course.”

Windemere indicated a set of French doors that led onto the back terrace of the small manor house. Devlin followed him outside. “I understand, of course, Mr. Windemere, that there is some history between you and my betrothed—”

“There is, indeed, but that isn’t why we need to speak. The truth is, I am very happy that you wish to wed Emma. She certainly deserves a bit of happiness and to not be relegated to the local object of pity. But if you announce your intent to wed her, I fear what will occur. There are people here who have no wish to see my sister-in-law have any sort of happiness. And these people are not above taking steps to sabotage your marriage before it ever takes place.”

“Mrs. Windemere,” Devlin surmised.

“She is certainly one of them. I love my wife but I will own that she has some unreasonable resentment of her sister which I could never make sense of. But she is not alone. Mr. Appleton will be among the ranks of those who will not wish to see you make it down the aisle with her. She rejected him years ago. And has continued to reject him since. I can only advise caution and discretion, sir. If possible, I should recommend that you take Emma and head north to Gretna Green. Elope. It may be the only way that you succeed.”

Devlin was shocked by how frank and forthcoming Windemere had actually been. It was shocking and infuriating. “Why have you done nothing to stop this?”

Windemere sighed heavily, sounding quite exhausted by all of it. “Because any attempt I make to intervene on Emma’s behalf is seen as a betrayal of my wife. As an admission that I have regrets about we had done to her. And it will only deepen the resentment she feels toward her, thus doubling her efforts to ensure that Emma is miserable here.”

“And do you? Have regrets, that is.”

“Every day, sir. Every day. But I have made my bed and will lie in it. She should not have to continue being punished for my mistakes.”

Windemere’s answer was more forthcoming than he had expected. But it also hinted that perhaps the man had more honor than he previously believed. “I will speak to Miss Crosthwaite about this. And if she is amenable, we shall depart tonight. The moon is high and the night is clear. We could be in Gretna Green by morning.”

“Do it, Mr. Barrowcliff. Or the consequences may be greater than you can imagine.”

Windemere went back inside, leaving Devlin to stand on the terrace and contemplate what had just been shared with him. As a rule, he avoided complicated situations. But he could not simply walk away, and even if he could, he wasn’t certain that he wished to do so. If what Windemere had said was true, then he had a duty to protect Emma. The desire to protect her was there, as well, and it unnerved him more than a little just how vital that felt to him.

With that thought pressing on him, he retreated inside the house once more and went in search of his betrothed. He found her seated on the edge of the ballroom, and it didn’t take him long to note the very smug glances that were cast in her direction. It all seemed to be the ladies present—ladies that were often in conversation with her sister, whispering behind their hands while staring pointedly in Emma’s direction.

Boldly and with a bit more fanfare than he normally operated, Devlin approached her. “Miss Crosthwaite, might I

have the pleasure of a dance?”

She appeared startled at first, then her mouth curved in a smile that transformed her from simply lovely to absolutely breathtaking. “I should like that, Mr. Barrowcliff, though I confess, my skills have not been tested in some time.”

“I’m certain you will acquit yourself beautifully,” he assured, holding out his hand to her. When she placed her hand in his, he felt that spark of desire flare to life inside him. Ignoring it, he led her to the dance floor as the musicians struck up the next set. It happened to be a waltz, which was fortuitous. It would allow them to speak to one another without anyone else overhearing.

As he swept her into his arms, twirling her about the dance floor, he said as directly but discreetly as possible, “We should elope, Emma. Apparently there are those here you would conspire against your happiness.”



EMMA STARED at him so intently that she missed a step. Had it not been for his strong arms about her, she would likely have sprawled on the floor. “Who told you?”

“I do not wish to say. Not here. But suffice to say, you are not without allies... unfortunately the degree of aid they can offer you is limited.”

“Thomas,” she surmised. “I fear he is as much a victim of the scheming as I am. Well, not just as much, but certainly he is a victim.”

His lips quirked in response to that. “I daresay he would classify it the same. Are you opposed to an elopement, Emma? A very sudden one that would begin sometime in the next quarter hour?”

Emma blinked in surprise. “We would leave tonight?”

“Yes. I have reason to believe that if we are not already wed before jealous foes discover our plan, then they would stoop to all manner of wickedness to prevent that from occurring. Let us eliminate that opportunity for them.”

Emma glanced past him to where her sister stood on the edge of the ballroom. She was the hostess of the event, and yet she was ignoring all of her guests and simply staring at Emma with the same cold resentment she had always possessed. “Yes,” she said. “I will elope with you tonight.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was a bit like sneaking out of the dormitories when he'd been in school, but Devlin wasn't sure he minded. His life had become very staid, he realized. How long had it been since he'd done something truly adventurous?

As he waited in the bushes next to the terrace, he reflected on that and realized that he had not done anything remotely reckless or adventures in seven long years. Not since before Hannah. In fact, since her death, he'd very much just been going through the motions of his life.

Further rumination was halted by the opening of the door. It wasn't one of the primary rooms of the house where guests were gathering. Rather it was the smallish breakfast room typically used for family. Emma had directed him to it as the easiest way to leave the house without being seen. Peering around the hedge, he saw Emma scurrying across the terrace. She wore no cloak as retrieving one would be suspect, but they planned to stop by her home to retrieve a few things for the journey. For himself, he would do well enough and had a sturdy overcoat in the carriage. It would be even colder in Scotland.

AS SHE DREW NEAR, he whispered her name and she whirled in his direction. “Oh, you frightened me half to death. I thought you would be waiting with the carriage!”

“Mr. Appleton is present tonight. He arrived just as I was exiting the ballroom. I did not wish to leave you alone in case he followed,” Devlin explained. There was something about the man that set his teeth on edge.

“Oh... I hadn't seen him. Thank you. I must confess, he makes me wary. I'm never in his presence that I do not feel... uncomfortable.”

They said nothing more as they skirted the house in the darkness, making for the line of coaches near the stables. His was near the end with a small stand of trees nearby that would offer them cover as they made their way to it. He would get her inside, then speak to the coachman with his instructions. The less time she was out where others might set eyes on her, the better it would be for her reputation and for their plans. He couldn't fathom that anyone would physically try to halt them. After all, Emma was a woman well above the age of consent and had reached her majority some while ago. No one had the right to stop them. But not having the right seemed to have little impact on the people around her when it came to their attempts to ruin her, or simply to make her miserable.

He meant to ask her about that. He wanted to know what the history was behind it all and why her sister and so many others seemed so determined to see her unhappy. It would change nothing for him in the way he felt for her, that he

intended to marry her. But he couldn't very well formulate a plan to correct it all unless he knew the details.



BY THE TIME they reached the row of carriages, she was breathless. Vanity had prompted her to lace her stays far more tightly than she normally would have. Of course, had she even considered the fact that she would be making a mad dash for the Scottish border during the darkest hours of the night, she likely would have had different priorities when dressing.

Devlin opened the carriage door for her and without any real warning, simply scooped her up and placed her inside it. She let out a minor squeak of alarm at being so unexpectedly plucked from the ground. Quickly, she clamped her hand over her mouth, but he only grinned at her. A second later, he disappeared from view, presumably to give instructions to the coachman.

Within minutes, Devlin was climbing inside the carriage with her and they were off. She would leave a note at the house for her Aunt Margaret who had not attended Alice's annual party but had opted to spend the evening with a sick friend. Of course, the friend wasn't really sick. It was a scheme the pair of them had cooked up to avoid spending an evening at the Windemere's estate. Not everyone was completely blinded by Alice's deceptively fragile appearance.

They made the short journey to Emma's home. It was less than a mile. In milder weather she normally walked the distance from her sister's home to her own. But it was much

too cold for that. After slipping inside just long enough to pack a small valise with a change of clothes, she opened her small jewelry box and retrieved the ring nestled inside it. It had belonged to her mother. She doubted that Devlin would have procured one just yet as they had not intended an elopement. *But he had intended a proposal.*

It boded well, she thought, that he'd hoped to marry her under better circumstances. Under normal circumstances. And yet, still he understood what they were up against. That he could see through the machinations of all those around them was exhilarating for her. Even her Aunt Margaret had thought her quite paranoid when she expressed the opinion that her sister habitually plotted against her and compelled others to do the same. She had only ever expressed that sentiment to a few people and most of them had greeted the accusation with skepticism. Others had clucked their tongues at her sympathetically and told her she must let go of the past and stop harboring resentments against her sister. Every criticism or question she posed about her sister's behavior and intentions had only ever been greeted as an expression of sour grapes on her part. But it wasn't simply that he had believed her, he had seen it without her ever having to say a word. There was only one thing, one small hesitation. A comment he'd made while at the ball, had her thoughts in a spiral. But not enough to say no, not enough to give up what was likely her last chance to ever be a bride.

She was not a mercenary woman. Not in the least. But she was a practical one. There was no fortune for her. A small marriage portion had been set aside for her, but there was

nothing for her to live on. At present, her Aunt Margaret supported her entirely, and painful as it was to think of, Margaret would not live forever. When she was gone, Emma would be at the mercy of Alice and Thomas. A more horrible fate she could not fathom.

There was no time to ruminate on all of that right now. If they wished to get away, to be married before anyone could stop them, she had to get moving. With one final look at her mother's ring, she closed the small box and tucked it safely into her pocket. She rather liked the idea of wearing her mother's ring. With one final glance to make sure she He took her bag and stowed it before once more helping her inside.

Once they were in motion, Emma asked the question that had ben plaguing her since their earlier conversation. "You said it had been years since you proposed to a woman... have you been betrothed before?"

The question was met with silence at first, then a small sigh. "I was married once. But it was many years ago that she passed away from a lung ailment. I have not seriously considered marriage again until recently."

Because he'd loved her so. Emma nodded. "I see. But you've considered it now?"

"After Hannah died, Emma, I devoted to myself to work. I was a very sought after solicitor in London and worked often from dawn to dark. There was little enough time to think of anything. It wasn't until this unexpected change in my circumstances presented me with more idle time that it

occurred to me I was actually quite lonely. Can you understand that?”

Better than anyone, she thought. Even in the middle of a crowded ballroom she was always alone. Until he had come along, of course. “I do understand it... but I would be lying if I said it didn’t give me pause. I know that we are not—that this is a very hasty marriage for a multitude of reasons, but I do not wish to live in the shadow of your late wife. I’ve been relegated to the shadows long enough.”

He leaned forward in his seat and the moonlight streaming in through the windows cast one side of his face in stark relief while the other remained entirely hidden in the darkness. “You will not be in the shadows of Hannah or anyone else. It is time for me to move on with my life, and I intend to do so with you. Can you put your faith in that? In me?”

Considering that she was in a darkened carriage with him, utterly alone, and heading off into the night to marry him after less than only a week’s acquaintance, that answer was quite clear. “I have already... or I would not be here with you now.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

She did not sound entirely convinced, Devlin thought. But then she hardly knew him. And she was there, she had consented and was running away with him into the night. If he needed proof that she was committed to the course, it was right in front of him.

In retrospect, he knew it had been a mistake not to disclose the fact that he was a widower. He hadn't been intentionally deceptive, but it was hardly the sort of thing one brought up at a party or other celebratory event. Mentioning the long, slow death of his very young wife dampened the mood considerably.

Of course, there were other reasons not to bring it up. It seemed to encourage the matchmaking and meddling of others into his life. A confirmed bachelor was assumed to be someone who simply had to wish to marry, while a widower was considered to be lonely and, for lack of a better word, easier to manipulate. But it was important to him that she understand that he did not expect her to be Hannah. Nor did he want her to think that Hannah had left some standard behind that she would never be able to live up to.

So he did what instinct prompted. He reached for her hand and pulled her across the expanse of the carriage until she was settled on the seat beside him, closely enough that their thighs touched and he could feel the soft press of her breasts against him. Turning his head, he captured her lips in a gentle kiss. But for all the gentleness, it was undeniably heated.

He kissed her as he'd wanted to do under the kissing bough the night they had met. Moving his lips over hers, he mapped every curve, every dip and contour in her full lips. And only when he knew them completely did he move to deepen the contact. With soft, teasing licks, he coaxed her until she parted her lips for him—an invitation he accepted greedily.

She had been kissed, of that he was certain. But not well, and likely not for a very long time. So he poured every ounce of patience and skill that he possessed into that slow seduction of lips, teeth and tongues. When he felt her tongue moving against his, stroking experimentally, he could have shouted with victory. He settled for simply pulling her closer, angling their bodies so that she was pressed against his chest, her skirts draped over his thighs.

It had been a strategic maneuver, one that gave him greater access to the generous curves of her body. As he continued kissing her, teasing and coaxing a series of pleased sighs and soft moans from her, he allowed his hand to settle firmly on the curve her hip. From there, he moved upward slowly. When he reached the swell of her breast, he paused, his thumb stroking gently over the underside of it but going no further. He wouldn't. Not until he was certain she wished for him to.

Dragging his lips from hers, he pressed a series of kisses to her jawline, along the column of her throat. She arched her back, letting her head fall against his shoulder. And with that movement, she pressed her breast into his cupped hand. There could be no clearer invitation to take things just a bit farther. He was mindful of the fact that they were in a carriage, and she was far too innocent for many of the things he wished to do to her and with her. But innocence aside, she was incredibly passionate and responsive—a fact that he reveled in.

Dragging his lips from the delicate arch of her neck, he pulled back just enough to look at her, to take in the enticing sight of a beautiful woman in the throes of desire. She met his gaze through half lowered lashes, her lips parted and swollen from his kiss. “You are perfect,” he whispered.

“I’m terribly improper at the moment,” she said, her prim words completely at odds with their current situation.

“I happen to like your improprieties very much... thus, you are, indeed, perfect. And as much as I would like to, I will not seduce you in a carriage. I do have some degree of decency and restraint.”

“I am innocent, but hardly ignorant. You are not seducing some unwitting miss. I know precisely what we are about,” she protested.

Devlin smiled. “A fact that bodes remarkably well for our wedding night.”



EMMA COULD FEEL her face heating. There was embarrassment there, certainly, but there was also anticipation. Her experience with kissing had been limited to a few brief kisses with Thomas many years ago. They had been... well, not at all like what she had just experienced. But perhaps that was the difference in being kissed by a man rather than a boy.

“You must think me very fast.”

“No. I think you remarkable. No man, contrary to what our society tries to convince innocent young women of, wishes to make love to a woman who takes no pleasure in it. And the men that do... well, they don't deserve to be called that, do they?”

“I wouldn't know, but it certainly sounds reasonable.”

Emma watched as he stretched out his long legs, propping his feet up on the opposite seat. Then he settled her on the seat beside him so that her head rested on his shoulder. “You should sleep, Emma. We have a long night of traveling ahead and the roads will get rougher the closer we get to the border. This may be your only chance to rest.”

“What about you? This cannot be comfortable for you.”

He smiled. “On the contrary, this feels remarkably good. Sleep, Emma. And I'll doze along with you until we cannot any longer.”

CHAPTER
NINE

As wedding ceremonies went, it was decidedly lacking in any sort of fanfare. Devlin felt a pang of regret at that, not for himself but for Emma. He'd had his church wedding with all the trimmings who he had married Hannah. But Emma would never have that. There were no orange blossoms and no decadent wedding breakfast waiting for her.

“Have you a ring?”

At that prompting from the blacksmith/vicar, Devlin retrieved the ring from his pocket. Emma had given it to him earlier. It had been her mother's, she'd said. Something else for him to have regrets about was that he had not yet provided one for her. But he would remedy that. If she wished to wear her mother's ring, that was all well and good. But she would have one of her own, from him. It was only right, after all.

The Blacksmith, satisfied with that answer, nodded to the other people present—his wife and his daughter. They both stepped forward close enough to hear their answers as he asked the only two questions required. “Are you of marriageable age?”

Devlin nodded. “I am.”

“As am I,” Emma answered.

“And Are you free to marry?”

After their duet of agreement, the blacksmith struck his anvil with a loud clang. “Then I now pronounce you man and wife.

“That’s it?” Emma asked softly.

“Aye, madame. Tis it,” the blacksmith priest answered in his gruff voice.

“We are truly married,” she mused. “It’s so simple! I cannot imagine why anyone would marry any other way.”

The blacksmith gave her a cheeky wink even as Devlin passed the man the reused coin for performing the service. After payment had been exchanged, he took Emma’s hand and together they left the forge/chapel and made their way back to the waiting carriage. There was a coaching inn they had passed on their way that was not too far. They would spend the day and night there before traveling back to Glynneden. It had been a long and difficult journey to get there. There was also the element of anxiety, wondering if anyone was in pursuit of them. Luckily, it seemed as though they had made a clean getaway.

Helping her into the carriage, he climbed in and after and rapped gently on the roof to signal the driver. When the coach rolled forward, he leaned back and rested his head against the wall of the carriage. It had been an exhilarating, exhausting, nerve racking but thoroughly satisfying experience. Emma was his wife.

At that thought, he opened his eyes slightly, glancing at her across the expanse of the coach. She looked tired, as was to be expected, but there was a light in her eyes. Whether it was some sort of delirium brought on by exhaustion or whether she felt the same rush of satisfaction that he presently did was yet to be determined.

“Why are you looking at me so strangely?” She asked.

“Hoping that you will have no cause to regret our hasty marriage and hastier wedding,” he said.

“I think that will be determined by you. Will you give me cause to regret it?”

“I sincerely hope not and will do everything in my power to ensure that you have no regrets at all... but I confess to some curiosity, Emma. Why did you agree?”

“I like you,” she said. “Very much. I enjoy your company, find you charming. And when you kissed me... well, I liked that very much as well. But there are more practical reasons. I am a spinster in a small village where my prospects, and my future security, are quite limited to start, and further limited by the schemes of others. You seem to be impervious to them—Alice and her sycophants.”

It wasn't a blow to his vanity. In truth, he didn't have very much of it. But he had confidence and understood his worth. He also understood there were inherent difficulties in navigating the world as a woman, and very few chances to improve one's situation without the benefit of marriage. “You are remarkably forthright, Emma.”

“Should I not have admitted that there pragmatic considerations?”

“No. I’m glad that you did. It allows me to address an important point of our arrangement... As soon as we return from Scotland, I shall take the necessary steps to ensure that your future is secured, whatever happens between us.”

Emma cocked her head to the side, her expression revealing more of her thoughts than she would likely be comfortable with. Gratitude, relief, but something else. Something that had nothing to do with very pragmatic reasons.

Finally, she asked, “Would you kiss me again?”

Devlin smiled as he levered himself up from the seat and pitched to take his place beside her. Without hesitation, he pulled her into his arms. And against her lips, he whispered a promise, “Emma, I’ve thought constantly about kissing you since our little mishap beneath the mistletoe.”

She ducked her head, a bit shyly. “So did I... Even when I was certain it would never happen again.”

“To answer your question, yes, Emma. I will kiss you again. Every day. Several times daily, in fact.” Then he granted her request.

CHAPTER TEN

Every time he kissed her it was like being transported to a different world. A world where all of the pain, humiliation and loneliness she had endured for the last seven years simply disappeared. She could think of nothing but him, nothing but the way he made her feel. And she reveled in that.

Emma had never thought of her self as being a particularly sensual person. But perhaps that was because she had never encountered anyone who awakened her senses in quite the way that Devlin did.

Like the kiss they'd shared before, the heat of passion quickly flared out of control. She found herself clinging to him desperately. Her fingers twisted in the fabric of his coat as she pressed herself shamelessly against him. And heaven help her, he seemed just as eager. His hands roamed over her body, skating along her flesh with a whisper light touch... and each time he found a sensitive spot, a place that made her gasp unconsciously, he would linger.

So many feelings, so many sensations. The hard press of his body against hers, the rasp of his whiskers on her skin, and the strange heat and tension that had begun to build inside her

—all of them simply left her reeling. This was not at all what others had told her to expect. The things he made her feel were not something to be endured, but something to be embraced.

His hands came up, releasing the buttons of her pelisse, his fingers brushing against her breasts through the layers of her clothing. Suddenly she resented those layers. She would happily have ripped every last one from her body just for the sake of feeling his hands on her bare flesh.

As if he'd read her mind, he tugged the bodice of her dress down until the swells of her breasts above her stays and chemise were visible. He made short work of those as well, each of those layers peeled back until he was touching her in a way she had never imagined. It was a revelation. She hadn't known she was capable of feeling such things, of being swept away by carnal hunger.

And then, without warning, the carriage jolted to a halt. The sound of raised voices from outside could be heard and they were all demanding to see her.

Devlin quickly straightened her clothes. "It looks as though we have been found. Your sister set the hounds on us."

"They can't do anything... Can they? We are married."

"We are technically, but someone could challenge it. They could file for an annulment but there are no grounds. It would simply be difficult, arduous and embarrassing for everyone involved."

Emma grimaced. Those were all accurate description of everything in her life from the time her sister had decided to

wreak havoc on her. “So my normal every day existence, then.”

His lips twisted wryly. “What *was* your normal every day existence. That is very much in the past now. Everything is about to change, Emma. Everything.”



“MISS CROSTHWAITE? Miss Crosthwaite, what has this blackguard done to you?”

The voice belonged to Mr. Appleton. Devlin felt a flash of temper. Of course, it would be him. The man was an utter villain. He’d intentionally made Emma’s life a misery for having the temerity to reject his dishonorable advances.

“Remain here. I will address them and then, if they still demand to speak with you, it will be at your discretion to do so. No one, Emma, will force you to do something you do not wish to do,” he assured her. And whatever was required to make it happen in just that way, he would do.

Opening the carriage door, he climbed down and met the group of men who were gathered in the roadway. Mr. Appleton was there, along with Thomas Windemere. Of course, he understood Windemere’s presence. Had the man not gone in search of his wife’s sister, there would have been questions. Jess Stanford was there, as well as another gentleman whom he did not recognize.

“What is the meaning of this?” Appleton demanded.

“I should think that quite clear, sir. Emma Crosthwaite and I have married... across the border in Scotland, but it is valid nonetheless. And I can assure you she was not coerced into this in any way.”

Appleton blustered. “Are we just to take your word for it, Mr. Barrowcliff? You are a stranger to this area, a man whose character is entirely unknown to us.”

Devlin’s eyes narrowed. “And yet your character is above reproach even though you have pursued Emma for dishonorable purposes for years. Even to the point of sabotaging any other potential courtships.”

“That is a lie!” Appleton insisted, but it rang hollowly to everyone gathered. No one else chorused his immediate denial or came to the man’s defense.

“We can put the question to Emma, if you like,” Devlin suggested.

“That will not be necessary,” Thomas interjected. “If you say that you have married her, and Emma was not an unwilling participant, then we shall leave the matter as is. Appleton?”

Mr. Appleton remained quiet, glaring at him with an intensity that certainly belied his denial. “I would hear it from Miss Crosthwaite’s own lips.”

“Mrs. Barrowcliff,” Devlin corrected.

“We shall see,” Appleton snapped.

Devlin’s temper, normally fairly even, flared hotly. “Dishonesty is not my purview, Mr. Appleton. If you wish to

question my honor or integrity again, sir, we may address it by choosing our seconds.”

Appleton drew back, clearly not having expected it to escalate so quickly. But Thomas Windemere was once more the voice of reason. “Let us not be hasty, gentleman. There is no need for violence. We were in pursuit not to halt a marriage or to impugn your honor, sir. We came merely to insure that this was a well considered decision and not an impulse that might not be followed through upon. That is all. So long as the marriage has taken place, it is no longer our right or duty to interfere.”

At that point, Devlin opened the carriage door and held out a hand to Emma. “If you would, Emma, please assure the gentlemen gathered here that we are indeed married and it was by your choice.”

She placed her hand in his and alighted from the carriage with all the grace and regality of a queen. Standing at his side, she didn’t remove her hand from his but kept it there as she faced the men who had come after them. “We are married. And I was very much a willing participant. I could not have envisioned a better outcome for myself than to be married to Devlin.”

“Then that is more than good enough,” Windemere said. “And I bid you felicitations on your marriage. Appleton?”

The other man did not offer any such supportive comment. Instead, he whirled his mount and headed back in the direction from whence he’d come, back toward Glynneden.

“I had not anticipated his reaction would be quite so... intense,” Windemere observed. “You’ve made an enemy, Mr. Barrowcliff,”

Of that, Devlin had no doubt.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They had reached Woodcrest Hall by mid afternoon. But they were so exhausted, they both simply fell into bed. Separately. When Emma awoke, it took her a moment to reconcile her surroundings. She'd had a moment of panic, at first, in the very unfamiliar bedchamber. But as the memory of all that had passed had come slowly back to the forefront of her mind, she'd had a moment to look around her and actually take in the chamber.

It was well appointed. The Tudor style of the home carried over into the bedchambers as well, and the room had darkly paneled walls with heavy furnishings. But it had its own kind of loveliness. The box bed was quite snug and cozy. As the fire was beginning to die down, that was much appreciated.

A soft knock sounded on the door. But it wasn't the door to the corridor. It was the door that connected her chamber to Devlin's. Her heart began to thump rapidly in her chest. "You may come in."

The door opened and she saw him standing there holding a candle in one hand and a plate of food in the other. "I raided the larder. No doubt the housekeeper will give me very

disapproving looks tomorrow. But it was well worth it. The bread is fresh and the ham is delicious.”

He walked in and placed the food and candle on a table before the fireplace. Then he squatted down before it and stoked the fire back to life until it blazed cheerily. But he didn't get up. He stayed there, facing the fireplace. “Why don't you don your wrapper and join me for a bit of refreshment? I know you must be famished.”

She was. In point of fact, her stomach was rumbling to the point of humiliation. Reaching for her wrapper, which was draped over the end of the bed, she shrugged into it and tied it tightly. Getting to her feet, she padded over to the table and settled into one of the well upholstered arm chairs that flanked the table. “I am quite hungry. Thank you for thinking of it.”

He glanced back at her. “Isn't that what I'm supposed to do now? Think of you and see to your needs?”

“I rather thought that is what we are supposed to do for one another,” she replied.

His lips quirked up in a slight smile. “So it is. Eat, Emma. I'll get the wine.” With that he disappeared through the door once more, and returned only a moment later with a bottle and a pair of glasses. Placing them on the table, he removed the cork from the bottle and poured a generous portion in each one. “It is a celebration. Our very private, very early morning wedding breakfast.”

“Is it morning?”

“One o’clock,” he answered. “I had thought to let you sleep, but reason that as hungry as I was, you must be also.”

“I’m glad that you did.”

He seated himself across from her and took a sip of his wine before tearing off a hunk of the bread. “We must talk about Mr. Appleton. He will not go away quietly.”

“Oh, I’m certain of that. If his own marriage never halted his pursuit of me, I cannot imagine that mine would halt him.”

“No. It will not. I have no intent to keep you sequestered here, but in light of his apparent anger, I think it would be wise that you remain close to the house unless I am with you or unless you have the escort of at least a pair of grooms... at least temporarily.”

“I concur. I’ve always made it a point never to put myself in a position where he might have an opportunity to corner me while I am alone... I made that mistake once and had it not been for my Aunt Margaret’s arrival, I hate to think what might have happened.” Glancing up to see how he reacted to that confession, she could see a muscle working in his jaw and the quiet fury burning in his gaze. But she knew instantly that it was not directed at her.

“I will not force you to do anything that you do not wish to do, Emma. I promise you that. Married or not, your body is your own and it is entirely at your discretion to share it with me or not.”

Emma nodded. “Well, it’s good that my decision is already made. It is technically still our wedding night, is it not?”

He was silent for a moment, surveying her carefully. “You are certain?”

“Do I strike you as a woman who does not know her own mind?” She asked.

Devlin smiled. “Indeed, you do not. It is one of the things that drew me most to you... well, that and a kissing bough.”

Emma smiled, and that smile turned into a laugh. She couldn't quite help it. The way they had met truly had been ridiculous. And it dawned on her in that moment just how long it had been since she had laughed, truly laughed. Since meeting him, she'd smiled more, laughed more than she had in years.

But her laughter faded as quickly as it began. Devlin had leaned across the table, capturing her lips in a kiss that seared her to her very soul.



THE SOUND OF HER LAUGHTER, the intimacy of their current situation, and the awareness he'd had for her from the moment of that first kiss had all come together. He hungered for her in a way he had never known. And she'd just informed him that he could have her, that he could kiss her and touch her and bring them both to that moment of perfect pleasure.

Without breaking the kiss, he rose, pulling her up with him. His hip bumped the table, wine spilling everywhere. He let it. He wouldn't have let go of her in that moment for anything.

It was different from their previous kisses. Because it was more than a kiss. It was a prelude to all that would come after. Wrapping his arms around her, pressing her body against his, he savored the softness of her lush curves, the way her body fit to his. It wasn't simply that it had been so long since he'd held a woman in his arms, it was that no woman had ever felt quite so right in his arms. And despite her innocence, she responded to his kiss with a passion that only fueled his own.

Breaking the kiss, he scooped her up, holding her to his chest and she let out a squeak of protest. "I'm too heavy!"

"You most certainly are not. The day I cannot carry you to bed is the day I do not deserve to have you there," he said. He spared a glance back at the box bed in her chamber. "And I haven't a hope of fitting in yours."

She glanced over her shoulder at the bed. "I should say not. It's a foot shorter than you are."

"Close," he agreed, as he angled them through the door to his bedchamber. He didn't stop until he reached his bed and deposited her on it. Without hesitation, he stripped his shirt off over his head and tossed it to the floor. He didn't remove his trousers. Not yet. For now, it was about her—about Emma and giving her all the pleasure that he could. *Begin as you mean to go on.*

Climbing onto the bed with her, he stretched out next to her, looking down at her. Lifting his hand to the sash of her wrapper, he slipped the knot free. The heavy velvet parted instantly, falling away to reveal the simple lawn chemise she wore beneath it. The fabric offered only a thin veil over her

body and the enticing shadows beneath. But he would not simply fall on her like a clumsy lout.

Kissing her again, placing feather light kisses over her lips, her jawline, the delicate shell of her ear, he felt her shiver against him. Instantly, he knew it had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Trailing those kisses down her neck, to the soft arc of her collarbone, he peppered those kisses with nips and licks. Committing every sigh to memory, every soft sound of surprise and pleasure, he set himself eagerly to the task of discovering what pleased her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Emma couldn't think. She couldn't even form thoughts much less words. The maelstrom of sensations he'd stirred within her was a revelation. That she was even capable of such mindless passion was quite the shock. She had not thought herself capable of such a thing.

With every kiss, with every touch of his hands on her body, it became more difficult to contain herself. Her lips parted on a soft cry as his hand closed over her breast. It was like nothing she had ever felt—nothing she had ever dreamed possible. Each exquisite sensation blurred into the next until she was mindless with it.

At some point, her chemise was stripped away. She didn't even notice. But she was fully aware of his hand skating along her inner thigh as he continued to lavish attention on her breasts, kissing one and then the other. When he drew one taut peak into his mouth, her hands dove into his hair, holding him to her as her neck arched and she cried out.

But if that had been shocking, it could not compare to what she felt when he cupped the mound of her sex, stroking it with exquisite gentleness. It was the most natural thing in the world

to simply part her thighs for him, to give him freer access to touch her when his touch elicited such undeniable pleasure.

“Have you touched yourself, Emma?”

That question was uttered in a low whisper against her ear. Emma wanted to deny it, but even as the lie came to her lips, she could not utter it.

“Do not be embarrassed... there is no shame between us,” he continued. “I only want to know if this pleases you. Every person is different in what sort of touch they will need to reach their peak... Gentle or hard, slow or fast. I only want to know what it is you need.”

“I cannot say,” she admitted softly. “This—the way I feel with you—is so different that I just do not know.”

His lips curved in a soft smile. “Then we shall discover it together.”

Before Emma could even fully understand what he meant, he'd begun kissing her again. Only this time he didn't stop at her neck, or even her breasts. His lips moved gently along her ribs, down to her navel. And then he kissed her belly just below it. But when she felt him kissing her intimately, his lips pressed to that place where his hand had been only moments before, she could do nothing. The air seized in her lungs and her whole body drew taut with shock—but also with pleasure.

The gentle way he kissed her, his lips and tongue moving over her in such a way that she could do nothing but shiver and tremble. Inarticulate words and sounds fell from her lips as the tension mounting inside her coalesced into something so

powerful, so undeniable, that she could do nothing but give herself up to it entirely. When that tension snapped, her body quaked and she cried out sharply with the waves of pleasure that ebbed and flowed deep within her.



DEVLIN SAVORED the taste of her on his tongue. Every soft moan or harsh cry was like the sweetest song to his ears. He would have liked to bring her to that shattering peak once more, but his own need was too great to delay for even a moment longer. Moving up the bed, her parted thighs cradled his hips as he settled between them.

As gently as he could, he began to ease into her, one slow and agonizing inch at a time. It had been so long. But he recognized that it was different. *She was different.* It wasn't about driving to the inevitable release. It was about awakening her desire, about sharing that most intimate connection with her.

She tensed beneath him, a soft hiss of pain escaping her parted lips. Instantly, he stilled—waiting for some indication that she had acclimated to the unfamiliar intrusion. When she relaxed once more, he continued. This time, there was no impediment, no need to stop. He could sink fully into the welcoming heat of her.

Devlin's jaw clenched as he struggled for control. Every muscle in his body was tensed as he set the rhythm. He could have shouted with joy when she matched it, arching her back and lifting her hips to meet each thrust. When he could think,

when there was even a hope of forming coherent thought again, he would likely utter a very sacrilegious prayer of thanks for her very passionate nature. But for the moment, every ounce of his will and intellect was directed at not spilling himself like an untried boy before she found her pleasure once more.

Hooking his hand behind her knee, he hitched it slightly higher. Within seconds, she was trembling again, hovering on the brink. Quickening his pace, when she tumbled over the precipice, he followed instantly.

Collapsing on the bed, his forehead pressed to hers, he managed, just barely, to support his weight on his arms to avoid crushing her. He breathed raggedly and shuddered in the aftermath of his own release.

“Well, I certainly understand now why women find themselves seduced into ruin,” she mused.

He hadn’t the strength left in him to laugh, but his lips did quirk upward. “We’ve barely scratched the surface, Emma. There are untold pleasures left to explore.”

Her fingers trailed over his skin, caressing him with featherlight touches. Unbelievable, he felt his body stir. But where the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak and he knew better than to attempt anything further. At least for a bit. Instead, he savored those touches for what they were—affection in the wake of shared passion and pleasure.

Rolling to his back, he pulled her against him, tucking her in at his side. “We still haven’t had dinner,” he mused.

“It will keep a bit. I’m not willing to get out of this bed... not just yet. When a moment is so perfect, it seems a shame to interrupt it.”

“So it does,” he agreed, wrapping a strand of her hair about his finger and testing the silken texture of it. “I’d be content to never leave this bed again. We could take on a truly hedonistic existence and have our meals served to us in bed... Do nothing but indulge all of our passions together.”

“We would likely grow very fat... Or I certainly would,” she mused. “Alice often said I could look at food and grow fatter.”

“Your sister is a jealous cat,” he remarked. “She’s plotted and schemed and done everything in her power to make your life a misery.”

“Oh, I know all that. But she is still my sister. And I love her despite all that... even if I do not like her over much.”

“And Mr. Windemere?” He hated the note of jealousy in his voice. It wasn’t that he thought she might be unfaithful. Despite their short acquaintance, if he knew nothing else about Emma, he knew that her morality was quite firm and unwavering.

“I feel sorry for, Thomas, honestly. I think he made a terrible decision and will likely pay for it throughout his days. I am eternally grateful that I did not end up married to him. I do not think we would have made one another very happy at all... and I wouldn’t be here with you. I would not trade that for anything, I think.”

Devlin smiled contentedly and drifted to sleep still holding her in his arms.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

“What do you mean it is out of your hands’?” Alice demanded. She did not look very much like the pale, sickly and frail woman most of their local society thought her to be. Her face was flushed with fury and she paced back and forth with a long, deliberate style rather than the falsely delicate, mincing steps so often used in public.

Thomas Windemere looked at his wife and, not for the first time, though she was quite mad. Her unreasonable animosity toward her sister was so much more than the jealousy he had once thought it to be. It ran through her entirely, all the way to the bone. She hated Emma and as far as he could tell, Emma had never done a thing to warrant it.

“I mean that by the time we had caught up to them, they had already been to Gretna Green, spoke their vows before the Blacksmith, and were returning home—to his home, I presume. Thornwood Hall.”

Alice let out a shriek of pure rage. “That isn’t supposed to happen! She’s not allowed to have a husband!”

“Why? Why is she not allowed to have all the things that every other woman in the world wants? What has Emma done

to you that you despise her so?” He demanded.

“She exists,” Alice snapped. “All I heard growing up was how perfect Emma was. She was polite, she was pleasant, she caused no trouble for anyone, she was helpful, she was smarter, she was prettier—she was everything that I should aspire to be! And until now, until she’d managed to ensnare a wealthy and landed gentleman as a husband, I was the one considered to be aspirational. I was the one who was envied and emulated!”

“Then all of this... even your persistent pursuit of me, was nothing but stupid rivalry and your own childish vanity?” Pausing, waiting for her to deny it, a sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. “Did you ever love me at all, Alice? Or did you only want me because of her?”

She shrugged. “What does that matter? Love! We are all surely too old now to believe in such nonsensical things. I have been a faithful wife to you, and that, husband, is more than many men will get.”

“But no children,” he said. “Because while you aren’t sharing anyone else’s bed, you aren’t sharing mine either.” She had barred him entrance to her bedchamber years ago and had not altered her stance since then. She wanted no children. To even consider something that would ruin her figure was an anathema to her.

She rolled her eyes heavily. “Must we have this argument again? Isn’t enough that you failed in the simple task of preventing Emma from running off with that man?”

“I don’t think anyone could have prevented it,” Thomas mused. “They appear to be something you will never be, Alice. Happy. Happy and, if not in love yet, certainly falling in love. In truth, I envy them that. Not begrudgingly, of course. Unlike you, I am capable of being happy for another human being to have found something so grand even if I cannot have it for myself.”

With that, Thomas walked out. He ignored the sound of crashing glass as she hurled something in the direction of his departure. Thankfully, he’d had the good sense to close the door behind him. Alice would be in a temper for days. And he... well, he was heading to London. He’d get a set of rooms for himself and spend the Season in town, far from his shrewish wife.



ALICE WAS BREATHING HEAVILY. The Staffordshire shepherdess was lying in broken shards on the floor and still her fury had not abated. Moments later when a maid entered the room to sweep up the mess, she greeted the girl’s entrance with an icy glare. “Send someone to fetch Mr. Appleton—no. Have the carriage readied and I will go to him. And say nothing to my husband. If he discovers where I’ve gone, you’ll be tossed out without a recommendation. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll have the carriage brought round,” the girl said, bobbing a curtsy before departing with her broom and bucket.

Not bothering to go to her room, Alice retrieved a serviceable woolen cloak from the hall by the kitchen. It was what the maids used when they had to go outside for any reason during the winter. The last thing she wanted was another confrontation with Thomas. He was so missish about everything. Love. What nonsense!

There were only two days to Christmas. Two days until they would all be in church together and she would have to see her sister glowing with happiness. And she would have witness the rush of congratulations and felicitations from all their acquaintances. It was not to be borne.

Appleton would help her though. There was nothing he wanted so much as he wanted Emma. That Emma found him so distasteful was likely part of her appeal. He was a perverse little man. She had little doubt that Appleton would be unsuccessful in any attempt to force himself on Emma. Her sister reviled the little man. But he didn't have to be successful. It only had to appear as though Emma had been unfaithful. No newly married couple could survive such a blow to their burgeoning relationship.

It was only a short drive to the other man's estate. He lived but a mile from them, after all. When the carriage slowed, she was already on her feet, waiting for the driver to open the door.

She climbed down and marched decisively to Appleton's door. When his butler opened the door for her, she did not wait to be asked in but marched past him to Appleton's study. She

knew where it was. After all, it wasn't the first time they had colluded together.

When she burst in, Appleton rose, clearly in a temper. "You have some nerve!" He shouted. "How dare you burst in here uninvited!"

"Do you or do you not still want my sister?" She didn't shout and demand with Appleton. That wasn't the way. He was such a small little man that making him feel threatened in any way would not work to her benefit.

"I'm not certain, now. Now that she's with *him*," he answered. "Emma's innocence was one of the things that made her so appealing."

Alice felt a mild degree of disgust for him. But then she felt that for all men, it was simply intensified with Winslow Appleton. "The very thing you wish to take from her is the thing you found most desirable about her?"

"Do you honestly care? I cannot believe you would suddenly develop some sort of sisterly concern for her when you have done naught but plot against her for the majority of your lives." The observation was uttered with a dismissive sneer.

"No. I have no concern for her. I'm here because I want you to have what you desire most—I propose to visit my sister tomorrow. On the pretext of wishing her well in her marriage, of course. But I shall impose upon her to come into the village with me a pay a call on our poor Aunt Margaret who is simply beside herself over the abrupt elopement. And when I do, you will be waiting for her."

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I loathe her,” Alice replied with all the simplicity and conviction she could. “I loathe the very ground she walks upon. And I will not stand for her to be happy, for her to have married so well and to be my equal socially. Emma must be put in her place... by any means necessary.”

Appleton looked at her for a moment. Then he smiled, showing his too small teeth and his very red gums. “Make some excuse about needing to stop by the chandler’s shop. There’s an alley there you may park in front of and I will be waiting for you there.”

“She cannot know that I arranged it. You will not betray me or you will pay dearly for it,” Alice warned him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, my dear. After all, no one knows how vicious you can be as well as I... unless it’s my poor invalid wife upstairs. How did the accident occur again? The two of you were simply walking along and she fell... down a flight of stairs. With no help at all from you.”

“It’s what you wanted,” Alice snapped. “Do not think to hold it over my head now.”

“If only you’d managed to kill her instead... then I’d be free of her and I could have made Emma my wife. Carried her off to Scotland and forced her to speak the words before the blacksmith myself.”

“You could have ended it yourself,” Alice mused. “A pillow over her face. A touch too much laudanum in her tea. There are ways, Mr. Appleton. The truth is, you like the

freedom you have to rut your life away with low women without the pressure of any of them excepting marriage. Your invalid wife is finally an asset to you. Tomorrow morning, Appleton. We shall be in front of the chandler's shop at eleven."

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Emma stared at her sister with confusion and suspicion. When she'd been informed there was a caller that morning, Christmas Eve morning, the very last thing she'd expected was that Alice would have come to visit. As with all things related to Alice, it was quite suspect.

“Good morning, Alice. It was very nice of you to come all the way to Thornwood Hall,” Emma stated. “Would you care for tea?”

“No, thank you, Emma. I simply had to come and ascertain for myself if the rumors are true. You are married to Mr. Barrowcliff now?”

“Yes. We are *legally* wed,” Emma answered. “All the details have been attended to.”

Alice leaned forward and whispered, “Has the marriage been consummated?”

Emma could feel herself blushing, to which her sister only laughed.

“Nevermind,” Alice observed, “I can see that it has... While I did come here to be certain of your safety and

willingness in this escapade, I've come for another reason, as well, Emma. Aunt Margaret is quite beside herself. She feels very put out with you that you would marry in such a havycavy manner. It hurt her feelings desperately that she did not get to attend your wedding.”

Emma had worried over that since their return from Scotland two days earlier. She'd sent a note to Margaret but there had been no response. “Is she terribly angry?”

“She called on us yesterday,” Alice explained. “And while I do not think I would consider her angry, I do believe she is quite hurt. It would not be remiss of you, Emma, to pay her a visit and at least offer some sort of explanation.”

“I will see her tomorrow after church,” Emma decided.

“I would not. You know she always has people over for tea afterward... Just so she can ply them with that wretched fruitcake Mrs. Stephens gifts her every year. I must go into town. There is an issue with the chandler. He's overcharged us several times now and it simply will not stand. If you like, you may ride into the village with me, see Aunt Margaret, and then the driver can return you home afterward.”

Emma felt a frisson of unease. But if her Aunt Margaret was truly that put out with her then seeing her and setting things to rights was the only option. “Let me get my cloak.”

Alice laughed. “Sister, you are now the mistress of this house. You do not fetch and carry for yourself. Call a maid and have them get it for you.”

Emma shook her head. "I'm not quite used to that yet. Besides, I need to leave a note for Devlin telling him where I have gone. If he returns from his trip to Carlisle and I am not here, he may worry."

"Ah to be newly married," Alice mused. "Fine. Go on then. I shall be awaiting you in the carriage."

Emma rushed upstairs. She dashed off a note very quickly and then carried it into Devlin's room and propped it on his washstand. Afterward, she donned her cloak, grabbed her muff and left the house to join her sister in the carriage.

When the footman helped her into the conveyance, she settled on the seat opposite her sister. She could feel Alice staring at her, but her sister's expression was inscrutable. As if realizing that she was being a bit too intent in her study, Alice suddenly donned a bright smile. "It's quite chilled today, but at least the snow has held off a bit longer. I fear we may have a blanket of white by this time tomorrow."

Alice had never made small talk in her life. "Alice, you've barely had a civil word for me in years," Emma pointed out. "Why are you suddenly having such a change of heart?"

"I haven't... but you must admit that it was terribly awkward since I am married to the man you were betrothed to! I am hoping that, now you are married as well, we might finally put the past behind us entirely."

Emma felt a moment of relief. If that was truly all that had kept them apart for so long, that was wonderful to finally now be on equal footing. But it was Alice, and nothing she said was

ever to be taken at face value. “I harbor no grudge or ill will. I have only ever wanted for you to be happy, Alice.”

Alice’s smile tightened. “Of course. I know that. But others—well, gossip is a dreadful thing.”

They fell quiet after that, making the short journey into the village in silence that, while not exactly comfortable, was at the very least not a misery.

Entering the village, Emma sighed. The carriage slowed in front of the chandler’s shop. “Wait here for me, Emma, and when I return, we will go together to visit Aunt Margaret.”

Emma thought her sister’s behavior quite odd. But, she reasoned, they were in uncharted territory. It had been a very long time—seven years, in fact—since they had been on any sort of equal footing socially, financially or maritally. No doubt Alice was uncertain of how to proceed. After all, it would be difficult to bully someone when they had equal power and cachet.

It hadn’t been more than a moment when the carriage door was yanked open. “That was very—” Emma broke off abruptly. It wasn’t Alice standing at the door of the carriage. It was Mr. Winslow Appleton. In his hand, he held a pistol which he pointed directly at her.

“Get out of the carriage, Emma, and do not even think to scream,” he said. “There is no one about to hear you in any regard. The chandler has closed his shop, along with almost everyone else in the village, for the holiday. It’s just us.”

“Alice,” she murmured, “what have you done?”

“Your sister has betrayed you... again,” Appleton said. “Come with me, Emma, or pay for your refusal with your life.”

“If you shoot me, then you will never get what you want,” she pointed out.

“Then I’ll shoot him. This poor driver, simply doing the work your sister pays him so very little for—and his blood would be on your hands.”

He meant it. Emma could see the truth of that in his eyes. “I will come with you, but there is no way for this to end well, Mr. Appleton. If you harm me, Devlin will have justice for it.”

“I’ll only hurt you if you make me, Emma. For now, I simply mean to have what you’ve denied me for so many years... you’re no longer a virginal spinster. I’m certain you know precisely what I want.”

She did know, and that only made it worse. “He will see you dead for it.”

“Only if you tell him... and I have the feeling you will not. The shame would be too great. It’ll just be our little secret,” he said with a leering smile.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Devlin had returned from Carlisle where he'd purchased a pearl and garnet parure to gift Emma for Christmas. There were also a selection of new dresses that would be delivered for her, but not until well after Boxing Day. Upon his return Emma had been gone and the note she'd left for him on his wash basin had left him feeling unsettled. While he hadn't told her she should not go anywhere with her sister, it had honestly never dawned on him that she would be asked to. He could not help but feel that this was all one of Alice Windermere's plots.

Immediately after reading the note, he'd a fresh horse saddled and was heading into the village. It was while he was on that road, he saw a familiar cart. Margaret Churchill was heading in the direction of Thornwood Hall.

"Mrs. Churchill," he called out.

"Mr. Barrowcliff! How fortuitous. I was just on my way to see you. I wished to inquire if Emma needed me to pack the remainder of her things for her, given that your marriage was so... abrupt."

There was clearly censure there, and it was likely well deserved. But he hadn't the luxury of time to deal with it. "Madam, have you seen either Emma or Mrs. Windemere? I fear that something terrible has happened. She came to call and Emma left with her, ostensibly to call on you."

Mrs. Churchill blanched. "I fear you are right. Alice knew that I intended to call on the pair of you today. There was no need for her to take Emma to my home. Please hurry, Mr. Barrowcliff. I fear that Alice's jealousy will only have been piqued by your marriage to her sister." She hadn't even finished that plea before he had nudged his horse into a gallop.

It was only a short ride to the village, but one that he made in record time. He could see the carriage parked in front of the chandler's shop on the way into the village. Immediately, reined in his mount and approached the driver who appeared so ill he actually looked green.

"Where is my wife?" Devlin demanded.

The driver began to stammer. "I didn't know... I didn't know, sir. I'd never have hurt Miss Emma—pardon, sir, Mrs. Barrowcliff."

"Who hurt her?" Devlin snapped.

"Mr. Appleton, sir. She went off with him a few minutes ago. That way," he pointed to a narrow alley that ran along the side of the shop. "He weren't dragging her, but she didn't look happy about it."

"When your mistress comes back, take her immediately home and inform Mr. Windemere of what she's done!"

“She’ll kill me, sir!”

“So will I,” Devlin vowed. “So will I.” With that, Devlin took the reins of his horse, leading him through the alley to the other side. The shop backed up to the churchyard. And on the opposite side of the churchyard, just outside the garden gate of the vicar, was a narrow lane that led directly to Mr. Appleton’s home.

Halfway down the lane, he paused, stooping to pick up a lady’s glove. Instantly, he recognized the fine stitches on it where Emma had repaired a small tear. Spurred on by the find, he continued toward the Appleton house. But he didn’t have to go far before he heard the scream. Leaving the horse where it stood, he took off at a run.



THEY HADN’T REACHED his home. Appleton had stopped at a small shed at the back of his property and had shoved her inside it. What she saw there sickened her. There was a lamp, a narrow bed, and on that bed were several lengths of rope.

“I won’t bind you unless you force me to, Emma,” he said, as if reading her mind.

“You are one to speak of forcing a person to do something!” She spat out the words with indignation.

He reached out, his hand stroking along her arm. “It need not be unpleasant, Emma. I can be very good to you if you but let me.”

“Do not touch me! And do not think to coax or coerce me into cooperation. What you are about is an act of violence and wickedness. Do not pretend otherwise.”

His expression hardened, his small teeth bared as he spoke, “You would do well to remember who is in charge here, *Mrs. Barrowcliff*. I can make this as pleasant or unpleasant as you demand.” With that, he reached out and yanked her cloak open, tossing the garment to the floor. Then he reached for the bodice of her gown, yanking until the fabric shredded.

Emma screamed. She couldn’t help it. Even with his threats, she could not prevent that instinctive response. But it only incited his wrath. He slapped her then, the back of his hand connecting painfully with her cheek and sending her tumbling backward onto the small bed. Panic clawed at her then. He had her precisely where he wanted her.



HE’D REACHED the edge of Appleton’s grounds. He waited for some sound, some sign of where she might be. It came quickly. There was a loud crash and a muffled curse from inside a small shed.

Without hesitation, he kicked in the door. What he saw filled him with a kind of rage he had never known. He would have been infuriated for any woman to be treated so. But this was not any woman. This was Emma. *His Emma. His wife.*

“He has a pistol!” She called out.

Which answered the immediate question of how she had been compelled to leave with him. Devlin didn't wait for Appleton to reach into his pocket. Before the man could even scramble up from the bed where he'd pinned Emma to the narrow mattress, he grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and hauled him up.

"I would be within my rights to kill you right now," Devlin said. "And make no mistake, Appleton, that is precisely what I want to do."

Appleton made a mad grab for the pistol in his pocket, but Devlin simply knocked the other man's hand away and then took the pistol himself. Keeping the weapon trained on the smaller man, he retrieved Emma's torn cloak from the floor. "Wrap up as best you can."

"You can do nothing to me, sir! I am the local magistrate, after all," Appleton insisted.

"Do you think I give a damn? Let me explain this to you, Appleton... simply, of course, as you seem to be quite thickheaded. I will not see you punished through the law. I will see you dead. With my bare hands, I will wring the very life from your body and bury your rotting corpse in a hole so deep not even scavenging animals will find it."

The little man blinked in shock at that coldblooded threat. "You are a gentleman!"

"Not that much of one," Devlin snapped. "You will leave Glynneden. I don't care where you go, but if you stay here, you will not live to regret it. I will not have Emma looking over her shoulder and wondering when you might strike next."

If you do not, I will see you ruined so completely that no one in all of Cumbria will even speak to you.”

Appleton seemed to have a sudden burst of intellectual acuity. He apparently recognized the sincerity in Devlin’s threats and gave a sharp nod. “I will go to London.”

“Today. Immediately,” Devlin insisted.

“Today,” the small man agreed.

Dropping him to the floor, Devlin reached for Emma and she rushed to his side, pressing herself against him. The tremors he felt in her roused his fury all over again. Had it not been for her presence, and for the trauma she had already suffered, he would have beaten the man to a pulp just for the pleasure of it. “If I find you have not gone by nightfall, I will come back and the opportunity you have been granted to save your worthless life will be forfeit.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

With that final warning ringing behind them, Devlin took Emma from the shed. Rather than taking her home in a torn gown and shredded cloak, he walked her through the churchyard and across the street to her aunt's home. Escorting her inside, he helped her up the stairs to her old room. Settling her on the edge of the bed, he retrieved water from the kitchen and brought it up to her, along with a cloth that he'd scavenged.

Her cheek was already starting to bruise. The sight of it would have reignited his fury, if it had actually died down at all. "I'm so sorry I left you," he said.

"It's my fault. I had misgivings when Alice arrived. I should have trusted my instinct. I know we are not close—that she has this unreasonable sense of rivalry with me. But I never imagined that she truly hated me. Not until today. She would have allowed him—no, she colluded with him to do the most horrible thing to me imaginable. Why? Why would she do that?"

Devlin sighed. "It is not your fault. It isn't my fault. It's no one's fault but Alice's and Winslow bloody Appleton's. I

should have just killed him.”

She shook her head. “No. I do not want people to know. I am more humiliated by my sister’s behavior than by what he attempted to do. Either way, the scandal would be horrible. And poor Thomas does not deserve that.”

“No. No, he does not. Despite your past, he has done what he could to mitigate her actions... It was Thomas who suggested that we elope. I believe he knew that if we did not, Alice would find some way to prevent it.”

Emma shook her head, tears falling freely from her bright blue eyes. “Let’s go home. I just want to be home.”

“Change your clothes. I’ll borrow a cart from Squire Wilham to get us home. And then I need to figure out where my horse has gone,” he said, hoping to tease a smile from her.

It worked. It was watery but it was a smile. “Go. I’ll be fine,” she promised. “I’ll bar the doors just in case.”

“That is an excellent notion.”

Within the hour, they were making for Thornwood Hall in the borrowed conveyance. Leaving behind the terrible memories of what had happened, and the worse imaginings of what could have, home was a beacon for them both.



CHRISTMAS MORNING DAWNED snowy and white. The world was covered in a blanket of white. Getting up from the bed where Emma still slept soundly, Devlin went to peer out the

window. It was a far cry from the gloomy, dingy, coal dusted mornings in London. It was just fields of pristine white snow and trees glistening with ice that sparkled in the light.

“It’s very pretty, isn’t it? I love Glynneden in the snow.”

He turned back to the bed to see her sitting up. Her hair had fallen over her cheek, concealing the bruise. But they both knew it was there. “It is beautiful. But I’d much rather look at you. You are remarkably beautiful, Emma. I do not think you have heard that nearly often enough in your life.”

“Then come to bed. It’s much too early to be up,” she said, her tone unmistakably seductive.

He had not made love to her the night before. He’d held her, comforted her—comforted both of them by doing so, in truth. But he had not wanted to press her for such intimacies after her ordeal. “Are you certain you know what you’re asking for?”

“Well, unless I have misinterpreted your previous demonstrations, yes... I’m very well aware of what I’m asking for. I want you to make love to me, Devlin.”

He started for the bed, but halfway there, he detoured slightly and moved to his bureau. From the drawer, he retrieved the velvet covered box from the jeweler and took it with him. Climbing into the bed beside her, he placed it in her hands. “Happy Christmas, Emma!”

“Oh! I didn’t have time to get you a gift... or even to make one.”

He smiled at her. “You are my gift... and all I need from you is the very thing I received when first we met. A simple forfeit.”

“And what forfeit do you require?” She asked.

“For you to wear those jewels and nothing else.”

She opened the box and lifted out the heavy pearl and garnet necklace. “I’ll need help to fasten it.”

Shifting slightly so that he was behind her, he brushed her hair out of the way and took the ends of the necklace which she had parted, and then latched the delicate closure at the back of her neck. Unable to resist that tender spot, he dipped his head and pressed a kiss to it, causing her to shiver. Goose flesh raised on her skin and he heard her sigh with pleasure.

Indeed, there was no greater gift he could have been given than to have Emma as his wife.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

DEVLIN LOOKED DOWN into the sleeping face of what had to be the most beautiful female to ever grace the earth. “Don’t tell your mother I said so,” he whispered to the sleeping infant.

“Giving birth does not render one deaf, husband,” Emma said somewhat grumpily from the bed. It had been a somewhat difficult labor, long and arduous. But she’d been so fierce and determined and in the end, both she and their daughter were healthy, at least, if not happy. “Now, bring me our child.”

Dutifully, he complied. After placing the swaddled bundle in her arms, he sat down on the bed next to her, wrapping his arms about her. As she placed the babe at her breast, he peered over her shoulder, watching the pair of them with rapt wonder. “I stand corrected. This is the most beautiful sight I could ever behold. I have the entire world right here in the circle of my arms.”

She smiled, at him. Clearly, holding their child had soothed her earlier temper. “She’s perfect, isn’t she? But we

must name her!”

“Noel,” he said. “What other name could there be for a girl child born at Christmas?”

“Noel,” she whispered. “You are quite right. Noel Elizabeth—after my mother.”

“There. She has a name. Now we just have to gift her the remainder of the universe.”

“You’ll spoil her!” Emma protested.

“How could something so perfect ever be spoiled?” He demanded to know. Taking one arm from around her, he slipped his hand into his pocket and retrieved a small box. Placing the box on the bed before her, he waited.

“What’s this?”

“It is Christmas. What sort of husband would I be if I did not have a gift for my wife?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t get to finish your gift. Our daughter’s appearance interrupted my sewing.”

Devlin reached out, brushing his hand over his daughter’s downy soft head. “Emma, you have given me everything... And not just Noel. Open the box.”

Holding the baby to her with one hand, Emma reached out with the other and opened the lid of the box. Inside was a ring. A simple band of diamonds and pearls that complemented the ring she already wore, the one that had been her mother’s. He’d commissioned it just so.

“Oh, Devlin, it’s perfect.”

“It’s inscribed,” he informed her.

Emma lifted the ring from the box and held it to the light. “*Emma, my love,*” she read the words aloud. “You are determined to make me weep today!”

“It’s about time, don’t you think, that we speak our truth? We may have married for practical reasons, but this past year has been the happiest and most perfect of my life... because of you. Because of the love you have given me and the love you have inspired in me. I thought I was lonely before you, Emma. But it wasn’t loneliness. It was emptiness—and now I am full. My heart is full.”

She leaned into him, her eyes filled with tears. “You are simply the best of men. I love you more than I ever dreamed possible.”

“Happy Christmas, love. When you are rested, there is a kissing bough with your name on it,” he warned her.

“I’m feeling quite well rested now. Go get it.”

Devlin did, laughing the whole way.

THE END

HOLLY, MISTLETOE, AND MIDNIGHT SNOW

COLLETTE CAMERON

Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides



DEDICATION

*For everyone who hasn't had a place to celebrate Christmas
and to those who invite the lonely into your homes for the
holidays. Bless you all.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Thank you to the other authors in Christmas in Cumbria who
made
this Regency Christmas Collection possible. A special thank-
you to Chasity Bowlin for organizing the set. Your hard work
is so appreciated.*

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CHAPTER
ONE

Heffershire House

Latham Duchy country estate

19 December 1826

Late afternoon

WHY DID I let Leonidas Westbrook talk me into this ludicrous farce?

Taking in the ostentatious manor—every window glowing with a warm welcome—and the immaculate grounds dusted with snowfall as if God Himself thought the tableau needed a sprinkling of festivity, Owen Lockington swore inwardly.

I've lost my everlasting bloody mind.

Slinging a battered satchel over his shoulder before dragging an equally dilapidated leather valise from the hackneyed coach's interior, he caught sight of his humble, less-than-fashionable attire and his scuffed boots, badly in need of a good polish.

I'm as out of place as feather dusters at a duel.

A crooked, self-deprecating grin skewed his mouth upward on one side as he gave a contemptuous shake of his head.

Nothing new there.

How long had it been since he felt he belonged anywhere?

Since his mother had been alive.

Dour, pensive, and resembling his mother's large, rough Gaelic tribal ancestors, Owen had never fit in. It was a wonder, in truth, that he and Leonidas had become such good friends at university. A friendship that had prevailed for over a decade now, though they seldom saw each other.

When they did, however, they resumed their acquaintance as if no time had passed.

A good-sized male Dalmatian pranced over to inspect the new arrival. After thoroughly sniffing Owen's feet and calves, the chap lifted his head for a pet.

"I've passed muster, have I?" Owen scratched behind the dog's solid black ears.

The dog thumped his thick tail thrice before trotting off, sniffing several bushes, and marking his territory along the way.

Unease scraping sharp talons the length of his spine, Owen once more skimmed his gaze over the stately mansion, smoke winding lazily skyward from multiple chimneys. Yet rather than turn around on his next breath, leap into the cold, smelly conveyance, and order the burly driver to make haste back to the village as common sense admonished, Owen sprinted up the steps.

At least this year, he wouldn't spend Christmas with only a bottle of brandy and a book for company, as he'd done for nearly a decade.

Leonidas had assured Owen that his parents, the Duke and Duchess of Latham, would welcome a guest for the holiday. Wholly out of character, Owen had accepted the invitation from his only close friend after running into him in London.

He already regretted his impulsive decision, but there was dashed little he could do now. Unless he stole a horse from the stables or walked, his chance for escape rumbled down the gravel drive, leaving dual ribbons in the glistening snow.

Filling his lungs with crisp winter air, he braced his shoulders.

A week at Hefferwickshire House was survivable, even for a social outcast such as himself.

He'd trimmed his hair this morning, and the unfashionable, unruly sable locks only brushed his collar now. He'd even deemed to shave his beard, lest the servants think him a vagabond and direct him to the back of the house for a crust of bread.

Sighing, Owen rapped upon the entrance with his forefinger's knuckle and veered a glance heavenward. The gray, lackluster sky and dusky horizon portending nightfall and, perchance, more snow matched his sour mood.

The door flew open. As if Leonidas had peered out a window awaiting Owen's arrival, his oldest friend stood there grinning like a baboon.

“Lockington! You actually came.” He pumped Owen’s hand. “I’m delighted! Flabbergasted but sincerely delighted.”

“Do you generally answer the door, Westbrook?” Owen asked drolly, stepping inside. The splendor slapped him in the face like a frigid arctic wind.

Hefferwickshire’s exterior merely hinted at the interior’s opulence.

Seasonal greenery with gold and scarlet ribbons adorned the elegant entry, filling the air with a pleasant pine aroma. A stunning Spode porcelain urn overflowing with cedar, holly, and fir stood majestically atop a marble-topped rosewood half table. Kissing boughs, heavy with white mistletoe berries, hung suspended from doorways by silver and gold ribbons, awaiting stolen kisses.

His heels echoed hollowly on the black and white Italian marble as he ventured forward a few more steps, unable to keep from craning his neck and gawking like a child at a circus.

Unlike many aristocrats, Leonidas wasn’t a pretentious prick and had never hinted at his family’s wealth. The manor fairly oozed grandeur and opulence, but his friend stood there, looking for all the world like an ordinary chap happy to see his long-time friend.

Yes, indeed. I’m as out of my element as an engorged tick on King George IV’s broad arse.

“Simms, our butler, is dealing with a situation in the kitchen. A kerfuffle regarding too much sampling of brandied

fruit and tipsy maids. I believe there might've been tossing of said fruit involved." Still smiling as if Leonidas had triumphed in a *coup d'état*, he shook his dark head. "I admit, I had doubts, and I swear a couple of minutes ago, you contemplated diving back in that miserable excuse of a coach."

Leonidas juttled his chin toward the rickety equipage trundling down the drive before turning and disappearing onto the main track.

So, he *had* been watching Owen.

"I did, in truth." A raspy chuckle escaped Owen. "But then I remembered you mentioned your cook made exceptional cinnamon buns, gingerbread men, Christmas pudding, and sugared almonds." He patted his flat stomach with his free hand. "I do like my sweets."

"Aye, I recall that about you, yet you never appear to gain weight. Must be your gargantuan size." Leonidas stepped farther into the grand entry. He gave a mischievous wink. "I'd say the brandied fruit ought to be quite the thing too."

"Don't believe I've ever had the pleasure." Owen shifted his bags.

"Come in and meet the family," Leonidas urged. "You're just in time for afternoon tea, and Mrs. Tastepotting, our cook, made several special holiday biscuits and tarts. This time of year, there are always extra treats to sample."

Mama only ever made shortbread during the holidays—a tribute to her Scot's ancestry and a testimony to Beauford's parsimony. Though the earl paid their basic expenses, he

hadn't been generous with his purse. They'd managed by skimping and economizing, habits that Owen had carried into adulthood and still served him well.

Speaking over his shoulder, Leonidas shut the door with a firm *snick*. "We don't eat supper until eight o'clock, which isn't typical country hours, so tea is generally quite substantial. I'm sure you're famished after the journey."

As Owen ate when he felt hungry and had never adhered to specific hours for mealtimes, he lifted a shoulder. Regardless, his stomach did gnaw rather persistently at his backbone at the moment. A sensation he'd grown accustomed to since hunger was a regular bedfellow.

Efficient, polite footmen in crisp crimson and gold livery took his two shoddy bags, treating the baggage with the reverence and consideration worthy of His Majesty's luggage.

"Perhaps I ought to tidy up a jot first." Owen hadn't a doubt the servants' crisp livery was far costlier than his rumpled suit. However, the clothing the servants presently toted upstairs was only slightly better than the travel suit he wore.

He'd never cared about current fashion, fancy waistcoats, expensive fabric, and assuredly didn't give two farthings whether he tied his cravat in a waterfall or a ballroom knot.

"Nonsense. No need to change." Leonidas shook his dark head again, still wearing that infuriatingly pleased-with-himself smile. "We don't stand on formality around here, and you are expressly forbidden to address me or my brothers as

my lord.” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “Besides, Grandmama doesn’t like her tea to grow cold.”

Affection and a trace of awe leached into Leonidas’s voice when he mentioned his grandmother.

Owen never knew his grandmothers.

Rubbing his nose, Leonidas chuckled. “She’s quite an eccentric old bird. I probably ought to have warned you. I beg you, don’t be surprised at anything she might say or ask. She’s quite beyond the pale and enjoys shocking people.”

“Your parents are a *duke and duchess.*” Owen quirked a sardonic eyebrow and clasped his hands behind his back. A practice he’d developed in order to do something with his oversized hands. “I find it hard to fathom that they don’t strictly abide by all decorum. You are positive they won’t take exception to me addressing you with such familiarity?”

“Not at all, and I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised, my friend.” Leonidas slapped Owen’s shoulder. “My parents are genuinely warm people. You’ve nothing to fear or be ashamed of. No need to worry about their approval and all that trite rot that the ponces in London are so fond of.”

Leonidas knew Owen’s scandalous origins, that he was the by-blow of a governess and an earl.

Though, to the Earl of Beauford’s credit, he’d done the honorable thing and acknowledged his bastard son by paying for Owen’s upbringing and education. No more than he ought to have done after seducing an innocent girl and then dismissing her when her condition became known to the

countess, who had only ever managed to produce three daughters.

How that circumstance had aggravated the old codger.

Beauford finally had his son, but Owen would never—could never—be his heir.

“I have the one thing Beauford covets above all else.” Mouth bent into a poignant smile, Mama would hug Owen before ruffling his thick, unruly hair. “*You*, my precious boy.” She’d kissed his cheek, the essence of lavender wafting from her pale skin. “And I love you above all else.”

Nevertheless, the shame of her circumstances and the ostracism by her family had shattered her spirit, and she’d died just after his seventeenth birthday, leaving him alone in the world where bastards were as numerous as rats and mice and treated with the same abhorrence as the detested vermin.

Owen had rebuffed Beauford’s overtures to visit and become acquainted with the man. He hadn’t shed a tear when the old sod died four years ago, ironically or perhaps aptly, on Owen’s fourth and twentieth birthday.

The inheritance he’d bequeathed Owen still sat in a bank account in London, untouched. Owen didn’t even know how much the seducer of innocents had left him. He didn’t give a blacksmith’s damn how much it was.

He didn’t want his sire’s money.

Although if he didn’t find the investors he sought to restart the coal mine in Workington that Owen had unexpectedly

inherited from his maternal grandfather, then necessity might force him to accept the bequeathment.

Bitterness burned the back of his throat.

That thought, a very real possibility, galled him to his marrow.

He must find another way.

In truth, because of how the Lockingtons had treated Mama, he initially hadn't wanted his grandfather's mine either. He supposed that made him the worst sort of hypocrite, accepting one inheritance while shunning the other.

"Leonidas? Grandmama sent me to fetch you. She vows her tea grows cold but won't take a sip until you return." A pretty girl strode into the foyer, her auburn hair streaked with fire and sunshine tied back with a pink ribbon across her crown. She wore a shirt a shade darker than her hair ribbon, and trousers covered her impossibly long legs tucked into men's boots.

If his life had depended on it, Owen couldn't have torn his attention away from the arresting vixen.

She slid to a stop, her blue, blue eyes round as dinnerplates and her full berry-red mouth parting.

"Lord have mercy and blow me over with a feather. You are quite the biggest man I have ever laid eyes upon."

CHAPTER
TWO

*H*efferwickshire House drawing room

An hour later

ALTHELIA PRETENDED to listen to Grandmama prattle on for the umpteenth time about when she snubbed a Russian prince. However, the somber man perched awkwardly on the much too small Mahogany parlor chair, thoroughly enjoying Mrs. Tastespotting's biscuits, sandwiches, and dainties, kept drawing her attention.

The cheery fire snapping and crackling in the hearth dispelled the chill to the room's outer edges though long shadows outside crept inside the drapery-shrouded windows. It had been an unseasonably cold December, but the snowfall remained slight and shouldn't impede her brothers' journey to Hefferwickshire for Christmas.

Mr. Lockington munched away happily as if his tree-trunks-for-legs were hollow.

At least she thought he was happy.

So difficult to tell with his guarded expression.

He hadn't exactly smiled, but occasionally, the corners of his mouth twitched upward, and his glacial eyes glinted with a hint of warmth.

Perhaps he wasn't the giant ogre she'd first thought when he'd turned frosty green eyes upon her at her unrestrained and admittedly rude outburst in the foyer. Likely, he often received such unwelcome speculation about his size.

But really.

How could she not stare, utterly flabbergasted?

He *was* enormous.

Not just tall, several inches over six feet, but also big boned. Althelia suspected from the way his suit pulled taught with his movements, honed muscle covered his frame.

Leonidas claimed he and Owen Lockington had been friends for years, but this was the first time she had met the man. Her brother warned the family that Mr. Lockington was a rather serious, brooding fellow but kind to his core, and though large and rough around the edges, he possessed unexpected gentleness and humility in a man so big.

At least Mrs. Tastepotting would be delighted that her Christmas dainties were well received. Mr. Lockington wolfed them down as if he hadn't eaten in a week, which Althelia suspected, kept him from having to speak.

She dropped her attention to his enormous hands, then his equally gargantuan feet. In contrast to their great size, which suggested clumsiness, he moved with an animalistic grace she felt certain he wasn't aware of.

At one time, not so long ago, he would have terrified her.

Before staying with her American cousins, she'd been a timid, blotchy-faced dumpling, afraid of her own shadow. Her complexion had cleared, and she lost weight in Boston, Massachusetts. She still watched what she ate, afraid she might become overly round once more.

Of more import, those two-plus years in America had transformed her into a confident woman who had vowed never to be intimidated or taken advantage of by anyone again.

Truth to tell, Mr. Lockington did make her a bit nervous, but this was a curious sort of unease—something she hadn't experienced before and, therefore, could not identify as yet.

She glanced up, disconcerted to find Eva, her cousin visiting from America, observing her far too acutely.

Eva curved her mouth into a mysterious smile.

No one knew Althelia like Eva did, and that seemingly innocent, entirely bothersome upward sweep of her cousin's mouth portended trouble.

Althelia speared her a chastising look that warned, *I don't know what you are up to, but stop your meddling.*

Never one to be shushed easily, Eva merely selected a piece of pound cake before cocking her head. "So, Mr. Lockington, how is it that you know Leonidas?"

Mr. Lockington raised his inscrutable gaze and set his half-eaten cherry tart back on his plate. Clearing his throat, his jaw rigid as steel, he glanced around, obviously uncomfortable

having everyone's attention focused on him. "We met at university."

"Leonidas told us that." Unforgivably snoopy—one of her less appealing American traits—Eva fluttered a hand glibly and, without a hint of compunction, asked, "But *how*, exactly, did you become acquainted?"

Mr. Lockington veered a speaking glance toward Leonidas. "The first week."

Either he was as obtuse as a parsnip—which Althelia seriously doubted given the keen intelligence in his unique eyes, or Leonidas and the behemoth shared a secret.

Althelia would bet her new primrose pink gloves on it.

And that, of course, made her all the more curious to know what that secret was.

Not that she would pry. No need to when Grandmama and Eva were such nose-y busybodies; bless their most convenient intrusiveness.

Pulling a comical face, Leonidas shook his head. "As Owen said, we became friends at university. That's all you need to know, cousin dearest."

He exchanged another telling glance with Mr. Lockington, who visibly relaxed at the skillful deflection.

"*I know.*" Ankles crossed and one arm slung over the back of the settee he lounged in, Fletcher, one of Althelia's half-brothers, sent Leonidas a wicked grin. He was her only brother that called her Kitten rather than Ally-Cat, and she adored him for it.

She envied her seven brothers' interactions—the camaraderie they enjoyed and took for granted.

Though she and Eva were as close as sisters now, they'd not grown up together. Being the youngest of eight children and the only female made Althelia somewhat of an outsider. Not that her family didn't adore her.

They did, of course.

Every one of her brothers would protect her with his life.

Until Eva had come to stay, Althelia had been terribly lonely. But Eva had been here a year, and her parents and siblings missed her and wanted her to sail home in the spring.

“You certainly do not, Fletch.” Leonidas leveled Fletcher a murderous glower, his dark blue gaze clashing with Fletcher's bottle-green eyes.

Nonchalantly examining a fingernail, Fletcher shrugged. “Leo let it slip one night when he was in his cups.”

“Indeed.” Eva leaned forward, eagerness twinkling in her eyes. “Do tell, Cousin.”

By this time, Grandmama had discerned something juicy was afoot. She thumped her ivory-handled cane, the many bracelets on her wrists tinkling like wind chimes. “Yes. Do. And speak up. My hearing isn't what it once was.”

A flush crept up Mr. Lockington's square jaw and chiseled cheeks, and his eyes grew shuttered as he retreated within himself.

Unexpected compassion engulfed Althelia.

He presented quite the juxtaposition. Enormous and powerful, yet seemingly tongue-tied over a simple question or reluctant to divulge the truth.

Althelia suspected he wasn't just protecting himself, either.

"Mama," she blurted, abruptly changing the subject. "When did you say Lucius and Clodovea and Adolphus and his family are arriving? They missed Stir-Up Sunday already."

On Stir-up Sunday, the last Sunday before Christmas, the family made Christmas pudding. Everyone took a turn stirring the pudding and making a wish.

Althelia's two married brothers planned on spending the holiday at Hefferwickshire. The remaining brothers, Darius, his twin Cassius, and her other adopted brother, Layton, said they would try to be here by Christmas Day but could not promise this year.

Last Christmastide was the first in years that all the Westbrook siblings were home for the holiday—thanks to Grandmama's meddling. She'd pretended to be ill—*life and death*, she wrote everyone. And her ploy had worked. The house had overflowed with Westbrooks.

At six and eighty, she remained feisty and sassy, but ill-health had plagued her this past year. Something to do with her heart, but she refused to discuss the ailment. She'd mourned the passing of her dear friend, Lady Portia Borthwick-Pickleton, last summer, which had taken a noticeable toll on the dear.

“Lucius arrives tomorrow and Adolphus the next day. I’m still hopeful Layton and the twins might spend Christmas with us too. Last year, Layton was so adamant that we all gather every year.” Smiling knowingly, Mama set her hand-painted holly berry teacup on the table. “I adore it when my family is all together. Especially for Twelfth Night. There is nothing quite like Christmas in Cumbria, is there?”

“I quite agree, Your Grace. Originally from Scotland, my mother’s family settled in Cumberland decades ago. One of the things they appreciated most about England was the ability to celebrate Christmas. It’s still prohibited in Scotland, though many Scots secretly partake.” Mr. Lockington slid Althelia an indefinable glance, those brooding eyes probing, and her stomach whirled as if she’d been turning in circles.

Did he suspect she’d come to his rescue?

He didn’t seem altogether pleased at her kindly interference.

“Then I hope you feel at home here for the holiday.” Mama rose, and Papa followed suit.

“Excuse me. I have correspondence to finish before dressing for supper.” She swept her regal gaze over Althelia’s casual attire. “I needn’t remind you that trousers are unacceptable for dining, my dear.”

Now it was Althelia’s turn to blush. “I know, Mama.”

She hadn’t changed after her morning ride.

It was wholly unfair that men enjoyed the comfort and convenience of trousers while compelling women to wear

confining stays and cumbersome gowns.

“I hope you enjoy your stay at Hefferwickshire, Mr. Lockington,” Papa said. “Have you need of anything, you’ve but to ask. Our home is yours.”

Like a panther unfolding from an afternoon snooze, Mr. Lockington had risen when Mama stood.

Althelia couldn’t fault his manners, even if he were as aloof and unapproachable as a Russian Czar.

“Thank you, Your Grace, but I am a man of few needs.” He clasped his hands behind his back, the picture of docility, but she suspected he held himself in check.

A man of his size and strength had probably learned to do so lest he hurt someone unintentionally. He reminded her of the great, gentle draft horses in the stables—stunning, muscular creatures capable of great feats but also capable of immense destruction if angered.

Papa wrapped an arm around Mama’s still slender waist—a wonder after she’d borne eight children—and guided her to the door. “We shall see you at supper.”

“I need to respond to letters from Mama and Mynna too,” Eva said, grabbing two ginger biscuits to take with her.

Mynna was Eva’s younger sister.

As everyone filed toward the doorway from which hung a mistletoe sprig, Althelia lingered behind. She glanced at the fern-green Wedgewood ormolu mantel clock, surrounded by Christmas greenery, holly, and ribbons.

Just a quarter past five.

Yes, she had time to peek in on the puppies and still bathe and dress for dinner.

Inez, her favorite Dalmatian, had given birth to seven wriggling, mottled bundles of wonder a week ago. Althelia planned on making one of the litter her very own. It might help her loneliness when Eva left at the end of March.

There was just the matter of convincing her parents to allow the dog in the house. And, *if* she could persuade one of her brothers to let her travel with him for a year or two, the dog would provide company and protection. However, she still hadn't figured out how to convince her parents or a brother to agree to her scheme.

After straightening the richly appointed drawing room and stacking the tea service on the tray for a servant to return to the kitchen, she collected a cloak from her chamber and donned it as she exited the mansion through the back stairs.

The sun had sunk below the horizon, and twilight tinged with shades of orange and crimson hovered over the estate.

This was her favorite time of day when night settled onto the land like a lover's embrace, protective and warm. The gentle coo of the turtle doves as they sought their nests, and the occasional glimpse of a rabbit or fox scurrying to its cozy den to snuggle with its family, warmed her heart.

Althelia often sat on her window seat in the wintertime or on the terrace in the spring and summer, welcoming the shadows as they caressed the trees and buildings into slumber.

Of their own volition, her feet carried her along the well-maintained gravel track to the stables. A golden glow seeped beneath the closed doors where the horses, barn cats, and dogs slumbered.

She pulled the door open, the hinges' familiar creak and groan announcing her arrival.

For as long as she could recall, the doors needed oiling. She believed it wasn't as much the servants' failure to maintain the hinges as deliberate neglect to alert anyone inside of a new arrival. Rather like bells atop a shopkeeper's door.

Pushing her hood off, she stepped inside and inhaled the tangy aromas: horseflesh, fresh hay, liniment, and leather.

Comforting and familiar scents today, but that was not the case just a few short years ago.

How could it be that she used to fear horses but now adored them?

Because you changed, Althelia Byrony Elizabeth Westbrook.

Yes, she had and didn't regret the transformation from quivering mouse to unconventional—mayhap a trifle headstrong—woman a jot.

A dog's whining and a puppy's squeal of terror or pain drew her attention, and she sprinted to Inez's stall. A hulking form loomed over the dog and her pups. Fear clogged Althelia's throat, and she shoved her way inside the enclosure without a thought for her safety.

Suspicion and fright made her voice rough and accusing.

“What are you doing?”

CHAPTER
THREE

*H*efferwickshire stables

A couple of tense seconds later

INTENT ON FREEING the stuck puppy, and amid the poor little beggar's mewling and his distraught mama's whines and growls, Owen hadn't heard Althelia enter the stables. He first became aware of her presence when she shoved past him, almost causing him to drop the rescued pup.

Anger sparked in her blue eyes, darkened to the color of the sea at nighttime with her fright and wrath.

Accustomed to people fearing him and reacting defensively, he held his tongue. It shouldn't sting that this wood sprite directed her ire toward him without knowing the situation, but it did.

Uncurling from his crouched position, he carefully extended the hungry week-old pup, cupped in his hand and rooting around in search of a nipple. "I came in to spend time with the horses and heard this little fellow's distressed cries. He'd caught his leg, and his mum couldn't free him."

Owen pointed to a slim opening, no more than half an inch along the bottom of one wall.

“You probably want to get that fixed,” he said, careful to keep his tone neutral and without a trace of accusation. “Tuck a cloth in there or nail a board temporarily.”

“Poor darling.” Lady Athelia scooped the puppy into her hands and nuzzled its tiny neck. “There’s a dear. Mr. Lockington rescued your pup, Inez. You can stop growling at him now.”

Inez wagged her speckled tail and began licking the puppy when Lady Athelia laid him by the dog’s belly with its dual rows of swollen nipples. The famished little fiend latched on to a teat like a barnacle to a ship.

“I presume the handsome black-eared fellow that greeted me when I arrived earlier is the sire?” Bracing a shoulder on the wall, Owen folded his arms, which people often compared to tree branches.

“Yes. That is Apollo.” A throaty, feminine chuckle filled the cubicle. “He thinks *he* is the lord of the estate. Papa permits him the illusion. He’s proud as a peacock of his pups too.”

“Your father or Apollo?” Owen could scarcely credit his witty rejoinder. Humor wasn’t his strong suit.

“Apollo, of course,” Althelia replied with a *you-cannot-be-serious* upward sweep of bronze-tipped sooty lashes.

Owen had come to the stables, where he’d always sought refuge. He’d never been able to afford to keep a horse, but the

magnificent beasts drew him like waves to the shore. He would own a horse large enough to carry his eighteen-stone weight someday.

If restarting the mining proved as profitable as he hoped it would—needed it to be. His entire future lay in that enterprise. After inheriting it from his grandfather, he'd invested every cent he'd saved the past decade and still needed investors to make the dream come true.

You could always use the earl's money.

Only as a last resort, and Owen wasn't that desperate yet.

Pray that he never was because, though humble, his self-respect meant everything to him. If he accepted the tarnished funds he viewed as nothing less than his father's attempt to ease a guilty conscience, could Owen live with his self-loathing?

Althelia angled her head, that swath of burnished hair shining in the lamplight. She stood so close he could see the flecks of gold in her blue eyes, the color of Loch Mor on the Isle of Skye.

His gut tightened, and moisture broke out upon his brow at the revelation that cudged him like a battering ram.

He was attracted to her.

She didn't shy away from him or avoid his gaze like most refined ladies of genteel breeding, which perplexed him. Usually, women couldn't look past his rough appearance and size, but she seemed not to notice or didn't care.

Why?

It didn't matter why.

Lady Althelia Westbrook was an enigma he wasn't bloody well going to try to unravel.

Not only wasn't Owen inclined to spend time on such a futile task, but he had other things occupying his mind. Mainly the thought that had occurred to him as he walked to the stables.

Would the Westbrooks consider investing in his mine?

Owen couldn't very well present the question as a newly arrived guest, but in a few days?

Yes. This might just be the opportunity he'd been seeking.

He'd have to put his best foot forward and call upon every social skill he possessed in the meanwhile—which, to his chagrin, weren't well rehearsed or numerous. For God's sake, his jaw already ached from the effort not to scowl and to keep his mouth turned upward, if not precisely in a smile, at least not an intimidating frown.

This holiday might prove to be quite profitable after all.

A horse nickered in a nearby stall, and another stamped its feet. Somewhere above them, a cat yowled, and another hissed.

Althelia proceeded to pick up and kiss each of the creamy pups, just now beginning to form spots on their silky pelts. A tender smile arching her dewy cupid's bow mouth, she held up the smallest before her face, a little female.

“I mean to make her my very own, though I haven’t named the precious darling yet. She’ll be my travel companion.” She paused and glanced upward, worry creasing her smooth forehead and the corners of her expressive eyes. “You mustn’t tell anyone. I haven’t asked permission about the pup or traveling. Please promise me.”

Oddly touched that she’d shared those confidences with him, a complete stranger, and trusted him to keep her secrets, Owen crossed an arm over his chest solemnly as if taking an oath. “I shan’t breathe a word. I swear it on my honor.”

“*Hmm.* I think perhaps that you mock me, Mr. Lockington.” Nevertheless, Althelia busied herself, stuffing an old blanket into the crack the pup had wedged itself in. “Do you make a habit of venturing into stables?”

The unspoken question was whether Owen had permission to be here.

“Leonidas said I might.” Owen stepped from the enclosure. “He knows I have a great fondness for horseflesh.”

Still crouched, she tilted her head and grinned, and so help him God, Owen swore the radiance of her unfettered smile lit the stables with the incandescence of a hundred candles.

“Would you believe, Mr. Lockington, that I used to be afraid of horses? Of course, as every proper English girl is required to do, I learned to ride. However, I didn’t learn to *enjoy* riding until I went to America and discovered riding astride. Now I feel deprived if I don’t take to the saddle every morn.”

Did she ride astride?

That explained the trousers molded to her shapely legs and behind.

'Twas a wonder the duke and duchess permitted her that breach of decorum.

Mayhap, their graces were cut from a different mold than other aristocrats, after all.

Althelia wasn't the prim, proper, hoity-toity duke's daughter Owen had expected. Something about her beckoned to him on a level he neither understood nor wanted to examine. He couldn't put his finger on what it was, but there was a genuineness, a refreshing unpretentiousness about her wrapped in a bold, appealing, pleasantly curved, feminine bundle.

Again, he reminded himself it did not matter.

She was the privileged, pampered, dowered daughter of an influential duke.

He was the by-blow of a lustful earl.

Their paths should never have crossed, and Owen was too far beneath her to entertain vain imaginations. Besides, it wasn't his nature to, and he sure as Hades wasn't about to start now.

"There, Inez. Your puppies should be safe now." Althelia stood and brushed her hands together, indecision etched upon her features. An attractive smattering of freckles across her pert nose and sculpted ivory cheeks suggested she didn't always don a bonnet.

Owen rather liked that.

She rubbed beneath her nose, leaving a smudge of dirt as she stepped from the stall and secured the door.

He checked the spontaneous grin that tried to kick his lips upward.

“You’ve a bit of dirt, just here.” He pointed to the area on his face.

She wiped above her lip with her hand. “Is it gone?”

He nodded.

“We just acquired a new mount. A seven-year-old gelding.” Althelia veered him a sideways glance, half shy and half uncertain. “I think you would like Sampson. Would you like to meet him?”

It wasn’t appropriate for Owen and Althelia to be alone. The animals hardly counted as proper chaperones. Though caution raised her head and hesitation sluiced through him, he extended an arm.

Something about this woman proved irresistible. “Lead the way.”

She led him to a stall on the stable’s other end, and as she walked, he studiously avoided admiring the gentle, tantalizing sway of her hips.

Most of the time.

“We’ve had him less than a month,” she said over her shoulder. “Papa witnessed his previous owner maltreating him and bought Sampson on the spot. Paid twice what he was

worth, but Papa is like that. Cannot bear for any of God's creatures to suffer."

That made the Duke of Latham a highly unusual peer of the realm. Most nobles were self-absorbed sots who didn't care a fig about people, let alone animals.

A massive black head appeared over the stall door with a glistening thick midnight mane. When the gelding's large coffee-brown eyes met Owen's, he fell in love with the big brute.

"Aye, my beauty," he crooned, stroking Sampson's glossy neck. "What a handsome fellow you are."

Sampson nuzzled Owen's shoulder in return.

"Why, he *likes* you." Awe threaded Lady Althelia's voice. "Sampson's usually more restrained when he meets new people. He wouldn't let any of us pet him for a fortnight."

Emotion clogged Owen's throat as he closed his eyes and leaned into Sampson's strong neck, inhaling the horse's scent. He made another foolhardy, spontaneous, impulsive decision, something he seemed to be doing a lot of lately.

No matter the cost or what it took, Sampson would be his when Owen left Hefferwickshire House.

When had his common sense, self-preservation, and reason flown to the wind like down upon a thistle or seafoam on the shoreline? Owen was where he was today because he insisted caution and reservedness guide his actions and decisions.

"Thank you for showing him to me." Emotion rendered his voice raspier than he'd anticipated. He cleared his throat.

“He’s a magnificent beast.”

A tabby stable cat jumped down from the haybale she’d been sleeping on and yawned before setting to grooming herself. Horses in adjacent stalls poked their heads out to see what was happening and perhaps to demand a little attention.

“I suspected you’d like him, but I didn’t expect he’d take to you so.” Althelia’s acute regard shifted between Owen and Sampson. She blinked and glanced around. “I’d better return to the house, or I’ll be late for dinner. My parents don’t adhere to rigid rules on many things, but being on time and properly attired to dine are two.”

“I’ll walk with you.” Owen gave Sampson one final pat, promising himself he’d pop in before seeking his bed tonight. For certain, he’d be back often to visit the grand fellow. “It’s full-on dark by now, and there may be wild creatures about.”

Althelia snorted as she pulled her hood over her tresses. “I’ve walked that pathway my entire life, and it doesn’t scare me. Besides, I rather like the dark. That is, I like nighttime.”

“You *like* the dark?” Owen shook his head as he fell into step beside her. “Has anyone ever told you what a unique woman you are?”

Something undefinable clouded her features in the muted light. “I’m a product of my experiences. I have chosen to let them make me stronger, and as a result, I’ve learned who I am and what I want.”

“And what would you most like to do?” Genuine curiosity prompted him to ask.

How long had it been since Owen had conversed so easily with an attractive woman, even if she was a tempest in a teapot?

He glanced downward.

The crown of Althelia's head barely reached his shoulder, but her confidence and self-assuredness made her seem larger.

I'm not too big for her.

Owen nearly tripped over his skiff-sized feet at the intrusive and unwelcome thought.

By Zeus, he'd better wrangle his ruminations under control.

He'd only just met the girl, and he wasn't going to do anything that might jeopardize the Westbrooks' potential investing in his mining venture. Not even if she was the first female in a very long while who'd garnered more than his passing interest.

"I would like to travel as several of my brothers have done. To see the world. I've been to America, and that only whetted my appetite." Wrinkling her nose, she pointed her gaze skyward for a second. "I'm also intrigued with the notion of owning a club as my brother Fletcher does. You can imagine how receptive my parents would be to *those* ideas, so I haven't broached the subjects."

Owen *could* imagine.

Genteel ladies were expected to make a brilliant match and settle into domestic life without protest or qualms.

He rather suspected Althelia's future lay along a different course.

Nevertheless, it was none of his business.

At the house, he gave a short bow.

"It's been a pleasure, Lady Althelia."

She gave him a nascent, slightly beleaguered smile before slipping indoors.

Owen stood with his feet rooted in place for several minutes.

If he had an ounce of sense, he'd march upstairs, pack his meager belongings, and leave.

But as he'd already discovered this Christmastide, his common sense had deserted him.

CHAPTER
FOUR

*H*effershire House stables

20 December 1826

Early the next morning

HUMMING and carrying several apple slices, Althelia entered the stables the next morning, coming to an abrupt halt upon spying Sampson saddled and Mr. Lockington leading the docile-as-a-kitten gelding out the opposite door.

Would wonders never cease?

“Mr. Lockington?”

Attired in her brother’s cast-off trousers, boots, cap, woolen jacket, and a distinctly feminine pink and lace shirt, she hurried forward, smiling at Tobie, the young stable hand, as he prepared Stardust for her daily ride. “Please give these to her.”

She handed the lad the apples and then pulled on her buff-colored leather riding gloves.

Upon hearing his name, Mr. Lockington half turned. He wore the same clothing as yesterday but had added a heavy coat and scarf, both of which appeared well used.

Was he short of funds or merely frugal? Or miserly?

There was a distinct difference between the latter two.

He didn't seem pleased to see Althelia.

No, in fact, he looked decidedly perturbed.

She turned her mouth downward.

Why the marked change in attitude since yesterday?

It would've been a gross exaggeration to call him charming or cordial in the stables last evening, but he hadn't displayed barely concealed annoyance then.

And that begged the question, *why* did he find Althelia annoying?

She'd introduced him to Sampson, the very horse he now led to the paddock to ride.

The ungrateful wretch.

Although, to be fair, he would likely have come upon the gelding at some point, as he said he enjoyed spending time with horseflesh. But he wouldn't have known Sampson's history, which seemed to have moved him.

Leonidas poked his head inside the stables, his eyes twinkling with brotherly affection. "Ah, I thought I heard you, Ally-Cat."

She glowered at him for using her detested nickname.

“We’d about given up on you, sleepyhead,” he continued, either oblivious to her displeasure or choosing to ignore her frown. “It’s not like you to be late for our morning jaunt.”

That was because she’d tossed and turned all night, her slumber interrupted by disturbing dreams. More frustrating, she couldn’t recall the elusive nocturnal specters, only that they involved Mr. Lockington somehow.

“I’m here now. I shan’t be but a moment.” In a trice, using a mounting block, she climbed astride Stardust, then guided her toward the other riders.

Fletcher, Leonidas, and Papa waited as Mr. Lockington settled into the saddle with unexpected agility.

“You look well upon Sampson, Owen.” Seated upon his mount, Orion, Leonidas gave an approving nod. “One of the best matches I’ve seen between man and equestrian.”

Seemingly unaccustomed to compliments, Mr. Lockington dipped his square chin.

He might be larger than the average man, but he possessed sleek, animal-like grace and strength.

What do those rippling muscles look like beneath his clothing?

Appalled at her errant thoughts, for Althelia didn’t go about undressing men mentally, she scrambled for something to distract her.

“I stopped by the kitchen.” She steered Stardust to Papa’s side. “Mrs. Tastepotting made cinnamon buns *and* sticky buns. They should be fresh from the oven when we return. She

said there would be shortbread and gingerbread for tea today too. I do believe she loves baking Christmas treats as much as we enjoy eating them.”

A light lit in Mr. Lockington’s eyes, and his mouth twitched the merest bit at the mention of the sweet treats.

Hmm, was food the way to win the man over?

Honestly, for some reason, that didn’t surprise Althelia.

“Mrs. Tastespotting does spoil us around the holidays.” Grinning, Papa patted his flat stomach. “I shall have to watch my waistline lest I grow fat.”

Still handsome and fit at almost six and sixty, there was little chance of that. He would celebrate his birthday on Christmas day.

“We all overindulge during the holidays,” Fletcher put in.

Fletcher’s continued presence was a distinct peculiarity.

Althelia had seen more of him this past year than the ten previous years combined. She had heard a few hushed conversations, which always came to an abrupt halt when she drew near.

Men and their secrets.

Something was afoot with his business ventures in London.

The small troupe set off at a sedate pace toward the south meadow. Yesterday’s snow hadn’t melted, and the horses’ hooves kicked up frozen white blobs as the riders slugged along.

Normally, Althelia preferred giving Stardust her head and letting the horse race neck or nothing across the field, but today, she held the mare back. Her brothers and father weren't so inclined, and in moments, they left her and Mr. Lockington behind.

Frost clung to the shrubs and grass, causing them to sparkle as the sun's rays gingerly touched them. An intricately woven cobweb on a fence glittered with a thousand frozen jewels, and a boisterous crow called raucously, disturbing the early morning tranquility.

Cheeks and nose cold and likely red as the holly berries throughout the house, Althelia sent Mr. Lockington a sideways look from the corner of her eye but refrained from asking the obvious.

He seemed content to walk Sampson.

Men of her acquaintance, including her father and brothers, liked to lay low across their saddles.

"I can practically hear the gears turning in your mind, Lady Althelia." Mr. Lockington twisted his mouth in what she presumed was meant to be a smile.

If so, he was sorely out of practice.

"Oh?" She arched a skeptical eyebrow.

He raised a hawkish eyebrow in challenge. "You cannot fathom why I didn't pelt after your brothers and father but are undecided whether it would be rude to say as much."

CHAPTER FIVE

A couple of awkward seconds later

BLAST OWEN LOCKINGTON for being spot on.

“I’m positive it wasn’t because you didn’t want to leave me behind,” Althelia quipped. She sounded completely calm despite the fluttering of a dozen birds’ wings in her belly. “Which, I assure you, you could not have done had you tried. I’m an excellent horsewoman.”

She could outride and outshoot most of her brothers, which vexed them to no end. Laughing at Owen’s nonplussed expression, she patted Stardust’s neck.

“By the by, please call me Althelia or Ally, and I shall address you as Owen. We don’t stand on *haut ton* formality here.”

“So Leonidas informed me, but you’ll forgive me if I remain unconvinced.” Owen’s piercing verdant glance was at once aloof and patient, as if he struggled to cast off his natural taciturn inclinations and adopt a different, more amiable reaction.

“You’re trying far too hard to be affable, Owen.” She gave him a cheeky grin. “I’ll wager it’s a terrible strain. You smile as if your stomach pains you or you need to pass wind.”

His gruff bark of laughter cut through the frosty air, and she almost dropped the reins as she gaped at him.

Good Lord.

When Owen Lockington laughed, the harshness dissolved, the coarseness faded, and he transformed into a striking creature. A wholly attractive man. He’d never be considered handsome in the classical sense, but he possessed a rugged appeal she’d never encountered until now.

It caused her pulse to jump and her belly to quiver.

God help her.

Had Althelia truly suggested he needed to ... *fart*?

What was wrong with her?

“I know no other woman that would remark upon my ah—*nature*—in such candid terms.” His features had softened around the edges, and genuine amusement, not offense, lingered in his eyes.

She found it impossible not to answer with a bright smile. “I *was* wondering why you haven’t picked up your pace.”

“I’m giving Sampson time to become accustomed to my weight.” He leaned over and stroked the gelding’s wither. “I doubt he’s carried anyone near eighteen-stone. I want to earn his trust, which won’t happen if I overtax him initially.”

“That is most thoughtful of you.” His unanticipated consideration for the abused horse caused Althelia’s heart to flutter and a warm sensation like hot chocolate to sluice through her veins.

Who was the real Owen Lockington?

The aloof, brooding brute or the caring, warmhearted man?

Couldn’t he be both?

“What is the real story behind yours and Leonidas’s friendship?” she asked without preamble.

An eyebrow quirked, he scratched his chin.

“You don’t mince words, do you, Lady Althelia Westbrook?”

She lifted her shoulders. “I see no point in tiptoeing around. Directness serves me better these days.”

He sighed, then leaned back in his saddle as if he’d made a decision.

“Several fellows—all legitimate sons of peers and a few with titles themselves—were teasing me about my birth and appearance. Even as a youth, I was gangly and huge, my hair unruly, and my clothing far inferior to theirs. They found me an easy target. Leonidas observed their taunting and called them out for it. They didn’t take kindly to his interference and thrashed both of us soundly.”

“I’m sure my family never knew that.” Althelia thinned her mouth in outrage. “The cruel brutes. I hope you managed a few sound punches too.”

“Aye, and so did Leonidas. Several of the buggers sported blackened eyes, as did both of us.”

“Well done, you.” She gave a satisfied nod.

He chuckled, a deep resonating purr in his wide chest, like a big, contented cat. “But that’s not what kept the curs from attending class the next day. Your brother, the wicked devil, bribed a barmaid to taint their ales all evening with generous amounts of a tincture meant to cure constipation. The chaps spent the next four and twenty hours on chamber pots.”

“*He did not!*” She giggled. “Oh, that is priceless.”

“He didn’t tell me until after he’d done the deed, lest he was caught, and I should get blamed too.” Owen shook his head. “No one had ever come to my defense before, and we became the best chums afterward.”

“Can I ask you something else, Owen?”

He eyed her suspiciously but not unkindly.

“I suspect, Althelia, you will do so even if I say no.”

She rolled her eyes, then shrugged because he had the right of it.

How was a person to learn anything unless they asked?

“Probably. I wasn’t always this outgoing, you know.”

Some might call her behavior today forward and sassy.

“*Hmm.*” The noise he made in his throat told her nothing.

“In truth, three years ago, I was a mousey, bashful wallflower, easily intimidated and manipulated and frequently

the target of humiliation and teasing. Not by my family, of course,” she rushed to reassure him when his sable eyebrows arched high on his broad forehead. “But by others in the community, one family in particular.”

The memory of the event that sent Althelia fleeing to Boston for over two years still caused discomfort but not the anguish and mortification it once had. She’d healed, but the scar remained—an irrefutable reminder to take extreme care of who she trusted and to guard her heart.

Across the meadows, the Hartigans’ manor’s chimneys stood as dark sentinels against the rising sun. Smoke slowly spiraled upward from one triple stack. Peter Hartigan was in residence—had been for a year. Rumor had it he’d been injured but that he’d recovered except for a partial memory loss.

Since none of the Westbrooks spoke to the Hartigans any longer—their closest neighbors and, at one time, good friends—they didn’t know precisely what had happened to him. Furthermore, if Althelia was any measure, they didn’t care. That proverbial bridge had burned, and there was no rebuilding it had anyone been so inclined, and no one was.

The oldest son, Peter, and his sister, Leticia, had caused Althelia’s torment, though she had no doubt, meanspirited and spiteful Leticia Hartigan had instigated the debacle.

Unexpected compassion shadowed Owen’s striking eyes. “I’d vow the transition from a bashful caterpillar into the vibrant butterfly you are now was not without angst and discomfort.”

How did he know?

Had he also endured pain and disgrace?

Adversity and disappointment turned some people bitter, cold, and toxic. In others, hardship strengthened them while enabling them to empathize with others who suffered.

Althelia pointed to the stately house, partially shrouded in mist. “That’s the Hartigans’ house. At a summertime ball, the daughter of the house plied me with spiked lemonade. I was so gullible and foolish back then. I believed her smiles and promises of friendship.”

She peeked at Owen from beneath her lashes but detected no discernable emotion.

“I take it that is not the entire story?” he asked, reining Sampson in as a hare dashed across the track.

She shook her head.

If only it had been.

“No. Leticia convinced me that her brother Peter was enamored with me and wanted to meet me on the terrace to declare himself. I’d been infatuated with Peter for years, and Leticia must’ve guessed my secret.” Althelia released a caustic laugh. “I have no idea what I saw in him now, but a young girl’s silliness blinded my eyes and emotions.”

And a yearning to be desired.

No man or boy, for that matter, had ever directed his romantic attention toward the unsure, gauche youth she’d

been. In truth, other than Gregory Bancroft in Boston—who'd pursued her quite vigilantly—Althelia had been beaules.

Gregory's clammy hands, wet lips, and propensity to burp at the most inopportune times didn't lend themselves to a successful courtship. Besides, though she'd fled England for a time, she had no wish to marry an American and make Boston her home.

Even with her eyes open, Althelia could still recall that fateful night as if it were yesterday: Leticia's arm around her waist as she guided Althelia out the French windows, onto the terrace, and toward a dark corner. The stars twinkling overhead, laughter and music carrying on the gentle breeze, and a lone cow lowing.

"Peter awaited me in a shadowy nook. As I drew near, I smelled the spirits on him. He was well into his cups. In truth, I believe the wall supported him."

"Here she is, dear brother." Leticia's singsong voice still grated along Althelia's spine. "Just as you requested."

"Peter called me his darling love and yanked me to his chest. Pulling the pins from my hair, he buried his face in my neck.

"I gagged at the stench of spirits, and suddenly afraid, I tried to wrest away.

"All at once, Peter stiffened and shoved me away in disgust and loathing, though he still gripped my arms. 'Bloody hell. You're *not* Meridith.'"

Meridith Peterson, the woman Peter had proposed to and who refused him, breaking his heart.

“And then I knew the awful truth. Leticia had deceived me in the most vile way. Peter too, but rather than act the part of a gentleman and apologize or stay to help me, he shoved me away. Through bloodshot, drunken eyes, he squinted at me.

“Althelia? Are you addled? How could you ever think I’d want *you*?”

“A chorus of laughter erupted behind me, and as Peter stormed away, I stood there frozen and unable to flee, the target of every nasty, malicious denizen Leticia had arranged to watch my humiliation.”

As she finished, the sun ascended past the horizon and glowed through the whispering pine trees.

Owen remained silent as a stone; his eyes steely cold.

Althelia couldn’t conceive why she’d shared the sordid tale with him. Other than her family, she’d never told anyone. All this time, she’d been so careful not to trust blindly, and what did she do?

Blurt her most private secret to him.

What must he think of her?

Heat flamed across her face, but she resisted the overwhelming need to spin Stardust around and gallop back to the stables. Fear no longer dictated her actions. She’d face the consequences of her impulsiveness—good or bad.

“Forgive me for boring you with pathetic tales.” Althelia shifted to kick Stardust’s sides and send the mare hurtling after the others—anything to escape this horrid awkwardness her oversharing had caused.

Making a gruff sound in his throat, Owen turned those fathomless green eyes upon her. “I sincerely regret you experienced such cruelty, and if I ever have the misfortune of encountering Hartigan, I’ll be sorely tempted to punch the bugger in the nose.”

A small, angry tick caused the muscle in his jaw to flex, and the question she’d meant to ask him flew from her mind.

Owen Lockington—a man she barely knew—was livid on her behalf?

That knowledge bolstered Althelia’s spirits much more than it ought to have done.

Eva had threatened to do much worse to Peter Hartigan when she’d heard the story. Her solution involved impossible physical contortions and emasculating the fiend.

“Someone needs to make him pay for what he did to you.” Vengeance had sharpened Eva’s features and tone that long-ago afternoon in Boston. “Louts like him cannot be permitted to get away with their misdeeds.”

Heaven help the man that crossed Althelia’s wallflower-by-choice cousin.

“I shan’t deny it was horrendous at the time,” Althelia said. “But it was also the catalyst that made me determined to

change. To come out of my shell and take control of my life. To never let another control me again.”

Owen smiled then, a genuine curving of his hard mouth, and her heart fairly melted.

“I think you are quite the most admirable woman I have ever met, Lady Althelia Westbrook.”

Then he kicked Sampson’s sides and thundered past her to join the other men.

And for once, Althelia didn’t feel the need to prove her prowess—to demonstrate she was just as good, strong, adept, fast, and intelligent as any man. Because the gentle giant who lumbered into Hefferwickshire House yesterday had rendered her utterly speechless and—*God help me*—had just taken a piece of her heart with him.

Now what was she to do?

CHAPTER
SIX

*H*efferwickshire House stables

Late afternoon

21 December

UNABLE TO RESIST VISITING the gelding again, Owen stood in Sampson's stall, stroking the horse's strong neck while considering the tawdry story Althelia had shared yesterday morning.

She'd faced ruination but, like the mythical phoenix, had risen majestic and glorious from the flames of her disgrace rather than permit the ignominy to consume her. He couldn't help but admire her gumption, strength, and intrepidity, even if forged by fires of difficulty and despair.

Sampson bumped his nose against Owen's chest, and his heart swelled with affection.

It seemed the horse had fallen in love with him too.

Until this magnificent beast, Owen hadn't believed in love at first sight.

Small wonder that two oversized, misunderstood creatures should develop an affinity.

How much convincing must he do to persuade the Duke of Latham to permit him to buy the animal?

Owen mentally calculated how much he dared spend of his limited available funds. His affection for the horse almost made him consider withdrawing a portion of his inheritance.

Almost.

It was too soon to broach the subject of buying the gelding just yet, but Owen suspected from the speculative glances Haygarth, Duke of Latham, and his sons veered his way during their rides yesterday and today that they'd concluded the same thing he had.

Fate or providence or God Himself had decreed Sampson should be Owen's.

The horse was an unexpected but welcome blessing—another unforeseen benefit of spending the holiday with the Duke of Latham and his family.

Lucius Westbrook and his wife, Clodovea, arrived early yesterday afternoon. The duke's second biological son seemed a pleasant enough chap, if a trifle reserved in his embarrassingly starched cravat and over-polished boots, in love with his exquisite Spanish wife.

Owen must join the family for tea shortly. Even as his mind shied away from having to carry on trite conversation, his mouth watered at the thought of more shortbread. Mrs.

Tastepotting's shortbread was as scrumptious as the fresh buns he'd gorged on at breakfast both mornings.

His ruminations wandered back to Althelia again.

She'd revealed multiple confidences in the short time he'd known her. She hardly seemed the type to blather on about personal issues to random strangers, so why had she confided in him?

Each time, she'd appeared as flummoxed about her revelations as he.

Mayhap Owen had the same effect on her that she had on him, which proved highly worrisome. At present, there was no room for the distraction of a woman in his life. He had a plan and must stick to it if he wanted to achieve success. Regardless, how often did he encounter a female as enthralling, captivating, and wholly entrancing as Lady Althelia Westbrook?

Never.

And he'd never, *ever*, met a woman who looked at him the way she did.

It made him want to puff out his chest and strut about like a proud rooster.

Granted, a gargantuan rooster.

And that was another thing; his size didn't seem to matter to her, and because of that, he was less self-conscious. His stomach tightened, and his pulse zipped along dizzily, simply recalling her radiant smile and the edge of vulnerability she'd no doubt deny when she told the humiliating tale.

Owen fisted his hands so hard that the nails bit into his palms.

Had Peter Hartigan been present, he'd have planted the sod a facer and assured he never treated another woman with the disrespect, disdain, and disregard he'd directed toward Althelia. As for Leticia Hartigan, she better hope Owen never made her acquaintance.

He was quite intimidating when he declined to act the gentleman.

The stable door squealed in protest, announcing someone's entrance.

He peeked around the stall's door.

Althelia, holding what appeared to be a bowl of milk, strode toward her beloved puppies.

Inez recognized her tread or perhaps smelled her, and a happy whine echoed from the puppy pen.

“Hello, my love. Forgive me for not greeting you and the darlings this morning. I've brought you warm milk.”

Noisy slurping commenced as Inez enjoyed her treat.

Althelia chatted on as if the dog was her dearest friend. “I've had trouble sleeping. Dreams of our visitor disturb my sleep most of the night. He's quite the most enigmatic man I've ever met.”

She slipped inside the stall.

Althelia had dreamed of Owen?

A decidedly idiotic grin split his face.

“Sampson, my friend. Will you excuse me?” He kissed the gelding’s soft nose. “I have the most curious pressing need to say hello to Althelia.”

Sampson blew out a horsey breath which Owen took as an affirmative response.

Perchance, he should also consider getting a dog?

He’d been lonely for a long time. A dog might be just the thing.

Casting a scorching glance ceilingward, he scowled.

Owen James Patrick Lockington. Stop with these domesticated musings.

A horse? A dog?

Fanciful notions about a nymph of a woman?

Nevertheless, his feet took him to Inez’s stall.

“Hello, Althelia.”

A cleverer greeting escaped Owen.

No one would ever accuse him of waxing poetic.

Sitting cross-legged in a pretty rose and green gown, she glanced upward with an inviting smile.

Did she suspect he’d overheard her chatting with the dog?

If so, he couldn’t detect any chagrin.

Although she’d always been open and welcoming with him, he still braced himself for the expected awkwardness and rejection his presence usually elicited with females.

“Come in, Owen.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Ten impossibly long heartbeats later

ONCE MORE, Lady Althelia Westbrook surprised Owen with her openness and approachability.

She patted a spot beside her, which he eyed dubiously. As if sensing his doubt that he could fit in the confined space, she scooted over. “If you extend your legs, you should fit.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for tea?” He folded onto the straw-strewn wooden planks, then gathered the little mite from yesterday, now well fed, into his hand. The puppy wriggled around until Owen tucked him beneath his chin.

He’d never owned a dog, but the idea grew on him with such ferocity, much like he must acquire Sampson, he didn’t know himself anymore.

Althelia pulled a face.

“I could say the same about you. I’ve already changed, but I thought I’d steal a few minutes with the puppies. Mama and Papa are occupied with Lucius and Clodovea, and I vow I heard a coach arrive just as I entered. Probably Adolphus, a

day early.” She stroked the puppy’s tiny head with her forefinger. “He’s the Marquess of Edenhaven and the future duke.”

“Yes, Leonidas explained your father adopted your mother’s two sons from a previous marriage before your parents went on to have six more children.” He bent his strong mouth upward. “I’m an only child.”

“Did you want siblings?” She cocked her head, her poignant azure gaze searching his face. “I cannot fathom my life without my brothers, though Mama might’ve obliged me by having another girl. My brothers are not unkind, but they call me Ally-Cat when they know I detest the nickname and often go off and do manly things together, which I’m not permitted to do.”

Leaning against the planks, which squeaked in protest at the pressure of his weight, Owen crossed his ankles as he cuddled the pup. “Leonidas tells me you can outshoot all of them and are a formidable rival at archery and billiards.”

“He told you that? Well, he fibbed because Lucius and Layton can best me at pistols.” She gave him a saucy grin. “*Barely.*”

Precocious minx.

Stroking the tiny puppy, he couldn’t contain a droll chuckle. “Does it bruise their manly pride?”

“I don’t think so.” Shrugging, Althelia shook her head and flicked a strand of straw from her gown. Her frock would likely bear wrinkles from sitting on the floor and perhaps even

a stain, yet she seemed completely unconcerned about her appearance. “I’m never sure whether they are proud or exasperated with me.”

“Definitely proud. Of that, I have no doubt.” He extended his other hand for Inez to sniff and scratched behind her ears when she wagged her tail in approval.

“I imagine my family is quite overwhelming to you, Owen, and they aren’t all here yet. Last Christmas, several of Papa’s brothers—he has five—and their families joined us. It was utter chaos but glorious too. Grandmama was in heaven.”

Glancing upward, Owen scratched his jaw.

It wasn’t a secret, but he didn’t generally volunteer his tawdry origins. “I’m the bastard son of an earl and the governess he seduced. My mother never married. I have three older half-sisters, but they do not acknowledge me.”

He’d run into the eldest, Lady Maristella Fernsby-Hartshorn, at Hatchard’s Book Store a few years ago. Tall and thin, cold and haughty, she’d looked through him as if he’d been window glass. He still wasn’t certain if she’d not known who he was or if she’d given him the cut direct.

Assuredly, Owen hadn’t lain awake at night ruminating about the encounter because the truth was, he had no more pressing desire to know his sisters than they did him.

“I’ve decided I should name my puppy,” Althelia announced.

She adeptly changed the subject as if sensing the conversation had crossed into uncomfortable territory for him.

A skill he was coming to learn she seemed quite adept at. Either that, or she was sensitive to others' feelings and would spare them discomfiture.

Her consideration raised her another notch in his esteem, which had become perilously close to placing her on a pedestal.

She ran a slender finger, the oval nail neatly filed, down the pup's tiny, fragile spine.

"If I name her, it will make it harder for my parents to tell me no." Through the thick fringe of her eyelashes, she cut him a chagrined glance. "Please don't think ill of me or that I'm always so devious. Truth be told, I'm quite desperate for a companion. Eva's leaving this spring, and I fear I shall be lost without her."

"I don't think ill of you, Althelia, for wanting a pet."

The nascent smile tipping her mouth upward was a mélange of self-castigation, guilt, and rebellion.

"I've decided on Zenobia," she said with confidence. "The Greek meaning is born of Zeus, though *she* was born of Apollo."

She chuckled at her wry jest.

"I'm considering getting a dog myself." The words left Owen's mouth, and as they did, he realized he had no desire to retract them. Indicating the little male he'd rescued yesterday, and which currently slept tucked into his neck, he lifted a shoulder. "This little chap made quite an impression on me."

Althelia graced him with another beaming smile and clapped her hands once. “I think that is a brilliant idea. You can name him Zeus. Zenobia and Zeus.”

“A most fitting name,” Owen agreed, setting the pup beside his concerned mother.

“I’m positive my parents will agree to *your* request.” She thinned her lips, doubt shadowing her eyes and turning them navy blue in the stable’s muted light. “I’m not altogether certain they’ll agree to mine, however.”

If she were Owen’s, he wouldn’t be able to refuse her anything.

In mere days, this enchanting creature had begun to wiggle her way into his thoughts and heart and was fast becoming an irresistible temptation.

He ought to be horrified. Terrified. Petrified.

She wasn’t part of his plan.

But she can be.

“Althelia?” Desire roughened his voice, and Inez cocked her head and lifted her spotted ears.

Althelia didn’t seem to notice his guttural tone.

“*Hmm?*” she responded distractedly while peeking upward through those sweeping lashes.

Before reason could check Owen’s insane impulse, he brushed her sweet, velvety lips with his.

Eyelashes fluttering, Althelia closed her eyelids and, sighing, leaned into him.

No force on heaven or earth could've prevented him from wrapping his arms around her and tasting that honeyed decadence again.

She moved her mouth beneath his, inexperienced but eager, and a ferocious wave of want made his head spin. If only she could be his, he'd protect and adore her all his days.

Impossible. Impractical. Irrational.

None of that mattered.

The sensual vixen in his arms did.

Seizing the precious moments, Owen cradled Althelia's delicate face in his hands and tenderly explored her mouth. He'd never get enough of this complex, courageous woman who smelled of spring, lavender, and wildflowers.

She was intoxicating—as addicting as opium or spirits—and he conceded it might already be too late for his heart. An organ he didn't think capable of love again after his mother died, though Sampson had dispelled that fallacy.

Mustering all of his self-control, Owen lifted his mouth but rested his forehead against hers. His blood thundered through his veins—deafening, powerful, and unrelenting—much like the flash flood he'd witnessed in Scotland a few years ago.

Her breath came in shallow little pants.

“Oh, my,” she whispered, her voice sultry and breathy. “That was quite something. I had no idea kissing could be so ... magical. I quite like it.”

Mirth bubbled behind his breastbone, and he chuckled low. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“Indeed. Very much.” Her focus trailed to his lips in an unspoken invitation.

And God help him, with every fiber of his being, Owen yearned to accept. He’d halfway lowered his head to sample their deliciousness again when he froze.

The stable doors squeaked open, and the distinct sounds of someone leading horses inside finally stirred Owen to his senses. After their journey, the ducal heir’s team likely needed a good brushing and feeding.

“Come on with ye, laddies.” The Scot’s burr held affection. “A nice brushin’ then warm mash on this cold day. How does that sound to ye, my fine fellows?”

Owen angled to his feet, making certain to keep quiet, then extended his hand to Althelia.

He put one finger to his lips to indicate she also needed to take care.

She nodded and, without hesitation, slipped her fine-boned fingers into his ham-like grip.

Should they be discovered, explaining why he and Althelia were closeted in the stall, silent as church mice, might take a wee bit of doing. He had no desire to look down the barrel of a dueling pistol as the duke or one of his sons demanded satisfaction on the field of honor.

“Once Maddock has them in their stalls, he’ll brush them down,” she whispered, releasing his hand and picking a piece

of hay off her gown. “We can sneak out then.”

“Aye,” Owen whispered back.

Coconspirators, they grinned at each other.

He had smiled more since arriving at Hefferwickshire House than in the past decade.

The horses’ steady *clip-clop, clip-clop* passed by the stall and then turned to shuffling as they docilely stepped into their assigned stalls. The sound of brushing soon commenced, accompanied by the stable hand’s murmured assurances.

Owen peeked out and, satisfied that the passage was clear and the outside door still open, signaled to Althelia that they could go, hopefully undetected.

When she unexpectedly slipped her hand into his palm, his heart toppled from his chest and plopped at her feet—hers to do with as she wished, if she only knew the power she had over him.

I’m in a bloody lot of trouble.

Hand in hand, as if it were the most natural thing in all the world, they tiptoed the stable’s length. Once outside, he exhaled the lungful of air he’d held for fear of discovery and released their entwined fingers.

As they headed toward the great house, Owen laced his hands behind his back lest anyone observe them and suggest anything untoward had occurred.

It had, but that secret couldn’t be made known.

“Why did you kiss me, Owen?”

Of course, Althelia being Althelia, would ask that.

Because I couldn't help it?

Because, Lady Althelia Westbrook, you have mesmerized me?

Because, although I have no right and nothing to offer a duke's daughter, I fear that I'm falling in love with you?

A grizzled gardener rounded the corner, shovel in hand, and saved Owen from answering. His weathered face crumpled into a wide smile, exposing a missing front tooth, as he tipped his hat.

“Lady Althelia. Sir.” He veered a practiced glance heavenward. “I’d guess we’ll have snow before long.”

“Oh, I do hope so, Barret. Christmas snow is always the best,” Althelia said. “But not before Cassius, Darius, and Layton arrive.”

Conflict raged behind Owen’s ribs.

Snow might well delay his departure after Christmas. However, the things that had been his priority a week ago had somehow faded in importance.

“Althelia?” Tall and regal, Margaret, the Duchess of Latham, stood in the entry, stunning in a maroon gown trimmed in cream lace with a ruby brooch pinned at the collar and matching ruby teardrop earrings dangling from her ears. Only a few silver threads peppered her auburn hair, much like her daughter’s.

“Your Grace.” Owen dipped his chin deferentially.

The probing look the duchess leveled Owen suggested she knew exactly what he'd been up to with her daughter, and guilt heated his nape.

“Come along, dear.” The duchess motioned for Althelia to ascend the stone risers. “I need you in the kitchen for a few minutes before we have tea.”

“Of course, Mama.” Althelia trotted up the steps, pieces of straw clinging to her hem.

“The men are in the billiard's room, Mr. Lockington, if you'd care to join them before tea.” The duchess inclined her head. “I'll send Simms to show you the way.”

Owen detected no frost in the duchess's smile, tone, or brown eyes.

“Thank you.” He angled his head. “There was something I wished to speak to His Grace about.”

Make that three somethings: Sampson, a pup, and investing in Owen's coal mine.

A fourth *something* tried to shove its way to the front of that important list, but his reason had returned, and Owen staunchly refused to totter down that dangerous path.

Now was not the time, in any event.

As she led Althelia away, the duchess linked her arm through Althelia's elbow and lowered her head to speak into her daughter's ear. Probably warning her away from Owen as any good mother worth her salt was wont to do.

But Althelia, *the delightful minx*, reached her other hand behind her and waggled her fingers in a secret farewell.

Every carefully laid plan Owen had erected disintegrated at that moment, leaving him standing in imaginary rubble.

“Bollocks.” He scraped his fingers through his mass of hair. “I’m in trouble up to my limp neckcloth.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

*H*efferwickshire House drawing room

Two evenings later, after supper

23 December 1826

STANDING before the window overlooking the shadowy gardens, lustrous with newly fallen snow, Althelia nibbled her lower lip, scheming how she might formulate a plausible excuse to hurry the gentlemen's after-supper brandy and cigars along.

Perhaps she should pretend to swoon?

She toyed with a holly leaf, taking care not to prick her finger on a spine. The essence of pine and other holiday greenery filled the room, adding to the already festive atmosphere.

A mild headache had niggled behind her eyes since this afternoon, making it difficult to do anything but nibble her dinner. Still, she'd never swooned from a headache or an empty stomach.

Just as rapidly as Althelia concocted her potential emergency, she discarded it.

True, that would bring Papa and her brothers running—hopefully, Owen too—but then Mama would send her to bed for the evening with one of Mrs. Bottleknob’s vile tonics, or at the very least headache powders, which would leave her groggy and woolen headed tomorrow.

In the past two days, she and Owen had managed to sneak off together several times. Five minutes here. Fifteen minutes there, and stolen kisses at every opportunity, beneath the mistletoe kissing boughs and elsewhere too.

However, it was impossible to arrange for longer assignations as more of the family arrived, and Christmas drew nearer. Up from Brighton, where he’d fulfilled his dream of opening an art studio, Cassius arrived this morning, only hours before the first snowflakes began falling.

At this juncture, it was doubtful Layton, a captain in His Majesty’s Army, or Darius, a lieutenant in the Navy and finishing what he claimed was his last year in military service, would put in an appearance. Likely they’d sent their excuses, but given the post’s unreliability and the distance the missives might have to travel, it could be the new year before the letters arrived.

That caused a temporary pall over the celebratory spirit, but as officers serving the King, neither Layton’s nor Darius’s time was their own.

There was always next year.

Althelia desperately wanted and needed time alone with Owen to explore this wonderful thing blossoming between them, which became increasingly difficult with all the activities Mama planned. For certain, someone would note their absence and remark upon it. Then believable explanations must be devised.

According to Leonidas, Owen planned to leave Hefferwickshire House before the new year. That gave Althelia scant little time to convince the dear man that they were exactly what the other needed. From the onset, he'd stirred something latent to life in her. When he first kissed her—what a wonderfully wicked thing for the darling rogue to do—everything became crystal clear to Althelia.

Every doubt faded.

Every piece fell into place, and she understood with complete clarity and excitement.

She'd done the untenable, the impossible, the most marvelously confusing, splendid thing she'd ever done in her three and twenty years.

Althelia had fallen in love at first sight.

If she weren't mistaken—*please God, I cannot be, must not be*—Owen's feelings mirrored hers. Now she must convince him to declare himself, ask Papa's permission, and then propose before he left.

Each of these was a monumental task, but not impossible.

Love made everything possible.

Time, however, proved a most inconvenient detriment to her future happiness.

Traveling and owning a club paled in comparison to becoming Owen's wife. Nevertheless, she still wanted a dog. In the evenings, she and Owen would sit by a fire reading or chatting, faithful Zenobia's and Zeus's heads in their respective laps.

Althelia had spent the better part of two days fantasizing about a future with him and sought him out at every turn. Which proved far more difficult than it ought to have done. The menfolk kept hying off to do manly things like cut the yuletide tree down while the women attended to the more domestic Christmastide duties.

Tonight, everyone would help decorate the tree erected this afternoon in the ballroom for tomorrow's annual Christmas Eve ball.

This evening, she had taken special care with her appearance. The cobalt blue velvet gown accented with gold ribbons flattered her coloring and emphasized her slight curves. Sapphires from Mama's parure set twinkled and glittered at her ears, collarbone, and wrist.

Althelia had suffered through Beatty, her lady's maid, arranging her thick hair into an artful Grecian creation with gold ribbon threaded throughout. The tugging, twisting, and pinning had provoked her headache to a new level.

Still, nothing, not even if thunder cracked inside her head, would keep Althelia from spending every minute she could with Owen. She'd even dabbed perfume behind her ears, at her

wrists, and scandalously in her décolletage before smearing the tiniest touch of rouge on her lips and cheeks.

All that to impress a man who'd been a stranger less than a week ago.

After the catastrophe with Peter Hartigan, hadn't she vowed never to let misguided affection dictate her choices?

But Owen Lockington wasn't just *any* man.

He was *the* man who'd captured her heart and who Althelia had decided she must marry.

Another glance at the Wedgewood ormolu mantel clock confirmed the minute hand had only moved three notches since she'd last looked.

She practically growled in frustration.

Whatever were the men discussing for so long?

Normally, they joined the women within thirty minutes.

A full five and forty minutes had passed since the ladies had come through for their after-supper tea in the drawing room. If she drank any more tea, she'd have to excuse herself to use the necessary, and just her luck, the men would arrive while she was away. Then Owen might be corralled into a conversation, card game, or who knows what with someone else before she returned.

Across the room, seated side-by-side on the ivory and gold brocade settee, her lovely sisters-in-law, Clodovea and Aurelie, chatted with Mama and Eva on the opposite matching settee. At the room's far end in the window seat, Aurelie's

niece and nephew, Nathalie and Rémi, played with an intricately carved and painted wooden Noah's ark set—an early Christmas present from their doting new grandparents.

Aurelie's Aunt Marie had retired earlier, complaining her bones hurt from the journey and cold. Mama instructed a maid to heat her bed with a bed warmer and Mrs. Tastepotting to prepare a hot toddy for the elderly woman.

Althelia slid her attention to Grandmama, dozing in an armchair before the fire several feet away, only to find Elizabeth Westbrook, the dowager duchess, wide awake and her keen gaze behind her thick spectacles pinned upon Althelia.

Her weak-tea brown eyes alight with a secret, Grandmama Libby beckoned with a gnarly finger. That was the problem with having an eccentric grandmother with Roma heritage.

She *knew* things.

Althelia crossed the room and, after settling on the short, needlepoint-covered stool, took her grandmother's knotty, blue-veined hand in hers. "You wanted to speak with me, Grandmama?"

Leaning forward, the many necklaces around her neck clinking over her mandarin orange clad bosom, Grandmama patted Althelia's cheek. "My dear child, you couldn't be more obvious if you waltzed naked down Bond Street wearing the crown jewels."

Bother and blast.

Was Grandmama correct?

Was Althelia's preoccupation with Owen that noticeable?

It didn't matter.

She wouldn't admit her innermost thoughts, particularly when they were new, bewildering, and wondrous. "I do not know what you are talking about."

"Tish, tosh." Grandmama laughed, a raspy chuckle, like the crinkling of old, brittle paper. "I wasn't born yesterday. You cannot keep your eyes off that striking rascal, Mr. Lockington."

Althelia cast a furtive glance around, relieved to see the other women paid her no heed other than a cursory glance from Eva. Her cousin probably had her ears wagging as she strained to hear the muted conversation between Althelia and Grandmama.

"Hush, Grandmama. Someone might hear you and take your ramblings seriously. I've only known him for a few days. You're jumping to ridiculous,"—*accurate*—"conclusions."

"Bah and balderdash." Grandmama waved her hand as if a pesky insect flew about her head. "I'm old but not blind. I know what I've witnessed."

Althelia must conceal her fascination with Owen until he declared himself.

Surely, he must feel the same way.

Grandmama bent her mouth into a mysterious smile. "And I know what I've *seen*."

That caused a frisson to skitter up Althelia's spine, and she shivered, despite the roaring fire blazing in the hearth. Grandmama rarely spoke so boldly of her unique Roma gift. Such preternatural things were frowned upon by *le beau monde*, though Grandmama, more often than not, cocked a snook at Society.

It was on the tip of Althelia's tongue to ask precisely what her grandmama had foreseen when the brazen dame bent forward and whispered, "Do you suppose his willy is as large as the rest of him?"

Althelia choked on a half gasp, half guffaw.

God above.

Had her grandmother no restraint?

"Grandmama! You are outside of enough." Althelia shook her head, instantly regretting when the motion rattled her brain around her skull. She said in a ferocious whisper, "I cannot believe you said that. You are truly outrageous."

Instead of remorse, Grandmama winked. "I do try."

"What am I to do with you?" Althelia shook her head. "Swear right now that you will not say anything to Mr. Lockington or anyone else about your fanciful musings."

"But child, I have no control over fate." Genuine bemusement creased the corners of Grandmama's eyes and sketched parallel wrinkles over her crepey cheeks.

"Grandmama. I mean it." Althelia squeezed the frail hand she still held. "*Please.*"

“I shan’t say anything *yet*.” Her grandmother cocked her silvery head, the usual assortment of colorful feathers swaying with her movement. “I’ll wait to see how things play out.”

Perfectly wonderful.

Now Althelia had to worry about her grandmother saying something inappropriate, and Grandmama *always* said unsuitable things.

“My dear, you look a bit piqued. Are you feeling quite the thing?” Grandmama pressed her hand to Althelia’s brow. “You’re a trifle warm, but it could be your gown.”

“A slight headache. Nothing more, I—”

Just then, the door opened, and the men filed in.

Husbands found their wives straightaway, and as Althelia stood, she tried to appear casual as she sought Owen. Last in, his broad shoulders practically touched either side of the doorway, or perhaps his commanding presence made it appear that way.

Her heart skipped a beat, then kicked back into an irregular tempo. She was delighted to see he’d also sought her out with his gaze.

He shared a private smile with her.

Was he remembering their kisses too?

Papa cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Forgive our tardiness in joining you, ladies.” Always the cavalier, he kissed Mama’s knuckles, and she gave him an

adoring smile. Their first marriages were not happy matches, but they'd found lasting love the second time around.

"Mr. Lockington, that is Owen..." Papa grinned, as did her brothers, as they exchanged pleased, secretive glances.

What was going on?

Papa continued. "The Westbrooks have invested in Owen's mining operation, and after Twelfth Night, we shall venture to Cumberland and inspect our new project. Moreover, he's purchased Sampson, and I've agreed he might have one of Inez and Apollo's puppies."

Oh, well done, Owen.

A triple triumph.

Did that mean he intended to extend his visit until January sixth when Twelfth Night ended?

Giddiness burbled in Althelia's tummy, and she was hard-pressed not to give a gleeful whoop.

That gave her and Owen almost another fortnight together.

He traveled farther into the room, accepting congratulations from the women and shaking the men's hands. He wasn't at ease but was more relaxed than when he arrived.

The Westbrooks had that effect on people, and Althelia couldn't be happier that her family had embraced the man she hoped to marry—even if *he* didn't know it yet.

This love business was messy and confusing.

Just in case anyone noticed her unusual happiness for Owen, she sought a distraction.

“I want a puppy as a companion too. I’ve already named her Zenobia.” At Althelia’s abrupt declaration, every person in the room swung their attention to her.

“Darling, of course, you can pick one of the puppies.” Papa’s indulgent smile didn’t quite meet his dark blue eyes. She had been unpardonably impolite and trampled upon Owen’s moment. “You only had to ask.”

“Thank you, Papa, but I want Zenobia to go wherever I go. Inside the house, the coach, everywhere.” She held her breath as her parents exchanged an unreadable glance.

“That’s something we shall discuss later.” Mama accepted Papa’s hand and stood. She faced Owen. “Permit me to offer my congratulations as well, Owen.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

A discussion usually meant no.

Lips pressed together, Althelia nodded and dared to raise her disillusioned gaze to Owen’s.

Compassion simmered there, and instead of pleasing her, perversely, it made her angry.

As happy as she was for him, it didn’t escape her that had he been a woman, none of the things he now celebrated would likely have come to pass. The tension she’d assumed was excitement only an hour ago now thrummed like a Highlander’s drum behind her eyes.

In truth, she felt quite wretched.

Simms entered, bearing a tray with champagne-filled flutes.

“Ah, Simms. Your timing is impeccable.” Papa gestured Owen forward. “Come everyone, gather ’round and celebrate with us.”

Althelia offered a weak smile, blinking against the haziness that had descended upon the drawing room. Those little squiggly lines and dancing dots before her vision were the queerest things. “Please excuse me. I’m not feeling myself.”

She pivoted to leave, but instead of moving forward, she tottered, her knees crumpling as if made of syllabub.

“Althelia!” Mama’s frightened cry came from a great distance.

The last thing Althelia recalled were iron-like arms catching her and pressing her to a marble-like chest.

And it was wondrous.

CHAPTER
NINE

Two agonizing minutes later
Still in the drawing room

OWEN HOVERED behind the settee he'd laid Althelia upon. When she'd swayed, and he'd realized she was about to faint, his heart had plummeted to the expensive Aubusson carpet before he bolted across the room, uncaring what the Westbrooks would think.

Her eyelashes fluttered before she opened her eyes and peered around, momentary confusion creasing the bridge of her nose.

Comprehension dawned, and she gasped. "Did I faint?"

"Indeed, you did, darling." Her mother sat beside her prone daughter on the settee and smoothed a hand across Althelia's forehead and then her cheek. "You don't feel feverish."

"You gave us quite a fright, Ally," Cassius Westbrook put in from near the fireplace.

“*Oui.*” Adolphus’s French wife, the Marchioness of Edenhaven, nodded, her arms around her niece and nephew. “I quite feared for you, Althelia.”

“Good thing Mr. Lockington is observant and caught her in the nick of time.” The dowager duchess, appearing rather oddly pleased at the turn of events, graced Owen with a brilliant smile. “Well done, you.”

“Yes. Thank you, Owen.” The beatific smile of gratitude Althelia directed toward him rendered Owen mute for a heartbeat. He didn’t even mind that she’d addressed him by his given name in front of her family, who all looked on with concern tinged with bewilderment.

All except for Eva and the dowager.

Those two were dual forces to reckon with.

“Dear, perhaps you should retire for the night,” Her Grace suggested.

“I’ll help you upstairs, Althelia,” Eva volunteered but not before giving Owen a sympathetic glance.

God help him.

Was he as transparent as all that?

“I’m perfectly fine. I just haven’t eaten much the last few days.” Althelia struggled to sit up. “I want to help decorate the tree tonight.”

“Have a drink of water.” Her father pushed a glass of water into her hand before signaling to the worried butler. “Please fetch light refreshments for Althelia from the kitchen, Simms.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The good fellow trotted off with such alacrity that he might’ve been walking barefoot on hot coals.

After obediently taking a sip and passing the glass to Cassius, Althelia swung her legs off the settee. “I have a slight headache. That is all.”

“I’ve always found fresh air does wonders for my headaches.” Everyone swung their attention to the dowager again. She blinked innocently, her eyes magnified behind her spectacles. “Owen, you should take my granddaughter for a brief walk on the terrace.”

“But, Mother, it is *snowing* outside,” the duke protested, eyeing his elderly mother as if she might be slightly addled.

Not addled.

Just meddlesome; God love the interfering dear.

“I know, dear boy, but part of the terrace is covered, is it not?” The old girl wasn’t backing down. “It would be a shame if Althelia couldn’t participate in decorating the tree after she made so many lovely paper cutouts today.”

Owen appreciated having the dowager in his corner, arguing his case, and he recognized an ally when he saw one. Truthfully, he would need a confederate, for though he’d only known Althelia for a few short days, he meant to ask for her hand in marriage.

His soul fairly sang for joy, and happiness thrummed in his veins because of his love for her—quite an abrupt change for a pragmatic, taciturn chap.

“Yes, a short walk. Just the thing, I think.” Althelia stood, not the least wobbly. “See. I’m as sturdy as a sailor upon a ship’s deck riding the sea’s rolling waves.”

“Here, use my wrap. I’m so near the fire, I do not need it.” The dowager extended a creamy knitted shawl.

Leonidas passed it to Althelia before giving Owen a considering look, the merest pleased smile teasing the edges of his mouth.

He knows.

Owen met Fletcher’s and then Lucius’s eyes.

They did too.

Owen didn’t care who had discovered his secret. If all went well, his dearest friend in all the world would soon be his brother-in-law.

“I don’t think...” the duchess began, but her husband took her hand.

“A few minutes with the doors open shan’t hurt,” he insisted.

“We haven’t toasted Owen yet.” Fletcher’s droll reminder brought everyone up short.

“Can we not do so in the ballroom before decorating the tree?” Clodovea Westbrook, the exotic Spanish beauty Lucius had married last year, suggested in her lilting accent. She’d accurately assessed Owen’s intentions as well.

“Brilliant, my love.” Lucius kissed her temple, and a becoming flush colored her cheeks.

“It’s settled then.” The duke gave Owen a severe look. One that said, *I’m trusting you with my only daughter. Do not betray that trust.* “You may walk her to the ballroom’s French window.”

As an apparent afterthought, he added, “Simms can bring her repast to the ballroom. Cassius and Fletcher, please open all the draperies along the terrace and ensure lamps are burning high in those rooms to illuminate the veranda.”

Owen swallowed as he met the Westbrook brothers’ eyes in turn.

He might be huge, but they outnumbered him.

“Yes, Father.” Fletcher dipped his chin before he and Cassius went to do as bid.

Althelia’s family cherished her. They wouldn’t forgive anyone hurting her again, if Peter Hartigan were an example.

“We’ll see you in the ballroom in a few minutes.” Althelia looped her hand through Owen’s elbow, allowing him to steer her to the door.

Once outside, the golden glow of the room behind them and along the terrace illumined the silvery landscape, turning it into a wonderland.

Giggling, she pressed into his side. “My word. That was quite intense.”

“I’ll say.” The tension knotting Owen’s shoulders eased as he breathed in the crisp, cold air.

Softly but steadily, the snow continued to fall. It seemed Hefferwickshire would enjoy a white Christmas. There was already talk among the men of sleigh rides.

Once out of earshot, Owen stopped and searched Althelia's face. "Are you certain you are quite recovered—*my darling*—?"

He wished he had the right to utter the endearment he'd silently added. He hoped to have that right soon.

Nodding, she gathered the shawl's corners tighter. "That's only the second time in my life I've fainted."

"Let me guess. The first was after the incident with Peter Hartigan?" he asked.

Bloody rotter.

"It was, but let's not waste our time alone talking about him." Althelia turned soft, adoring eyes upward. "I'm happy you and my family are getting on well."

He put a finger beneath her chin, searching her beloved face and memorizing each precious feature.

Was it too soon?

Or was this an opportunity Owen could not let pass?

"I hope one day they might be my family too. I believe I would rather enjoy having seven brothers."

Her eyes grew impossibly round, and her pretty mouth parted.

"Owen?" Uncertainty flickered across Althelia's face, and she licked her lower lip. "Are you saying you want to...marry

me?”

“Yes, my dearest love.” He brushed a finger across her lips, reverent and adoring.

“I want to marry you, Althelia, above all else. I love you. I adore you. I know it’s too soon, but we can wait as long as you need to, if you’ll have a by-blow clod such as me. I’ll never be refined or handsome or possess a sunny disposition. But I vow to cherish you every minute of every day for as long as I live, and when I shake off this mortal coil, my soul shall yearn for yours until we meet again.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes.

“Oh, Owen. It’s *not* too soon. I love you too. Yes, yes, I’ll marry you.”

They’d reached the ballroom’s open doors.

Likely, every Westbrook peered out the opening, but Owen didn’t care.

He gathered Althelia into his arms and sealed their troth with a kiss so scorching, it threatened to melt the nearly one foot of snow.

As Owen savored her kisses, the dowager’s raspy voice, filled with mirth and joy, carried into the crisp December night.

“We were right, Eva. It seems we’ve another wedding to plan.”

“Hurry up, you two.” Leonidas’s amused voice shattered the romantic moment. “We have a tree to decorate.”

CHAPTER
TEN

*H*effershire ballroom

Christmas Eve 1826

Ten minutes to midnight

TING. Ting. Ting.

Papa tapped a knife against his crystal wine glass. “May I have your attention, please? Servants are circulating the ballroom with champagne. Please take a flute in preparation for a toast.”

Slowly the guests’ conversations faded as they turned their curious attention to the Duke of Latham and his duchess standing before the four-piece string quartet. Likely, those who attended the Lathams’ annual Christmas Eve ball anticipated Papa’s usual Christmastide speech.

This year, they were in for a surprise.

Giddy with anticipation, Althelia pressed one hand to her stomach, the other securely wrapped in Owen’s warm and comforting hand.

He squeezed her fingers as if sensing her excitement.

Her parents had agreed to their betrothal but asked Althelia and Owen to wait until spring to wed. Althelia couldn't be certain, but she suspected they made the provision in case she changed her mind.

She wouldn't.

This kind of love, though sudden and unanticipated, was a forever love.

Casting a sideways glance at Owen, she wasn't surprised to find him staring at her in wonderment. As if he couldn't believe *she* wanted to marry *him*.

"I love you," she whispered, gratified to see his intense green eyes soften with adoration.

He lifted her hand to his mouth, murmuring, "And I love you, my heart," before grazing her knuckles with his lips. "I don't have an engagement ring for you yet, darling."

"I do not care." And Althelia didn't.

A ring merely symbolized to others what she treasured in her heart.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are tonight?" Owen's gaze held male appreciation and a promise of something much more intimate. "Pink becomes you."

"Yes, you have, and pink is my favorite color." She hugged his arm to her chest. "You look quite dashing too."

She had no idea how they'd managed it, but Owen wore a new ebony suit, complete with a holly-berry red waistcoat.

Undoubtedly, a tailor's purse was much heavier for completing the difficult task in record time.

"Everyone. My duchess and I have a wonderful announcement." Papa glanced around until he spied Althelia and Owen and motioned them forward. "Come, come, children."

Astonishment followed by delight skittered across Owen's rugged features.

Althelia could've hugged her father for his consideration and would later on.

Her parents would treat Owen, a bastard orphan, as their own. He would finally have the love, acceptance, and family his birth had denied him.

Althelia's heartbeat accelerated as Owen led her to the front of the room, and her family formed a semi-circle behind them.

Once before, at a similar ball, she had faced a crowd, humiliated and defeated. This time, with this remarkable man at her side, nothing and no one could make her feel anything but ecstatic.

"Family and friends." Beaming, Father lifted his glass. "Permit me to announce the betrothal of my daughter, Lady Althelia, to Owen Lockington."

Oohs and aahs followed by polite applause swelled around the glittering ballroom, lit by hundreds of beeswax candles suspended from crystal chandeliers.

Leonidas slapped Owen's shoulder. "I expect to be asked to be the best man."

"I wouldn't dream of having anyone else," Owen assured him.

Althelia hugged Eva, trying unsuccessfully not to cry. "And, Eva, I wish you to be my maid of honor."

"Nothing would make me happier." Eva blinked back tears. "Except castrating Peter Hartigan," she whispered fiercely in Althelia's ear.

"Don't continue to be offended on my account, Eva." She searched her cousin's earnest gaze. "I'm happy. Peter is part of my past."

Eva gave a tight nod.

"Sir, might I steal my future bride for a breath of fresh air?" Owen asked Papa.

"More likely, my future grandson wants to steal a few kisses." Grandmama's comment earned a round of amused chuckles.

She was correct, but she needn't announce Owen's intentions.

"Grandmama, you are incorrigible." Althelia kissed her grandmother's papery cheek. "But I adore you for it."

"Get on with you." Grandmama swung her cane toward the French windows, open to allow the night air to cool the sweltering ballroom, and above which hung a kissing bough of holly and mistletoe.

At the threshold, as the clock chimed the midnight hour, Owen drew Althelia to a stop beneath the bough. He pointed outside. “It’s snowing again. Are you certain you won’t get chilled?”

Happier than she’d ever been, Althelia cast off convention and gave the kissing bough a speculative look.

“Holly, mistletoe, and midnight snow. What could be more perfect?” Then in front of her amused family and the slightly shocked guests, just as the orchestra struck the first chords of the annual midnight Christmas waltz, she raised onto her tiptoes and kissed her betrothed.

EPILOGUE

Belforton Hall

Harrington, Cumberland, England

Early April 1828

Late evening

THIS IS CONTENTMENT.

Sitting on the floor, her back resting against Owen's wide chest and idly rubbing Zenobia behind the ears, Althelia drowsily watched the waning fire. Too comfortable to move, she sighed as he traced little circles behind her left ear and down her neck.

Zeus sprawled across the hearth, his head resting on Owen's ankle.

That Christmas season she'd first met and fallen in love with her husband, Althelia had envisioned a similar moment. Married just over a year and happy beyond measure, she now lived that dream.

Nine months ago, she'd finally persuaded Owen to accept his inheritance from his father. For the suffering he'd endured, he deserved much more than the fifty thousand pounds his sire had left him, which had swelled considerably with interest.

Owen had conceded to use the funds to purchase Belforton Hall to provide them a home and a future. They used Althelia's substantial dowry for the refurbishing of the house and stables where Stardust and Sampson, who had become inseparable, had adjacent stalls.

The investments from Papa, her brothers, and a portion of her dowry helped get the Lockington Coal Mine running again. Owen's keen but fair management had also seen a profit the first year.

"I received a letter from Eva today," Althelia murmured sleepily, curving her mouth into a half smile when Owen pressed a warm kiss to her crown.

Lord, how she loved this gentle giant of a man.

"Oh?" He sounded just as drowsy as she did. "I still cannot believe she married that rotter."

Owen hadn't entirely forgiven Peter Hartigan, though he managed to be grudgingly polite at Eva and Peter's wedding last year. Only because Leticia Hartigan hadn't received an invitation.

The Scottish Mahogany long-case clock struck half an hour past midnight.

Althelia really ought to go to bed.

“She says more snippets of Peter’s memory have returned.” Sighing again, she unfolded her legs, causing Zenobia to peek at her with chocolatey eyes and thump her dappled tail.

“*Hmph.*” Owen gave a noncommittal grunt.

Althelia shifted until she kneeled before him and cupped his dear face. “You don’t have to like him, but I shall visit my cousin, so you’ll have to come to terms with Peter. If I can forgive him, then you can too.”

“I cannot refuse you anything, my darling wife.”

A grudging smile tugged Owen’s mouth upward, and his smoldering glance warned his fatigue had transformed into something else altogether.

No longer sleepy either, Althelia rose and extended her hand. “Let’s go to bed, shall we?”

Owen’s knowing look heated her blood.

“The dogs stay here tonight.” His twitching mouth belied the scowl he directed at the Dalmatians. “I have no wish to awaken to slobbery kisses again.”

“Only my kisses, my darling?”

“Ever only your kisses,” Owen purred before scooping her into his arms.

THE END

[Read the entire Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides Series](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One historical fact I must address is Cumbria itself. The county of Cumbria didn't exist until

1974 when a local government act brought the counties of Cumberland and Westmoreland

together. However, ancient Cumbria (established around 550 AD) is a different matter. Once a

powerful Celtic kingdom of the British Isles, ancient Cumbria, also known as Rheged, was

located in the northwest corner of England, in what is roughly present-day Cumbria. A Regency

anthology set in actual Cumbria wasn't possible, but fortunately, with imagination, anything is

possible.

I hope you'll forgive this small historical inaccuracy.

My research also led me to explore the Gaels—ancient ancestors of the Scottish

Highlanders. The Gaels were Celtic people who settled in parts of central Europe, Anatolia, Italy,

France, Belgium, and Hispania. From there, they branched into the Byronic and Gaelic linguistic

categories and are known to have inhabited ancient Gaelic regions in Ireland. Around the fifth

century, the Gaelic people from Ireland immigrated to parts of Scotland.

In 1560, Scotland's kirk (church) prohibited the extravagant and often pagan practices of

Christmas, though it wasn't until 1583 that yuletide officially ceased. Many Scots secretly defied

the church and continued celebrating Christmas, but not without persecution. In 1712, the ban

was officially lifted, but that didn't mean the church didn't continue to frown upon yuletide

revelry. Still afraid of recriminations, Scots quietly celebrated the holiday until 1958, when

December 25 became a national holiday.

I mention other characters in HOLLY, MISTLETOE, AND MIDNIGHT SNOW with their own stories.

Lucius Westbrook: MISSION AT MIDNIGHT

Adolphus Westbrook, Marquess of Edenhaven: THE MIDNIGHT MARQUESS

Eva Westbrook: THE WALLFLOWER'S MIDNIGHT WALTZ

To stay abreast of the releases of the other books in the
Chronicles of the Westbrook Brides

and my other upcoming releases, subscribe to my
newsletter (the link above) or visit my author

world at collettecameron.com.

I hope you enjoyed a romantic holiday historical escape to
times gone by for a few hours

with Owen and Althelia. If you liked their story, please
consider leaving a review.

Hugs,

Connect with Collette!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author COLLETTE CAMERON ® is renowned for her Scottish and

Regency historical romance novels featuring daring rogues, scoundrels, and the strong heroines

who capture their hearts. Her stories are filled with inspiration and humor, making them the

perfect escape for fans of Sweet-to-Spicy Timeless Romances ® . Living in Oregon, Collette is a

confessed chocoholic and dreams of spending part of her time in Scotland. From the rugged

highlands to the refined drawing rooms of Regency England, Collette's stories transport you to

another time and place, where love and adventure are just a page away.

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MIDNIGHT SNOW in my Chronicles of
the Westbrook Brides Series.

THE SMUGGLER'S CHRISTMAS ROGUE

JANE CHARLES

(Scot to the Heart #5)



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ABOUT THE SMUGGLER'S CHRISTMAS ROGUE

Miss Sheena MacGregor had loved Camdyn Oaks, Earl of Irvine, once upon a time. How could she not fall for his charm, honeyed words, and seductive lips? When she found out it was all a ploy, his betrayal cut deep. Never would she be such a fool again.

Camdyn Oaks had set out to charm secrets out of Miss Sheena MacGregor. Instead, she captivated him and stole his heart. Before Camdyn could explain, confess the truth, and beg for forgiveness, she walked away and refused to ever speak to him again.

Now with Christmas drawing near, Sheena is stuck on the English side of the border and forced to seek shelter in his home. Camdyn is determined to win her heart once again but fears that it may be lost to him forever.

For the members of my private reader group – Romance and Rosé. Whenever I have a question, need help with a title, and thoughts on a blurb, you are always there to help me out and I cannot thank you enough.

PROLOGUE

*L*ondon, 1816

SHEENA MACGREGOR'S first Season in London was more than she could have ever dreamed. It helped that neither her Uncle Aiden, nor her older, overly protective brothers were here. They had to remain back at Anagburn, their family estate in Bonnybridge, Scotland, to see that the oats and barley were planted. However, they did intend to join her and Aunt Rose shortly. Sheena couldn't help but hope that the planting had been delayed, thus her male relatives would be as well.

These first six weeks had been absolutely magical, and Sheena was also quite certain that she was in love.

She blew out a sigh and glanced about the ballroom looking for Camdyn Oaks, Earl of Irvine. He'd made her acquaintance at the first ball she had attended. During that first sennight, they had encountered each other occasionally and he always requested a dance. And then, he had asked for the supper waltz, which Sheena happily granted. Following that night, he had called on her regularly and they had taken drives in the park, visited Gunter's, attended the theatre, sat near each

other at musical entertainments, and picnicked together. It was everyone's opinion that he was courting her. It simply wasn't official because Uncle Aiden wasn't in London to grant such.

Sheena was torn between wanting Uncle Aiden here so that Lord Irvine's courtship could become official, or that he'd remain in Scotland so she could have more time without her brothers acting as unwanted chaperones.

Aye, she wanted the men to remain away, for if they were here, Camdyn wouldn't be able to take her off and steal kisses.

Yes, he had asked that she call him Camdyn when others were not around, and he called her Sheena instead of Miss Sheena. There was not so much of a difference in his address of her, but there was certainly one in her calling him by his Christian name instead of Lord Irvine.

"Are you looking for me?"

Sheena grinned and turned to find Camdyn behind her.

"I was simply admirin' all the handsome gentlemen," she teased.

"You wound me." Camdyn placed a hand over his heart, but laughter lit in his light blue eyes. "I thought I was the only one you thought handsome."

"Ye are not the only one," she informed him. "But ye are the handsomest."

"And you are the loveliest," he returned.

"Gentleman?" Sheena quirked a brow.

"Miss," he answered with a chuckle. "As you well know."

No matter how often Camdyn complimented her, Sheena's cheeks still warmed.

And then, when he looked down at her, his blue eyes darkening with an intensity, almost smoldering, she warmed all over inside and out.

"It is a pleasant night. Would you care to stroll with me in the garden?" Camdyn offered his arm.

Sheena glanced to Aunt Rose for permission. Her aunt gave a slight nod with a knowing smile, though she had warned Sheena not to become too attached to Lord Irvine until she had a chance to speak with Uncle Aiden. Her aunt was being overly cautious because Sheena could not imagine that her uncle would object.

As Camdyn led her from the ball and onto the terrace and further into the gardens, the cacophony of voices and laughter faded as did the music. Once they reached the edge of the garden, and with no one around, Camdyn stopped, turned, and looked down at her. He was no longer smiling and appeared gravely serious.

"I have changed my mind, Sheena."

She fought a wee bit of panic that settled in the pit of her stomach. What had he changed his mind about?

"I will not be asking your uncle to court you when he comes to London."

Sheena's heart ceased for a moment. He had promised to request an audience with Uncle Aiden the moment he arrived. Did Camdyn no longer care for her?

“Instead, I am going to ask him for your hand in marriage.” The relief was so overwhelming that Sheena’s knees nearly buckled.

“What did you fear that I was going to say?” The corner of his mouth tipped. “Certainly, you know my heart.”

Sheena thought she knew his heart when in truth she only knew her own. And that was that she loved Camdyn Oaks, the Earl of Irvine.

“Unless you do not want to marry me?” He studied her with concern.

“Aye, I do.” She was not going to let him believe anything else.

He smiled and relaxed. “I am glad to hear that is your response.” Camdyn lifted her right hand and then removed her glove, gently pulling on each finger until her hand was free, then put it inside of his coat.

She did not know what he was about, but a delicious thrill swept through her body as he brought her hand to his lips. Camdyn first kissed the back of her fingers, then turned her hand over and put his lips against the pulse at her wrist before kissing her palm—an open kiss in which she felt the tip of his tongue.

Goodness. Her knees weakened, breasts tightened, and warmth flooded her nether regions. She’d had a similar response to his caresses before, but never this strongly.

Camdyn looked up, his blue eyes dark and intense, the side of his mouth quirked and then she was in his arms.

“I have fallen in love with you Sheena MacGregor. You are my heart and I do not want to go another day without you by my side.”

Her heart melted at that moment. Those were the words that she had longed to hear from his lips. “And you have my heart, Camdyn. I love ye as well.”

His hands caressed her back, down to her waist and then her bottom.

“Perhaps we should not wait for your uncle. We could leave for Gretna Green tonight.”

Oh, the idea was so very tempting. She did wish to wed him as soon as it was possible to do so.

“Come with me now.”

“My aunt will notice,” Sheena laughed.

“I will come for you as soon as your household has retired. Be waiting for me and we will travel to Gretna Green as fast as the horses can take us there.”

He was so earnest, and Sheena wanted to agree with his plan, but she had no intention of bringing scandal to the family. Her Aunt Rose was formerly a Trent, and that family had faced enough scandal these past few years and she would not add to it, especially since Clayton Trent, the Earl of Bentley, had been so kind to allow her and Aunt Rose to reside in their London home this Season. “While the offer is tempting, and it would put us both much closer to home, I do not feel that it would be right to run off.”

He stared into her eyes. “Are you certain?”

“I canna do that to them.”

Camdyn groaned and pulled her closer. “Then I hope your uncle arrives soon so that we can have this matter settled and wed.”

Sheena may have wanted her uncle and brothers to be delayed earlier, but she wished they were here right now.

“I have a desire for you, Sheena. A hunger. My heart is full of love for you and my body craves yours so strongly that once we wed, I may keep you in my chamber for a sennight.”

A delicious thrill swept through her when he pressed his lips against her neck. “Those are the words and the promise of a rogue.”

“But it is not just my own pleasure that I seek, but yours as well, and I hope that it will be as great as mine and you will not wish to leave either.”

Sheena still was not certain what happened in the marriage chamber but could not wait to find out since her sister confided that the secret side of marriage was also the most pleasurable.

His lips then found hers and Sheena eagerly kissed him in return, parting her lips as he invaded her mouth. Sheena tilted her head and wrapped her arms about his shoulders. There was no longer tentativeness for Camdyn had kissed her in this manner several times and whenever they could sneak away from others. His arms tightened, bringing her against his body.

Oh, she knew it was wrong to behave in such a wanton manner, but Sheena was helpless when Camdyn’s lips touched

hers.

“I need you, Sheena.”

“Aye, and I you.”

His hand slid down her back and to her waist and then to her bottom, pressing her against him as another hand came forward and cupped her breast.

Sheena gasped. He'd never been so bold before, but she had no will to deny him, especially when he broke the kiss and trailed kisses down her neck and across her bodice.

Goodness, it was becoming difficult to breathe as her breasts grew heavy and ached. If what happened in the privacy of the marriage chamber was anything like this, she may never want to leave.

With a sigh, Camdyn straightened and took a step back before he blew out a breath.

“I hope your uncle does not insist on a long betrothal.”

Sheena nearly laughed. “He is more than likely to insist upon a Special License.”

“That is what I will do,” Camdyn announced. “I will obtain a Special License so that the moment he allows it, we can be married.”

His hand caressed her cheek and Camdyn leaned in and kissed her, then once again pulled her close.

Sheena was beginning to wonder if they would return to the ball that night, but also did not care if they did. She didn't

want to be anywhere else than in Camdyn's arms, just as she was at that moment.

And then she wasn't.

Her mind barely registered what was occurring when the eldest of her brothers, Alistair stepped between them and planted Camdyn a facer.

Camdyn raised a hand to his chin but her other brother, Ewan came forward and struck him a second time, and with enough force to send Camdyn flying back. He struck the brick wall before he crumpled to the ground.

With a gasp, Sheena ran forward and knelt beside him. Other than blood at the corner of his mouth from where he'd been struck, he had no other injuries, except he was unconscious. Yet, he breathed, and she could only pray that it was only a minor injury, and he would wake quickly.

"What is goin' on?" her Uncle Aiden barked.

"They struck him for no reason," Sheena cried.

"There was a reason. He was takin' advantage of ye," Ewan argued.

It was on the tip of her tongue to insist that he was not and that she had welcomed Camdyn's kisses but thought it better to hold her tongue given the glares of her two brothers.

"There is only one thing left to do," Alistair announced.

They all looked at him in anticipation.

"Marriage!"

As that was what she and Camdyn wanted, Sheena was not going to voice an objection.

“Not so quickly.” Uncle Aiden held up a hand to stop her brothers from making any more decisions. “If they were just walking or sharing a simple kiss, there is no reason to force a marriage.”

“But his hand...” Ewan’s face began to turn red, and he leaned over to whisper to Uncle Aiden.

Sheena could only guess what they’d seen.

Uncle Aiden straightened and glared. “Marriage it is!” he declared. “Now, let me see who my new nephew-in-law is to be.”

Sheena scrambled out of the way when Alistair crouched down and lifted Camdyn so that he was sitting up. He was still unconscious, but the light from the torches allowed them to see his face.

In turn, Uncle Aiden’s features hardened even further and his eyes grew cold.

Sheena’s stomach sank.

“Irvine!” he ground out. “Ye willna be marryin’ him, lass.”

“Why?” Sheena asked in alarm.

“Nor was that my son’s intention.” A man stepped from the shadows.

My son’s intention. Was that Camdyn’s father and had he been watching them the entire time? She had not met him yet

as he had not come to London. Apparently, everyone had arrived tonight.

“Since you havena been successful in ruinin’ my family, you sent your son to ruin my niece?” Uncle Aiden demanded.

Sheena’s throat began to tighten in panic. They did not understand.

“If necessary.”

“Why?” Sheena found herself asking, though they were all wrong about Camdyn. They didn’t know how much they loved the other and that they were to wed, but given their reactions, she and Camdyn may need to head to Gretna Green after all.

“I will one day see your uncle, brothers, and cousins arrested for their criminal activity,” the man informed Sheena.

Sheena gasped. “Illegal activity?”

“Do not play innocent,” Lord Walsingham barked. “They smuggle Scotch whisky across the border and have for years. They are likely thieves and murderers but have not been caught in doing that either.”

“They are not,” Sheena insisted.

“Hold your tongue,” Uncle Aiden instructed.

“He is accusing ye of crimes,” Sheena cried.

“We have a long history of accusations between the two families,” Uncle Aiden grumbled with little patience.

“My son will not be marrying her.”

“Nor will I allow it,” Uncle Aiden insisted.

“But Uncle Aiden you did not see what he did,” Ewan insisted.

“He was simply wanting information,” Walsingham dismissed.

“What do you mean he wanted information?” Sheena asked.

Lord Walsingham chuckled. “You did not think he would actually marry you?” And he laughed again.

“Aye, he asked me to.”

“That is only because he was running out of time.”

“What do you mean?” Alistair asked fisting his hand.

“My son was tasked with obtaining information from Sheena. We thought with sweet words and seduction she would reveal the roads and the trails you take from Scotland into England to deliver your whisky and who those customers may be. We were determined to catch you once and for all. My son hadn’t gotten all the information yet but knew that he must press the suit before you arrived and tell her whatever she needed to hear in order to share her secrets.”

Sheena grew sick. “Seduce me for information?”

What he was saying could not be true. Camdyn would not do such a thing.

“To say whatever is necessary for you to trust him, even if he had to seduce you in the process.”

“There is nothing to tell,” Sheena cried. “The only whisky we have is what we distill for ourselves.” Sheena knew never

ever to mention anything about their illegal whisky smuggling, or the family would be ruined and possibly jailed. As much as she loved Camdyn, that was a secret she did not share because it was not hers alone.

However, she still did not believe Lord Walsingham. He had not been in London, so he did not know what she shared with Camdyn.

“I guess you are not as naïve and foolish as Camdyn thought you to be.” His eyes grew cold. “Yet, you still believe that he loves you.”

Sheena sucked in a breath at the cruel words.

“My son will never marry the likes of you,” he snorted. “My son will marry a lady from Society, not a Scot and certainly never a MacGregor.”

“He was using ye, lass.”

She did not want Alistair’s opinion.

“I have to agree with your brother,” said Uncle Aiden. “The Oaks are not honorable men. I have known them long enough to never trust a single word out of their mouths.” Uncle Aiden glared at Walsingham. “But in this case, I believe the marquess. If Irvine made promises, it was only so he could gain something else.”

Her stomach churned and Sheena swallowed the bile that threatened to rise and glanced from her uncle to her two brothers and then to their enemy.

Camdyn began to moan. She needed him to wake and tell her that the others were wrong.

Sheena rushed to him when Camdyn groaned and sat up rubbing the back of his head. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“What your father said?”

“My father?” Camdyn glanced past her, and his eyes widened.

“What did he tell you?” Camdyn asked quietly.

“That you came to London to seduce me for information.”

Camdyn’s lips hardened, but he did not deny her words, just glared at his father.

“Ye hoped to learn all that you could about my family’s supposed illegal whisky smuggling, which they doona do.”

Camdyn looked into her eyes. “Let me explain.”

Her blood ran cold. “Enough has been explained. Is what he says true? Did you beg an introduction for the single reason in hopes of gaining information? To seduce it out of me if you had to?”

“Yes,” he answered, then reached out to her. “That was my intention, but...” She didn’t allow him to say another word and slapped him so hard that her hand may sting for days.

“Ye are a rogue. The worst of the rogues. The worst rogue ever!” As tears blinded her vision, Sheena rose to return to her uncle. “Take me home.”

“Sheena, wait,” he called.

“She has heard enough,” Alistair said. “Doona come near her again.”

“I will take you back to Bentley’s townhouse right away.”

“Scotland,” she clarified. “Home is Anagburn. I want to go home.”

CHAPTER ONE

Cumbria, December 1817

Camdyn Oaks, now Marquess Walsingham, wandered to the window. Snow blanketed the ground and the clouds threatened to bring more as the day continued.

The manor was silent. Not even the servants made a sound though they were in preparation for the holiday. The greeneries, candles, and confectionaries were for them because they found enjoyment in the festivities. They had even hung mistletoe in the doorways. At least they had someone to kiss, not that he was supposed to be aware of the various romantic liaisons among his staff, which had been forbidden by his steward. Frankly, Camdyn did not care and was glad someone had another to kiss.

He dared not hope that he would enjoy the same and anticipated that this would be the loneliest Christmas yet.

His father had passed five months ago, his mother had died when he was a child and as he had no siblings, there was little point in embracing the traditions and festivities this year.

This Christmas would also be much different than last one. His father had urged him to travel to Devon for a house party

and Camdyn had needed the distraction. What he hadn't counted on was being only one of ten gentlemen invited. They were the only guests because Lady Lucinda Claxton had been told to settle on a husband.

Camdyn had not known what type of house party he was attending until he arrived. He nearly left but reconsidered because he knew that he must wed. He had lost the only woman he had ever loved, and as he was required to father an heir and hopefully a spare, knew that he would need to settle for someone whom he could get along with.

It wasn't that he hadn't tried to explain to Sheena, but by the time he had finished arguing with his father and went in search of her, the MacGregors had already left London for Scotland.

He'd then attempted to call on her at Anagburn, but he was not even allowed on the estate and had been turned away each time.

The pain and tears in her eyes from that evening still haunted him, and had he been able to think clearly, Camdyn knew that he would have been able to explain so that she understood. But her family intended to keep her from him.

It was Lady Lucinda who convinced him that he must try to set matters right with Sheena and that he should not simply give up because the MacGregors had made it difficult.

She was correct of course, and maybe that was what had brought him out of his self-loathing, for Camdyn had been determined to court Sheena the next spring. Except, she had

never returned to London and that was when he put his next plan in motion.

He would not give up but do everything in his power to win Sheena back, if she would have him, and he did not care how long it took. And, if by chance he spied a Christmas star this year, he'd even wish on it and hope that in the spring she would once again be his.



SHEENA STOOD, hands fisted on her hips, and glared at her older brother Ewan. “Why did ye insist on trying to cross here and not stay on the road?”

“Excisemen,” he answered.

“We doona have whisky,” she reminded him. They were returning from a delivery, so it didn’t matter if their wagon was searched.

“I wasna thinkin’ of that.”

“Instead ye take a path better suited for a horse, through the forest and then try to cross Kershope Burn.” Sheena stomped forward to free the horses currently standing in the freezing water. They should have avoided Kershopefoot, but Ewan wanted to take the quickest route home since Christmas was but a few days away. Now they were stuck in England, just on the other side of the border.

“Doona free ’em!” Ewan yelled. “They need ta pull.”

“They have been pullin’ but the wagon is only digging deeper into the slush and mud.” Taking the reins, she led the horses back to the bank and to the solid path before retrieving oats for them. It had been a long day and they’d already gone too long without food and rest.

“Leave the wagon,” she insisted. “We will ride the horses home.”

“We canna ride them,” Ewan insisted. “They are for pulling wagons, not for riders.”

Nor did they have saddles. Besides, the horses were probably as exhausted as she and needed to rest. They could set out again first thing in the morning and the horses would just need to get used to having a rider on their backs.

“Then there is nothing left for it.” She started gathering kindling because the night would soon fall. Already the sun had dipped behind the trees.

“What are ye doin’?”

“Building a fire, or do ye intend to remain standin’ here all night freezin’?”

Why had Uncle Aiden sent Ewan with her to smuggle whisky into England? Alistair, the eldest of her brothers had been available, but Ewan had begged, and Uncle Aiden had finally consented. Now they were stuck.

“I ken the area. There is shelter not far from here.”

Sheena frowned. “Where?” She didn’t think they were near anywhere.

Ewan looked away with his head down. "Oakley Park."

"No!" She would rather freeze than call on Marquess Walsingham. He hated her family and would likely turn her and Ewan over for smuggling. He had tried often enough, but they were never caught with the illegal whisky on this side of the border. Nor would they now as it had already been delivered. Even if he couldn't see them arrested, he certainly wouldn't give them shelter.

Nor did she want to see his son, the Earl of Irvine. She never wanted to set eyes on Camdyn again.

"Build a fire, Ewan, we are not calling on the marquess."

"Ye build a fire if ye want, but I am not stayin'."

"Ye got us stuck here in the first place," she yelled at him. If only he had stayed on the road instead of a less used path, they would not be in this predicament. She had tried to argue that the routes he took on his horse could not always be used for a wagon, but Ewan insisted that he knew best, which left them in this predicament.

Ewan grabbed the reins of the horses from her and turned away. She thought he was going to tie them to a tree so that they didn't wander off; instead, he kept walking.

"Where are ye goin'?" Sheena yelled after him.

"Oakley Park," he yelled. "Ye can stay back and freeze, but I am not willin' to do so."

Blast! She either remained in the forest alone, and without food, or went with Ewan.

Sheena watched and wondered if she was brave enough to stay. But darkness was falling, and she soon lost sight of her brother.

Grabbing the valise where she kept a spare set of clothing and a few essentials from the back of the wagon, she hurried after him.

Yes, she was brave, but not stupid. The temperature was dropping and there was no way to remain warm. Not even with a blanket and fire. The marquess may dismiss them from his doorstep, but maybe he'd let them sleep in the barn or stables and then they could be on their way in the morning.

If he didn't, then they'd sneak in.

CHAPTER TWO

Camdyn sipped the Scotch whisky that Aiden MacGregor had given him when Camdyn visited three months ago and settled by the fire with thoughts of the future and what Spring may bring.

As Sheena had not returned to London, and probably never would, he would look for her in Edinburgh, where she had spent last spring. Edinburgh was as well-known to him as London, and he had many friends there. In fact, he visited Edinburgh more often because it was much closer to his home.

After his father had died, Camdyn had gone to MacGregor to explain the circumstances of what had happened in London. It had been a difficult conversation and Camdyn had expected to end up with two blackened eyes and a bruised jaw. Thankfully, MacGregor heard him out and understood that Camdyn was not his father. That was when he broached the subject of courting Sheena.

MacGregor first laughed and then advised that even if he approached Sheena, she would reject him outright and that she had gone so far as to order that neither Camdyn's name, title, nor his father's, were ever to be mentioned within her hearing.

Despite the four visits to MacGregor, Sheena's uncle refused to force a courtship or wedding despite what may have occurred in London. His only offer of assistance was to let Camdyn know when the family traveled to Edinburgh and what entertainments they may attend so that Camdyn could then plead his case directly to Sheena. MacGregor hadn't even told Sheena that Camdyn had called because as soon as he started to say the name, Sheena stormed out of the room. However, if she came face to face with Camdyn in a crowded room, Sheena may give Camdyn a chance to explain as she would not want to make a scene that would invite gossip. But, MacGregor warned, she was the most stubborn of lasses.

“Lord Walsingham, a Mr. Ewan MacGregor has called, along with his sister, Miss Sheena. Their wagon was stuck in the mud while trying to cross Kershope Burn.”

Camdyn stared at his butler. He could not have heard correctly. “What did you say?”

“Mr. Ewan MacGregor and his sister, Miss Sheena, are stranded because their wagon got stuck while trying to cross Kershope Burn and they are seeking shelter for the night.”

“Please, show them in immediately, and alert Cook that we have guests, and please have a tea service delivered.” Perhaps he would not need to wish on a Christmas star after all.

He had waited over a year and a half to see her again, but the Sheena who entered beside her brother was not one he had ever seen before, not that he had any objection to her appearance, and found it quite fetching.

Every time he'd been around her, she had dressed as a female with delicate curls about her face. All that was feminine and soft, and she'd never been more beautiful than the night he had asked her to marry him. Tonight, however, she wore trousers, and a coat, far too large for her frame that hung from her body. A hat, that had long lost its shape flopped about her head. Had he not recognized the ruby, kissable lips and pert nose, he may have mistaken her for a lad.

"Ewan, Sheena," he greeted as they entered the parlor. "Please, have a seat. I have already instructed the butler to bring tea."

Ewan, not at all deterred, wandered in and settled in a chair, while Sheena remained by the door.

"Please, Sheena." Camdyn gestured to the settee.

She blew out a heavy sigh, her narrow shoulders rising and falling within the large coat before she trotted across the floor and plopped herself down in a chair.

"I understand that your wagon is stuck," he said.

Sheena glared at her older brother.

"Aye. I thought to take the shortest route home," Ewan answered.

"The foolish route," Sheena grumbled.

"At least it was near my home, for I would hate to think of you stranded in the wood. It promises to be a cold night and I would not be surprised if it snowed again." At least he hoped that it snowed, and so much that she was stuck here until spring so that he could win her heart again.

“If you would be so kind as to allow us shelter in the barn or stable, I promise that we will be on our way in the morning,” Sheena requested.

Camdyn nearly laughed. “I would never ask guests to sleep anywhere other than a bedchamber.” He looked into her eyes. “Especially you, Sheena.”

“Yer father may not even allow us to use the barn,” she muttered.

His father, the most unpleasant man on the planet would have sent them away in a blizzard. “I am not my father.” His tone may have been a little harsher than he intended, but it was because of his father that Sheena hated him. “Further, you do not need to worry about him. He died five months ago.”

Sheena nearly jerked in surprise. “I...um...I am sorry for your loss.”

He nodded. “You will stay here, inside.”

“I thank ye for your kindness, Lord Walsingham,” she offered formally. “We promise to be gone tomorrow.”

Not if he could help it.

“I have requested two more places set at the table. I am certain you must be hungry.”

“We do not want to be an imposition and I am certain your cook was not prepared for visitors this late in the day.”

Camdyn really wished Sheena would talk to him as she once had, when they’d been friendly and in love. Instead, she spoke as if she were in a London parlor with a duchess.

“I can promise that she has made plenty of food,” Camdyn assured her.

“I for one could use a meal. We havena eaten since this mornin’,” Ewan announced as the tea trolley was rolled in.”

Sheena shot him a glare, then schooled her features as the footman poured tea for each of them.

She may not be happy with her circumstances, but Camdyn was determined to win her over. Further, Ewan would not be a hindrance as he’d hardly note Camdyn’s courtship of his sister and would be more interested in flirting with the comely maids within the household.

The one thing that everyone could count on was that when Ewan saw a pretty face, he forgot his purpose.



SHEENA HATED TO ADMIT IT, but she’d been freezing by the time they reached Oakley Park and she was certain that her toes were blue with the cold. When the cup of tea was handed to her, she wasn’t certain if she just wanted to hold it to thaw out her fingers or drink it to warm her insides.

That didn’t mean that she still wasn’t suspicious of their host. The only reason she was in his home now was because she didn’t want to freeze to death.

As she sipped the tea, and let it warm her inside, Sheena studied Camdyn. His appearance still made her heartbeat increase, and his blue eyes seemed warmer tonight, his smile relaxed and dark hair tousled. Aye, he was verra pleasing to

look upon but so had been the adder she'd found in the woodlands. Pretty to look at but the bite had been painful and made her ill, much like her encounter with her host in London.

He was also being far too accommodating for them to just appear on his doorstep at the dinner hour without being expected. Was his friendliness a ruse? While they sat here exchanging pleasantries, were his men searching their wagon in hopes of finding whisky?

Well, they'd come away emptyhanded and when that happened, would Camdyn then kick them out instead of giving them shelter for the night since he'd not be able to see her and Ewan arrested?

Not Camdyn, but Walsingham. She needed to think of him in that manner, and not with familiarity. He was not the gentleman she had thought she loved, and he could not be trusted. Walsingham had lied to her and tried to seduce her for information, and for that she would never forgive him.

"Dinner is served," the butler announced from the entry into the parlor.

Walsingham stood and offered his arm. Sheena glanced at it and then walked away. She may be stuck here, but that did not mean that she needed to touch him or be overly friendly. She'd be polite because he offered shelter, but that was all.

Thankfully, once they were seated at the dining room table, Ewan did most of the talking and she was able to eat a delicious meal of roast chicken and potatoes and partake of a light wine. She also grew sleepy from the full belly, comfortable seat, wine, and warm room. They'd crossed the

border a little before midnight, traveled further into England to make the delivery and were on their way home. Once any of them crossed into England while smuggling whisky, they tried not to sleep because they could not risk getting caught.

She and Ewan had planned on finding an inn once they were back in Scotland, but instead they were here.

Sheena blinked to keep her eyes open and then stifled a yawn with her hand as the meal was concluded.

“I will have a maid show you to your chamber,” Walsingham offered. “We will talk more in the morning.”

“Thank you for dinner, but we will be gone in the morning.” Sheena then turned her back on their host and climbed the stairs following the maid.

“Where is my brother’s chamber?” she asked as the maid stopped before the door leading to the room that Sheena had been given.

“Directly across the hall, Miss Sheena.”

Before the sun rose, she would be waking her brother so that they could be gone before Walsingham ever rose from his bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Camdyn sipped coffee and reviewed the reports and recommendations from his estate manager. He then blew out a sigh and checked his pocket watch to note the time, then glanced down the length of the dining room table to the entry. He did not normally work in this room, but it offered clear sight to just below the grand staircase and he did not want to miss Sheena trying to sneak from his house.

He had also already eaten, and once finished had gathered the reports, contracts, and accounting from his desk in the library and brought them to the dining room and worked while he kept vigil for her shadow to cross the threshold.

Oh, he had no doubt that was her intention—to be gone from here and *him* as soon as it was light enough to travel. That was also the reason he had his valet wake him just as dawn was breaking and then asked a maid to check on his guest to make certain she was still within and sleeping.

He was just thankful that when their wagon had gotten stuck that it was at dusk. In the light of day, Sheena would have never approached his home, but only when it was too much of a danger to remain out in the elements.

It had not been so very late when they retired, and he was surprised that Sheena still slept. Not that he minded, for she could remain in his household for as long as she liked, but it was nearing nine in the morning.

At the squeak of footsteps in the corridor he waited. Instead of Sheena, however, it was an upstairs maid who quickly bobbed a curtsy upon entering the dining room.

“She has awakened.”

“What is her temperament?” he asked though Camdyn could already guess.

“She is not happy, from what I could hear through the door. She did not intend to sleep so late.”

Camdyn bit back a smile. “Thank you. Please inform Cook that our guest will soon be breaking her fast.”

The maid bobbed another curtsy and turned for the kitchens.

Camdyn returned to his reading, though he could no longer concentrate on the words before him as he listened for footfalls.

“Where is Ewan?” Sheena asked from just inside the entry to the dining room.

“He is gone.” Ewan’s departure had been a surprise to him and even though Camdyn had insisted that he wait until a reasonable hour to leave, Ewan had refused.

“Where did he go?”

Camdyn leaned back and removed the spectacles from the bridge of his nose and set them on top of the documents and studied his guest. Sheena was dressed in the same manner as the evening before: trousers, dirty boots, shirtsleeves, and a waistcoat. This morning she carried her coat and the floppy hat.

“He borrowed my horse to return home.” Camdyn nearly held his breath waiting for her outrage to surface.

“Home?” Sheena demanded.

Camdyn remained calm. “He asked to borrow my horse so that he could return to Anagburn and inform MacGregor that your wagon is stuck and that you would not be returning right away.”

Sheena stood there staring at him mouth agape. Camdyn could not blame her as it was a nonsensical excuse to leave her behind.

“Instead of tryin’ to get the wagon free?”

Camdyn shrugged.

“Do you not have servants who could have helped us?”

“Yes, I do. But he did not want to be a bother.”

“Ye should have insisted,” Sheena nearly ordered, her voice rising.

“I did but your brother refused.” Camdyn tried to keep his voice calm. “He claimed it was his responsibility to get the wagon unstuck and that he would return for you.”

Again, she stared at him as if he were speaking a foreign language and she did not understand his words. Not that Camdyn could blame her. Ewan's reasoning had been very strange, and Camdyn had even questioned his decisions. But Sheena's brother was adamant that he go and leave her behind because the travel would be quicker.

Camdyn supposed he could have tried harder to make Ewan see the error in his planning, but had he been successful, Sheena may have left without Camdyn ever having a chance to explain what had truly occurred in London and then beg her forgiveness.

“Let me have a horse.”

Camdyn had anticipated this request though hers was more of a demand.

“I am afraid I do not have one available for your use. Your brother took mine and there are no others.”

“Ye only own one horse?”

“I have horses but with the exception of one, the horses currently in the stables are not for riding but for pulling carriages and wagons.”

“Ye only have one more horse for riding?”

Camdyn understood her dismay given he was a titled gentleman, wealthy and owner of a large estate. Most similarly situated usually had several horses, but he found it impractical for his stables to be filled with such when he was but one man and could only ride one horse at a time. Though, he did keep a

full stable, just not for pleasure. “One remains for me, and the others are in use.”

Sheena frowned, her brows forming a V above her nose. “Then ye have one for me to borrow.”

“The horses are being used by my workers. Some are riding the land to check on the sheep and cows. We are expecting several calves starting in January. Others are felling trees for next years’ firewood, and some are hunting. The one waiting is for me if I need to go out into the fields to assist with the cattle or sheep, or if I am needed for another purpose.”

“When will one be returning?”

“Later today,” he answered.

“I will take one then,” she decided with the lift of her chin.

“I am afraid that cannot be allowed for they will be needed tomorrow.”

“All of them?”

Camdyn leaned forward. “Yes. Each horse is needed to run this estate. I cannot have one unavailable.”

“Then I shall get the wagon unstuck myself and be on my way.” At that, Sheena turned for the entry.

“At least break your fast first.”

Sheena stood there for a moment and then her narrow shoulders rose and fell as if she sighed, and she slowly turned. “Very well but then I am leaving.”

Camdyn nodded. “And I will help you get your wagon unstuck.” And he hoped it was not that easy or he would have to come up with another excuse to keep her here until he earned her forgiveness.

He also hoped that she didn’t remember that she had two horses in his stables that had been pulling that wagon and decide to ride them even without a saddle.

She’d changed since that Season in London. Then she’d been all sweetness and charm and he’d fallen under her spell. Sheena was tougher now, and independent and strong, stubborn and angry, and carried herself much like a lad. How much of the change was because of his duplicity?

Was he responsible for this bitter change?

Yes, he was; Camdyn answered his own question. If only he would have been given a chance to explain...though it still didn’t change his original intent when he had first approached her.



SHEENA WAS GOING to kill Ewan as soon as she found him. How dare he leave without her! Uncle Aiden may even kill him before she had a chance to.

She was a *miss* in the home of a *bachelor* without a chaperone.

It was bad enough that she’d nearly been ruined by him in London, this was so much worse. Her stomach tightened.

Uncle Aiden would not take lightly to the situation. He may force the issue whether she or Walsingham wanted it or not.

After setting her coat and hat at the end of the table, Sheena plunked down in a chair, not the one that would have her facing him, but at the side so she could look out the window. The last thing she wanted was to dine across from Walsingham, even if there was the expanse of a long dining table between them because she could not think straight looking at him. Aye, she was still very angry and embarrassed at her own foolishness in trusting him, but it also wasn't so simple.

She was also still very exhausted. Sheena had assumed that she'd be asleep as soon as her body sank into the comfortable warm bed, but her mind was of a different matter and returned to the question that had haunted her for the past year and a half. It was the "*but*".

Those last words to her could still be heard as if he had just said them. *Yes. That was my intent.* Then he reached out to her. *But...* Sheena hadn't given him an opportunity to continue and as she marched away from him, his *Sheena wait*, still echoed in her mind.

What came after the *but*? Honeyed words from his silver tongue to beg for forgiveness and thinking her naïve enough to do so? Or did he intend to confess his love again thinking she'd believe him? Did he call out for her because he really did not want her to leave him?

She shook the memories from her mind. It did no good to worry or wonder, for likely whatever words may have passed

his lips would have been a lie. As soon as she was finished eating, Sheena intended to get her wagon unstuck and then travel home. Once there she would blister Ewan's ears for leaving her behind and then ask her other brother and cousins to beat him to teach him a lesson.

Sheena tilted her head and glanced at Walsingham out of the corner of her eye because she could feel his gaze upon her. He lounged back in the chair, coffee cup in hand, and watched her. There was no plate of food before him, only his beverage and several documents, inkwell, and quills. On top of the stack of papers was a pair of wirerimmed spectacles. He had never worn them before, which was a curiosity. But even more so was wondering if he conducted his business in the dining room instead of at a desk in the library or office like most gentlemen.

It was none of her concern, nor did she care, and with those thoughts, averted her eyes to look out the window and over the snowy landscape, for she did not want him to think she was the least bit curious about him even if he was staring at her. What they shared in the past was over and all because of his perfidy.

“Do you still hate me, Sheena?”

His voice was low and remorseful, but she would not be moved. She could not afford to be no matter how much she wished matters had turned out differently or how much she wondered what came after the *but*.

“I hate no one, Lord Walsingham,” she answered. “Though I willna dispute extreme dislike for your person.”

“I understand,” he answered, tone still filled with regret. “I would as well if I were lacking as many facts as you.”

She slid a side glance to him and then looked away. “I have all the facts that I need. Ye admitted as much.”

“Except you did not let me explain before you slapped me.”

“You are lucky that is all I did.”

She had slapped him right after his *but...* was Walsingham able to read her mind?

Impossible! He only wished to clear his conscious.

She knew the truth, as did he. “I would rather not speak of the past.”

“Then shall we discuss the future?”

“Whatever future there may be will not involve me ever encountering you, so I see no need.”

Before Walsingham could respond, two footmen entered. One carried a teapot and cup and saucer. Another a plate of food and utensils. All were placed before her, and one footman poured her a cup of tea then stepped back to stand against the wall near her in the event she needed anything else while the other footman disappeared.

Sheena stared at the breakfast, which included tattie scone, sausage, fried eggs, beans, and toast. The food overflowed the plate and she glanced at her host once again. Did he instruct the cook to make so much food or did he believe she could eat all this. Yes, they were her favorite foods to start the day, but

the amount on her plate was more suited for her brothers than herself.

Regardless, she set her mind to the food, knowing that it would likely be the only meal she ate before she reached home, and tried to ignore her host.

He said nothing, but Sheena could feel him watching and did her best to ignore him.

“Is that how you always dress when traveling?”

Sheena looked at Walsingham from the corner of her eye.

“Or is that clothing only reserved for smuggling whisky?”

“I was not smuggling.”

“As your wagon got stuck crossing the border, I assume the smuggling portion of your trip had been concluded.”

“This manner of clothing is more comfortable when traveling by wagon.”

“Where did you and your brother travel?”

His tone was conversational, but she was no fool. She had not confessed to smuggling when she was in love with him, and she certainly was not going to now.

Whenever she or one of her family left home to carry whisky across the border, they always knew what the story would be if anyone asked. “Ewan and I traveled to Carlisle to do a bit of shopping.” They had not been near Carlisle, but she certainly would not give him the true direction.

“Carlisle?”

“Aye.”

“Do you also shop while in men’s clothing?”

“It depends on the manner of shopping being done and who we might encounter.”

“Then you have dresses with you?”

“That is none of your concern, Lord Walsingham. Nor is it your concern how I dress on any day for any reason.”

“You are correct,” he agreed. “It is simply a curiosity, and I cannot help but wonder if it is because you hope to pass as a man when coming into England?”

Sheena set her fork down, no longer interested in eating or having a discussion with Walsingham. With one last sip of tea, she stood.

“The only reason I make such a remark is because while you are dressed as a man, your curves are not what one of my sex would possess.”

Sheena gasped, turned, and stomped from the dining room, taking her hat and coat with her. How dare he remark upon her form!

“Though I do enjoy seeing your bum in trousers.”

“Please refrain from looking at or commenting on my person.” Sheena marched out of the manor and did not look back as she shrugged on her coat and made certain her hat was in place. She then turned down the drive and walked until she came to the path that she believed she and Ewan had taken the

night before. It'd been so dark she was not certain which direction they had come from.

“Sheena,” Walsingham called.

She stopped but did not turn.

“The path is in this direction.”

With growing irritation, she turned around and followed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Camdyn pulled his heavy coat close. It had snowed last night and with each step, his foot sank up to his ankle. The air was cold, but what was worse was the dampness. Such winter weather bled into the bones. He would be pouring a glass of whisky and building the fire up when he returned to the manor.

Sheena trudged behind him, head down and hands shoved into her pockets. Her coat wasn't as thick as his and Camdyn stopped to unwind the scarf from around his neck and when Sheena reached him, he stepped in front of her.

Sheena glared up, her cheeks and the tip of her nose red from the cold.

Camdyn took the scarf and wound it around her neck.

"I doona need yer scarf."

Yet, she didn't take it off or give it back, but tucked her chin inside and marched on, both of their breaths coming out as puffs of smoke.

Even if they did manage to get her wagon unstuck, he could not let her leave in this cold, especially since the sky

threatened more snow. Though, if Sheena insisted, there was little he could do.

She also would not make it home in time for Christmas, which was the day after tomorrow, leaving them both very much alone for the holiday.

He'd need to convince her to stay.

Camdyn bit back a grin. Sheena MacGregor was one stubborn lass. He'd not seen much of it in London, but she'd been determined since she arrived at his home and Camdyn found that this may be one of his more favorite personality traits.

The two finally broke through the woods and Sheena walked to the wagon. Camdyn may have said that he'd assist, but not until she asked.

Sheena kicked the snow from around the stuck wagon wheels and then stomped on the frozen slush and mud. No matter how much she stomped and kicked, the surface merely crackled and splintered but beneath and around the wheel was frozen solid.

“We need shovels or axes, and my horses to pull the wagon free.”

“It will not work, Sheena.”

“Miss Sheena,” she bit out and turned to him. “Yes, it will.”

She stomped past Camdyn on the way back to the manor.

“Chopping at the ice and forcing the wagon wheel could damage it, making it impossible for you to leave.”

She paused, her shoulders stiffening. She knew that he was right.

“Then what do you propose I do?” Sheena demanded as she wheeled on him, fists on her hips.

“Maybe this afternoon it will warm enough to melt, and we can use the horses to pull the wagon free.”

Sheena blew out a sigh. “Verra well.”

With that she turned and marched away from him again.



SHE HAD TO LEAVE!

She needed to get away from Walsingham and could not remain at Oakley Manor a moment more.

It ached to look at him and Sheena was no longer certain if it was from longing for what had been, or from the pain and humiliation suffered in front of her uncle and brothers.

Though anyone may have been as gullible as she. Walsingham did charm and further, he was handsome with a smile that was always slightly crooked, which caused her heart to melt.

No! Her heart would not be melting. Not any more. The only thawing and melting that needed to be done was the ground and mud around the wagon wheels.

Blast! She glanced up at the sky when a snowflake landed on her nose. It was a light snow and she hoped that it ended soon because she needed no further hindrance in her leaving this place.

“I will have the fire built up in the parlor,” Walsingham announced as they reached the manor. “And ask for refreshments and something to drink to warm our blood.”

“Thank you, but I will wait in my chamber until it is warm enough outside to move the wagon.”

She marched past him and up the stairs.

“I will be in the parlor if you change your mind,” Walsingham called after her.

She could not spend time with him—especially alone.

Sheena reached her chamber and marched to the stove in hope of bringing warmth to her hands and taking the chill from the chamber, but it was cold. Nor was there coal or kindling. She did a slow turn. The room had been completely cleaned and her valise sat next to the door as if waiting for her to vacate the estate.

Well, that was her plan, but...She sighed and pulled her coat close and burrowed down into the scarf.

It smelled of him. She hadn't noticed outside, but now the scent of lavender and citrus enveloped her, bringing back memories of when she'd been the happiest.

She inhaled deeply and then reminded herself that while she had been happy then, her heart had also been crushed not long after and she pulled the scarf from her neck.

Taking her valise and his scarf, Sheena left the chamber and then marched down the stairs. She left the valise by the front door and entered the parlor with the scarf in hand.

Walsingham was sitting in a chair beside a roaring fire, his feet out before him, and sipping a liquid that much resembled whisky, which she knew was not possible, unless it was the English version, which was inferior to what the Scots distilled, especially her family.

“This is yours. Thank ye.”

Walsingham stood, reached out and took the scarf before tossing it on the back of the settee. “Let me get you something to warm your bones.”

Sheena glanced about but there was no tea service.

Instead, Walsingham walked to the sideboard and poured her a glass of what he was drinking and pressed it into her hand.

Sheena frowned and then sniffed, not certain if she wished to drink an inferior whisky.

Walsingham chuckled and returned to his chair. “Please, join me.” He indicated to the matching chair beside the fire. The warmth drew her, and she reluctantly accepted his offer and sank down into the chair.

He then took his seat and sipped again, watching her over the rim of his glass.

Sheena took a small sip.

And stilled because the taste was all too familiar.

“You recognize the taste?” he asked.

“Why would you ask?” she countered.

“You appeared puzzled.”

“Perhaps it is because a gentleman doesn't usually offer whisky to a miss.”

The question that she could not ask was why Walsingham had just given her MacGregor whisky. How had he come by it? Was it delivered to someone her family could no longer trust?

Was this a trap and did he still hope to gain information into her family's smuggling?

CHAPTER FIVE

Camdyn watched her face and calculation in her eyes while Sheena tried to reason out how he had come by the whisky her family distilled. He also did not expect her to admit that it was from them.

MacGregor had sworn that a Scot could tell the difference between whiskies and by the puzzlement in Sheena's eyes, Camdyn now believed him.

Sheena sighed then stared into the fire.

He should just tell her. Come right out and confess everything, but Camdyn knew the risk and the cost if he could not make Sheena understand.

Except, if he didn't face the truth now, he may never do so, which would make him nothing but a coward.

"Though you will not admit it, yes, that is MacGregor whisky, which was given to me by your uncle."

Sheena narrowed her eyes on him and sipped again, taking her time in tasting it. Her mind was working around a plausible explanation but was too careful to say anything that could implicate her family in smuggling.

“We did not intercept a shipment or find out where you make deliveries and confiscate it.”

“As we do not smuggle, it would be impossible for you to do so.”

It was a lie and they both knew it. And, while their relationship had started off with lies, hers were to protect her family, even if their activities were illegal. His had been far more destructive because he had begun with a fake courtship to obtain information.

“Your uncle did give me a bottle of his whisky,” Camdyn insisted.

This caused a frown. “When and why?” she finally asked.

“I requested an audience with him after my father died. I needed to explain so that he understood and then to ask for permission to court you.”

“Then you are the one who broke the law by bringing it across the border.”

That was her response to his answer?

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Aye, I did.”

“And that is all you have to say? That I am the one who broke the law?”

“I assume ye feel bad for what happened.”

“If it was something so simple as guilt, I would not have bothered to call on MacGregor during summer last year or this past one.”

Sheena frowned. “Both summers?”

“He refused to see me that first year. He only granted an audience after my father died.”

“There was still no reason to do so.”

Camdyn wanted to throw his glass into the fireplace because she was so frustrating. “At least he heard me out. *He* let me explain. You will not even give me the same opportunity.”

Sheena stood and marched from her chair. “There is nothing to explain. You admitted why you approached me in London. There is no reason to discuss it further.”

He had hurt her, deeply. “My entire life I had listened to my father disparage the MacGregors and blame them for any ill fortune that befell our family. He scorned Scots in general but had a hatred for the MacGregors.”

Sheena wheeled to face him. “Why are you telling me this? It doesna matter.”

Camdyn stood and looked her in the eyes. “It matters greatly.”

She sucked in a breath and stepped back. Admittedly, his tone had been harsh, but she was being stubborn, and it was aggravating. If Sheena would just sit and listen to him.

Camdyn pushed his fingers through his hair. If he were her, he’d not listen to a word that he said or accept any explanation either. Therefore, he needed to be calm, then hope and pray that she understood.

“My father asked me to charm you for information so that he could finally have your family arrested for smuggling. I thought it only fair for the harm they had caused.”

“We have harmed no one,” Sheena bit out.

“I know,” he answered quietly. “I know that now.”

He took a drink and welcomed the burn and hoped that it would help calm him and he could manage to say the right words to help her understand. “Then I met you. The prettiest and sweetest miss in London and I found it hard to believe that you came from the family my father hated. The family of smugglers and thieves. And that’s when I began to question his motives.”

“What did you do?” Sheena sounded curious enough to really want to know instead of dismissing him. Camdyn took it as hope.

“I spoke with a friend I trusted, Jamie,” Camdyn answered. “We attended school together.”

“Jamie?”

“Jonathan James Trent, brother to Gideon Trent, who is married to your cousin Arabella.”

Sheena frowned and her green eyes filled with worry and suspicion. “Did Jamie tell ye we were smugglers?”

“I do not care if you smuggle whisky or anything else in England,” he nearly yelled. Whether her family smuggled or not was not the point of this conversation. It was his confession of why he had wronged her.

Sheena took a step back.

“I am just trying to explain my stupidity.”

At least she started to smile at that statement. “Do go on.” Then she took a sip of the whisky and waited.

“For as long as I can remember, my father had insisted that all MacGregors were bad and not to be trusted. The men and the women. Smugglers and marauders who came in the middle of the night to take what they wanted. If a barn burned, then the MacGregors must have set it. If a prized animal disappeared, or became sick and died, it was the fault of the MacGregors. The stories were so engrained that as a child my deepest fear was the MacGregors crossing over the border and onto our land.”

He shook his head and chuckled at his childhood fear.

“Jamie told me that your father was not anything my father had claimed. The last realization of how wrong my father was came when I remembered that your aunt had been a Trent, the dowager countess and well-respected. She would not have married your uncle, or had anything to do with him, had my father been telling me the truth.”

“So, a few conversations changed your mind about me and my family.”

“You did that all on your own,” he answered honestly. “I thought you were all rotten, so I had no guilt in approaching you in the first place, having no idea how very wrong I was. My father was filled with hate for reasons that I will never

understand.” Camdyn shook his head. “I had no reason not to believe his stories—until I met you.”



“I KNOW why your father hates MacGregors,” Sheena whispered, still not certain if she believed his confession that he had changed his mind about her.

“I wish someone would inform me. Such hatred is not warranted.”

“My uncle Calum knew your father and they were friends at one time...until they fell in love with the same woman. Aunt Jean chose my uncle, and your father has been trying to destroy my family since.”

All Camdyn could do was stare at her. He then blinked. “All that hatred and animosity because a lady chose someone else?”

“A miss,” Sheena clarified. “A Scottish miss.”

“How do you know this?”

“Uncle Aidan told me on our return to Scotland.”

“I thought my name and that of my father were forbidden within earshot of you.”

How could he possibly know that unless Uncle Aiden had told him?

Sheena still hadn’t forgotten what else Camdyn had said about his visit to her uncle—that he wished to court her. It was not something she was prepared to discuss.

“I asked my uncle to explain. Then you were never to be mentioned again.”

“I was wrong, Sheena. So very wrong.”

Aye, he was, but they could not go back and change things now.

“But I was not wrong for long.”

“How long?” she asked.

His blue eyes darkened. “That first supper dance,” he answered. “When I first met you, it did not feel right. I could not imagine you were all my father claimed and each time we spoke, I became more convinced and that is what led me to finding my own answers.”

His words tugged at her heart and some of the ice that she had packed around it had begun to thaw, but she’d made the mistake of falling for his silver tongue before.

“Do you remember when I practically begged you to go to Gretna Green with me?”

Sheena remembered it well. Every moment of that night was burned into her memory even though there were many times that she wished that she could forget.

Camdyn had wanted to leave that night. She was the one who would not bring shame or scandal to the family. Not that it would’ve mattered. Her uncle and his father arrived before they could have ever left London.

“I knew that my father would never permit a marriage. I suspected that MacGregor would deny us as well.” He stepped

forward and reached out. Sheena would not take his hand.

“I had fallen in love with you. I wanted to marry you and I knew that if we made it to Gretna Green and became husband and wife in truth, there was nothing that they could do other than be angry.”

Sheena studied his face and searched his eyes for the truth.

He had nearly begged her to go.

Then she noticed something else and frowned. “You have a scar on your cheek. That was not there before.” She would have remembered because everything about him had been memorized.

The corner of his mouth tipped a smile so familiar to her. “You gave me that scar.”

Sheena pulled back. “I most certainly did not.”

Camdyn chuckled. “When you slapped me, your fingernail caught my skin and it cut deeper than I even realized. I actually had three scratches from your nails across my cheek, but it was the middle one that cut the deepest. Did you not notice the blood?”

She had turned away and never looked back. “I am sorry.”

Camdyn touched it with the tips of his fingers. “I am not. I deserved no less and much more.”

She used to think the same, but was not certain she did any longer.

Oh, this was so confusing, and he did know how to charm.

She did not want to be a fool for that rogue again, but her heart wanted to forgive him.

“I am still in love with you, Sheena. I tried to forget but was unable to. It is the reason I requested an audience with your uncle.”

His words were a knife to her heart, or maybe it was a pick chopping at the ice.

She turned and walked away and added more whisky to her glass. What would be his purpose in lying to her now? She was here in his home, and he did not have to tell her anything. He could have simply been kind enough to offer a roof over her head and let her be on her way, but Camdyn felt the need to explain.

And she needed to finally learn the truth. What came after the *but*.

“What did you want to tell me that night?” she asked. “You admitted to your duplicity and then started with a *but*...at least I think you did, before I slapped you.”

“I could not let you walk away from me believing the worst. I needed to explain, but I also could not get my thoughts straight.”

“That is likely due to your head being slammed against the brick wall and being knocked out.”

Camdyn rubbed the back of his head as if he could still feel the pain. “I am certain that had everything to do with why my thoughts were scrambled. That and panic that my father had arrived and your uncle, and they had told you what I had

set out to do while I was unconscious. You needed to hear my side but you never gave me the chance.”

“I would not have believed you.” She’d been too angry and hurt to believe anything that he would have said then.

“Perhaps not then, but what about now?”

Sheena stared into his blue eyes. They were so warm, caring, and worried. She wanted to believe him in her heart of hearts but how could she trust him now when he had not been honest before?

“And as I am confessing all, there is something else you must know.”

Her stomach tightened, afraid of what else he might say. “What would that be?”

“That in coming to know you, I did come to love you. That was never a lie, nor did I want to live without you. I was sorry for the reason I first asked for an introduction, but not sorry that we had met.”

Sheena walked to the window and stared out. The snow was falling more quickly now, and it was thicker. The wind had also increased and she watched the top of the trees and wondered if they were going to experience a blizzard. If so, she may not be able to leave for days. Sheena also wondered if that was such a bad thing as it would allow her and Walsingham to discuss what needed to be said and settle upon what happened. Then, maybe she would have peace.

“As I was saying earlier, I visited MacGregor to explain the truth of the matter and asked for permission to court you.

He was more understanding than my father would have ever been. But he did not grant me permission.”

“I was unaware that you had even called on him.”

Camdyn smiled that crooked smile again. “That is because he was not allowed to mention my name, remember.”

Sheena’s face heated with the truth. It was too painful to be reminded of her first Season in London even though a day hadn’t gone by that she’d not had at least one thought of that night.

“MacGregor suspected that if I came to call on you that you would not be home to me or blatantly refuse to see me.”

“It is likely.” If she were to be honest, she would have been curious as to his visit, but she would’ve been too afraid to see him. Her heart had not completely healed nor had it yet.

“We hatched a plan.”

Sheena stilled and narrowed her eyes on him. “What kind of plan?”

Camdyn laughed. “It is not so sinister as you fear.”

“What was it?” she bit out. Was Uncle Aiden somehow responsible for her being here. Had Ewan intentionally gotten them stuck and then left her behind?

“He promised that if you were going to go to Edinburgh in the spring instead of London for the Season, that he would tell me. He would also let me know which entertainments you attended so that I might approach you. He thought that I should be given the chance to explain to you in person.”

Sheena blew out a sigh, relieved that her uncle hadn't intentionally arranged for her to be here.

"You ran the risk of me giving you the cut direct," she offered.

"Do you think I would have let that stop me from speaking to you?"

Sheena could not help but smile and was thankful that he could not see her face.

Yes, her heart was thawing, but it had not yet forgiven. He had still set out to deceive her, which made her question his character as a whole.

CHAPTER SIX

At the very least, Sheena had listened to his explanation. Whether she forgave him was another matter, but he would do whatever was necessary to win her back.

“How many men are out?” she asked quietly.

“Why?” Camdyn asked as he walked to join her by the window.

“I hope they have decided to return to their homes.”

Just as he looked out, a tree down the lane toppled from the heavy snow, the wind or both. Since he and Sheena had been inside, a blizzard had blown in. Such weather was dangerous for not only his workers, but the cows. The sheep were already penned near a barn open to them and could tolerate this weather better than most other animals. As for the cows, they were kept further away. They had talked about moving them to a closer pasture for the remainder of the winter so that they were close to shelter, but they were going to do that after the Christmas holiday.

“Please excuse me, Sheena,” he said as he set his whisky aside and hurried out of the parlor.

Camdyn called for his thickest coat and gloves and when he turned, Sheena approached with his scarf.

“Are ye certain ye want to go outside?” she asked, her brow creased with worry.

“They are my workers and my cattle. I must see to them.”

His valet returned from downstairs, and he helped Camdyn into his greatcoat then handed him his thickest gloves.

“Be careful,” Sheena whispered as he set out from the house.

Even if she hadn't forgiven him, she still cared, which may be all that he would ever have, but Camdyn could not think about that now.

The snow was nearly blinding as he made his way toward the stables. His horse was already being saddled and Camdyn could only assume that his stable master anticipated that he would be out here shortly, or a servant ran ahead and alerted him. It was not unusual for Camdyn to ride out and work alongside the men. The health and safety of the cows was the responsibility of them all. Each man had a stake in their survival so that there were plenty of healthy, adult cows to take to market come September.

Each worker also had a small tract of land and a cottage. Some were married and had children, whereas others were bachelors. Each had gardens for food and were able to hunt for meat. They weren't tenant farmers in the sense that they worked the land because they were hired to see to the cows and sheep. The main income of the estate was beef and wool.

Cows lost this December could create hardship next winter.

He rode as quickly as he dared but not as fast as he would have liked to reach the cows. He heard the mooing and his workers shouting in the distance, but the blinding snow made it almost impossible to see anything until he grew closer and there he fell in with the workers as they maneuvered the cows to the smaller fenced pasture attached to the cow barn. After each was counted and accounted for, they saw that there was plenty of feed and water and then they did the same for the sheep.

That was all they could do, and all Camdyn could hope was that the livestock survived.

By the time they had completed the tasks, each worker was exhausted and half frozen, as was Camdyn and he was finally able to turn for home as darkness was falling. The stablehands rushed to take the horses and as his workers trudged their way back to the cottages, he turned for the manor, the lights in the windows his beacon to safety.

He had to kick the snow away from the back door leading into the kitchen before opening it and then stomped his boots before entering the manor.

“I will fix you something to warm your insides,” Cook said when she saw him.

Camdyn simply nodded. “I will be by the fire in the parlor.” He then made his way through the kitchen, then dining room and into the entry when he looked upon the sweetest

sight. Sheena stood at the foot of the stairs, her brow creased with worry.

“Ye were gone so long.”

“Did you worry about me?” he asked, warmed at her concern.

“Ye ken I did. Ye were out in a blizzard for hours.”

Camdyn allowed his butler to remove his coat, gloves, hat, and scarf. “Help me remove my boots.” His feet were frozen and would thaw quicker free of the leather.

A footman brought a chair forward and Camdyn nearly fell into it. All he wanted right then was for the boots to be off his feet and to stand in front of the fire until he was warm again.

When a glass was pressed into his hands, he looked up into the green eyes of Sheena.

“MacGregor whisky will help warm yer blood.”

She did care and perhaps there was a chance that he may win her back.

“Thank you, Sheena.”



SHEENA COULDN'T SLEEP. There was so much to think about.

Further, the wind still howled outside and branches scraped against the window. It was likely she'd get no sleep tonight, nor was it so important. Given the amount of snow

from today, she'd not be able to travel back to Scotland for a few days.

She hated that Camdyn had only approached her that Season because he thought he could charm family secrets from her. He was acting on information from his father and beliefs he had held since he was a child. And he came to realize his error.

Yet, what did that say about his character that he would be willing to manipulate her like that in the first place?

He had admitted he was wrong. He was remorseful. A man who could learn from his mistakes and look back and realize the errors he had made in word or deed was to be respected.

If he were truly a horrible person, he would not have cared who he hurt in the process, like his father.

He probably would not even be able to love.

Camdyn claimed to love her. Sheena believed he did.

But, she had held onto her pain and humiliation for so long that it was difficult to let go of. This morning, all she had wanted to do was leave. She could lie to herself and claim it was because she hated him, but the truth was, her heart was still very much vulnerable when Camdyn was near. As much as she had tried to extinguish her love for him, she had not been able to do so.

She also hadn't thought that she could ever forgive him, but then he had gone out into the blizzard and was gone for the longest time. She had been certain that he was frozen in a

snow drift somewhere and when it was safe to go outside again, they would find his body.

Fear had gripped her heart and she'd paced the parlor and the entry, looking and waiting and when he had stepped through the door, it was the greatest relief she had ever experienced in her life.

She thought her heart frozen to him, but it had thawed during a blizzard and all she had wanted to do was take care of him. After his boots were removed, he had entered the parlor and settled back into the chair before the fire. She had built it up before a servant could be called and then found a blanket for him.

She was not finished with Camdyn Oaks and she would not have him die until she was.

He had thanked her for her kindness and Sheena found herself hovering, afraid that he would take ill.

They hadn't even eaten in the dining room, but before the fire. They had a light meal of hearty soup and warm bread, fitting for the weather outside.

Then he had retired, and she came to her chamber.

He was probably asleep, but Sheena had a need to see him.

Mind made up, Sheena decided that she'd just peek in his chamber, make certain that he had not become ill from being so cold and then she'd return to her own.

Quietly she opened the door and peeked out into the corridor. It was empty and all lights had been extinguished below stairs. She took the lamp from the table and then made

her way to Camdyn's chamber, which was only two doors down for she had seen him enter it, and paused just outside.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door, lifted the lamp, and stuck her head inside.

No servants were about, and he lay on his bed in darkness.

Did she check for a fever or just leave him be?

“Did you need to speak with me, Sheena.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sheena let out a squeak and nearly dropped the lamp. The last thing he needed was his manor burning down in the middle of a blizzard.

“Nay,” she answered.

Camdyn had been tired and was starting to drift off when his chamber door was opened. He assumed it would be his valet; instead, it was Sheena and all she wore was an oversized shirt that came nearly to her knees. She must have gotten her clothing from her older brothers because they were all ill-fitting. Not that he minded what she wore as he could see a good deal of her shapely legs.

He was also no longer tired.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“I feared you becoming ill,” she answered.

“I will be fine. In that you have my promise.”

“Yes...of course...I am sorry to have disturbed you.” She started backing out the door and Camdyn did not want her to leave. He’d waited over a year to be in the same bedchamber as her, but what could he say.

“Wait!”

She stopped but did not turn.

“May I ask you a question?”

She nodded but still did not turn.

“Is there a chance...any chance of winning your heart again?”

She grasped the trim of the door so tightly that her knuckles grew white, and his stomach sank. The answer was going to be no.

“Is it true?” Her voice was quiet with her question.

“Is what true?”

“Do ye truly regret how we began? Your duplicity in pretending to like me?”

“With all that I am,” he answered earnestly.

“Did you truly fall in love with me?”

“Yes. That is something I would never lie about, no matter what the circumstance.”

Her shoulders dropped, as did her chin. Camdyn wished she would turn around.

“Ye still love me?”

“Yes. I never stopped.”

She let out a heavy sigh and his heart sank. Despite everything and how much he hoped, she was going to reject him. He had ruined everything, and he had no chance of

winning her back. Otherwise, she would turn around and face him.

“Good night, Camdyn. Sleep well.”

Then she was gone, closing the door behind her, and Camdyn was left staring at it.



SHEENA EXTINGUISHED all lamps in her chamber, opened the curtain and stood at the window. Every once in a while, there was a break in the clouds and the moon would cast a bright light on the snow-covered ground.

It may no longer be snowing, but the wind tossed the white around until it came in contact with a stronger, unmoving object, such as the base of a tree, where much snow had already piled.

She wanted to cry at the beauty of the landscape and wished all the clouds would move on so that she could enjoy the pristine elegance that remained unmarred by man or beast.

That was not the only reason she wished to cry. As the landscape out her window remained frozen, the ice around her heart had melted and was now dripping, which she suspected was the cause of the moisture in her eyes.

Her heart ached, but she suspected it came from healing, or possibly mending and stitching itself back together, the way a bone still ached for days after being set.

If only she would have remained to hear what Camdyn had to say after the *but* that night in the garden. If only she would have demanded answers. This past year and a half could have been lived so differently.

Except, had she waited and asked, she would not have heard him.

The need and love for Camdyn that she had felt in that garden before they had been discovered still lived within her. It had not been eradicated but new life had been breathed into it when she first saw him upon arrival at Oakley Park and then fully permeated her being while she waited for him to return, fearing that he had perished in the blizzard.

“You never answered my question.”

Sheena nearly jumped and then whipped around. “You need to stop scaring me.”

Camdyn frowned and slowly walked toward her. He then lifted his hand and with his thumb brushed away the tears from her cheek.

“Why do you cry Sheena? Is it because you can never love me again.”

It was the most foolish statement she’d ever heard but she could not answer. Tears clogged her throat and made it impossible so instead of speaking, a sob broke. All that pain and humiliation that she had been holding in for a year and a half bubbled out of her and she could not have quit crying for anything in the world.

Camdyn drew her close and she sobbed into his chest as he rubbed her back. She wanted to explain but could not find the words. What she knew for certain, however, was this crying was healing. She had not cried over what had happened. She had wanted to be strong, brave, and determined and every time there was a chance of a tear, she had pushed it away and set her mind to something else so that she could forget Camdyn. Except she never forgot him. He was with her daily and nightly. He came to her in dreams, of their happy times when she was falling in love. Then she'd wake and hate herself for not being able to hate him for what he had done.

She had never stopped loving Camdyn Oaks no matter how much she had wanted to.

Sheena sniffed but there was nothing to wipe her nose and now she was embarrassed at having made such a display in front of him but at the same time so comforted to be in his arms to be able to let all the emotion out. She was free and lighter for it.

He shifted and reached into the pocket of his dressing gown and withdrew a fine handkerchief and handed it to her. Sheena accepted it gratefully and then wiped her eyes and then her nose.

“Are the tears because you can never love me again? Did I hurt you so deeply?”

She nearly laughed and finally looked up at him. “Nay, that is not the reason.”

“Then can you answer my question, Sheena. Is there a chance of winning your heart again? Could you ever love me

again?”

His blue eyes were so full of worry and concern, and she wanted to reassure him.

Sheena brought her hand to his face and the tip of her finger caressed the scar that she had given him. “I never stopped loving ye, Camdyn. I wanted to. I tried to hate ye, but I couldna. As much as I loathed doing so, I never stopped loving you and when you were gone for so long today in the blizzard, I realized just how very much my heart still needed yers.”

He said nothing but he didn’t need to because his lips said everything. Love and tenderness, mingled with passion and desire.

He pulled her tight against his body and she wound her arms around his shoulders. His arms caressed down her back, to her hips and then bottom. He had done so before, but then she’d been dressed for a ball. Now, she was only in a shirt far too large for her, and the heat of his hands nearly scorched her skin through the linen. Then she was lifted and carried, one arm beneath her knees and the other cradling her back and not once did he stop kissing her.

It was Sheena who pulled back. “Where are ye takin’ me?”

“My chamber is warmer and my bed larger and more comfortable.”

Anticipation shivered through her as well as a bit of fear. What did he intend to do?

“I am going to make you mine so that you can never leave me again.”

The idea of being claimed was both frightening and exciting. And Sheena was not certain she was ready.

Camdyn strode down the corridor and into his chamber and then kicked the door shut before marching to the bed and placing her in the middle of it. Sheena pushed the shirt as far down her legs as it would go, bit her bottom lip and looked up at him.

He stilled and then sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand in his. “You do not want this?”

“Aye. Nay. I doona know.” He lifted her hand and kissed the back of her fingers.

“Have I frightened you?”

“I am not certain,” she answered because she didn’t know what she wanted right then or why she was indecisive.

“Is it because you want to wait until we wed?”

Sheena had not even considered marriage, just that she was confused over what her mind had been telling her that her heart wanted. She wanted the comfort of being in his arms and the familiar anticipation and excitement of being with him.

“Do you not want to marry me?”

She stared at him, and everything settled into place. He was home. Camdyn had been home since the first time he kissed her in London. She had known it then, which was why

she fell so easily and why she had been so devastated. “Aye, I want to marry you.”

Camdyn grinned at her. “We shall do so as soon as the roads are clear enough to travel and I will sweep you off to Gretna Green.”

She couldn’t help but return his smile “If only we had left that night.”

He pulled her up so that she was no longer lying next to him and caressed her cheek. “I have waited so long to make you mine and have you here so that we are never parted again but I understand why you wish to wait. I will honor that wish.”

In that moment, Sheena was filled with comfort and love, so much deeper than before and she didn’t want to be parted from him, not even a bedchamber away. “I was only confused earlier, Camdyn. So much has happened so quickly.”

He grasped her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I understand Sheena. We will take this as slow as you need, so long as you do not stop loving me again.”

“I never stopped loving you Camdyn. I wanted to. There is a difference.”

He leaned forward and kissed her with such tenderness that it made her heart ache. This was love and so different from desire. For such love is from where desire does grow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Camdyn pulled back. To continue kissing her would only bring further discomfort. He did have a need for her, but it would not be sated tonight.

As much as Camdyn wanted Sheena, he would wait until they were man and wife, and even then, he would wait until she was ready. There was no pleasure being intimate with a woman who did not want it as much as he. That did not mean that he wouldn't attempt to seduce her as soon as they wed. He may even begin the seduction before they reached the anvil, but if he sensed any reluctance, he would not push her. They had an entire life together.

Wind howled outside and branches scratched at the window while there was crackling in the fireplace, making the room warm and cozy. Cozier with Sheena here.

She rose on her knees and leaned toward him, taking his face between her hands and leaned in to kiss him.

Camdyn groaned, then pulled away. "No more kissing tonight."

Sheena frowned. "I thought that is what you wanted."

“I do, but more kissing will lead to...further intimacy.” She was so innocent that Camdyn struggled to find the right words.

“You do not want intimacy?”

“You are not ready. You said so yourself.”

“Nay, that is not what I said.” She smiled and kissed him again. “I said that so much has happened so quickly that it was confusing. But I am certain that I love you. I am certain that I want to marry you. I am also certain that I desire you.” She frowned for a moment. “I am not certain what I desire, I only know that you have made me feel things that I do not understand, but find pleasure in them, and I know that there is more to enjoy, but...”

“What, Sheena? You can tell me anything.”

Tears formed again. “I doona want to hesitate. I am afraid.”

The last thing he wished to do was frighten her. “Because you do not know what to expect?”

“I doona, but I trust you in that. It is just...I trust you Camdyn, and I love ye...but I did once before.”

She did not need to say any more. She had spent a year and a half hating him because she thought he had only been using her for information without knowing the full truth. He would have doubts about their current situation. She'd only arrived on his doorstep yesterday. The truth may be known between them now, but pain and heartache would still linger, and trust cannot be replaced so quickly.

Camdyn caressed her cheek. There was nothing that he wanted more right now than Sheena, but it was too soon for her.

“No more kissing tonight and no more caresses.”

She pulled back as if she were struck. “Isna that what you want?”

“Oh, Sheena, more than anything. It is you with the doubts.”

She opened her mouth to speak but he placed a finger against her lips. “We have a lifetime. I will be true to my word and carry you off to Gretna Green as soon as it is safe to travel, but I think your hesitation stems from that promise being made once before.”

She looked down at her hands and he knew that it was the truth.

“I will earn your trust again. Somehow, I will, and it will start with me not asking for more than I should, not being your husband. But I promise we will wed unless you change your mind.”

Sheena glanced up at him. “I willna Camdyn. I willna.”

It was that assurance that she needed. Not the promise but the vows, and he could not blame her, especially after all that had happened. Further, a miss had far more to lose in this situation than a man. Once innocence was lost, it could not be reclaimed and the reason he was going to do right by her.



CHRISTMAS ARRIVED a day later with neither one of them alone, and Sheena couldn't remember being happier or more content in her life. Camdyn showed her the estate, and his home, and took every opportunity to kiss her beneath mistletoe.

“Excuse me, Miss Sheena,” a maid interrupted as they were finishing supper. “I was instructed by your brother to give this to you Christmas night if you and Lord Walsingham had...um...overcome your differences and were getting along.”

A blush spread across the poor maid's cheeks. The whole household of servants knew they were getting along quite well and that she now slept in Camdyn's chamber. She knew they assumed that much more was happening besides sleeping, but Camdyn had stayed true to his promise that there would be no intimacy until they wed. All he did was hold her and it was the most wonderful sleep she had ever gotten. Further, she was now quite certain that she'd never be able to sleep again if he wasn't curled about her, keeping her close or her head upon his chest.

She really should be scandalized and embarrassed by what she assumed the servants were thinking, but they also knew that she and Camdyn were to marry as soon as it was safe to travel.

“Thank ye.” Sheena took the document and unfolded the parchment.

SHEENA,

I KNOW you were angry with me for taking the route that I did, but it was on purpose as was getting the wagon stuck. As you were pulling the horses, I was making certain the wheels dug deeper and deeper into the mud.

SHEENA GASPED and looked over to Camdyn. “He did this on purpose.”

Camdyn rose and came to stand behind her. Sheena knew that he read the correspondence over her shoulder, but she did not care. What Ewan had done to her, he had also done to him.

IT WAS my intention to bring you face to face with Lord Walsingham. I know that he called on Uncle Aiden and I heard his explanation, apologies, how he wanted to court you, and that he loved you.

I also know that you love him but are too stubborn to see through your pain. Nor would you give him a chance to explain unless you were forced to listen.

He is a good man, Sheena. Given him a chance and open your heart again if you have not already.

However, if Lord Walsingham breaks your heart again, I will issue a challenge as I wanted to in London. Uncle Aiden and Alistair were in agreement, but Rose talked us out of it as

she did not want further scandal brought to her family nor did she want all of London to know what had happened to you. It was her protection of you why we did not insist that Walsingham meet us on the green the following morning.

Your loving brother, Ewan.

SHEENA SET THE LETTER ASIDE. “Uncle Aiden is going to kill him.”

“I am not so certain.” Camdyn chuckled. “But I do believe we should wed soon, love, for I am expecting your uncle to call as soon as he is able.”

EPILOGUE

It was another six days before the snow had melted enough that they could travel, and Camdyn sent for his carriage.

Sheena had been able to borrow dresses from the maids because she did not want to be married in trousers. He was perfectly fine with her doing so as he could enjoy watching her bum. She insisted that it was not proper.

Though he did want to know where she had run off to. One moment she'd been inside the manor waiting for the carriage and then she was gone.

Camdyn stepped outside to see if she was waiting there, but all he found were footprints in the snow going different directions.

What the blazes was she doing out here?

He turned to look toward the direction of the stables, when something solid hit him in the center of his back.

He turned to find her laughing as she scooped up more snow and started forming another snowball.

“I am warning you. If you throw another, you will not like the consequences.”

She simply grinned, then let the ball fly, striking him in the chest.

Camdyn took off after her, quickly catching up to Sheena because he was not wearing skirts like her, and they both went tumbling into a snowdrift.

“What are the consequences,” she asked from beneath him.

“Maybe you are in need of a spanking,” he warned.

Sheena lost all color as her eyes widened.

Camdyn chuckled. “I would never lay a hand on you, but it was the only threat that I could think of.”

“You could deny me kisses,” she offered with a grin.

“But then I would only be denying myself,” he reminded her. “Maybe I will make you wear trousers instead of skirts. They are my preference.”

Before she could respond, the sound of a carriage on the drive drew their attention. Camdyn looked back, assuming it was his, except it was not, which sent him scrambling to his feet and helping Sheena out of the snowdrift. Sheena brushed the snow from her clothing as the faces of the occupants in the carriage were revealed.

Camdyn nearly groaned when the carriage stopped, and Aiden MacGregor stepped out.

Camdyn’s carriage then pulled in behind the MacGregors’. “We would invite ye inside but were just about ta leave,” Sheena announced.

MacGregor arched an eyebrow. “And where were ye goin’ lass?”

“Gretna Green,” Camdyn answered. “Sheena has agreed to be my wife and given we’ve spent these last days here...” Camdyn trailed off as MacGregor turned to glare back at Ewan.

His stomach tightened. Would MacGregor deny him now?

“Is this what you want, Sheena?”

Camdyn held his breath waiting for her answer. These days had been the happiest in memory, but what if she had a change of heart now that her uncle was here?

“Aye. More than anythin’.”

“Is that your answer because he compromised ye? Ye’ve been alone with Walsingham, and ye was just frolickin’ in the snow. Is it because ye have no choice? I would rather ye were happy.”

“I still have a choice,” she answered and looked up to Camdyn. “If you must know the truth, he refused to seduce me until we wed.”

MacGregor frowned. “Ye dinna seduce my niece?”

“No,” Camdyn answered, though he had wanted to many times, but his future uncle-in-law did not need to know those facts.

MacGregor looked from one to the other then he shook his head. “You do not have to go to Gretna Green. Once you cross the border any vicar or blacksmith will do.”

Camdyn had always assumed that such weddings could only take place in Gretna Green because that was where everyone went. He had never bothered to learn otherwise as he'd only considered marriage once before, when he had first asked Sheena.

"If that is true, then we can be married today," Camdyn told Sheena. "Newcastleton is less than an hour away, though it may take longer in the snow." He then turned to MacGregor. "With your permission, of course."

"Yes, you have his permission, and mine."

He turned to find Mrs. MacGregor stepping from the carriage to stand beside Ewan and Alistair, Sheena's older brothers. "Then I hope to return here for a warm meal."

"Yes, of course," Camdyn readily agreed.

Mrs. MacGregor then slowly smiled. "My husband and I may also stay a few days so that I can finally come to know my nephew-in-law, and while her brothers return to Anagburn to collect Sheena's belongings."

"Yes, of course," Camdyn eagerly agreed. "You may stay as long as you would like."

Two hours later, Sheena and Camdyn stood before a vicar and recited their vows. This was not at all how he had expected his year to come to an end. He was happier for the unexpected and thankful to Ewan for doing what he thought was best.

When he leaned in to kiss Sheena, she eagerly accepted and returned his kiss, which quickly deepened. At the loud

clearing of a throat from behind them and Camdyn pulled way.

“That is enough. Yer in a church,” MacGregor chastised.

Camdyn stifled a groan at the realization that MacGregor would now be staying in his home, and he hoped that the man did not object to further kissing because Camdyn was not going to ignore the mistletoe that would remain hanging in every doorway until the greenery was swept from the house on the eve of Twelfth Night.

But more importantly, as soon as he had Sheena back home and alone in their bedchamber, she would finally be his, with all doubts and fears being put to rest.

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USA Today bestselling author Jane Charles is a prolific writer of over fifty historical and contemporary romance novels. Her love of research and history lends authenticity to her Regency romances, and her experience directing theatre productions helps her craft beautiful, touching stories that tug at the heartstrings. Jane is an upbeat and positive author dedicated to giving her characters happy-ever-afters and leaving the readers satisfied at the end of an emotional journey. She is a lifelong Cubs fan and lives in Central Illinois with her two huskies and a mellow cat. She is currently writing her next book and planning her dream trip to England.

Scot to the Heart Reading Order

Courting the Scot ~ <https://books2read.com/u/4AgDXe>

Kissing the Lass ~ <https://books2read.com/u/3J8J1E>

Once Upon a Midnight Masquerade ~

<https://books2read.com/u/4N99z9>

Mistletoe, Whisky and a Rogue ~

<https://books2read.com/u/mY7oWd>

The Smuggler's Christmas Rogue (Christmas in Cumbria)

MINE THIS WINTER

ADELE CLEE



CHAPTER ONE

Westmore Hall

Whitehaven

Christmas was a time of miracles, when one should be prepared for an event that defied logic and the laws of nature. Yet the handsome gentleman entering the drawing room had been summoned by the devil, not the Divine.

Gwen clasped her trembling hands in her lap and willed herself to wake from her nightmare.

She'd heard Simon Garrick was dead. Shot by marauders in the Americas or forced off the plank of a pirate ship in the Indies. Someone said his wife found him cavorting with his mistress and drove a blade through his black heart. Mrs Berridge seemed convinced he'd gambled away his fortune and downed enough port to pickle his liver.

The tales were untrue.

Because, much to the horror of the other guests, Simon Garrick had just marched to the drinks table and poured his own brandy.

Flanders tried to intervene, but Mr Garrick shooed the butler away like one would an annoying fly. He tossed back the amber liquid, hissed to cool the burn, and quickly poured himself another drink.

All the men watched and muttered between themselves, their voices tight with disapproval, yet no one dared approach him.

Why would they?

They were staring at a ghost. A mesmerising and somewhat angry ghost who looked ready to drag their poor souls to Hades.

“So, Mr Garrick isn’t dead,” Mrs Astley said, relaxing beside Gwen on the sofa. She patted her vibrant red hair as a pleasurable hum left her lips. “That man is like fine wine. He gets better with age. How old is he now? Thirty?”

Gwen feigned disinterest. “I’m not sure.”

He would be thirty in February.

Despite every effort to ignore him, Gwen let her gaze slide southward over Mr Garrick’s impressive physique. The sight had her heart thumping hard against her ribcage. Broad shoulders filled his dark blue coat. Muscular thighs filled his buckskin breeches. His skin had a golden hue, and she imagined him stripping off his clothes against the heat of a tropical sun.

Five years had passed, yet she remembered everything.

The arousing smell of his cedarwood cologne.

The honey highlights in his sandy-brown hair.

Eyes as blue as a Mediterranean sea.

Lips that had devoured hers in a kiss that left her body aching. A kiss that ruined her for any other man.

“Did his father not own the neighbouring estate?” came Mrs Astley’s curious question. Everyone knew the widow wanted a new gentleman to warm her bed, and had come to Westmore under the guise of playing chaperone to her sister Miss Netherwell.

“Whitney Grange is a short walk from here.” Memories flashed into Gwen’s mind. The secret picnic with Mr Garrick in the woods bordering his property. His hand moving gently between her thighs. “The house has been empty since his father died last year.”

Mr Garrick had not returned for the funeral.

Confirming the claim he was dead.

Gwen looked up from her lap to meet Mr Garrick’s intense stare. The power of it stole past her defences, sending her pulse skittering.

He studied her over the rim of his glass, disdain marring his fine features, yet he was the one who had kissed her passionately and left England hours later without uttering a word.

Struggling beneath the weight of his observations, Gwen stood. Her legs wobbled like the boards beneath her feet were made of quicksand. Mr Garrick’s arrival had shaken her very foundations.

She needed air.

She needed space.

And she needed answers.

Keeping the drawing room door in her sights, she put one unsteady foot in front of the other and crossed the room.

Don't look at him.

Don't give him the satisfaction of knowing you're ruffled.

She walked past him, the force of his magnetic pull thrumming in the air between them. Simon Garrick made her feel alive. Just being in his presence did strange things to her insides.

“Gwendolyn,” he whispered in the low, husky voice she often heard in her dreams.

Gwendolyn. An exceptional woman needs an exceptional name.

But she didn't stop to acknowledge the man who had hurt her so cruelly. Words could not mend a broken heart. Excuses could not erase the five years spent lost and alone in utter confusion.

With a renewed sense of purpose, she strode across the hall to her brother's study. The door was ajar, and she knocked before marching inside and closing it behind her.

Oliver sat perched on the edge of the desk, rubbing his jaw as if the action might atone for the fact he'd welcomed Lucifer into their home.

“Did you know Mr Garrick had returned to Whitehaven?” Blood charged through her veins but she fought to maintain a calm tone.

“No. He was the last person I expected to see when Flanders called me to the door. Garrick is in Whitehaven on business. The heavy snowfall means he’s stranded.” Oliver gritted his teeth. “He’s to stay here until the roads are passable.”

“Stay here?” Sleep mere feet from her bedchamber? “But Whitney Grange is a ten-minute walk. Why can’t he stay there?” Because he was leaving again and planned to ruin Gwen’s life for another five years.

“The house has been empty since his father died. There are no servants, no provisions. How could I refuse him?”

“Is that why you’re so agitated?”

“I’m not agitated.”

Gwen grinned. “You’re nibbling your nails. You only nibble your nails when there’s a problem.”

“I’m not nibbling my nails.” Oliver motioned to the door. “I wanted things to go smoothly, and Garrick is too uncouth for my liking. He’s bound to rile the guests.”

There was nothing uncouth about Simon Garrick.

Yes, he took what he wanted without compunction. He dominated a room, made every other man seem weak and insignificant. And he did it all with an air of grace and sophistication.

“I hoped you’d choose a husband this week.” Oliver spoke as if she were baggage he needed to offload. “You said you would consider all the eligible men I’ve invited.”

Gwen pursed her lips to stifle a sigh.

Lord Bancroft was ten years her senior and a frightful bore. Mr Payne was obnoxious. Sir Robert Harris possessed an affable countenance and fell over himself to shower her with compliments.

None of them looked at her like Simon Garrick had. Like they wanted to devour every inch of her naked flesh. Like they could hear the sweet callings of her soul.

“I agreed to spend a week in their company, Oliver, nothing more.” The thought of marrying anyone filled her with dread. She should leave tonight, take the stage to the nearest convent and take a vow of chastity. “Do not force the issue.”

He brushed a hand through his mop of black hair. “You’re five and twenty, Gwen. You cannot afford to wait any longer.” Feeling a little guilty for his blunt manner, Oliver stepped forward and captured her hand. “You’re beautiful and charming. I don’t want you to waste away waiting for Mr Perfection to walk through the door and offer his hand.”

She closed her eyes briefly against an image of the handsome Mr Garrick. “I don’t seek perfection. I just want someone to love me. Someone I can love in return.” Someone who made her forget about perfect kisses and broken promises.

Oliver snorted. “Our kind cannot afford to wait for love, Gwen. Besides, love is nothing more than infatuation. Such emotions fade with time.”

And yet, five years felt as little as five seconds. The sad reality was little had changed for Gwen during that time.

A sudden knock on the door brought light relief.

Flanders entered, his bushy grey brows drawn in consternation. “Forgive me, my lord, but Mr Garrick is demanding someone show him to his room. He’s tired after the long journey and finds the insufferable fools in the drawing room tedious company.”

Gwen suppressed a gasp.

The gentleman had the cheek of the devil.

Was he not grateful for their hospitality?

Oliver muttered something foul under his breath. “Tell Garrick I’ll be along in a moment. I’m sure he can bear them for a few minutes more. If all else fails, give the man brandy.”

Flanders gave a discreet cough. “I believe he has downed three glasses in as many minutes, my lord.”

“Good. Hopefully, the reprobate will be so sotted he’ll leave and freeze to death in the snow. I find myself thankful for the plummeting temperatures.”

Gwen blinked in disbelief. Oliver rarely lost his temper. But why permit Mr Garrick to stay? Why not throw him out? And what made Mr Garrick think he could ride roughshod over a viscount?

“I’ll tell Mr Garrick we have no rooms available,” Gwen said, though she would need every ounce of courage she possessed to face him.

“No!” Oliver recovered quickly from his sudden outburst and straightened his coat. “I’ll deal with him. I’ll not see you upset. Not when you had every hope of making a match this week.”

There was more chance of her marrying Flanders than any of the insipid men warming themselves in the drawing room.

“Why would I be upset? Mr Garrick means nothing to me.”

Oliver clearly doubted her word and reeled off reasons why he should deal with the problem. “Wait here until the coast is clear. Flanders will fetch you once Garrick has retired to his chamber.”

A flush warmed her cheeks.

Did Oliver know of the intimate picnic? He knew she had developed some affection for Mr Garrick, knew his absence had left her heartsick for months. But five years had passed. Why was he so anxious?

“I’m not afraid of Mr Garrick,” she said, striding from the study. Oliver called to her, but she ignored his irrational plea and returned to the drawing room.

Mr Garrick stood alone, his arms folded over his broad chest as he stared at her portrait. If he felt an ounce of remorse for mistreating her, it was not apparent. He was so lost in a dreamlike state he failed to notice her approach.

“Mr Garrick.” Gwen fought to keep the tremble from her voice. Being so close opened a Pandora’s box, the sudden plague of unwanted feelings leaving her lightheaded. “Might we speak privately?”

The man’s magnificent blue gaze moved slowly from the painting to her person. It did not come to rest on her lips—he used to stare at her mouth like a parched man in need of sustenance. “Where do you suggest we go? Not the orangery, or the woods, or the stables?”

Images of every kiss they’d shared filtered through her mind. Mr Garrick meant to provoke her temper, yet he left her awash with confusion. What had she done to deserve his censure?

“I thought the hall.”

“The hall?” he scoffed as if offended.

Deciding the matter called for directness, Gwen lowered her voice. “We have no rooms available. You cannot stay here.”

His heavy sigh breezed over her. It took effort not to breathe deeply and inhale the essence of the man she had never forgotten.

“The matter is not open for negotiation. Send one of your admirers away. I’m staying here, Gwendolyn, and you have no choice but to suffer my company.”

Heaven help her! When had he become so insufferable? Worse still, why did she experience a delightful shiver at the sound of her given name?

Sensing something was amiss, the ever-obnoxious Mr Payne approached. He'd barely opened his mouth before Mr Garrick growled, "Bugger off, Payne, before I shove my fist down your throat."

"Now listen here, Garrick. The ladies—"

"Step away. I'll not warn you again."

Oliver appeared. "That's enough, Garrick. Flanders will show you to your room. I pray you're in a more congenial mood tomorrow. We're here to celebrate the festive season, not squabble amongst ourselves."

If anyone should berate the man, it was Gwen.

She deserved answers—a detailed explanation why he had promised her the world, only to disappear as quickly as smoke up the chimney.

Yet, despite everything, her heart softened. The need to defend him against a barrage of criticism forced her to say, "I'm sure Mr Garrick is merely tired after his long journey."

The gentleman met her gaze, the power of it throwing her off kilter. "As you say, Miss Caldwell, I wouldn't want the guests to mistake my intention. All warfare begins with deception."

And after that cryptic comment, he left.

While Oliver agreed to join Mr Payne in a game of cards, and made light of the incident to calm the guests, Gwen stared at the door.

Mrs Astley approached and thrust a glass of sherry into Gwen's hand. "Good Lord. There's nothing more appealing to a woman than a dangerous man. Mr Garrick's disregard for propriety has left me hot and flustered."

Gwen could not disagree. Her body glowed. Her heart had not thundered in her chest since Mr Garrick laid her down on the picnic blanket and touched her intimately.

But these ripples of lust were the least of her worries.

A troubling emotion took precedence. Despite a five-year separation, she feared she was still in love with Simon Garrick.

CHAPTER TWO

Simon mounted the stairs two at a time, keen to distance himself from the woman who haunted his dreams. The need to release the breath he'd been holding since entering Westmore Hall left him gasping.

He would throttle Mowbray for this.

Had the blackguard concocted a story about spies to force Simon to confront his past? If only he'd not downed too much wine and stupidly revealed his secret. If only his tongue hadn't been as loose as a bawd's drawers.

He paused on the grand staircase, gripping the bannister as if it were his employer's blasted neck. How the devil was he supposed to focus on the case when in the company of Gwendolyn Caldwell?

Just one more job before you retire.

You won't need to spend a day in France.

Intelligence says this spy is working close to home.

Simon had gathered a wealth of information, spent weeks planning and preparing for the operation, only to find the north of England his destination—Whitehaven, to be precise.

Whitehaven!

Of all the godforsaken places!

He'd hoped never to set foot on Cumbrian soil again, let alone visit old haunts and stir unwanted memories. Like ghosts keen to make themselves known, visions of stolen kisses slipped into his mind. He heard echoes of promises made, of every romantic word he'd whispered as he nuzzled Miss Caldwell's neck.

Guilt surfaced.

Should he have tried to resolve their differences?

Should he have spoken to her before leaving England?

A sudden cough drew his gaze to where Flanders stood waiting on the landing. "I beg your pardon, sir, but it may be unwise to linger on the stairs. After downing three glasses of sherry, Mrs Astley has a habit of wandering into the wrong bedchamber. Doubtless she'll not be far behind."

Simon hardly knew Mrs Astley, but only one woman had dared to scan his body like she wanted to devour him whole. And it wasn't Gwendolyn Caldwell.

"How many glasses has the lady consumed?" he said, finding solace in the amusing conversation.

"Six at the last count, sir. Enough to make her indulge in the much-loved sport of swapping beds."

Simon continued up the stairs. "Does Lord Holmes know his butler spreads malicious gossip about the guests?"

“His lordship suggested I have a polite word with all the gentlemen present. You fit the criteria.”

Simon snorted. “His lordship might disagree.”

On a dark winter’s night five years ago, Oliver Caldwell had made his true feelings known. Then, he had been his father’s errand boy. Despite inheriting the title Viscount Holmes, he was still an arrogant arse.

“Doubtless your master had much to say about me. I’m the unwelcome intruder come to spoil the festivities.”

“Nothing one could repeat, sir.”

Simon chuckled to himself. There was one consolation to this whole sorry business. Holmes’ face had twisted into a perfect picture of outrage as he read the King’s missive. The viscount had no choice but to grant His Majesty’s request and give Simon leave to conduct an investigation.

“What a shame you didn’t adopt the same philosophy five years ago,” Simon said. Had the butler kept his mouth shut, Gwendolyn would not have been forced to change her opinion. But who was he fooling? Perhaps she had always been false-hearted. “I might have married Miss Caldwell.”

Flanders gave a nervous cough and seemed relieved they’d reached their destination. “You’ll be staying in the blue room, sir. As requested, it gives an excellent view of the garden. It’s usually reserved for special guests.”

The butler led Simon into a palatial chamber of true Elizabethan design. Luxurious blue and gold hangings adorned

the huge oak tester bed. Rich, detailed tapestries covered the walls.

A maid had been to turn down the bed, light the fire and lamps.

Oddly, Simon felt more at home in a traitors' den in France. The Caldwells might not have betrayed king and country, but they were all snakes in the grass.

Simon strode to the window, focusing on his mission and not those who deserved his contempt. "I recall there's a stile giving access to the coastal path leading down to the beach." It was hard to get one's bearings when gazing at nothing but a white blanket of snow.

Mowbray was confident the villain's fellow conspirator would arrive by sea. But few, except for experienced fishermen, would take to the water in the dead of winter.

Flanders ambled to the window. "Walk beyond the formal gardens, past the fountain to the path behind the tall topiary hedge. Be careful if you venture outdoors, sir. The path is rocky underfoot and often unstable in bad weather."

"You almost sound like you care, Flanders."

"I'm paid to be polite, sir."

"Regardless of how you feel about me, I admire honesty above all things." What a shame Gwendolyn had spun a web of lies instead of explaining how she really felt. "Perhaps you might teach your employer the value of integrity."

The butler shuffled uncomfortably, the change of atmosphere revealing the servant's sudden unease. What had

made Flanders nervous? The mention of the beach or integrity? Simon had not discounted the possibility the spy worked at Westmore.

“So I might avoid Mrs Astley’s nighttime antics, can you tell me who occupies the rooms along this corridor?” It wasn’t Gwendolyn. She had a chamber in the west wing. It probably smelled of spring roses and other female trappings. Things a man remembered when his body craved company at night. Devices used to make a man fall in love.

“I’m not at liberty to say, sir, though Mrs Astley can cover the best part of a mile when half asleep and in a state of dishabille.”

Simon chuckled. He’d make sure to keep the door to his chamber locked. That said, he planned to do a little midnight snooping himself.

Flanders withdrew.

Time ticked slowly.

Simon’s thoughts turned to Gwendolyn, and a host of questions flooded his mind. Why kiss him passionately if she found him lacking? Why insist she must marry a titled man yet remain unwed? Every fellow at Westmore sought an alliance—that’s what had made him so damn angry. So why wait five years to take the plunge? Which fop had taken her fancy? He’d kill the first man who laid a hand on her.

Damnation!

Simon rubbed his temples to ease the mounting tension.

He should have stayed in the drawing room and been friendly to the guests. How else was he to catch a spy? Yet being in Gwendolyn's company roused all the old memories.

He craved her touch. Needed to feel her delicate hands roaming over his body. Longed to slide his tongue over her plump lips. God, he was desperate to hear her sweet pants and moans.

They're the moans of a traitor, he reminded himself. A woman who broke bread with him, professed her love only to abandon him hours later.

Only a fool would marry a pauper.

It was hard to believe those words had fallen from her lips.

Simon slipped his fingers inside his cravat and tugged it loose. The need to breathe clean air and rid his mind of these crippling thoughts had him striding to the door.

While the guests were engaged in a lively game of charades, he snatched his greatcoat from the cloakroom and headed out through the terrace doors into the garden.

The biting wind nipped his cheeks and ruffled his hair, but he pulled his coat tightly across his chest and braved the winter weather.

It made sense to venture along the path and check how easy it was to access the beach. Few spies conducted their unlawful transactions by day. A man needed to move quickly through the darkness. In these treacherous conditions, it paid to know the route.

He passed the fountain, the water frozen like his heart, and rounded the high hedge. Beyond the stile fifty yards ahead, he noted where the path met the cliff edge. A rickety wooden fence would hardly keep a man from tumbling to his death.

Simon was busy chastising himself for not bringing a lantern, when the crunch of snow and a feminine groan reached his ears.

Damn, Mrs Astley. The woman was probably scouting the bedchambers and had watched him leave. He hadn't the patience to deal with her pathetic attempts at seduction.

Hoping the darkness would deter her, he hid behind the verdure but had to bite his tongue when snow tumbled from the high topiary hedge and landed on his head.

The footsteps came closer.

Water trickled down his temple and cheek. An ice-cold rivulet ran down his neck. He pursed his lips to avoid making a sound, but a shadow stepped from blackness into the moonlight. A dark-haired shadow with porcelain skin and rosebud lips.

“Gwendolyn!”

She jumped in shock. “Simon!”

“Mr Garrick,” he corrected, his anger surfacing. She had forgone the right to use his given name. “What are you doing outdoors, Miss Caldwell? You’ll freeze to death. And these paths are treacherous.”

He sounded like a vicar, not a dangerous bastard who caught criminals for a living.

“I—I saw you leave. I know you enjoy a late-night walk along the beach, and thought someone should warn you about the path. It’s no longer safe.”

The muscles in his abdomen tightened as he remembered kissing her beneath the full moon, the whoosh of the sea like a soothing sonata. “Thank you. You have done your duty and may return to the house.”

She blinked rapidly but gathered herself and tilted her proud chin. “You might sound a little more grateful.”

“Grateful you invented an excuse to follow me?” He let his anger swamp all feelings of love and lust. “Go back to the drawing room, Miss Caldwell. The men there are vying for your attention. I’m sure one will have the honour of being your betrothed before the week is out.”

She jerked as if reeling from a blow. “I have no intention of marrying any of the gentlemen my brother invited.”

Was this a callous joke? A means to torment him? “Can you not find anyone worthy amongst the wealthy men here tonight? Heaven forbid you were forced to marry a pauper.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “How can you even say that?”

“Say what?” What right did she have to feel affronted?

“Suggest I care about money after all that has passed between us.” Gwendolyn straightened her shoulders. “Why are you here? Have you finally come to claim your inheritance?”

There wasn’t a day that he didn’t consider returning home. “Inheritance? Do you know how much it would cost to repair the damp-ridden Whitney Grange?”

Finding funds was not the problem. He'd earned a small fortune while working for the government. The problem was living close to a woman who still held his heart in her talon-like grasp.

"I'm told you're a capable man." Her gaze dipped to his chest, and she swallowed deeply. "Your wild adventures abroad have had a marked effect on your physique."

Good God! Had he heard a hint of admiration in her tone?

Was he good enough to bed, just not good enough to marry?

"Despite our past acquaintance, Miss Caldwell, such an intimate conversation is hardly appropriate. Perhaps you should save your praise for the men in the drawing room. It would take more than a half-hearted compliment to rouse a reaction from me."

The lady clutched her breast as if mortally wounded. Water welled in her eyes. "What happened to make you so cruel?"

"Cruel?" Cruel was professing love for a man and casting him aside hours later. "Those in glass houses should not throw stones, madam."

Confusion marred her brow.

Knots twisted in his stomach as she dashed more tears from her cheek.

"So it's true. All hope is lost. You're no longer the caring man I used to know." Desperate to make a quick escape, she swung around too quickly and lost her footing in the snow.

Before Simon knew what the devil was happening, he'd caught her and hauled her into his arms. He was ready to chastise her again, but she sagged against his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist like she used to.

Simon closed his eyes, his soul content for the first time in five years. The warmth of her body melted the ice around his heart. She smelled exactly as he remembered—like sunshine and summertime—like the woman he still loved.

Don't do this to me, he uttered silently.

Not now. Not after all these years.

He looked down at her, ready to pull away, but couldn't resist pressing a lingering kiss to her temple.

Gwendolyn looked up, desire's fire in her damp eyes, her plump lips parted as if hungry for more.

His cock hardened.

His pulse soared.

And his heart nearly broke in two.

He was seconds away from devouring her mouth, from laying her down in the snow and indulging in every wicked pleasure. The thought was like dousing a drunkard with cold water—sobering.

He clasped her upper arms, determined not to fall for this hoyden's tricks. "We're not the same people anymore. Go! Go now! Go, before I do something we will both regret."

CHAPTER
THREE

Gwendolyn took to her heels and ran, anger propelling her forward, though she wanted to drop to her knees and wallow in grief. Despite all the ridiculous stories she'd heard involving Simon Garrick, she always hoped he would come home, regretful, eager to make amends and plead for her hand in marriage.

I love you, Gwendolyn. Forgive me!

But no! He had put a lit torch to her dreams. He had forced her to face a stark reality. He didn't want her. Perhaps he never had.

Damn the man.

Why had he come to Whitehaven and opened old wounds?

Ignorance was easier to deal with than the truth.

Blinded by tears, she stumbled and slipped in the snow, her bare hands breaking her fall. Despite the cold, she remained there, a crumpled heap, a fragment of the elegant lady who'd played the pianoforte so perfectly for her brother's guests.

"Miss Caldwell." Mr Garrick's deep voice pierced the silence. "Allow me to help you back to the house." Firm

fingers gripped her elbow as he hauled her to her feet. “You’ll catch your death out here.”

She wanted to yank her arm free, tell him she was capable of finding her own way, but all the strength had left her body.

“Thank you, Mr Garrick. I should have known better than to venture out in this weather.” She brushed snow from her hands and cloak, though her fingers were as numb as her heart. “I shall be fine on my own.”

The last statement was a mantra she repeated often.

A state of mind she’d adopted the past five years.

“Miss Caldwell,” he repeated, looming like he had unfinished business and meant to flay her alive again. “We should agree to put our differences aside. It will make my stay at Westmore easier to bear.”

Gwendolyn couldn’t look at him. Of all the stressful situations she expected to encounter this week, this tested her resolve to the limit.

“Put your mind at ease, Mr Garrick. Whatever happened between us is in the past. For everyone’s sake, I’m sure we can be civil.”

She didn’t give him a chance to reply but continued her march back to the house, praying she didn’t fall again.

Her face damp with tears and her cloak wet with snow, she hurried to her bedchamber, locked the door and collapsed to the floor.

Breathe!

The world will seem brighter tomorrow.

She had told herself that many times.

Yet Mr Garrick lived under her skin.

He haunted her dreams nightly.

“Good riddance to all men!” she muttered.

It was better to remain a spinster than live with a loon. Mr Garrick was definitely three pence short of a shilling. His waffling made no sense. And he avoided answering the simplest questions.

A light knock on the door brought her maid. “Flanders said you’d retired for the evening, miss. But I knew something was wrong when you didn’t ring for assistance.”

Wrong was the understatement of the century!

“Come in, Myrtle, and don’t ask why I’m wearing a wet cloak.”

Myrtle slipped into the room and closed the door. “Happen it has something to do with your walk in the garden. It’s only right you’d want to speak to Mr Garrick now he’s made a shocking return.”

As always, Myrtle had the measure of the situation. “One question. One answer. What is so difficult about that?” Yet pride meant she hadn’t directly asked why he’d deserted her five years ago.

And why was he so angry?

It was like she’d missed a vital piece of the puzzle.

“Have any of the servants mentioned Mr Garrick?” Gwen raised her arms as Myrtle helped her undress. “Most of you were here when he left Whitehaven so suddenly.”

Myrtle hesitated. “Only that his arrival is bound to cause a stir.” She guided Gwen to the stool as if she were incapable of walking unaided, and quickly changed the subject. “Sit down, miss, while I brush out your hair. You know how tangled it gets in damp weather.”

Gwen met Myrtle’s gaze in the looking glass.

The air grew thick with suspicion and unspoken secrets.

Myrtle knew something.

“Flanders must have an opinion.” Gwen turned in the seat and faced the young woman. “A lady’s maid should always be truthful. If I cannot trust you, Myrtle, I shall have to find a replacement.”

Myrtle worried her bottom lip before blurting, “Flanders said Mrs Samuel would likely die of apoplexy if she’d witnessed Mr Garrick’s return. He didn’t say why.”

“Mrs Samuel? The old housekeeper?” A sickening feeling coiled in Gwen’s stomach. “What has she to do with anything?”

Oliver had thrown Mrs Samuel out when he inherited the viscountcy. The woman claimed to be their father’s mistress and had demanded money from the estate. But what did Mrs Samuel have to do with Mr Garrick?

“I don’t rightly know, miss, but Flanders said she could wrap the old Lord Holmes around her little finger and use him

to spin a yarn.”

Gwen’s father had behaved like a fool around the young widow, giving her an important role in the household when previously she’d only managed young children.

While Myrtle pulled out the pins and tugged the tangled curls, Gwen contemplated Mr Garrick’s strange behaviour. He wasn’t the only gentleman acting oddly. Oliver seemed more irate than ever, which added to her growing suspicions.

“Do the servants know what prompted Mr Garrick to leave five years ago?” Just as importantly, why had he stayed away?

Myrtle avoided meeting Gwen’s gaze.

“Myrtle?”

The maid’s throat worked tirelessly. “Mrs Samuel told Flanders that you’d sent Mr Garrick away because his father was a reckless fool. But it’s not for me to question your word, miss.”

Sent Mr Garrick away?

Why would she want rid of the man she hoped to marry?

Yes, his father was a wastrel, but she didn’t care about that.

A sudden chill passed over her.

A chill cold enough to freeze a tropical sea.

Had there been a misunderstanding?

The only way to know for sure was to ask Mr Garrick directly. But a lady could not barge into a gentleman’s bedchamber at night. Nor could she sneak about in a state of

dishabille in a house full of guests. That said, when one had waited five years for the truth why care about the risks?

“You may leave now, Myrtle. There’s no need to return.”

The woman frowned. “I’m not sure I should leave you alone, miss. You seem all out of sorts tonight.”

“After such a taxing evening, I shall be asleep within minutes.”

As soon as the house fell quiet, she would dress quickly, find Mr Garrick and demand answers. She just had to pray she didn’t find the man sprawled naked on the bed.

What a glorious sight that would be!

Memories of her caressing his hard body made her heart skip a beat. What she would give to touch him intimately again, to kiss him, their tongues lost in an erotic dance. Failing that, she’d be grateful for his friendship and would learn to cope with the constant yearning.

Myrtle took an age folding clothes and tidying the room and eventually left when Gwen feigned sleep.

An hour passed before Gwen heard the boards creak and the guests bidding each other good night. Soon, all was quiet, so she quickly threw on her day dress and prised the door slowly from the jamb.

Tentatively, she crept along the dark corridors leading to the east wing, her heartbeat thumping wildly in her throat. The whine of a door opening scared her out of her wits. She crouched behind a bust in the alcove and watched Mr Payne leave his bedchamber and disappear downstairs.

Doubtless he was keen to empty the brandy decanter.

Mrs Astley was also on the move, hunting for late-night entertainment. Wearing a frilly silk wrapper, she swayed along the corridor, pitching left and right as if aboard a ship on high seas.

Gwen didn't dare move a muscle.

She lost count of how long she hid in the shadows. She was about to venture to Mr Garrick's room when the gentleman came creeping along the landing.

She squinted amid the blackness.

Where on earth was he going?

Perhaps he had her bedchamber in his sights and sought to offer an explanation for his strange manner. Alas, no. He checked the coast was clear before slipping into Mr Payne's room.

Her heart skipped a beat.

How odd!

What did he want with Mr Payne? Did he mean to throttle the man as he'd threatened to do earlier? If Oliver got wind of these late-night antics, he would throw Mr Garrick out despite the plummeting temperatures.

Simon Garrick is not your problem, she thought.

Him leaving would be the best solution all round.

And yet she couldn't bear to see him go.

The muscles in her throat tightened. She desperately wanted to hate him but knew she'd be heartsick the minute he left Westmore. The thought of feigning happiness for another five years urged her to stop this nonsense. It was time to put the past behind her. Time to discover what had gone wrong all those years ago.

Mr Garrick was not expecting anyone to enter the room. Gwen found him rifling through Mr Payne's luggage like a common thief.

He swung around when he heard her shocked gasp. "Shut the damn door," he whispered through gritted teeth. "I cannot let Payne find me here."

Not wanting Mrs Astley to see her lingering in the doorway, Gwen did as instructed. She closed the door and crossed the room. "Why are you searching Mr Payne's luggage?"

Mr Garrick muttered a curse. "Don't ask questions. I'll be done in a moment, and then you'll not mention this incident to anyone. Do you understand, Gwendolyn?"

She blinked at his impertinence. If he thought she would live with more unanswered questions, he was grossly mistaken. "As mistress of this house, you will tell me what you're looking for, sir. Is it money?"

"Money?" He shot her an irate glare. "Is that what you think of me? That I'm a wastrel like my father? Good God, Gwendolyn, I thought you knew me better than that." Then he continued flicking through Mr Payne's personal diary like the worst sort of snoop.

Gwen closed the gap between them and gripped his arm. “I don’t know what to think. You act like a stranger. I fear the man I once knew no longer exists.”

“No, you killed him long ago.”

The comment hit like the crack of a whip, causing a sudden pain in her chest. Something akin to grief and confusion. Something eradicated by a violent wave of anger.

“How dare you?” In a bout of sheer madness, she gripped his coat lapels and forced him to look at her. “How dare you come into my home and lay the blame at my door.”

He had the strength to shirk out of her grasp but didn’t.

The air about them thrummed wildly. Desire unfurled in her belly. Years of frustration had taken its toll. She stared at his lips, wanting to shake him and devour him in equal measure.

“I know what you want, Gwendolyn,” came his growled whisper. “By God, I mean to give it to you. Perhaps then you’ll see I’m no longer the fool you remember.”

He kissed her roughly.

Just once.

Their mouths meeting for a few agonising seconds.

They both stumbled backwards in shock, their gazes locked, their breathless pants mating in the air between them. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she could feel his hunger clawing at the walls—an inner desperation she shared.

She wasn't sure who made the next move, but she was suddenly wrapped in his powerful arms, the heat of his breath on her neck, his hands squeezing her buttocks as he pulled her against his hard body.

Drawn by a magnetic force, their lips collided. This time, he coaxed them apart with his tongue and entered her mouth, eager to feed the craving.

Such was the sudden rush of passion, the wave of lust and love, she might have wept.

Regardless of his harsh words and muscular physique, this was the man she knew. The potent scent of cedarwood filled her nostrils. His earthy essence filled her mouth. His masculine aura surrounded her, a potent thing that left her feeling rampant.

Simon!

She deepened the kiss, pressing her aching breasts to his chest, keen to keep the emptiness at bay.

Don't let this be a dream.

Perhaps it was. Somehow, she ended up with her back pressed to the door, Simon Garrick raining hot kisses over her neck, cupping her breast.

“God, Gwendolyn. Do you mean to see me in Bedlam?” He was panting hard, kissing her wildly. “Tell me you’ve touched yourself and thought of me. Hell, I’ve come so many times with your name on my lips.”

Cool air breezed over her legs as he slid his hand up her bare thigh. Yes! This was what she wanted. Not polite

conversation. Not compliments about her musical ability. But the burning heat of desire. The touch of a man who made her mindless with need.

“I only ever think of you,” she whispered.

“Do you remember the last time I did this?” He slipped his fingers over her damp folds, rubbing lightly over her sex.

“I—I remember everything.” Lord, her knees almost buckled.

“Touch me, Gwendolyn. Like you used to.”

She dared to touch him.

He was solid, hard as steel.

As her fingers moulded around the thick length in his trousers, he kissed her, moaned in her mouth, massaged her sex and slipped his long fingers inside her.

She stroked him through the material, tried to maintain a steady rhythm, but her climax ripped through her. She came apart as she always did—with one man’s name on her lips.
Simon!

CHAPTER FOUR

The muscles in Gwendolyn's core clenched around his fingers. She was panting, her breasts heaving. They might have been lying on a picnic blanket deep in the woods or hiding in the orangery and stealing every second of pleasure. Instead, they were in Payne's blasted bedchamber, Simon's fingers buried deep inside her, his cock ramrod stiff.

He met her gaze, the need to make love to her urging him to lay her down and drive home. "How does it feel, Gwendolyn?" He pushed a little deeper into her wetness, relishing her sensual gasp. "Like I've never been away? Like you need my touch now more than ever?" Were their thoughts aligned?

She closed her eyes as he pumped his fingers slowly. He brushed his lips over hers and slipped his tongue into her mouth to tease a reaction.

He wanted an explanation. He wanted a bloody apology. More than that, he wanted to make her come again. He wanted to lose himself in the body of the only woman he had ever loved.

The spy was probably down on the beach selling secrets, while Simon was afraid to move from Payne's room in case Gwendolyn cast him aside again.

"Talk to me," he urged. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Though he wanted her, he couldn't trust her.

He'd never trust her again.

A single tear slipped down her cheek. She opened her eyes, the power of her gaze holding him captive. "That I'm dreaming. That some part of you still wants me after all that has occurred."

Because he was a fool.

A fool who couldn't resist her.

"And you still want me." He stroked her clitoris with his thumb. She was a slave to his will, grateful for every sweet morsel of pleasure. "More desperately than you did before."

"It's like we're both starving."

"I've been ravenous for years."

"Then why leave?"

The image of her taunting him that night charged into his mind. The cruel things she'd said. The way she'd tossed him out like the dinner scraps.

With the sting of bitterness rising in his chest, he snatched his hand from under her skirt. "You made your feelings clear five years ago. Perhaps you take pleasure in toying with a gentleman's affections. Is that why you remain unmarried?"

Her eyes widened—eyes he'd once presumed would never lie. Eyes no longer glazed with desire but clouded with hurt. "I told you I'd fallen in love with you. How was that toying with your affections?"

Was she being deliberately obtuse?

After years of imprisoning his emotions, he released them from their shackles. "You could have told me you were unsure about your feelings. You could have been honest instead of blaming my father. Hell, even when your brother delivered the letter written by your own hand, I struggled to believe you wrote it. That's how much faith I had in you. That's how much faith I had in us."

Despite the vehemence in his tone, she stared through him, not saying a word. But then she shook her head. "What letter?"

"The letter you sent the night I left England."

She started blinking and couldn't seem to stop. "I never sent you a letter. One minute, we were kissing and enjoying a picnic, and I believed my whole life was mapped out before me. Hours later, Oliver told me you'd left. I've been confused ever since."

What the devil?

He scoured his mind, dragging buried memories to the surface. "Oliver delivered the note to Whitney Grange. It looked like your handwriting. I feared your father had discovered our secret, decided I wasn't good enough and persuaded you against a match."

The frown lines on her brow deepened. “I was told you’d had a change of heart. I came to Whitney Grange in the dead of night, but your father said you’d left for the Continent.”

The words penetrated his armour, bringing with them the sudden realisation all was not as it seemed. Had he spent five years living with a mistruth? Five years trying to forget the woman whose callous words had cut like a knife?

“Do you take me a fool? I heard the truth fall from your lips.” He had not waited at Whitney Grange like a milksop. He hadn’t bothered to saddle his horse but had sprinted across the fields, hoping to change her mind and make her see sense. “You said you couldn’t marry a pauper. You said you couldn’t risk a child inheriting my father’s roguish ways.”

She jerked. “How could you think I would say such things?”

Simon dragged his hand down his face. “For the love of God, I saw you in the garden. I heard you tell your father you wanted to marry someone with a title.”

She touched her fingers to her forehead as if dazed. “I don’t know who you saw that night, but it wasn’t me. What time did you call?”

“Seven. Ten minutes after your brother left.” It had taken that long to catch his breath and stop his head spinning. “You were sitting on the bench amid the topiary, talking to your father. Your father chased me away.”

“I—I went to visit Miss Marsham that evening and didn’t return until eight. You may ask my brother and maid.”

Confused, he stepped back. “You wore your blue pelisse with the sable-trimmed hood. The one you said made you itch.”

She suddenly snapped her spine straight. “Then you didn’t see my face. You couldn’t have.”

He closed his eyes briefly against the memory. Every cell in his body had convinced him it was her. “No, but based on —”

“Oh, Lord!” Gwendolyn clasped her hand to her mouth, smothering a keen cry. Her knees buckled. She would have hit the floor had he not caught her. Tears streamed down her face. She grabbed his coat lapels. “I—I gave Mrs Samuel that pelisse.”

Simon froze.

The truth hit him hard in the chest.

The Gwendolyn he knew would never have been so shallow.

He’d been duped.

Five years wasted.

Five years spent living a lie.

He couldn’t speak, which was just as well. He might not have heard the heavy footsteps trudging along the landing, followed by a sharp feminine gasp.

“Mr Payne?” came a woman’s voice from the corridor outside. “You gave me such a terrible fright. What are you doing wandering about in the dead of night?”

Yes, what was Payne up to?

Had he been checking the route to the beach?

“I might say the same of you, Mrs Astley.”

“I’m unused to keeping country hours and am on the hunt for entertainment. Perhaps you’d like to join me for a little tippie. Something warm to chase away the cold. Have you brandy in your room?”

Merciful Lord!

Gwendolyn would be ruined if Payne caught them in a clinch. The pompous Lord Holmes would call Simon out, leaving the spy free to trade his secrets, to sell the names of all the British agents working in France.

Fear darkened Gwendolyn’s brown eyes. Tears still fell. Simon was forced to press his mouth to hers again to mask every stuttered breath. And to taste her lips one last time.

“I’ve come to Westmore to win Miss Caldwell’s hand,” Payne said, his tone lacking conviction. “One mistake and all the hard work will be for nothing.”

The damn snake.

As if Gwendolyn would marry someone so shallow.

“You could always marry my darling sister. She has a decent dowry, and you’d get to spend an inordinate amount of time with me.”

Payne sighed. “Miss Netherwell is as dull as a winter’s morn.”

“Yes, bless her soul, but I shall ensure you’re never bored in her company. And it will save me having to attend tedious house parties again.”

“Miss Caldwell’s brother is a viscount.”

“Yes, but my sister is far more biddable.” After a brief pause, Mrs Astley added, “Come. Let us venture to my room and discuss the matter in detail. No one will disturb us there.”

For heaven’s sake, go! Simon silently willed.

“I could fetch Holmes’ best port from the library,” Payne suggested, his complete surrender to the widow a given.

“I shall come with you,” Mrs Astley purred. “We may steal a quiet moment alone, though it will be our little secret.”

The creak of the boards accompanied the pad of footsteps.

Simon pressed his finger to his lips, urging Gwendolyn to remain silent. They stood statue still but for her bosom heaving against his chest.

Only when the danger had passed did the true meaning of their conversation hit him. Gwendolyn’s father and brother had ruined his damn life. The men were responsible for five years of abject misery. Had conspired to destroy a profound love affair. A love that would always be tainted. A love that would always be marred by their wicked treachery.

Anger burned in Simon’s chest.

The previous Lord Holmes might be entombed in the family’s mausoleum, but Oliver Caldwell was still alive and

breathing. By God, Simon wouldn't rest until he'd made the bastard pay.

"Return to your room, Gwendolyn," he whispered with some urgency. "I shall ensure the coast is clear." Then he would seek out Lord Holmes and smash his fist into the viscount's smug face.

She shook her head, her beguiling eyes swimming in disbelief. "Tell me again why you left."

"Your family convinced me you didn't want me." Hatred licked at every word. "That's the only reason I accepted Lord Mowbray's offer to work overseas."

She swallowed deeply. "So, you didn't come back for me?"

He could not lie, but the truth cut through his heart like a rusty blade. "No, Gwendolyn. I did not come back for you."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gwen fought to remain upright but her world spun on its axis, her mind a whirl of questions. She wasn't sure which one to address first: the loss, the pain, the treachery, the revival of a passion she thought dead and buried. Still, despite the confusion, two things remained.

She still loved Simon Garrick.

And Oliver had been lying to her for years.

No wonder Simon's arrival had left her brother agitated.

The thought caused a sudden tempest in her chest, a rising storm of anger. Someone would pay for ruining her life, starting with her conniving brother.

She met Simon's gaze as he repeated the words that had pierced her heart like barbed arrows. "I didn't come back for you, Gwendolyn. I didn't come back because I heard you'd made a new life for yourself."

A new life!

"You thought I'd married?" He thought she spent her days loving another man, not standing on a deserted clifftop staring at a bleak sea.

He shrugged but seemed impatient to leave Mr Payne's room. "It's of no consequence now. You need to return to your bedchamber before we're found together. I have urgent matters requiring my attention."

He didn't wait for a reply but peered around the jamb and checked the corridor was clear before beckoning her to follow.

They crept from their hiding place just like they had after every passionate clinch. This time, they weren't grinning, touching, stealing one last kiss and promising to meet again tomorrow.

Uncertainty hung in the air.

"Good night." He took his eyes off her to scan the shadowed walkway. "The evening has been ..."

Magical?

Heartbreaking?

"Enlightening?" she offered.

"Yes. Enlightening."

She didn't throw herself into his arms but turned away and hurried along the corridor. With the first steps came the ache of separation, a feeling that grew in intensity but quickly turned to anger.

Oliver owed her an explanation.

An explanation that could not wait until morning.

She whirled around and retraced her steps, hesitance giving way to determined strides. Hurt firing her fury.

The door to Oliver's chamber was closed, but the growl of irate voices inside confirmed he was not alone.

Despite rarely entering Oliver's private domain, Gwen gathered her confidence and barged into the room.

In the soft glow of candlelight, she saw Simon kneeling beside Oliver in bed, one hand gripping her brother's throat. Forced to ignore the sight of her brother's bare chest, she closed the door and stepped forward.

Amid their tussle, neither man heard her approach.

"Get your damn hands off me," Oliver croaked.

"You bastard! I loved her, and you damn well knew she loved me." Simon gave Oliver a backhanded slap. "I'm going to drag you out of this blasted bed and beat you as honour demands."

"I had no choice," came her brother's pathetic cry. "That witch bribed me to keep my mouth shut. Besides, Gwendolyn needs stability and security. You're too damn wild for her."

"Don't tell me what I need, Oliver."

Simon's head shot in her direction. His eyes were a cold Arctic blue. "Go back to your room, Gwendolyn."

"Don't tell her what to do," Oliver snapped.

"Be quiet, Oliver. It's too late to play the concerned brother now." She braced herself and stepped closer. "You may release him, Mr Garrick. Let him catch his breath. He'll need all his strength to pull himself out of the quagmire."

Oliver muttered an obscenity as Simon scrambled off the bed. "I knew you'd come to Westmore to cause trouble." He rubbed his jaw and stabbed his finger at the armoire. "Gwendolyn, pass me a shirt and trousers."

Gwen scowled. "You'll not move from that bed until you've explained why you lied to Mr Garrick. More importantly, why you lied to me."

Oliver fell back against the pillow, sighing like he had suppressed it for five years. "Mrs Samuel convinced us Garrick was only after your dowry. She said he'd behaved inappropriately and suggested she might be his mistress once you were married."

Gwen met Simon's gaze in the muted light. She didn't know this hard, rugged version of the man she loved. She didn't know if the wild stories about him were true. But she knew he would never abuse a servant.

"Oliver, you're an intelligent man. Did you not consider the fact Mrs Samuel had lied? By all accounts, she manipulated everyone in the household."

Oliver couldn't look her in the eye. "It was complicated."

"He was sleeping with her," Simon said, snarling with contempt. "She probably threatened to tell your father unless he did her bidding."

Gwen blinked in shock.

But Oliver was so ... so upstanding.

"Is it true?" She couldn't quite believe it.

Her brother's shoulders sagged.

“Oliver! Is it true?”

“Yes, it's true.”

Gwen fought back tears. “True that Mrs Samuel was your mistress or that you ruined my life to prevent Father from discovering your sordid secret?”

“Both.” His face twisted in discomfort. His tone was heavy with regret. “I had to pay to get rid of her. I had a contract drawn up and gave her money. She's not permitted to come within five miles of the property, or she will forfeit all rights to the money.”

Gwen staggered back. “But I—I trusted you.”

All these years, Oliver had said nothing. He'd seen her distraught. Sick with heartache. He'd offered guidance. Yet he'd let her believe a lie.

Dazed, she looked at Simon. “Did you come back because you suspected treachery? Is it vengeance you seek, sir?”

Guilt passed over his handsome features. “You must understand, my work is confidential. No one must know I'm here on the King's orders.”

The King?

“What poppycock!”

“It's true, Gwendolyn.”

She pointed at her brother. “Does Oliver know?”

“As a peer of the realm, he has a duty to protect the Crown.”

“And yet you both let me wallow in ignorance. Neither of you trusted me enough with the truth. You let me hope—”

A rush of emotion choked her throat. Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she couldn't dash them away quickly enough.

She couldn't breathe.

She needed air.

She needed to be far away from this den of deceivers.

“Many people's lives are at risk,” Simon said, desperate to offer an excuse. “I cannot neglect my duty, Gwendolyn.”

Oliver was about to slip out of bed but remembered he was naked and uttered a curse. “I don't want him here any more than you do, but I had no choice.”

Gwen jerked, the words revealing the crux of the problem. Oliver didn't believe in love. He couldn't see the damage he'd caused. He thought her anger stemmed from his dishonesty, not because she had lost the love of her life.

She wanted to run as far away as her legs would carry her, but to waylay suspicion, she said, “I'm going to bed. I cannot think. We'll talk in the morning.”

Both men let her go without question.

She didn't care if Simon broke her brother's nose.

She didn't care if they spent the rest of the night squabbling.

Even when shoving her feet into her kid boots and wrapping herself in her pelisse, she felt numb. She only realised she'd reached the garden when a snowflake landed on her nose.

The cool air nipped her cheeks, reminding her she was still alive despite feeling like a ghost of her former self. The real Gwendolyn Caldwell was trapped in time. Stuck in the woods on a picnic blanket, believing life was wonderful.

The mutter of voices dragged her from her reverie.

Determined not to listen to Oliver's pathetic excuses, she hid behind the high topiary hedge out of view. Two people passed, heading from the coastal path in the dark. It looked like Mrs Astley and Mr Payne, though the pair had likely been frolicking in the shadows, not admiring the view.

They stopped and kissed, all slobbering noises and fake groans, before returning to the house.

Well! Of all the cheek!

And this was the man Oliver would have her marry?

Anger mingled with hurt. She would rather freeze to death than return to the house and play the obedient sister. There was a cave on the beach that didn't flood during high tide. It would serve as shelter for the night while she battled her emotions.

Determined to prove a point, she raised the collar of her pelisse and thrust her hands into her muff. After quickly stopping at the orangery to collect the wool blanket from the chair, she followed the coastal path down to the beach.

Braving the icy wind, she hugged the blanket and crossed the snow-covered pebbles to stand alone on the sandy shore.

Like her temper, the sea raged, the crashing waves racing to escape the emptiness. Amid the dark desolation she spotted a few stars sparkling in the distant sky. It was the glimmer of hope she needed. A sign tomorrow might be a brighter day.

“Gwendolyn!”

Her name was but a whisper against the roaring tide. Pebbles crunched beneath booted feet, but she didn’t turn around. Only one man refused to shorten her given name.

“Gwendolyn!”

He was close now, but she stared at the swell of a wave as it hurtled towards the shore.

Simon wrapped his fingers around her arm and whirled her around to face him. “What the devil are you doing out here? You’ll catch your death. Good God! You might have been killed on that path.”

“Go back to the house, Mr Garrick.”

“Mr Garrick?” He searched her face, but she could barely look at him without feeling weepy. “You were happy to call me Simon when I touched you intimately.”

It had been a mad moment of unbridled passion.

A perfect moment she would relive forever.

“Go back to the house, Simon.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

She closed her eyes against the words. Memories surfaced. If only he'd waited an hour before coming to Westmore. He would have learned how much she loved him, how people were conspiring to keep them apart. He might have made the same pledge and taken her with him to France.

"If it's any consolation, your brother is nursing a bruised eye. If I didn't have to consider your feelings or the fact I'm here on the King's business, I would summon him to a dawn appointment."

She opened her eyes, tears gathering anew. "He deserves to live the rest of his life with a guilty conscience. Nothing he can say or do can make this right."

Simon brushed a lock of hair from his brow. "I'm sorry, Gwendolyn." He turned to stare out at the volatile sea. "I'm sorry I let them convince me our love was a lie."

She faced the sea, too. It was easier to speak when not dazzled by his eyes. "I'm sorry my family did this to you, to us. You thought it was me in the garden and are not to blame."

They fell silent while listening to the wind and the crashing waves. The light snowfall brought a certain magic to the scene.

"It hurts to think of what could have been," she said wistfully. "We're not the same people anymore. We might have matured together, yet now we seem worlds apart." Her throat tightened. "I don't know who you are."

"I'm a hard, cold version of my old self," he said.

Yet he had been hot and passionate in the bedchamber.

Perhaps it was his way of letting her down gently, of telling her he had changed too much to salvage anything from the wreckage. Well, she'd cling to hope a little longer.

“You are,” she agreed, aware she had nothing to lose by being honest, “and much more volatile. Though when you kissed me, it felt like nothing had changed.”

He inhaled sharply.

Then his hand came to rest on her back, and he drew her slowly round to face him. What she saw in his eyes was anguish, not love or lust. “I have a responsibility to the Crown and cannot allow my personal feelings to affect my investigation. I should be rooting through Lord Bancroft's personal effects, not standing in the darkness with you, consumed with thoughts of stripping off your clothes and worshipping every inch of your magnificent body.”

His words did strange things to her insides.

The muscles in her core pulsed.

Every nerve sparked to life.

He wanted her.

Nothing else mattered.

She straightened, preparing to leave. This might be her only chance to steal a moment of happiness. “I know things will never be the same between us. We're different people now. But I'm sleeping in the cave tonight. You're welcome to join me.”

She didn't wait for an answer but turned away and walked towards the cliff face. If he didn't follow, the loss would be heavy. A weight she would have to carry for years.

Gwen reached the pathway through the rocks leading to the craggy opening of the cave. Too scared to turn around, she entered.

One way or another, she would be a different woman tomorrow.

CHAPTER
SIX

Simon watched Gwendolyn cross the beach and head towards the cave. The separation had the dreaded emptiness seeping into his bones. Bitterness still ran like poison in his veins.

All the time lost. All the years spent believing a lie.

Only one thing could numb his pain and it wasn't brandy.

When you kissed me, it felt like nothing had changed.

She was right. The first touch of their lips had ignited their passion. Only she could sate the hunger growing inside him. Only she could fill the emptiness.

He took the first few steps, then quickened his pace, his body urging him to follow her to the ends of the earth, even if his mind was a little slow to catch up.

I'm sleeping in the cave tonight.

You're welcome to join me.

A gentleman would caution her against such folly and escort her back to the house. But honour be damned. He imagined holding her soft satin body against his bronzed skin, taking the one thing he'd always wanted. Her.

Simon watched her enter the cave. She didn't glance over her shoulder, offer a coy smile and beckon him into her boudoir. The decision to join her was his alone.

He stepped into the cave.

The devil himself couldn't stop him.

Gwendolyn was waiting.

He didn't caution her about the cold or ask about the tides. He didn't tell her this was madness and they should accept the cards fate had dealt them. He didn't urge her to save herself for the man she would eventually marry.

A smile touched her lips, lips soon to be bruised from his rampant kisses. Her hair fell in ebony waves almost to her hips. "I'm glad you came."

"I've never been one for parties, but some invitations are impossible to resist."

Her sensual brown eyes caressed him as she unbuttoned her pelisse. "It's a small affair, but we have never struggled to keep ourselves entertained."

Nothing had changed.

His body reacted instantly. His heart thumped a wild beat in his chest. In truth, he didn't care if he died tomorrow. But by God, he meant to have her tonight.

"I should return to the house and fetch kindling, attempt to light a fire to keep us warm." His mouth was dry, his cock thickening. If he had his way, they'd be making love until dawn.

She shrugged out of her pelisse and laid it on the ground. “Now we’re sheltered from the elements it’s not so cold. During our escapades in the woods, we never struggled to make our own heat. Besides, you know we won’t care about a thing once we’re kissing.”

He moistened his lips, his hunger reaching a fever pitch. The minx wore nothing under her dress. He’d never seen her breasts, only cupped them in his palms, but he’d imagined them round and full and squashed against his chest.

“Come here,” he growled.

“I issued the invitation, Mr Garrick. You must come to me.”

He was out of his coat by the time he reached her.

Their mouths clashed with the power of a lightning storm—all electrifying intensity and a passion to light the heavens. It was wild. Frantic. He’d not stop until he was buried deep inside her. The only place on earth he belonged.

They were panting as they tried to undress each other, neither wanting to break the kiss. They fumbled with buttons and tugged at material, their frustration building in a bid to be naked.

On a gasp, Gwendolyn tore her mouth from his. Her hands shook as she shoved his waistcoat off his shoulders and dragged his shirt from his breeches. Nervous fingers moved under his shirt to flutter over every hard muscle.

“Love, I want you so badly I can hardly breathe.” He’d never been this aroused. Not when he’d made her come on a

picnic blanket. Not when he'd pushed her against Payne's door, his fingers pumping inside her.

In a lustful frenzy, she dragged his shirt over his head and threw it to the sandy bed beneath them. While he unbuttoned his trousers, unable to get them off quickly enough, she tugged her dress off her shoulders, wiggling her hips as she pushed the garment past her narrow waist.

Her breasts were glorious.

Pale against the slivers of moonlight shining in through the cave entrance. Nipples pink and tight like rosebuds.

Her gaze journeyed over his body to linger on his hard cock. "You're everything I imagined and more. Forgive me if I appear impatient." She stepped forward, a naked goddess on a mission to please. The minx touched him, her dainty fingers wrapping around his thick shaft.

Simon hissed a breath. "Stroke me."

Convince me this isn't a damn dream.

"I want what my brother stole from me," she uttered, her hand moving slowly back and forth along his hard length.

She wanted love and marriage and a lifetime of bliss?

"I want you to have my virtue," she clarified. "I want to indulge in every wicked pleasure. I want you inside me."

His conscience pricked him for all of a few seconds.

But he was a slave to this woman's will.

His heart ached. His cock throbbed.

“And you shall have it all.” He pulled her tight to his body, relishing the feel of her soft breasts against his chest. “Tell me again what you want.” He’d spent so long believing she’d cast him aside that he’d never tire of hearing her salacious demands.

“You,” she breathed.



THE CHILL NIGHT air did not deter Gwen from her quest.

The risk of someone finding them did not prevent her from stroking Simon’s engorged manhood or daring to say things no respectable lady should repeat.

Confessing her desires had never been a problem.

Declaring her love? That would be a mistake. She’d risk ruin but not rejection. Her heart would not survive another cruel blow.

Simon kissed the sensitive spot below her ear. “All the times I imagined this moment, the need was never this great.”

She shivered against him.

I’ve only ever wanted you.

The words whispered through her mind, though she refused to address the host of feelings fighting for supremacy.

His body. That’s what she wanted. That would be enough tonight. And his attention. She would command every second, make him look at her, make him want her so desperately he would never leave Whitehaven again.

Their goals were similar, it seemed.

The man who stole her breath, bent his head and sucked her erect nipple into his mouth. Warmth spread through every cell in her body. But it was the sudden flick of his tongue over the peak that made her knees tremble.

“Don’t stop,” she panted, releasing his manhood to grip his hair and anchor him to her breast. “Yes.”

He was ravenous, determined to drive her wild.

Worship me!

Hearing her silent plea, he lowered her down onto the makeshift bed, his mouth finding hers as he nudged her legs open with his knee.

His body was hot. Hard. Heavier than she remembered. The dusting of hair on his chest sent tingles scattering over her skin. Their tongues thrust together with a confidence they had lacked in their youth.

“Are you cold?” he whispered against her neck. Simon Garrick was on a mission to kiss every inch of her naked flesh.

“No.” Her body burned like a blacksmith’s furnace. She smoothed her hands over his broad back, wanting to remember every muscled contour. “I’m never cold when I’m with you.”

Outside, snow fell, white and pure amid frigid temperatures and the hostile roar of the sea. Inside, they bathed in the glow of passion, their pleasurable moans the only sound that mattered.

Simon kissed her breasts, kissed the tiny mole below her ribs. The hot brush of his lips left a scorching trail down to her navel. He looked up at her, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "I mean to taste you, love. I've wanted to taste you for so damn long."

Gwen was trying to establish what he meant, but his tongue slid through the folds of her sex before grazing lightly over her bud.

The action tore a gasp from her lips.

Their intimate touches on a woodland picnic had been daring.

This was downright wicked.

A scandalous assault on her senses.

The coil of arousal tightened as Simon's tongue worked its magic. The man had her rolling her hips in time with every lewd stroke.

"You taste like heaven," he uttered as the intense feelings inside her grew. "And you smell divine."

The man devoured her as she came apart against his mouth. The shudders had barely subsided when he rose above her, a broad grin on his handsome face.

"Shall we return to the house before we're missed?" He glanced at his jutting erection. "We're at the point of no return, love. Say now if you've had a change of heart."

Despite arousal thrumming in her veins, she had not lost the use of her faculties. Five years spent nursing a broken

heart helped to put things into perspective. She wanted no man but him. Even if it meant that one night of heavenly bliss had to last her a lifetime.

Gwen reached for him. “I need you. I need to know you intimately before you have to leave.”

She wished she’d not uttered the last word. His secret mission for the King would see him returning to London once the snow thawed and the lanes were passable. She didn’t know if he’d ever come back.

Simon bent his head and kissed her, so slow and deep her toes curled. She clung to him as he nudged at her entrance. Delighted in the glow of satisfaction on his face as he pushed inside her.

“Gwendolyn,” he groaned as her body stretched to accommodate him. “You were made for me, love.”

She wrapped her thighs around him as he rocked slowly in and out of her body. It wasn’t enough. She needed every inch of him, chased the desire to feel full, complete.

“Don’t wait,” she panted, urging him on.

“It might hurt a little.”

Nothing would hurt as much as the day he left her. “I don’t care. I’m confident any pain will be fleeting.”

His eyes remained locked with hers as he thrust hard. He studied her, hissing a breath while sinking deep. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She was soaring above the clouds. He was hers now. No one could steal this moment from them. Simon Garrick would always be her one and only lover.

They lay still for a few seconds. The powerful emotions rioting through her were almost too much to bear.

Tears pricked her eyes

Focus on pleasure, not love!

Gwen stroked his back and rocked her hips, a sign she was happy to continue. Carnal needs took over. The pressure inside her built again as he moved slowly in and out of her.

They found a perfect rhythm.

Their bodies moved as one.

Despite the need to temper her emotions, love filled her heart as he filled her. She clung to him, hugged every inch of his naked flesh. Remembered how every day without him had felt as cold as the dead of winter. Recalled every lonely night spent wrapped around her tear-soaked pillow, wishing it was him.

I love you, she whispered silently as their desperate pants and groans mingled in the cool air.

He came up on his muscular arms, rocked against her sex until the movement proved maddening. She came apart around him, the power of her climax ripping through her core.

It was divine.

An emotion-choked moment beyond all comprehension. One made worse when he withdrew abruptly and loneliness

consumed her again.

Simon Garrick had taken her heart to France five years ago. The next time he left Whitehaven, he would take her soul, too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Simon gathered Gwendolyn in his arms and pulled the blanket over their naked bodies. She curled into him, her cold hand resting gently on his chest. Neither spoke. What did a man say to a woman when he'd taken her virginity out of wedlock? What words would assuage his guilt?

And yet he was not sorry.

Touching her always felt right.

The timing couldn't be worse.

Pursuing spies was a dangerous hobby. Every dice with danger might be his last. He couldn't promise to right past mistakes until he'd caught the villain. This wasn't the time to chase his own happiness but a time to think about the lives of every British agent living and working in France.

Aware of his disquiet, Gwendolyn came up on her elbow and looked him keenly in the eye. "I have no regrets. I invited you here. We were always destined to be lovers. We could barely keep our hands to ourselves all those years ago. Why should it be any different now?"

Her hair was a mess of dark curls, her lips swollen from their passionate kisses. She'd never looked more beautiful than she did at this moment. "A gentleman should show restraint."

She smiled though her eyes lacked lustre. "Restraint? According to gossip, you're a pirate and a heathen."

He smoothed his hand over her bare buttock. Mother of all saints! He wanted her again. "Minx. We should dress before I roll on top of you and plunder you senseless."

"A damsel alone in a cave wouldn't put up a fight."

Only a rake would take her again so soon. "As enticing as the thought may be, you need time to recover."

Time was the one thing they didn't have.

The ache in his chest returned.

Only two months ago, one of Mowbray's men was shot whilst attempting to apprehend a suspect in Dieppe. If the spy was amongst the gentlemen attending the viscount's Christmas festivities, he would kill to keep his identity a secret.

"I understand. I must sound like a wicked wanton." She sounded hurt and a little embarrassed. "What must you think of me?"

He cupped her cheek. "I think you're adorable. But there's a reason I'm here, an important reason. If I fail in my duty to the Crown, men might die. I can't live with that on my conscience."

"Let me help you. I can find what you're looking for. No one would question me inspecting the bedchambers."

Though she made a good point, he'd not place her at risk. "It's too dangerous. The less you know, the better."

The determined set of her jaw said she disagreed. "You suspect Mr Payne of a crime. Why else would you rummage through his personal possessions? I can help you. I have a reason to question the men staying at Westmore."

He stroked her hair off her cheek. "When did you become so brave?"

"Life is precarious, and we—" She froze.

The scuffle of footsteps on the pebbled beach forced Simon to sit up. He tapped his finger to his lips and lowered his voice. "Rise slowly. Dress quickly and quietly. Stay away from the cave entrance."

Gwendolyn obeyed his instructions.

He threw on his clothes, crept to the entrance and peered out.

A lonely figure stood on the dark shore. Judging by his height and build and swathe of dark hair it had to be Lord Bancroft. The man carried a lit lantern, the flame spluttering amid the wind and light snowfall.

Seconds passed as he stared out at a desolate sea.

Was he waiting for a boat? For his French counterpart?

Only a fool would risk making the journey when the weather was volatile. Had Simon's arrival left the lord spooked? But no one knew he worked for the Crown. Unless there was a traitor amongst the ranks.

“What the hell is he waiting for?” Simon whispered.

Gwendolyn crept up behind him and peered over his shoulder. “Is that Lord Bancroft? Why would he be outside in the dead of night?”

“Who can say?” In hindsight, perhaps it was better if Gwendolyn knew the truth. What if she accosted the lord at breakfast and invented a story about seeing him from her window? “Can I trust you?”

“I would never break a confidence.”

He’d always believed she was loyal to a fault, until her brother conspired to prove otherwise. “According to intelligence, one of the guests is a spy. There’s to be a trade. Money for a list of British agents working in France.”

She snorted. “Lord Bancroft is too dull to be a spy.”

Simon smiled at her naiveté. “It’s always those you least expect. Any one of the guests might be guilty. If I can find the list, I can save the lives of those working abroad.”

“And that’s what you were doing in Mr Payne’s room?”

“Yes, until you became an alluring diversion.”

She laughed, her hot breath tickling his nape. “So, I’m to blame for you losing focus?”

“I haven’t had my mind on the mission since locking eyes with you in the drawing room.” In truth, he’d spent the journey northward remembering every passionate kiss. “If I’m not careful, I’ll get myself shot.”

“Shot!” The word left her lips in a shriek of panic.

Her body was close to his, he felt her shudder.

“Shush. Bancroft will hear us. If I’m to succeed in my mission, I must stay alert. I must apprehend the traitor before he discovers who I am.”

She fell silent for a moment, and he could almost hear the cogs in her mind whirring. “Searching the rooms during daylight hours would carry less risk. I shall supervise the cleaning of Lord Bancroft’s bedchamber in the morning. See what I can discover.”

“What if you’re caught?”

“I shall say my prying stems from a need to know more about the man I might marry. It’s the perfect excuse. No one will suspect me.”

He thought to inform her she would marry no one but him. But what if they were destined to be nothing more than lovers? What if he was destined to die during the assignment and fate had granted them a chance to say goodbye?

“Let’s wait and see what Bancroft is up to before we make a plan.” There was every chance the deal would be done tonight. “If I’m forced to leave the cave and confront him, you must race back to the house and inform your brother.”

They watched and waited.

Long minutes passed.

Still, Bancroft stood on the shore.

Gwendolyn yawned. She didn’t wrap her arms around his waist and rest her head on his shoulder. Despite spending the

last hour making love, despite the spark of electricity in the air, she seemed reluctant to touch him again.

“Look,” she whispered as a figure in an over-sized greatcoat hobbled along the shore towards Bancroft. “It’s a man. It’s impossible to say who, though it’s not one of the guests.”

The newcomer stopped to talk to the peer, though no documents or money changed hands. Bancroft pointed to the headland north of their position. The men seemed to be negotiating. They could be arguing over the price, though the stranger pointed at the heavens while shaking his head.

Upon reaching an agreement, both men nodded and parted ways. Perhaps they’d arranged to meet tomorrow night. If so, that meant Bancroft had the list in his possession, and Simon still had time to find the document. If only he could focus on the task, not the woman whose soft breath stroked his neck.

“Mr Pope walks with a slight limp.” Gwendolyn gestured to the stranger with the odd gait. “And he owns a fishing boat. His business has suffered since he injured his leg and his son moved abroad.”

Simon turned to look at her—and almost wished he hadn’t. God, he had never seen anything as beautiful. The gleam of satisfaction in her dark eyes held him spellbound. He wanted to kiss her but could not afford to become distracted.

“You’ve an eye for detail,” he said, keen to make amends for five years worth of pain. “Perhaps you could assist me. On condition you do exactly as I say.”

Gwendolyn's eyes widened, and she grinned like a court jester. "Do you mean it? I swear, I shall be no trouble. I shall do whatever you ask."

His heart swelled. He could think of many things he'd like her to do, none relating to the case. "Come. You're shivering. We cannot sleep here all night. Now Bancroft has gone, let me escort you back to the house."

She nodded, though he sensed her hesitance. "It was foolish to think we might remain in the cave until dawn."

"It's not foolish to long for what we once had. What we might still have when I'm free of my obligations." Danger lurked in the shadows. It would be foolish to make promises or cling to false hope. If only he could find the damn list.

"I promise to be a help, not a hindrance." She placed her hand on his upper arm, the merest touch igniting a fire in his blood.

"Then perhaps you should kiss me to seal our bargain."

Their mouths met.

The kiss was achingly slow. A caress so deep it tightened every muscle. They held hands as they walked along the snow-covered beach, only parted as they neared the house.

They met her pathetic excuse for a brother in the hall. Snow covered the shoulders of the viscount's greatcoat. The ugly purple bruise surrounding his eye made him look more like a pirate than a peer of the realm.

"Where the hell have you been?" the lord whispered between gritted teeth. "I searched the house and gardens.

Walked as far as Whitney Grange. You realise you left the front door open, Garrick?"

"I've not visited the Grange in years," he said, keen to avoid discussing their whereabouts. "Perhaps a vagrant forced the lock."

"There's a makeshift bed on the floor, blankets strewn about the place. Someone had stacked dry wood beside the fire."

The lord's accusatory tone roused Simon's ire. "As I said, maybe some poor devil is merely sheltering from the storm."

"A deserted house would be the ideal place for a lovers' tryst." The lord stepped closer, his nose twitching like a hound sniffing out the scent of their arousal. "Look at her. She looks like she's been tumbled in a bloody haystack."

"It's snowing and blowing a gale," Gwendolyn countered. "Mr Garrick found me on the beach and insisted on escorting me home."

The viscount muttered a curse. "You being here, Garrick, has left everyone unsettled. I encountered Miss Netherwell wandering aimlessly along the corridor. Myrtle had taken to cleaning the study because she couldn't sleep. I found Mrs Astley and Mr Payne drinking port in the library. Both were keen to know why you've come to Whitehaven."

"I trust you put your duty to the Crown before your need to feed the gossips." Simon considered the man who had lied to his family. Oliver Caldwell was a consummate actor. Perhaps he was the spy and wished to cast suspicion elsewhere.

Simon made a mental note to search the lord's desk. He would only mention it to Gwendolyn if he found proof of her brother's duplicity.

Gwendolyn stifled a yawn. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go to bed. It's been a day full of shocking revelations. Doubtless the guests would be appalled to know you're not what you seem."

Despite her brother's plea to discuss the matter privately, she whirled around and marched upstairs.

"My work abroad taught me an important lesson," Simon said, feeling contempt, not pity for the pathetic lord. "A man cannot escape his transgressions. The past always comes back to haunt him."

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Gwen was the first down to breakfast. Partly because she had not slept a wink last night. It had nothing to do with the aches and pains from making love on a sandy bed. Or the way her heart still raced at the memory. Nothing to do with nerves. She would steal into the King's chamber if it meant finding the list and preventing Simon getting hurt.

No. Oliver was the cause.

After his treachery, how could she continue to live at Westmore?

How could she play hostess for a man she didn't respect?

The alternative proved bleak.

She stared at the floral pattern on the plate while nibbling her toast. How quickly one's illusions could be shattered. One could spend their life with someone and wake to find they were living with a stranger.

"I'm surprised to see *you* up bright and early." With a ravenous glint in her eyes, Mrs Astley examined the breakfast buffet. "You were out well past midnight." She loaded a china

plate with cake rather than eggs and ham. “I believe Mr Garrick’s room was empty, too.”

Ordinarily, Gwen would feign ignorance and change the subject, but she had grown tired of being lectured by hypocrites.

“I’m surprised *you* had time to notice. I heard you plotting with Mr Payne in the corridor. I saw you kissing him in the garden.”

“Touchè, my dear.” Women like Mrs Astley thrived on being rebellious. “Why remain indoors when there’s pleasure to be had elsewhere?”

Gwen waited for Mrs Astley to sit before questioning her morals. “Where are your loyalties? Mr Payne made it clear he’d come to Westmore to win my hand.”

The footman returned with the teapot, though Mrs Astley did not curb her tongue or her wanton eye. “Mr Payne has more chance of marrying a princess of Persia than he does marrying you. You can’t keep your eyes off Mr Garrick.”

Gwen couldn’t argue with the woman’s assessment. “Mr Garrick is a handsome man.” He was an incredible man. Strong. Virile. “You said so yourself. Still, my brother arranged these festivities hoping I would find a husband.”

This time, the lady had the foresight to glance over her shoulder before speaking. “Yes, because you’re a dreaded inconvenience. He wants rid of you so he can move his French mistress in. It’s supposed to be a secret, though a select few are party to the gossip.”

French mistress!

Gwen's heart missed a beat. The toast slipped from her fingers and landed on the plate. "I—I'd know if my brother had a mistress."

Would she? Oliver had kept a wicked secret for five years. He had taken a servant into his bed. Did it not prove he was a walking monument to deceit?

Mrs Astley swallowed a mouthful of saffron cake. "From what I hear, the mistress may soon be the wife."

The wife? No wonder Oliver had been keen to host the party. The man was desperate to see her wed. No wonder Oliver was angry. Mr Garrick's arrival had scuppered his plan.

Mrs Astley gestured for the footman to pour the tea. "Tensions are running high, my dear. A storm is brewing, and I'm not referring to the weather."

Mr Payne appeared looking more gaunt than usual. He smoothed his hand through his dark hair, bowed and moved to sit beside Gwen. "Good morning. I see the weather is still grim. The heavy clouds suggest more snow."

"What a pity. I hoped you would leave once the roads were passable." Gwen gestured to the seat beside Mrs Astley. "You should sit there, sir. I would hate to deprive lovers of a chance to hold hands beneath the table."

Mr Payne's sunken eyes widened.

Mrs Astley merely grinned. "Miss Caldwell saw us in the garden last night. I suspect she knows you need her dowry and the connections that come with marrying a viscount's sister."

Mr Payne froze. Conniving men rarely knew what to do when confronted with the truth. “I—I—”

“Do close your mouth and sit down,” Mrs Astley said, offering a satisfied grin. “The game is up. You may as well enjoy your breakfast.”

Lord Bancroft entered the dining room with Miss Netherwell and Sir Robert and soon engaged the guests in mundane conversation.

As per the plan, Gwen had to await Simon’s arrival before she could sneak upstairs to inspect the bedchambers. She did not need to wait long. Minutes later, the gentleman strode into the room, a perfect picture of masculine dominance.

Their eyes met, and her insides melted. She struggled to keep her breathing even, let alone maintain an impassive expression.

Visions of his naked body burst into her mind. She watched him help himself to food from the platters, entranced by the sight of his firm stance and large hands. She’d been wrong to think making love would sate her growing need for him. It was quite the opposite. All the food on the silver platters wouldn’t stifle her hunger.

Gwen excused herself before Simon sat down.

Mr Payne made to chase after her, but Mrs Astley forced him back into the seat. “Don’t go making a fool of yourself. No one likes a dribbler.”

Gwen climbed the stairs. She slipped into Lord Bancroft’s room without notice and forced herself to focus.

The bulging valise on the floor struck her as odd. Daring to peer inside, she found folded clothes and a coin purse stuffed with sovereigns. No list. No incriminating letters. Not even a weapon.

She searched beneath the pillows and mattress, in drawers and cupboards, all to no avail. Without evidence, they could not accuse the lord of treason.

In contrast, Mr Payne's room was in utter disarray. One could barely see the floor for clothes, let alone glimpse a flimsy piece of paper. Judging by the state of his bed, he had not slept alone last night. The crumpled sheets reeked of Mrs Astley's French perfume.

The maid was already cleaning Sir Robert's room. Gwen entered on the pretence of checking Jane's work. Still, there was nothing amongst the baron's belongings but books.

Suspecting the spy might have hidden the list somewhere less conspicuous, Gwen thought to check Mrs Astley's room. Doubtless every man had been in there. But nagging questions drew her in the opposite direction.

Did Oliver have a French mistress? Had she duped him into betraying his countrymen? Anything was possible. He had friends in the Foreign Office and made regular trips to London.

Gwen was about to knock on Oliver's bedchamber door but noticed it was ajar. Peering around the jamb, she saw Myrtle ferreting in the nightstand.

The maid jumped out of her skin when Gwen entered. She slammed the drawer shut and thrust her hands behind her back. Never had a woman looked so guilty.

“Myrtle? Why were you rooting through my brother’s things?”

Myrtle’s eyes shifted nervously back and forth. “Forgive me, miss. Since Mr Garrick came, I’ve not had a minute’s peace. There’s rumours. Terrible rumours.”

“What rumours?”

Myrtle’s grimace spoke of a brief tussle with her conscience. “That Mr Garrick is here on the King’s business. That he’s come to catch a spy. Happen he’s here because of his lordship’s French mistress.”

Mother Mary!

Was Gwen the only one ignorant of the facts?

“I know it’s wrong to go snooping, miss, but we’ll all be for the gallows if evidence comes to light.”

“My brother is not spying for the French.” Gwen tried to sound convincing, but a sliver of doubt crept into her mind.

“I pray you’re right, miss.” Myrtle showed Gwen a letter she had hidden behind her back. “I think it’s written in French. Happen you could read it and put all our minds at rest.”

Gwen should have argued against reading a person’s private missive, but lives were at risk, and she had to discover the truth.

She took the letter, the heavy floral scent assaulting her nostrils. “It is written in French.” Despite neglecting her studies, she deciphered the message. “It’s a love letter.” A lewd letter. “There’s nothing here to support these ludicrous claims.”

Myrtle’s shoulders sagged. “Thank heavens.”

“If you have any further concerns, you’ll bring them to me.”

The maid curtsied. “On my word, I’ll not go snooping again.”

Gwen opened the chamber door. “I’m sure you have work to do.”

“Yes, miss.”

Myrtle scuttled away, leaving Gwen to place the note back in the drawer. She glanced about the room before making a quick retreat. Thankfully, she’d reached the stairs when Oliver came striding up, mounting the steps two at a time.

“I need a private word with you.” His clipped voice revealed his displeasure. With his bruised eye, he looked like the devil on a mission to slay souls. “We’ll remove to my chamber.”

“I have other matters to attend to at present.”

“Now, Gwendolyn!” Oliver ushered her back along the corridor and into his room. He slammed the door shut and whirled around to face her. “Have you lost your mind? A respectable woman needs a respectable husband. Garrick is a

rogue. Had Mother been here to see the state of you last night, she would have died of apoplexy.”

The mere mention of their mother left her choked with emotion. “If Mother were here, the last five years wouldn’t have been so unbearable. Indeed, she would have seen through your facade. Doubtless she’s turning in her grave, horrified by your duplicity.”

The insult barely roused a grunt. “Garrick is using you to hurt me. He’s out for revenge. You’ll be left here, ruined and alone. I’m of a mind to throw the devil out.”

Did Oliver have something to hide?

Was he clambering for an excuse to get rid of Simon?

“I’ll wager he’s made the whole thing up,” Oliver ranted. “There is no spy. He’s come to Westmore to drive a wedge between us.”

Gwen fought to remain calm. “You drove a wedge between us when you lied to Mr Garrick. When you spent five years lying to me.”

“It was for your own good!” In his anger, he knocked his cufflink box off the chest of drawers. “That bastard has been here for five minutes and already has you in the palm of his hand.”

“That’s not true.”

“He stole your virginity. Don’t dare deny it.”

“He didn’t steal it. I gave it to him.”

Gwen didn't wait for Oliver's reply. She darted from his chamber and hurried along the corridors back to her own room. Once there, she changed into sturdy boots, grabbed her ermine-trimmed pelisse and matching muff.

A walk to the harbour would calm her spirit. Moreover, she needed to question Mr Pope about his late-night antics. She wrote Simon a note, gave it to Flanders, then left the house.

She kept to the lanes rather than taking the shorter route across the fields. Snowflakes fell like soft feathers from the heavens. Was it not a sign one should have hope? A belief their problems would be resolved soon?

Her thoughts drifted to the many times Oliver had lied, and how she would be oblivious to his treachery had Simon not returned to catch a spy. Indeed, she had reached the market hall when the thud of footsteps woke her from her reverie.

Simon appeared, panting with exertion, every breath leaving a puff of white mist in the chill air. "I thought we agreed to visit Pope this afternoon?"

The sight of him had her heart thumping hard against her ribcage. "We did, but I encountered Oliver's wrath and had to escape the house." She paused—her loyalty conflicted. Despite her brother's treachery, how could she betray him? "You should avoid returning to Westmore. Oliver may call you out. He may look for a reason to get rid of you."

"To call me out is to call out the King," he said as they strode towards the harbour. "It would be considered treason."

“Not if he lays the blame at your door. He’ll say you ruined me.” Like a trapped bird, panic fluttered in her throat. “Perhaps you could stay at Whitney Grange for a night or two.”

Simon gave a mocking snort. “I’ll not flee like a coward. Besides, according to Mrs Astley, Oliver has a French mistress. A mistress whose brother was killed by a naval officer. A British officer.”

Lord have mercy!

Could matters get any worse?

“I found Myrtle in my brother’s chamber, looking for proof he’s a spy. I wonder if that’s why she was cleaning his study late last night.” Gwen relayed her conversation with Myrtle. “Oliver may not be a loyal brother, but he is loyal to his country.”

Simon brought her to a halt and faced her. “After what he did to me, to us, I’ll never trust the devil again.”

Gwen hung her head. It came down to a choice. Her kin or the man she loved. “You must do what you think is right. You have my blessing and my full support. I’ll not give you cause to doubt me.”

Simon glanced around the deserted street before kissing her on the lips. “I know now is not the right time to speak from the heart, but for the first time in years, I fear what tomorrow will bring.”

She drew her hand from her muff and cupped his cold cheek. “People conspired to keep us apart once before.” If she

lost him again, life would not be worth living. “It’s best to leave nothing unsaid.”

Regardless of the public setting, he wrapped his muscular arms around her. “I’m in love with you, Gwendolyn. I’ve always been in love with you. I will always be in love with you.”

Tears welled. His love was all she wanted, all she had prayed for. No amount of sadness or regret would spoil this moment. “I have never stopped loving you, Simon. I love you more with each breath.”

They stood on the snow-covered quay, Mr Pope’s establishment in their sights, but they only had eyes for each other.

“I promise no one will keep us apart again.” As the words left Gwen’s lips, a thought gnawed at her confidence.

A traitor lurked in the shadows.

Someone capable of tearing their world in two.

CHAPTER NINE

With a disgruntled mumble, Pope led them to his private quarters above the boathouse. A small fire crackled in the hearth, stealing the icy nip from the air. The elderly man struggled to look Simon in the eye, and his shiftiness screamed of guilt.

“What brings you from Westmore on such a bleak day?” The fellow dropped into a rickety chair and propped one leg on a stool. He rubbed his knee vigorously. “The cold squeezes the life out of old bones. Don’t expect it affects you young’uns.”

“Perhaps you should remain indoors at night,” Simon said, eager to discover the truth and put this sorry business behind him, “instead of meeting Lord Bancroft on the beach.”

A muscle in Pope’s ruddy cheek twitched. “Happen you’ve mistaken me for someone else. I never venture far from the hearth in the dead of winter.”

Simon produced the letter bearing the King’s seal. “I’m in Whitehaven on behalf of the Crown. I followed Bancroft last night and witnessed your private encounter. You may know

nothing of Bancroft's nefarious deeds, in which case, it's in your best interests to confess all now."

As quick as a fisherman casts out a line, Pope's resistance faltered. His shoulders curled around his feeble frame. "He's paying for the use of my boat. I've explained it's lunacy to take to the water when there's a storm brewing, but the man is desperate."

"Desperate to do what?" Gwendolyn asked, her distress evident.

Doubtless she prayed her brother was innocent. That his French mistress had not persuaded him to betray his country. Simon had no such loyalty. But if he meant to marry Gwendolyn, he couldn't be the one to send her brother to the gallows.

"He means to elope and wants me to row seven miles to Workington," Pope said. "From there, it's not far to the Scottish border. He said the girl is willing."

"Elope? With whom?" Gwendolyn clutched her chest like she was the intended victim.

Pope shrugged. "A young lady staying at Westmore. She's under the care of her sister. He's agreed to pay me twenty sovereigns. A poor man can't say no. Not to a nabob with deep pockets."

Clearly, he referred to Miss Netherwell.

No wonder the woman was so quiet around company.

Gwendolyn's excited smile died. Any joy she felt for Miss Netherwell was surely overshadowed by the fact Bancroft was

not the traitor. Indeed, all suspicion reverted to her brother.

Simon silently cursed.

If Oliver was found guilty of treason, Gwendolyn would be ruined. Not that it mattered. Simon would marry her regardless. The world was a big place, and he had no real ties to Whitehaven.

“You’ll not mention this meeting to anyone.” Simon loomed over Pope to ensure he took the order seriously. “Once Miss Caldwell confirms the girl is a willing participant, you may go ahead as planned.”

Pope blinked in surprise. “And if she’s not?”

“I’ll deal with Bancroft, and you shall have the sovereigns for your silence.”

Pope agreed, and they left him nursing his aching leg.

“I doubt Mr Pope can row seven yards, let alone seven miles,” Gwendolyn said. “Still, one must commend Lord Bancroft for wanting to rescue Miss Netherwell from her scandalous sister.”

“I pray his affections are genuine, and he’s not out to make a hasty escape with the list.” Simon scrubbed his face with his hands and sighed. He’d dealt with more complicated cases, always when his heart was filled with anger, not when it thumped wildly with love. “We must return to Westmore. I shall question Bancroft while you speak to Miss Netherwell.”

Gwendolyn inhaled deeply. “Afterwards, we’ll confront Oliver together.”

Simon reached for her hand and entwined their fingers. “I suspect he will do everything he can to drive us apart.” No man wanted to live with a constant reminder of his mistakes.

“Oliver won’t ruin my life a second time.”

Despite the cold, they strolled back to the house. Gwendolyn hugged his arm. When their passions overwhelmed them, they stopped to kiss behind the broad trunk of an oak tree.

They kissed again before parting at Westmore’s gates.

He watched Gwendolyn walk up the long drive. Love for her consumed him. Yet a deep sense of trepidation warned him not to count his blessings.

Before tackling Lord Bancroft, Simon went in search of Oliver Caldwell. He’d not let the bastard upset Gwendolyn, and the viscount would not discuss his mistress with his sister present.

He knocked on the study door and was met with silence.

The lord wasn’t in the drawing room or library.

“His lordship asked me to give you this note, sir,” Flanders said when Simon sought him out.

Simon snatched the note from the silver salver and broke the seal. Oliver wished to meet him on the beach and advised he bring his pistol. It wouldn’t be the first time Simon had stared down a loaded barrel or been threatened at gunpoint by a madman. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be the last.

Even so, he did not race upstairs to fetch a weapon. The quickest way to defuse the situation was to arrive unarmed. For all his faults, Oliver would not court dishonour.

Simon headed to the beach. Gwendolyn was probably questioning Miss Netherwell, and he would not alarm her unnecessarily.

The lord was pacing the shore like a caged animal, a pistol evident in his right hand. “I should have shot you the moment you arrived at Westmore.” The wind whipped at his ebony locks. “You’ve ruined my sister in the most despicable fashion and deserve to pay with your life.”

Simon remained calm and raised his hands in surrender. “I love Gwendolyn and mean to marry her, with or without your blessing. You’ve stolen five years. You’ll not steal a day more.”

“Lying bastard.” The lord’s growl of frustration mirrored the angry rush of the sea. “Does she know you have a wife? I have the proof of it here.” He dragged a note from his pocket, the paper fluttering amid the wild gusts. “You left this in your bedchamber. A letter to your dearly beloved.”

What the devil!

“You know damn well I’ve never married. You obviously wrote that to turn Gwendolyn against me.” Or to give him a justifiable reason to shoot. “She knows about your plans to marry your French mistress. She read the letter hidden in your bedchamber.”

The lord jerked his head. “What letter? I don’t have a mistress.”

“The gossips beg to differ. Mrs Astley told everyone at breakfast. You invited people for the Christmas season to marry off Gwendolyn and be rid of her. If you don’t believe me, gather the guests and ask them yourself.”

The lord seemed lost in a moment of confusion.

Simon sought to offer clarity. “I’m inclined to believe you’re a traitor to your country. I’ll wager I’ll find a list of British spies hidden in the house.” He decided to bend the truth. “Mrs Astley said your mistress means to use you to exact revenge for the death of her brother.”

The viscount cursed. “I’m a peer of the realm. Loyal to the King. Why the hell would I risk the noose for a casual encounter?”

“Why would I write to a wife I don’t have?” Recognition dawned. Was Myrtle planting letters, not finding them? “Might this be an attempt by the real traitor to stir up a hornet’s nest?”

The lord frowned in disbelief. “But I might have shot you.”

“I wouldn’t have shot you. Gwendolyn means too much to me.” She might never forgive him for killing her brother. He’d rather die than have her lose faith in him again. “Whereas you’re seeking a way to justify your actions.”

The viscount had the decency to look ashamed. “As her brother, I have a right to shoot the man who left her damaged.”

“Then, shoot yourself. You broke her bloody heart.” A sudden pang in his chest stole his breath. If the real traitor wanted them to kill each other, did that mean Gwendolyn was in danger? “If you’ve finished acting the hero, we should return to the house. It’s like we’re puppets and someone is pulling our strings. If we mean to discover who, we must work together.”

They hurried back to Westmore. Despite searching the main rooms, Gwendolyn was nowhere to be found.

The guests were enjoying hot punch and playing piquet in the games room.

Simon spotted Miss Netherwell sitting alone in the corner. “Have you seen Miss Caldwell? She wished to speak to you about playing the pianoforte before dinner tonight.”

After her shock at being addressed directly, Miss Netherwell nodded. “She asked to speak to me privately, but her flustered maid interrupted us.”

Her maid?

Suspicion flared.

“What was so important?”

Miss Netherwell shrugged. “I heard mention of a meeting at Whitney Grange.” A blush rose to her pale cheeks. “I wondered if you had arranged an assignation. Miss Caldwell seemed eager to leave but insisted the maid accompany her.”

Fear snaked up Simon’s spine. When they parted, Gwendolyn knew he was to question Lord Bancroft. They’d

arranged to meet later in the orangery and share a kiss along with their findings.

The viscount gave a mocking snort. “Perhaps she wants to inspect her future home before she accepts your proposal,” he whispered for Simon’s ears only. “The place isn’t fit for a dog.”

“She would have spoken to me first.”

“Like the rest of us, perhaps Miss Caldwell is bored,” Mrs Astley said with a deep sigh. “The lack of entertainment is shocking.”

“You’re welcome to leave,” the viscount snapped. “While on the subject of entertainment, perhaps you might explain why you’re spreading lies about me to all and sundry. Who told you I had a French mistress and meant to get rid of my sister?”

While the other guests paled, Mrs Astley’s mouth curled into a sly grin. “Reliable information always comes from those with nothing to gain. A lowly maid has no cause to lie.”

Simon’s heart constricted. The pieces of the puzzle were slotting into place. “The same maid who encouraged Miss Caldwell to leave for Whitney Grange?”

Mrs Astley turned to her sister. “What is that girl’s name?”

“Myrtle,” Miss Netherwell said. “The maid who’s always lurking in the shadows.”

CHAPTER TEN

Gwen was so scared she could barely put one foot before the other. Her worst fears had been realised. Oliver had summoned Simon to Whitney Grange and meant to make him pay for stealing her virtue. She pushed through the snow-covered fields, desperate to reach the Grange before Oliver did something stupid.

Please don't shoot him!

“Keep up, Myrtle. The cold won't kill you.”

With the snow inches deep, the maid lagged behind. Perhaps it was unwise to force her to come, but Oliver would not embarrass himself in front of his staff. And if Oliver was the spy, was it not better to have a witness to his crimes?

“Happen I should return to Westmore. I'll send a carriage, save you walking back on foot, miss. You'll be frozen to your bones when you reach the Grange.”

The idea had merit. The cold had worked its way into every extremity. But a twinge of distrust drew Gwen to a halt.

“Are you certain Mr Garrick mentioned Whitney Grange?”
Would the beach not be the best place to kill a man? One could

weigh down a body and cast it out to sea.

Myrtle brushed snow from her gloves. “His lordship told Flanders to give Mr Garrick a note. Flanders said one of his lordship’s pistols is missing from the case he left on his desk.”

The butler had confirmed as much.

“And Mr Garrick said to tell me he’d come to the Grange?” Gwen attempted to confirm. It didn’t take much to put Myrtle in a tizzy, though perhaps an empty house was a perfect place to fight a duel.

“Yes. He said not to follow.” Myrtle glanced nervously behind. “I’ll go back and have Mr Davies bring the cart. If his lordship has shot Mr Garrick, we’ll need help.”

A knot of fear tightened in Gwen’s gut. Surely Oliver wouldn’t be so cruel. “No one is getting shot today. My brother will fetch the carriage once I’ve given him fifty lashes with my tongue. Now, keep up, Myrtle.”

With mumbled complaints, Myrtle kept Gwen’s pace.

While Whitney Grange’s ancient cedar tree stood as a symbol of strength, its broad branches healthy and robust, the manor’s exterior spoke of neglect. Beneath the winter blanket, the lawn was likely overgrown. A stone urn lay smashed on the steps. The rendering was cracked and faded, the windows filthy.

So why did Whitney Grange feel like home?

Memories of secret liaisons slipped into Gwen’s mind. The moonlit walks. The stolen kisses. Every tender caress. It’s why she had not ventured to the Grange for years. It represented all

she had lost. But she'd be damned before she let Oliver ruin her life again.

Gwen stepped over the debris and entered the house. The front door creaked on its hinges as she pushed it open, the sound echoing through the damp, cobwebbed hall.

“Oliver?” Gwen called but received no response.

All was deathly quiet.

Nausea roiled in her stomach.

What if she was too late?

What if she found both men lying in a pool of blood?

Raising the hem of her skirt, Gwen raced into the drawing room. Someone had been in the house. Embers glowed in the hearth. The smell of wood smoke clung to the air.

She faced Myrtle and pointed at the burgundy coverlet acting as a makeshift bed. “Is that not the coverlet missing from my mother’s old ottoman?”

Myrtle shrugged. “Happen it’s similar.”

The creak of the upstairs boards had them glancing nervously at the ceiling. Someone was in the house, yet Gwen would stake her life it wasn’t Oliver or Simon.

“Stay here,” Gwen whispered, determined to investigate.

She crept to the first floor, though every stair groaned and the wood felt spongy beneath her feet. Dead leaves and shards of glass littered the landing.

Gwen headed for Simon’s old bedchamber.

The door was ajar.

Heart pounding, Gwen pushed it open and stepped over the threshold. The person inside made no attempt to hide or flee. She wore her black hair loose, wore a grin that distorted her pretty features.

“Mrs Samuel?”

The woman snorted. “We both know I’ve never been married, my dear. Though, I mean to rectify the situation soon.”

Gwen fought to calm her breathing. She scanned Mrs Samuel’s faded blue dress. “Does Oliver know you’ve decided to spend the Christmas season in Whitehaven?” Had she fallen on hard times and found herself destitute?

“I could hardly broadcast my return.”

What on earth did she want?

Gwen scoured her mind. “If you’ve come to pressure my brother for money, I assure you, he will refuse. As I’m aware of his betrayal, you have no means to blackmail him.”

“I’m not here to blackmail a viscount.” The lady stood a mere six feet away. She made no move to sit or draw Gwen into the room. “I’ve concocted a far more elaborate plan.”

Was vengeance the plan?

A means to punish Oliver for casting her out?

Anger sparked in Gwen’s chest. “Where is Mr Garrick?”

“He’s dead.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut, but she refused to fall for this woman's wicked tales. "You're lying." She would know if Simon had drawn his last breath. "You're not clever enough to overpower him."

The lady's evil titter grated. "All a woman has to do is pit one man against another, then sit back and watch the show. Two angry men in a fight with pistols never ends well."

Gwen's blood pumped at too fast a rate. "Where are they? Tell me!" She had to find them before it was too late.

"Likely dead on the beach." Mrs Samuel brushed dust off her sleeve as if proud of a job well done. "I couldn't persuade your father or brother to marry me, but I've had better luck with your cousin. Indeed, Thomas Caldwell will inherit the viscountcy, and I shall be his viscountess."

Gwen blinked in disbelief. Thomas Caldwell was a bumbling idiot. A dull man of science and a staunch advocate of reform who had never married.

"Poor Thomas was easily seduced. The besotted ones are quick to tame. Thomas alerted the Home Office of a spy willing to sell a list of British agents. I explained I had a contact in Whitehaven, showed him a few fake letters, and he convinced Lord Mowbray to send his best agent."

"You conspired to have Mr Garrick sent to Whitehaven?"

Mrs Samuel shrugged. "I prayed Mr Garrick would throttle your brother as soon as he discovered the truth. Sadly, it took a little more manipulation, and Myrtle was able to help."

Hearing her name, Myrtle slipped from the shadows. “Forgive me, miss. Mrs Samuel knows my brother stole two silver candlesticks from his employer. She has his signed confession. If I don’t do what she says, he’ll hang.”

The foolish girl.

“She has lied to you, Myrtle. If you’d come to me in the beginning, we could have dealt with the matter swiftly.” And yet, Gwen couldn’t help but think a higher force was at work. One keen to right the wrongs of the past. “I just pray my brother and Mr Garrick had more sense than to shoot each other.”

As soon as the words left her lips, a question sprang to mind.

One that sent an icy shiver shooting up her spine.

“Why summon me to Whitney Grange? I’m no threat. Thomas will inherit if my brother dies.” Gwen would have always believed the spy story and that Oliver and Simon had fought over her.

Mrs Samuel straightened her shoulders. “Because your cousin will probably pity you and offer to make you his bride. I can’t take the chance. They will blame Mr Garrick for your death. The man has never forgotten the cruel and callous way you discarded him.”

Blind fury surged through Gwen. She was about to issue an ultimatum, but Mrs Samuel suddenly screamed and charged at her like a banshee.

A violent tussle ensued.

While Myrtle looked on, the deranged Mrs Samuel tried to push Gwen over the railing. The rotten wood cracked and splintered against the sudden weight. The railing and spindles broke away and crashed to the floor below.

Gwen gulped.

One slip and it would be a sure tumble to her death.

Mrs Samuel must have feared the same. With the devil's strength, she grabbed Gwen's cloak and tried to push her to her doom.

Gwen gritted her teeth, determined to be the victor. "You'll not hurt me again." She dropped to her knees without warning, throwing Mrs Samuel off balance.

That's when Myrtle rushed forward and shoved Mrs Samuel hard in the back. The lady tumbled over Gwen and fell to the tiled floor below, landing with a heavy thud.

Death's stillness descended, the silence punctuated by Gwen's ragged breaths and Myrtle's cries for mercy.

The front door burst open.

The Lord had answered Gwen's prayers. Simon mounted the stairs two at a time, while Oliver stared at Mrs Samuel's lifeless body in disbelief.

"Good God, Gwendolyn." Simon reached her, crushing her to his chest and raining kisses over her hair. "What were you thinking? This place is a death trap. You might have been killed."

“I—I feared Oliver would shoot you,” she uttered as tears fell, tears of relief. “I was scared I might lose you.”

Simon clasped her cheeks and dashed the tears away with his thumbs. “Love, the devil himself couldn’t part us a second time.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gwen wrapped her cloak across her chest, hugging herself as she stood on the shore, staring at a calmer sea. The spangle of stars in the night sky made her smile. The heavens were celebrating their victory. Fate decreed it safe to travel the seven miles along the coast to Workington.

She did not need a pocket watch to know it was seven o'clock. Nor did she need to turn around to know the clip of booted footsteps on the pebbles heralded Simon's approach.

He dropped his valise on the stones and slipped his arms around her waist. "Are you sure you're happy with the plans?"

She hummed as he nuzzled her neck. "I've waited five years for you. I'll not wait another second. After the way my brother has behaved, he will understand our need to do this."

"I'm not sure Lord Mowbray will. But as this was my last assignment, I don't give a damn. I'll send the report once we've reached our destination."

"Did you see Oliver?" Gwen had left a note explaining all and hoped it would suffice.

“He’s drinking port with the magistrate. The coroner’s jury agreed Mrs Samuel’s death was accidental, though your cousin must answer for his naiveté.”

“What about Myrtle?”

“Oliver will make a plea for transportation over the noose.”

Gwen released the sigh she’d been holding. “Good. We can put all this behind us and focus on the future.”

He drew her to face him and captured her chin. “Then, I shall ask you the same question I did two hours ago when we agreed on this plan. I love you. Marry me, Gwendolyn?”

Tears of joy sprang to her eyes. “In a heartbeat.”

“You’re certain you don’t want a lavish wedding in London?”

“Most certain.” She wanted him. Just him.

Simon claimed her mouth in a fierce kiss. His hands roamed over her body, possessing her with every scandalous caress.

They might have slipped into the cave and made love, but the glow of lantern light in the distance signalled the boat’s arrival.

Lord Bancroft rowed to the shore while Miss Netherwell looked on proudly. “Ahoy there!” the lady called, sounding more chipper than she had all week.

Simon carried Gwen to the boat and loaded their luggage. “I shall row to Workington,” he said when Lord Bancroft

wiped beads of sweat from his brow. “As you bought the boat, it’s the least I can do.”

Lord Bancroft didn’t argue. “We should make Workington in a few hours. From there, we’ll find someone to take us to Scotland.”

A gentleman at the Pheasant Inn lent them the use of his vehicle for a reasonable sum. Tired and aching, they reached the Scottish border a little after sunrise. They found rooms at Gretna Hall. Once a manor house, the now coaching inn was the perfect place for runaway aristocrats seeking to marry.

While Lord Bancroft had Miss Netherwell carry a posy of winter heather when they exchanged vows, Gwendolyn insisted on holding nothing but Simon’s hands.

Like the night he had buried himself deep inside her, when he pushed the gold band onto her finger love infused every cell.

“I shall purchase something more suitable once we return to town,” he whispered.

Gwen glanced at the ring he had bought from the innkeeper, tears gathering behind her eyes. “There’s never been anything complicated about our love. It’s pure and precious. I’ll always wear the ring you gave me on our wedding day.”

They kissed the moment they were declared husband and wife.

Lord Bancroft suggested they dine together.

Gwen smiled. She wasn't hungry for food. "Perhaps tomorrow. I've barely slept and would prefer to take a tray in my room."

Simon's warm hand settled on the small of her back. "We're all in need of a good night's rest." He made polite conversation before bidding the Bancrofts good night. "Come, Mrs Garrick," he said when they reached their bedchamber, "let me carry you over the threshold."

"On the subject of thresholds, we're yet to decide where we shall live." While he was her home, a piece of her heart lived at Whitney Grange.

He scooped her into his arms and entered the room, kicking the door shut behind them. "We can go anywhere in the world. Paris. Boston. I don't care where as long as I'm with you."

Gwen pursed her lips, unsure how he would react upon hearing her suggestion. "I want to make a home with you, raise a family. It will take hard work, and I'm a capable gardener."

Simon smiled. "What are you saying, love?"

"That I'd like to make Whitney Grange our home." She touched his chest. "We can make one room habitable at a time. If we need a bed, we can always sleep in the cave."

"I imagine we'll visit the cave even when the Grange is habitable," he said, his voice warm and husky.

"Yes, but tonight we get to make love in bed."

His gaze burned hot with desire. “In bed. On the floor. Against the wall. You straddling me in the chair. All the ways I’ve dreamed about for so damn long.”

He claimed her mouth in a searing kiss. A kiss that chased away all the painful memories. They stripped each other naked, caressed each other, declared undying love.

“Your body is so hard and hot,” she breathed as he entered her, filling her in one long stroke. “I’ve been so cold without you. I’ve spent so many winters feeling empty, believing you didn’t want me.”

“I’ve always wanted you.” Simon withdrew, and they both moaned when he pushed inside her again and slid slowly to the hilt. “You’re mine this winter and every winter to come.”

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WISH UPON A SNOWFLAKE

CHRISTINE DONOVAN

The Wallflowers #3



ABOUT WISH UPON A SNOWFLAKE

Summary

Lady Sarah Templeton is spending the holidays in Cumbria at her family's country estate. During a snowstorm, she wishes upon a snowflake for Mr. Percy Bedford to fall in love with her. He is the only gentleman to overlook her wallflower status and seek out her company.

Mr. Percy Bedford, while visiting his sister in Cumbria for the holidays, is caught in a vicious snowstorm and becomes lost. Fortunately for him, the estate he seeks shelter at is the home of Lady Sarah, whom he's admired for the past several months.

Lady Sarah's parents are orchestrating a marriage between her and Lord Warren, a family friend. Mr. Bedford and Lady Sarah are making their own plans, and they don't include Lord Warren and his terrible reputation towards women.

CHAPTER
ONE

Lady Sarah Templeton spun around, her arms out wide, as snow fell in light flakes around her. The delicate ice crystals landed on her eyelashes and tickled her face. She loved snow—the distinct smell in the air right before the flakes began to fall—the wetness when the flakes kissed her cheeks. She especially loved snow at Christmastime. Her family’s country estate in Cumbria, near the Scottish border, was bursting with friends and family with Christmas just four days away.

One unattached gentleman was in attendance, Lord Warren, and her parents hoped he would be interested in her and that he would forget her unfortunate status as a wallflower. Sarah did not want to forget. She’d met her two best friends while being a wallflower. Both were happily married now, and she wanted what they had. Her heart squeezed. She missed them both terribly but was happy for them for finding love among the *ton*. Something that didn’t happen very often. Marriages among the aristocracy had little to do with love and more to do with power, title, and wealth.

Sarah didn't care about power, title, or wealth. She opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, catching intricate snowflakes. Love. She wanted love. Using her hands she scooped up a small pile of fluffy snow, brought it to her mouth, and whispered, "I wish Mr. Percy Bedford would fall in love with me." She blew the snow out of her hands, scattering it all around her feet, which she realized were numb from the cold.

She shivered and hurried inside to warm up. As she entered the foyer and handed the doorman her fur-lined cape and gloves, her mother, Lady Ruby Templeton, descended the stairs. "Sarah, go to your room this minute and change into dry clothes before you catch your death."

As the only surviving child of the Marquess and Marchioness of Templeton, her parents were protective of her. Three of her older siblings had died during infancy. Sarah couldn't fault her parents for being cautious of her well-being, nor for the fact they sometimes treated her like a child at ten and seven.

"Yes, Mama." Sarah quickly ascended the stairs and went to her chambers where a blazing fire occupied the hearth. Her maid, Rose, helped her change into a warm day dress, dry stockings, and slippers. She sat before the hearth, closed her eyes, and reveled in the warmth from the blaze kissing her face and hugging her body. She may love snow, but she didn't love the cold and how it made her icy inside. With her eyes closed and the heat warming her insides, she thought about Percy and the time they'd spent together at Lord and Lady Bromley's house party several months past. He even went so

far as to steal a kiss in the gardens. A kiss she relived nightly before she slumbered. The house party had been a smashing success in that it solidified the marriage between not one but two couples. Mr. Benedict Montgomery and Lady Penelope Sheffield and one of her best friends, Miss Emma Montgomery and Lord Hartley. Now, if she could only be so fortunate to marry the man of her heart.

She would have to wait until her second Season for Percy to call upon her at their London residence. Until then she would be in the country with her parents, avoiding discussing marrying Lord Warren, and awaiting her time in London come spring. A deep sigh escaped her lips as she tried to envision Percy's handsome face. She couldn't, and her heart fluttered painfully.



MR. PERCY BEDFORD left his sister and her husband's home in Cumbria where he was spending the Christmas Holiday, to take a much-needed ride through the countryside on his mare, Willow, when snow began to appear. He'd expected a light snowfall, but within a short time, winds whipped up, blowing snow everywhere and he could barely see. To his utter dismay and embarrassment, he found himself lost and shivering from the cold.

Willow became skittish and he stared into the white abyss, looking for shelter. He hoped he had successfully turned around and would arrive at his sister's any minute, but he couldn't see any familiar landmarks. Bloody hell, he couldn't

see at all. After what he presumed was several miles of trudging through the blinding snow, Willow turned right and acted as though she knew where she was going. Relief washed through him as he envisioned himself sitting in front of his brother-in-law's hearth with a brandy to warm his insides.

Eventually he made out dim candlelight illuminating a windowpane in the distance. Thank Christ, they would be safe. He'd been worried about Willow. She followed the glowing light without any help from him. Once stairs and a front door greeted them, Percy dismounted, carefully holding onto the reins. He banged loudly on the door with all his energy, hoping to be heard despite the whipping wind.

After possibly a minute, maybe less, maybe more, Percy couldn't tell as he suddenly felt sleepy, he leaned heavily against the door. He snapped awake when the door opened, revealing a butler he'd never seen before cautiously peering out into the freezing cold and nasty weather.

"Is this the Boyd Manor?" Percy fought the words out as his face was frozen and refused to move.

"No, sir, it is not."

"May I come in?"

As the door opened all the way, Percy found himself on the ground as his numb legs gave out. "My horse..."

"Fear not, your horse will be taken good care of." The butler barked out orders and an abundance of servants and people filled the foyer.



“DID YOU HEAR THE NEWS?” Rose queried as she entered Sarah’s room later that day with a swish of her uniformed skirt. “We have an unexpected gentleman guest.”

Sarah looked up from the book she was reading on her chaise lounge. “Is there a name attached to this gentleman?”

“I believe Lord and Lady Templeton said his name was Mr. Percy Bedford.”

A gasp escaped Sarah and her heart accelerated. “Did they say how he came to be here?” She did not believe he was invited as all their guests had arrived. Hearing his name made her remember how she’d wished upon a snowflake earlier that Mr. Percy Bedford would fall in love with her. Could it be...

“According to Fredrick the butler, there was pounding on the door. When he opened it, Mr. Bedford fell in, frozen and concerned about his horse.”

Scooting off the chaise, her heart pounding from excitement moments ago, now pounded with worry. “Do you know where he is?”

Rose frowned. “You cannot go to his room. It would be scandalous. Do you even know this person? Besides, Lady Templeton is having tea in the family drawing room. She sent me to tell you she requests your presence.”

Sarah smoothed her skirts and patted her hair while looking into the mirror, ensuring she didn’t look disheveled from lounging on her chaise before exiting her room. As she

made her way down the hall to the family's private drawing room, her hand over her wildly thumping heart, she worried for Percy's health.

Her mother looked up over her delicate china teacup when she entered and said, "Good. You have come."

Didn't she always come when her mother requested her presence? Sarah sat next to her mother on the settee and poured herself tea, or at least tried to. The shaking of her hands had her sloshing tea everywhere.

"Here, let me pour," her mother said, looking concerned.

"Thank you." Sarah didn't trust herself to pick up the cup. She sat back instead. "I heard we have a visitor."

Worry crossed her mother's features, making Sarah feel sick to her stomach.

"Yes. Mr. Percy Bedford."

Sarah gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. Even though Rose had told her it was Mr. Bedford, having her mother confirm it didn't bode well with her. Something was wrong, she could tell by her mother's actions.

"He has not regained consciousness since he arrived. However, he is mumbling about Willow, Boyd, and blinding snow. The poor man's clothing was frozen to his body and needed to be cut off."

Once again, Sarah gasped.

"He's resting comfortably under blankets with warmers by his feet. I'm afraid that until he wakes and tells us what

happened, we won't know anything or if anyone is looking for him. Obviously he was caught in the storm while traveling. Also, until this storm passes, we can't risk sending anyone out to fetch Dr. Brooks."

"May I see him?" Sarah knew she would unlikely be permitted to visit a bachelor's room, but perhaps she'd be allowed with a chaperone.

Mother ruminated on her question. Sarah could see every one of her emotions. "I realize at the Bromleys' house party you and Mr. Bedford formed a friendship. I expected him to ask your father if he could court you." She wiped a wayward curl that had fallen out of her coiffeur off her face. "Perhaps he had good reason not to or heard we had high hopes of a marriage between you and Warren and bowed out graciously. Regardless, I will accompany you to visit him for ten minutes at the most."

Sarah gulped in air, most unladylike. It wasn't until her mother agreed to let her see Percy that she realized she had been holding her breath. And to be honest, she had been hurt and disappointed when Percy didn't ask to court her. She believed that he cared for her, especially after he kissed her. Not that she would share that tidbit with her mother. And as far as Warren went, Sarah wouldn't think of him.

"Thank you." Sarah waited patiently for her mother to finish her tea and biscuits. The whole time she couldn't breathe past the lump in her throat. When her mother finally stood and declared they could go, she nearly fell off the settee from lightheadedness. She followed her mother down the hall

to the rooms where unmarried gentleman visitors stayed. Sarah rarely ventured to this part of Templeton House for obvious reasons.

The door stood ajar and Sarah saw their housekeeper, Mrs. Campbell, sitting in a chair, watching over Percy. Her pulse eased at the knowledge he wasn't alone. What if he woke up alone, confused and disoriented, not knowing where he was or how he got here? How awful that would be.

"How is he?" Mother inquired as she approached Percy's bedside and placed her hand gently against his forehead. "He appears to have warmed up, which is promising. Now we must watch for a fever."

"A fever?" Sarah's pulse sped up. Her heart had never raced and calmed so much in such a short time span, making her wonder if she would live until Percy gained consciousness.

"He was out in the storm for some time, we don't know how his body will react. All we can do is hope and pray," Mother said with a worried frown. "He is a healthy young man. I suspect he will fight off any ailment that befalls him."

"Yes," Sarah mumbled, fighting tears burning her eyes. Usually full of light and laughter, Percy appeared pale, small, and lifeless. The tears she tried to fight trickled down her cheeks and she wiped them away, but not before her mother caught sight of them. She pulled Sarah into a hug and rubbed her back. "No need to cry. I'm positive he will make a full recovery. Why don't you rest before tonight's festivities?"

"Do I have to attend?" Sarah pleaded.

“Yes. You must. Our guests have traveled far to spend the holidays with us. There will be dinner and dancing.”

Sarah left with one last backward glance at Percy, then scurried to her room. She picked up her book where she'd left off, but her mind was so consumed with worry about Percy she found it difficult to concentrate. Instead, she lounged on her chaise before the hearth beneath a throw and remembered the last time she had seen him. The day Emma Montgomery and Lord Hartley wed. Those months now seemed years away.

She may have told herself she wasn't tired, but her eyes closed and she dreamed about wishing upon a snowflake.



PERCY CRACKED open his eyes and took in the unfamiliar surroundings. The room was cast in shadows with only a single lamp lit. However, he could tell he was alone. His memory of his ride and getting lost in the storm had him frowning. Where was his horse? Was Willow safe? He vaguely remembered coming upon a residence and asking for shelter. He hoped he was still in Cumbria and hadn't traveled overly far.

Needing answers, he pushed the bedcovers down and frowned. Where were his clothes? More importantly whose nightshirt was he wearing? He couldn't leave the room dressed in night clothes. He exited the bed and rummaged around the room looking for a robe, and his heart sank when he didn't find one. Perhaps he could wrap a blanket around himself and venture into the hall.

He pulled a blanket off the bed, wrapped it around his shoulders, and left the room. Standing outside the door, he glanced left and right, wondering where to go. Faint voices traveled down the hallway from the left. So left it was. As he walked, he used the wall for support, suddenly feeling weak and dizzy. How long had he been here? As he neared the end of the hall, he came upon a grand staircase. He had three options. Go back to his room and hope someone would check on him soon, stay where he was, or descend the stairs, following the cheerful voices from below.

Before he decided, a lovely voice he recognized but was shocked to hear said his name in a half whisper, half question. With a pounding heart, Percy clutched the blanket to his chest, slowly spun around, and came face to face with Lady Sarah Templeton. How on earth...

“Mr. Bedford, should you be out of bed?” Concern washed across Lady Sarah’s face.

“Where am I?”

“You are at my family’s country estate in Cumbria. Where did you come from?”

Confused, he answered, “A room down the hall.”

With her head shaking, she smiled. “Not now. Before you arrived at our door?”

“Oh, Boyd Manor. I’m spending the holidays with my sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Boyd.”

“They must be worried sick about you. We didn’t know who to send word to about your safety. Indeed, we couldn’t

anyway with the storm, even if we knew.

“Bloody hell,” he flinched, “forgive me. They must be worried sick. I will leave this very minute if you could have a groomsman saddle my horse.”

Her mouth opened and closed, then opened again. “You can’t leave now. Would you even know how to get to Boyd Manor?”

She had a good point. It would be difficult enough with all the snow in the light of day, but in the dark, near impossible. The last thing he wanted was to get lost again and wind up on someone else’s doorstep. “I’ll leave at first light.” He turned to head back in the direction he had come when a wave of dizziness and nausea barreled into him. He swayed and grabbed the wall. To his mortification, Sarah rushed forward and steadied him. And it was then he focused on her dressed in a soft pink ballgown, her auburn hair pulled up into a fancy do, jewels adorning her throat and ears. His insides cringed. He was interrupting her family celebration. “I’m so sorry to be a burden when Lord and Lady Templeton clearly have guests.”

She wrapped her arm around his waist and nudged him toward his room. “Nonsense. We have family and guests visiting for the holidays. Having you as an unexpected guest is a pleasure.”

It was also then he realized that Lady Sarah helping him to his room was quite scandalous. He cleared his throat. “I can make it the rest of the way on my own.” He stepped back from her and fought the war waging inside him. The war of attraction and knowing he wasn’t worthy of her. He believed

that Lord Templeton would never allow his only child to marry a man without a title, even one as wealthy as he. Even believing he would be rejected, he'd planned on calling upon him after the Bromley house party, asking to court Sarah. The opportunity never arose as the Crown had called upon him for his services.

“Are you hungry?”

Pulled out of his thoughts at hearing her soft voice, he answered, “Yes.”

“I'll have a tray sent up.” Her eyes took in his lack of clothing, then met his, blushing a becoming shade of pink.

“Thank you.” He turned and hurried into his room, closed the door, and leaned against it. He had to stop noticing her. Had to fight the invisible tether that pulled him to her. She probably had suitors downstairs right now waiting to dance attendance on her. Lavish her with attention and waltz with her. He groaned as he approached the fireplace, which needed logs. He placed several on the fire and used the metal poker to get a roaring blaze going. He sighed when he finally sat in a comfortable chair facing the hearth and awaited a dinner tray.

CHAPTER TWO

Instead of making her way to the ballroom and awaiting the announcement that dinner was served, Sarah headed down another flight of stairs to the kitchen in search of someone to take Percy a tray. She didn't often venture into the kitchen, but all the servants were busy with the ball going on. She found the housekeeper. "Mr. Bedford is awake. Could you take him a tray of food?"

"I'm preparing it now."

"How did you know he was awake?"

"I didn't but thought he may awaken soon and decided to bring him a tray just in case."

Sarah shook her head. Mrs. Campbell was always ahead of everyone else.

The feat accomplished, Sarah made her way up the stairs and to the small ballroom where her parents and guests were mingling before dinner. She sashayed on feet covered in slippers the exact shade as her gown to her mother's side, who was engrossed in conversation with her sister, Victoria. "Excuse me, Mama, Aunt Victoria." Sarah bobbed her head. "May I have a word with you, Mama?"

Once they were far enough away from the guests not to be overheard, Sarah said, “Mr. Bedford is awake and planning on going to his sister’s home first thing in the morning.”

Mother frowned. “He shouldn’t travel so soon since waking up. Not to mention, the snow is waist-deep in spots. I would think his horse would struggle.” She must have noticed Sarah’s worry because she touched her arm. “Do not fret, I will speak to him and convince him it isn’t safe to travel.”

Sarah watched as her mother gracefully left the ballroom, no doubt heading to Percy. She stood by herself, as usual, and watched several of her aunts, uncles, and cousins talk animatedly among themselves. As well as her parents’ oldest friends, Lord and Lady Hampstead and their twenty-five-year-old eligible son, Viscount Warren, and their twenty-one-year-old daughter, Lady Vivian who had yet to make a match.

Standing alone, Sarah wondered if there was anyone she could befriend. Besides her newly married wallflower friends, Lady Blackstone and Lady Hartley, whom Sarah always felt comfortable in their presence, relaxed and unguarded, no others made her feel that way except for Percy Bedford. She had hoped for a female friend to spend this holiday with. It didn’t happen. Her female cousins were much younger than her, and Lady Vivian Hampstead treated her like she had the plague. And regarding Sarah’s mother’s hope to match her and Viscount Warren, she would rather spend the rest of her life as a spinster than have Warren as a husband and Lady Vivian as a sister-in-law. How disappointed Mother would be when the holidays ended and she was still unattached.

Not that she minded. Sarah had several years before she was considered on the shelf. With any luck, she could convince Percy they belonged together. The week at the Bromleys had only solidified her belief. They were perfect together. They laughed, smiled, and even had several serious conversations. She would never be bored with him, and she wanted to think likewise on his part. So why hadn't he called upon her? Hadn't that one stolen kiss meant anything to him?

Dinner was announced and since it was mostly a family affair, there was no formality to entering the dining room, although there were place cards on the table. Sarah found herself sitting between the Hampstead siblings. How lovely. Just what she needed to ruin her appetite. Warren looked down his overly large nose at her. His dull, silly, plain sister put on airs. Sarah didn't know why they thought they were better than her. One of her best friends married a duke and the other an earl. It wasn't as though she didn't travel in well-connected circles. Never mind her father possessed the title of marquess.

"I heard Percy Bedford is here after getting lost in the storm," Lady Vivian said with a wistful look in her muddy brown eyes.

Dear God, Sarah almost choked on her soup. Had Lady Vivian set her sights on Percy? "Yes. He is recuperating upstairs."

"Perhaps, with my mother chaperoning," those wistful eyes again and a hopeful tone to her voice, "I could visit him. He must be bored to death knowing festivities are happening he cannot attend."

“Indeed. But truthfully, he was spending the holidays with his sister. He’s only here because he got lost in the storm. I believe the only thing he’s thinking about is leaving and going to be with his family. They must be frantically looking for him and worried to death.” Sarah didn’t believe Vivian heard a word she said. Perhaps she wasn’t too smart. Her mind, if her expression was any indication, seemed to have trouble following what she said.

“Yes, well, perhaps I will still visit him. He is on Mama’s prospective eligible gentleman list after all.” She sighed. “Perhaps I am also on his.”

This time Sarah did inhale broth and quickly covered her mouth with her hand while having a coughing fit. It was a good thing she did cough. Otherwise, she might have laughed out loud. And that would have been very, very bad. When she trusted herself to speak, she said, “Perhaps.” She doubted Percy had such a list, and if he did, she doubted Vivian’s name was on that list. But what could she say besides, perhaps? She couldn’t very well tell Vivian she didn’t think so and list all the reasons why. And if she was on his list by some miracle, what would’ve stopped him from marrying her already? As much as Vivian ignored her during the Season, it wasn’t in Sarah’s nature to be mean. Sometimes, bending the truth to spare someone’s feelings was necessary.

Sarah had never been so thankful when dinner ended and the men left to have their cigars and brandy. Not that she wanted to be left alone with Vivian and their other female guests, but sitting next to Warren, who hadn’t spoken a word to her, was grating on her nerves. She’d never said or done

anything unkind to him, so why did he treat her with such disdain? If his parents forced him to marry her, would it be that bad? Not for him, but definitely for her. As far as she could tell, he didn't have many friends, probably because he was a snob. So he would be an earl someday. No need to alienate people by thinking you are better than them.

With no dance partner, Sarah stood off to the side when the gentlemen joined them in the ballroom and the musicians began playing. She didn't have a partner and didn't mind one bit as the quadrille was not her favorite dance. When the song ended and the first strings of a waltz began to play, she sighed and watched her parents dance perfectly in tune with one another. They gazed into each other's eyes while smiles graced their faces. Her parents' marriage hadn't started as a love match, but they'd loved each other as far back as Sarah could remember. She wanted that. She wanted her future husband to look at her like her father did her mother. He valued her for more than being a beautiful wife and mother. He valued her opinions and shared everything with her. At least Sarah thought so. It appeared that way to her.

If only Sarah could spend some private time with Percy as they had during the Bromley house party. Would anyone notice if she stole away? Glancing here and there, Sarah noticed not a soul paid any attention to her, so she slowly and steadily made her way to the ballroom exit. Once outside and in the hall she stopped and leaned against the wall, her hand to her heart thumping wildly inside her chest. One would think she was committing some ghastly deed instead of sneaking a

visit to a weary traveler even if that traveler was an unmarried gentleman.

“There you are,” a nasally voice said.

So startled, Sarah nearly screamed. Would have had she not covered her mouth, smothering up said scream. He may never have spoken to her until now, but she recognized the unpleasant voice that belonged to Viscount Warren. Why was he looking for her? She looked him in the face and tried to hide her annoyance that he had foiled her plans. “Is someone looking for me?”

He smiled. It looked more like a grimace. “May I have this dance?” He bowed rather stiffly.

Words refused to come. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing. The man had succeeded in making her speechless and not in a good way. “I’m afraid my ankle is troubling me this evening. Perhaps later if it feels better.”

The same muddy brown eyes as his sister’s flashed disappointment or perhaps anger. She didn’t know him well enough to read him. And why was he paying her any attention or even speaking to her? It must be torturing him to stoop so low as to talk to a wallflower, never mind ask her to dance.

His mouth twitched up, and he leaned close to her, making her skin crawl and her body freeze in place. The polite gentleman of moments ago vanished. “You do know our mothers are hoping we marry.” He ran his vile hand down her exposed arm and her insides quaked in revulsion. “Perhaps we could announce our engagement tonight. We could then sneak

away to your room, and I can introduce you to the art of lovemaking.” He leered at her. “I promise to be gentle.”

Before she contemplated what he would do next, his arms rose on either side of her head, his entire body pinning her to the wall. She couldn't breathe and fought not to be sick as his putrid breath wafted across her face. He pushed his hips into hers. He was short for a man, and his hard manhood hit her right between her legs. She may be innocent, but her married friends had shared everything about the marriage bed with her.

This, what Warren did to her, was nothing she wanted. He was a disgusting excuse for a gentleman. Fighting down panic because what could he do to her right outside the ballroom, she freed her arms and shoved him away as she brought her knee up to connect with his manhood.

He fell to his knees, screeched like a girl, and then through gritted teeth he hissed, “You little bitch.”

He may have said more, but she hurried down the hall and up the stairs and didn't stop running until she stood outside the door to Percy's room. Leaning against the wall, her eyes closed, she breathed in and out, trying to steady herself. She'd just gotten a peek into the devil himself. And to think her parents wanted her to marry that? She couldn't call him a man, he was the farthest thing from a man. Were all men secretly browbeaters in private? No. She would never believe that. When she trusted herself to have her emotions under control, she knocked on the wooden door, held her breath, and waited for an answer. When Percy's voice, belonging to a man she

didn't believe could be mean and disgusting, said, "Come in," she almost wept with relief.

She opened the door and closed it quickly behind her, knowing it was wrong and scandalous to be here but needing to see him. "I'm sorry to bother you." The room was illuminated by the fireplace and one lantern on the bedside table, yet she could see him clearly standing by the hearth, dressed in breeches and a white shirt. Clothes belonging to her father, no doubt as they were overly large on Percy. "Should you be out of bed?"

He turned around and their eyes connected and she warmed all over. "I couldn't spend another minute in that bed. I'm fine, really. No need to worry over me." He paused, and his brow rose. "Should you be in my room?"

"No." She shook her head and couldn't think of anywhere else she'd rather be than with him.

Their eyes had yet to disconnect. He walked toward her, bypassing the furniture in his path, until he stood right in front of her, causing all the air in her lungs to vanish.

"This is dangerous," he murmured as his hands reached out and cupped her cheeks.

"I know," she breathed, her body liquefying.

"May I kiss you once, then send you on your way."

"Yes."

Percy leaned forward, placing his lips to hers. Their lips barely touched before he moaned, deepening the kiss. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her tight to his

hard body. A body she didn't mind being close to. He took her breath away with his lips. His tongue tasted and teased the inside of her mouth. Totally lost to the sensations he caused her to experience, she was shocked when he pulled away from her, his breathing heavy.

“You need to leave,” he said with a regrettable look, “now.”

She blinked several times, focusing and trying to regain control of her body and emotions. “Goodnight.”

Without another word or glance, she exited the room, hurried down the hall to the family wing, and locked herself inside her bed chamber. Just as she was about to fling herself on her bed, her maid said, “May I help you undress and prepare for bed?”

How could Sarah forget Rose would be waiting for her? “Just unbutton the back, I can do the rest.”

Alone at last, Sarah, dressed in her night rail, climbed beneath the counterpane thinking of the kiss she and Percy had just shared. Just as sleep was overtaking her the handsome face of Percy turned into the distorted evil face of Warren. Chilled down to her bones and shaking uncontrollably, she burrowed as deep as she could beneath the covers, even going so far as to cover her head. Nothing eased the icy chill. It wasn't long before she realized sleep would elude her that night.



AFTER SARAH LEFT, Percy paced around the furniture in the small room. His body and mind were on fire. Why the bloody hell had he kissed her? She could never be his. He'd always known that. Her mother tonight had hinted at a match between her and Viscount Warren. Although the man wasn't handsome and somewhat odd, he possessed wealth and would inherit an Earldom someday. Percy possessed wealth but no title. He couldn't compete with Warren. Not when her parents had already made up their minds. It was only a matter of time before the announcement of an upcoming marriage would be declared.

His heavy heart ached for her. His body craved hers. Everything was right in his world when she was near. When their lips met, fireworks exploded around them, and everything else faded away but the two of them. Everything he did in the name of The Crown faded into the ether, and Sarah became a balm for his soul.

She desired him. He could tell by her smoldering eyes, the subtle movements of her body gravitating toward him. How her breathing and heart increased and her lips and hands quivered.

He needed to leave at first light. Staying close to her and being unable to claim her, now that he knew about Warren, would torture him. He would have to be content dreaming about her for the rest of his days. He would have to take a wife someday, but he couldn't see him loving anyone but Sarah. He would make someone an excellent, faithful husband even if he couldn't love them.

Against all odds, Percy slept for several hours, awakened when he heard the house come alive and winds whipping against the windows. He dragged his bone-weary body out of bed, parted the window curtains, and groaned. Snow had returned with a vengeance. He could barely make out anything but white swirling around and around. He sank into the chair before the nonexistent fire with a deep, heavy sigh. He worried about his sister and brother-in-law. They must be frantic not knowing what happened to him.

What to do? He had no clothes but the borrowed nightshirt he wore. He couldn't stay hidden in this room, he'd go crazy. Just as he was ready to pull out his hair, a knock and a male servant entered the room.

“Excuse me, Mr. Bedford, I'm Harold, Lord Templeton's valet. The storm has returned. I have brought you clothing and other essentials for your comfort. When ready, please join the family and other guests in the morning room for breakfast.”

He left as quickly as he'd arrived. Percy went through the clothes and changed into clean breeches, shirt, waistcoat, and a jacket that fit relatively well. Fortunately for him, his boots were dry after some time near the hearth. He washed up and shaved, making himself presentable.

He made his way to the staircase, descended, and followed the voices to the morning room. His nose also led him there as the smells wafting his way tantalized his empty stomach, making his mouth water. He paused outside the open door and took a deep breath to gain courage. After all, he was an uninvited guest. He took a calming breath and forged inside.

The table was nearly full. He recognized almost everyone seated around the large rectangular table.

He went to fix a plate at the sideboard but was told by a servant that one would be prepared for him. Before he took one of the two empty seats, he bowed. “Good morning.” Many good mornings were spoken back at him. The only one that mattered was Sarah’s. Too bad both seats beside her were occupied. One by Warren, the other by his sister. He fought not to grimace as he took the vacant seat to Vivian’s left. During Lady Vivian’s first Season, she had thrown herself at him any chance that arose. He’d quickly become wise to her antics in trying to be caught in a compromising situation with him, thus causing a hasty marriage. He hadn’t gotten close to her since.

His stomach coiled up tight when his plate was placed before him. He knew he needed the food. He had been starving moments ago. He tried to block out the woman beside him and concentrate on his food and the steaming cup of coffee that suddenly appeared before him like a lifeline. As he ate, she chatted to him. At least, he thought she was chatting to him. It all sounded muffled and coming from far away as he did everything to ignore her. When a hand touched his thigh, he nearly jumped out of his seat. As nonchalantly as he could, he pushed her hand away, slid his chair back, and stood at the same time several others rose as well—saving him from being noticed. He graciously thanked his hosts for breakfast. He wanted to ask if he could use their library, but he didn’t want Vivian following him.

The library was empty when he entered. He walked around the floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with old and new books that

appeared alphabetized. If only his library were so organized. So engrossed in his thoughts, it wasn't until he heard her speak that he realized someone had entered the room.

“Percy.”

He spun around and came face to face with Sarah. She looked worried. “What’s wrong?” Fright flashed in her eyes. He grabbed both her hands and held on. “What has you so upset? You are shaking.”

As natural an act as breathing, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her close as she cried. It tore his heart open to hear her tears. He rubbed her back, trying to soothe her. “How can I help?”

She mumbled something unintelligible as she clung to him. Percy’s eyes snapped to the door as it opened and in walked Warren and Lady Vivian, neither looking at all surprised to see he and Sarah entwined.

“Well, this is cozy,” Warren said with a deadly glare Percy felt down to the center of his bones. “Kindly take your hands off my soon-to-be fiancée.”

Even though Percy knew this was coming, Lady Templeton had hinted at it, he wasn't prepared. Every muscle and tendon in his body constricted. He stepped away from Sarah, and his hands curled into fists by his side. He wouldn't use them, but it made him feel better that he was ready if need be. Percy had the sense to stay silent. He had a feeling nothing he said would help the cause.

“We are not engaged,” Sarah said as she stood tall and glared at Warren.

“Not yet. But I will speak to your father this afternoon and rectify it.”

“You sound like you are talking about a business arrangement.” Sarah continued to glare.

“It is. I offer to be your husband, and you will give me heirs. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Sarah said, her voice sounding hollow.

Right before she left, Warren grinned. “I look forward to the announcement this evening.”

The three of them stood staring at each other. Percy wondered what they had planned for him. It wasn’t long before he found out.

“I believe my sister, Lady Vivian, would like to marry you.”

He couldn’t help it, laughter came out before he could stifle it. He cleared his throat and quickly apologized. “Forgive me.” Angering Warren or Lady Vivian wouldn’t do Sarah any good. How did people not notice how crazy they were? They hid it well when it mattered. “At this time, I’m not looking for a wife. But I thank you for the offer.”

“It wasn’t an offer.”

He would not stand for being threatened. “Are you threatening me?”

Warren smirked. "I'll tell my father I found you in the library with Vivian and that you kissed her."

Percy's eyes saw red. "Go right ahead. The only thing you'll accomplish is ruining your sister." He moved so he was inches in front of Warren. Percy, being half a foot taller than Warren, towered over him. "I will never marry her. I would rather die."

"It can be arranged," Warren snarled.

"I'd like to see you try."

CHAPTER THREE

Sarah fought the bile rising up her throat at the thought of being married to this relative of Satan and giving him heirs. She did not think she would ever survive being touched by him. She would speak to her father immediately, and if he didn't listen to her and her fear of Warren, she would take all her pin money and run away rather than subject herself to his vile attentions.

Fortunately for her, she found her father in his study alone. "May I have a word?"

Lord Templeton stood, came around his desk, and kissed her cheek. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this morning, my darling daughter?"

Thank goodness he was in a jovial mode. "May I?" She gestured toward the door. When he nodded, she closed it and took a chair facing her father as he sat behind his sturdy oak desk.

"Why so serious? This is a most joyous time of year."

She fought the urge to bite her bottom lip, a habit she'd outgrown years before. Instead, she clasped her hands together on her lap. "It has come to my attention that Lord Warren is

planning on asking you permission to marry me.” Her heart sank when her father didn’t seem all that surprised. So it was true? When she went to speak, he held up his hand.

“Before you continue, hear me out.” As she waited, her hands trembling on her lap, he turned around and poured himself a glass of amber liquid. “Lord and Lady Hampstead have been our closest friends forever. He and I attended Eton together, and your mother met Lady Hampstead during her first Season. That is when the four of us became close.” He paused and took a large gulp of his drink. “Ever since the viscount and you were born we’d hoped to pair the two of you. We had hoped it would happen on its own. That you both would find out you suited and marry without our interference.” He downed the rest of his drink. “To our dismay, it hasn’t happened. You have barely acknowledged one another. And Warren hasn’t shown interest in you until now.”

Not interrupting her father was the hardest thing she’d ever done. She wanted to scream at him to make him listen to her and take her side. Instead, she breathed through her anguish.

“I expect him to ask for my blessing today.”

When he said nothing for several seconds, everything she wanted to say became jumbled inside her mind. “I come to plead with you as your only daughter. I believe that you and Mother want me to be happy. Marry a good man and have children. Live a long and prosperous life.” She looked her father in the eye, showing all her emotions. “That will never happen if you force me to marry Lord Warren.”

“Warren is a fine gentleman and will inherit an Earldom.”

“I beg to differ about him being a fine gentleman. You do not know him as I do.” She leaned back in the chair and hugged herself with her arms. “Please, don’t do this to me?”

“What has he done to make you feel this way?” Her father didn’t seem angry, just disappointed.

“It’s a feeling I have in here.” She touched her heart.

“Your mother and I realize you have taken an interest in Mr. Bedford. Is that why?”

Why was he making this difficult? She didn’t want to come out and say things about Warren that would make her father look at him differently. She didn’t want to cause a rift between friends. Nor did she want to say that she loved Percy, which she did. With all her heart. Couldn’t he take her word for it? “I do like Mr. Bedford. I would be thrilled if he asked you if he could court me or marry me. Be that as it may, it has nothing to do with marrying Warren. Even if I didn’t prefer Mr. Bedford, I would not want Warren. I would choose a life of spinsterhood over marrying that man.”

“Thank you for expressing your wishes. However, sometimes a parent must do what they think is right for their child. You may go.”

He dismissed her. She stood on wobbly legs, holding in her tears until she made it to the privacy of her room. Once she did, she fell onto her bed on her back, yelling every curse word she could think of, and some she made up, suddenly too angry to cry. Tonight, her father would make the announcement. Tonight would be the worst night of her life up

until now. Because she knew once she married Warren, every day and night would be awful.

She usually loved this time of year. But it looked bleak with the snow hindering some of the outdoor celebrations. With help from the kitchen staff, Sarah and her mother had made gift baskets of food and treats to give out to the elderly women and widows for St. Thomas Day—a day she always looked forward to. Thanks to the snow, everyone had stayed home yesterday and the baskets spoiled.

There were three days until Christmas. Would they get to decorate the house and cut down a tree for Christmas Eve with all the snow? Sarah loved the snow but not the amount that was falling. Would they even make it to Christmas Mass? The more the servants shoveled, the more snow came.

Of course, if there were no snow, Percy wouldn't be here. What a conundrum.



THAT EVENING, the drawing room was set up for cards and chess for those who wanted to participate. But first, Sarah had to finish dinner without casting up her accounts. Tonight, Warren sat opposite her and leered at her the entire time they ate. Lady Vivian was seated beside her with Percy on Vivian's other side. As horrible as she felt for herself, she felt equally bad for Percy. When afternoon tea was served, he had told her what Warren said about Lady Vivian wanting to marry him. She couldn't imagine a worse fate except perhaps hers.

Would her father announce her betrothal at the dinner table or wait until later in the evening? The uncertainty had her insides vibrating, her stomach aching, and her head pounding. Never had she felt so uneasy. Each and every time she looked at her father, he glanced the other way. Same for her mother. Did they not love her anymore? Did her opinion and happiness mean nothing to them?

A serving of plum pudding with clotted cream found its way before her, and she knew the time had come. Her father stood and held up his wine glass. Her hands gripped her thighs tightly through the silky material of one of her favorite dresses. One she'd burn the first chance she got. Nails dug into her flesh. Her breathing sped up, and she believed she might faint for the first time in her entire life.

"I have an announcement to make. Lady Templeton and I would like to congratulate our daughter, Lady Sarah, and Viscount Warren on their betrothal."

The rest spanned out like a dream. Her body was present, but her mind, heart, and soul had escaped. Voices pummeled her from every conceivable direction; the most she could do was nod. Words clogged her throat. She'd run to her chambers if she weren't numb all over. Afraid to look at Percy, for what she'd see, she was equally fearful to look at Warren. No doubt his chest was puffed out and he was gloating. All she could do was wait. After what seemed like an entire day of waiting, people finally made their way to the drawing room. She averted her eyes and went straight up the stairs to her room where she locked the door. She didn't even want to see her maid.

She tore off her dress and stuffed it into the hearth, taking immense satisfaction in watching it melt and burn. She removed her underthings and slipped a night rail over her head. After plucking all the pins from her hair and tossing them carelessly to the ground, she shook her head, causing her tresses to fall to her waist. Too tired to brush out her hair, she climbed beneath the covers and prayed for sleep.

Pounding on the door had her scrunching her eyes tight.

“Open this door this very minute,” her mother said, sounding angrier than she’d ever heard, “or I’ll get Mrs. Campbell to come with her keys.”

Sarah didn’t think she needed to open the door or answer her mother. Eventually she’d get the key and open the door. Until then, she might as well enjoy her quiet isolation. It was most likely the last time she’d get either. She’d be married in a month. And she believed peace and quiet would be missing from her life until her death.

Death? Would it hurt? Would God punish her if she sought it? No, she wanted to live even if the rest of her life was hell. Perhaps when she bore children, their love and the love she had for them would sustain her. She needed to believe that. She had to focus on her future children to survive Warren.

Sarah finally slept, her mind and body exhausted from pain and heartbreak.



THE FIRST THING Sarah noticed the following morning as she made her way to breakfast was the sun shining brightly in every window and the sound of the snow melting and dripping off the roof. Silence prevailed as she entered the breakfast room as all eyes turned to her.

“Good morning, daughter.” Mother left her seat and hugged her, whispering, “No fear, I told our guests you were feeling ill last night.”

“Thank you.”

“We will talk later today.”

Wonderful. Something to look forward to. Was it only days ago she was happy, young, and carefree? How things had changed. Thankfully Warren was absent this morning. However, Percy stared at her, concern written all over his face. He would be a good husband to some lucky woman someday. Lady Vivian excluded.

She picked at her food, moving it around on her plate. The only thing she could tolerate was the toast. She nibbled on it, hoping to settle her stomach. From this day forward, her stomach would never be at ease. However, she didn't want to bring the wrath of her parents' anger and disappointment down around her, so she would have to learn to smile and act, if not happy, at least content when in their presence. She gathered from the conversation around the table that an impromptu ball would be held in her and Warren's honor tonight.

Once more she glanced at Percy and before he could mask his feelings from her, sadness and regret radiated from his eyes. The same emotions churned inside her at that very

moment. Perhaps they would already be married if he had spoken to her father after the Bromley house party. Her insides shuddered from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. They would never know.



WHEN LORD TEMPLETON had announced Sarah and Warren's betrothal, Percy's heart shriveled and died. He knew it was coming, but he wasn't prepared when the words were spoken out loud. He'd thought he was, he'd kept telling himself to be ready. Lord Templeton's words came to him shrouded in mist. Each word a sword thrust to his heart. It took all his self-control not to stand up and bellow, "Warren is a bloody arse. He's not worthy of Sarah."

Instead, he sat in his seat, his body quaking, his mind screaming while his heart shriveled and died. He would not make this any harder for Sarah than it already was. But the look on her face as all the blood drained from it eviscerated him. He believed momentarily that she would faint and her face land in her desert. He could only imagine what her emotions were doing if his were exploding. Actually he could because he could see it. He would do anything to take her torment, fear, and future with Warren away if he could. He sympathized wholeheartedly with her. He loved her. Too bad it was too late, and he was not right for his daughter, according to Lord Templeton.

He'd spent the night in his room with a friendly bottle of whiskey. After downing a third of the bottle, he realized it

wouldn't solve anything. He would leave, and Sarah would marry Warren. He never missed his friends, Blackstone and Hartley more. They would have words of wisdom to share. Perhaps they wouldn't, but they would be good company to ease his broken heart and take his mind off his troubles because he was troubled. He didn't trust Warren to be a good husband to Sarah. He'd witnessed a meanness about the man. A cruelty he would unleash onto Sarah. She deserved flowers, sunshine, and love.

Sitting in the breakfast room, watching her move her food around on her plate, he sighed with deep regret and guilt. Then a thought occurred to him. They were close to the Scottish border. He could whisk her away to Gretna Green. Once the ceremony occurred and the marriage was consummated, her father had to accept their union.

His heart felt lighter than it had in days. He would speak to Sarah immediately after breakfast. They could travel on horseback through the snow. It would be slow going and dangerous. His throat clogged. Dangerous. Could he risk her life traveling through roads that were snow-covered and unfollowable? Not knowing if he could see road markings? He'd gotten lost on his sister's property. Would he get lost again with so much at stake?

His elation from moments ago turned to dread. Perhaps Gretna Green wasn't the answer, but he wouldn't give up until he figured out something to keep Warren and Sarah from exchanging vows.

As Sarah neared the exit, Percy stood and followed her close but not too closely. He suddenly felt as though everyone knew what he'd been thinking, how he'd been deviously planning on keeping the affianced couple apart so he could claim Sarah for himself.

He didn't call out to her or catch up with her as he followed her footsteps to the library. Once he entered behind her, he closed the door silently.

"How can my father make me marry him?" Her voice sounded strained, and the light from her blue eyes dimmed.

His heart dropped. Perhaps the perilous journey to Scotland would be worth the risk. "I'm sorry. It's my fault. If I'd approached your father after the Bromley house party and asked to court you, perhaps things would be different." He paused, "Although I doubt it since I did visit Lord Templeton yesterday, and he would hear nothing I had to say. He ignored my wishes to marry you as though I hadn't spoken. I was dismissed rather rudely."

Her eyelids fluttered closed, then opened. "I practically begged my father to consider you yesterday, but he refused. My parents think Warren is an honorable man." Percy winced and she held up her hand. "My father knows you are honorable, but they want me to marry their closest friends' son."

"I understand," he said through gritted teeth. "Warren puts on an act of being a good-natured, affable bloke in public, but we both know he's not." Percy began pacing the room, his nerves stretched tighter than a violin's strings. "I had an idea at

breakfast. Call me crazy, but I was thinking of Gretna Green.” He waited with bated breath for her to say something.

Instead of answering, she actually gave out a quick laugh. “I dreamed about Gretna Green last night.”

When she laughed, he’d thought he would die where he stood, thinking she was mocking him. Quickly his death turned to life. “You did?”

“Yes.” Hope flared in her eyes and on her face.

He pushed the drapes aside on a large window and stared at the melting snow. It was perhaps knee-deep and melting fast with this warm spell. Would the roads be passable tomorrow? Not for a carriage. “How are you on horseback?”

“Very well. I love to ride.”

Percy ambled toward her and took both her hands into his. Looking deep into her compassionate blue eyes, he saw the confidence he needed. “Will you travel to Gretna Green and marry me?” He brought both her hands to his mouth and kissed the palm of each. It wasn’t how he’d envisioned proposing to the woman he loved, but somehow, it was perfect in every way.

Her face broke out into a beautiful smile and her eyes sparkled. “Yes.”

“I need to plan. We’ll leave tonight after the ball. The guests will have consumed food and drink, and with any luck, sleep soundly, giving us the perfect opportunity to escape.” He paused to control his excitement. “Pack a small bag and hide it beneath your bed. We can’t let anyone know of our plans.”

She squeezed his hands and nodded her head. “I can’t believe we are going to do this.”

“I have to be honest, it will be tough traveling. I don’t know if the major roads have been ridden on yet. We may find ourselves traipsing in deep snow on horseback. Dress warmly, and I will do my best to get us there safely.”

“I believe in you.” She looked toward the door. “I must go before I’m missed.”

“Once the ball ends and everyone retires to their room, meet me at the kitchen entrance an hour later.”

With a nod and a backward glance, Sarah exited the room, closing the door behind her, leaving Percy alone in the library. He returned to staring out the window, praying they made their way safely to Scotland. He’d never forgive himself if anything happened to Sarah under his care. He was used to dangerous situations, but not with the lady he loved under his protection, which raised his need to share private things about his life with her. He wouldn’t enter this marriage with secrets that could put her life in peril.



AFTER LEAVING Percy in the library, Sarah went to the family drawing room, knowing her mother expected her. Out in the hall she took a moment to breathe in and out several times, hoping to hide her excitement for later tonight. She had to remain calm and disappointed in her planned marriage to Warren. She must not let anyone think anything was amiss.

She strolled into the room, “Hello, Mama,” and took her usual seat, picking up her current embroidery project of a pillowcase.

“Sarah,” Mother said with narrowing eyes. “Are you finally going to complete the pillowcase? If so, you now need two.”

Sarah winced and stuck her finger with the needle. “Ouch.” She sucked the bleeding finger into her mouth. There was no sense in working on the pillowcase now, she’d only get blood on it. “I suppose you’re right now that I’m to be married.”

“You seem to accept it better today than yesterday.”

“I’m not. I still don’t want to marry Warren. He and I do not suit no matter what you and Father believe.”

“Sarah.” Mother put her embroidery down with a sigh. “Lord and Lady Hampstead are our oldest and dearest friends. The four of us are elated with the match. We hoped a union would happen between you two since the day you were born. I cannot, for any reason, see why you are unhappy.”

Did her mother not know her at all? How could she be blind to her feelings for Percy? Sarah had always admired her mother. Thought she was intelligent and intuitive. Caring and unassuming. Had she been wrong for seventeen years? It appeared so. She ignored the pain in her heart and the need to rub her chest. Both her parents disappointed her this week. It was the first time she could remember her opinions not being considered. She knew she had it better than most young ladies,

but her good fortune had run aground during the most important decision of her life.

“May I be excused? I have a headache?” Sarah lied.

“Yes. But your father and I expect you to smile and be happy tonight for our guests. After all, this ball is in your honor.”

As Sarah left the room, she mumbled, “Mine and Warren’s honor.” She lifted her skirts and hurried down the hall to the solitude of her room. Once inside, she took a moment to calm her racing heart. Percy, she must think of Percy. When he mentioned Gretna Green, she’d almost fallen to her knees in thanks. How attuned to each other they were since she’d dreamed last night about running off with him. She didn’t care if her parents disowned her. She would be with the man she loved, and he would take care of her.

He would never cause her harm or belittle her. She may have known Warren her entire life, but they’d spent very little time together until this week. And what she’d learned about him had her wanting to run away, which she was doing. His eyes were a deep well of nothing—his heart black as ash. Lady Vivian was no different. Lord and Lady Hampstead appeared to be kind and loving. Was it all an act on their part?

Good thing she would never find out. She busied herself packing a small bag with a night rail, extra undergarments, gloves, and one of her warmest day dresses. She stuffed the bag beneath her bed and the clothing she would wear while traveling. Sarah would have to keep her maid away from her bed and wardrobe lest she notice anything unusual. She knew

Rose was loyal to her, but with something this important and monumental, she didn't trust anyone. Her happiness and future were at stake.

The day went by slower than slow. Sarah barely managed to make it through afternoon tea. Thankfully Percy didn't attend because she didn't know how she would hide her feelings for him or the excitement for that night.

When it came time to prepare for the ball, Sarah pretended to be excited when Rose dressed her in a lovely pale blue gown that she now hated and did her hair up in an elaborate coiffure.

“You are quiet this evening, my lady.”

“I'm just excited for the ball.”

“Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials.”

“Thank you, Rose. You may leave now.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Sarah waited until the last possible moment before she needed to be downstairs. To her utter dismay, she spotted Warren waiting at the top of the stairs. Presumably for her. His cold eyes looked her up and down and he grinned, showing his crooked, yellow-stained teeth. His grin did not convey warmth or joy. It resembled a wolf ready to devour its prey. Her insides quivered and her blood chilled.

“Come now,” he snarled, “tonight is a celebration. Look happy.” His head looked in all directions right before he grabbed her by her arms, his hand squeezing her tight through her long gloves, no doubt causing bruises. “I expect you to look the part of the dutiful fiancée this evening. You may dance with me, both our fathers, and that is all. If I see you looking or talking to Bedford, there will be a price to pay.” When he spoke next, it was with gritted teeth and hatred radiating from his voice. “I’m keeping a tally of your misdeeds. When we are married, I will punish you for each and every one you commit.”

All she wanted to do was push him away from her and scream, “You have no right to punish me.” Thankfully she

restrained herself and mumbled, “Shall we join the others?”

She placed her gloved hand on his offered arm and descended the stairs, hoping her knees didn't buckle, taking them both tumbling down the marble stairs. With her luck, she would fall and break her neck and he would go unscathed.

Sarah was so very fortunate that with the snow and it being two days to Christmas, the only guests were the small amount already in residence. She didn't think she could handle a ballroom overflowing with people congratulating her and offering best wishes for a long and fruitful life.

Sarah's father spoke a few words before declaring the beginning of the festivities. A plentiful buffet was set up in one corner of the ballroom and relief washed through her. She would not be tortured sitting with Warren at a lengthy meal.

People flocked to the food and wine. She only wanted the wine, but not more than one as she needed to keep her wits about her.

The orchestra broke with tradition and opened with a waltz in her and Warren's honor. He played the dutiful and loving fiancé as he bowed formally to her, held out his arm, and led her to the dance floor. For such a nasty man, he danced beautifully. She was the one stiff and uncomfortable in his arms. He smiled and played his part perfectly. Well, almost perfectly. One had only to look deep into his eyes to see the icicles. She forced herself to smile.

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” she said, trying to pretend nothing was amiss. “Will you take part in decorating the house and the tree?”

“I don’t believe in all that nonsense.”

“That’s too bad. It’s always my favorite part.”

“I don’t see Bedford anywhere. Do you suppose he’s in his room licking his wounds?”

How dare he bring up Percy. “I wouldn’t know.” Actually she did know. He was gathering food and supplies and readying the horses for their escape.

“Regardless, he is of no consequence now since the bands will be read this Sunday, and our wedding can occur three weeks later. I believe our mothers were planning the details this afternoon.” He leaned into her ear and whispered, “I can’t wait until our wedding night.” He grinned salaciously at her, then whispered into her ear again, “Or not. Perhaps I will come to you tonight.

All the blood drained from her face, she could feel it as it went down her neck and continued to her feet. An ice-cold chill took the place of her warm blood.

“Come now, my dear, it won’t be that painful.”

Words escaped her, and she was never so thankful for a dance to end in all her seventeen years on earth.

“Have you eaten, you look pale?” He could pretend he cared about her, but she knew better. He only cared about marrying her, taking her innocence, and beating her into submission, which would never happen because she wasn’t marrying him. She escaped him by pretending she needed to visit the ladies’ retiring room. How unfortunate to find her mother inside fixing loose pins in her hair.

“My dear, I have always loved that blue gown on you,” she said as she patted her hair. “Please smile for our guests. You don’t want rumors spreading that you are unhappy about your upcoming wedding.”



AS THE LAST of the guests exited the ballroom, amongst boisterous laughter, Sarah followed right behind them, silently thanking her parents for the never-ending flow of spirits. Everyone appeared well into their cups, including Warren whom she thought would fall down the stairs at any moment. As Warren and the other guests made their way to their wing, Sarah hurried down the hall ahead of her parents to her room.

Her maid greeted her and Sarah allowed her to ready her for bed. Once Rose left, Sarah locked the door to her room and noted the time. One hour. One hour to freedom and Percy. It was the longest hour of her entire life. She dressed in a warm day dress, thick stockings, and fur-lined boots and gloves. She covered herself in a dark brown fur-trimmed pelisse with a hood for warmth from the cold. Small bag in hand, she slowly opened her door and stuck her head out, scanning the dark hallway for any signs of people, which wasn’t easy since she didn’t trust lighting a candle. Seeing and hearing nothing except her blood pounding in her ears, she carefully descended the stairs, then another set of stairs to the kitchen. Seeing a dark silhouette by the door had her heart easing inside her chest. He’d come!

Percy opened the door without a word, leading the way to the horses. He tied her bag to her saddle and assisted her up. After putting her feet in the stirrups and taking the reins, she waited until he mounted his horse. Percy led them around the outskirts of the property until they reached what she hoped was the road before he said a word.

“I feared to speak until now. It’s approximately forty-seven miles to our destination. We’ll have to stop twice along the ride. Fortunately for us, my friend, Lord Honeywell, has a hunting lodge near Gretna Green, and I’ve traveled this way many times. There are several lodgings along the way I’m familiar with.”

Her nerves calmed down at hearing this. She had wondered how they would find their way in the snow. “So we won’t get lost?”

Hearing Percy laugh was a balm to her soul. “I hope not. Thankfully there are plenty of tracks on the road for us to follow. We are not the only ones braving the elements. However, I want to get as many miles as possible between us and Templeton House before we stop and rest the horses. The Horse and Hound is around twenty miles from here. I’m hoping you and the horses can make it that far. I don’t know when our disappearance will be discovered, but I’m convinced Warren will not let this go. He and possibly your father will pursue us. Or Warren may come alone, telling no one if his pride gets in the way.”

She’d known it wouldn’t be easy, but she hadn’t thought Warren would try to intercept them. It sounded so easy to

elope, but she should have known there would be danger involved. And when she meant danger, she meant Warren. He didn't seem like the man to let himself be embarrassed and humiliated by his fiancée running away with another man.

Her mind screamed out in worry. Would Warren call Percy out? Would Percy be killed in the duel? She couldn't let herself dwell on the possibilities. She had to concentrate on the here and now, on them arriving at Gretna Green safely and marrying before anyone could stop them.



PERCY HAD HAD to force himself to stay away when the ball took place. He'd busied himself preparing for their elopement, but still, it was a constant battle to stay clear of the ballroom. His insides were jumbled up in knots, envisioning Warren waltzing with Sarah. His lecherous hands on her body as he held her close. His frigid eyes drinking in the sight of the swell of her creamy white bosom peeking over the top of her low-cut bodice. Even now, riding beside Sarah, he wanted to go back and beat the bloody pulp out of Warren for even thinking he was good enough to marry her.

He only slightly felt remorse for having helped the two young groomsmen, keeping watch over the horses, get drunk. It wasn't as though their services were needed. Besides he and Sarah, no one would take to the road that night. And Percy didn't need their help in preparing the horses. No. He needed them passed out drunk so he could saddle his horse and Sarah's. Before they took to their cups, he'd found out which

horse was hers. It was so important she rode a familiar horse as the roads would be muddy or icy and at all times treacherous for horse and rider.

At nearly three in the morning, he'd waited for Sarah at the kitchen entrance, his heart pounding with fear and excitement. For the briefest of moments he'd worried she wouldn't show. And when he had seen her form coming through the dark toward him, he'd almost fallen to the floor in relief. He knew when they arrived at Gretna Green and their marriage vows were spoken he would indeed fall to the ground in thanks for his good fortune. But until then, he would be on high alert and tense. Percy had no doubt Warren would push his mount if and when he pursued them while they traveled carefully. It was better to be careful than to have your mount slip in the snow and get injured or worse.

The howling wind had him pulling his hat down tighter on his head. "Are you cold?"

"A little," Sarah answered, white breath coming from her mouth.

Percy had noticed the drop in temperature the farther they traveled north and daylight came upon them. He hoped it didn't snow, that was the last thing they needed. But with the gray, low-lying clouds, he wouldn't be shocked if snowflakes began to fall. At his best guess, they had traveled ten miles at most with ten more to go before The Fox and Hound. They could make it if it snowed and stayed light, but they would be doomed if it came down like it had when he left his sister's home days ago.

Several more hours of travel went by, and he and Sarah stayed silent as they hunched forward in their saddles, trying to stay warm and sheltered from the winds and light snow that had begun to fall. When Percy saw the outline of the Fox and Hound, he inhaled and exhaled several deep breaths in relief. He'd been worried for Sarah's safety.

"We have arrived."

"Good," Sarah said through chattering teeth.

As Percy helped her down from her horse, a young boy appeared to take both their horses to a small stable. "Weel take right good care of them, milord."

Percy handed the boy a coin. "See that you do. And there'll be more."

Wrapping one arm around Sarah, Percy helped her inside the inn while his other hand carried their small belongings. She seemed stiff and almost asleep on her feet, which he imagined she was as he felt the same. The last hour, with the snow falling, had seemed hypnotic. He'd caught himself nodding off several times.

The Fox and Hound was deserted except for the innkeeper and his wife this Christmas Eve. Usually with the holidays the inn would be overflowing with guests. The snow had kept everyone home, which was good for them. No riffraff to bribe with coin to keep their whereabouts secret. The innkeepers would hold their tongues. They knew him.

"Mr. Bedford," Mrs. Swensen said as she hurried to their side, taking the bags from him. "Come with me. The private

room in back tis nice and warm. Me husband will be right over with a warm stew and ale for ye and tea for the misses.” She clucked her tongue. “Ye must be right frozen. Nasty weather we be having. I’ll put yer bags in our best room upstairs. Number four.” She placed a large metal key on the table.

Percy didn’t contradict her belief that they were wed. He didn’t trust Sarah in a separate room from him just in case any other travelers arrived. He needed to keep an eye on her at all times. It may be almost noontime, and Percy planned on returning to the road late afternoon, but Warren could still sneak in and steal her away at any time. He shivered, not from the cold but from the premonition that it could very well happen.

He led Sarah to the table directly facing the roaring fire and held out a chair.

“Thank you. I can feel my bones thawing already.”

He let out a relieved laugh, feeling much better since they had a roof over their heads. “Mine too.”



SARAH ADMITTED to herself that the ride to the Horse and Hound was the hardest thing she’d ever done. At times she’d thought she would slide off the saddle and become buried beneath the snow drifts. It had taken everything she’d had to stay seated on her mount since her body was numb from the elements. She couldn’t feel the reins in her hands several miles

into their trek across the frozen roads. Roads that were eerily silent as they saw not another rider.

It reminded her of a fairy tale her mother used to tell her about a Russian princess. She ran away from her family to find her banished prince and nearly froze to death before her beloved prince rescued her and they lived happily ever after in an ice castle high on a mountain top.

When the small, bearded, rotund innkeeper placed a bowl of steaming stew, a piece of bread, and a mug of black tea in front of her she almost kissed his cheek. She'd never been so thankful for warm food and drink. The aroma teased her senses, and she scooped a spoonful into her mouth. "Hmmm. This is delicious."

"It is," Percy said between a mouthful of bread dipped in stew. "Mrs. Swensen can cook."

"How often have you come here?"

She waited for his reply as he took a large swallow of ale. "Once or twice a year. A good innkeeper remembers her well-paying customers and treats them accordingly when they return."

"Indeed." When she finished the last spoonful of stew and sip of tea, Sarah sighed with contentment at being safe and warm and no longer experiencing hunger pains. "I can hardly keep my eyes open."

Having also finished his meal, Percy said, "We should retire to our room and get some sleep. We still have a long way to go." He helped her from her chair and led her up the stairs

and down the hall to the last door on the right. Once he unlocked the large wooden door, he let her enter before him and immediately locked it behind them.

Her eyes took in the dimly lit room, the drapes still closed, blocking the daylight. It was small with a screen partitioning off a small section that she presumed was for privacy. The furnishing appeared sturdy. A basin of water and two thin towels graced the top of the only bureau. The room was clean, the wooden floors covered with a worn but thick rug, and a blaze filled the large brick hearth.

“Are you worried about Warren?” She was trying not to be concerned as she stood before the fire, warming up more.

“Some. Hopefully he didn’t learn of our escape until breakfast. If that turns out to be true, I don’t think we have anything to worry about as we are already twenty miles ahead of him. We will rest here for five hours then travel another ten miles if you can before we stop for the night. I don’t want to risk staying here until morning. He will catch up to us here if he comes after you.”

“Oh.” What could she say, she’d thought they were staying until morning, but what he said made perfect sense. It was too risky to stay here. After some sleep, she would be perfectly fine to ride to the next inn. She would trust Percy and his plan to arrive at Gretna Green safely.

“Why don’t you get some rest.” He helped her take her pelisse and boots off, then pulled the covers down on the bed.

Bone weary and lightheaded from lack of sleep, Sarah gratefully climbed on the bed and sighed when Percy pulled

the covers over her and kissed her cheek. “Aren’t you going to sleep?” She could barely keep her eyes open and didn’t hear his response.

CHAPTER FIVE

Percy stood beside the bed until Sarah fell asleep. Which only took moments after tucking her in. She looked even lovelier in sleep if that were possible. His heart was nearly full to bursting. He hadn't realized until this very moment how much he loved her. He'd fallen in love with her months ago, but what he felt now was much more intense. He would do anything for her—anything to keep her safe. What he felt for her frightened him down to his core. He knew he couldn't live without her if anything happened to her.

He removed his pistol from his sack, checked the lock on the door, moved the one chair in the room in front of it, and sat down with a weary sigh. As much as he wanted to stay awake and guard over Sarah, he needed to sleep for an hour or two. If he didn't get some rest, he wouldn't be much good at protecting them from whatever lay ahead.

His body jerked awake at the sound of footsteps out in the hallway. Could it be? He held his breath, listening for familiar voices while willing his heart to calm because it was near to bursting out of his chest. He gasped with relief at the sound of Mrs. Swensen talking to a couple. The voices of the couple

were unfamiliar to him. He covered his still-racing heart with his trembling hand and sighed. He checked his timepiece and decided it was time to make haste. Standing beside the bed, he smiled at the sleeping Sarah. Her blonde hair had tumbled from the pins and her curls covered the pillow. Her lips were slightly parted and she made little breathy sounds, making his body tighten with sexual awareness.

“Sarah,” he crooned, “time to wake up.”

She sat up in a panic, her eyes darting around the room.

He placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. “Easy. You are safe.”

“I forgot where I was.”

He helped her off the bed.

“I need to go behind the screen.” Her cheeks pinkened.

To ease her embarrassment, he unlocked the door, entered the hall and stood with his back to the closed door, waiting several long minutes before he knocked and went back in.

They made haste down the stairs, and Percy was relieved when Mr. Swensen handed him a satchel of food. “No one has inquired as tae yer whereabouts.”

Relieved even more, Percy replied, “Much obliged.”

“When I heard ye moving around upstairs I took the liberty of having yer horses readied. They are right outside.”

“Thank you again.” Percy placed several coins into the man’s hand.

“Safe travels,” Mr. Swensen said.

Back on the road again, thankful the snow had stopped, but with very little daylight left, they pushed their mounts a little harder, knowing they were only covering ten miles until the next inn. An even smaller inn tucked away off the road. Unless you knew of its whereabouts, one would ride right by. It would be safe to spend the night. Halfway there and feeling the cold deep inside his bones, he wished they were safely in the warm inn already. He worried for Sarah who never complained, even though he could tell she was freezing.

“How are you?” He was surprised at how hard it was to speak. His face frozen as it was.

“Co-co-cold,” she stuttered.

“I’m sorry. Can you ride another five miles? I don’t trust the couple that runs The Brown Pheasant, which is only a half-mile away.”

“Y-y-yes.”



IT WOULD BE a long five miles, but Sarah would push on. If Percy didn’t trust the next inn owners, they couldn’t risk staying there or being seen. She would keep wiggling her numb toes, keep her chin down, and hunch her shoulders forward to protect herself from the wind. She could and would do anything to secure her future with Percy.

Sarah was so thankful when Percy led them off the road and through the woods. She’d never felt like crying at the sight of candlelight in the distance before. There were a lot of firsts

during this trip. And the most important first she hoped would happen that night. She didn't believe they could risk waiting until Gretna Green. Deep inside, where women knew things, she knew Warren pursued them. She would do whatever it took to secure her marriage to Percy.

Percy helped her off her horse, and it took all her effort to walk inside the inn on feet and legs she couldn't feel. He hurried her to the blazing hearth.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking worried.

"Don't be. I'll be fine in a minute or two. Just need to thaw out." She tried to make light of the situation to ease his concern.

"To be honest, so do I. I was never so thankful in my life as when I saw the inn's lights in the distance."

She loved that Percy admitted his feelings and weaknesses to her.

"Have I ruined my image as a stiff-upper-lipped member of the *ton*?"

She laughed. "On the contrary. I prefer you to be open and honest with me."

He hugged her close and kissed her forehead. "Always."

The innkeeper's wife, Mrs. Hunter, hurried to their side. "Mr. Bedford, ye should nae be traveling in tis weather. And on Christmas Eve, no less."

"Mrs. Hunter, nice to see you again. I need a room for the night and dinner for me and my wife."

She beamed. “Congratulations on yer marriage. Mr. Hunter made venison stew. Would ye like tae eat here, or would ye prefer to sup in yer room?”

“In our room.”

Sarah was relieved they would take their meal in their room as several other travelers were inside the inn, and they looked quite unsavory.

Mrs. Hunter led them up a steep, narrow set of stairs and down the hall to the last room on the left before another narrower set of stairs.

“I’ll be right up with a tray,” Mrs. Hunter said as she unlocked the door and handed Percy the brass key.

Once inside, Percy locked the door and helped Sarah remove her pelisse and boots, placing them on a wooden chair in front of the hearth where he added fresh logs and poked until the flames licked up the inside of the chimney.

The heat drew her forward, and she held out her hands and sighed as her body thawed. Never had she been so cold. “This feels like heaven.”

Percy removed his overcoat and placed it near her pelisse. Then he stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her close to his chest. She let her head fall back and relax, thinking, *this feels even more heavenly*. “How come both innkeepers put you in a room at the end of the hall?”

She felt his body stiffen.

“Excuse me.” He went to the door, unlocked it, and came back with a tray of food and placed it on a table beside the

bed. He dished out a plate for Sarah and handed it to her. “Because they know it’s what I prefer. There are things about me you don’t know.”

She could tell he was debating on telling her as he fixed a plate for himself and ate standing up.

When they were done he took her plate and placed both of them on the tray then said, “I may as well explain now as you will suspect things after we live together in London.” He paused and she felt him take a deep breath. “I sometimes work for the Crown.”

“As in?” She had an idea and it terrified her.

“As in secret spy work. That is why Mrs. Swensen put us at the end of the hall. There was a secret staircase that would’ve taken us outside for an easy escape. Also why we’re in this room. Both innkeepers also work for the Crown. That is why I trust them to keep our whereabouts to themselves.

Sarah tried to think of any instances that would have given clues to this new revelation but couldn’t think of any. She wondered if Blackstone and Harley knew.

“I can hear you thinking,” Percy said. “And the answer is yes. Blackstone and Hartley know, but they do not work for the Crown. I’m telling you now because I don’t want to endanger you without your consent. Just being my wife puts you in harm’s way if my identity is ever revealed to our enemies.”

Her heart constricted, then eased. She would stand by him regardless of the danger. She spun in his arms, looked him

right in his worried eyes, and said, “I love you. I will stand by your side and love you forever.”

His eyes flashed with relief and then something altogether different. The creamy brown of his eyes darkened to near black as he pulled her tight against his chest and lowered his mouth to hers. She shivered and held her breath right before his lips touched hers. She knew this kiss would be different than all the others they’d shared. The soft and slow kiss teased her mind and body awake to the possibilities. Percy’s arms tightened around her waist, his hips thrust forward, letting her know he desired her. Moving on instinct, she pushed her hips forward and gasped at the instant tingling and wetness between her thighs.

Percy deepened the kiss. He tilted his head, giving him better access to her mouth and thrust his tongue inside. Her knees weakened as he tasted every crevice of her mouth. Her tongue joined his, and they waltzed to a tune only they could hear. He pulled his mouth from hers and she pouted, then gasped as he licked his way down her neck, his fingers deftly removing her clothing. He kissed her breasts and sucked one nipple inside his mouth. She felt the tug all the way to her womanhood, causing her to moan.

“Do you like this?” Percy’s words fought their way through the fog to her brain.

“Yes.” He scooped her up in his arms and placed her on the top of the bed. Sarah scooted up to lay her head on a pillow. Too mesmerized by his eyes and what his hands were

doing, she didn't have time to be embarrassed at her nakedness.

His eyes never looked away from hers as he unbuttoned his shirt, removing it and revealing a hard, muscular chest, narrow waist, and thick upper arms. His hands moved down to the front of his breeches. His head shook and he laughed. "My boots."

He sat beside her and made quick work of removing his boots. He stood again, locking eyes with her once more, and continued where he'd left off. As his breeches slid down his legs, Sarah's eyes widened at the sight of his aroused manhood. Or as she'd heard it called once or twice, a cock. It was hard and thick. She swallowed as a touch of panic seized her. How on earth would that...

"I can see your mind working," Percy said with an easy smile as he joined her on the bed, his legs straddling her thighs. "Relax."

She tried to. She really did. And then she did relax and then she wasn't anymore.

His soft lips returned to kissing her breasts and her body settled deep into the mattress. His tongue swirled around her nipple, he sucked it into his mouth, then moved on to the twin. Only this time he bit down gently and her entire body shuddered with a need she'd never experienced before. Her hands reached for his thick brown hair, which she'd barely caressed before he moved down her body, leaving butterfly wing kisses upon her skin.

No, he wouldn't, she thought. She gasped, her hips rising off the bed as his mouth covered her there. His hands gently pushed her hips back onto the bed. "Easy love. You will like this, I promise."

He didn't lie. His lips caressed her folds and his fingers played with her, entering her and retreating. Teasing her, making her body tighten and relax, then tremble with an explosive emotion she thought might be her undoing. He climbed up her body, positioned his cock at her entrance and pushed—slow and steady. Her body tried to fight it.

"Easy now."

Percy kissed her, his tongue teasing the inside of her mouth while one of his hands caressed her between her thighs, and it wasn't long before she was bombarded with need. Her body needed him.

"I'm sorry," he murmured as he pushed all the way inside her.

She gasped with shock at the instant and quick pain, the full and unfamiliar feeling inside her body. Percy, moving his hips, eased out and pushed back inside, over and over. His tongue mimicked the act with her mouth, and her body awakened. She wrapped her legs around his waist and met him thrust for thrust. That allusive feeling took over her mind and body again, and she reached for it. She buried her hands in Percy's hair, pulling when she couldn't stand the onslaught of emotions. Finally stars exploded inside her eyes, her body tightened, and her legs shook uncontrollably as wave after wave of pleasure engulfed her.

Percy arched his back, gasped and groaned, collapsing onto her chest as his warm seed released inside her.

She hugged him to her. “I love you.”

He raised his head and grinned, causing heat to curl around her heart. “I love you too.”

Sarah smiled, and her eyes fluttered closed as sleep called to her. She had no energy to fight it.



PERCY ROLLED off Sarah and gazed at her beautiful sleeping face, so peaceful in slumber. His heart was heavy and full. He rolled off the bed, pulled on his breeches and shirt, and went to the water basin. He tested the water, lukewarm, but it would have to do. He dunked in a cloth and gently cleaned between Sarah’s legs. She frowned and moaned in her sleep, and he cringed. He knew she would feel better in the morning if he cleaned off the blood and semen even if it felt like he was invading her privacy.

He washed his hands, took his pistol out of his bag, checked to ensure it was loaded, then jammed a chair beneath the door handle and joined her in the bed. She slept beneath the covers, he on top. Not because he didn’t want to hold her close, but because he didn’t want the entanglement of sheets and counterpane deterring him if he needed to jump out of bed fast. He still thought they might make it to Gretna Green without Warren catching up, but one never knew.

He crossed his arms on his stomach, his pistol beside him, and closed his eyes. He didn't fall asleep, his mind relived making love to Sarah. He knew the first time wasn't easy for women, but he believed she'd found pleasure. He would do whatever it took to make the marriage bed enjoyable for her. He believed her pleasure should come before his. He was not procreating with her solely to bear an heir. Yes, he wanted heirs but also a happy, satisfied wife. He fought to stay awake but exhaustion took over his body a little at a time until he succumbed to sleep.

CHAPTER
SIX

Percy sprang out of bed at the sound of knocking, followed by, “Mr. Bedford.”

Mr. Hunter’s voice came through the door. Percy moved the chair, unlocked the door, and opened it a crack. “I’ve word that two gentlemen are looking for ye and yer,” he cleared his throat, “wife. They are five miles tae the south.”

Bloody hell. “Thank you. Will you ready our horses, we leave immediately.”

“Yes sir. Mrs. Hunter packed yer breakfast for the road.”

Percy pulled coins out of his pocket and handed them out the door for the innkeeper to take. “My gratitude, as always.”

“Anything for ye and yer misses.” He winked and disappeared down the back stairs.

While speaking to Mr. Hunter, Percy had seen Sarah out of the corner of his eye get up, taking the counterpane with her to the corner and dress.

“I heard and I’m ready.”

Percy pulled her into his arms and kissed her softly, feeling bad they had to leave and didn’t have time to talk. “Happy

Christmas.” He smiled, then frowned. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“A little sore, but I’ll be fine.” She kissed him. “Happy Christmas to you.”

“I promise we will celebrate later when we are safe.” Percy grabbed all his warm clothing and put them on as he led the way down the backstairs to find Mr. Hunter waiting for them with a sack of food.

“Godspeed.”

“Thank you.”

Percy waited until they were underway before he said, “Warren is closing in fast. We must push the horses if we are going to beat them to Gretna Green.”



THEY PUSHED the horses as soon as the words left Percy’s mouth. The road was still muddy and covered with a thin layer of snow, so they wouldn’t be able to travel as fast as they normally could in perfect conditions, and that worried Sarah.

Warren didn’t strike her as the type of man who would worry about his horse when his pride was in jeopardy. She didn’t believe he cared overly much about marrying her. However, once their engagement had been announced, she believed he would do anything to keep himself from being made the next gossip of the *ton*. That in itself frightened her. Her mind ran away with numerous scenarios of what would happen when Warren caught up to them. Be it before they

were wed or after. She believed he was a man of violence and worried for Percy's safety.

However, after what he'd shared with her about working for the Crown, she knew Percy was used to dangerous situations. That knowledge only eased her heart a tiny bit. All she knew was she would be so very thankful when they reached the blacksmith shop and exchanged marriage vows.

Sarah's mind was a whirlwind of visions for hours. When they arrived at the smithy, she was shocked and relieved when Percy helped her down from her mount that her knees buckled.

"Easy there, love." He wrapped his arm around her as he handed the horses off to the stable boy. "Can you walk?" The concern in his voice melted her frozen heart.

"Yes. My knees buckled in relief, not exhaustion, although I'm also that."

He kissed her forehead. "Me as well."

They entered the blacksmith shop, shocked to find the blacksmith priest prepared for them.

"I received word ye would be arriving. Let's begin."

Sarah could barely hear the priest because of her blood pounding in her ears as she stood facing Percy, holding his hands. She knew the priest spoke because his lips moved, but something was wrong. His expression changed. She looked at Percy and saw fear and anger in his eyes. He pushed her away and mouthed, "Get down," as he reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a pistol.

Dear God, what was happening? She ducked behind the wooden post, which the anvil rested on and was shocked when the blacksmith priest himself picked up a rifle. When she dared glance around the post, her blood froze at the sight of Warren and his father, holding pistols pointed at Percy.

“You thought you could steal her from me,” Warren snarled, his face monstrously twisted. “Drop your weapon, and I’ll spare your life. As for you,” he swung his pistol toward the priest, “you will marry the lady with the questionable reputation to me now. And if you want to live another day, put the rifle down.”

The priest complied.

To her shock, Percy jerked his hand and kept his pistol trained on Warren. “The bloody hell you’ll marry her.”

Sarah swallowed her screams.

“Father, would you relieve Bedford of his pistol?” Warren moved quickly toward her, grabbed her by her arm, and dragged her around to the front of the anvil, her feet having trouble keeping up. “I would prefer to marry her, but I’m just as happy to kill her. It’s up to you, Bedford.”

She worried that after Warren married her he would kill Percy. The priest began the ceremony with Lord Hampstead holding a pistol to Percy’s head and Warren’s aimed at the priest. Once again, the priest’s expression changed in the middle of the vows. What on earth could be happening now?

And then she knew.

“Stop! Drop your weapons.” She nearly collapsed to the floor at the sound of her father’s commanding voice.

She dared to look his way. He stood, rifle in his hand with three other men, all holding either a rifle or pistol trained on Warren and Lord Hampstead.

Warren grabbed her, pulling her in front of him as a shield. Lord Hampstead dropped his pistol.

Everything that happened next happened so fast Sarah would be hard-pressed to remember all the details—shouting, a metallic taste on her tongue, and the smell of gunpowder in the air—being shoved to the ground and covered up by a hard body. Barely able to breathe, never mind see anything—hearing Percy’s voice shouting, threatening Warren. The deafening sounds of gunshot. Her father whisked her away, keeping her from witnessing the aftermath of what happened.

“Percy, where is Percy,” she repeated over and over. Her eyes and throat clogged with tears. Her body shook uncontrollably. Her feet barely touched the ground as her father dragged her up narrow wooden stairs to a room and pushed her into a chair before a blazing fire, which did nothing to stop her body from shaking. She inhaled and breathed out, “Where is Percy?”

“Here.” Her head dropped into her hands at the sound of his voice, and she sobbed with relief. He hunkered down beside her, hugging her, rubbing her back, and murmuring into her ear. “I’m here. You’re safe. We are safe.”

“Wh-wh-what happened?”

“Warren and Lord Hampstead are dead.”

“D-d-dead?” She couldn’t stop her voice from stuttering.

“Come, let’s rest on the bed.” Percy helped her climb onto the bed and he joined her, holding her close to him. Her father quietly left the room, giving them privacy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Percy's body, now crashing from the aftermath of adrenaline, leaned heavily against the headboard as he held Sarah close to his side. No doubt she felt the same as he did. But where to begin the story? He was having difficulty processing the seriousness of what had transpired. The imminent fear of losing Sarah to death nearly paralyzed him even now.

"I'd anticipated Warren arriving at the blacksmith shop with your father, not his. That was a shock. I'd expected an altercation, just not the one we got. I thought I would argue with your father and admit to taking your virginity, forcing his hand and allowing us to marry. Warren would bow out, lick the wounds to his pride, and leave when hearing this." He kissed her forehead, then rested the top of his head on hers. "As you know, none of that happened.

"Before your father left Templeton House, Lady Hampstead confided that between Warren and Lord Hampstead, they had gambled away everything that wasn't entailed. They needed to receive your dowry to pay off their debts.

“When your father showed up and Warren used you to shield himself, I almost lost it. Meeting your father’s eyes and seeing his confidence gave me the courage I needed to do what I had to. Hampstead lunged for his gun on the ground, and your father shot him. Seconds later, Warren pushed you aside to aim his gun at your father, and I shot him with my pistol I had retrieved off the ground.” Percy would not feel guilty about what happened. Warren and Hampstead had brought it upon themselves.

“What will happen now?”

“It has been taken care of. Rest. We will return to Templeton House tomorrow with your father and the three men he’d hired to accompany him. I’ve already discussed our wedding. I’ll write the Archbishop of Canterbury, requesting a special license. He’ll know the circumstances by then, and I don’t foresee an issue. We’ll wed privately at Templeton House once it’s received.” He paused, his heart stopping mid-beat. “That is if you still want to marry me. Please say yes and make me the happiest man this Christmas.” With everything that had happened, perhaps she had changed her mind. It would kill him, but he would respect whatever she wished.

She turned her body and glanced up into his eyes, and if his heart hadn’t already stopped, it would with the love he saw shining from her crystal blue eyes pooling with tears. “Yes,” she whispered. “You are the best Christmas present I could ever receive.” And she kissed him, making everything right in their world.

THE END

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ROGUE UNDER THE MISTLETOE

AMANDA MARIEL



FOREWORD

In the snow-kissed splendor of Regency England, a jaded lord with a scandalous past and a heartbroken lady determined to avoid love find themselves irresistibly drawn together in a chance meeting, where secrets, scandals, and the magic of the holiday season ignite a passionate second chance at love.

CHAPTER ONE

Lady Eleanor Winthrop stood before her vanity mirror, the reflection of her exquisite visage casting a spell over any onlooker. Her long, caramel-colored hair cascaded down her back in soft curls, framing her delicate features like a halo. Eleanor's emerald green eyes sparkled with wit and intelligence, making it clear she was not just another beautiful face. Eleanor's curvaceous figure turned heads, but she was also fiercely independent and had a quick mind.

Beyond the window of her elegantly furnished bedroom, the sprawling family estate lay draped in a blanket of freshly fallen snow. Nestled amidst the rolling hills of Cumbria, the imposing manor house boasted an air of grandeur that spoke to the generations of Winthrops who had lived within its walls. Winter imbued the surroundings with a sense of serenity, as if the earth itself held its breath in anticipation of the festivities to come.

As Eleanor applied a touch of rouge to her cheeks, she contemplated the upcoming Christmas ball. She was determined to make it a night to remember for both herself and the esteemed guests who would be attending. With her

mother's insistence that she should find a suitable match, the ball held even more significance for her.

She ran her fingers over the delicate lace of her mother's wedding gown, a mixture of sadness and disdain clouding her eyes. As she traced the intricate patterns, her thoughts drifted to the broken engagement that had left her disillusioned with love and marriage. Her heart ached for something more than the traditional life of a wife and mother, a desire for excitement and a change of mood that could break through her cynicism.

"Darling, you look lost in thought," Lady Winthrop, Marchioness Banbury, said as she entered the room, her voice laced with concern. Eleanor quickly let go of the gown, forcing a smile onto her face.

"Mother, I was merely admiring your exquisite wedding gown," Eleanor replied, hoping to deflect her mother's scrutiny.

"Ah, yes, it was quite a day when your father and I married," Lady Winthrop sighed wistfully, her green eyes shining at the memory. "One day, my dear, you shall have your own beautiful gown and a dashing gentleman to call your husband."

"Perhaps," Eleanor murmured, her tone noncommittal. She hesitated before continuing, "I have been thinking about our upcoming Christmas ball, Mother. I believe it is time for me to take the reins and host it this year. After all, I am no longer a child."

Lady Winthrop regarded her daughter with surprise, but also a hint of pride. “Eleanor, are you certain? It is a great deal of responsibility, and I know how you feel about... well, the expectations society places upon young ladies such as yourself.”

“Indeed, Mother, but I am determined.” Eleanor stood tall, her chin lifted in defiance. “I will make this ball an affair to remember, and who knows? Perhaps I will even find someone who can convince me that love and marriage are worth pursuing once more.”

“Very well, my dear. I have no doubt you will rise to the challenge,” Lady Winthrop conceded, a warm smile gracing her lips. “But remember, there are many eyes upon you. A successful ball not only reflects well on our family, but may aid in finding you a suitable husband.”

Eleanor nodded, accepting the weight of her mother’s words. Her heart raced with anticipation as she imagined the lavish decorations, the music, and the swirling gowns of the guests. The Christmas ball would be the perfect opportunity to prove that she was capable of more than simply being a beautiful bride.

“Thank you, Mother. I promise I shall make you proud,” Eleanor vowed, determination shining in her eyes. As she left the room, her thoughts turned to the task ahead.

A short time later, Lady Eleanor Winthrop stood at the window of her bedchamber, gazing out over the snow-covered landscape of her family’s estate. A light dusting of fresh snow lay upon the ground, sparkling like a thousand diamonds in the

winter sun. Her breath fogged the glass as she pressed her forehead against it, contemplating all she must do to host a successful ball.

“Focus, Eleanor,” she murmured to herself, turning away from the view. She began pacing across the plush carpet, her mind whirling with thoughts and ideas. “I must create an atmosphere that is both festive and enchanting.”

Eleanor closed her eyes for a moment, envisioning the ballroom filled with twinkling candles, elegant garlands draped gracefully along the walls, and tables adorned with exquisite delicacies. The scent of pine and cinnamon would fill the air, mingling with the warm laughter of friends and family. The very thought sent shivers of excitement down her spine, and she knew she had to make it a reality.

“Mrs. Granger,” she called, her voice echoing through the hallways. Moments later, the door opened, and the head housekeeper bustled into the room, her gray hair pinned neatly beneath a white cap. Mrs. Granger was a plump, kind-eyed woman who had been a fixture in Eleanor’s life since her infancy. Over the years, she had become more than just a housekeeper; she was also a trusted confidante and friend.

“Good day, my dear,” Mrs. Granger said, catching her breath as she stood before Eleanor. “What can I do for you this morning?”

“Mrs. Granger, we have much to discuss,” Eleanor replied, her eyes alight with determination. “Mother has given me permission to host the Christmas ball, and I need your help to

ensure that it is the most splendid event our neighbors have ever witnessed.”

“Of course, my lady,” Mrs. Granger replied with a warm smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “I am at your service. Where shall we begin?”

“First, we must make a list of everything that needs to be done,” Eleanor said, retrieving a quill and parchment from her writing desk. As she wrote down her thoughts, she felt a thrill of excitement coursing through her veins.

“Decorations,” she mused aloud, her hand moving gracefully across the paper. “We shall require garlands of holly and ivy, along with mistletoe for the doorways. And candles—hundreds of them—to illuminate the ballroom and cast a warm, inviting glow.”

“Indeed, my lady,” Mrs. Granger agreed, nodding approvingly. “And don’t forget the musicians. You will certainly want a quartet.”

“Ah, yes,” Eleanor said, adding it to her list. “Now, let’s discuss refreshments. We shall need an array of delectable treats to tempt our guests’ palates. Mulled wine, spiced cider, plum pudding, mince pies... The list goes on.”

“Of course, my lady,” Mrs. Granger replied, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. “I shall oversee the kitchen staff personally to ensure that everything is prepared to perfection.”

“Excellent,” Eleanor said, making a final notation on her parchment. “Now, as for entertainment, we must have music and dancing, of course. But I also want to include some unique

diversions to keep our guests engaged throughout the evening.”

“An inspired idea, Lady Eleanor,” Mrs. Granger responded, her mind already racing with possibilities. “Perhaps a fortune teller or a magician to delight and astonish our guests?”

“Perfect,” Eleanor breathed, her heart swelling with optimism. “This ball will be an evening to remember, Mrs. Granger. Together, we shall make it so.”

As they continued to discuss the details of the upcoming event, Eleanor felt a renewed sense of purpose coursing through her veins. This ball would not only serve as a testament to her own capabilities, but might also pave the way for a brighter future—one filled with love, happiness, and perhaps even redemption.

“Let us begin,” she declared, determination shining in her eyes. And with that, the two women set about transforming Eleanor’s vision into a reality.

A short time later, Eleanor’s carriage stopped in the village square. She stepped out into the crisp winter air, her breath forming small clouds as she inhaled deeply. The scent of wood-smoke and pine needles filled her senses as she surveyed the bustling street. It was here that she would find the local artisans who would help bring her vision for the Christmas ball to life. With a determined stride, she approached the first of these tradespeople.

“Mr. Turner,” she greeted the burly blacksmith, whose forge radiated heat amid the frosty surroundings. Sparks flew

like tiny fireworks as he hammered away at a glowing iron rod.

“Ah, Lady Eleanor.” Reginald Turner paused, wiping his brow with a soot-stained sleeve. “What can I do for you on this fine day?”

“I require some intricate ironwork for my Christmas ball,” Eleanor explained, describing her concept for elegant candleholders and decorative wall sconces. Mr. Turner nodded, his eyes alight with inspiration.

“Leave it to me, my lady. Your guests will be dazzled by the craftsmanship.”

“Thank you, Mr. Turner.” As she turned to leave, the clang of the hammer on metal resumed, punctuating the air like a heartbeat.

Next, Eleanor entered the warm embrace of Mrs. Sweatwater’s bakery. The enticing aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg filled the air, reminding her of joyful holidays spent with family and friends. Plump, rosy-cheeked Mrs. Beatrice Sweatwater greeted her with a motherly smile.

“Lady Eleanor. It is always a pleasure to have you in my shop. How may I sweeten your day?” She smiled.

“Mrs. Sweatwater, I’d like your finest creations for the upcoming ball. Sugar biscuits, gingerbread, a variety of cakes, and perhaps a surprise or two?”

“Of course, my lady,” Mrs. Sweatwater replied, her eyes twinkling like stars. “I have just the thing—a secret family

recipe passed down through generations. Your guests will talk about it for years to come.”

“Marvelous,” Eleanor said, her anticipation growing with each step of the preparations.

Finally, she made her way to Miss Penelope Stanton’s dress shop. The seamstress was a whirlwind of energy, surrounded by bolts of sumptuous fabric. Colors and textures abounded in the small room, a testament to her impeccable taste and skill.

“Miss Stanton, I need your finest gown for the Christmas ball,” Eleanor declared, her voice imbued with hope. “Something that will make an unforgettable impression.”

“Leave it to me, Lady Eleanor,” Penelope answered, her nimble fingers already sorting through swatches of silk, satin, and lace. “I will design a gown worthy of your beauty and grace.”

As Eleanor watched the skilled hands at work, she felt a glimmer of excitement. She knew that with the help of these dedicated artisans, the ball would be unforgettable. The village square dissolved into a blur of festive activity as she returned home, her heart buoyed by the prospect of new beginnings.

And as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow that bathed the Winthrop estate in a heavenly light. Eleanor once more stood in her bedroom, gazing out at the snow-covered grounds, her thoughts turning to the upcoming ball.

“Could this be it?” she whispered, her breath fogging up the windowpane. “Could this Christmas ball be the key to unlocking my heart once more?”

“Are you speaking to yourself again, dear?” Lady Winthrop asked, entering the room with a knowing smile. “This habit is becoming most concerning.”

“Mother,” Eleanor said, startled by her sudden appearance. “I was just... thinking about the ball.”

“Ah, yes,” Mother replied, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “And perhaps contemplating the possibility of finding love and happiness again?”

Eleanor blushed but did not deny it. “Maybe. It’s been too long since I’ve allowed myself to hope for such things.”

“Darling, there is always hope,” Mother assured her, gently touching her daughter’s shoulder. “Especially during the holiday season. This ball could very well be the turning point you’ve been searching for.”

“Or it could be another disappointment,” Eleanor mused, biting her lip in uncertainty.

“Only if you let it, my dear,” her mother chided gently. “You must seize the opportunity and make the most of it. Open your heart to the possibilities, and who knows what might happen?”

“Perhaps you are right,” she conceded, allowing herself a small smile. “I will do my best to embrace the spirit of the season and see where it leads me.”

“Good,” Mother said approvingly, patting Eleanore’s hand.

As mother left the room, Eleanor felt a newfound resolve coursing through her veins. This Christmas ball would be more than just a lavish celebration; it held the promise of redemption and the chance to reclaim the happiness that had eluded her for so long. With her heart open and her spirit unbound, she stepped into the night, eager to embrace whatever lay ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

The sun had not yet risen when Alexander Harrington, Marquess Rockingham stepped out into the brisk morning air. Tendrils of snow clung to the ground, swirling about his boots as he made his way across the courtyard of his newly inherited estate. Though the hour was early, he found he could not sleep—not with the prospect of this fresh start laid out before him.

Cumbria was a world away from the debauched parlors and crowded ballrooms of London where he had earned his reputation as a notorious rake. Here, there were no scornful whispers or judging eyes, only endless rolling hills and forests ripe for adventure. Alexander felt the long dormant stirrings of hope. Perhaps this pastoral paradise could be the balm his weary soul so desperately needed.

As the first rays of dawn crested over the distant mountains, the receding darkness revealed a quaint village nestled just beyond the manor walls. Alexander paused, keen eyes taking in every detail. The thatched rooftops, little church with its pointed steeple, cobbled streets yet untouched by carriage wheels—it was like stepping into one of those

countryside paintings he'd seen hanging in the long gallery back home. Charming as it seemed, however, he knew appearances could be deceiving. His own genteel facade hid a damaged man, one who had seen and done things no God-fearing person would dare whisper.

No, he thought wryly, better not to let one's imagination run wild with fantasies. The locals were sure to take a dim view of having London's most notorious scoundrel as their new neighbor. He'd likely find more judgment here than acceptance.

With a heavy sigh, Alexander raked a hand through his wheat-blond hair and turned back toward the house. Perhaps he could outrun his past, but never himself.

He made his way up the gravel path leading to the manor, his boots crunching on the frozen ground. Though still early, he could see wisps of smoke already rising from the chimneys, signs of the staff preparing for the day ahead. They were no doubt anxious about meeting their new master, a man with a reputation blacker than chimney soot.

As he reached the carved oak doors, Alexander paused to take in the stately Georgian facade, with its rows of tall windows staring back like disapproving eyes. The bitter wind whipped through his coat, but he hardly felt the cold. A different sort of chill had settled in his bones, one born of past mistakes and the uncertainty that lay ahead.

With a steadying breath, he reached for the iron door knocker. The sound echoed like a thunderclap in the heavy silence. Moments later, the door creaked open to reveal an

elderly butler, his eyes widening at the sight of the strapping young lord on the threshold.

“Welcome, Lord Rockingham,” the butler sputtered with a low bow. “We’ve been expecting you.”

Alexander stepped into the foyer, keenly aware of the servants peeking at him from doorways and around corners. Their curious eyes took in his tall, muscular frame, no doubt searching for some outward sign of the kind of man he was.

Let them look their fill, he thought. Their judgment mattered little to him now. He had come here for a new beginning, a chance to rewrite his story. What they saw as only a rake and a scoundrel, in time, he hoped to transform into a man of honor, worthy of respect.

With a cordial nod, he handed his gloves and hat to the butler. “Please inform the housekeeper I would like a tour of the premises when it’s convenient. But first, I should like to take some refreshment in my room.”

“Right away, my lord,” the butler replied, visibly relieved at his new master’s courteous manner.

As Alexander followed him up the grand staircase, he felt the tiniest spark of hope. Here, far from the temptations and pitfalls of London, he had a chance to redefine himself. It would take time and persistence to overcome his past, but this could be the fresh start he so desperately desired.

Once alone, Alexander gazed out the mullioned window of his bedchamber, taking in the snow-covered grounds of the estate. Fat, lazy flakes drifted down from an endless gray sky,

coating the land in a tranquil blanket of white. The cold, crisp air carried the faint scent of wood-smoke, likely from a fire lit in the kitchens below.

After the chaotic crush of London's crowded streets, the peaceful countryside felt like a balm to his soul. Here, there were no judgmental eyes or wagging tongues, just the simplicity of nature, dormant and pristine.

Alexander felt the persistent knot in his chest loosen. The urge to drink, gamble, and womanize had ruled him for so long. But now, looking out at the unsullied snow, he sensed the possibilities before him. This land, and this new role as Marquess, could be the redemption he sought.

There was much to do to set the estate to rights. Repairs were needed, tenants required attention, and the house's accounts had fallen into disarray. But he would see to it all. This would be a new chapter, one defined by responsibility, dignity, and honor.

With a deep breath, he turned from the calming winter vista. Chin high, he went to meet the staff and begin building the future he desired.

Alexander made his way down the grand staircase, his boots echoing on the marble floors. He had donned his finest jacket and breeches, wanting to make a good first impression on the servants.

In the foyer, he found a small group assembled—the housekeeper, butler, cook, and stable master. They stood stiffly at attention, regarding him with wary eyes. His reputation had clearly preceded him.

“Good day,” Alexander said warmly, giving a gracious bow. “I am Alexander Harrington, the new Marquess Rockingham. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The staff murmured greetings and dipped into bows and curtsies.

“Please, be at ease,” Alexander said. “I look forward to working with all of you to restore the estate’s former glory.”

“Yes, your lordship,” the housekeeper said. “We are eager to serve.”

Alexander smiled. “Excellent. Tell me your names so I may address you properly.”

He moved down the line as they introduced themselves. The stable master, Mr. Thomas Burner, was a burly, barrel-chested man with a firm handshake.

“Fine horses you have here,” Alexander said. “I look forward to seeing your stables.”

“I keep a tight ship, my lord,” Thomas said, puffing his chest. “Finest horses in the county.”

The plump cook, Mrs. Bethany Cutar, gave a deep curtsy. “So pleased to have you, my lord. I’ve a lovely roast planned for supper.”

Alexander kissed her hand. “I can already smell your delectable cooking, Mrs. Cutar.”

The housekeeper, Mrs. Ida Hawthorne, blushed prettily when Alexander complimented her tidiness.

One by one, Alexander charmed them, showing his noble manners despite expectations. By the tour's end, the staff seemed much more at ease, warming to this unconventional marquess.

There was hope in their eyes now, mirroring the hope rekindled in Alexander's own heart. This was a promising start to his new life.

Alexander retreated to his study, gazing out the window at the snow-blanketed hills. This pastoral paradise was a world away from the endless parties and debaucheries of London. Here, there were no temptations to lead him astray, no vices to entice him into scandal. Only peace, tranquility, and a chance to rediscover himself.

A chance for redemption.

The door opened, and the housekeeper entered with a tea tray. "Pardon the intrusion, my lord. Mrs. Cutar insisted you take tea to warm yourself from the cold."

"Most thoughtful, thank you, Ida." Alexander poured a cup, breathing in the fragrant steam.

"If I may say, my lord," she began hesitantly. "It's good to have Netherfield Park bustling again. His late lordship was much loved in these parts."

Alexander nodded. "I hope to prove worthy of my uncle's legacy in time."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but...is it true what they say about you in London?"

Alexander met the woman's gaze steadily. "I cannot deny I am a bit rough around the edges. But I aim to leave my old habits behind. The past is the past."

Ida looked relieved. "Glad to hear it, my lord. This may be a sleepy corner, but tis a right pleasant one."

Alexander smiled. "Yes, the peace and simplicity here suit me well. I believe Cumbria is just what I needed to turn the page and chart a fresh course."

He raised his teacup in a toast. "To new beginnings."

Alexander stared out the frost-laced window, lost in thought as he sipped his tea. Despite his resolve, ghosts of the past still lingered. The gambling dens, the card parties, the endless stream of wine and women. London's vices had almost swallowed him whole.

Almost. But not quite.

He was here now, far from those temptations. This was a chance to become the man he wanted to be, not the scoundrel society expected.

Still, the question remained—could he truly change? Or was he fooling himself?

He sighed as he rubbed his palm over his jaw. This place, these people, deserved better. He had much to prove before he could truly call himself worthy. But prove it, he would—to himself and everyone else.

CHAPTER
THREE

Eleanor's emerald gaze swept over the bustling village square, taking in the familiar sights and sounds of Yuletide preparations. Ribbons and holly adorned shopfronts while carolers filled the brisk air with cheerful melodies. The tantalizing scents of roasted chestnuts and fresh baked bread mingled with the sharp tang of evergreen boughs.

Despite the festive atmosphere, Eleanor's countenance remained reserved. She had no intention of allowing the holiday cheer to sweep her into the romantic fervor that seemed to infect the *ton* every Christmas. Her broken engagement the previous year had led her to swear off marriage. No, this Christmas she would retain her common sense.

As Eleanor admired the handiwork of Mrs. Stanton's display in her storefront window, her breath caught at the sight of an unfamiliar gentleman surveying the square. Though she had never seen him before, recognition sparked through her as their gazes locked. His piercing blue eyes and chiseled features marked him unmistakably as Lord Rockingham.

Rumors of his reputation as a scoundrel had reached even her remote village, but seeing him now in the flesh, Eleanor understood how he had earned such a notorious status. He was dashing, with blond waves framing his classically handsome face. His broad shoulders and athletic build were evident even beneath his finely tailored greatcoat.

As he approached with an air of easy confidence, Eleanor's heartbeat quickened, though she willed her expression to remain neutral. What business could the roguish Lord Rockingham have in her sleepy village? She would soon find out, for their paths were fated to cross this morning.

Eleanor lowered her gaze demurely as the Marquess drew nearer. Though she feigned nonchalance, her thoughts raced. The rogue's reputation was infamous. Still, his striking visage evoked unfamiliar and unwanted sensations within her. This man could be dangerous, indeed.

As he paused before her, the timbre of his voice sent shivers down her spine. "What brings a lady as lovely as yourself out on a morning such as this?"

Summoning her courage, Eleanor lifted her chin. "I could ask the same of you, my lord. Is our humble village not beneath the notice of a marquess?"

Amusement danced in his azure eyes. "On the contrary. I find myself quite charmed by its rustic allure." His gaze lingered on her features. "And its inhabitants."

Warmth bloomed in Eleanor's cheeks at his bold flirtation. She cast about for a distraction. "Perhaps you would care to

sample Mrs. Sweatwater's confections? Her baked goods are the pride of our village."

"A tempting offer," he purred, "but sweets cannot satisfy me today. No, I find myself craving more... substantial fare." His suggestive tone left little doubt as to his meaning.

Flustered and a bit angry, Eleanor turned away, her pulse racing at his forward remarks. This scoundrel was even more dangerous than his reputation foretold. She would do well to avoid him, yet something in his roguish charm called to her. Perhaps she was not as immune to the folly of mistletoe magic as she had thought.

Eleanor steeled herself and turned back to face him, meeting his gaze directly this time. "While I appreciate your interest, my lord, I'm not some tavern wench to be so crudely courted."

Alexander had the grace to look chastened. "Forgive me, my lady. I meant no disrespect. It's only..." He faltered, then continued earnestly, "I confess I find myself quite taken with you. Won't you allow me the chance to make a proper acquaintance?"

Taken aback by his sincerity, Eleanor studied him. His reputation painted him as a scoundrel, yet she sensed no malice in him now. Perhaps there was more to this lord than met the eye.

"Very well," she conceded, removing her hand from her fur muff and holding it out. "I am Lady Eleanor Winthrop, daughter of the Earl of Ashford."

He took her proffered hand and bowed over it. “Alexander Harrington, Marquess of Rockingham, at your service.” His thumb brushed over her knuckles, sending sparks skittering up her arm.

Reclaiming her hand, Eleanor gestured to the red and green gowns framed in the shop window. “I was just admiring Miss Stanton’s gowns. Her eye for fashion is unparalleled in the county.”

“Indeed?” Alexander turned his attention to the display of sumptuous silks and satins. “I can see why her work has earned such praise. The cut of that green velvet is exquisite. It would complement your coloring perfectly.”

“You think so?” Eleanor couldn’t help preening a little under his appreciative eye. Perhaps allowing his acquaintance would not be so perilous after all.

Eleanor felt her cheeks warm at the intensity of his gaze. To hide her fluster, she pushed open the door and called, “Miss Stanton. A word, if you please.”

The seamstress bustled over, her sharp eyes taking in the pair. “My lady, how may I be of service?”

“Lord Rockingham was just admiring your emerald velvet gown. I’m inclined to agree it’s one of your best creations.”

Miss Stanton beamed. “You honor me, my lady. I would be happy to take your measurements if it pleases you.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly...” Eleanor demurred, before Alexander interjected smoothly.

“Come now, Lady Eleanor. It would be a crime to deprive the world of your beauty cloaked in such a masterpiece.”

His voice was like warm honey, melting her reservations, and she allowed herself to be led into the shop. “Oh... very well,” she agreed.

As Miss Stanton whisked Eleanor behind a screen to take measurements, Alexander called, “I shall pay for the gown as a gift, of course. Consider it an early Christmas present.”

Eleanor’s protests died on her lips. The prospect of receiving such a personal gift from him made her pulse quicken. She had to remind herself to breathe steadily as Miss Stanton wrapped the measuring tape around her stays.

When she emerged, Alexander’s gaze caressed her figure appreciatively. “Excellent. I look forward to seeing the finished product at the Christmas ball.”

“Christmas ball?” Eleanor echoed in surprise as she refastened her cloak.

“But of course.” Alexander flashed a roguish grin. “I shall be graced with the first dance, I hope?”

Flustered once more, Eleanor found herself saying, “If you wish it.”

“I do.” The warmth in his eyes made her heart skip. Dangerous as he might be, she couldn’t deny her fascination with this lord.

Cheeks burning, she stepped out into the cool winter air. “Thank you for the generous gift, my lord. However, I must insist on purchasing the gown myself.”

“Nonsense,” he said.

“It is not proper for me to accept such a personal gift,” she argued, having come back to her senses.

“No one need know. It will be our secret,” he said, his tone brooking no further argument.

She swallowed, then nodded her agreement. “Thank you.”

“I assure you, it is my pleasure, and but a small gesture on my part. Consider it an apology for my less than gentlemanly behavior earlier.”

Eleanor’s breath caught as Alexander took her hand and brushed his lips delicately across her knuckles. The brief contact sent a spark through her veins.

Around them, the villagers noticed the intimate gesture. Mrs. Sweatwater paused in hanging wreaths outside of her bakery, a knowing smile playing on her lips. Inside the smithy, Mr. Turner glanced up from stoking the fires just in time to see the exchange through the window.

“Well, I’ll be...” he muttered to himself, before returning to his work with a shake of his head.

Oblivious, Eleanor gazed up at Alexander, a pretty blush staining her cheeks. He still held her hand loosely in his own, the pad of his thumb idly caressing her knuckles through the fabric of her glove.

“I should very much like to continue our conversation, my lady,” he murmured. “Perhaps you might take a turn with me through the village?”

Eleanor's instincts warned her against wandering alone with a man of his reputation. But the earnest look in his piercing blue eyes overwhelmed her reservations. Besides, they were in the open where anyone could see them. There was no scandal in that.

"I would be delighted," she said.

Alexander led her down the row of shops and cottages, pointing out various Christmas decorations. Eleanor hung on his every word, enthralled by his deep voice and the occasional brushes of his arm against hers. Time slipped away unnoticed...

The church bells chimed in the distance, marking the hour, and Eleanor came back to herself with a start. "Goodness, is it two already?" she exclaimed. Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand from Alexander's arm. "I'm afraid I must be getting back."

Disappointment flashed briefly across Alexander's face before he schooled his features. "Of course. Thank you for a lovely time, my lady."

He brought her hand to his lips once more in a lingering kiss. Around them, villagers whispered excitedly about the undeniable connection between the mysterious lord and Lady Eleanor.

Eleanor smiled, a light blush coloring her cheeks. "Thank you, my lord. I've quite enjoyed our time together."

She turned to leave, acutely aware of his gaze following her. As she walked away, Eleanor's pulse quickened. She had

never met someone who could match her wit so effortlessly.

Behind her, Alexander watched her figure retreat into the distance. His eyes traced the alluring sway of her hips, the sunlight glinting off her caramel curls. Already he missed her quick laughter and the sparkle of mischief in her emerald eyes.

Alexander sighed, his breath fogging the crisp winter air. He felt a flicker of hope. Perhaps the Christmas season would grant him a chance to win the lady's favor and redeem himself.

Eleanor's mind raced as she made her way back to the manor, replaying every moment of her encounter with Lord Alexander. The memory of his deep blue eyes gazing into hers made her cheeks flush. She quickened her pace, hoping the cold winter air would calm the flutters in her chest.

Turning onto the tree-lined lane leading to her home, she paused to catch her breath. Eleanor leaned against the rough bark of a towering oak, its bare branches stretching toward the steely gray sky. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to imagine Alexander's strong arms enveloping her, his breath warm against her neck. A shiver of longing passed through her.

"He is a rake, a scoundrel..." she whispered, a half-hearted attempt to temper the desire blossoming within. Yet she thrilled at the thought of their next meeting. Would he really seek her out again? Eleanor hugged her woolen cloak tighter, shielding herself against the chill.

She turned toward the manor looming in the distance, tendrils of smoke from its many chimneys disappearing into

the clouds. It represented comfort and familiarity, everything she had craved before today.

Alexander was an enticing unknown. A single conversation with him had awoken passions and dreams deeply buried since her broken engagement. Eleanor gazed up at the stark winter sky, making a silent wish.

“Let this Christmas bring whatever is meant to be,” she breathed. With a swirl of her yellow skirts, she continued on her way, ready to embrace whatever fate had in store.

CHAPTER
FOUR

The grand facade of Winthrop Manor glowed in the early morning light, its marble columns and soaring windows framed by garlands of cedar and crimson bows. Inside, Lady Eleanor Winthrop strode through the bustling halls, green eyes sharp as she inspected each perfect detail.

“No, those ribbons simply will not do,” she directed the footmen hanging swags along the staircase. “The color must complement the wallpaper. Fetch my samples.”

The footmen nodded and hurried off as Eleanor pivoted to examine the arrangements of holly and mistletoe adorning the entryway. She pursed her lips, mentally repositioning a sprig here and there until satisfied. This Christmas ball would be utterly flawless. She was determined to make it so.

“Ah, Mrs. Granger,” Eleanor greeted the head housekeeper warmly as the older woman approached. “How fare the preparations in the east wing?”

“Quite well, my lady,” Mrs. Granger replied. “The maids are hard at work polishing the woodwork as we speak.”

Eleanor nodded, pleased by this news.

As Mrs. Granger bobbed a curtsy and withdrew, Eleanor turned her attention to inspecting the garlands along the banisters, evergreen swags entwined with crimson ribbons and holly.

The foyer soon bustled with activity as tradespeople arrived, ready to lend their skills to preparing the estate.

Mr. Turner, the burly village blacksmith, hefted several wrought iron candlesticks, his muscular arms flexing. Mrs. Sweatwater, the kindly faced baker, carried trays of freshly iced petite fours that made Eleanor's mouth water.

As Eleanor oversaw the controlled chaos, Mrs. Granger kept pace at her side, ever the loyal assistant.

"The garlands on the east staircase, my lady?" Mrs. Granger inquired.

"An excellent notion," Eleanor agreed. "And in the ballroom, let's line the mantel with holly and mistletoe."

Mrs. Granger nodded. "I shall instruct the maids directly."

Eleanor watched approvingly as Mr. Turner arranged the candlesticks on the sideboards with care. His skill was apparent in the elegant twists of black iron.

Mrs. Sweatwater offered Eleanor a tiny fruit tart. "A taste, my lady? Baked just this morning."

"Delicious," Eleanor declared after a bite. Mrs. Sweatwater beamed at the praise.

Despite the frenzy of activity, Eleanor felt a thrill of anticipation. This Christmas ball shall be the event of the

season.

Eleanor's gaze moved to the grand staircase, where Miss Stanton was attaching handcrafted bows to the garlands. The young seamstress had outdone herself, shaping glossy magnolia leaves and red winterberries into artful arrangements. Each cluster was accented with velvet bows in jewel tones that popped against the deep green garland.

"Exquisite work, Miss Stanton," Eleanor complimented as she ascended the stairs.

Miss Stanton flushed with pride. "Why thank you, my lady. I wanted it to be just right for the ball."

Eleanor ran her fingers over the velvet ribbons. "I adore these accents. The colors are so vibrant."

"I thought they added a bit of festive cheer," Miss Stanton said.

Eleanor nodded. "They give the garlands that perfect final touch. Please see the mantel and chandeliers receive similar embellishments."

"It will be my pleasure," the seamstress promised.

Descending the stairs, Eleanor noted how the candlelight from the blacksmith's sconces glinted off the garlands' glossy leaves and plump berries. Combined with the tangy scent of citrus and cinnamon emanating from the kitchens, it was deliciously festive.

She found Mrs. Granger in the ballroom, directing footmen who were hanging wreaths above each window. Each wreath

was adorned with red velvet bows and gold pine cones that shone in the sunlight streaming through the frosted glass.

Eleanor tilted her head appraisingly. “I do believe the ballroom is perfect, Mrs. Granger. You’ve outdone yourself.”

Mrs. Granger flushed with pleasure. “You are too kind, my lady.”

Eleanor gave her a fond smile, then made her way to the kitchens, where she found Mrs. Sweatwater elbow-deep in dough. The plump baker hummed a cheerful tune as she kneaded and rolled out pastry after pastry.

“Those smell heavenly, Mrs. Sweatwater,” Eleanor said, breathing in the sugary scents of cinnamon and nutmeg.

Mrs. Sweatwater beamed. “Why thank you, Lady Eleanor. I do hope they’ll be a treat for your guests.”

Eleanor peered at the rows of pies and tarts cooling on the counters—apple, pear, mincemeat, and more. “With such an array, I’ve no doubt our guests will be thoroughly spoiled.”

“It’s a labor of love, to be sure,” laughed Mrs. Sweatwater. “Now, do sample this cherry tart. I need an expert opinion.”

Eleanor accepted the proffered tart and took a dainty bite. The sweet cherry filling burst on her tongue. “Mrs. Sweatwater, you’ve outdone yourself. This is ambrosia.”

The baker’s chest swelled with pride. “You are too gracious, my lady.”

Eleanor smiled before continuing on her way, satisfied that all was in order for a magical Christmas Eve ball.

She made her way upstairs to the sewing room, where she found Penelope Stanton hard at work on the final alterations for her gown.

“It’s looking exquisite, Miss Stanton,” Eleanor remarked as she admired the shimmering silk embellishments and delicate embroidery on the green velvet frock.

Penelope smiled shyly. “Why thank you, Lady Eleanor. I do hope it meets your approval.”

“It exceeds my expectations. The beading alone must have taken you ages.” Eleanor ran her fingers over the intricate beadwork cascading down the bodice.

“I confess I lost a bit of sleep bringing it all together, but for you, it’s worth every weary hour.” A blush rose on the seamstress’s cheeks.

Eleanor squeezed her hand warmly. “You are too good to me, Penelope. I don’t know what I’d do without your talents.”

“You are too kind, my lady.”

Their eyes met for a moment, a spark of friendship passing between them.

Clearing her throat, Eleanor stepped back. “I should let you return to your work. But I cannot wait to wear your exquisite creation at the ball.”

“And you shall be the belle of the ball, Lady Eleanor,” Penelope replied softly.

With a swish of skirts, Eleanor took her leave, anticipation building within her breast for the magical evening that would

soon be upon her.

Eleanor stopped in the entry hall to have a look at the main entrance and found Mother inspecting the decorations. “Mother,” she greeted as she allowed her gaze to take in the space. Everything was splendidly festive, and she felt a glow of satisfaction seeing the results of her meticulous planning coming to fruition.

“It seems you have the ball well in hand,” Mother said. “I daresay the estate has never looked so festive.”

Eleanor’s cheeks warmed at Mother’s compliment, and she declared, “I believe we’re nearly ready for the main event. The decor is stunning, the menu decadent. Now we just need our finely dressed guests and the quartet to bring it all to life.”

“It shall be the highlight of the holiday season,” Mother said. “But for now, rest. We have a busy day tomorrow, and the ball shall go long into the night.”

Eleanor nodded. “You’re right, of course.” She pivoted, then looked back. “Goodnight, Mama.”

“Sleep well, darling.” Mother smiled.

Eleanor retired to her chambers, removing the pins from her hair and letting it fall about her shoulders. She gazed out the window at the moonlit grounds blanketed in snow. Lanterns lined the drive, ready to light the way for carriages tomorrow evening. The trees shimmered, adorned with crystals and velvet ribbons. It was a winter wonderland.

A knock sounded at the door, and her lady’s maid entered. “Your bath is drawn, my lady.”

“Thank you, Lucy.”

Eleanor slipped into the fragrant, steaming water with a contented sigh. As she relaxed, her mind wandered to thoughts of Lord Rockingham. Would he think her beautiful tomorrow night in the gown he'd bought? Dare she even wear it? Would they share a dance? Her heart quickened at the possibility.

She envisioned the ballroom filled with twirling couples, the orchestra playing a lively reel. Laughter would flow along with the champagne. She could almost hear the murmur of voices and shuffling of slippers on the parquet floor.

Climbing from the bath, she allowed her maid to dry her before slipping a soft nightgown over her head and tucking her into bed.

As Eleanor drifted off to sleep, images of the ball flitted through her mind. In just a few brief hours, the Estate would come alive with Christmas joy. She could hardly wait for the festivities to begin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eleanor's heart fluttered with anticipation. Any moment now, the carriage bearing her dearest friend would roll up the snow-dusted drive. How she had missed Lydia's infectious laugh, her spirited embrace. The Yuletide season would be so dull without her.

At last, the awaited carriage rumbled into view. Eleanor darted through the manor, heedless of her mother's gentle admonishments about comportment. She threw open the oaken doors just as Lydia descended in a burst of crimson skirts and sable fur.

"Eleanor, my darling," Lydia cried in her melodic voice, embracing Eleanor fiercely. She was resplendent in a gown of rich crimson satin that accentuated her curves, with an ostrich feather hat perched at a rakish angle atop her chestnut curls. "Oh, how I've missed your lovely face."

Laughing, Eleanor drew back to admire her friend's audacious ensemble. "Lydia, you look utterly ravishing. The ladies will be so scandalized."

"Let them whisper behind their fans. I've never cared for their tedious rules." Lydia's eyes gleamed with mischief.

“Now, take me inside this instant. I’m positively frozen from the journey.”

Arm in arm, they entered the great hall with its evergreen swags and crackling hearths. Lydia sighed contentedly. “It feels like coming home. Now, tell me everything I’ve missed since last we met.”

As Eleanor guided Lydia through the familiar rooms, her own spirits lifted. Lydia’s presence filled the hollowness left by their months apart. No one understood her so absolutely as her dearest friend. With Lydia, she needn’t pretend to be anything but her truest self.

This Yule season promised much joy indeed.

Eleanor linked her arm through Lydia’s as they strolled together down the gallery, admiring the garlands of holly and mistletoe festooning the walls.

“You must tell me all about your travels,” Eleanor said. “Your letters simply did not do your adventures justice.”

Lydia’s eyes sparkled. “Oh Eleanor, it was magical. I toured the galleries in Paris and saw the ruins in Rome. Such freedom to go where I wished without some man telling me ‘no’.” She gave a little spin, her skirts swirling. “I cannot imagine being tied to a husband and his rules.”

Eleanor nodded, thinking of her own broken engagement the year before. She had loved Reggie, but over time realized they wanted vastly different things.

“You’re so brave, Lydia,” she said wistfully. “I wish I had your courage to live life on my own terms.”

“But you do.” Lydia grasped Eleanor’s hands firmly. “You refused to marry Reggie when you knew he would stifle your spirit. Only you can decide what brings you joy.”

Warmth bloomed in Eleanor’s chest. Dearest Lydia, she always knew precisely what to say. Perhaps Eleanor could find the path to her own happiness.

“Come.” Lydia looped her arm through Eleanor’s once more. “I want to hear all about the local happenings. Any new beaux I should know about?” Her eyes twinkled impishly.

Laughing, Eleanor allowed Lydia to whisk her off, her heart feeling lighter than it had in ages. With her bosom friend by her side, anything seemed possible.

Eleanor’s laughter died down as she considered Lydia’s question about potential suitors. While Lydia embraced her independence, Eleanor still felt the pull of her duty to marry someday. Though she had broken off one engagement, she knew her family expected her to find another match.

“I’m afraid there are no intriguing beaux at present,” she admitted. “Mother keeps presenting me with perfectly suitable gentlemen, but I feel nothing when I’m with them.”

Lydia nodded thoughtfully, her feathered hat bobbing. “You cannot force love, my dear. It must strike like lightning, igniting your very soul.”

Eleanor sighed. “You make it sound so romantic. But I wonder if such a love exists.”

“Of course it does.” Lydia squeezed her hand reassuringly. “You simply haven’t met the right man yet.”

Lowering her voice, she added, “Or perhaps your passions lie elsewhere?” One eyebrow arched suggestively. “Is it a torrid affair you seek?”

Eleanor’s cheeks flushed crimson. “Lydia,” she admonished, glancing around to ensure they were alone. While she loved her friend’s free spirit, such brazen talk shocked her sensibilities.

Lydia laughed merrily. “Come now, you know I jest.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

Flustered, Eleanor stammered, “Only you would speak of such things.”

“Someone must,” Lydia said. “But enough teasing. I want you to make me a promise.”

She stopped and turned to face Eleanor, her expression earnest. “Promise me you won’t close your heart off to love. Be open to all possibilities. Confound society’s rules and follow your passions. Only then will you find true happiness.”

Eleanor held her friend’s intense gaze. Perhaps Lydia was right. If Eleanor wanted something extraordinary, she would need to take extraordinary chances.

“I promise,” she vowed solemnly.

Lydia beamed. “That’s my brave girl.”

Lydia tapped her fan against Eleanor’s arm as they made their way downstairs, the sounds of preparation growing louder. Servants bustled to and fro, arms laden with trays of food and drink to sustain the guests throughout the evening’s merriment.

As they reached the great hall, Eleanor took in the splendor surrounding them. The vaulted ceilings fairly dripped with garlands of fragrant pine boughs and bright-colored ribbons. Beeswax candles glowed from intricate candelabras and illuminated the hall with their flickering light.

“There you are, my lady. The musicians have arrived.” A young maid said as Eleanor and Lydia approached.

“Very well. Show them to the ballroom and I will be along in a moment,” Eleanor said, then turned to Lydia. “Please excuse me for a short while.”

“Of course,” Lydia said, her smile lighting her entire face. “I will seek out Lady Winthrop, as I have not greeted her yet. Do not fret over me. You know I am perfectly happy left to my own devices.”

“I do believe that is when you are the happiest, my dearest friend,” Eleanor said.

“Touché.” Lydia laughed as she propelled herself down the hall.

After seeing the musicians settled, Eleanor went in search of Lydia and Mother. Upon entering the parlor, she spotted her mother deep in conversation with Lydia, who was clearly charming the elder woman with her usual vivacious manner.

As she drew near, Eleanor overheard Lydia regaling Mother with tales of her travels through the continent, including a narrow escape from an Italian count intent on stealing her virtue.

“My dear, you are utterly incorrigible,” Mother scolded, though her eyes twinkled with amusement.

“She’s always been thus, even as a girl at finishing school,” Eleanor interjected fondly, embracing her mother.

Turning to Lydia, Mother took her hands warmly. “We are honored to have you here. Do take care not to corrupt my daughter overmuch with your scandalous notions.”

Lydia laughed. “I shall do my best. Now, I simply must sample these delightful cakes Beatrice has prepared.” With a saucy wink, she twirled away toward the banquet table.

Mother shook her head, smiling. “That one is a force of nature. I feel for her poor mother, I do. But if the Duke and Duchesse approve and I see they do, then who am I to judge?”

Eleanor squeezed her mother’s hand. “She means no harm and has been an excellent friend to me all these years.”

“Indeed,” Mother said, her eyes reflecting warmth.

As the afternoon wore on, Eleanor felt increasingly drained by the final preparations for the ball. Seeking respite, she slipped out onto the terrace overlooking the frozen gardens. The cold air was bracing, chasing away the tiredness that had settled over her. Eleanor inhaled deeply, gazing up at the cloud laden sky.

“Escaping your duties?”

Eleanor turned to see Lydia stepping out to join her, two glasses of wassail in hand. She gratefully accepted one.

“It has been a long day, and the ball is yet to come,” Eleanor admitted. “But this is nice. Peaceful. I just need a few minutes to relax.”

Lydia nodded, leaning on the balustrade beside her. “The quiet is a welcome change. As much as I enjoy a lively time, I shan’t mind returning home to simpler pleasures.”

Eleanor studied her friend’s serene profile. “Do you ever wish for more? A home of your own, a family?”

“On occasion,” Lydia acknowledged. “But no suitor has tempted me to relinquish my independence.” She gave Eleanor a playful nudge. “What about you? Are there truly no prospects stirring your heart? I noticed a slight gleam in your eye when I asked earlier.”

Warmth rushed to Eleanor’s cheeks at the thought of Lord Rockingham. “No one of note. I cannot imagine entrusting my heart to another so soon after, Reggie.”

“It has been a year.” Lydia looped her arm through Eleanor’s. “The right man for you is out there, I’m certain of it. But there’s no need to rush into marriage. Allow yourself all the time you need. We ladies have more options now than merely becoming some man’s broodmare.”

Eleanor laughed softly. “How is it you always know precisely what I need to hear?”

“That’s what bosom friends are for,” Lydia replied, resting her head on Eleanor’s shoulder. “Now let us dress for the ball. It would not do for your prince charming to arrive only to find you in your day gown.”

“Indeed, not,” Eleanor said, turning toward the door. Her cheeks warmed at the memory of Alexander, Lord Rockingham, and her green gown. “That would not do at all.”

CHAPTER SIX

The carriage clattered to a halt in the courtyard, its occupants peering eagerly through the window. As soon as the door swung open, Sebastian Wentworth, second son of Lord Southfield, leapt out, his dark green eyes bright.

“Alexander, you rogue,” he exclaimed, striding forward to embrace his old friend. Though they hadn’t seen each other in months, their bond was as strong as ever.

Alexander grinned, gripping Seb’s shoulders affectionately. “It’s good to see you, my friend. I’m delighted you could make it for the holidays.”

Seb’s eyes twinkled. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away. Besides,” he added, “I know Marion has been eager to see your new estate.”

At that moment, Lady Marion Wentworth, daughter of the Duke of Create, stepped gracefully from the carriage. Her petite figure and gentle smile embodied warmth and light. Taking Alexander’s offered hand, she said, “Lord Rockingham, how wonderful to be here. You simply must give me a full tour.”

“It would be my pleasure, Lady Marion.”

As the trio moved inside, chatting amiably, Alexander felt a swell of gratitude. After years of scandal and heartache, he finally had a place to call home and friends to share it with. The future looked bright, indeed.

Alexander led his friends into the grand foyer, the dark wood paneling and crystal chandelier speaking of refined taste. As a footman appeared to take their coats, Seb whistled appreciatively.

“Quite the bachelor pad you’ve got here. The ladies of the *ton* will be swooning once they get a look.”

Alexander chuckled. “Let’s hope they find the library more impressive than the wine cellar.” He knew Seb was gently needling him about his rakish past.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Marion chimed in playfully. “Some ladies enjoy a good vintage.”

The men laughed. Alexander was struck by how comfortable he felt, without pretense, in their company.

As they settled in the drawing room, Seb’s expression grew thoughtful. “In all seriousness old friend, I’m happy to see you settling down. This place suits you.” His tone was earnest.

Alexander met his friend’s gaze. “Thank you Seb. That means a great deal.”

Seb cared for his well-being, he realized. After years adrift, the unconditional support of true friends was like an anchor. For the first time, he allowed himself to hope for a future filled with meaning, and perhaps even love.

Alexander smiled wryly. “I know my reputation precedes me. But I hope to leave the debaucheries of the past behind.”

Seb nodded. “The *ton* may gossip, but I’ve always known there was more to you than the tales implied. I have seen it with my own eyes.” He leaned forward. “You’re a good man, Alexander. This is your chance for a fresh start. It pleases me to see you embracing it.”

Alexander felt a swell of gratitude for his friend’s faith in him. After a moment, he said quietly, “I won’t pretend it will be easy. Old habits and all that.” He gazed into the fire, watching the flames dance. “But I am ready for something real. Something that matters.”

Seb clasped his shoulder. “You’ll find it. I know you will.”

Alexander met his earnest gaze. In Seb’s settled domestic life, he glimpsed the possibility of his own redemption. His friend had overcome his own rakish past to fall in love with Marion and forge a respectable life. Perhaps Alexander could too.

The sound of Marion’s laughter drew them from their reverie. Alexander smiled, his heart lifting.

Marion breezed into the parlor, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Oh, I can hardly wait for the ball.” She clasped her hands, brown eyes dancing. “It will be the event of the season.”

Alexander smiled indulgently. “I’m pleased you think so, Lady Marion. I want my first Christmas here to be memorable.”

“I’ve no doubt of that.” Marion touched his arm playfully. “And so it shall be. Why, half the ladies in the county are swooning over the mysterious Marquess Rockingham. You’re all the gossip in the village from what we could tell during our brief respite there.”

“Am I now?” Alexander laughed. “Well, I hope the gossips won’t be disappointed.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it.” Marion winked and squeezed her husband’s hand. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

Seb drew his petite wife onto his lap. “Quite right, my love. Alexander aims to impress, and impress he shall.” He nuzzled Marion’s neck, eliciting a giggle.

Alexander regarded the couple wistfully. Seb had once been as reckless and wild as Alexander. Now he was devoted to Marion, his days of carousing far behind him. They shared a profound connection Alexander yearned for.

Perhaps this Christmas, amid music and magic, he would find a lady to spark that kind of passion in him. The sort of lady he would wish to marry. A lady to share moonlit sleigh rides, steal kisses by the fire, and warm his bed on snowy nights. His heart quickened at the thought. Lady Eleanor came to mind and warmth spread through him.

“Alexander?” Marion was watching him closely, a knowing look in her eyes. “You seem deep in thought.”

Alexander collected himself, offering a rakish grin. “Just anticipating the ball, my lady. And all the festive delights it

promises. I have been told the Winthrop's host a Christmas ball every year, and it is always the highlight of the season."

Marion laughed. "Indeed. It will be a night to remember." She rested her head contentedly on Seb's shoulder.

Alexander gazed out the window. Somewhere out there, his future awaited. He need only shake off the mantle of unrepentant rogue and embrace a staid and true course to find it. And devil take it he would. He was ready to be domesticated and determined to do right by the people under his care as the new Marquess Rockingham.

Seb lounged in an armchair before the crackling fire, Marion nestled cozily in his lap. He smiled at Alexander as Marion stood.

"Come, Alex. Join me for a drink while Marion goes to prepare herself for the ball." He gestured to the decanter of brandy on the table beside him. "These ladies take three times as long as we men do."

Alexander poured two glasses and handed one to Seb before settling into the opposite chair.

"It's good to see you so happy, old friend," Alexander said, raising his glass. "To your continued joy."

"And yours," Seb replied, tapping their glasses together. "Speaking of such, any prospects catch your eye? I know a few ladies who would relish a dance with the dashing Marquess Rockingham."

Alexander chuckled ruefully. "My reputation precedes me, although not always favorably. Any young lady with sense

should steer clear.” He chuckled, though he was only half-jesting, for he knew there was more than a bit of truth in his statement.

Seb shook his head. “The past is done. This is a chance to show them the man you are now—honorable, steadfast, and true. Remain your course and you will win them all over before Twelfth Night.”

“You have too much faith in me,” Alexander sighed.

“With good reason.” Seb leaned forward intently. “That wild youth is gone. You’ve changed, though you’ve yet to see it. Any lady would be fortunate to win your heart.”

Alexander stared pensively into the fire. “I hardly know my own heart. How am I to give it to someone else?”

“You will,” Seb said confidently. “When the right woman comes along, you’ll feel it here.” He thumped his chest. “And you’ll do no giving, for she will take it without your consent. It is the way of love.”

Alexander met his friend’s earnest gaze. “Thank you, old friend,” he said quietly. “I don’t know what the future holds, but your faith means the world.”

Seb clasped Alexander’s shoulder warmly. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Now come, we must dress for the festivities.”

“Indeed,” Alexander said, striding across the parlor with Seb beside him.

A short hour later, heart swelling with hope, Alexander followed Seb and Marion out into the moonlit night, ready to greet whatever lay ahead.

Marion could barely contain her excitement as the carriage rumbled down the snow-lined lane toward the Winthrop estate. She fidgeted with the silk roses adorning her gown, anticipation bubbling within her.

“Do sit still, my dear,” Seb teased gently. “You’ll muss your lovely dress before we’ve even arrived.”

“I can’t help it,” Marion exclaimed. “I’ve been waiting what seems like forever for the Christmas Ball. The decorations, the music, the dancing—it’s simply magical.”

She sighed dreamily, then her eyes sparked with mischief. “And I know you’re excited too, Sebastian, though you play it cool.”

Seb chuckled. “Guilty as charged. Even we staid married folk need a bit of holiday cheer.” He winked at Alexander. “It’s good for the constitution, isn’t that right?”

“Indubitably,” Alexander agreed with mock solemnity. Inside, he felt a flutter of nerves. Was he truly ready to relinquish the lifestyle he’d lived for so long? Could he truly reform?

As the carriage rolled up the drive of the Winthrop estate, gasps of delight sounded from its occupants. The grand home was festooned with evergreen garlands, candles flickering in each window. Even the trees sparkled. The air itself seemed to shimmer with a mix of snowflakes and fairy lights.

“It’s breathtaking,” Marion whispered. She turned to Alexander, eyes shining. “Just wait until you see the ballroom. I’ll wager It’s simply magnificent.”

Alexander gazed out at the spectacle, hope and anticipation welling within. “I have no doubt,” he murmured. Though he’d wager, it would be Lady Eleanor in the green velvet dress he’d purchased that would truly steal his breath. If she dared to wear it.

At last, the carriage halted before a grand, candle-brightened entrance. Livery-clad footmen hurried forth to hand down the occupants. Taking a deep breath, Alexander stepped down and turned to offer Marion his hand.

Seb beamed at his companions, then gestured toward the glowing doorway.

“Shall we?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The grand ballroom at Winthrop House glowed with the warm light of a hundred candles. Garlands of holly and mistletoe draped the walls, filling the air with the crisp scent of evergreen. Violins and cellos played a lively country dance as ladies in elegant gowns of silk and satin and gentlemen in tailored coats whirled across the polished parquet floor.

Lady Eleanor glided into the ballroom, her eyes wide as she took in the magical atmosphere. She had spent weeks under her mother's guidance to prepare the ball, overseeing every detail, but now, seeing it all come together, it exceeded her wildest expectations.

As she moved further into the room, the strains of a waltz filled the air. Couples came together, hand in hand, eyes only for each other. Eleanor felt a pang in her heart, remembering the last time she had danced in this room, wearing a ring on her finger that had turned out to be false.

"My lady Eleanor," came a deep voice beside her. She turned to see Mr. Lucas Trumbley, a local landowner. His broad shoulders strained against his tailored black coat.

“Mr. Trumbley,” she replied with a smile. “You look dashing this evening.”

He chuckled. “I can hardly take credit. This is all Miss Stanton’s handiwork.” He gestured to his outfit. “She manages to turn even a brute like me into a gentleman.”

Eleanor’s eyes sparkled with humor. “I daresay she’s worked magic here tonight.” As the music swelled, she asked, “Might I have the pleasure of the next dance?”

Lucas bowed gracefully and took her hand. As they stepped onto the floor, Eleanor was glad for his sturdy frame and confident lead. She felt safe in his arms.

As the dance ended, they stood, catching their breath. Around them, the festivities continued in a whirl of music and laughter.

“You seem happy tonight,” Lucas said, studying her face.

Eleanor’s smile faltered. “I am trying to be.”

He gave her hand a paternal pat. “You’ve been through a great deal. But this...” He gestured around them. “You should be proud.”

Eleanor blinked back sudden tears. At that moment, the strings swelled into another waltz and Lucas swept her back onto the floor, sparing her the need for a reply. She let the music wash over her as he led her in confident circles around the room, the candles and Christmas garlands blurring together in a beautiful kaleidoscope. For the first time in months, her heart felt light.

Eleanor sighed as the final notes faded away. Lucas bowed and kissed her hand before releasing her.

“Thank you for the dance, my lady. It was a pleasure, as always.”

Eleanor smiled. “The pleasure was mine, Mr. Trumbley.”

As he retreated into the crowd, Eleanor took a moment to catch her breath and smooth her gown. She had chosen the gown Lord Rockingham bought for her, an elegant emerald green velvet, with gold embroidery accentuating her waist and décolletage. Around her neck glittered a diamond pendant, and matching earbobs adorned her earlobes. Her maid had arranged her hair in an intricate style, with curls cascading over her bare shoulders. She knew she looked her best, yet her stomach fluttered with nerves.

Tonight was her official reentry into society after close to a year of mourning her broken engagement. She desperately hoped the whispers about her reputation had faded. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her chin and turned to the room at large.

As she looked out over the crush of friends and neighbors, her breath caught. There he was. Alexander, Lord Rockingham, stood at the edge of the dance floor, his piercing blue eyes fixed on her in undisguised admiration.

Eleanor met his gaze boldly as she glided across the room. She felt like a queen in her emerald gown, a goddess returning to claim her kingdom. This night was hers, and she meant to enjoy it.

Alexander approached and bowed deeply. “Lady Eleanor. You look ravishing.” His voice was a caress.

Eleanor curtsied, maintaining his heated gaze. “Lord Rockingham. How kind of you to notice.”

He took her hand and brushed his lips lightly over her knuckles. “I could notice nothing else.”

Around them, the music started again. Couples took their places on the dance floor. But Eleanor was oblivious, trapped in the spell of Alexander’s eyes.

Her heart fluttered as Alexander led her to the dance floor. She was acutely aware of the envious glances from other ladies, all wishing they could be in her place. But Alexander only had eyes for her.

As he pulled her into the steps of the dance, his hand on her waist seared her even through the layers of her gown. She gazed up at him, struck again by his masculine beauty—the chiseled jawline, the waves of golden hair, the piercing blue eyes that seemed to see into her soul.

“You look exquisite tonight,” he murmured, his voice a low caress. “This gown was made for you.”

A blush stained Eleanor’s cheeks. “Thank you. You have excellent taste, my lord.”

“Please, call me Alexander.” His thumb traced circles on her hip. “I feel we know each other well enough for that.”

“Alexander,” she repeated, savoring the intimacy. Around them, the candlelit ballroom glowed with magic, the strains of the orchestra enveloping them.

Eleanor knew she should pull back, keep her wits about her. But Alexander's presence intoxicated her, his scent the heat of his hand on her body. For the first time in ages, she felt beautiful, desired.

As the dance ended, Alexander lingered, his fingers trailing down her arm. "Come, there is mistletoe in the east gallery I would show you."

Heart racing, Eleanor let him lead her from the ballroom. She could not resist his temptation—nor did she want to.

Eleanor's pulse quickened as Alexander led her down the empty hallway, away from the gaiety of the ballroom. The music and chatter faded into the background, replaced by the pounding of her heart.

He paused beneath an archway, where a sprig of mistletoe hung overhead. Turning to her, he lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a feather-light kiss to her knuckles while his eyes smoldered.

"You take my breath away," he murmured. "From the moment I first saw you, I've been bewitched."

Eleanor's cheeks flushed crimson. "Surely you say that to all the ladies, my lord."

"Only you," he insisted, moving closer. Eleanor was exquisitely aware of his hard, muscular body nearly pressing against her own. "No woman has ever captured my attention as you do."

His fingers trailed up her arm, leaving tendrils of fire in their wake. Eleanor trembled, torn between propriety and

desire. She knew she should flee, yet her feet seemed rooted to the floor.

Alexander's hand cupped her cheek, tilting her face up to his. "Let me kiss you," he whispered.

Unable to form a reply, Eleanor gave the slightest nod. Alexander's mouth descended on hers in a kiss that seared her to the core. She melted against him, her hands resting on the solid strength of his chest as his arms enveloped her.

He kissed her deeply, hungrily, as though he could not get enough of her sweetness. Eleanor clung to him, swept away by sensations unlike any she had ever known.

Finally, he raised his head, eyes dark with passion. "I want to kiss you again. I wish to explore the passions between us," he implored recklessly. "Stay with me."

Eleanor's mind reeled. To steal away much longer with him would be ruinous, yet the temptation was nigh irresistible.

"I cannot simply remain in the darkness with you, my lord," she managed.

Alexander stroked her cheek. "My sweet Eleanor, do you not feel what burns between us? Let me show you the heights of pleasure we could reach together."

His bold words made her blush, even as they stirred longings she scarce understood. Still, she gathered her resolve.

"While I confess you have awakened feelings in me I have never known, I must protect my reputation," she insisted gently. "There is a ballroom full of guests who will notice our absence if they have not already."

Alexander sighed, then nodded. “You are right, of course. Forgive my rash suggestion. It is only that you intoxicate me so. I have no wish to play the rogue with you.” He lifted her hand to his lips in a courtly gesture. “I can be patient. Say you will allow me to call on you, and we shall further explore what lies between us.”

Eleanor’s pulse quickened, but she inclined her head. “Yes, my lord. I should like that very much.”

His smile was radiant. Offering his arm, he escorted her from the shadows. As they stepped back into the light of the ballroom, Eleanor felt as though she floated on air. Though proper society surrounded them, the memory of his kiss still tingled on her lips.

Eleanor glanced around the opulent ballroom, her cheeks still flushed from her passionate encounter with Lord Rockingham. As they rejoined the glittering party, she noticed the curious glances and whispers trailing in their wake.

“Did you see them emerge from the shadows?” tittered Lady Caroline to her friend. “How brazen, slipping away together like that.”

Lady Margaret nodded sagely, envy evident in her pinched expression. “Mark my words, that rake will ruin her. We all know his reputation.”

“She is already tarnished after breaking her engagement last year. I daresay her reputation cannot withstand another scandal,” Lady Caroline added.

Eleanor held her head high, ignoring the gossiping hens. She knew full well the impropriety of her stolen moments with Lord Rockingham, but she did not care. She felt alive.

As they began a second dance, Alexander drew her close, his hand firm on the small of her back.

“Let them whisper all they want,” he murmured. “I see only you.”

His words made her shiver with delight. She knew she was playing with fire, but the promise of passion overwhelmed her reservations.

As the dance ended, Eleanor curtsied deeply, struggling to rein in her emotions. Desire warred with propriety, her heart pulling her toward Alexander even as her mind urged caution. She longed to throw herself into his arms again, to feel his lips on hers, his hands roaming her body...

But no, she chided herself. She must proceed with care, guard her reputation, and deny the tempting rogue until she was certain of his intentions.

Tomorrow, she thought, tomorrow she would discover if he was worthy of her trust. For now, she must be patient and resist the consuming fire between them.

Drawing a deep breath, Eleanor glided away, Alexander’s heated gaze burning into her back.

Eleanor made her way through the glittering ballroom, nodding politely to acquaintances but not stopping to chat. She needed some air to clear her head.

As she neared the French doors leading to the terrace, a familiar voice called out.

“There you are, darling. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Eleanor turned to see Lydia swooping toward her in a froth of lace and silk. Trust Lydia to be the most fashionable woman in the room.

“Lydia, hello,” Eleanor said warmly, embracing her friend. “Are you enjoying the ball?”

“Immensely. Though not as much as you, from the looks of it.” Lydia gave her a knowing smile. “That Lord Rockingham is quite the dashing rogue. And the way he was looking at you...”

Eleanor blushed. “Hush, he’ll hear you.”

“Oh let him,” Lydia laughed. “Perhaps it will spur him into action. I swear, if a man looked at me like that, I would drag him to the nearest broom closet and have my way with him.”

“Lydia,” Eleanor gasped, then dissolved into giggles.

“What? I’m only speaking the truth,” Lydia said with a wink. “Now come along. I’m parched for some punch and you’re going to tell me everything about this lord of yours.”

Arm in arm, the two friends made their way across the ballroom. Eleanor smiled to herself, grateful for Lydia’s unique perspective. Perhaps she was right, and it was time Eleanor threw caution to the wind.

Eleanor settled into a plush chair in the drawing room, grateful for a moment of respite from the crowded ballroom. Lydia perched on the settee across from her, two crystal glasses of punch in hand.

“Here,” she said, passing a glass to Eleanor. “This will help restore your energy after all that dancing.”

Eleanor accepted it with a smile. “Thank you. I confess, I’m quite worn out.”

“Understandably so, after the way Lord Rockingham whisked you around the dance floor,” Lydia said, eyes glinting mischievously. “Now tell me, how ever did you meet him?”

Eleanor’s thoughts drifted back to that chance encounter in the village square. “It was just happenstance,” she said. “Our paths crossed during a walk.”

Lydia laughed. “How very romantic. Though I can’t say I’m surprised. With your beauty, men are probably falling at your feet daily.”

“Oh hush,” Eleanor chided, though she smiled at the compliment.

“I speak only the truth,” Lydia insisted. “That man is utterly smitten. I saw it in the way he looked at you, like you were the only woman in the world.”

Warmth bloomed in Eleanor’s chest at the memory. The way Alexander’s piercing blue eyes had bored into hers, so intense it made her shiver.

“He is rather dashing,” she admitted softly. “And when we danced, it felt like...like magic.”

“Then you must see him again,” Lydia declared.

Eleanor bit her lip. “I don’t know if that’s wise. What if he breaks my heart like Reggie did?”

Lydia leaned forward, expression serious. “You cannot let one man’s folly stop you from finding love again.”

Perhaps Lydia was right. Eleanor had built walls around her heart, but Alexander had begun to tear them down with his charm and passion. It was time to take a leap of faith.

“Very well,” she conceded. “I shall give him a chance.”

Lydia beamed. “Excellent. Lord Rockingham will be the envy of every man in England once he wins your heart.”

Eleanor flushed at the thought.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mrs. Prudence Simmons peered through the hedgerow, her beady eyes alight with mischief. She had spotted Lady Eleanor and Lord Rockingham strolling along the snow-blanketed path, their heads bent in hushed conversation.

“Well, well, what have we here?” she murmured, craning her neck to catch their words. This was a juicy opportunity she could not resist. As the self-appointed authority on gossip and scandal in the village, it was her duty to uncover any improper dalliances.

Eleanor glanced over her shoulder before speaking in a low voice. “Alexander, I must confess, since your arrival I feel as though my heart has wings.”

A smile played on Alexander’s lips. “My darling Eleanor, I have never met another who sets my soul aflame as you do. Your beauty haunts my dreams.” He reached out and caressed her cheek tenderly.

Prudence stifled a gasp, her mind racing. The new Marquess and Lady Eleanor? This was scandalous indeed! She could already imagine the uproar such news would cause, especially given Lady Eleanor’s failed betrothal last year. Her

next quilting circle would be buzzing with shocked titters and outraged whispers.

As Prudence's thoughts spun with the delicious possibilities, Eleanor and Alexander continued their stroll, oblivious to her watchful gaze and keen ear. They ambled toward a frozen fountain, the picture of new love.

Prudence rubbed her hands together gleefully. This morsel of gossip was too tantalizing not to share. She would make sure the whole village knew of the brazen pair's tryst by nightfall. This was going to be her juiciest story yet.

Prudence could barely contain her excitement as she hurried from her hiding spot. She had struck gossip gold. This scandal would set tongues wagging for months. The rogue and the jade. To think of it.

She made her way into the village square, peering around eagerly for familiar faces. Spotting her friend Beatrice exiting the bakery, Prudence scurried over.

"Beatrice, you'll never believe what I've just witnessed," she exclaimed, voice lowered conspiratorially.

Beatrice blinked in surprise. "Goodness Prudence, what is it?"

"I saw the new Marquess Rockingham, in a rather compromising position with Lady Eleanore Winthrop," Prudence revealed.

Beatrice's eyes widened. "No! Surely not. He has only just arrived in the village."

Prudence nodded smugly. “Be that as it may, they were quite familiar with one another. Whispering sweet nothings and embracing in the park. It’s a scandal for certain.”

“Oh my word,” Beatrice gasped, hand flying to her mouth. “We mustn’t spread idle gossip, Prudence.”

“It’s no idle gossip. I saw it with my own eyes,” Prudence insisted. “Mark my words, this will be the talk of the county by nightfall.”

Prudence scurried off, leaving Beatrice shaking her head in dismay. She made her way around the village, stopping to whisper in ears and pass on her shocking tale. Everywhere she went, she left behind exclamations of disbelief and tutting disapproval.

By late afternoon, Eleanor and Alexander’s supposed tryst was on the lips of every villager. As Prudence retired home, she rubbed her hands together in satisfaction. Her work was done, the rumors were flying free. This was going to cause quite the stir.

Eleanor hummed to herself as she arranged a bouquet of winter blooms, oblivious to the chaos unfolding in the village below. The conversation with Alexander had lifted her spirits, a welcome distraction from her doldrums.

She inhaled the scent of pine and cinnamon that lingered on her gloves from their walk through the park. Alexander had shown such kindness and understanding, qualities sorely lacking in her former betrothed.

A knock at the door drew Eleanor from her thoughts.

“Come in,” she called.

Mrs. Hargrove entered, wringing her hands. “Begging your pardon, my lady, but I’m afraid there is some unpleasant talk circulating in the village.”

Eleanor’s brow furrowed. “Whatever do you mean?”

“It seems Mrs. Simmons spied you and the Marquess in the park this morning. She is spreading vicious rumors implying... impropriety between you both.”

“What? That is outrageous,” Eleanor exclaimed, rising swiftly. She paced in agitation as Mrs. Hargrove recounted the vile gossip sweeping through the village. “Has Mother been told?”

“No, my lady. Though I fear it is only a matter of time before the gossip reaches her.”

This could ruin her. Eleanor’s mind raced, thinking of Alexander. He was working so hard to escape his sordid past and start anew. Would they condemn him without allowing him to defend himself?

She steeled her resolve. This malicious rumor would not prevail. Eleanor summoned her courage and called for the carriage to be brought round. She had to speak with Alexander. Together, they would form a plan to counter these lies. She only prayed the damage was not already irreversible.

Alexander paced the drawing room, raking a hand through his blond waves. How could this have happened? He and Lady Eleanor had merely enjoyed a pleasant stroll through the park, conversing lightly about literature and the ball. There had been

nothing even remotely scandalous in their encounter. Yet, according to his valet, the entire village now buzzed with sordid speculation about their relationship.

He sank into an armchair and dropped his head into his hands. This could ruin everything. He had come to Cumbria for a fresh start, hoping to leave his rakish reputation behind. But unsubstantiated gossip could sully his name further and destroy any chance of acceptance and redemption.

Even worse, Lady Eleanor's reputation would be tarnished through no fault of her own. Anger simmered in his chest at the thought. That vibrant, intelligent woman did not deserve to have her character impugned.

The creak of the door made him glance up. Lady Eleanor swept past his butler with a maid on her heels, her emerald eyes flashing. Despite her obvious fury, she still took his breath away, every inch the statuesque beauty.

“Lady Eleanor,” he said, rising. “I take it you have heard —”

“Every vicious utterance, yes,” she interrupted. She paced, skirts swishing. “She seems bent on portraying us as...as...”

“Illicit lovers?” Alexander supplied grimly.

A pretty blush stained Lady Eleanor's cheeks. “Indeed. When nothing could be further from the truth.”

Alexander moved closer, yearning to caress her soft skin. But he stayed his hand.

“We must stop these rumors before they destroy us both,” he said.

She lifted her chin. “I will not allow our reputations to be shredded by petty gossip. We will fight this.”

Hope flickered in Alexander’s chest. With Lady Eleanor by his side, he could withstand any slanderous storm. Together, they would find a way through this.

“No one who knows your true character will believe such lies,” he assured her.

She gifted him with a radiant smile that made his heart skip. “We will emerge from this with heads held high.”

He smiled back, admiring her strength and spirit. Come what may, he would defend this woman and stand proudly at her side.

Eleanor’s eyes flashed with determination as she swept from the room, skirts swirling behind her. Alexander watched her go, mesmerized by her beauty and poise, even in distress.

Moments later, he followed, jaw set with resolve. Side by side, they marched to confront the architect of their troubles—the notorious gossip, Mrs. Prudence Simmons.

They found her in her parlor, enjoying tea and scones without a care. At their entrance, she blinked in surprise.

“Lady Eleanor. Lord Rockingham. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Eleanor’s voice was ice. “You know very well why we are here.”

Mrs. Simmons’s eyes gleamed. “The scandalous rumors? But my dear, I merely repeated what I overheard.”

“You deliberately misconstrued an innocent conversation,” Alexander said through gritted teeth. “Now you will retract your lies at once.”

Mrs. Simmons lifted her chin. “I never lie, Lord Alexander. I am not responsible for any...misunderstandings.”

Eleanor slammed a hand on the table, rattling the tea set. “Vicious gossip. That is all you peddle. Retract your words, or you will regret it.”

Mrs. Simmons merely smirked, secure in her position. “I think not. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m expecting company.”

She sipped her tea calmly as Eleanor and Alexander stared daggers. Realizing she would not yield, they had no choice but to take their leave.

Once outside, Eleanor grasped Alexander’s arm. “She is impossible. But we will clear our names, I swear it.”

He covered her hand with his own. “Together, my lady, we are unstoppable.”

Arm in arm, they departed with heads held high. The battle was not over yet.

Once back at Winthrop House, Eleanor paced the length of the drawing room, her skirts swishing in agitation.

“That horrid woman. I should thrash her with my bare hands.”

Alexander reclined on the settee, appearing calm, though inside he seethed at the injustice.

“Violence will only make matters worse. We must be strategic in repairing the damage she has wrought.”

At that moment, the door burst open and Lydia swept in, face flushed.

“My darling Eleanor. I came as soon as I heard the dreadful rumors.”

She grasped her friend’s hands, her expression earnest. “Tell me everything, so I may help clear your good name.”

Relief washed over Eleanor at the sight of her dearest friend. She relayed the entire tale with Alexander interjecting details. Lydia listened intently, her brows drawing together in concern.

“This is outrageous. That harpy has gone too far this time,” Lydia declared when they finished. She began pacing just as Eleanor had done earlier.

“We must gather irrefutable proof of your innocence. Witnesses to your true activities in the park.” Her eyes lit up. “The blacksmith. He saw you two walking together in the village. His word is unimpeachable.”

Alexander nodded thoughtfully. “An excellent notion. I will seek the good man out at once and obtain his statement.”

He made to leave, but Lydia stopped him with a touch to his arm. “I know some village women who were near the gardens, too. I will question them myself.” She shot Eleanor a wink. “Never underestimate the power of feminine charm.”

“I will come with you,” Eleanor said.

Eleanor felt a spark of hope. With her dearest friend by her side, they would root out the truth. Arm in arm, the two women headed out, spirits lifted. The tide was turning.

Eleanor and Lydia hurried through the village, stopping to speak with anyone who may have witnessed Eleanor and Alexander's innocent activities that day. Though many had heard Mrs. Prudence Simmons' vicious rumors, none could corroborate her claims.

Lydia charmed and cajoled statement after statement from villagers clearing Eleanor's name. The seamstress confirmed Eleanor's fitting that morning. The baker verified her purchase of treats for the children. The haberdasher recounted, seeing her walking with her maid.

By the time they returned to the manor, Eleanor's spirits had lifted considerably. Alexander, along with Lord and Lady Wentworth, awaited them, a triumphant grin on his face.

"The blacksmith was adamant in his account of our morning walk," he announced. "His word carries much weight."

"As does the testimony of half the village," Lydia added with a satisfied smile.

Eleanor sighed in relief. "Surely this mountain of evidence will force Mrs. Simmons to retract her lies."

Alexander's expression hardened. "I intend to make certain of it."

Donning his greatcoat, he strode from the manor, the two ladies fast on his heels. Eleanor's stomach fluttered with

nerves, but she held her head high.

The walk to Mrs. Simmons' cottage was charged with purpose. Alexander pounded on the door. A moment later, Mrs. Simmons appeared, blinking in surprise at the small crowd on her doorstep.

“What is the meaning of this?” she blustered.

“The meaning, madam, is that your false rumors end today.” Alexander's voice rang with authority.

Mrs. Simmons paled slightly but lifted her chin. “I've no notion what you mean. Now good day.”

She moved to close the door, but Alexander stopped it with his hand.

“We have compiled undeniable proof of our innocence. You will retract your lies at once.”

“Or suffer the consequences,” Lydia added. “Do be mindful of my station as a duke's beloved daughter. I carry much sway wherever I wonder.” She smiled sweetly, but her eyes held a dangerous glint.

Mrs. Simmons scowled, hesitation flickering in her eyes. The truth was upon her, but her stubborn pride remained.

CHAPTER NINE

Alexander's heart pounded as he approached the grand Winthrop estate. The sprawling manor loomed before him, a formidable edifice of weathered stone and aged oak. He hesitated at the towering front doors, sweat beading his brow despite the winter chill. He could not imagine Lady Winthrop summoned him here for a pleasant tea.

With a fortifying breath, he grasped the ornate bronze knocker and rapped sharply. The sound echoed through the silent halls within. After an agonizing moment, the door creaked open to reveal the butler, and beside him, the stern visage of Lady Winthrop.

"My lord," she intoned coolly.

Alexander swept into a deep bow. "Lady Winthrop. It is a pleasure to see you again."

Her lips pursed into a thin line as she regarded him. "I wish I could say it was a pleasure. You've put me in a difficult position with your continued pursuit of my daughter. Your reputation does not recommend you."

Stung by her blunt disapproval, he straightened. "With all due respect, rumors and gossip do not reflect the reality of a

man's character.”

“Pretty words,” she said crisply. “But Eleanor requires more than pretty words for a husband. She requires honor, fidelity, and steadfastness. Traits you seem to lack, if hearsay is to be believed.”

Alexander met her flinty gaze unflinchingly. “I understand your reservations, my lady. But if you look past the surface, you will find a man worthy of your daughter's hand. I ask only for a chance to prove myself.”

Lady Winthrop pursed her lips, clearly unmoved. The tension between them was palpable, a battle of wills as they stared each other down on the shadowed threshold.

“I have heard enough in the short time you have been in Cumbria. No thanks to you, my daughter's reputation has been questioned. She can ill afford another scandal and I will not sit quietly by as you create one. You are a rogue and a scoundrel. Everyone knows it.”

Alexander could not help but flinch. He had come to Cumbria determined to leave his past behind and forge a better life, and he remained determined to do so. “Mrs. Simmons retracted her gossip. Neither Lady Eleanor nor I did anything wrong. My intentions toward your daughter are honorable.”

“No thanks to you, my lord. If not for your tarnished reputation, the rumors would not have been believed to begin with,” Lady Winthrop said, disdain in her gaze. “Stay away from my daughter.”

Alexander wished to argue further. He wanted to make Lady Winthrop see that he had changed and was worthy of respectability—worthy of Eleanor. But the ice in her gaze told him he would not change her mind with mere words.

He bowed, turned, and left, the door thudding shut in his wake.

Eleanor's breath billowed in white clouds as she crept across the frozen grounds, the crunch of snow beneath her feet deafening in the stillness of the night. Her cloak pulled tight against the chill, she glanced over her shoulder, heart pounding at the thought of being discovered. But the house remained dark, not a candle flickering in any window.

She was utterly alone, the silence broken only by the frantic hammering of her pulse in her ears. Up ahead, through the skeletal fingers of bare trees, she could see the warm glow of Alexander's manor beckoning her like a lighthouse through the darkness. She quickened her pace, nearly stumbling in her haste. She had to see him, had to make him understand that no matter what her mother said, she would find a way for them to be together.

The wind picked up, biting at her cheeks, but she trudged onward, keeping her eyes fixed on the light ahead. She imagined Alexander waiting for her, his muscular arms ready to envelop her in their warmth. The thought sent a spark of longing through her that kept the cold at bay.

At last, she reached the perimeter wall of his estate. With trembling fingers, she unlatched the side gate and stole inside, moving through the shadows toward the front entrance. This

was madness, she knew, risking her mother's wrath and ruination. But she didn't care. Her heart belonged to Alexander. She raised her hand and knocked, the sound reverberating through the surrounding space.

Eleanor held her breath, listening intently for any sign of movement within. The seconds stretched on endlessly, the only sound the rapid thrum of her pulse in her ears. Doubt crept in. What if he wasn't home? What if this had all been a mistake?

Just as despair threatened to overwhelm her, the door creaked open. Alexander stood framed in the entryway, surprise and elation mingling on his handsome face.

"Eleanor," he breathed, saying her name like a prayer. Before she could respond, he pulled her swiftly inside, pushing the door closed behind them.

His mouth found hers in a searing kiss that stole her breath away. All the fear and uncertainty melted, replaced only by the glorious sensation of his lips claiming hers with a possessive hunger. Her body molded against his, fitting together as though they were two halves of one soul.

When at last the kiss ended, Alexander rested his forehead against hers, his eyes dark with longing. "I feared your mother would keep you from me," he whispered raggedly.

"Never." She twined her arms around his neck. "I love you, Alexander. Only you. Nothing could keep me away."

He made a low sound of desire and kissed her again, backing her against the wall. His hands roamed her body

boldly, possessively, making her ache and tremble with need. She knew then that she would give herself to him, propriety be damned. All that mattered now was being with the man she loved.

Alexander drew back slightly, his breathing ragged. “My love, as much as I want you, I cannot take your virtue until I’ve made this right. Until I have taken you to wife.”

Eleanor sighed, her body burning with unsatisfied desire. “You know my mother will never accept you. She’s determined to see me wed to someone of her choosing.”

“Perhaps not yet, but I aim to change her mind,” Alexander said resolutely. “I will prove myself worthy of you, no matter what it takes.”

He took her hands in his, his blue eyes blazing with intensity. “I swear to you, Eleanor, I will become the man you deserve. I know I have a dark past, a reputation for vice. But since meeting you, I’ve changed. You make me want to be better.”

Tears shone in Eleanor’s eyes. “Oh Alexander, you already are that man. Can’t you see how you’ve changed?”

“Not enough,” he said fiercely. “Not until your mother sees me as more than a scoundrel unfit for her precious daughter.”

Eleanor smiled tremulously. “Then we shall convince her, together.”

Alexander drew her close, kissing the top of her head. “Together,” he echoed. “No matter what trials await us, we will face them as one.”

“Always,” Eleanor said. She rose onto her toes pressing a kiss to his jawline. “If you refuse to steal away with me, I must return before Mother notices my absence and grows angrier.”

Alexander gave a nod. “Hurry home and do not fret. I will show your mother how much I love you. I will gain her favor and when I do, I will marry you.”

A short time later, Eleanor paused outside her mother’s chamber, steadying her breathing before raising a trembling hand to knock.

“Enter,” came the terse reply.

Lady Winthrop sat ramrod straight, her mouth a thin line. Eleanor glided forward, skirts swishing over the oriental rug.

“Mother, I have come to make you understand.”

Lady Winthrop arched one brow. “Oh? Pray tell, what is there to understand about dallying with rakes and scoundrels?”

Eleanor kneeled before her mother, grasping her hands earnestly. “Alexander is so much more than his reputation. He has known hardship but remains kind-hearted. Please, you must give him a chance.”

Lady Winthrop pursed her lips. “Men like him do not change. He will use you, then discard you when it suits him.”

“You’re wrong,” Eleanor implored. “If only you could see us together, hear the sincerity in his voice when he speaks of a future with me.”

Lady Winthrop shook her head. “I’ll not have my only daughter shackled to that blackguard. You know nothing of

men and their deceptions.”

“But I know my own heart,” Eleanor whispered. “I love him, Mother.”

Lady Winthrop’s expression softened slightly. Eleanor pressed on.

“Might you reconsider, if not for me, then for the happiness I could know as Alexander’s wife? I beseech you, give him a chance to prove himself worthy.”

Silence fell. Eleanor held her breath, scarcely daring to hope. At last, Lady Winthrop sighed.

“Very well. I shall call on Lord Rockingham. But,” she added sharply, “if he fails to convince me of his sincerity, you will end this dalliance at once.”

Joy surged within Eleanor. “I told him everything would be alright. Oh thank you, Mother!” She embraced Lady Winthrop, hope and anticipation for her future with Alexander blossoming like spring flowers after the winter’s chill.

CHAPTER TEN

The library was Alexander's refuge. He stood facing the fireplace, arms crossed as he watched the dancing flames. Their warmth did nothing to thaw the chill that had settled in his chest.

The door flew open and Lady Winthrop swept in unannounced, nearly knocking his butler over in her wake. The rustle of her silk gown the only warning before she pierced him with her sharp gaze. "Well, my lord? Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

Alexander met her challenging stare with a neutral expression. "I wasn't aware you required an explanation, Lady Winthrop."

"Oh no, not at all." She clasped her hands before her, lips pursed. "I thought I made my feelings perfectly clear. You are not to go near my daughter again. And clearly you have."

His jaw tightened. The fire crackled loudly in the silence. "With all due respect, Eleanor is old enough to make her own choices."

Lady Winthrop's eyes flashed. "Eleanor is an innocent. She knows nothing of men like you, those who care only for

their own pleasure, no matter the lives they destroy.” She took a step closer, glare unwavering. “I will not allow you to seduce her, as you have so many others.”

Alexander’s composure wavered, shame rising swift and hot. He looked away, fingers digging into his arms. She was right, of course. His past was littered with regrets, hearts left broken in the wake of his careless debauchery. He was utterly unworthy of someone like Eleanor.

Yet now, for the first time in his life, he yearned to be a better man.

Alexander took a deep breath, gathering his resolve as he met Lady Winthrop’s gaze once more. “You’re right about my past. I’ve made terrible mistakes, hurt those I should have cherished.” He paused, shame and regret churning within him. “But Eleanor...” Her name was soft on his lips. “She makes me see the man I could be, the man I want to become. I know I don’t deserve her, not yet, but I intend to spend my life trying if she’ll let me.”

Lady Winthrop searched his face, surprise flickering in her eyes. She opened her mouth to respond, but Alexander pressed on, words spilling urgently from him.

“Let me prove myself to you, to Eleanor. I swear on my honor I will never hurt her, never be anything less than the man she believes I am.” He stepped forward, voice ragged with emotion. “Give me the chance to show you both the man I can become with her love to guide me. Please.”

Silence fell, heavy and profound. The fire crackled, logs shifting. Lady Winthrop stared at him, features unreadable.

For a long moment, neither moved.

Then she inclined her head ever so slightly. “I will consider it.”

Hope bloomed in Alexander’s chest. It wasn’t acceptance, not yet, but it was a start.

Alexander released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. This was more than he could have hoped for.

Before he could respond, the library door opened and Eleanor swept in, skirts swirling around her. Lydia trailed behind, curiosity dancing in her eyes.

“Mother, Alexander, whatever is going on here?” Eleanor asked, glancing between them.

Alexander straightened, heart pounding at the sight of her. “Eleanor, I was just...” He faltered.

Lady Winthrop smoothed her expression. “All is well. Lord Rockingham and I were just having a discussion about the future.”

Understanding dawned on Eleanor’s face. She moved to Alexander’s side, slipping her hand into his. The warmth of her palm against his was infinitely comforting.

“Mother,” she began, “I know you only want what’s best for me. But I love Alexander with all my heart. He makes me so happy, happier than I ever dreamed.”

Alexander squeezed her hand, overcome with love for this extraordinary woman. Her faith in him was humbling.

“I believe he’s a good man,” Eleanor continued softly. “The man I fell in love with. If you would just give him a chance...”

Lydia stepped forward then, linking her arm through Lady Winthrop’s. “Do listen to her. I’ve never seen Eleanor glow like she does with Lord Rockingham.” She shot Alexander an encouraging smile. “They are quite perfect together.”

Lady Winthrop looked between the three of them, then sighed. “You are as stubborn as your father, Eleanor.” But there was a hint of fondness in her tone.

She pinned Alexander with her sharp gaze once more. “Do not make a liar of me, Lord Rockingham. Prove you are worthy of her.”

Joy surged within Alexander, and he bowed his head. “You have my word, Lady Winthrop. You will not regret this.”

“I pray I do not. You may approach Lord Winthrop with my blessing.” She turned to Lydia, and said, “Let us give them a moment of privacy.”

Lydia led her from the room, leaving Alexander and Eleanor alone behind a slightly open door.

Eleanor let out a delighted laugh and threw her arms around him. As he held her close, Alexander silently vowed to spend his life proving himself to this incredible woman who had given him a second chance he didn’t deserve. With her by his side, he would become the man she saw in him. The man she deserved.

Eleanor drew back to gaze up at him, her eyes shining. “Oh Alexander, I’m so happy. This means we can be together.”

He tenderly brushed a stray curl from her cheek. “Nothing could keep me from you, my darling.”

Taking her hand, he led her to the settee by the fireplace. Its flickering light cast a warm glow over her features as she sat, accentuating her beauty. He could hardly believe this exquisite woman loved him, despite his past mistakes.

Settling beside her, he took a deep breath. “Eleanor, I know I have much to atone for. My reputation...” He grimaced. “Well, it is not undeserved. I was a fool in my youth, careless and selfish. But I swear to you, I am not that man anymore.”

She squeezed his hand encouragingly. “I know who you are, Alexander. The man who makes me feel cherished, who challenges my mind, and sets my heart racing with just a look.” A becoming blush stained her cheeks. “You underestimate your own goodness.”

Warmth bloomed in his chest at her faith in him. “With you by my side, I feel I could move mountains. But first...” He brought her hand to his lips in a fervent kiss. “I must make amends here. I intend to apologize to those I have wronged and prove myself through honorable deeds.”

Joy lit up her face. “Oh Alexander, I’m so proud of you.” She threw her arms around him again.

He held her close, breathing in her lavender scent. The silken curls brushing his cheek were soft as a caress. When she

drew back, the longing in her emerald eyes mirrored his own.

“Eleanor...” he murmured, before capturing her lips in a passionate kiss. She melted against him with a soft moan, returning his ardor as desire blazed between them.

When they finally broke apart, breathless, he tenderly cradled her face in his hands. “You are my redemption, my love. Marry me, Lady Eleanor Winthrop.”

“yes,” she said. Overcome with emotion, she kissed him again sweetly. “And I will always be at your side.”

Filled with hope, Alexander gazed at the woman who had changed his life. With her faith and love, he felt anything was possible. This was his chance to rewrite the story of his life.

“I will speak with your father at the first opportunity. Wish me luck, my darling,” he murmured, pulling her close.

“You won’t need it,” she whispered. And she drew him into a kiss brimming with promise.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The soft, golden glow of candles illuminated the grand hall of Netherfield Park. Garlands of holly and fir hung above arched doorways, their dark leaves and red berries a striking contrast to the pale stone walls. Logs crackled merrily in the massive fireplace, wreathing the room in the smoky sweetness of applewood, and his betrothed stood beside him. Everything was perfect for Alexander's Twelfth Night celebration.

Outside, the crunch of carriage wheels announced the arrival of guests. Mr. Reginald Turner, the village blacksmith, stepped down first, extending a hand to help his wife alight. Mrs. Turner, round-cheeked and rosy, smiled at the footman who rushed to take her woolen shawl.

"Thank you kindly, young sir," she said. "My, doesn't the house look a treat."

Mr. Turner chuckled, clapping a hand on the footman's shoulder. "Aye, Lord Rockingham has outdone himself. He knows how to make a body feel welcome."

More carriages pulled up, spilling out tradespeople and tenants dressed in their holiday finest. Ribbons and lace adorned the women's gowns, while the men sported waistcoats

embroidered with silver thread. Laughter and greetings filled the air as old friends reunited.

“Mrs. Sweatwater,” cried Miss Penelope Stanton, the seamstress. “What a vision you are in that gown. The rosettes on the sleeves are exquisite.”

“All thanks to you, my dear,” said Mrs. Beatrice Sweatwater, the plump village baker. “Your needlework is unparalleled.”

Linking arms, the women ascended the steps. Footmen bowed, opening the doors to release the sounds of violins and the scents of succulent fare within.

Mr. Turner’s broad face lit up. “Well, what are we waiting for? I believe I spy some mulled wine with our names on it.”

With a cheer, the villagers entered the ballroom. Garlands glittered, candles glowed, and the spirit of the season infused every heart with joyful anticipation.

Inside, Lord Alexander Harrington, Marquess of Rockingham, moved through the crowd, greeting each guest.

“Good evening, Mr. Turner,” he said, shaking the blacksmith’s hand firmly. Though once reputed a scoundrel, Alexander had changed since coming to the village. His eyes shone with sincerity as he welcomed the townsfolk.

“Thank you for coming, Mrs. Sweatwater. I have no doubt your mince pies will be the highlight of our feast.”

The plump baker blushed at his praise. “You’re too kind, my lord.”

Alexander nodded. “It’s thanks to your efforts that this celebration could take place at all. I’m grateful to you all.”

At his side stood the radiant Lady Eleanor Winthrop, her caramel curls framing an elegant face. “Welcome, Miss Stanton,” she said warmly to the seamstress. “That gown is exquisite on you.”

“Why thank you, my lady.” Penelope curtsied, thrilled by the compliment.

As Eleanor greeted each guest, Alexander’s gaze lingered on her. Though once hurt, she had softened since coming to know the real man behind his rakish facade. Catching his eye, she gave a coy smile that made his pulse race.

The aroma of roasted chestnuts and mulled wine filled the air, as footmen circulated with trays of treats to tempt the palate. Alexander lifted two goblets, handing one to Eleanor. Their fingers brushed, sending a spark through them both.

“To new beginnings,” he said.

“To second chances,” she replied. Their eyes locked, speaking of a future ripe with possibility, before they turned back to mingle among the guests.

The joyful sounds of carolers floated in from the distance as dusk settled over the countryside. Their familiar melodies filled the air, conjuring nostalgic memories in the hearts of all who heard them.

“God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay...”

Alexander watched as Eleanor’s face lit up at the carolers’ refrain, her voice joining in. Taking her gloved hand, he gave

it an affectionate squeeze.

“Your singing warms my heart, my dear. I’ve not felt such holiday spirit in many years.”

A rosy blush graced her cheeks at his tender words. “After so much heartache, hope feels possible again,” she replied softly.

He smiled as he led her to the open door so they could better hear the carolers.

In the gently falling snow, the village children frolicked with carefree delight. Shrieks of laughter rang out as snowballs soared through the air. With red noses and wind-kissed cheeks, they gathered around a growing snowman, adorning it with stones for eyes and buttons down its front.

Alexander and Eleanor observed the merriment, her arm tucked in his. Playful as children themselves, he bent to gather a handful of snow and sculpted it into a perfect ball.

“Shall we join in the fun, my lady?” His eyes danced with mischief.

Eleanor’s answering smile was all the response he needed. Their joyful laughter soon mingled with the children’s as they embraced the simple delights of an old-fashioned country Christmas.

The festivities continued into the night as candles flickered within the manor, casting a warm glow across the grounds. Inside, the grand dining hall was aglow for the Christmas feast. Garlands of holly and evergreen lined the walls while a

towering fir tree stood sentinel in the corner, its boughs laden with ribbons, baubles, and flickering candles.

Alexander escorted Eleanor into the hall, her arm resting elegantly upon his. She was resplendent in an emerald gown, the color accentuating her sparkling eyes. As they made their way to the head of the table, mouths watered at the sumptuous spread before them.

Platters laden with honey-glazed ham and roasted goose shimmered beneath the candlelight. Bowls brimmed with buttery mashed potatoes, rich gravy, and roasted vegetables. Fruits and nuts glistened, accompanying an array of pies and puddings for dessert. The scents of cinnamon, cloves, and pine mingled in the air as the promise of fine food and drink beckoned.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Alexander,” Eleanor murmured appreciatively. “This feast rivals any in London.”

“I wanted it to be special for you and our guests,” he replied. As he spoke, his eyes locked with hers, conveying wordless affection. Eleanor’s heart stirred at his thoughtfulness and care for those around him.

Guests began filling their plates and sharing in lively conversation. Laughter rang out frequently amidst the clinking of glasses and scraping of cutlery. Eleanor and Alexander savored the meal alongside their friends and family, the atmosphere warm and convivial.

As the evening progressed, the two often stole glances across the table, pulses quickening at each shared look. Amidst

the food, festivities, and company, all they truly craved was a private moment together.

The hall echoed with fond recollections and tales of Christmases past as the meal wound down. Mrs. Beatrice Sweatwater, the jovial village baker, sat beside Eleanor, patting her hand.

“I’ll never forget the Christmas when you and your mother came round my cottage with baskets of baked goods for my family, and new dresses for the girls,” she said warmly. “We were going through a lean time that year after my husband fell ill. Your kindness meant the world.”

Eleanor smiled, touched by the memory. “We wanted to make sure your family still had a proper Christmas.”

Across the table, the blacksmith Reginald Turner regaled some gentlemen with a story. “One year when Lord Wentworth was just a boy, he snuck out to my smithy to help me shoe the horses on Christmas morn,” he chuckled. “Nearly took his thumb off with my hammer.”

Seb grinned ruefully as the men roared with laughter. “I was determined to prove I could be a blacksmith too,” he said, shaking his head.

The seamstress Penelope Stanton chimed in. “I’ll never forget the Christmas ball where Lady Lydia spilled punch down the front of her gown and pretended it was part of the design.”

Everyone joined in the merriment as Lydia laughed. “I have always had a way of flowing with the tide.”

As the night wore on, the warmth of friendship, community, and the spirit of the season enveloped all. Eleanor and Alexander basked in the evening's glow, thankful for the people they held dear.

As the laughter and merriment filled the grand hall, Alexander rose and extended his hand to Eleanor. "May I have the honor of this dance, my lady?"

A smile spread across Eleanor's face as she accepted, placing her delicate hand in his firm grasp. He led her to the center of the floor as the small orchestra struck up a lively waltz.

Alexander's arm encircled Eleanor's waist, pulling her close as they began to swirl and glide across the polished parquet. Their bodies moved in seamless unison, predicting each other's steps and spins as if they shared one mind. Eleanor's emerald skirts flared out as Alexander led her through a graceful turn. His hand rested firmly yet gently at the small of her back, guiding her movements.

They circled the floor, lost in their own private world. Eleanor's eyes sparkled with joy, her cheeks flushed from the dance and Alexander's proximity. His piercing blue gaze was fixed on her, filled with adoration and desire. The music and chatter seemed to fade away until it was just the two of them, locked in an intimate dance.

As the waltz slowed, Alexander pulled Eleanor even nearer. Her bosom grazed his chest, their joined hands pressed close between them. They swayed gently to the melody, pulses.

“You are exquisite,” Alexander murmured, his voice low and husky. Eleanor’s lips curved into a coy smile.

“And you are a divine dancer, my lord,” she purred.

Alexander grinned roguishly. “I’d dance with you until dawn if propriety would allow it.”

A delightful shiver ran through Eleanor at his words. As the final notes faded, they remained suspended in the moment, neither wanting the dance to end.

As the lively reels and jigs resumed, Alexander drew Eleanor close, one hand resting lightly on the small of her back. Eleanor’s breath caught at his touch, her skin tingling even through the layers of her gown.

“You look radiant tonight,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers dancing down her spine.

“As do you, my lord,” Eleanor replied, tilting her chin up to meet his intense blue gaze. Alexander smiled roguishly.

“I confess, I’ve wanted to steal you away all evening.” His eyes flicked to her lips. Eleanor’s pulse quickened. “Might I show you the conservatory? It’s spectacular at night, with all the candles lit.”

Eleanor nodded, suddenly feeling shy. Alexander took her by the hand and led her from the great hall. As they slipped into the darkened corridor beyond, Eleanor noticed the sprig of mistletoe hanging directly above them. Her eyes widened.

Alexander followed her gaze upward and let out a throaty chuckle. “Well, it seems we’ve been caught.”

Before she could react, he pulled her into his arms. Eleanor's breath escaped in a rush as his mouth captured hers in a searing kiss. She melted against him, twining her arms around his neck. His kiss left her dizzy and breathless.

When at last they broke apart, Eleanor gazed up at him, lips kiss-swollen and cheeks prettily flushed.

"Happy Twelfth Night, my darling Eleanor," Alexander whispered huskily.

"The happiest," she sighed blissfully. The promise of romance and passion shone in their eyes as they lost themselves in another lingering kiss.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

The snow fell in fat, lazy flakes outside the chapel windows, the grounds now a blanket of shimmering white. Inside, the candles' golden glow cast dancing shadows across the stone walls. Lady Winthrop adjusted the pearls at her neck, her satin gown rustling as she took her seat in the front pew. Beside her, Lord Wentworth winked at his wife, Lady Marion, who blushed prettily in her lace gloves and blue dress.

“Do you suppose Eleanor shall actually go through with it this time?” Lydia teased Lady Winthrop.

“Incorrigible girl—” Before she could continue, the heavy oak doors creaked open. Lord Winthrop entered first, his broad shoulders filling the doorway as he scanned the room with a protective glare. Lady Eleanor glided in on his arm, an ethereal vision in gold silk and seed pearls, her caramel curls pinned up to reveal the graceful curve of her neck. Her eyes shone with nervous excitement as she caught sight of the handsome gentleman waiting for her at the altar, his golden hair and piercing blue gaze reminding her of the mysterious man who had stirred her heart a mere month before.

Lady Eleanor's thoughts raced as she took measured steps toward her betrothed. Lord Rockingham, Alexander Harrington, looked dashing in his navy coat and snowy cravat. His eyes locked on hers, unspoken promises reflected in their depths.

"We are gathered here today..." the vicar began.

Lady Eleanor scarcely heard the words, lost in her groom's ardent stare. She felt the brush of his fingers as he slid the golden band onto her finger.

"With this ring, I thee wed." His voice caressed her like velvet.

At last, she was his.

Eleanor's heart pounded as Alexander's lips met hers, the vicar's voice fading into the background. This was the man who had saved her from her past, who had brought love into her life, whose smoldering gaze set her soul aflame. As they parted, Eleanor whispered, "I thought I'd never find you."

Alexander smiled, his thumb gently caressing her wrist. "Fate brought us together." His eyes crinkled with happiness. "Now you are my wife, my marchioness, to have and to hold, from this day forward."

Eleanor flushed, the passion in his voice heating her blood. She had sworn off marriage after her broken engagement, too independent for a subservient role and too stubborn to settle for less than true love. Yet Alexander was different—protective but never controlling, desiring her counsel and partnership. With him, she could be both wife and free spirit.

As they turned to face their cheering guests, Eleanor knew her life would never be the same. She smiled as she took in the faces of her dearest family and friends seated in the chapel. Garlands of holly and ivy adorned the pews, accented by poinsettias in festive shades of red and green. It was a simple ceremony, but touched by holiday magic and true love.

She clutched Alexander's hand, reassured by its strength and warmth. Last year, she had been a runaway bride, fleeing her ill-fated betrothal to Reggie, Viscount Shewbury. Now here she stood, wed to a man she hardly knew yet somehow trusted completely.

Eleanor's cheeks flushed as she glanced demurely at the guests, hoping her flustered state was not too obvious. Alexander gave her hand a reassuring squeeze as they moved down the aisle to accept the well-wishes of those gathered. A new chapter was beginning, one filled with hope, joy and the promise of a happy future together.

Lady Winthrop dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief, overcome with emotion. "Oh, Eleanor," she murmured, embracing her daughter. "I'm just thrilled for you, my dear." She kissed her daughter's cheek. "Be happy, Eleanor. That is all I ask." Though initially skeptical of the match, even her protective mother could not deny the joy radiating from the bride.

Lydia hugged Eleanor tightly. "I just knew this rogue would win your heart," she teased, with a playful glance at Alexander. "Take good care of her, Lord Rockingham."

"With my life," Alexander vowed solemnly.

Sebastian clapped him on the back. “Well done, old chap. I daresay married life rather suits you.”

Alexander grinned at his longtime friend. “I believe you may be right, Seb.” His eyes met Eleanor’s, a lifetime of promises shining in their blue depths.

The party moved to the grand ballroom, where a sumptuous feast awaited them. Liveried footmen poured champagne while a small orchestra played a lively tune in the background. Though the guest list was intimate, the atmosphere was one of celebration and cheer.

Alexander and Eleanor sat side by side, fingers entwined. He leaned in close, his breath tickling her ear. “Have I told you how ravishing you look tonight, Lady Rockingham?”

A delightful shiver went through her at the sound of her new name on his lips. She angled her body toward his, green eyes sparkling. “You may have mentioned it once or twice, my lord.”

His thumb traced slow circles over her knuckles as they shared private smiles. The revelry swirled around them, though they scarcely noticed- neither had eyes for anyone but each other. Their love was a shelter from the storm, a light guiding them home.

Eleanor’s gaze kept straying to the doors leading out of the ballroom, anticipation building within her. She longed to steal away with Alexander and finally, completely, be his.

As if reading her mind, Alexander leaned in, his breath hot against her ear. “What do you say we slip away, my darling? I

find I cannot wait a moment longer to have you all to myself.”

A flush stained Eleanor’s cheeks, but she nodded eagerly. Hand in hand, they made their excuses and exited.

The walk to his bedchamber seemed to take an eternity and no time at all. When at last they were alone behind closed doors, Eleanor trembled, suddenly overcome with nerves.

Alexander cupped her face in his hands, love shining in his eyes. “There’s no need for fear, my love. Tonight we come together as man and wife, to share in the most profound intimacy two people can know.”

Reassured, Eleanor melted into his embrace. Their kiss deepened, tongues tangling as hands roamed with more urgency. Layers of clothing were shed between heated caresses until no barriers remained between them.

Laying her back against cool sheets, Alexander worshipped her body with hands and mouth until she was mindless with desire for him.

Eleanor’s breathless moans filled the bedchamber as Alexander’s hands and lips roamed her body. He thrust into her, her passage slick and welcoming. Their fervent kisses deepened as their bodies moved together.

“I love you...” Eleanor murmured as she arched against him, taking him deeper.

“I love you more.” Alexander gave her another searing kiss. “I need you,” he rasped, desire burning through his veins. “Always.”

Eleanor answered by drawing him deeper until every inch of him was buried in her heat. The bed creaked faintly beneath their writhing forms, accompanied only by impassioned cries ringing through the shadowed room.

Afterwards, they lay entwined in a glowing aftermath, fingers idly tracing glistening skin. Eleanor pillowed her head on Alexander's chest, listening to the thunder of his heart.

"What are you thinking?" he murmured, twining a lock of her hair around his finger.

She smiled up at him. "That I never want this night to end."

Alexander's expression softened. "It won't," he promised. "No matter what comes, I will always be beside you, loving you."

Eleanor snuggled closer with a contented sigh, lulled by his steady heartbeat. This was where she belonged—in his arms, now and always. She felt cherished, adored—like the most precious treasure in the world.

"I love you," she whispered, tilting her head up to meet his gaze. His eyes, dark with passion just moments before, now radiated warmth and devotion.

"And I you, my darling wife." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Being with you feels like coming home."

She smiled, her heart full to bursting.

As she drifted off to sleep, visions of their future played through her mind. The laughter of children with his smile and her eyes. Growing old together, still deeply in love after

decades of marriage. It was the life she had scarcely dared dream of, now hers for the taking.

When morning light filtered through the curtains, Eleanor awoke to find Alexander already gazing at her, propped up on one elbow.

“Good morning, my love,” he murmured. And she knew then that every morning for the rest of her life would begin just like this one—filled with joy, passion, and the promise of a bright future together.

She had found her true love. Her forever and always.

EPILOGUE

The following Christmas...

Lady Eleanor stood at the grand window overlooking the snow-covered grounds of Winthrop House, her family's ancestral estate in the rugged hills of Cumbria. The ancient stone manor was bedecked with garlands of holly, ivy, and mistletoe, their deep tones a striking contrast against the gray facade. Twinkling candles lined the window frames, casting a warm glow over the freshly fallen snow.

Despite the festive trappings, Eleanor's heart felt heavy, weighed down by memories of past tribulations. Her broken engagement, her mother's incessant matchmaking attempts, the whispers and stares from those who relished in gossip. A weary sigh escaped her lips as she traced a finger down the frosted pane.

"My lady?"

Eleanor turned to see Mrs. Hargrove, her family's longtime housekeeper, regarding her with kind eyes. In her pudgy hands, she held a tray of iced holiday biscuits, their sugary scents redolent of cinnamon and nutmeg.

“Have one, dear. Mrs. Sweetwater’s treats never fail to lift the spirits.”

A hint of a smile graced Eleanor’s face as she selected a snowflake-shaped cookie. The buttery shortbread melted on her tongue, sweet and delicate.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hargrove. Please give my compliments to Mrs. Sweetwater. Her baking is unparalleled, even on the most trying of days.”

“Chin up, my lady. Each dawn brings a fresh start.” With a wink, the housekeeper bustled away, leaving Eleanor to nibble her biscuit and ponder the woman’s words of hope.

Eleanor gazed out at the snow-blanketed gardens, lost in thought as she finished the last sweet crumbs of the cookie. The housekeeper’s kind words echoed in her mind, yet she struggled to push away the lingering memories.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind as Alexander pulled her into his embrace. Eleanor relaxed against the solid warmth of his chest, comforted by his steadfast presence. He pressed a kiss to her temple as they swayed gently together.

“You are miles away, my love,” he murmured. “What troubles you so?”

Eleanor turned in his arms to meet his gaze, her fingers reaching up to smooth the worry line between his brows.

“Just old ghosts, trying to steal my joy,” she admitted with a rueful smile. “But you, my darling, are the light that keeps them at bay.”

Alexander's expression softened. He caught her hand and brought it to his lips.

"We've weathered much," he said. "All I care about is that you're here with me now, as my wife. To the devil with everything that came before."

Reassured, Eleanor nestled against him once more as they looked out over the snowy vista, taking comfort in each other's presence. The past could not touch them anymore.

Eleanor tilted her chin up, meeting Alexander's lips in a tender kiss. As they parted, a playful smile curved his mouth.

He led Eleanor out into the snow-covered gardens, the cold air nipping at their cheeks. He glanced over at her, heart swelling at the joy sparkling in her emerald eyes. "This past year with you has been the happiest of my life."

Overcome with emotion, Eleanor threw her arms around him. "I love you," she whispered.

Alexander held her close, relishing the feel of her in his arms. "And I love you, my darling. Always."

After a long embrace, Eleanor drew back, eyes dancing. "I believe a snowball fight is in order, Lord Rockingham."

With a laugh, Alexander scooped up a handful of snow. "I accept your challenge, Lady Rockingham."

Their joyous laughter echoed through the gardens as snowballs flew fast and furious. Eleanor's cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright with exhilaration as she lobbed snowball after snowball at her husband.

When Alexander tackled her into a snowbank, she squealed. He silenced her with a long, passionate kiss.

“Mercy, my lord,” Eleanor finally gasped when they broke apart.

Chuckling, Alexander helped her to her feet. Arm in arm, they surveyed the winter wonderland around them.

“Let’s build a snowman,” Eleanor said eagerly.

Working together, they rolled balls of snow, stacking them into a tall, lopsided snowman. Eleanor produced a carrot for his nose, while Alexander donated his top hat.

“He needs a name,” Eleanor mused.

Alexander pretended to consider. “How about Lord Frostington?”

Throwing her head back, Eleanor laughed merrily. “Perfect.”

As the fading light painted the sky in hues of pink and gold, Eleanor tucked her arm through Alexander’s. “I do believe we shall miss the Christmas feast if we tarry much longer.”

“Indeed,” Alexander agreed as he proffered his arm to lead her back inside.

The grand dining hall at Winthrop Manor was a vision of holiday splendor. Garlands of holly and evergreen wound up the banisters, while mistletoe and ivy adorned the mantle. In the center of the long table, an enormous roast goose anchored a mouthwatering spread.

Eleanor smiled as she surveyed the guests already seated. Her mother, Lady Winthrop, was engaged in lively discourse with Alexander's aunt, Lady Huffington. Nearby, her childhood friend Lydia was whispering and giggling with Alexander's rakish friend, Lord Dalton.

At the head of the table, Eleanor took her seat beside Alexander. His eyes shone with warmth as he lifted her hand to his lips. "You look ravishing tonight, my dear."

Eleanor's cheeks grew rosy. "Why thank you, kind sir."

As the rest of the guests filtered in, Eleanor was pleased to see more familiar faces—Lord and Lady Wentworth among them.

When everyone settled, Eleanor tapped her glass to get their attention. "Friends, we are so pleased you could join our Christmas feast. This past year has held many blessings,"—she exchanged a loving glance with Alexander—"as well as some trials. But no matter what the future brings, we know we have the support of our family and friends."

Murmurs of assent rippled around the table. Eleanor continued, "So tonight, let us give thanks for this food, this fellowship, and the hope of brighter days ahead. Merry Christmas."

A chorus of "Merry Christmas," erupted in response. As everyone began passing dishes and filling their plates, the room soon rang with lively conversation and laughter.

Alexander leaned in and murmured, "I'm so proud to call you my wife."

Eleanor's heart swelled. No matter how many Christmas feasts they shared, she knew she would never tire of this man by her side.

After the meal wound down, Eleanor slipped away while the guests mingled. In the library, she stoked up the fire and waited, thinking of the stolen moments she and Alexander had shared in this very room.

Soon he appeared in the doorway. Crossing the room in long strides, he drew her into his arms.

“Have I told you today how beautiful you are?” His voice was low and husky.

Eleanor pretended to consider. “I don't believe so, my lord.”

“An egregious oversight on my part.” Alexander trailed kisses along the curve of her neck as she sighed with pleasure.

Drawing back, he gazed deeply into her eyes. “This past year with you has been the happiest of my life. I was like a ship lost at sea without a north star before you blazed into my life the brightest star in the heavens to light my way home. What did I do to deserve such a woman as you?”

Eleanor caressed his cheek. “The same thing I did to deserve you, my love. We are simply two souls who found each other.”

As their lips met in a lingering kiss, the glow of the fireplace bathed them in warmth. No matter what the new year held, their love would be their guiding light.

Eleanor and Alexander eventually emerged from the library to rejoin the festivities. As they entered the grand ballroom, Eleanor gasped in delight. Garlands of holly and evergreen branches decorated the walls, while candles and lanterns cast a magical glow over the space. In the center of the polished parquet floor, couples danced and twirled to the lively music of a small orchestra.

“Shall we?” Alexander extended his hand with a grin.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Eleanor replied, taking his hand.

They stepped onto the dance floor, joining the other couples. As Alexander slid his arm around Eleanor’s waist, their eyes locked. Moving as one, they began the steps of the energetic country dance. Eleanor’s skirts swished around her legs as Alexander led her through the intricate patterns of the dance. Their chemistry was evident in their flawless teamwork and synchronized movements.

As the music transitioned into a slower waltz, Alexander drew Eleanor close. One hand clasped hers while the other rested lightly on her back. Eleanor relaxed into his embrace, her body attuned to his. They circled the floor gracefully, the crowd and music fading away as they stared into each other’s eyes.

Under the sparkling lights, Eleanor and Alexander were lost in a world all their own. All that mattered was the love that had carried them through the past year and would continue lighting their way in the years to come.

Amanda Mariel, an accomplished wordsmith, holds dual master's degrees in liberal arts and education, specializing in the captivating realms of history and literature. Beyond her academic pursuits, she embraces the joyful chaos of motherhood, tending to both her cherished teenagers and her trio of adored fur babies. Among them, a noble Bernese Mountain Dog named Blaze, and two cats of distinct character, Ezra and Puff, share their home.

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CHRISTMAS FOR TWO

NADINE MILLARD



CHAPTER ONE

“My lady, are you sure you want to continue? The weather looks as though it might worsen.”

Lady Adeline Stanley sighed as she took in the thick, white clouds forming above them. She’d hoped to reach her aunt’s house before the threatening snow fell but now, she simply wasn’t sure that they’d make it.

It would be frustrating beyond belief to be so close to her destination and delay her journey. She’d promised Aunt Lenora that she would arrive in plenty of time to help with Christmastide festivities and if there was one thing she knew about her aunt, it was that she would require all the help she could get. It seemed that every year the celebrations grew more lavish. And more filled with potential husbands for Adeline, though she steadfastly ignored that particular fact every time.

“My lady?”

Adeline’s stomach twisted with indecision. She wished Papa or Mama were here to decide for her, but Papa was recovering from a riding accident and so they wouldn’t be joining Aunt Leonora in Cumberland until Christmas Eve at

the earliest along with Adeline's younger siblings. She'd begged and pleaded to be allowed to travel ahead with only her driver and a servant for company. Had assured her father that she was perfectly capable of travelling in a private carriage alone. *What harm could it possibly do*, she'd asked. *We have been going to Aunt Leonora's since I was a babe in arms. And with Uncle Wilfred's death last year, she'll be wanting my company more than ever.*

Finally, she'd worn him down and now here she was, unable to decide without him. And that simply would not do.

Eyeing the sky again, she thought of Aunt Leonora missing her late husband, missing the daughter who'd moved Rome with her Italian husband and couldn't travel back due to her lying-in. She didn't want her aunt alone. Though 'alone' was something of an exaggeration since she had a live-in companion now and was extremely active in her village. But still, Adeline had promised to come, and she didn't want to break that promise.

"Let's continue," she finally said. "We're due to arrive before nightfall in any case. So, we're sure to reach Lady Briarcastle's before any inclement weather hits."

Her driver eyed the skies dubiously before nodding and turning toward the carriage. Adeline wished he would tell her outright if her decision was a foolish one, but he said nothing, merely climbed into the driver's seat and took up the reins. The footman that papa had sent along with them dutifully stood alongside the conveyance, huddled into his greatcoat and Adeline felt a twinge of guilt. She would be tucked away in

her carriage with warming bricks and blankets while these poor men had to drag themselves through icy winds because she was in a hurry.

Well, the sooner they got to Briarcastle the sooner she could make sure they were well taken care of by Aunt Leonara's household staff. At least she hadn't dragged her maid along. Mama had tried to insist but Adeline had held her ground. Her maid Maisy was sweet on one of the merchant's sons back home and Adeline had a feeling that they might become betrothed over the holiday season. She wouldn't stand in the way of that for all the money in Christendom. Though she might have enjoyed the company. There was only so much thinking, napping, and reading one could do on a three-day journey. Still, they were almost there now and knowing Aunt Leonora, she would have more company than she would know what to do with there. Of the unwanted male variety, most likely.

Hurrying to the carriage she reached inside and plucked out two of the blankets piled atop the bench. Turning to the footman who held the door open for her, she smiled in what she hoped was a contrite manner. "I'm so sorry to make you journey in such cold weather, George," she said. "But here, these should keep you both a little warmer."

"You're too kind, my lady," the young footman stammered, flushing red. "I couldn't accept. What if you need them?"

"Please," she interrupted, practically shoving them into his hands. "I am warm enough, I assure you. And I shan't be able

to relax if I think you're shivering away up in that driver's box."

The young lad finally took the blankets, tucking them under his arm while he waited for her to climb into the carriage. Once settled, she rapped on the ceiling and sat back as they trundled from the busy inn courtyard and began the final leg of their journal.

The countryside flew by, growing more rugged by the second. Something about being so far north always called to Adeline's soul. She loved the weathered, stark beauty of the place. Especially now with frost dusting the tips of bare branches, and a light dusting of snow making the landscape look like it had been sprinkled with sugar. Despite her trepidation around Aunt Leonora's plans for the house party, and the bachelors who would doubtless be in attendance, she couldn't stop her smile from breaking through. She loved Briarcastle almost as much as she loved Aunt Leonora. The sprawling estate enjoyed unparalleled views over the rugged coastline. And in size it rivalled even her father's main seat. Aunt Leonora's late husband had been an earl, too. Just like Papa. For a year now they'd been searching for the Uncle Wilfred's rightful heir. He'd passed away a couple of months before last Christmas, putting an end to any and all festivities for that particular yuletide. That was another reason that Adeline was so determined to get to Aunt Leonora's now. She was finally out of mourning and ready to celebrate her favourite time of year again. And Adeline knew she worried about what might become of her when a male heir was finally tracked down. Cousin Julia's husband had been assisting Aunt

Leonora's man of business in finding a distant nephew or cousin or some such thing, but the last Adeline had heard about it all, there'd been no luck in finding him.

Afternoon turned to dusk, and the snow began to fall in earnest, Adeline watched it until the outside world turned black before she leaned her head against the velvet-covered cushion at her back and closed her eyes.

Adeline jolted awake as the carriage tilted alarmingly to the side and she realized that she must have dozed off. She right herself on the bench then turned to squint out the window. Her stomach clenched as she took in her reflection. Not surrounded by the black of night as expected, but by the unmistakable white of a snowstorm.

Her heartbeat frantically as she listened to the shout of her driver, barely audible above a screaming wind. It was dark and freezing. Her mind was muddled with sleep, but she had enough wits about her to know they were in trouble.

She screeched as the carriage careened to the side again, the horses screaming, the driver and poor George shouting, all against the backdrop of an unforgiving, howling wind.

Tumbling to the floor, Adeline winced as her knees made impact with the solid wood beneath her feet. The warming bricks had long since cooled and even in the darkness she could see her breath on the frigid air. This was all her fault. If something happened to the horses or to either of the men outside, it would be because of her selfishness. Her impatience.

She would have to bang on the ceiling and tell them to stop. They would need to find shelter, or they'd never outlive such a blizzard. With panic clawing at her insides, Adeline pulled herself upwards and back onto the bench.

But before she could take her next breath, there was a sudden sharp crack a split second before a cry of dismay from one of the poor servants outside, and the carriage was suddenly moving at a frantic, terrifying pace. Adeline held on, closed her eyes, and prayed for dear life. It could have been seconds or eons that she sat there in abject fear wondering if she'd ever see her parents or brother and sister again, wondering if Aunt Leonora would survive the grief of another family death.

And then suddenly, it was over. The carriage crashed to a halt and Adeline was once more flung from her seat. Only this time, she was thrown toward the window. She felt the bang of her head meeting frozen glass, heard the sickening thud, and felt a moment of searing, flashing pain before everything around her went black.

CHAPTER TWO

Henry Gladstone leaned against the back of the armchair and prayed that the headache which had plagued him for weeks now would finally abate soon. He hadn't slept in days. He'd travelled to the point of exhaustion. The horses who'd lugged his carriage would never forgive him. And now, at the very last hurdle, he was snowed in at some Godforsaken country inn.

He wondered, not for the first time, what sort of madness had taken over his body when he'd agreed to make this journey. A part of him still believed that what was in the letter that had found him in the West Indies couldn't possibly be true.

He couldn't possibly have gone from the son of a moderately wealthy but relatively unimportant merchant to the heir of the prominent Earl of Briarcastle. Further still, he couldn't possibly *be* the new earl since the old man's demise.

When the missive had first arrived, he'd visited his mother's home and laughingly informed her of it, sure that there was some mistake or mix-up, that she'd laugh it off alongside him and they'd move on with their lives.

But when he'd handed over the parchment, she hadn't laughed. Instead, her eyes had widened, her hands had shook and by the time she'd looked up at him, there had been tears falling down her cheeks. What had followed had rocked Henry's world completely. His father had not been the business-minded nobody from England that he'd been taught. Rather, he was the son of the Earl of Briarcastle who'd fled England in disgrace when he'd been cut off for marrying below his station. The old earl had apparently threatened his second son with the fires of hell themselves if he should ever disgrace the family name by admitting to marrying a servant. And so, he'd run. Arrived in the West Indies with little more than the clothes on his back and an Irish maid for a wife.

Henry's father had always intended to tell him of his heritage, but he'd succumbed to a fever last summer before he'd had the chance. And as it turned out, the Briarcastle line wasn't one for producing gaggles of children or those of the male variety. Somehow, through a mad twist of fate and early deaths, Henry was the closest living male relative of his Uncle Wilfred whom he'd never even heard about and now, he was the earl and rightful owner of a sprawling estate in Cumberland alongside an obscene number of holdings and wealth.

It couldn't be true. It simply couldn't. He'd told himself that over and over even as he'd sailed from the only home he'd ever known toward this dark, cold coast. Yet here he was on the outskirts of the village named for the earldom, waiting to meet an aunt he didn't know he'd had and learn the ropes of a position he'd never dreamed he'd own.

He didn't even *want* to be a damned earl. A peer of the realm who would shoulder countless responsibilities and be forced to marry and fill a nursery to carry on a dynasty he hadn't been aware he was part of. It was the stuff of fairytales. And he'd never been particularly fond of fairytales.

At his mother's insistence, he'd agreed to come to England for the holidays, to meet this aunt through marriage and find out if it could all possibly be real. Hence the headache.

Leaning forward to refill his tumbler, Henry glanced at the longcase clock in the corner of the room. He'd sent the innkeeper to bed some time ago, refusing to allow the widowed woman to stay up to wait on him when he didn't need anything beyond a bottle and a glass. The fire he could tend to himself. And from the looks of the skeletal staff, he'd seen floating around, the old woman had more than enough to do without him adding unnecessary burdens. Surprisingly the place was empty save for him, which was perhaps why she'd been so attentive but once this storm passed, he had no doubt she'd be run off her feet. This time of year tended to bring travellers out in force. He'd travelled light, leaving his driver and coachman at an inn outside London and acquired himself a decent mount to make the rest of the journey alone. He'd wanted the solitude and fresh air to think. Being holed up in a tiny inn hadn't been part of the plan but it did afford him that aforementioned solitude so perhaps he should see it as a gift; a way to avoid the inevitable for a while.

Feeling restless with the weight of upcoming burdens, Henry stood to stretch his legs. He wandered to the window that looked over the inn's modest courtyard. The place was

small but spotless and the stew Mrs. Davidson had whipped up for him was nothing short of divine. After a couple of days in the saddle, battling frost and snow, the hearty meal and decent brandy had tasted like ambrosia.

He was shocked to see the view entirely whited out. The storm had come in earnest while he'd been sitting in his maudlin thoughts. The wind howled, the snow thundered from the sky and Henry could only imagine that the lanterns at the stable doors had long since blown out. His conscience prickled and he decided to dark outside to check on his horse. It wasn't a particularly skittish creature, and he had no doubt that the stable lad he'd met earlier would have things well in control, but he wouldn't be able to sleep if he didn't check on the creature.

Hurrying into the jacket and greatcoat he'd divested himself of in his private parlour, he plucked up a lantern from the rustic wooden table that dominated the room and hurried toward the door. He barely managed to get the thing open before the wind was slamming it back against his hand, but he pushed on and managed to get outside.

He took a moment to catch his breath and began fighting against the wind toward the stables. The flame inside the lantern stuttered alarmingly but by some miracle, and the use of his coat, it didn't go out. Henry could barely see as he tramped through feet of snow before finally reaching the shelter of the stables.

Once inside he was pleasantly surprised to see how warm and sheltered it was. The horses knickered a little nervously

but there was the stable hand, tending to them and using a soothing voice to calm them.

“Hello there, John.” He kept his voice low so as not to startle the mounts. His was the only one that didn’t belong to the inn, but the weather surely made them all a little skittish so a stranger in their midst wouldn’t help.

“Mr. Gladstone,” the stable lad said, doffing his cap. “Is there something I can help you with, sir?”

The name slipped easily from the lad’s lips, and it had no reason not to, but for the first time, Henry wondered if he should have used the Briarcastle title. Though he hadn’t yet accepted it. A rather large part of him was still contemplating getting back on a boat to the West Indies and forgetting the entire thing, truth be told. Though he’d promised his mother that he’d at least hear the countess out. It was nothing short of a mess, frankly. Which was why he wasn’t prepared to use the title.

“No,” he answered now. “I just came to check on the old boy here and see if the storm is causing him any problems.”

“I’m taking good care of him, sir,” the younger man said, his chest puffing out with pride.

“I can see that,” Henry replied with a grin. He remembered being young and eager to please, too. “You’re doing a stellar job, young man. Are you planning on staying out here all night?”

“I usually do, sir. I’ve a right comfortable sleeping area in the loft and Mrs. Davidson always leaves the back door open

for me in case it gets too cold. Hasn't happened yet, though."

Henry allowed the boy to chatter for a while, the raging storm outside barely intruding on the warmth and comfort of the stables. It was pleasant, he realised with some surprise, to forget about his upcoming visit to Briarcastle. To forget about being an earl. To forget about the life of duty and responsibility that had been so suddenly thrust upon him.

For the first time since he'd received that life-changing letter, he felt at peace. In fact, he might even sleep tonight.

He was just about to bid adieu to young John when a cacophony of noise rent the peaceful air, shattering the pleasant atmosphere. Above the storm, he heard the unmistakable sound of horses shrieking in distress. The sound raised the hair on the back of his neck and set the horses inside the stable whinnying and stomping frantically.

Without a moment's hesitation, he darted to the doors, grabbing at the lantern he'd set down on the way. He heard the faint sound of men's shouts right before the screech of metal and the deafening crack of wood.

Heart pounding, he called over his shoulder for John to follow him before dashing out into the lashing snow. It was impossible to see anything, impossible to catch his breath against the driving wind, but Henry pressed on, calling out for guidance as he went.

After moments of silence, a voice answered back, and he trudged toward it. After what felt like eons, he came upon the scene of a rather severe carriage crash. The conveyance was tipped on its side, one wheel broken off completely, one

spinning furiously. The horses had broken free though they were still attached to the reins that a shocked-looking driver was desperately hanging on to.

Henry hurried forward to help, grabbing the reins with his free hand, but the man, whose face he could now see was battered and bloodied, waved frantically behind him. “T-the mistress,” he stammered, his teeth chattering, whether from shock or the cold, Henry didn’t know. “P-please. The young lady.”

Henry frowned in confusion, looking through the driving snow to peer more closely at the carriage. Movement to the left caught his eye and he realised that there was at least one other person here. “John,” he called as the young lad came upon them. “Take these.” He thrust the reins into the boy’s hand then turned and hurried toward where he’d seen movement by the wreckage.

The sight he came upon stopped his heart dead in his chest. A man in livery was crouched in the snow, and beside him was the unmoving body of a young lady. He could tell, even in the darkness that this was the mistress that the older man, the driver he now knew, had been rambling about. The cloak she lay upon was velvet. The gown muddied and torn was, from the little he could see, good quality. But none of that mattered. Quality or working class, given how still she was, she might be too far gone to tell him who she was. Henry knelt beside the man who was hovering uselessly over the lady as though he didn’t quite know what to do with himself.

“This is your mistress?” Henry demanded.

“Y-yes. She, we – we couldn’t see. And we meant to stop but there was nothing and then.” He took a deep, gulping breath. “I don’t know what happened, the road seemed to give way. Something spooked the horses and we just.” He shrugged helplessly. “She – she won’t wake up.”

Henry could see that he wasn’t going to get any sense out of either of these men. And if they didn’t get inside and warm soon, they could very well perish. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he reached out a shaking hand and pushed a lock of hair from the lady’s face. She was freezing to the touch and in the dimness, he thought he saw that her lips were blue.

Pushing away his dread, he skimmed his fingers down her face until he found her neck and, sending a prayer skywards, began searching for a pulse. For a terrifying moment, he found nothing but then – there. A fluttering. Faint and erratic but there all the same. His relief was acute though brief. If she he didn’t get her some help and fast, she might not live much longer.

Divesting himself of his greatcoat, he threw it over her before lifting her into his arms and standing. The servant picked up the lantern and held it at the lady’s face. She was beautiful, Henry thought distractedly, then cursed himself for the errant thought.

He watched her eyes suddenly flutter and open. She blinked slowly before pinning him with a wide, doe-eyed gaze. To his amazement, a soft smile touched her lips before a sudden gust of wind blew out the lantern and her eyes closed drifted to a close once more.

CHAPTER
THREE

The journey back to the inn was arduous to say the least. Though the lady in his arms weighed next to nothing, there was still the blizzard to contend with. The icy wind cut through his clothing, and he was already soaked through from the snow.

But none of that concerned him as much as the body in his arms. He could only hope that the greatcoat afforded her a modicum of protection against the storm for he could feel that her cloak was a sodden, freezing mess. The slippers on her feet were useless and in fact, one of them had come off when he'd hefted her into his arms. Behind him, he could hear the servants and John coaxing the horses along and he was just glad that the men could stand on their own feet and were reasonably able to get themselves to the inn.

After what felt like eons, the grounds of the inn came into sight and Henry sent John ahead to wake Mrs. Davidson and whomever else she had living and working there. By the time he reached the courtyard, the place was a hive of activity. It was far too bad out to send for the local doctor, so they could

only hope that the young lady wasn't in urgent need of medical care.

Henry hurried through the doors of the inn and straight toward his private parlour where he'd left the fire blazing. Mercifully it hadn't yet died out when he entered the room, though it was little more than embers but a quick shout to Mrs. Davidson had a maid rushing in to spark it to life once more.

"I've prepared a bedchamber, sir," Mrs. Davidson called over the chaos. "The fire is lit and warming the room."

"Excellent, thank you," Henry said as he placed the unconscious lady on the chaise by the fire. "We need to get her warm and see to her servants," he continued as he plucked his greatcoat from her body and untied the ribbon of her cloak. That was as far as he was willing to go, as far as he *could* go given that he was a stranger to the chit. "You might see that the girl is changed into something dry, Mrs. Davidson? And have a bowl of something hot prepared?"

"Yes of course, sir." With a clap of her hands, the redoubtable lady had the maid rushing to her side. A moment's whispered conversation and the young servant was gone again. "I'll see to the girl myself while Franny warms up some stew for everyone and makes a pot of strong tea."

"I thank you, Mrs. Davidson. I shall retire to my rooms to change while you get everything in order here. And I'll speak to her servants. See if we can find out exactly what happened."

A flash of what looked like relief crossed the older lady's face. "Thank you, Mr. Gladstone. I'd be most grateful to you.

My husband, Lord rest his soul, used to take care of this sort of thing and well, this is the first crisis I've faced without him."

Henry felt a pang of sympathy for the woman but before he could express it, a shiver wracked his body.

"Gracious, get along with you and change," Mrs. Davidson demanded, shooing him from the room. "You'll be no good to me if you're struck down now, will you? Off with you now."

Henry took a last, fleeting glance at the unmoving girl on the chaise before he hurried from the room and to his own modest bedchamber. It was the work of a moment to divest himself of his soaked clothing and he groaned in relief as the heat from the fire seeped into his skin. He rubbed roughly at his skin with the fresh linens that had been laid out by the bathtub in the corner of the room while he wondered if he should insist the girl was bathed in hot water. That was surely the fastest way to heat her up. He felt on edge, worried about this beautiful stranger. But given that he wasn't used to snow and cold of this magnitude he knew she was best left in the care of Mrs. Davidson and her maid.

He hurriedly threw on fresh clothing before making his way back down the stairs. The door to the private parlour he'd been given was still firmly shut but the driver and footman, along with the stable hand who'd assisted them were tucked into the corner of the tap room devouring steaming bowls of stew with large tankards of ale on the table in front of them.

Young John leapt to his feet as soon as he spotted Henry and set about filling a tankard for him from behind the well-

worn bar. “Here you go, Mr. Gladstone,” he said, setting it on the table in front of where Henry had chosen his seat.

“Thank you, John.” Henry lifted it and took a sip of the surprisingly good ale. Though he shouldn’t be surprised. This little inn had some of the highest quality food and brandy he’d ever had. Why should the ale be any different? “Gentlemen, have you had your injuries seen to? I’m afraid it isn’t possible to get a doctor here yet but if the storm eases off tomorrow, I shall ride myself to fetch one.”

“Thank you, sir. That won’t be necessary.” This from the older gentleman. The driver. The blood on the man’s face had been cleaned off and Henry was relieved to see little more than a scratch and a black eye. The footman by appearances at least had fared better. He had little more than a small cut on his cheek, and one hand was bandaged.

“I cut it on the glass, sir,” the footman said when he noticed Henry’s gaze on his hand. “Trying to get the mistress out.” At the mention of the girl, the air suddenly stirred with apprehension and the two men put down their spoons as though their appetites had disappeared.

“She’s in good hands with Mrs. Davidson,” Henry reassured him. “And she awoke briefly when I lifted her so that’s an excellent sign.” He didn’t actually know if that was an excellent sign or not, but he hoped it was. “But perhaps you might tell me what happened so that we can discern what type of help she will require.”

“Lady Adeline wanted to keep going,” the driver answered, still a little shaken if the timbre of his voice was any

indication. “We were to reach her aunt’s house by this evening and the young mistress has never liked to let anyone down. Even when she was a little ‘un, she was unfailingly kind.” To Henry’s shock, the older man’s eyes filled though he blinked rapidly. “She was the sweetest little thing, sir. And she remains so even now that she is a woman full grown. His lordship didn’t want her travelling alone but he entrusted her care to me and George here. If she’s hurt or sick, I-“

He trailed off, but Henry waited patiently for him to gather himself. It was clear that the driver was fond of the girl. And that mention of ‘his lordship’ meant that his suspicions were correct. She was Quality. The wife or daughter, even sister perhaps, of a peer. It was no wonder the men were worried. Though he thought their concern was genuinely for the lady and not for their jobs.

“The weather had turned.” This from George. “And we probably should have warned her against continuing, but we thought we might be lucky to outrun the storm. It hit us so much quicker than we thought it would, sir. By the time we knew we’d have to stop it was too late. The horses couldn’t see. We were no better. I-I can’t even say for sure what happened. One minute we were in control of the horses, the next the carriage went sideways, and we were thrown from our seats. By the time I got to Lady Adeline it was too late. Her.” He stopped suddenly, clearing his throat. “Her head had come through the window, sir.” Henry winced at the image. “And there was glass everywhere. I couldn’t get her door open, so I had to pull her through the broken pane.” He held up his

bandaged hand in confirmation. “I didn’t know what to do save for lie her there.”

“How long was she unconscious before I came upon you, George?” Henry asked gently.

“Not above five minutes, sir.”

He didn’t let it show on his face given how petrified the young man looked, but five minutes in this inclement weather was plenty of time to do severe damage to the poor chit. He was about to insist that he try to get a doctor here after all when the door to the parlour opened and Mrs. Davidson stood in the frame, her hands filled with bundled material. “The young miss is awake,” she said to the palpable relief of everyone sitting at the table. “I’ll run to the kitchen and have Franny bring a fresh pot of tea. She’s groggy, but coherent and she remembers the accident.”

Henry let out a breath while John the stable lad clapped the two servants on the back. “There you are now, George, Trevor. She’ll no doubt be right as rain soon. Come, let’s get you something stronger to drink.”

Henry left the men to their whiskey and strode to wear Mrs. Davidson signalled him with a jerk of her head. “I didn’t want to worry those poor men,” she said in a whisper. “But the poor girl is covered in glass. I removed as much as I could, but I’ll have to wait until she can be bathed before doing the rest.”

The poor girl had really been through it, Henry thought.

“I have some laudanum from when my poor husband was suffering before he passed,” Mrs. Davidson continued. “Do

you think I should give her some? She's taken an awful knock to the head and shoulder. Not to mention the cut I found at her temple."

"That might be wise," Henry offered. "Mrs. Davidson, her servants are still in quite a bit of shock, but the girl is titled. A Lady Adeline. And they referred to a lordship in their explanations."

Mrs. Davidson's eyes widened. But before she could speak again, Franny called out to her from the kitchens and she hurried off, leaving the door to the parlour open, and giving Henry a direct line of sight to the huge, brown eyes staring at him from the chaise.

CHAPTER FOUR

A deline had never felt so terrible in all her life. Her head ached, her shoulder could barely move, and her entire body felt as though she'd been run over by a carriage. From what she could remember, it was highly likely that she had been.

Though her mind was fuzzy, she knew that she'd been thrown against the window of the carriage. She faintly remembered George calling out to her. But then, nothing. Nothing save for a pair of startling storm-grey eyes and the feeling of being held against something solid and heated, despite the frigid air.

Oblivion had swept her away once again before she could even begin to guess at who or what was carrying her, and the next time she'd woken she was lying in a strange room while someone she couldn't see piled blanket after blanket atop her. It was only when she was covered up to her nose that she realized her entire body was shaking with cold. And that only caused the pain to worsen.

“Wh-what happened?” she'd croaked. A kindly face, one she vaguely recognised though she couldn't quite place it,

appeared over the back of the chaise.

“Oh, you’re awake, thank God.”

Adeline would have frowned in confusion, but her head had been too sore. “You gave us all quite the fright you know,” the older lady continued. “The menfolk will be so happy to hear that you’re awake. Now, can you tell me what happened, dear?”

It took Adeline a couple of minutes to remember and when she did, she tried to bolt upright but there were so many blankets on her that she barely managed it. Even that small movement had her head swimming alarmingly. “George,” she said hoarsely. “And Trevor, my driver. Are they – are they hurt?”

“Shh, shh,” the woman soothed, pushing her gently back to lie on the cushioned chaise. “Not to worry, they’re right as rain and being well looked after. I am Mrs. Davidson, and you’ve been brought to my inn. Now, I can see you getting upset so why don’t you lie still, and I’ll bring you a nice cup of tea? I can answer all your questions once you’ve rested.”

She was up and gone before Adeline could even answer. But any thought she had of calling the innkeeper back emptied from her head when a tall, broad gentleman appeared beside Mrs. Davidson. Adeline could only watch as he conversed with the innkeeper, nodding and whispering, his face a mask of serious stoicism.

Her eyes raked over him, the dark hair, the huge shoulders encased in a charcoal superfine, the lighter grey breeches tucked into shiny black Hessians. He was the epitome of a

polished gentleman. Certainly not, for example, Mrs. Davidson's husband or son. Not from the way she was deferring to him.

Adeline was about to call out when Mrs. Davidson toddled off and the gentleman turned to stare directly at her. Storm grey eyes. The eyes she'd gazed into before that blessed nothingness overcame her again.

He'd rescued her. He'd carried her here, to this inn.

"My lady." He took a slow, cautious step into the room as though she were a skittish mare. "Forgive my boldness in addressing you but you've given us all quite the scare and I must insist on seeing with my own eyes that you are well. If only to put your servants at ease."

Adeline realised she was still staring when his face went from polite concern to confusion, and she quickly pasted a smile onto her mouth.

"Of course, thank you. Come in. I mean, come in please. And thank you for-for rescuing me. Not for – coming in." *Good gad, Adeline, shut UP*, she told herself sternly, feeling her cheeks heat with embarrassment.

She was rambling and she sounded like a dolt. Plus, she had no doubt that she looked as though she'd been dragged through a particularly unforgiving hedge with her hair askew and her entire body swamped with blankets and Mrs. Davidson's far too big night rail.

To his credit, the gentleman didn't scoff at her babbling. Rather, he bowed slightly, a smile hovering around his lips.

They were beautiful lips, she acknowledged silently, but that was of no matter of course.

“It was my pleasure,” he said in answer to her incoherent blathering.

“Are Trevor and George well?” she asked before she could get distracted by him. Her brain was growing fuzzier by the second and she needed to know that her foolish decision hadn’t caused them any harm.

“They are quite well, Lady Adeline. No grievous injuries to report, and they have been fed and watered to the best of Mrs. Davidson’s ability. They were far more concerned with you and your wellbeing, I assure you.”

The relief she felt was overwhelming and to Adeline’s horror, she felt tears prick at the back of her eyes. “That is wonderful,” she sniffled. “I-I’m sorry, I was just so worried.” She felt a tear track down her cheek but her arms were practically glued to her sides with the weight of her blankets so she couldn’t even move one to wipe it away.

The gentlemen strode forward, pulling a pristine handkerchief from his pocket and holding it out to her.

“I’m stuck,” she mumbled miserably, her throat aching from trying to hold in her tears.

He frowned in confusion before his expression cleared and he smiled at her, his face stamped with kindness. “Then allow me, my lady.”

To Adeline’s shock, he dropped to his haunches beside her and reached out, wiping away the tear, and another that had

escaped, with the handkerchief.

“T-thank you,” she muttered, embarrassed and sore, tired, and emotional. “I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m not usually such a watering pot.”

He chuckled softly, his breath skimming her cheek. “I’d warrant you have every reason to cry, my lady. And you’re being terribly brave. I know plenty of women who would be inconsolable if faced with even half of what you’ve experienced this evening. And certainly, none who would be more concerned with their servants than with themselves. That is too your credit and nothing to be ashamed of.”

His kindness made her want to cry even harder but then she realised something and got a hold of herself. “You know who I am?” she asked curiously. She was sure she hadn’t given him her name what with fainting every two minutes and crying in between times.

“Your servants told me,” he answered patiently.

Oh, well of course. That made sense. Lord, her head was fuzzy.

“I’ve disturbed you long enough,” he said, standing to his full, considerable height. “Mrs. Davidson has gone to fetch some tea and medicine.” He ran an eye over her, the stormy gaze lingering on her mouth. She might have thought it a little exciting, even romantic, if he didn’t suddenly glower. “Are you still cold?” he asked, his voice more demanding than the gentle tone he’d been using thus far, and she had the mad thought that she was in trouble.

“Um, yes?” she answered sheepishly.

He muttered under his breath, an oath of some kind if she wasn't mistaken. Striding out of her line of sight, he returned a moment later with a tumbler of what appeared to be brandy in hand.

“May I help you sit up, my lady? So that you can drink this without it spilling on you?”

“I don't like brandy,” she answered swiftly. She remembered a time not too long ago when curiosity had gotten the better of her and she'd down half a glass after sneaking into her father's study. She'd been immediately sick and had learned that she wasn't cut out for the stuff.

The gentleman raised a brow. “You've had it before then?”

“Once,” she answered with a shudder. “And I don't care to repeat the experience.”

His laugh was beautiful, Adeline thought distractedly. Melodious and slightly gruff. It caused her stomach to flip in the oddest way and despite the terror of the last couple of hours she found herself feeling oddly peaceful.

“I won't pry,” he said, “though I will have to insist on hearing the story when you're feeling better. Right now, however, we need to get you warmer, and this is the quickest way to do that. You were in the snow for quite a while and we can't have you falling ill, can we?”

Adeline dutifully shook her head in answer. Though even that movement caused a lance of pain that had her wincing. His eyes snapped to her own immediately. And once again, the

teasing almost flirtatious tone disappeared, replaced with a no-nonsense sternness that was hard to argue with.

He placed the tumbler on the floor beside the chaise then leaned over, giving her a whiff of a spicy, masculine scent that made her stomach flip again. “May I?” he asked. She didn’t trust her voice all of a sudden, so Adeline merely nodded. “I’ll be gentle,” he said before reaching under the covers. His hands were large and warm, and Adeline’s cheeks flamed alarmingly at the contact of his skin against the cotton of Mrs. Davidson’s nightgown. There was nothing improper in his touch, save for the fact that it was happening at all in a room with nobody else about. But her skin sizzled as though he’d stripped her naked.

And just where had that thought come from?

Before she could question her sanity or sudden wantonness, he’d lifted her into a sitting position, and piled cushions behind her back. The loosening of the blankets freed up her hands and she took them out, shocked by how pale and blue her skin looked.

She frowned at them before moving her gaze back up to the gentleman’s. The grey of his own was already trained on her and Adeline didn’t move a single muscle as he lifted a hand and grazed his knuckles along her cheek.

“You’re freezing,” he said, his voice low and husky.

She didn’t know what to say, didn’t know why she was rendered dumb by that merest of touches, but she was. She sat utterly enthralled, completely captured in his gaze, for what could have been seconds or eons. And she didn’t know if she

would have looked away before he broke the connection and reached down for the tumbler.

The strange attraction she felt paled in comparison to her disgust as she eyed the amber liquid, and his laugh brushed her cheek yet again. “Come now, it’s not that bad.”

“I can assure you it is,” she countered.

“Small sips,” he coaxed, pressing the glass into her hand. “Just a few. You can take your time, but it will warm you up like nothing else.”

Adeline realised he was right. She knew the dangers of exposure and she didn’t want to arrive at Aunt Leonora’s half dead. So, heaving a long-suffering sigh, she brought the tumbler to her lips and took a tentative sip. Unable to keep from making a face at the taste, she took another and then one more before deciding that was enough and thrusting it back into his hand. Though disgusting as it was, she could admit that the feeling of it coursing through her body and into her stomach was rather pleasant.

“More?” the gentleman offered, holding the glass out to her once again.

“Fine,” she huffed before taking three more sips.

The liquid sloshed quite pleasantly in her stomach, and she covered a yawn with her hand.

“Well, that looks as though it’s doing the trick,” he said wryly, putting the now empty glass on the floor beside her. “Mrs. Davidson has gone to fetch you some tea and laudanum

though you don't look as though you'll stay awake long enough to manage the tea."

"Perhaps I can have it tomorrow," she agreed sleepily as she lay back fully against the cushions.

"I'll go and check on the medicine," he answered. Just as he reached the door, Adeline remembered to call out.

"Wait." He turned to look at her, that pewter gaze boring into her. "What's your name?"

"Henry," he answered. "Henry Gladstone. I'm –"

He hesitated, some emotion she couldn't discern flickering across his face. She was too tired to question it or to even fully wonder why it was there.

"I'm just Henry."

She smiled at that. "Well, goodnight Just Henry. And thank you."

She was asleep before she heard if he answered her or not.

CHAPTER FIVE

Henry stood outside the parlour while awaiting the return of Mrs. Davidson. He felt uncomfortable, as though he'd been dishonest with the lady inside. He *was* just Henry. But, well the fact that she was clearly a member of the ton meant that she was likely to recognise the title of Briarcastle should he give it, and he didn't want that particular complication cropping up between them. Not least until he knew that she was well and had no long-lasting injuries.

Being Just Henry was infinitely less complicated than being the long lost Briarcastle heir. And if it happened that she knew the family, which was highly likely given her own title, it would just make everything worse. For one thing, she would worry about the propriety of their situation and for another, well, he felt a sense of duty to his uncle's widow. Surely he owed it to this Lady Briarcastle to tell her that he was here before anyone else.

No, it was best kept to himself. Hopefully by tomorrow the storm would have cleared up enough for him to fetch a doctor for Lady Adeline and for him to continue to the estate that was somehow his. For now, though, he'd help Mrs. Davidson help

get Lady Adeline upstairs and then try to get some much-needed sleep.

If this evening served any purpose, it had distracted him somewhat from his own mess and miraculously cleared up his headache.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew Henry's attention and Mrs. Davidson bustled over, a tray in hand.

"Lady Adeline has fallen asleep," he said, keeping his voice low. "But I think if you can get the laudanum into her, it will only help."

"Very well," she answered. "If you don't mind, Mr. Gladstone, I shall need some help getting her to her room. I've put her beside your own. I know it's rather unorthodox, but her poor servants were dead on their feet, so I've sent them off to with John to find shelter and sleep."

"I don't mind at all, Mrs. Davidson," he answered smoothly. "The situation is beyond any of our control and the lady's comfort is more important than any sense of propriety. I'll help you get her settled and leave her to your care."

She nodded her thanks then hurried into the room. Setting the tray on the dining table, she plucked the bottle of laudanum and a spoon from it before creeping over to the sleeping lady. With the practised movements of someone who'd done it a hundred times before, she sat at the edge of the chaise and tipped a spoonful of the medicine into Lady Adeline's mouth without spilling a drop. Henry bit back a grin as the girl scowled just as she had when she'd sniffed at the

brandy. But at least this time those expressive eyes of hers were closed so he wouldn't get distracted by them again.

“That should see her through the night,” Mrs. Davidson said, putting the cork back in the bottle and standing up. “But I'll stay close by just in case.”

“Mrs. Davidson, you need to rest,” Henry said taking in the woman's tired appearance. She'd already retired when he'd sounded the alarm for help, and he knew she kept frightfully early hours. “If Lady Adeline is in the room next to mine, I can listen out for her. I assure you I mean her no ill will and shan't enter her bedchamber without you. If she awakens in the night, I can come for you directly.”

He knew it was presumptuous of him. Knew that the woman had no reason to trust him but something inside him couldn't leave this fragile young woman in the hands of someone else.

The innkeeper searched his face for a moment and Henry found himself wondering what she was looking for. Eventually, she nodded and smiled. “That would be immensely helpful, thank you Mr. Gladstone. Perhaps you would be so kind as to help me bring the lady upstairs?”

Henry gladly hurried to do Mrs. Davidson's bidding and within seconds, Lady Adeline was back in his arms, with as many blankets as he could fit his arms around still swaddling her. He ran his eyes over her face, noting with no small amount of relief that though she was still incredibly pale, the blue tinge had left her lips. In fact, the brandy she so despised appeared to have pinkened her cheeks ever so slightly. That or

her proximity to the fire. Either way, he was pleased to see she looked less like a ghost than she had earlier.

It took only moments for them to arrive at the bedchamber beside his own. Henry stood back to allow Mrs. Davidson to open the door then followed her inside.

The room was a mirror image of his own. A fireplace, a small table and two chairs, a tub tucked discreetly into the corner. The bed was flush against the wall. The same wall against which his own bed rested in the other room. That was good, he thought. He should be able to hear if she cried out in the night with only a relatively thin wall between them. The fire was roaring in the hearth just as Mrs. Davidson had promised it would be, and the room was pleasantly toasty as a result.

Henry walked toward the bed, careful not to jostle the woman in his arms too much. He waited while the innkeeper pulled back the coverlet then gently placed Lady Adeline onto the mattress, ensuring that the blankets stayed around her before standing back to allow Mrs. Davidson to tuck her in properly. Throughout it all, the lady slept, her soft breaths sending a lock of mahogany hair fluttering across her cheek.

Once they were sure she was comfortable, they tip-toed from the room, with Henry shutting the door behind them as softly as possible.

“Well,” Mrs. Davidson said, “that was a rather eventful evening, wasn’t it?”

Henry could only huff a tired laugh in response. “You could say that, yes,” he responded. “But it had a good ending

so we can thank God for that.”

“Indeed,” the woman agreed vehemently. “After all, I don’t know if poor Lady Briarcastle could stand another bout of bad news.”

Henry felt his entire body go still with shock even while his brain struggled to make sense of what Mrs. Davidson had just said. Surely not. The Fates could not have thrown such a thing his way.

“Lady Briarcastle?”

“Yes, the dowager countess. Oh, the poor lady. She lost her husband some time back and they’ve been on the hunt for the man’s heir ever since. The last I heard the lady’s son-in-law was taking care of the search for her. Lady Adeline is the countess’s niece. Her brother’s girl. I recognised the name straight away and then of course when I got a good look at her, I remembered. A lovely young lady. She’s been coming to Briarcastle for the holidays since she was a babe in arms. Usually with her father, the Earl of Darmount. I can’t think what brought the poor thing up here alone, especially at this time of year. But at least she’s safe, thank heavens. We shan’t have to send word to the Abbey about another family tragedy.”

Henry could only stare, his mind reeling, as Mrs. Davidson chattered away oblivious to his inner shock and turmoil.

There was so much to think about what she had said. So many questions, both answered and unanswered. Yet for some reason, his mind kept circling back to one, insistent thought. Even though it had no relevance to him or his situation, even

though it was the last thing that he should be thinking of, his still couldn't help but voice the niggling question.

“You say she is Lady Briarcastle's niece on her brother's side?” He tried to keep his voice as calm and even as possible. “So, she is not a blood relative of the late Earl of Briarcastle?”

If Mrs. Davidson was surprised by his question, she didn't show it. Merely shrugged as she began to take her leave. “No, only a niece through marriage. The countess will be glad to have her here,” she continued oblivious to Henry's reeling thoughts. Though if this storm doesn't abate, it might be quite a while before she sees her aunt.”

With a quick curtsy the innkeeper took her leave and Henry was left alone in the darkened corner, his mind spinning with everything he'd just heard. But one thought was more prominent than the rest. Why had he cared about whether the girl in that room was his cousin? And why was he so relieved to find that she wasn't?



ADELINE AWOKE to a blinding white light and wondered for a panicked moment where she was. This was not her bedchamber with its gold wall hangings and powder blue coverlet. Wherever this was it was pleasant and clean but a far cry from her luxurious rooms at Papa's manor house.

She blinked rapidly, trying, and failing to clear her muzzy thoughts. Her head felt as though someone had taken a blunt object and bashed her with it. Her throat was dryer than a

desert under a midday sun. And when she turned her head toward the window which was the source of the offending light, her shoulder and neck protested in the most painful of manners.

Squinting against the pain in her head, she gazed out the crack in unfamiliar curtains covering an unfamiliar window. All she saw was white. Dense, thick white and for a moment the sight confused her even more.

But as she lay there, slowly the night before came back to her. The carriage ride, her body wracked with shivering cold. The blood and glass in her hair. The pain and terror. And then a pair of stormy eyes and strong arms. The scent of spice and sandalwood. A wicked smile, warm brandy, and blankets. And then, blessed nothingness.

It was all there.

She lifted a tentative hand to her hair, wincing as she felt grit and mud, perhaps even glass, smattered among the locks. She felt sick and sore and grimy. But above all else, she felt parched.

Flinching at the pain, she turned her head slowly to look around the room. It was small but pleasant and clean. A fire had obviously lit the hearth the night before, for there will still embers there now, glowing orange and keeping the room warm. Not that she needed it. The blankets she'd almost drowned in last night were still atop her, making her feel as though she couldn't catch a proper breath.

She gritted her teeth against the throbbing in her skull and turned toward the table at her bedside upon which sat a pitcher

and an empty glass. Water. She was suddenly desperate for some. It took a considerable effort for her to extract an arm from the cocoon of blankets and by the time she managed it, she was weak and panting.

This was a disaster! Aunt Leonora was expected her hale and hearty and what she would get instead would be a bedraggled, injured mess. Well, if any good was to come of it, at least she knew that whomever her aunt had lined up as potential husbands, they would be sure to find her unattractive to say the least.

Pushing the nonsensical thoughts from her head, she reached out a shaky hand toward the pitcher. But she couldn't reach the datted thing. Sighing in frustration, she wiggled and twisted herself into a sitting position, sweat beading her brow by the time she'd managed even that small fete. This was no use. She wouldn't be able to travel in this condition, even if the weather decided to be more cooperative today. And she needed to be well in case Trevor or George needed assistance. It was her fault they were in this position after all.

Plus, she should probably send word to Papa. From what little she remembered; he'd be needing to purchase a new carriage. So, there was plenty to do and not much time in which to do it. Which meant she had to be able to perform a simple task like pouring a glass of water.

Gritting her teeth determinedly, she reached out once more to grab hold of the jug. She smiled to herself when she grasped the handle, but her triumph was short lived, for as soon as she lifted it from the table she lost control of it completely, the

weakness in her hand catching her by surprise, the effort of trying to catch it leaving her breathless.

She could only watch in dismay as it tumbled to the floor, crashing against the wooden boards so loudly it could wake the dead. Mumbling to herself about her own idiocy, Adeline was about to make the Herculean attempt of getting out of bed to clean up her mess when suddenly the door to her bedchamber burst open, slamming against the wall, and causing her to shriek in fright.

She stared in amazement as the gentleman from last night filled the doorway, his face a mask of concern, his broad shoulders filling the frame and dwarfing everything around him.

“My lady, are you well?” His voice was gruff and laced with worry.

And suddenly Adeline was breathless for an entirely different reason.

CHAPTER SIX

Henry hadn't slept a wink last night. He'd tried to, once Mrs. Davidson had taken her leave. But his mind had been racing with the information that the innkeeper had shared, and with concern for the young lady lying fast asleep in the room beside his own.

In the end, he'd been so on edge listening for any little noise that he'd taken the wooden chair from his room and set up camp outside Lady Adeline's. It hadn't been a total waste of time, either. For when the young maid came by to reset the fires, Henry had been able to send her away, instructing her to let the lady sleep. If the maid thought it unusual that he was sitting in a rickety old chair outside the room, she gave no indication, merely bobbed a curtsy, and went on her way.

He must have dozed off soon after for the sound of something loud hitting the floor had him jumping out of his skin and darting to the door before he could so much as breathe.

A quick perusal told him that everything was fine and his oddly racing heart calmed down as they stared at each other across the room.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, her voice husky from sleep. “I wanted a drink and, well-“ She waved a hand toward the mess on the floor, but Henry only spared it a glance. He was too busy taking stock of her. She was still pale, yes but definitely not blue any longer. The daylight showed more bruises this morning, one particularly bad near her temple though she didn’t seem confused which was a good sign.

He hadn’t yet had a chance to check outside but if the howling wind was any indication, the storm had yet to abate. And it might be next to impossible to get a doctor here, though he would try to if she needed it.

“I was just about to clean it up,” she continued when he didn’t speak.

“Don’t worry about it,” he answered. Now that he could see she was relatively well his heart had stopped racing. “Allow me to fetch you some fresh water and call Mrs. Davidson to see to you.”

A smile lit up her face and he felt an odd punch in his gut at the sight of it. “You are very kind, Mr. Gladstone. How fortunate for me that we happened to be travelling at the same time or goodness knows what would have befallen me.”

Henry answered her smile with a weak one of his own before taking his leave to find Mrs. Davidson. Little did Adeline know that it wasn’t coincidence that had them on the same path, but a mutual destination. He should tell her who he was, he knew. But something was holding him back. For some utterly bizarre reason, he was loathe to be anyone other than Henry to her. He didn’t want to be the Earl of Briarcastle. He

didn't want to be the heir that her aunt had been searching for. As he'd told her last night when she'd asked for his name, he wanted to be just Henry.

Entering the main room of the inn, he spotted Mrs. Davidson sweeping the flagstones while John cleaned out the giant hearth. It seemed as though the young man was more than just a stable lad then. He found himself oddly glad that the innkeeper had an extra pair of hands to help.

"Mrs. Davidson," he called out. "Our patient is awake and I'm afraid she lost a battle with a water jug. Might you have a replacement? And perhaps some breakfast? I'm sure she's hungry."

"Of course, Mr. Gladstone. I'll see to her right away. Won't you take a seat in the dining parlour, and I'll have some breakfast brought to you, too?"

Henry bowed his thanks then made his way to the room he'd procured the day before. All evidence of their rescue of Lady Adeline had been cleaned up and the place was back to its immaculate self. It was unorthodox to say the least, the way this stay had played out. As was his mad desire to go and break his fast with the lady upstairs though of course he knew he couldn't.

He couldn't quite put his finger on what fascinated him so. It wasn't her beauty, striking as it was. He'd met many a pretty girl and base creature that he was, he hadn't exactly lived like a monk. Perhaps it was some sort of hero complex, and he enjoyed her being a damsel whom he'd saved from distress.

But something told him that she was perfectly capable of fending for herself whether he was there or not.

Maybe it was because now he knew she was a connection to that elusive future of his and she helped it feel more real. Either way, he seemed to want to be around her more than he usually wanted to be around other people. Especially of the single, marrying age variety. Usually that meant there was an ambitious mother floating around somewhere close. And now that he was apparently a peer of the realm, that would only get worse for him.

Deciding that his thoughts were too circuitous to sit still awaiting his breakfast, Henry decided to make his way outside to check on the weather and the horses. He really needed to name his new steed, he thought distractedly. Perhaps he'd ask Lady Adeline for her suggestion.

Finding his greatcoat freshly cleaned and dried, though how Mrs. Davidson had managed the fete was beyond him, he quickly donned it before hurrying to the doors that would lead to the courtyard. The first thing he noticed was how difficult it was to unbolt them. The second, when he finally got them open, was that they were still right in the eye of the storm. The wind shrieked and wailed as loudly as before but it was the snow that concerned him. It had deepened now to well beyond his knees and the flurries showed no sign of slowing. It would be three days at the very least before any of them could leave this place. And that was only if the blizzard ended soon which didn't look in any way likely.

There was a distinctive track through the snow leading to the stables, so he knew the horses were being cared for but other than that, there wasn't a sign of life anywhere to be seen.

Heading back inside, he caught Mrs. Davidson on her way out of his parlour.

"Mrs. Davidson, I've just gotten a look at the weather outside. I'm no expert but it doesn't look to me as though it will let up any time soon. I wanted to check that you have enough provisions for us all?"

"Oh, not to worry, Mr. Gladstone. The snow is keeping the usual amounts away, but I've accounted for a busy travelling season. Besides, we are well used to bad weather this far north. I've enough to see us through a full half a year, let alone a week or two."

"Ah. I'm glad to hear it," Henry said a little sheepishly. "I'm afraid that hailing from the West Indies means I'm not quite *au fait* with English weather."

"Well, you're in good hands, sir. Now, your breakfast is all laid out. If you'll excuse me, the young lady feels up for a bath, so I'll take my leave of you for now."

She hurried off in that busy way of hers and Henry entered the parlour to dine on the feast she'd laid out. Once again, he marvelled at the older woman's capabilities. How she'd had time to see to both he and Lady Adeline, clean the place from top to bottom, dry his clothing *and* fix eggs, bacon, fresh bread, and strong coffee, he didn't know but he was grateful all the same. That maid of hers must be quite the helping hand.

Henry ate his breakfast and contemplated the next few days. Perhaps even week or two as Mrs. Davidson had suggested. There would be no newspapers delivered and no way to get messages to either Briarcastle or his men of business, never mind to his mother overseas. Equally, Lady Adeline would have no way of getting word to her father or aunt. He wondered how worried they would be when she didn't show up, or if they would reason that the storm kept her away. And he wondered what he would do when the storm passed, and she realised they were both heading to the same place.

Still, he supposed he'd get his answers soon enough given that there was nothing to do here. They'd have to get to know each other better or silently ignore each other for their entire stay and that wasn't really an option. For one thing, it would be unpardonably rude and for another, frankly he didn't *want* to avoid her. Getting to know the lovely Lady Adeline better was more than a little intriguing.

Once he'd finished his meal, Henry found himself wandering a little aimlessly. He checked in with John and the horses but didn't stay long since Adeline's servants had made themselves comfortable in the lodgings. After a brief chat with the men who were doing a stellar job taking care of the spooked animals, he spent a good half an hour grooming his stallion and getting to know the horse. Even slipping him some oats to keep him happy. The horse had been bred for speed and movement and was making his dissatisfaction with being cooped up in a tiny stall very obvious. But after some attention and outright bribery, he seemed to settle.

With little else to do, Henry left the men playing cards over an upturned haybale and headed back inside the inn. There he found the servant girl, Franny, waiting with a message that Lady Adeline had requested his presence in her bedchamber.

He studied the girl closely for any sign that she would gossip about the lady requesting the presence of a man who wasn't her husband or a relative in her private bedchamber, but the girl looked open and unconcerned. Indeed, there was something of a camaraderie between them all in this little inn though the servants usually stayed out of his way. At least with Lady Adeline he'd have company.

Suddenly eager to see her, he thanked Franny then hurried upstairs. The door was closed when he approached their shared landing and he felt strangely nervous as he took a breath and rapped on the wood.

Her voice sounded clear and steady as she called for him to enter. That was surely a good sign. Taking another, deeper breath he twisted the handle and stepped inside.

The room was warm but not stiflingly hot. That was the first thing Henry noticed. The second was that it smelt of lavender and rose. The scent was feminine and tantalising, stunning him for a moment before he spotted Lady Adeline, not in the bed covered in blankets but sitting by the fireplace. And he was stunning all over again.

The fire had cast a healthy flush upon her cheeks and her hair, freshly washed and pinned away from her face, was a riot

of reds and deep, chocolate browns. A few loose tendrils fell towards her shoulders which were covered in a woollen shawl.

“George salvaged one of my trunks,” she said by way of greeting, waving a hand over a sage green walking dress under the paisley shawl. “But Mrs. Davidson didn’t think anything I had was warm enough, so she’s insisted I wear this over my gowns and I daren’t disobey her.”

Henry laughed at her wide-eyed expression. Those eyes of hers would be all too easy to get lost in, he thought. Outwardly, however, he merely nodded solemnly. “That sounds imminently sensible,” he said. Then, when the silence had stretched a little, he took a step further into the room. “You are looking well, all things considered,” he said. “But are you sure you should be out of bed so soon?”

“Only with express permission from Mrs. Davidson,” she said, a soft smile playing around her mouth as though his question pleased her. “Truth be told, I think I was in danger of suffocation under all those blankets. It’s safer for me out here on the chair. And tis little more than a trifling headache in any case.”

“The excessive blankets might have been my fault,” he admitted. “When I carried you up to bed, I was so terrified that you’d freeze in the night, I carried all the blankets with you.”

Her cheeks grew even more flushed, and he realised he’d set her to a blush. It made him inordinately pleased and suddenly he wanted to see how much he could do it.

“Thank you,” she answered a little primly. “For, well, for all of it. Truly, I shudder to think what might have become of

me had you not done all that carrying, blankets and all. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for saving me."

"You are very welcome," he said. "And infinitely worth saving."

Ah, another blush. This was an enjoyable new game he'd found.

"As for how to rest," he continued, moving closer to where she sat. "I've been outside and I'm afraid it looks as though we'll be snowed in here together for quite some time. So, I have an idea of exactly how you can repay me."

He stopped at her chair, watching the way the firelight danced across her face, the way her lips popped open in a tempting oh. But before she could slap him or demand that he take his leave for such vulgarity, he continued. "How are you at chess?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Adeline had never considered herself a particularly competitive person but having lost to Mr. Gladstone in two games of chess and just been roundly trounced in their third of backgammon she decided that she very much did not like to lose.

She blamed the gentleman sitting across from her at the small wooden table by the window of her room. Not because he was particularly skilled in either, though she had to reluctantly admit that he *was*, but because he was so distracting that she couldn't keep her mind on any game that they played.

When he'd first suggested that she repay him, she'd shocked herself by her wanton thoughts in response to that gravelly tone, that mischievous glint in his eye. He'd put her in mind of a jungle cat, prowling and dangerous yet intoxicatingly seductive. It had been something of a disappointment to hear that he only wanted her for chess and backgammon.

She hadn't been able to concentrate for this entire afternoon. Her eyes were too busy drinking in his broad

shoulders, his large hands, that lock of dark hair that fell across his brow while he'd been contemplating his next move.

Every so often she caught the scent of sandalwood which inevitably led to her making a silly mistake. And every time he laughed at her cross face or whispered, decidedly unladylike oath, her stomach did the most peculiar flipflop as though it were filled with rioting butterflies.

In fact, she'd been so enamoured of him that she hadn't noticed the time slip away and was surprised when Franny, the shy but friendly maid, arrived with a tray of lunch things.

She watched, ridiculously disappointed as Mr. Gladstone stood to take his leave but knew that she couldn't very well ask him to stay. They were already crossing boundaries that would have her utterly ruined if anyone were to ever find out. There was no point in making it worse for herself.

Besides, though she was loathe to admit it, she was growing weary from sitting up for hours, and her head was starting to pound unpleasantly.

"Thank you for a most entertaining morning, my lady," Mr. Gladstone said, a smug grin stamped across his face. "I do so enjoy winning."

She scowled up at him, not missing the way Franny was biting her lip to keep from laughing.

"You are most welcome, Mr. Gladstone," she said, her voice sickly sweet. "I am glad you don't appear to be one of those gentlemen who insists on winning with honour, it can so tiresome dealing with all that morality."

“Forgive me, Lady Adeline. But it sounds as though you think I’ve won *dishonourably*, though I’m sure that cannot be.”

“Oh, not at all, Mr. Gladstone. I am merely pointing out that most gentlemen of my acquaintance might consider it something of an embarrassment, besting a grievously ill woman in games of chess and backgammon.”

His mouth twitched. “Grievously ill,” he repeated with faux solemnity. “And here I thought it was nothing more than a trifling headache.”

“Yes, well,” she sniffed piously. “One doesn’t like to complain too loudly. It’s unladylike.”

His loud chuckle reverberated around the room and set her heart fluttering wildly, traitorous thing that it was.

“And you are so gracious in defeat, the epitome of a lady, one might say.”

She merely raised a brow at him.

“But you make a good point, Lady Adeline. And I should never like to have my honour called into question. Perhaps this evening, after you’ve rested, we might play again. And this time, we can make it a little more interesting.”

She had no idea what he meant by that but before she could question him, he’d bowed and swept from the room. All through her lunch of pheasant pie and strong, sweet tea, Adeline wondered what could make their games more exciting. But she knew that whatever it was, she was already excited for it.

Still, as she allowed Franny to help her into the bed for a much-needed rest, she couldn't shake the almost unhealthy need to beat him. "Franny," she said as she lay back against the pillow. "How good are you at backgammon?"

The maid stifled a smile. "I'm afraid I never learned to play, my lady," she said apologetically.

Adeline sighed in defeat.

"Don't worry, my lady," Franny continued as she collected Adeline's lunch tray and made her way to the door. "There are plenty of ways a lady as bonny as you might get one up on the gentleman."

"There are? Can you tell me what they might be?" she asked but the maid merely shook her head.

"You'll figure it out soon enough, I'm sure," she answered cryptically before shutting the door with a soft click.



HENRY COULDN'T SEEM to keep the grin from his face for the rest of the afternoon. Indeed, all through lunch he laughed to himself at the memory of Lady Adeline's utter disgust every time she lost. She was a manipulative little thing calling his honour as a gentleman into question just because she was a sore loser. But, he admitted, it worked. Because he was desperate to win that honour back.

Though that likely had more to do with wanting to spend time with her again than any real concern for his moral compass.

He'd ended up eating dinner with John, and Adeline's two servants since there seemed little sense in standing on ceremony when he was the inn's only guest apart from the grievously injured sore loser upstairs. And it had been a most enjoyable meal, too. He'd learned about Briarcastle in a way that was only possible with those who lived with or knew the people below stairs. He learned about Adeline's father, too, and the type of household she'd grown up in.

It was clear that the staff held a real fondness for their mistress. Just as it was clear that Briarcastle was a well run and happy place to be, at least according to these men and the servants with whom they were acquainted. Even John the stable boy had only good things to say about the place.

By the time the meal was done, and Henry was enjoying a glass of port and a cheroot, the place didn't seem quite so daunting, the task of being earl quite so insurmountable.

He watched the seconds tick by painfully slowly until he decided enough time had passed since dinner had been served before he could once again call in on Lady Adeline.

As soon as she was well enough, he would of course stop going to her bedchamber. But for now, he wouldn't have her risk her health for the sake of propriety.

He met Mrs. Davidson on her way out of Lady Adeline's room.

“Ah, good timing, Mr. Gladstone, I've just settled her ladyship into bed, but she insisted on being unable to sleep until she's bested you in a game of some sort. She was quite adamant about it, and I thought it best not to upset her.”

Henry couldn't contain his laugh. He never would have guessed that the sweet, grateful lady had such a stubborn streak, and he could admit that it made her all the more intriguing.

"Not to worry, Mrs. Davidson," he answered making sure his voice was loud enough to carry. "I'll beat her in one more game of backgammon and then insist that she rests."

Even from out here he heard her snort of derision. He could see Mrs. Davidson eyeing him speculatively, but he wasn't in the mood to answer any prying questions, so he avoided her gaze while bidding her adieu, then slipped into Lady Adeline's bedchamber. He made sure to leave the door open, of course. Not least because he didn't want to be tempted to cross any lines.

"Good evening, my lady." He struggled to keep his countenance smooth when he spotted the unmistakable light of battle in her eyes.

"Good evening, Mr. Gladstone. Shall we start?"

This time, a bark of laughter escaped him. She was sitting regal as a queen on a throne, the look ruined a little by the fact that she was tucked back into the bed, Mrs. Davidson's too big night rail swamping her, with the backgammon board resting on her legs.

"Mrs. Davidson said I wasn't allowed out of bed until morning," she said by way of explanation. "And I had to promise to listen before she'd leave."

“If you’d like, we can just pretend you’ve won. Nobody but us would know.” Her gasp was filled with outrage.

“I would never do such a thing,” she sniffed.

“Ah, I forgot I was speaking to a paragon of honour,” he quipped in response.

Though outwardly he was charming and jovial, Henry knew that he would be playing a very dangerous game by shifting closer to that bed. He might have been more concerned with her safety and health than anything else last night and even this morning. But she was looking better by the second and he was just a man, with all the weakness for a beautiful young woman that came with the territory.

“But I’m afraid it might be rather difficult to play on a bed.” Christ, even uttering such a thing made his mind swim with dark, ungentlemanlike thoughts and that was when he knew for certainty he couldn’t go anywhere *near* that bed.

Lady Adeline’s sigh was deep and long-suffering. She looked up at the ceiling before pinning him with that chocolate-brown stare that was fast becoming irresistible. “Mr. Gladstone,” she started. “I’m not proud of this but I won’t be able to sleep a wink if I don’t win at least one game of something tonight.”

“We all have our flaws, my lady,” he said, earning himself another scowl.

“How about a compromise of sorts?” he asked.

“A compromise?”

“Mmhm. Something that you could win as easily as you lose that won’t require a board.” *And won’t bring me anywhere near you lying in that bed*, he tacked on silently.

“Very well. What is it?”

Grinning, Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out a crown. “A good, old-fashioned coin toss,” he said. “You can call it. Cross or pile.”

She didn’t look impressed. “And if I call it correctly, what do I get?”

He thought about it, brutally pushing away those errant, improper images. “You can ask me for any truth or favour.”

He could tell the idea intrigued her. “And if I call it *incorrectly*, what do you get?”

Henry knew it was his overactive imagination but to him, her voice sounded huskier, filled with invitation. He needed to clear his throat before he could answer, and even then, the silence stretched paper thin.

“I get to call you Adeline,” he said softly. “No titles. No family names.” He smiled, recalling last night when he’d told her he was Just Henry.

She remembered too, for she met his smile with one of her own. “Just Henry,” she said. “And Just Adeline?”

“If the fates are on my side,” he answered.

“Very well then. I call cross.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

For three days now, they'd been playing cross or pile and for three days, Adeline hadn't won a single coin toss.

After the first few tries, she'd demanded to inspect his coin. After the next few, she'd insisted on using one of her own. It was no use. The fates were well and truly against her.

Outside, the snow had eased a little but not enough for them to leave. Inside, she was secretly glad of it.

Though her chest tightened with guilt every time she thought about Aunt Leonora worrying about her, she couldn't help but enjoy every second of the days she spent here in this snowed-in, quiet inn. Mrs. Davidson and her staff were unfailingly kind. The food was excellent, the rooms warm and clean. George and Trevor had indeed recovered from the accident with little more than bruises and scratches. Even George's hand had healed remarkably well. They seemed content to take care of the horses and drink Mrs. Davidson's taps dry.

Best of all, Mr. Gladstone, or Henry was, well whatever made her heart speed up every time he looked at her, whatever made her stomach tighten and her core throb with the

strangest, most wickedly delicious need when he winked at her – that’s what he was.

One of his demands when he’d won a coin toss had been for her to call him Henry. Then he’d decided that he would call her Addy since he’d won the chance to call her Adeline three days ago. Their game had become something of an excuse for them to get to know each other better. She knew all about his childhood in the exotic West Indies and he now knew everything about her own childhood, particularly the summers she’d spent at Briarcastle with Uncle Wilfred and Aunt Leonora. He listened attentively to all her stories, as though she were the most fascinating creature in the world, and in turn she was enthralled by his tales of a land she’d never dreamed of.

Now that she was fully back on her feet, he didn’t make any more visits to her room, which saddened her a little, wanton hussy that she was. Indeed, every moment spent with him, with every meal they took together, and every short walk to the stables when he insisted on carving out a path for her before she could step foot outside, with every game of cards, or chess, or backgammon, every poem or sonnet or story read aloud from one of Mrs. Davidson’s books, she grew more and more wanton when it came to this man.

All these years that Mama had spent dragging her around the marriage mart in Town, or Aunt Leonora had spent parading gentlemen around in front of her had led her to think that perhaps there was something wrong with her. That perhaps she wasn’t cut out for love or romance, courtship, or

marriage. Because she'd never wanted to so much as kiss a gentleman on the cheek.

But with Henry? With Henry she felt quite different. She felt quite the opposite in fact, which was as thrilling as it was frightening. She'd always considered herself a perfectly respectable lady but frankly, Henry made her feel anything but.

“Addy? Don't tell me you're sulking again.”

The sound of Henry's voice pulled her from her musings, and she felt her cheeks heat in response to it. Given what she'd been thinking, she couldn't help but feel like her inappropriate thoughts were painted on her face.

“Look at that blush,” he teased. “You're not contemplating ways to kill me, are you? Just because you've yet to best me.”

His favourite thing in the world seemed to be to tease her, though he'd been good in sharing a lot about himself even though she hadn't yet won her secret or her favour.

And there was still plenty that he held back. For example, she had heard all about his journey to England from the West Indies but not *why* he'd made it. And he knew plenty about his mother and how fond he was of her, but nothing about the rest of his family, save that his father had passed away.

He didn't owe her any information, of course. And it seemed strange that she felt as though she should know these things about him. She supposed her only excuse was that spending almost a week alone with him, with nobody else for

company felt intimate in a way she'd never experienced with anyone else.

"I'm contemplating ways to win," she said archly, earning herself her favourite smirk. She'd gotten to know every one of his expressions by now. That cheeky smile, vaguely arrogant and utterly incorrigible was among his best. "You remember that I'm still owed my favour or secret?"

"Indeed, how could I forget?" he asked.

They were sitting in the private parlour off the main room as had become their wont in the afternoon. At this time, Adeline knew, Mrs. Davidson and Franny would be in the kitchen preparing dinner. John, Trevor, and George would either be seeing to the horses or chopping wood or some such task. Her servants had grown restless after the first couple of days of rest and had taken to helping out around the inn.

In fact, unless Adeline was very much mistaken, Trevor had taken a bit of a shine to Mrs. Davidson.

"What should we play then?" Henry asked, setting aside the book he'd been perusing. "What do you want to do?"

Outside, the wind still sang its winter lament. In here, the fire crackled and spat. If they listened really carefully, they might even hear the clang of pots and pans from the kitchen. The winter sun was invisible, hidden behind a sky of pure white.

Perhaps it was the sense of isolation from the world. Perhaps the accident had addled her head a little. Perhaps being cooped up inside had made her a little crazy. Whatever it

was, suddenly Adeline decided to throw caution to the wind. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. The question was if she was brave enough to do it.

“Let’s toss the coin,” she said which had become something of a code between them. When they wanted to talk, to learn more about each other. To get to know each other in a way that went beyond polite chitchat.

Without question, Henry removed the crown from his pocket. It seemed that he kept it on his person at all times, but Adeline refused to see too much in that small gesture, lest she make a fool of herself.

“You sure?” he asked, rolling the coin between his fingers in a most distracting way. “It hasn’t exactly been going well for you, has it?”

No. It hadn’t. And that was exactly why she wanted to play it. It was a way of justifying her actions to herself. If she lost the flip, nothing would change. But if she won it, she was taking it as a sign to be courageous and do what she wanted.

“I’m sure,” she said, surprised by how steady her voice was when inside, she was a trembling mess.

Henry frowned slightly, as though he read her tumultuous emotions in her eyes.

“Call it,” he said. “Cross or pile?”

“Cross.”

The air felt thick with expectancy. It even seemed as though the howling wind outside quietened down.

Adeline watched the coin flip into the air and felt as though time itself had slowed as she watched it go up, and up, then fall down, down, down into Henry's waiting palm.

They both stared at it for eons and seconds before finally that storm-grey gaze came up to meet her own. "Well look at that," he rasped. "You've won. So, what's it to be, Addy? A secret or a favour."

Adeline had a moment of complete, utter stillness before she caught hold of all her courage and pulled herself to her feet to cross the short distance between them. As though sensing the importance of the moment, Henry climbed slowly to his feet until he was towering above her.



HENRY'S HEART hammered furiously as he stood there unmoving, waiting for Adeline to seal his fate. Because he knew that he couldn't outright lie to her. If she asked him why she was here, he wouldn't have it in him to lie.

He was already struggling with the fact that he was withholding that life-changing information.

Every day, they'd grown closer. Every day, he wanted her more until he stood here now, on the brink of madness from desire. Christ, she was beautiful. Beautiful and stubborn, competitive, and kind. He watched her help Mrs. Davidson around the inn, fuss over George and his injured hand. She watched his horse, still unnamed eat oats from her hand, utterly infatuated with her, just like he was.

He listened with mounting jealousy as she told him of her aunt's ploys to get her married off to any number of eligible bachelors that she paraded under Adeline's nose. And in turn, he told her everything about himself except the most crucial thing of all.

At first, he'd kept it to himself because he hadn't been ready to face it and because he'd wanted to be Just Henry. Like she was enjoying being Just Addy. It was an unspoken agreement of sorts.

Yet standing here now, drowning in those heart-wrenching eyes of hers, he knew he wouldn't keep it to himself any longer. If she asked for his secret, he would tell her and somehow, he knew that this tentative *thing* between them would be altered forever because of it.

He was preparing himself to apologise for the subterfuge when he saw a flash of determination in her eyes, as though she'd decided something. She tilted her chin in that stubborn way he'd come to love, and then shocked the hell out of him.

"A favour," she said boldly, steadily. "I want a favour," she repeated. And then. She kissed him.

CHAPTER NINE

Henry froze completely while his brain tried to catch up with what was happening, though his body was way ahead of him.

For without even quite knowing what had just happened, his arms were wrapped around Adeline pulling her flush against his suddenly aching cock. His groan of pure, masculine desire at the contact elicited a responding moan from her and just like that, his brain left the party completely leaving the base creature inside of him to take over completely.

Good God, in all his years on this earth, nothing had ever felt as good as having this woman in his arms. Some small, ever shrinking part of him knew that he needed to hold back. That he couldn't allow the roaring lust inside him to break free. She wasn't ready for that. He couldn't unleash on her. But damn it, how he wanted to.

In all the nights he'd lain alone in the bed that shared a wall with her own, taking himself in hand and imagining this very moment, none of his fantasies had come close to the real thing. The sounds she made as he coaxed her mouth open with his tongue before delving inside at her first open-mouthed sigh

of capitulation. The feel of her delicate curves beneath his hands as he examined every delectable inch of her. The innocent rock of her hips against the part of him that needed her the most. It was all more than he could have possibly imagined.

“God, I want you, Adeline,” he whispered against her mouth, not even recognising the tortured voice as his own. In answer, she pressed her lips tighter against his own, both demanding and completely untied in a paradox that sent him hurtling to the edge of self-control.

Delving a hand into her soft, satiny curls, he revelled in the feel of the pins coming undone, of a waterfall of mahogany silk falling over his palms. And Christ, the *scent* of her. He was drowning in it.

Gripping the strands at the base of her neck, he angled her head so that he could take the kiss even deeper, so he could show her with his tongue what he so longed to do with his body. And it wasn't enough. It was nowhere near enough.

“Tell me to stop,” he said gruffly even as he moved to press hot, nipping kisses along her jaw and down her long, delicate throat.

“No,” she said stubbornly, panting and making him crazed.

“Please,” he groaned against her throat. “Please tell me to stop. It's the only way I'll be able to.”

She pulled back slightly so she could look into his eyes, her lust-filled gaze piercing his soul. And he tried not to feel disappointed that she was listening to him. Tried to remember

that he was a gentleman and she deserved more than having her skirts lifted in the parlour of a modest inn.

But then she went and ruined it all by offering him a devilish little smile. “Henry,” she said, her voice little more than a rasp. “Just Henry.” He held his breath feeling as though she held his very life in the palm of her hands. “I don’t want you to stop.”

And the last vestiges of his control snapped clean in two.



IF HENRY’S kiss before now had been passionate, it was nothing to what he unleashed upon her now. Adeline barely caught a breath before he was upon her, wringing a pleasure and passion from her that she hadn’t known she was capable of.

If she’d had any wits left about her, she might have been embarrassed by the guttural sounds being drawn from her. But she couldn’t think enough to be embarrassed, couldn’t feel anything beyond a desperate yearning for more from this man.

Her core throbbed, her heart pounded, and throughout it all, she clung to Henry as though he were the very centre of the universe.

The fact that any one of the servants, or even Mrs. Davidson herself could walk through the door at any moment meant nothing. The fact that she was unwed, that she’d only known Henry a week, and for part of that she’d been unconscious, that he’d made her no promises and she’d

demanded none meant nothing to her. Not in the face of this maelstrom that could rival the storm outside.

Henry's hands, which had found their way back into her hair were now on the move, one of them grasping at her derriere, lifting her until the hard length of him was pressed right against where she needed him the most. Adeline had no idea what she was doing but she let go of any and all thought and just *felt*. And when rolling her hips against him, searching for, and finding a delicious friction drew a growl of unfettered need from his lips, she couldn't help but feel a pure, feminine pride. She did that. She had brought this great man to the edge of desperation, though she couldn't be too smug for she was right there with him.

His other hand stroked against her hip then began to move slowly, so *slowly* upwards until it grazed the underside of her breast and she found herself thrusting wantonly against him, her body demanding that he move further. That he ease the sudden ache he'd awoken there. But his thumb only drew maddening circles, right under where she needed him the most.

She was about to lose her mind entirely when he finally moved, stroking across the peak, and sending her spiralling.

"Henry," she moaned into his mouth, begging for something that she couldn't put a name to. But he seemed to understand her for the hand that was holding her punishingly close to his body moved and began to bunch the material of her skirts, pulling them higher and higher until she began to

feel the cool air on the skin above her stockings and higher still until –

Suddenly, she wasn't in his arms anymore.

Adeline stumbled, blinking rapidly in shock, her mind trying to catch up to what happened. One moment she was surrounded by his heat and hardness, the next she was standing quite alone in the middle of the room, while Henry sprung away from her as though he'd been burned.

“What are you -?”

“My lady?”

Adeline realised that while she'd been losing herself in Henry's arms, Franny had been knocking on the door of the parlour. With dawning horror, she realised just how close they'd come to being caught.

She stared wide-eyed at Henry who'd mercifully heard the maid outside. Although, she couldn't help but feel a little offended that he'd been decidedly less affected than she considering he'd been able to hear *anything* outside of the sounds of their lovemaking.

The saving grace, she supposed, as she felt her cheeks grow unbearably warm, was that his breathing seemed as laboured as her own. Though he looked insulting calm and put together.

“My lady, would you like to ready yourself for dinner.”

“Um, y-yes of course, Franny.” She bent and gathered up as many of her pins as she could, hastily and haphazardly throwing them into her hair. “I shall come directly.” Keeping

her head down, she hurried to open the door. Thankfully, Franny had already reached the stairs to the bedrooms.

Adeline was about to scurry away when Henry's voice stopped her in the doorway.

“Adeline?”

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. The look on his face was positively wolfish.

“I think we need to let you win more often.”

She didn't know what to say so she chose silence, rushing from the room toward the staircase. But try as she might, she couldn't keep the smile from her face.

CHAPTER TEN

Dinner was torturous. There was no other word for it. Every time Adeline lifted a fork to her mouth, or took a sip of her wine, his cock twitched.

He'd never been afflicted like this, not even as a lad who'd lost his virginity to the merchant's daughter whom he'd thought was the most beautiful woman in the world. He couldn't even remember her name now, and she certainly wouldn't remember his.

Even then when all he'd been was a raging ball of hormones, he hadn't been this uncomfortably aroused. It was deuced unfortunate since this was one of the evenings that Mrs. Davidson was feeling particularly chatty and was staying in between courses to talk about her day and how it looked as though the snow had finally eased up.

Henry had watched her closely all evening for any sign that she knew what had happened between he and Adeline, but she only blinked innocently at him whenever she caught his eye. Too innocently, perhaps.

Regardless, he desperately needed to get Addy alone. He loved that she allowed him to call her that, he thought

distractedly. Loved that she was so free and easy with him. He could only hope that easiness would continue between them when she knew the truth.

Because *that* was why he needed to get her alone. Not to bed her, though he couldn't deny that the idea had become something of an obsession. But because that kiss had changed everything for him, and he could no longer deny that Adeline was coming to mean something very important to him. If he wanted to pursue anything with her, in any real way, he needed to face up to who he was. To be worthy of Adeline, he would need to be transparent with her and with himself. He would need to decide if he could settle into this life that he hadn't planned for. If taking all of this on was worth it for her.

And deep down, he already knew the answer. Crazy as it was after just a week of knowing her. But the heart was a mysterious beast, his mother had always said. And sometimes you needed to follow it whether it made sense or not.

“Shall I bring you a tea tray, my lady?”

Henry bit back an oath. A bloody tea tray? This dinner had already been interminable with Mrs. Davidson insisting on offering seconds of everything and even thirds. Then there had been the dessert. Then the plates of sweets left over from this afternoon's bake. And now tea. It was too much, though Henry couldn't very well say so.

He'd kept up a polite discourse through every dish served, had discussed art and music and all manner of mundane things. He'd tried his best and almost succeeded in not being distracted by how beautiful Adeline looked bedecked in dusky

pink silk. How the colour deepened the red in her hair, and how it made her eyes seem like the most luxurious pools of decadent chocolate. But he was nearing his limit of patience.

But then Adeline spoke, gentle and kind as ever. “Thank you, Mrs. Davidson but I think I shall retire for the evening. I believe you’re right. The weather seems to have calmed somewhat, it mightn’t be long before we’re on the road again and I shall have to be well rested for the final leg of our journey.”

Much as Henry was glad this torture method was coming to a close, the mention of Adeline travelling to Briarcastle was enough to darken his mood.

What would she say, when he confessed all to her? It wasn’t as though it was a *bad* thing. And if anything, it would at least save her from being passed around a bevy of bachelors, all of them vying for her hand.

He steered his thoughts away from that particular subject since his mood was already decidedly low. If he added that level of jealousy in now, he might very well explode from rage.

“Oh, how I shall miss having you both here,” Mrs. Davidson cried, making Henry feel like a heel for his uncharitable thoughts. Christ, this woman had him tied in knots. “You’ll think me a silly old thing, but I had quite begun to imagine you both sitting right here on Christmas Day, all cozy and warm.”

Adeline reached out and clasped Mrs. Davidson’s hand in her own. “That sounds wonderful, Mrs. Davidson,” she said.

“And if my aunt could spare me, I would like nothing more than to spend my Christmas here. Truly.”

Mrs. Davidson merely patted Adeline’s hand then quickly took her leave with a watery smile.

The silence she left in her wake was deafening and suddenly Henry was afraid to fill it. He was afraid that he would ruin this tentative thing between them. Afraid that the magic that had weaved itself between them would be shattered.

The sound of Adeline’s chair scraping back brought him out of his musings, and he jumped to his feet. “I’ll leave you to your brandy,” she said quietly, almost unsure.

“You’re sure you don’t want to join me in a glass?” he joked, hoping to ease the odd tension between them. “I remember how fond you are of the stuff.”

She rolled her eyes, and something loosened in his chest. “Tempting as that is, I think I shall retire.” She hesitated, as though waiting for him to say something but coward that he was, the words simply wouldn’t come. And so, he only reached out and grasped her hand, bending to place a kiss atop it, his thumb stroking her knuckles. “Goodnight, Just Adeline.”

“Goodnight, Just Henry.”

And with a fleeting smile, she was gone.



HE WAS DEFINITELY in his room, Adeline told herself as she pressed an ear to the cold wall that lay between them. That was definitely the sound of a boot being removed. And if she listened closely – yes, there went the other one.

He was undressing.

She swallowed a sudden lump in her throat at the idea.

Dinner had been interminable with Mrs. Davidson chattering as though she was about to lose the power of speech. Normally Adeline quite enjoyed a talk with the innkeeper, if only because she liked to see the older woman blush at the mention of Trevor's name. But this evening – well, she really could have done without the constant interruption.

After what had happened between them today, after what she'd offered to him, what she was sure he'd been about to take, she'd thought dinner might be a romantic evening of anticipation that would end in a kiss as earth-shattering as the last one. Perhaps, if she was brave enough to truly do what she wanted, even more than a kiss.

Such a thought never would have crossed her mind, even two weeks ago. But this interlude, this break from real life, it had changed her immeasurably and irrevocably. She had fallen in love. As marvellously mad and terrifyingly wonderful as that was, she had. And no amount of respectable bachelor or titled gentleman would ever come close to meaning anything to her. Not compared to Just Henry. He had captured her heart and she'd known it for sure from the second they'd kissed.

That was why she wanted to give all of herself to him. Because he already owned the most important part of her.

She heard a chair scraping and allowed her mind to wander. Perhaps he was sitting down to remove his cravat and lawn shirt. Perhaps he would lift the linen slowly over his head, revealing the sharp planes and angles of his muscled stomach and chest.

Right. That was it. She was decided and to hell with the consequences.

Silent as a church mouse, Adeline opened her door and poked her head out, looking up and down for a stray servant. But everyone it seemed was abed and asleep. Everyone but her and Henry.

She tiptoed the few feet until she was standing at his door and then, heart pounding almost clean through her chest, she lifted her hand and knocked. She sensed more than heard the total cessation of movement in his room and wondered if he would just leave her standing there and ignore her completely.

But then, right when she was about to skulk away with her tail between her legs, the door opened and there he was.

Just as she'd imagined, he'd removed his shirt and he stood before her now barefoot and clad in only breeches. Her imagination, she soon learned, was a useless thing. For when faced with the reality of this man, it simply couldn't compare.

All she saw was skin and muscle, miles of it. Entranced as she was, she barely realised that she reached out a hand to

press against his rock-hard abdomen, until his own came up to grasp it.

“Adeline.” His voice was brandy, and stolen kisses, and the still, dark night. “I don’t have the strength to stay away from you. So, you need to turn around and go back to your room.”

Adeline felt as though she stood on a precipice. One way was the life she’d been bred to live; safety, virtue, finding a staid, solid husband and leading a staid, solid life. The other was this. This wild, unpredictable thing between them as frightening and exhilarating as the storm that had brought them together. This life-changing, addictive, dangerous thing that had wrapped around her heart and would never, she knew, let her go.

Lifting her eyes from their joined hands to his stormy gaze, she made a choice that would be her salvation or damnation.

“I don’t have the strength to stay away from you,” she whispered. “And I don’t want to.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” His voice was pleading, begging her to leave. But she couldn’t.

“I do. I know what I’m saying, and I know what I want. You, Henry. All of you. Everything you have to give me. I want it all.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Henry hated the part of himself that grasped at the opportunity to delay the talk he didn't want to have with Adeline.

But the part that craved her more than he craved air to breathe was powerless to deny her. With his hand still holding hers to his body he walked backward until she was in his room. He reached out and shut the door, pushing her gently until her back was pressed against it. With one hand pushed against the wood above her head, he moved the other to the doorknob, turning until he heard the click that sealed both their fates.

And then, he kissed her.

He tried to keep it slow and tender. To give her the gentle introduction to lovemaking that she deserved. But the fire that always seemed to burn between them, just below the surface, raged to life at the first touch of their lips and before long, his tongue was dancing with her own and his arms were around her waist, lifting her until his cock was pressed against her and her legs were wrapped around his waist.

She had a natural sensuality that called to him in a way that nothing and no one else ever had. It felt as though she'd been made just for him, and he her. And it would be far too easy to tear at the flimsy material that separated them and drive himself home to where he wanted, nay, *needed* to be. But he didn't want to rush this. He wanted to take his time and explore every inch of her. And the thought of that alone was enough to give him the strength to walk them toward the bed, her legs still wrapped tightly around him as though she thought he would be insane enough to ever let her go.

He tumbled them both onto the bed and rolled until she was beneath him, her mahogany hair spread out against the stark white of his pillows. She looked like a goddess, made for sin and seduction and Henry knew he needed to taste her. Knew she would be the most delectable thing he would ever feast on in his life.

It was the work of a moment to remove the nightgown until she was bared before him and he had to stop for a moment to catch his breath. She was glorious and he felt the impact of her shift something in the very heart of him. Right in his soul. There would never be anything in his life as perfect as this moment, this night.

Bending his head, he captured her mouth once more in a drugging kiss before he went to work, exploring every inch of her with his mouth and teeth and tongue. She writhed beneath him like a living flame, moaning and sobbing, gripping his hair while he ran his tongue over first one nipple then the other. Only when she was panting and thrusting herself against him did he move lower, licking his way down her taut, smooth

stomach, running his teeth along her hipbone and lower still until he reached the apex of her thighs.

She hissed in surprise at the first touch of his mouth against her centre, her legs moving as though she intended to clamp them shut. But he would not be denied access to this, the very core of her.

“Open your legs for me, love,” he whispered. “Let me taste you.”

“Y-you can’t,” she whispered frantically, her entire body trembling as she fought to restrain herself and that sight alone was enough to drive him to the edge of sanity. He wanted to watch her let go, to become completely undone. To be utterly wild with him and for him.

“Oh, believe me, I can,” he said with a wicked grin. She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously but then she let her legs drop open and he wasted not a second. The first lick sent her head dropping against the pillow, the second earned a moan that sounded as though it came from the depths of her soul.

He kissed around that bundle of nerves that he knew would send her flying, never quite giving her what she needed, not until she was sobbing and begging, pushing herself into his mouth, her hands clawing at his hair.

And because she was asking so nicely, he gave her what she wanted, the first suck sending her spiralling out of control, her cries ringing out around the room while she chanted his name as though it were a litany of prayers.

Henry stayed with her through it all, his patience and control on a knife edge. Sweat beaded on his brow and he swore he would come just from the sight of her climaxing under his tongue.

“You taste better than I could have imagined,” he praised her as he made his way slowly back up her trembling body. “Now, we’re going to do that all over again.”

“I can’t,” she breathed, wide-eyed and dazed looking.

I did that, he thought with no small amount of male pride. I put that look on her face. And I’m going to do it again and again.

“You can, love,” he told her tenderly, pushing a lock of damp hair back from her brow. “Let me show you.”

This time, he used his fingers to bring her to the edge, watching her face for that tell-tale hitch of breath. He plunged a finger inside, feeling her muscles start to contract but before he could reach the other in, her small hand suddenly clasped him around the wrist. “I want you with me,” she said and damned if they weren’t the five most beautiful words he’d ever heard.

Settling himself between her legs, Henry lined himself up with her entrance. At the first push her eyes fluttered closed but he wouldn’t allow that. He wanted her with him, too. “Eyes on me, Adeline,” he demanded, waiting until she complied.

He pushed further, groaning at the excruciating pleasure of her walls closing around him. “I’m sorry, love,” he said before

he pushed himself to the hilt. She flinched as he broke through her barrier and he stayed still, trembling with restraint until she got used to the feel of him inside her.

He watched the pain etched on her face and leaned down to whisper words of love and encouragement in her ear, pressing kisses to her throat and mouth until he felt her relax, until she rolled her hips, just a little, searching for the friction he knew she needed. And he was more than happy to oblige.

He started slowly letting her body become acquainted with his own, but soon as always, the desire took over and they found a rhythm as wild and untamed as their feelings. It was frantic, it was desperate. It was perfect.

And when Adeline cried out and careened over the edge of oblivion, Henry went right over with her.



“ADDY.” She felt the kiss on her bare shoulder, the next on her back. And even though she was exhausted, and sore in places she hadn’t even known existed; she felt her body flutter to life at his touch.

“I think you killed me,” she mumbled into the pillow at her face, earning herself a chuckle and a slow, soothing stroke along her back.

“Likewise,” Henry answered gruffly, his voice sending shivers down her spine.

Last night had been more than anything she could have ever dreamed. Henry had shown her ways to make love that

she wasn't even sure had a name. He'd brought her to completion again and again, with his tongue, his fingers, his, well, *that*. Then he'd taken care of her, used a wash clothe to soothe the sting of their coupling, and done it all again for good measure.

The man was insatiable and, she'd discovered, so was she. But only with him. Only ever with him. He had positively ruined her for anyone else and she wasn't one bit sorry for it. He'd made her no promises and she'd asked for none.

She wouldn't use this as an excuse to trap him or to make him feel any sort of obligation toward her. She'd gone into this with her eyes open. Even if she never saw him again, she knew she would never experience something like this in her life so she would be glad for it even if it was just this one night.

"Much as I love waking up to you here, we need to get you back to your room before Franny or Mrs. Davidson awake," Henry said against her shoulder.

"Well, that sounds like an excellent plan, only I don't think my legs work anymore," she mumbled tiredly.

She vaguely wondered if she should feel shy or awkward. Perhaps even ashamed of herself. But all she felt was happiness, undiluted, ecstatic happiness.

"You are doing wonders for my ego, love," he said, dropping another kiss on her shoulder. "Come, I'll carry you back."

“Just like a week ago,” she said with a smile as she sat up and pushed her hair from her face. When he didn’t answer, she looked up to see him staring at her as a wolf might stare at his prey. He looked as though he could eat her alive right there on the spot.

“We really need to get you out of here,” he said hoarsely, and the words might have stung if she couldn’t see the ravenous hunger on his face.

“There might be time,” she started shyly but he was already shaking his head.

“You’re sore,” he said, and she wondered how he could tell. “I should have been gentler. I’m sorry.”

But Adeline wouldn’t hear it. “It was perfect,” she countered softly but firmly. His gaze immediately softened. “It *was* perfect,” he agreed. “*You* are perfect. But you’re also too tempting for my sanity so we need to get you out of here and then I can count the minutes to breakfast alone like a lovesick puppy.”

Adeline refused to show how her heart flipped when he mentioned being lovesick even though she knew he was teasing. She hurried into the discarded nightgown then laughingly waved him off when he indeed attempted to carry her.

Before slipping from the room, he reached out and grabbed her hand.

“We have much to discuss,” he said, his tone oddly serious. And for a moment, she was afraid he would say that

they'd made a mistake. But then he reached out and tilted her chin up, his hand cupping her jaw. "But last night was the best night of my life and whatever happens, I'm going to make sure it's repeated."

Then he placed a brief, sweet kiss on her mouth and shoed her toward her door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next couple of days were the most agonising and simultaneously wonderful of Adeline's life. The storm had finally passed and with it, Adeline knew her days here were numbered.

They'd already started clearing paths in the yard and Henry had taken her out to play in the snow. They'd thrown snowballs and chased each other until her nose had turned red with the cold and then he'd hurried her back inside and called for a bath to be brought to them both.

As soon as Mrs. Davidson and Franny had returned below stairs after filling the tubs, he'd snuck into her room and squeezed into hers, lifting her onto his lap and complaining that he would smell like a lady.

It was a tight fit but that didn't stop them from making love, with her straddling his hips and him guiding her into a rhythm that left them both depleted but satisfied. Every night he came into her room and made wild, passionate love to her before disappearing again while she slept. And every morning she woke with a smile on her face.

Yet along with the good, there was a niggling feeling that something was wrong. Sometimes she would catch Henry staring at her with something like fear in his eyes. Others, she felt sure he was on the brink of telling her something serious. And when that happened, she grew so scared that she would insist on a walk, or, if it was safe, she would simply throw her arms around him and press her lips to his until she distracted him from whatever it was.

They'd been at the inn almost two weeks when she knew they could put off her trip to Aunt Leonora's no longer. It wasn't fair to her aunt. And besides, if she'd managed to track down her earl, she could be very well sitting up in Briarcastle Abbey alone with this strange man who might turf her out at any moment. If nothing else, she would need Adeline's support in case that happened.

By rights they should have left yesterday, Adeline knew. But she'd been loathe to leave Henry behind and she knew that Trevor was reluctant to leave Mrs. Davidson. What a web they'd woven while staying here in this little slice of paradise at a country inn in Cumberland.

Breakfast that morning was a morose affair. Henry was silent and brooding and Mrs. Davidson was maudlin and quiet as she brought in trays of food that would go largely untouched.

"You should eat more," Henry said, and Adeline looked up from pushing eggs around her plate to see his gaze on her. "Let's not forget what you went through only weeks ago. You need to keep your strength up."

Deciding to get this over with, Adeline took a deep breath and simply blurted out what she didn't want to say. "I have to go," she said. "I must leave today. For Briarcastle."

The silence was deafening. A part of her desperately wanted Henry to beg her to stay, to give some indication that he wanted more from her than just this past week. But he merely stared, a plethora of emotions she couldn't pin down flitting across his face.

When it became excruciating, she couldn't take it anymore. Jumping to her feet, she turned to leave.

"Addy, wait. I – I must tell you something," he said. "I haven't known how to tell you but, but I must."

She waited, afraid to look at him lest she turn to stone.

"I'm not who I said I am."

Her whole body froze in shock at those words, and she whipped back around to face him.

"That is, I *am*. I am me. Just Henry. But I'm also –" He stopped suddenly and raked a hand through his hair. "I need you to understand that I never meant to be dishonest. But, well, I was undecided. I didn't know if I could do this. Live this life. If I even *wanted* to. And then I met you and I know that I can. That I must if, if we are to – damn it all. I'm making a mess of this."

Adeline could only stare at him, confusion and trepidation crawling through her. "Henry, what are you talking about?"

"Before you go. To Briarcastle, I mean, I need you to know that I never intended to lie to you. At first, perhaps, but

then I just couldn't find a way to tell you without it seeming as though I kept it from you just to be dishonest. And in truth, I only kept it from you for so long because I was selfish and terrified that it would change everything between us. And the last thing I ever want is for anything to come between us. Not this lie of mine. Not the title. None of it."

Adeline shook her head, even more confused than when he'd started talking. "Henry, for goodness' sake. What lie? What title? I – "

"Adeline! Oh, thank goodness. I was beside myself worrying that the storm had got you. As soon as I saw the roads clear this morning, I set out to find you. How lucky that you were so close. And – oh, who might this be?"

Adeline turned toward the screeching voice of Aunt Leonora who rushed to her side in a flurry of maroon fur.

"Um," Adeline's head was spinning, her heart thundering as she tried to figure out what on earth Henry had been about. But now was clearly not the time to discuss it. "Aunt Leonora, I – I was just about to set out to Briarcastle myself," she said, smiling weakly. "May I introduce my – ah – friend. Henry, this is my aunt, the Dowager Countess of Briarcastle. Aunt Leonora this is – "

"Henry Gladstone," Henry interrupted and though he bowed to Aunt Leonora, he kept an apologetic gaze on Adeline. "The Earl of Briarcastle. Your husband's nephew."



THE RIDE to Briarcastle Abbey was subdued to say the least. Henry's statement had clanged into the quiet room and set Adeline's world on its head. She had felt shocked, then angry, then betrayed. Now, she felt numb.

She hadn't spoken a word while Aunt Leonora had gasped and exclaimed and demanded answers to a hundred questions. She'd listened while he told the story of Julia's husband tracking him down, while he spoke of his childhood and how his father had never told him of his estrangement.

Throughout it all, she wanted to demand to know why he'd lied. He had explained how when he'd first arrived, he hadn't been sure that he would even take on the earldom. How he hadn't announced who he was because he wasn't even sure that's who he would be.

And in a way it made sense, but how could he continue to keep it from her, when he had learned who she was? Adeline felt so foolish. All this time he'd known exactly who she was while he pretended to be Just Henry.

"And yet you've announced yourself as the earl," Aunt Leonora had said when she'd listened in awe to his complicated tale. "Does that mean you've decided to stay? To live as the Earl of Briarcastle?"

Adeline hated how her heart had stuttered while waiting for his answer. After all, it would have no bearing on her life. Except that if he allowed Aunt Leonora to stay living at Briarcastle then she would see him every time she visited her aunt.

“I have,” he had said solemnly, and she could feel his eyes on her the entire time.

“Just like that?” Aunt Leonora had pushed.

“Not quite,” Henry had answered. “Let’s just say it’s a means to an end.”

“So, what changed your mind then?” Aunt Leonora, ever the boundary crosser had pressed.

Adeline hadn’t waited to hear the answer. Instead, she’d simply turned on her heel and slipped from the room. By the time she was packed, Aunt Leonora’s carriage was ready to go, and she’d bid a quick goodbye to Mrs. Davidson and Franny, to John the stable boy and to Trevor who’d insisted on staying behind to make arrangements for the horses. Such a task was unnecessary of course but when she’d seen the delight on Mrs. Davidson’s face, she couldn’t begrudge her driver the chance of happiness. Nor would she.

George, at least, would come to Briarcastle with them.

“Your young man is quite a handsome thing,” Aunt Leonora broke the silence. “He’ll make a fine-looking earl. And from what he said, he’s happy to allow me to live in the dowager house. Terribly kind of him, wouldn’t you say?”

“He’s not my young man,” Adeline had answered dully. “And apparently he’d been intending to leave you all high and dry so how kind can he be?”

“Well, we must allow that the letter was quite a shock, dear. It’s not every day someone is informed that he’s an earl. That he’s expected to ship his entire life to the other side of the

world out of obligation to a family who turned their back on him.”

Adeline frowned, hating the twinge of sympathy she felt for Henry. “When you put it like that, it sounds awful.”

“Because it is awful. I wouldn’t have blamed him at all if he’d made us keep searching until we found a third cousin twice removed. And to think he’s willing to take it all on before even seeing the place. Yes indeed. He is a very fine young man.”

“He’s a liar, Aunt Leonora. You can’t trust him. Why did he keep his identity hidden?”

“Because he didn’t want to be the earl,” Aunt Leonora said soothingly, her tone grating Adeline’s nerves.

“Then why suddenly decide he *does* want to be the earl?”

“I’m not sure that’s what he’s decided at all, actually,” Aunt Leonora answered cryptically.

Adeline was heartily sick of everyone speaking in riddles today.

“Oh, really? Then what is it that’s keeping him here, hmm?”

“Well, that’s for him to tell you now, isn’t it?”

Adeline found the mysterious answer and knowing smile so vexatious that she ignored her aunt for the entire rest of the journey.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Briarcastle Abbey was by far the most beautiful house Henry had ever seen. The grounds were astoundingly pretty, with rolling meadows and formal gardens leading to the huge, sandstone building, complete with turrets, for goodness' sake. All set against the dramatic backdrop of the ocean behind it.

Yes, it was stunning. His ancestral home, dating back centuries, giving him a family history that rivalled that of the royals themselves.

And he didn't give a single damn about any of it.

When Adeline had quietly slipped from the parlour at the inn, his first and only instinct had been to go after her. To beg her forgiveness. To tell her how sorry he was and how much he loved her. For he did love her, he never would have taken something as precious as her virginity if he didn't love her. If he hadn't intended to make her his wife.

That was the only reason he'd decided to take on this madness. He didn't care about being an earl. He didn't want to be a peer. But he cared about Adeline. And he wanted to be her husband.

And if taking this title was the way to do that, then he would take it with a smile on his face.

But first he needed to get her to talk to him.

Her Aunt Leonora was as formidable as Addy had described and she'd steadfastly refused to let him get by her and to Adeline. Short of bodily shifting the woman, something he didn't think Adeline would approve of, he'd been stuck in the room with her.

He'd been determined to stay quiet, to refuse to discuss anything with anyone other than Adeline. But then she'd smiled at him, the picture of kindness and sympathy, and suddenly he'd found himself blurting out the whole sorry tale. How he'd wanted to explore Briarcastle without the burden of the title, how he'd rescued Addy from certain death, how she'd entranced him from that first fluttering of her eyes, and how he'd enjoyed being just Henry with none of the complications.

He left out the part where he'd ruined her, but he'd admitted to falling in love with her because hell, what did he have to lose apart from his very reason for living? To her credit, Aunt Leonora had listened to it all, silently and without interruption.

When he'd finally talked himself hoarse, she'd peered at him over her spectacles. "And now you want to be an earl?" she'd asked sceptically.

"No," he'd answered. "I want to be Adeline's."

He had thought that she might perhaps lecture him on the burden of the title, on the responsibility, on the great honour it was to be a Briarcastle but instead she'd merely smiled looking pleased with his answer.

"It will be nice having Adeline nearby," was all she'd said. "I'll have my things moved to the Dowager House before Twelfth Night." And that had been that. Henry only wished he had her confidence.

The horse pranced beneath him as though sensing his unease and he reached down to give him a reassuring pat. The poor thing had yet to receive a name, he thought distractedly. And then it came to him. The perfect name. The perfect plan.

But to put it into effect he would need help.

He'd intended to march straight into Briarcastle Abbey and demand that Adeline hear him out. Perhaps even throw his weight around as earl if it would get him anywhere. Although knowing Adeline that would probably have quite the opposite effect.

But no. He wouldn't win her over by brute force.

He'd hurt her, he knew. He'd taken from her, allowed her to share everything with him while keeping this huge part of himself a secret. And it killed him that he'd caused her pain. That flinch of shock, the hurt and betrayal in her doe eyes – they would haunt him forever and he swore to himself and to any gods listening that he would never intentionally hurt her again.

All he could do now was be as honest as possibly, lay his heart at her feet, and pray that he could somehow earn back her trust.

And he knew just how to do it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Adeline had thought she knew what heartache was. When she was twelve, she'd brought home a stray cat begging to keep it. She had loved that cat with all her might. She'd begged and pleaded and promised to do everything for it so that not even the Cook in the kitchens would have to bother with it.

Eventually Papa had relented and allowed her to keep it. She'd fed it and cleaned it up and doted on it for years. And three days later it had almost scratched her eye out and run away, never to return again.

She had thought that was heartbreak. And that was nothing compared to what missing Henry felt like.

The fact that he hadn't shown up here at the Abbey was bizarre. Aunt Leonora hadn't mentioned him since that day when they'd returned, and she was carrying on as if the new earl hadn't popped up, announced himself, broken Adeline's heart, then disappeared again. It was most odd.

Papa, Mama, and the rest of the family sadly wouldn't arrive until after Christmas, the storm having delayed their travel plans. But of course, the usual plethora of guests were

already dotted around the house for the festivities. On a whim, Adeline had extended the invitation to Mrs. Davidson and had been genuinely thrilled when the lady had shown up, newly betrothed to Trevor who had beamed with pride when they'd made the announcement. He was going to stay and help her run the inn and though Adeline would be sad to lose him, she was beyond happy that he'd found love.

If she was envious of the life they would lead, working side by side and supporting each other through ups and downs, she didn't let it show. She'd merely congratulated them then rushed off lest she burst into tears.

The ball would be under way soon and she knew she would have to get ready, but her heart wasn't in it. And for the first time ever, she wanted to just run away. In fact, she was contemplating doing just that when suddenly Trevor of all people appeared at her side. "My lady," he whispered, pulling her away from where an army of servants were filling vases in preparation for the guests' arrival.

"Trevor, what is it?" she asked, alarmed by the man's serious expression.

"I'm right sorry to ask, my lady," her old driver said. "But there's a bit of an emergency back at the inn. I would have Mrs. Davidson see to it herself but she were that excited about the ball and, well I wanted her to be able to celebrate the news and –"

"Say no more," Adeline immediately interrupted. "I will come immediately and do whatever I can but – well, won't you be missed?"

“Ah – er – no, no I’ll ah – I’ll be sure to explain myself once it’s all sorted out. But come, we best be on our way.”

Adeline only had time to offer a brief explanation to Aunt Leonora who seemed marvellously unperturbed that her niece was flitting off only hours before the ball and she waved Adeline off with a good luck and Merry Christmas.

It was only when Adeline was tucked into the carriage and well on her way that she realised she hadn’t actually asked what the emergency was, or if she would be able to do anything about it. Still, it was too late to worry about that now and she would simply have to do her best when they got there.

The journey took close to two hours and by the time they pulled into the familiar courtyard, Adeline was an emotional mess. She missed Henry so much it was a constant ache in her heart. She’d even whispered through her tears at night that she would forgive it all, that she would try her best to understand if he would just return from wherever he’d disappeared to. But every day she’d woken up and he hadn’t come.

She didn’t know what to do with herself these days. It felt as though her life had been split in half. Before Henry and After Henry. And the after was torture.

She waited for Trevor to jump down from the driver’s seat, glad that at least this time their journey to the inn had been a smooth one. Feeling tears begin to form, Adeline lowered her head as the carriage door opened, blinking rapidly to get control of herself.

Once she was sure she could keep her composure, she looked up.

Straight into a pair of stormy grey eyes.



HENRY WATCHED AS SHOCK, delight, then sorrow filled Adeline's eyes and his chest twisted in response.

Never again, he told himself fiercely. I will never hurt her again.

“Henry.” His name on her lips was a benediction and he felt something jagged and cutting inside him smooth over and just being close to her again.

“Hello, Just Adeline,” he said with a soft smile, holding his hand out and nearly weeping in relief when she pressed her own into it.

“What’s going on?” she asked. Demanded really. She sounded just like she did when she lost a game and wanted a rematch.

“Come inside and I’ll tell you,” he said. He could see that she was about to refuse. “Please,” he added, a touch frantically. She studied him closely then nodded her consent, albeit hesitantly.

He didn’t let himself get scared by her reaction. Instead, he reminded himself that she was entitled to be angry.

They walked inside the inn and he watched Adeline’s reaction. First, she came to a jarring halt, then her eyes widened, and the breath left her lungs in a giant gush as she took in her surroundings. He’d covered every surface he could

find with candles and holiday boughs. Mistletoe hung from every beam in the ceiling and holly branches and evergreens adorned every table.

She turned a look of pure wonder on him, and his knees almost buckled at the impact of that stare. God, she could flay him alive with just that look, and she had no idea.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“I-it’s beautiful,” she answered in awe. “But what is it for? Who is it for?”

“It’s for you, love,” he said tenderly. “All of it is for you.”

“But why?”

Henry felt as though his heart would beat out of his chest, but he moved them toward the door of the parlour where they’d first kissed. He swept her inside, watching as she took in even more candles, even more mistletoe and holly, even more evergreen boughs before he turned to answer her.

“Because I love you, Adeline. Because I think I loved you from the first moment you opened your eyes and looked at me out in that snow. Because even though I hurt you, I love you so much that I simply cannot live without you. And if you don’t forgive me, I’ll understand but I will still spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you.”

He watched tears spring to her eyes and fall down her face and he reached out to swipe at them with his thumbs.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the title,” he said gruffly. “At first, it was because I didn’t want it, I wasn’t even sure I would acknowledge it. And then, when I realised I was falling

for you, I didn't tell you because I was a spineless idiot who just wanted to pretend the world outside this inn didn't exist. Because what we had became the single most important thing in my life. *You* because the single most important thing in my life and I was so scared of losing you that I just kept pushing it away."

She opened her mouth to talk but he pressed on, needing to get it all out in the open so that if she did reject him, she would do so knowing that his heart was hers regardless.

"I never wanted any of it, Addy. I wanted nothing to do with the family that had turned their back on my father."

"But you told my aunt who you are," she mumbled.

"Yes, I did. Because I realised that the surest way to get you to marry me was to take the title and live here in England where you can be with your family. Where you can live in the house you so adore."

"You're staying here just to marry me?" she asked incredulously, as though that weren't the single most important reason to do anything.

"I'm staying here because it's where you are. If you told me tomorrow that you wanted to live on the moon, I'd find a way to get there, too. If becoming the Earl of Briarcastle means I get to see your face every day, that I get to see you throw silly tantrums when you lose a coin toss, that I get to hold you in my arms, wake up to you every morning, and fall asleep beside you every night then I would do it a thousand times over."

She shook her head, whether in disbelief or denial he didn't know.

“I wanted to be just Henry to you, love. And that's who I am. Just Henry. Just a man so deliriously in love with you that I can't function without you. These days apart from you have been torture. And if you can find a way to forgive me for my deceit, I promise never to lie to you again. I promise to let you win every game of backgammon, and every coin toss we ever play. I'll buy this place from Mrs. Davidson if you want to stay here forever. Just, just please say you'll be mine. Please say you'll marry me.”

She stared at him for eons.

“You can never lie to me again,” she finally said, her voice stern but strangely loving.

“Never,” he vowed.

“And you must stop cheating at backgammon.”

He opened his mouth to deny her claims but hell, he didn't care what she accused him of if she'd stay with him. “I don't cheat,” he mumbled but nodded his consent, nonetheless.

“And I think you should give me a secret, even though I got my favour. Since you lied to me.”

He began to think she was doing it a bit brown, and he scowled at her in mock severity before sighing. “Fine,” he said. “Though I feel I should tell you, you know everything about me now. Everything but one thing. I decided on a name for the horse.”

She blinked at the change of subject. “Oh, really? What is it?”

“Coin Toss,” he declared proudly.

Adeline stared at him before bursting into laughter. “Coin Toss? You cannot name the poor thing Coin Toss!”

“Too late, it’s done. And I’ll be proud to tell people his name for the inevitable questions will give me a chance to brag about you.”

She rolled her eyes, but he saw the smile playing around her mouth.

“Now, I’ve agreed to your demands. And I’ll agree to a hundred more. Just please tell me. Will you marry me?”

“I think I shall have to,” she responded. “Since I love you so much I’m not sure it will be possible to live without you.”

Henry couldn’t speak past the relief, so he merely swept her into his arms and showed her with actions instead just how happy he was to hear that.



HOURS LATER, they dozed on the chaise in the parlour, wrapped in the same blankets that Adeline had been wrapped in that first, fateful night.

Henry hadn’t stopped touching her, not that she minded. And every so often she would think of the poor horse with the ridiculous name and giggle, earning herself a faux scolding from her fiancé.

Outside, the snow had started to fall in earnest once again.

“I hope we don’t get snowed in again,” she said sleepily.

“I hope we do,” Henry countered. “A nice, cozy Christmas for two? What could be better?”

Nothing, Adeline decided as Henry bent his head to kiss her once more. Nothing could be better than this.

The End.

THANKS FOR READING Christmas For Two. I hope you enjoyed Adeline’s and Henry’s story.

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SNOWY SNOWY NIGHT

EMILY ROYAL



PROLOGUE

L *ondon, England, August, 1807*

“I BEG YOU, dearest Emilia, to put an end to my torment, and consent to become my wife.”

Emilia’s heart soared with joy as he kneeled before her.

Barrett Longford, Fifth Earl Raine, and the most devastatingly handsome man in the world, was declaring his love for her! After a somewhat disappointing start to her Season, Emilia had all but given up hope of finding a partner for life, let alone any hope of finding *love*. But Barrett had entered the fray of the marriage mart part-way through the Season, causing a ripple of hunger among the perfect, titled debutantes with their brittle porcelain looks and desperate mamas. He had stood head and shoulders above all the other young men in looks, and breeding—and, as she’d discovered, also in character. For he was not a man to be tempted by a pretty face, a title, or a large dowry.

His features, which bore a look of primal savagery, concealed a depth of character that had emerged during their

courtship. Rather than languish in his estate, relishing his superiority over all other creatures by virtue of his title being one of the oldest in the kingdom, he was that rare beast—a man who harbored a genuine heart.

And, out of all the preening young misses, Barrett Longford had singled Emilia out. With a sharply angular face, he reminded her of the statue of a Roman god. He was Zeus, god of gods, in all his splendor, with clearly defined cheekbones, a perfectly straight nose, and a firm, square jaw. He could have been carved from marble, save for the air of raw virility that shimmered about his form. A faint shadow of beard had caressed his chin, giving him a piratical air. And when he'd met her gaze, previously unknown—and decidedly *wicked*—sensations had coursed through her body. His eyes, a deep chocolate color, had darkened as he'd fixed his gaze on her—darkened until they were almost black—two deep pools of sin into which she yearned to dive, even though they promised plunder and ruination. His mouth, full-lipped and sensual, had curled into the ghost of a smile, while he'd flicked his tongue out, the pink tip moistening his lower lip until it glistened in the candlelight.

From the moment she'd first set eyes on him at a dull dinner, her heart was lost. When he'd first asked her to dance and taken her hand, pure female need had coursed through her veins, enslaving her body to the anticipation of desires fulfilled. And yet, over the course of their courtship, she had penetrated the armor that surrounded him and perceived, beneath the façade of the rake, a heart so tender, so pure, that

her own heart and soul willingly followed her body into his thrall.

What might they achieve together as Earl and Countess Raine? She closed her eyes, relishing the dream that was within her grasp—a home of her own, and an occupation filled with duty and honor.

And the years ahead of her filled with love, which she would share with the man she adored more than her own life—with the prospect of children to love...

Oh, was there ever a moment in a person's life as blissfully happy as this?

All that stood before her and a life of fulfilment and ecstasy was a single word.

Yes.

The man she loved had bared his soul, kneeling before her in her chaperone's garden, away from eavesdroppers and gossips. He looked up at her, and her heart wept at the intensity of the love glowing in his warm brown eyes.

The time had come to bare her own soul—to strip away the veneer and reveal her final secret, so that he might love her for who, and what, she truly was. Only then, could she accept his offer, and their life together would begin.

CHAPTER
ONE

*B*raithwaite, Cumberland, December 24th, 1810

THE CARRIAGE LURCHED sideways with a jolt, and Barrett almost lost his seat, colliding with the occupant next to him.

“Damn it!”

He cursed under his breath. Why were the roads outside of London always in such a bloody awful state?

“Is anything the matter, sir?” a soft, feminine voice spoke.

Barrett looked up, and his gaze settled on the couple sitting opposite—a young man and woman so sickeningly in love that they could barely keep their hands off each other, curse them. There they were now—holding hands in front of strangers, with no thought of decorum or restraint. When he’d stepped into the carriage that morning, expecting to be the sole traveler, he’d been disappointed to find it already occupied—and even more disappointed when a fourth passenger had climbed in, meaning that he had to share his seat. He’d half expected the couple to start rutting an hour into the journey, but the young man had merely planted a kiss on the woman’s

cheek, then continued to hold her hand while she flushed a delicate shade of rose.

Delicate—*ha!* All women were hussies, tempting a man to sin. Most likely Barrett was witness to an elopement, given that they must be less than fifty miles from Gretna Green, where countless couples defied their families to embark on what they foolishly believed to be an adventure. Such an escapade might elicit excitement for the few days that the journey north took, followed by a burst of passion once the vows were uttered in the Scottish village. But, after they returned to England and the real world with a bump, the foolish souls had nothing to look forward to, save the prospect of a forty-year long gaol sentence.

Otherwise known as *matrimony*.

“Sir! Are you well?”

The young woman leaned forward, concern in her eyes then, for the first time, Barrett noticed the slight roundness of her belly.

Good grief! She was with child.

Hence the elopement. No doubt she'd snared the unfortunate fellow beside her by parting her thighs in anticipation of the wedding night. And the young man had accepted the noose around his neck, rather than father a bastard.

Bastard...

That's what Barrett had called *her*—the woman who'd tried to ensnare him.

And, she'd almost succeeded. Were it not for her confession—whether it were from a fit of conscience or from overconfidence, believing him already in the bag, he knew not—she would have triumphed. He only thanked the Almighty for having effected his escape.

And, of course, for also raining His divine retribution upon her head given that she'd compromised herself with another only days after her failed attempt to trap Barrett.

Once a doxy, always a doxy.

“Ahem.”

The young man opposite cleared his throat in a very marked manner—an expression of disapproval—and Barrett realized that he'd been staring at the young woman's belly.

He looked up and met her gaze. “Forgive me, Miss...?”

Her eyes widened and she exchanged a glance with her lover.

“It's *Mrs.*,” the young man said, with emphasis. Then he held out his hand. “Mr. and Mrs. Field, at your service. And you are?”

Barrett eyed the proffered hand.

“Minding my own business,” he said.

The woman drew in a sharp breath, and sat back, blushing. Her lover—or husband as he would have the occupants believe—reached for a blanket and placed it over her knees.

“Not long to go, Sophia my love,” he said. “Less than five miles, I'd say. Ernest said he'd have the carriage waiting for us

at the crossroads.”

“You’re not bound for Scotland?” Barrett asked, unable to stop himself.

The man frowned. “Whatever for?” Then his expression darkened as he caught Barrett’s meaning. “My wife and I are visiting my brother and his family for Christmas. Sir Helmsley Field. Do you know him?”

Sir Helmsley Field, fourth Baronet. Yes—Barrett had heard of the man, though was yet to make his acquaintance. Which was just as well, given that Sir Helmsley would most likely call him out for insulting his brother and sister-in-law.

“I believe I may have played cards with him at Whites,” Barrett said.

“Unlikely,” came the reply. “My brother despises gambling.”

Oh bloody hell.

Just his luck to be trapped in a carriage with a man of moral fiber.

“Though,” the man continued, “I’m not averse to a few rounds of vingt-et-un myself. Do you play, Mr...?”

Barrett recognized the olive branch. He reached forward, offering his hand, and the man took it in a firm grip.

“It’s *Lord*, I’m afraid,” Barrett said. “Barrett Longford, Earl Raine.”

“Oh, forgive me,” the young man replied.

“I believe it is I who should beg forgiveness of you, and your lady wife,” Barrett said. “I meant no offense.”

“No matter, Lord Raine,” the woman said, smiling. “Christmas is, after all, the season for joy. In my happiness, I refuse to be offended by *anyone*.” She turned a smile on her husband, and he leaned toward her and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

Ugh. If they were at a house party, Barrett would instruct them to go find a chamber.

“You must forgive us, Lord Raine,” Mr. Field said. “We’ve not been married long, and this is our first Christmas together.”

“I *love* Christmas, don’t you?” Mrs. Field cried. “The aroma of spices in the air, the garlands of holly, the log fires—and of course, the children singing. Christmas is a time to celebrate family, is it not? Oh, I’m *so* happy to be here!”

Good lord—was the woman out of her wits?

“Don’t forget the roast goose, my love,” her husband said. “I just love a well roasted goose.”

“With roast potatoes,” his wife added. “Soft and fluffy on the inside, yet crispy and tasty on the outside. Oh—I hope it’s as you described it, my love!”

“It will be, my darling. Helmsley’s cook is the finest in all England.”

“The finest—*really*?” Barrett couldn’t help saying.

The man frowned. “I’m not prone to exaggeration, sir.” He glanced at his wife and caressed her hand. “Not even when speaking of my wife. She has made me the happiest man in all England—nay—in the *whole world*.”

Barrett sighed inwardly. Ye gods—in conversing with the man, had he unleashed a beast? Would the remainder of the journey be filled with inane chatter and nausea-inducing professions of love? Christmas was bad enough with all the singing, gorging and smiling. He’d travelled north to escape it, not to thrust himself into the midst of it all.

The man sitting next to him, who’d been asleep almost since they’d left the inn, stirred and stretched. Thank the Almighty—someone to engage in a sensible conversation about things other than geese, chestnuts and those damned holly garlands that always seemed to tear a man’s fingers to shreds.

“What about *you*, sir?” Barrett asked. “Where are you bound?”

“I’m returning to my family—I’ve not seen them for some weeks,” the man said. “I promised my wife I’d be home by Christmas,” he added, pride in his voice.

“She’ll be glad you kept your promise, sir,” Mrs. Field said.

“Thank you, Mrs. Field.”

“You’re acquainted?” Barrett asked.

Mrs. Field nodded. “We dined together at the inn last night. Mr. Whitworth was dining alone, and I couldn’t bear to

see it. A man should be with his family at Christmas, should he not? Are you visiting family, Lord Raine?”

“After a fashion,” Barrett said. “I’m visiting a cousin’s estate.”

“Your cousin will appreciate it, I’m sure.”

Unlikely, given that the man had been lying cold in his grave for the past six months.

“Does your cousin have any family?” she continued. “Is he married?”

“No.”

Cousin George had died a recluse, on his own, with no wife or children to mourn him. Barrett had barely known the fellow, but owed it to him to go to the funeral, given that he’d inherited—and given that, save for the vicar, the undertaker, and the lawyer, he was the only one in attendance at the ceremony.

“Then he must be very glad you’re visiting,” Mrs. Field continued. “A man should not be on his own—particularly at Christmas. Had Mr. Field and I known you were travelling alone, we would have asked you to dine with us last night at the inn, wouldn’t we, my love? I cannot bear to think of a man on his own. In fact, if you and your cousin are alone over Christmas, perhaps my husband could prevail upon his brother to invite you to dine with us?”

“My love,” the unfortunate husband protested. “Perhaps Lord Raine wishes for a quiet Christmas with his cousin.”

“Nonsense!” came the reply. “Who in possession of their wits would want to be *quiet* at Christmas?”

On the contrary—who in possession of their wits would *not*?

“I insist,” Mrs. Field continued. “There’s no harm in asking your brother, is there, my love? With a house full of guests...” she turned to Barrett, “...twenty two, at the last count—there’d be room for two extra spaces at the table. You’ve promised to come the day after Christmas, have you not, Mr. Whitworth?”

The treacherous man sitting next to Barrett nodded with enthusiasm.

“There!” Mrs. Field continued. “With Mr. Whitworth and his family—that would make twenty eight. You and your cousin would make up the numbers to a round thirty. Oh, imagine how jolly that would be!”

By all the saints—was there no stopping the woman and her pursuit of jollity? Since when had he been reduced to the sort of person who was fit only for *making up the numbers to a round thirty*?

“Oh, my love, *do* ask your brother when we arrive. You will, won’t you?”

Unable to bear it any longer, Barrett lifted his cane and rapped on the side of the carriage, three times.

The carriage rolled to a halt.

“Are you well, sir?” Mrs. Field asked.

The question that had started it all. Why had he not just responded with a *'perfectly so, I thank you, ma'am'* then closed his eyes and feigned sleep? It would have saved his ears, at least.

"I find myself a little overheated," he said. "I think I'll walk the rest of the way."

"In this weather?" Mr. Field eyed the view outside. "It's snowing rather heavily."

As Barrett pulled down the window, a footman appeared.

"Is anything the matter, sir?"

"How far is it to Handleford House?" Barrett asked.

"About three miles along the road, sir."

"Walking distance, then?"

"The road rises up ahead, sir," the footman said. "It'll be tough going in this weather for the horses, let alone a man on foot."

Barrett's resolve waned as he looked up at the sky, smothered with thick purple clouds, swollen with snow.

"There's a shortcut about half a mile along the road," the footman continued. "A path that winds straight up Grisedale Pike."

"What the devil is Grisedale Pike?" Barrett asked.

"It's the hill yonder," came the reply. "The path's sound, but I wouldn't advise taking it in this weather. A man can get lost on the slopes if he's not familiar with the landscape."

“Then the road it is,” Barrett said.

“What about your trunk?” Mrs. Field asked. “Surely you’ll not carry that? Or is your man sitting outside on the carriage?”

“My valet is in London, ma’am,” Barrett replied. “I have only a small travel bag which I’m perfectly capable of carrying. A man can travel light when he’s without his entourage. But I thank you for your concern.”

“But still—walking, in this weather!” she protested.

“I am fond of walking,” Barrett replied. Then he addressed the footman. “Good man, fetch down my bag, would you?”

The footman bowed, then disappeared, while Barrett climbed out of the carriage and closed the door behind him. Mrs. Field’s head appeared at the window.

Take care to stick to the road, sir,” she said. “And I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

What the devil did she mean? But before he could ask, the footman appeared before him, holding up a brown leather bag.

Barrett took it, then reached into his waistcoat pocket and fished out a coin, dropping it into the man’s hands.

“For your trouble,” he said.

“Thank you sir,” the footman replied. “Mind you keep to the road.” Then he climbed back onto the carriage and, with the crack of a whip it set off.

Clutching his bag, Barrett watched the carriage roll away into the distance until it turned a corner and disappeared, the snow in the air swirling around its form.

Alone at last.

Alone...

It was how he preferred it—away from the false jollity of Society, which always worsened at Christmas when the whole world seemed to fall over itself to demonstrate the blissful state of the season of goodwill.

And, for him, nothing could be further from the truth. He'd had his moment of bliss, when he'd offered his hand to the woman who had captured his heart and soul. But she had deceived him, and in doing so, had ripped his heart from his body, leaving an empty void.

But, each time he closed his eyes, he couldn't dispel the image of her face—her soft, delicate skin with a faint flush of rose, framed by glossy hair the color of a raven's wing. And those eyes—the clear, pale gray, devoid of color, but that only rendered them all the more pure for it. As pure as her heart.

Or so he'd thought, until she revealed her deception and betrayed his trust.

Emilia...

No! He would not let her enter his mind. He would banish her from his heart, as he had banished her from his life. In breaking his trust, she had ruined his world, for he would never trust a woman again. She had done him a service, opening his eyes to the falsity of love. And he would look forward to the day when he'd finally succeeded in banishing her from his mind as he had banished her from his heart.

No—she meant nothing to him.

Nothing at all.

He lifted the collar of his greatcoat, clutched his bag and set off in the wake of the carriage.

CHAPTER TWO

A long, low howl echoed across the landscape. Barrett tightened his grip on his travelling bag and hunched his shoulders against the onslaught of the cold.

What the devil had he been thinking, believing that he could walk the rest of the way?

Or that the shortcut would quicken his journey?

Half an hour ago—or perhaps it was several hours, given that he'd lost all sense of time, as well as the sensation in his legs and feet—the damned shortcut had seemed like an excellent idea. But now, he recognized his folly. Thick snowflakes swirled in the air, forming a sea of white in the air, to match the white of the landscape, punctuated by the occasional rock jutting through the snow, like a drowning man straining for breath. Overlooking the land were the trees—tall, silent sentinels that swayed in the wind, whispering to each other—their branches bowing under the weight of the snow. Occasionally, an overladen branch would shed its load, the snow sliding to the ground with a cold hiss, causing the branch to spring upward once free of the weight. At first, he'd believed it to be a phantom, dancing in the air ahead—or

worse, a hungry predator. Then he'd cursed the stupidity of his imagination.

With each step forward, the blanket of snow seemed to grow deeper—icy fingers tugging, first at his ankles then, as more snow fell, clinging to his calves while he trudged forward, trying to keep his mind off the numbing cold in his feet. As it was, he couldn't recall when he'd last been able to feel his toes.

In fact, he couldn't recall how long he'd been walking.

The shortcut which had been a clear straight path from the road, winding up the hill, had long since disappeared. The landscape which, at first, had sparkled in the afternoon light, revealing tiny jewels of light in the snow crystals, had been smothered into cold white oblivion.

The most sensible course of action was retreat. But the snow fell so thickly that his footprints had been obscured. Retreat would mean another long slog down the hill, followed by three miles of winding road. A man could walk such a distance in an hour at a brisk pace—but not in these conditions.

No—the shortcut led directly up the hill, and that was the direction he must travel. Even if the path was no longer visible, he couldn't be far from the summit. Any simpleton could point his nose toward the top of a hill, then follow it.

With luck, he'd reach the summit soon, then he'd be in a position to see the world about him, including Handleford House. The housekeeper had promised she'd have a fire waiting for him, together with a well-stocked larder. She was

sure to have prepared a meal, ready and waiting for him to eat on his arrival.

His stomach growled, and his mouth watered at the prospect of roast goose—crispy skin with tender flesh on the inside, washed down with a good claret. That was, if Cousin George had stocked his cellar well.

Just a few more steps and he'd surely be within sight of his destination.

The howling came again—this time much closer, swirling around him.

Curse the wind!

Assuming it was the wind...

The skin on the back of his neck prickled with anticipation, and he drew in a sharp breath. He stopped and glanced around, but there was nothing, save the blurred shapes of rocks and trees, and the constant onslaught of snow.

Then he heard it—a long, low growl, coming from the trees.

Perhaps it was a branch creaking.

Yes, that must be what it was.

Barrett glanced toward the direction of the noise, his gaze following the line of his lengthening shadow in the fading light.

Then his gut twisted in terror.

A pair of eyes was fixed on him—pinpricks of light, seeming to float in the air.

Stop it you fool—you're imagining it!

He rubbed his eyes and blinked, willing the apparition to disappear. But the eyes remained fixed on him, their color a poisonous green that seemed to ripple as they moved from side to side.

Another low growl rumbled in the air, and he raised his cane.

“Begone, demon!” he cried.

The eyes blinked, then turned and disappeared, and he discerned a dark shape slipping between the trees.

An animal then, not a demon. A wolf, perhaps? Were there wolves hereabouts? The books he'd read about them said they seldom travelled alone. In which case the animal might return with its companions.

What chance had he against a pack of them?

Why the bloody hell did he think the shortcut was a good idea! The sooner he was off this damned hill and in the warm, the better.

Gripping his cane in one hand, ready to defend himself if need be, he trudged on, quickening his pace.

It wasn't his fault he was lost on this godforsaken hill.

It was *hers*.

Curse you, Emilia Templeton!

She had destroyed his faith in love. Were it not for her, he'd be safely entrenched in his estate, with a household to tend to his meals, an heir in the nursery, and a wife ready to

warm his bed. Instead, he was a bitter soul, trudging through the snow to distance himself as far as possible from all those blasted happy couples determined to taunt him with their wedded bliss.

A howl echoed around him, followed by another, and then a third.

Dear God! What folly had led him to this?

He broke into a run, his breath coming in short, sharp puffs, which crystallized in the air before fading.

What would become of him up here? If he were attacked, who would find him in time? He'd instructed the housekeeper to prepare the fire and the meal, then leave so he could enjoy the solitude. His valet wasn't due to arrive until tomorrow evening. Thomas was a resourceful chap, but even if he sent out a search party, how long would it take to find his master, while he was being torn to pieces by wild beasts?

Stop being such a fool!

Silently he chided himself.

This was England—a man's world. Men such as he had ruled the world and everything in it for centuries. If he were going to die, it would be safe, and warm in his bed, and not at the teeth of some animal he could easily overcome with a sharp strike of his cane.

Nevertheless, he maintained his pace, his chest straining as he drew in lungfuls of ice-cold air.

Then he caught sight of a dim light ahead, flickering mid-air.

What devilry was afoot, now? Another demon?

But he soon realized his mistake. The light was square in shape—or rather, four squares.

A four-paned window.

As he drew near, a shape came into focus, and his heart soared with relief. Regular in form, and blessedly man-made, with straight sides and a low roof—it was a cottage.

“Thank the Almighty!” he cried, and he surged forward.

The building was barely large enough to be called a cottage. Besides—nobody in possession of their wits would dream of actually *living* there. Fashioned from irregularly-shaped blocks of gray stone, it had a wooden door and a single, four-paned window. One of the panes was cracked, but the roof seemed sound, and it would give some shelter, at least until the storm had cleared.

Barrett approached the building, and knocked on the door.

Silence.

He knocked again, then another howl rose up from behind.

Propriety be damned when his life was at stake. He pushed open the door and slipped inside, closing the door behind him.

The cottage—if it could be called such—was a single room, with a fireplace on the opposite wall, flanked by two dark recesses. It was unoccupied with nothing inside save for a pallet against a side wall, and a wooden crate beside the fireplace.

The light came from a candle, burned almost to the wick, in brass candle-holder, on top of the pallet.

Barrett approached the fireplace and touched the grate.

Stone cold.

Whoever had been here was long gone and, given the storm, was not likely to return. It made no sense to leave a lit candle, but Barrett silently thanked his benefactor, whoever he may be, for leading him to sanctuary.

It wasn't much, but at least he had a roof over his head. His stomach growling, he approached the crate and lifted the lid. Inside, he found a pile of blankets—a Christmas gift from his absent benefactor. He slipped off his greatcoat and laid it out on the floor to dry. Then he pulled out a blanket, wrapped it around his shoulders, and settled himself down on the pallet. Sheltered from the wind, his shivering began to subside, followed by the familiar ache in his feet as the numbness faded. He wiggled his feet inside his boots to bring them back to life, wincing at the pinpricks in his toes. Better that than the alternative. He'd heard of a man who'd become stranded in the Highlands who had lost a foot as a result of the cold. Of course, that might have been a tale told by nannies and governesses to prevent their charges from wandering off in the snow. Children lacked a sense of self-preservation at the best of times. But when the snow fell, they threw caution to the wind, taking delight in the opportunity to mold it into missiles to throw at each other, to build snowmen, and, of course, indulge in sledding on any and every slope they could find. In his youth, he'd once done just such a thing—sliding down a

hillside on the cook's tea tray. It had earned him a thrashing from his father, but a sore seat had been worth the sheer exhilaration.

What a pity children had to lose their sense of wonder when they grew up, and confine themselves to the rules of adulthood and constraints of Society! Only once, since coming of age, had he shed the chains of responsibility and indulged in childish fun.

And he'd learned the folly of *that*. Nothing would persuade him to do so again. No—the onset of snow and anticipation of Christmas was best left to wide-eyed children who knew nothing of responsibility. What he had to look forward to was the solitude that Handleford House could provide while the rest of Society made merry with their parties.

Drawing the blanket closer—which would be comfortable if it weren't so damned scratchy—Barrett watched the flame of the candle as it danced to and fro, with the drafts that whispered through the cottage. The bright orange form swayed from side to side in a smooth, rocking motion and, his eyelids heavy, he lowered himself onto the pallet and drifted into sleep.

CHAPTER
THREE

A loud crash jolted Barrett awake, splintering through the dream of plum pudding and spiced wine—so vivid that he could almost taste it—and he lifted his head.

Where the devil was he?

His limbs ached and he sat up, scratching the skin of his neck.

That blanket really was too itchy.

Of course—the cottage!

He glanced at the candle, which was still alight, though beginning to sputter as its demise drew near.

He couldn't have been asleep for long. So what had awoken him?

Then he saw it—a slim, dark shape in the doorway, flakes of snow swirling in the surrounding air.

A man.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

The man stiffened, and Barrett thought he heard a low gasp. Then he spoke.

“This is *my* house—not yours.”

No—not a man, his voice was too light. It was a boy, and an arrogant one at that.

“Can’t a man seek shelter in storm?” Barrett asked. “And for goodness sake, close the damned door, will you?”

“Well, seeing as you asked so *politely*.”

The boy stepped inside and closed the door. He wore loose-fitting breeches, thick leather boots, and a hooded cloak. In his arms he carried a pile of logs. His face was in shadow, but a pair of clear eyes glittered in the candlelight.

“I ought to ask who you are,” the boy said, dropping the logs onto the floor beside the door. “And—what are *you* doing here?”

“I asked first,” Barrett said.

“*I asked first*,” the boy mocked. “I told you, it’s my house. I have every right to be here.”

“Surely you don’t live in a place such as this?”

The boy let out a snort. “Arrogant as ever. I should turn you out—then how would you fare?”

Barrett curled his hands into fists as anger boiled in his gut. He ought to teach the lad a lesson—by whipping his hide.

Arrogant as ever—what did the young pup mean by that? Did the boy know him?

Barrett rose to his feet, and the boy stepped back. But he saw no fear on the lad’s eyes—only defiance.

“What’s to stop me from giving you a bloody good hiding, here and now?” Barrett asked.

“This.”

The boy reached inside his cloak, then drew out a blade, the sharp, curved edge glinting in the candlelight like a sinister smile.

Barrett’s skin prickled. Had he escaped the jaws of carnivorous beasts to find himself at the mercy of a madman in the woods?

The boy let out a laugh, and sheathed the blade. Then, as if Barrett was either absent or of no consequence, he approached the dying candle, drew another out of his pocket, lit it from the flame, and pushed it on top of the first, securing it in the candle- holder.

“If you must trespass on my hospitality, you ought to at least explain what you’re doing on my land.”

The boy’s voice seemed oddly familiar, but Barrett couldn’t place it.

“Is this what you call hospitality?” he sneered. “A hovel with nothing but a few blankets.”

“You’re welcome to chance your luck outside,” the boy replied. “You always thought too much of yourself. Now’s your chance to prove your prowess.”

“What do you mean?” Barrett asked. “Do you *know* me?”

The boy let out a harsh laugh. “Oh, how quickly the mighty earl forgets! *I* am not so afflicted with a poor memory,

more's the pity. I recall the last words you ever spoke to me, as if you said them yesterday.”

Barrett shook his head. That voice...

No, it can't be!

He stepped toward the boy who stared back at him out of clear, pale eyes.

Pale gray eyes...

“What did I last say to you?” Barrett asked.

“You told me to throw myself in a lake to cleanse my tainted reputation.”

Sweet lord!

Then he—or rather, *she*—pulled back the cowl, and Barrett's gut twisted in recognition.

Wide, clear gray eyes glared at him, cold with fury, framed by dark, winged eyebrows. Thick, black hair tumbled over her shoulders in glossy curls, and Barrett's fingers itched to be buried in their softness. Her mouth—her rosy, full-lipped mouth, that had once parted in anticipation of a kiss—hardened into a scowl.

“It's you!” he cried. “Emilia—dear God, is it really you?”

She curled her lips into a sneer. “Not as intelligent as he is arrogant,” she said. “Some things never change.”

Barrett caught his breath. She was as lovely as he'd remembered—her beauty only enhanced by the wildness that shimmered beneath her skin. The memory of having her in his arms threatened to overwhelm him—that soft body as it

yielded to his touch, the lush breasts that had heaved against him, the valley between promising a feast for him to indulge in. And those long, long limbs of hers—arms to envelop him and hold him to her bosom—and those ripe thighs. How many times had he imagined what it might be like to part them and explore the paradise within?

The pleasures of her body had been merely the tools of a temptress to entrap him. But, even now, his body craved the satisfaction that only she could give—the satisfaction he'd denied himself, and had yearned for in his dreams almost every night since their parting.

Emilia Templeton—the woman he'd fallen in love with. The bastard daughter of a servant who had fooled the earl and almost caught him.

She was right—he would fare better outside. For there was only one thing more deadly than a pack of hungry wolves.

And that was a determined harlot.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Emilia stared at her uninvited guest.

Barrett Longford.

Sweet lord, he was unchanged from the moment he'd first broken her heart! Even his eyes, though dark with anger, were as beautiful as she remembered. And though they glared at her in bitter contempt—as they had done the day he'd discarded her, setting her on the path to ruination—they were still the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen.

Or was ever likely to see, now that she'd withdrawn from the world.

At first, when she'd spotted the scuff of footprints at the door, she'd wondered if old Mr. Cornhill had followed her again. The dear man might be a paid agent, but he treated her with affectionate indulgence, and he was the closest she had ever come to a having a father. Since she had returned—permanently—to her home in the foothills of Grisedale Pike, Mr. Cornhill had seen fit to appoint himself as her personal guardian angel, watching over her when he feared her actions were too reckless for a finely bred young lady.

Except she wasn't a finely bred young lady. By a quirk of fate, and a mere ten minutes, she was not the eldest daughter of a respectable country squire.

She was the bastard brat of a servant.

And now, sitting before her, in her very own haven from the world—as if he'd come to intrude on what little peace of mind she had left—was the very man who'd uttered those hateful words three years ago.

Three long years. Time enough to mend her broken heart, Yet, with the passing of each year, that wound had festered. She had buried the pain deep inside, easing her suffering by living life to the full, indulging in all the pursuits that a young lady would be forbidden from enjoying.

But a treacherous voice whispered in her mind, as she saw his face once more in the candlelight, that she'd give it all up in a heartbeat to be loved by him.

But he was incapable of love. Three years ago, she had been too blind to see it.

And now she hated him.

No—she didn't. Hate had a permanence, a finality about it, that she could never harbor for another creature. She had long since learned that in order to survive in the world, she must view her disappointments as opportunities, rather than problems. And, in some ways, he'd given her an opportunity which she had grasped with both hands.

As much as she would have taken satisfaction from turning him out into the blizzard, she must be the better person of the

two. Where he would have shown retribution, she must show mercy.

“I’ll permit you to stay here, Barrett,” she said. “The storm should be gone by morning.”

“You mean I have to stay the night here? With you?”

She let out a laugh. “You don’t *have* to do anything, my lord. And you needn’t fear—you’re quite safe from me.”

“B-but—you and I...” he hesitated, then shook his head. “We can’t stay the night here together, in the same building.”

“It’s kind of you to fear for my reputation, sir, but let me assure you that I have no such qualms. After all, I have no reputation to speak of now, do I?”

“Not since you were caught in a compromising position with Lord de Blanchard.”

His arrow his home, and she felt a stab of pain.

Curse her heart! Were her defenses so weak that they’d crumble at the merest taunt from him?

“It’s a wonder why you didn’t marry de Blanchard,” he continued. “I hear that after the two of you were discovered he offered his hand, despite knowing the circumstances of your birth.”

“I refused him because I *loathed* him,” she replied. “As I’d refuse any man whom I didn’t...”

She checked herself. There was nothing to gain in reopening old wounds—reiterating old confessions.

...any man whom I didn’t love.

She approached the fireplace. “I should get a fire going. The night is young, and it’s going to get a lot colder. You’re lucky I was prepared, seeing as you, obviously, were not.”

“Do you have anything to eat?” he asked.

“Why—do *you*?”

“I’m in your home, as you were so keen to tell me.”

“And you expect me to serve you as my honored guest?” She let out a laugh. “I have no intention of becoming your lackey. We could be snowed in for hours—perhaps days, if the storm continues. If you are hungry, you must accept responsibility for that yourself.”

“You must have water here, at least,” he said.

“There’s a stream half a mile away,” she replied. “Or, by virtue of the weather, we have a ready supply just outside.”

“A trough?”

“No,” she said. “The snow.”

Laughter threatened to burst inside her at the expression of horror on his face.

“Forgive me, my lord,” she said. “Bastard spawn such as I must live on what we can. But I assure you, you’ll not be tainted by my disgrace.”

“I can’t say I find that reassuring,” he retorted, “not after you almost tricked me into disgracing myself by association with you.”

His words cut through her heart, and she drew in a sharp breath to temper the pain.

How could the man she'd once been so utterly, completely in love with—still harbor such hatred for her?

Curse him! He still had the power to breach her defenses. The merest notion of him hating her was more than she could bear.

And there was only one reason why she could not bear the thought of him hating her.

It was because, despite wishing otherwise, she still loved him.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Miss Templeton's—*Emilia's*— stricken expression, pale in the moonlight, pricked at Barrett's conscience.

Curse it! He hadn't meant to speak so harshly. But did she honestly expect him to grub around in the dirt eating snow to quench his thirst?

A pinprick of light reflected in her eyes. Moisture perhaps? But before he could look closer, she blinked, averted her gaze, and turned toward the window.

"It's safe outside," she said. "And you'll not have to go far to collect enough snow."

She approached the fireplace, reached inside and picked up an iron pot.

"You can collect it in this."

Her voice was flat, toneless—but with a slight tremor as if she fought to contain her emotions.

"Forgive me if I spoke harshly, Emilia," he said. "But you cannot deny the circumstances of your birth."

"I make no attempt to deny it," she replied, "as I made no attempt back then."

“You did not confess it, either.”

“Confess?” She turned to face him and this time there was no mistaking the tears in her eyes. “You speak as if I had committed a crime—a crime by virtue merely of being born. Should a child be punished for the sins of her parents—if a sin had even been committed?”

Sweet lord, how he’d longed to hear her voice—the raw emotion that only she could elicit in his heart! How many times had his treacherous soul whispered of the yearning to hold her in his arms again, and to hear her voice, thick with emotion, as she professed her love?

But no—she was deceiving him, even now, with false tears. He curled his hands into fists to stem the urge to take her in his arms once more.

“You must understand,” he said, “as you surely understood then. Fortune, and a title are desirable qualities in a wife, but a respectable gentleman can live without them. However, birth is—and always will be—everything. And your circumstances were such...”

“Ten minutes!” she cried. “In your eyes, a mere ten minutes makes all the difference between whether a woman should be accepted, or thrown out into the gutter!”

He recoiled at the feral fury in her voice as she stepped toward him, eyes glittering, teeth bared. For a moment, a tremor of fear threaded through his body. This land was far from London Society. It was wild, untamed, and filled with ravenous beasts who’d happily rip his throat out if he so much as glanced at them.

Was *she* such a beast?

He caught his breath, his heartbeat whooshing in his ears, while he waited for her to strike. Then she shook her head.

“It matters not. Ten minutes, or ten years—it’s all the same to people like you. Here...” she lifted her hand, holding out the pot.

“What did you mean—ten minutes?” he asked.

She let out a sigh. “What does it matter?”

“It seems like it matters a great deal to you, though I cannot understand why.”

She sighed, and lowered her hand. “My father died on his wedding day.”

“You mean to say he betrayed his fiancée with your mother?” Barrett shook his head. “Perhaps the Almighty saw fit to claim retribution for your father’s sins.”

She set her mouth into a firm line. “His fiancée *was* my mother,” she said. “He suffered a seizure while standing at the altar. He died in my mother’s arms—almost nine months before I was born.”

So that means...

“Yes,” she said, her voice hard and cold. “Had he lived but ten minutes more, I would have been his legitimate daughter. I hear many couples in love anticipate their wedding night a day or two before exchanging their vows. After all, the banns have already been read, and the woman is secure in the knowledge

that their love will be legitimized. Nobody could have foreseen what happened—especially Mamma.”

“Did she not seek another husband, to give you a name?”

“You really don’t understand love at all, do you?” she sneered. “Mamma loved my father and could not contemplate the notion of loving another man, or even giving herself to another merely for security and comfort. She inherited my father’s estate, and had no wish to see another take his place at its helm.”

“Your father bequeathed his estate to a *servant*?”

“He bequeathed it to the woman he loved!” she cried. “He did not view her as chattel, or as a possession whose only purpose was to produce heirs and keep house. He loved her for herself, and viewed her as an equal.”

She took a step closer and jabbed a finger at his chest. “And *that*, Barrett Longford, Fifth Earl Raine, makes him a better man than any other who walks upon this earth—and certainly a better man than *you*.”

Barrett might have right on his side, but he couldn’t temper the shame that engulfed his body and heated his cheeks. He had—together with every other man when he’d revealed her secret to the world—assumed that Emilia’s mother was some local slut who’d parted her thighs to entrap a man and failed. But here she was, painting a very different landscape of events—a landscape depicting a couple whose love had bridged the gap between their stations but had been cruelly cut short on the brink of their declaring themselves to each other for eternity.

“Forgive me, Emilia,” he said. “I didn’t know.”

“Would it have made a difference?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. In the eyes of Society it would have made no difference whether her mother was a bride whose fiancé was snatched away by the jaws of death, or a fallen woman who’d soiled herself to satisfy her baser urges. But perhaps it ought to have done. What misfortune to have her position in Society—whether that be a respectable wife of a landowner, or a disgraced harlot—be dictated merely by the passage of ten minutes?

“Perhaps it ought to have made a difference,” he said, “but neither circumstance would have impacted how deeply I’d fallen in love with you.”

“No,” she said, quietly, “but it made a significant difference to how you treated me.”

“Forgive me,” he said, “I...”

She held up her hand, the pot swinging on its handle.

“Perhaps it’s best if we don’t discuss the matter further, Barrett, for I fear it would bring us pain. And Christmas a time for joy, and families—not pain. Or so I’m told.”

“You don’t know?”

She lifted her gaze to his, and for a moment, he saw an image in his mind—a crackling fire, the aroma of orange and spices in the air, and the woman he loved in his arms while their children sat playing on the hearthrug.

A time for families...

The past three Christmases he'd spent at house parties with his married friends—a week of noise, merriment and indulgence. But how had *she* spent those Christmases—alone, in this desolate place, with a ruined reputation...

And with, perhaps, a broken heart?

He reached out to take the pot, and his fingers brushed against hers. A crackle of need rippled through his skin, and, instinctively, he curled his fingers around hers, and caressed the back of her knuckles with his thumb. The skin, that had once been silky smooth when he'd brushed the back of her hand with his lips, was now rough and calloused, bearing the trophies of toil, unlike the delicate fingertips of the ladies of Society who knew nothing of hard work.

She caught her breath, and looked up, and his body tightened at the expression in her clear gray eyes. *Sweet Lord*, he wanted her as much as he'd wanted her when he offered his hand. He'd never stopped wanting her, spurning the attempt of all those persistent Society mamas attempting to foist their ungainly daughters onto him.

Then he withdrew, the pot in his hand, and the moment was gone.

"I'll see if I can find us something to eat," she said. "The snow will need to be boiled. Can you light a fire while I'm gone?"

Who the devil did she think she was?

"I won't take orders," he snapped.

“Oh, I forgot,” she retorted. “Earls don’t sully their hands, but bastards do.”

He flinched at her expression. “Can’t we just eat the snow as it is?” he asked. “Surely there’s no need to heat it.”

She shook her head. “It’ll make you thirsty if you eat it frozen—and it could chill the body and cause illness.” Then she cocked her head to one side and raised her eyebrows. “You don’t know how to light a fire, do you?”

What did she think he was—a simpleton?”

“Any fool can make a fire,” he said.

“Good. Then you can demonstrate what kind of fool you are while I look for food.”

Her tone carried an undercurrent of contempt. Was she toying with him?

“Where will *you* find food on this godforsaken hill?” he asked.

“I’ll hunt for it.”

“Hunt?”

She curled her lip in a smile of amusement. “We’re in the wild out here, your lordship. The rules of the Society drawing room no longer apply.”

Then she drew out her knife again, and smiled. He stepped back, and she brushed past him, opened the door and slipped outside. By the time he’d followed suit, she was already several yards from the cottage, toiling further up the hill, her cloak billowing about her.

Where the devil was she going?

CHAPTER
SIX

*C*urse him!

Emilia trudged ahead, her body hunched against the cold. The snow was thicker on the slopes, and she had to lift her feet to move forward. Damp clung to her breeches, soaking through the material, but she pushed on, driven by hunger and the urge to put as much distance between herself and—*him*—as possible.

Perhaps she'd imagined his return.

She stopped halfway toward her destination and glanced back.

There he was, grubbing around, gathering snow, beside the cottage, the light from the candle flickering in the window. Most likely it was the first manual work he'd ever undertaken—if it could be called work.

Then she turned and trudged on.

Why?

Why, of all the people she could encounter out here in the wilderness, did it have to be *him*? Over the years she'd hardened herself to the cruelty of Society and the harsh

elements of the landscape. Her life was not an easy one, but it was a good life, filled with honesty and toil that yielded rewards from the fat of the land. And it wasn't a lonely life, no matter how cold her bed might be as she climbed into it, alone, each night. Her treacherous mind might torment her on occasion, transporting her in her dreams to another world—the world that had been within reach once before. But each morning when she woke, ready to till the land once more and see to her estate, the joy of fulfilment from her independence conquered the loneliness.

Until Fate had sent *him* to re-open her wounds.

The further up the hill she trudged, the colder the air seemed to grow. As the trees thinned out, the wind whipped around her in a swirling, howling maelstrom. But, she hunched her shoulders and soldiered on. Then she caught her foot on something hidden beneath the snow, and lost her balance. She pitched forward, landing, face down, in the snow.

“Why?” she screamed. “Why did you have to come back to plague me after I'd spent the past three years trying to forget you?”

Sobbing, she pushed herself upright as the howling increased. Her breeches were soaked, the material clinging to her thighs. She let out a scream of frustration and the wind captured her cry and sent it swirling into the night.

Her anger fueling her strength, she continued on until she reached her destination—a snare she'd set earlier that afternoon by one of the many rabbit runs on the hill.

But it was empty.

“Damn you, Barrett Longford!”

Cursing, she ripped the snare out of the ground, then soldiered on to the site of the next snare. This time, Fate had granted her bounty in the form of a buck rabbit. Not a feast by any means, particularly given that she had a second mouth to feed tonight—but it would stave off the hunger until the storm had cleared.

She placed her hand on the rabbit’s flank. A residual flicker of warmth penetrated her gloves from the creature’s dwindling body heat.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Then she dismantled her trap and placed it in her bag, picked up the rabbit, and headed back to the cottage.

She emerged from the trees, and as she caught sight of the cottage once more—a dark, squat silhouette against the backdrop of snow—her gut twisted in apprehension.

The light in the window had gone.

There was only one plausible explanation.

Barrett had taken the candle and abandoned her, as he’d abandoned her once before.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Why wouldn't the bloody thing catch alight?

Barrett crouched beside the fire, cursing. No matter how vigorously he rubbed the twigs together, the flame wouldn't come. The pile of logs remained where they were—damp, stinking, and resolutely refusing to light, as if they mocked him.

Muttering a curse, he stood, and his foot caught on the candle he'd dropped earlier.

“Damn you!”

He kicked the candle aside.

Why had he been so foolish, thinking he could light a fire? His servants make it look so damned easy, scrabbling about at the hearth until a fire burned in the grate. He'd never paid them any real attention—after all, it was *their* job to see to the house and light the fires. His job was to direct.

“Why?” he whispered.

Why!

He'd heard that word outside, uttered in a scream of despair, echoing across the hillside while he'd scooped

handfuls of snow into the pot. It could have been the wind, save for the fact that it had been uttered in a voice he recognized.

The voice had touched his heart. The notes of contempt, and anger, that he'd heard in her voice in the cottage had gone—to be replaced by despair.

The same despair he'd seen in her eyes when he'd pushed her from him after her tearful confession about her parentage. He might have deceived himself at the time that her expression was that of disappointment due to her scheme to entrap him having failed. But it wasn't. It was the expression of a broken-hearted woman who finally came to trust the man she loved, and had only asked him to trust her in return.

And he'd betrayed that trust.

But perhaps Fate had presented him with the chance to make amends. He could care for her, and cherish her, as a man ought. And he could deliver her from this life of hardship.

He could be a man for her so that she need never worry again.

If only he could light this bloody fire!

The door opened and he turned to see her in the doorway, silhouetted against the hillside, holding something in her hand. She closed the door and approached him, dropping the object onto the crate beside the fireplace.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Trying to light the fire.”

He held up the twigs in explanation. But rather than the admiration he'd expected, she threw back her head and burst into laughter.

“Oh, Barrett!” she cried. “Did you seriously believe you could light a fire by rubbing sticks together? It might work when children play make-believe, but you're in the real world now.”

“But, I thought...”

“Have you ever lit a fire?” she asked. “Or watched one of your many servants light one for you?” She shook her head. “Doubtless when you usually enter a room, the fire's already lit—the servants being under orders to make sure they have prepared the room for you in advance then scuttled back below stairs so you're spared the ordeal of being in the same room as them.”

He opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. She spoke the truth, after all.

“Did you not consider using the candle?” she asked.

“Of course I did!” he retorted, unable to hide his indignation. “But the log didn't catch alight, then I dropped it and it went out.”

She approached the fire and picked up a log.

“It's damp.”

“It's one of the ones you brought in earlier.”

“No wonder it didn't catch,” she said. “It's not seasoned.”

“It's not—*what?*”

“Seasoned,” she said. “Don’t you know *anything*?”

“I know plenty,” he said, his pride piqued by her question.

“I meant, don’t you know anything that would facilitate survival in the wild?”

“I’ve never needed to.”

“We never do, until that need arises,” she said, quietly.

The mirth had gone from her voice. Three years ago, that need *had* arisen for her. And it had been his doing.

She removed the pile of logs—his handiwork—from the fireplace, and set them aside.

“These logs are fresh,” she said. “They need to be laid up for at least six months so they can dry out. They’d be nigh impossible to light, and even if you succeeded, they’d smoke out the place and dirty the chimney. Why didn’t you take one from the store?”

“What store?”

She gestured toward one of the recesses at the back of the cottage. “The log store.”

“I hadn’t noticed it contained anything,” he said.

She sighed, then approached the recess, returning with an armful of logs and smaller twigs.

“I daresay you hadn’t noticed the tinderbox, either.” She nodded to the mantelshelf above the fireplace where a squat little box had been placed.

No, he hadn’t.

Heavens! What must she think of him?

“The first rule of survival,” she said, “is to take note of your surroundings to ascertain whether there is anything that can be of use.”

Did she have to sound so pompous, merely because he’d not noticed a few paltry items?

“What’s the second rule?” he asked, unable to disguise the flippancy in his tone.

Her eyes narrowed. “To be prepared,” she said, crisply. “Had not these logs been here, or the tinderbox, we’d be unable to keep warm, and we’d be unable to eat.”

“Eat?” he asked. “Eat what?”

She nodded toward the crate. “Our supper. But first, let me show you how to light a fire. Am I safe to presume you know how to use a tinderbox?”

“Of course!” he retorted. “I’m not a *complete* simpleton.”

Her mouth curved into a smile, but she said nothing. Instead, she formed a neat pile of smaller sticks in the fireplace, then carefully placed three logs on top, leaning against each other in the shape of a pyramid.

“Where’s the candle?” she asked.

Rather than reply, and thus reveal himself to be even more of a numbskull than she believed, he retrieved the candle from the floor, replaced it in the holder, and handed it to her in silence. She placed it on the crate, then reached for the tinderbox, opened it, and struck the flint, until a dull glow

appeared on the tinder. She blew on it until a flame sprang to life, then held the candle over it. Once the candle caught light, she closed the tinderbox. Then she pulled out a number of objects from her pocket that resembled long, thin pencils, and held one over the candle until the tip caught alight.

“A taper,” she said, anticipating his question. “It’s made from rolled up paper—long enough to reach into the fire without burning your hand.” She crouched beside the fireplace, and reached into the bottom of the pile at the center with the taper, holding the tip against the smaller twigs. The flame danced around the twigs, then with a soft crackle, tiny pinpricks of light began to glow at the base.

“What the devil’s that?” he asked.

“Dried moss. It catches easily, then you can fan the sparks into a flame until the smaller sticks are alight.” She leaned forward and blew, slowly and softly, until with a soft sigh a flame burst into life, followed by another, licking around the base of the twigs, crackling softly, as if woodland spirits chattered away to each other.

Woodland spirits, indeed! Since when had he become such a sentimental fool?

The flames grew, until Emilia’s face glowed in the firelight, and Barrett caught his breath at the expression of contentment in her eyes—contentment with her life, and the satisfaction of having achieved her objective. Something he had failed utterly to do, despite being of the stronger sex.

At length, the fire crackled merrily, and heat radiated throughout the room. Barrett held out his hands, relishing the

warmth on his skin.

“Did you collect the snow?” she asked.

In answer, he held up the pot. Smiling, she took it, and suspended it over the fire.

“Thank you.”

He felt a prick of pride at her words—pride in his having achieved something so small, yet she valued it nonetheless. He’d half expected her to taunt him, to note that at least he could undertake simple tasks to prove he wasn’t *completely* useless. But, she didn’t. Instead, she spoke with genuine gratitude.

He might be a man, but here, out in the wilderness, he was the lesser creature and she the more capable of the two. And, he realized that he wanted nothing more than to be of use to her. Having failed her three years ago, tonight, he would do whatever it took to prove himself worthy of her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Poor Barrett! He couldn't help his inability to function in the wild. He was a produce of his upbringing as a pampered Society creature.

He'd looked so crestfallen after she had laughed at him for trying to rub two sticks together. Her conscience had triumphed over her contempt of him, until his arrogance had returned. But, as he watched her light the fire, she caught something else in his expression.

A sense of wonder.

It was the same wonder that she'd experienced not long after she'd come to Cumberland, three years ago, alone and frightened, but determined to make a success of her life here. At first, she'd failed miserably at every turn, having been schooled in the manners of a lady with the sole purpose of getting a husband to look after her. But her ruination had plunged her into the stormy waters where she had two choices. Swim—or drown.

And swim she did. Each success, no matter how small—be it the first fire she lit by herself, or the first meal she'd cooked with her own hands—had been a victory, marking each

milestone that led her away from the useless creature she'd been before, to the survivor that she was now. And she never forgot that first victory when, under Mr. Cornhill's guidance, she'd lit her very first fire. The sense of achievement, the moment of magic...

Then Barrett spoke, and the magic was gone.

"Is *that* what I'm supposed to eat?"

He was gesturing toward the rabbit on the crate. She picked it up.

"You're not *supposed* to eat anything," she said. "You're my guest, and you may come and go as you please. It's not much, but there's enough for two."

"And you—*caught* it?" he asked, wrinkling his nose.

"You hunt, do you not?"

"I go on shoots, if that's what you mean," he said, the superior tone returning.

"This is no different," she said. "But, at least when *I* hunt, I have a specific purpose."

"A man shoots with purpose, also," he said.

"When I hunt, I take what I need, and give thanks for everything I catch," she said. "And I'm not afraid to look the animal I have killed in the eye. Whereas a gentleman will not sully himself with the harsh reality of what he does. He has gamekeepers to breed the creatures for him, beaters to flush them up into the air in their hundreds, and gundogs to fetch the bodies. He merely needs to shoot as many as he can out of the

sky, then congratulate himself on killing more creatures than his rivals because he believes that the number of creatures he destroys is in direct proportion to his male prowess.”

“I eat the birds I shoot,” he said.

“All of them?”

“Of course not—don’t be a fool!” he replied. “The whole estate benefits—and they are thankful for it.”

“And are you thankful for the souls who toil at your behest so you can enjoy the pleasure of shooting the birds?” She held up the rabbit. “After you’ve killed a creature, do you know what happens before a ragout is placed before you?”

“My cook sees to it.”

“Your cook is not here Barrett.”

His eyes widened and he eyed the rabbit once more.

“Then what is to be done?”

His stricken expression tugged at her heart. No man wished to be teased, a proud man least of all. And, Barrett Longford was such a man. He was so far above her in station, understanding, and in the way he carried himself, as if he fitted into the world, and the world fitted around him. As a naïve debutante in love, she would never have dreamed of making sport of him.

Here, in her territory, he was fair game. But she found she hadn’t the heart to torment him. He was a function of his birth, as much as she was of hers.

“I can deal with it,” she said, softening her tone. “Would you like me to show you how?”

He accepted the olive branch.

“Yes please—Emilia.”

She removed her gloves, then turned the rabbit onto its back.

“First, you remove the skin.” She made an incision with her knife in the fur at the animal’s throat, then with the tip of the blade, followed a line along the body, cutting through the skin.

“How do you remove the skin?” he asked.

“It’s quite simple, really,” she replied. “It’s like removing a tight glove—though you must be careful not to pierce the stomach.”

He drew in a sharp breath, and Emilia smiled to herself.

She slipped her fingers under the cut, to loosen the skin, then pulled with both hands until the skin came away, peeling backward to reveal the flesh, until the rabbit lay before her, the skin bunched up at either end of the body.

“Now, you remove the feet and the head.”

Ye gods,” Barrett said, his voice a harsh whisper.

To his credit, he continued to watch while she worked.

“And finally, the most gruesome part of the process,” she said. “The gutting.”

He let out a whimper.

“Surely you’ve seen a fox gutted during a hunt?” she said. “I’ve not seen it myself, but gutting a rabbit—slowly, and deliberately—can be no worse than a pack of dogs tearing a fox to pieces.”

“Yes, b-but I’ve never actually *seen* it,” he said, his voice tight. “The dogs obscure the view.”

He sounded a little unwell.

“Great care must be taken when piercing the flesh,” she said, working away with her knife. “The guts must be removed intact, or the meat won’t be fit for eating.”

He muttered something incomprehensible and she glanced up. Even in the orange glow of the firelight, she could swear his skin had taken on a greenish hue.

“The innards...” she began, then he leaped to his feet and stumbled out of the cottage. Moments later, she heard retching from outside.

She shook her head. “Poor Barrett. You’re out of your depth in the wild, are you not, my love?”

Then she resumed her work. As she was securing the rabbit on a spit, she caught her breath as she recalled her words.

My love.

CHAPTER NINE

Could this ordeal get any worse?

Barrett's stomach heaved as he bent over, his body convulsing with nausea. He'd never witnessed anything as disgusting as what he'd seen just then.

Who in their right mind would choose to live like this?

His Emilia, that's who. She was a savage—a wild woman living off the land, grubbing about in the dirt rather than remaining indoors as any respectable young woman would do. Yet her body glowed with health and vitality, her eyes bright with the satisfaction that could only be achieved through not being dependent on others for survival.

It was an astonishing thing to behold.

And, against his rational judgement, he had never been more aroused.

The thought of having a woman such as her in his life, and in his bed, sent a fireball of need ripping through his body, hardening his cock until he strained with every fiber of his being to battle the urge to bury himself inside her.

Perhaps all men were savages with an instinctive, primal desire to rut. What might it be like to take her? No refined little miss was she. A Society bride might lie back and lift her skirts as her mama had instructed, before closing her eyes against the onslaught of her husband's attentions, to await the conclusion of her ordeal in the marriage bed.

But, Emilia...

She was wild, and free. Would she relish the act—the *ultimate* act—of celebrating her vitality? Would she writhe beneath him, howling his name into the night while she savored her climax?

His manhood surged with the desperate need to take her. But there was little he could do to ease the agony.

Unless...

He only need slip his hand into his breeches, to ease the pain. Just a little...

Footsteps crunched on the snow, and he looked up to see Emilia approaching. She inclined her head in a nod, then disappeared round the back of the cottage. Moments later she returned.

“Barrett, what *were* you doing?”

He felt his cheeks warming. *Sweet Lord*—he was no better than an adolescent fisting himself to ease the base urges he had yet to grow out of.

“I-I needed some air,” he said, his voice strained, and he squeezed his legs together to ease the ache in his groin. “What were you doing?”

“Removing the waste matter,” she said. “The rabbit’s fur I’ll keep, but I needed to bury the—ah—*contents* outside.”

He didn’t know whether to be grateful that she deliberately avoided using the word *innards*, or ashamed that she’d felt the need to pander to his squeamishness.

“Are you well?” she asked.

“Quite so.”

“Then come back inside. Supper should be ready soon.”

She held out her hand and he took it, relishing the feel of her cool fingers against his, and together they returned inside.

His nostrils quivered with the aroma of roasted meat, and his stomach let out a low growl.

“Hungry?” she asked.

“Ravenous,” he said, unable to hide the hoarseness in his voice.

Her eyes widened as she caught his meaning, and as she turned away to resume attention on the fire, he could swear he saw a brightness in her eyes—and a hunger to match his own.

He settled himself on the pallet and watched while she tended to the rabbit, turning the spit occasionally, and testing the meat with her knife. Occasionally, the fire hissed and sizzled, as juices dripped from the meat, intensifying the rich aroma. It may not be roast goose with crispy potatoes, but nevertheless, his mouth watered at the prospect of tasting it.

Emilia lifted the pot from the fire and placed it on the pallet.

“The water’s boiled, but we should let it cool before drinking it.”

She resumed her attention on the roasting rabbit, turning the spit once more.

“It’s nearly ready,” she said. “I don’t have any salt with me—but at least it’ll be hot.”

“It smells delicious.”

“We’ll have to eat with our fingers, I’m afraid, but I can carve it with my knife. Do you mind?”

“Of course not,” he replied. “Is there anything I can do to assist?”

“No.” She smiled. “I can’t recall how many times I’ve done this.”

“What—get stranded in a snowstorm?”

She let out a soft laugh. “No—camped outdoors and cooked my meal on an open fire. I’ve only been stranded a few times.”

“You mean to say you do this *deliberately*? Why?”

“I like being outdoors in the fresh air,” she said. “Waking up with the birdsong in my ears, the wind rushing through the trees, and the babbling of a nearby stream. The music of the landscape...” she sighed, “...better than anything one could hear in a London drawing room.”

“I suspect you’re right there,” he said. “Do you recall Miss Trotteville and her attempts to entertain the company at Lady Westbrook’s party?”

She frowned in concentration, then the smile returned, and she let out a giggle. “Did you not liken her to...”

“A strangled frog!” they chorused in unison.

He closed his eyes, reliving the memory—the two of them sitting side by side in Lady Westbrook’s drawing room, their fingers bumping against each other’s while he handed her a cup of coffee—and their inability to suppress their laughter while poor Miss Trotteville committed assault on an aria that must have sent poor Herr Mozart spinning in his grave.

And their first kiss—snatched during a brief opportunity while they sat unobserved at the back of the audience—his lips brushing against hers, while he longed to slip his tongue inside and taste the sweetness within.

Then he opened his eyes to find her looking directly at him, an expression of longing in her gaze.

“How did you learn to do all this?” he asked, gesturing about the cottage.

“My agent, Mr. Cornhill, taught me most of it,” she said. “Dear man, he thought me most incompetent at first, but I was determined. There are a number of buildings just like this, all over the estate. I visit them from time to time—sometimes to keep the log stores stocked, and sometimes when I want to spend a day or two by myself.”

“Forgive me,” he said.

“What for?”

“For reducing you to this—for rejecting you and setting you on the path to ruination.”

“Is that what you think this is?” she asked. “Ruination?”

“Had I not spurned you, you’d never have been compromised by that rake de Blanchard,” he said.

“True—but that doesn’t mean my life would have been any better.”

“Nevertheless, I’m sorry for the part I played.”

She reached for him and smiled. He took her hand, and drew in a sharp breath at the rush of need as her fingers curled around his.

“My life is better now than it could ever have been,” she said. “Some things I shall always regret. But had I remained in London, I’d have been stifled by the imprisonment in a world in which I could never hope to fit. Here, I have my freedom. I’m not bound by the rules of Society which I confess I always found unfathomable, such as which fork to use first, when to speak and when to remain silent—or the ridiculous notion that if I have refused to dance with a man I loathe, then for the rest of the evening I’m obliged to refuse every offer to dance, even if it’s from a man I love.”

“And *was* there a man that you loved?” he couldn’t help asking.

Her eyes glistened and she squeezed his fingers.

Then she withdrew her hand.

“You know there was, Barrett.”

His name on her lips, spoken with such feeling, elicited the urge to take her into his arms. But she was no longer the

helpless young miss he'd been captivated by the urge to protect. She was an independent woman, more capable of surviving than he.

And he loved her all the more for it.

She returned to the fireplace, and poked the tip of her knife into the meat. Then she glanced back at him and her lips curled into a beautiful smile. "The juices are running clear."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"That your meal is ready, my lord. Would you care to join me?"

Oh yes, Emilia. I would join you forever, if only you'd let me.

But rather than voice his thoughts, he merely nodded, overcome by joy and sadness—joy at the woman she had become.

And sadness because he understood, at last, the full extent of what he had lost, three years ago.

CHAPTER TEN

Sweet heaven, the expression in his eyes—the raw need—threatened to breach her defenses. But she needed to be strong, and withstand temptation. Instead, she focused on the task at hand—removing the spit from the fire, taking care not to burn her hands. Then she carved a slice of meat and handed it to him.

“Guest’s privilege—the first bite,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows and eyed the piece of meat.

“It may not be worthy of a London Society dinner, Barrett, but it’s perfectly safe.”

To prove her point, Emilia took a bite. Charred and crisp on the outside, the meat was succulent and juicy on the inside. She chewed the morsel, relishing the sweet, smoky flavor that could only come from cooking on an open fire. Then, she swallowed.

“See?” she said. “I’m still alive.”

She held out the rest of the slice. “Go on. I may think you’re an arse, but I’d never stoop to poisoning you. I’d just call you an arse to your face.”

“An *arse*, eh?” His lips curled into a smile.

“Besides,” she added, “there are easier ways to send a man to his maker. I’d never waste a good rabbit that I’d taken the trouble to trap, prepare, and cook. Instead, I’d abandon you to the cold outside, or dispatch you with my knife...”

His eyes widened and she could swear his face grew pale.

Did he think her serious?

“I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to punish me for what I did, Emilia,” he said quietly.

Clearly he *did* think her serious. Or, perhaps his conscience plagued him. His expression showed penitence—and regret.

A regret to match hers.

Yet the life of a Society lady would never have suited her.

“You taught me a valuable lesson, Barrett, and for that I thank you. I now realize that my circumstances are much improved as a result.”

“Unlike mine.”

He spoke so quietly she could almost have believed she’d imagined it.

Then he shook his head, gave her a watery smile, and plucked the meat from her fingers.

“*Bon Appetit.*”

He took a bite—carefully at first, as if uncertain of his fate. Then a smile danced in his eyes.

“Surprisingly delicious,” he said.

“Then the cook is worthy of retaining her position?” she teased.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “She’s worthy in every aspect.”

His eyes seemed to glow in the firelight, and she could swear she caught a flicker of desire in his expression. He took another bite, then let out a low growl of approval, which resonated deep inside her body, igniting a flicker of need.

Heavens! Was there anything so desirable as the sight of a man relishing a meal, surrendering to the baser urges of a hungry savage out in the wilds? In a Society dining room he would, at most, have inclined his head in a nod of appreciation and remarked on his hostess’s ability to engage a competent cook. But here, in a cottage on a windswept hill, far from civilization—here, he was a beast, shedding the inhibitions of a well-bred gentleman to express his repletion.

And the mere sight of him—licking his lips, tearing the meat apart with his fingers and devouring the flesh—was enough to set her body ablaze with need.

“Another piece?” she asked, conscious of the tightness in her voice.

“Oh yes,” he whispered. “I could feast all night.”

A wicked pulse of longing threaded through her. Swallowing her need, she cut another slice of meat and handed it to him, then cut a slice for herself.

“You never explained why you were here, in Cumberland,” she said. “I still wonder whether you’re a figment of my

imagination.”

“I’m real enough,” he said. “I came to take a look at an estate I inherited from a cousin. Rather foolishly I chose to take a shortcut over the hill.”

“Do you mean old Mr. Darley, at Handleford House? It’s the next valley across from my estate.”

“Yes, he is—or rather, *was*—a cousin. I never knew him, but he had no other family.”

“Poor man,” Emilia said, recalling the reclusive individual who’d spent his final years in isolation.

“Did you know him?” he asked.

“I met him once—when he warned me off his land,” she replied. “He refused admittance to anyone and everyone—he preferred to keep himself to himself. His privacy was to be respected, but I can’t help wondering how lonely he must have been in his final days. But he passed away in the summer, and the house has been empty for months. How did you come to visit at this time of year?”

Barrett chewed at the meat, a thoughtful expression in his eyes. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

“On a whim—I suppose,” he said. “Over the past years, I’ve become increasingly disillusioned with all the mindless jollity I was surrounded with.”

“Mindless jollity?”

“You know—the unfathomable desire to spend one’s time in a room crammed full of people, all shrieking in delight

when they encounter someone they know, and laughing with each other to give the appearance of happiness, even though they have no notion of what it is that's so amusing. It's all so..." he waved his hand about as if clarify the point, "...so *insincere*."

"Is not insincerity the quality prized most in Society?"

"I didn't realize that at first," he said. "Having spent so many years indulging in my position, it was only in the last three years that I grew to understand that none of it really matters. Position, wealth, the respect and admiration of my peers—it's all a barrel-load of nonsense."

"And that's why you decided to lose yourself up a hill today?"

He let out a laugh. "I must sound a very self-indulgent creature to you, Emilia. But there's more to it than that. I realized that I couldn't bear the notion of spending another Christmas among my kind. Christmas is, after all, a time to be spent with those we love—and not with a whole host of people who only fuel one's sense of self-importance by virtue of being included in the largest, noisiest, and most decadent parties where we relish our comforts with little thought to what really matters."

"Careful, Barrett," she teased, "you're sounding like a philosopher. Or worse—a dissident."

His brow furrowed as if in pain and he looked away. She reached out and took his hand.

“Forgive me, Barrett. I didn’t mean to ridicule you—or give you pain.”

“Sometimes the truth is painful,” he said. “And you have been nothing but truthful with me.”

He curled his hand around hers, and a shock of need rippled over her skin as his fingers took possession of hers.

“I ought to have commended your honesty back then, rather than deriding you for it,” he continued.

“You had every right to be angry,” she said. “I should have told you about my birth from the start. But in truth, I’d not expected to spend more than one season in London. I only did it to honor my mother’s memory. She told me before she died that she wanted me to have the life that had been denied her—a Society marriage, to a husband who would give me a loving home and care for me, so that I’d never have to struggle alone as she had. I promised her I’d have one Season, after which, I would have fulfilled my obligation and could be free. So I’d resolved to act the Society lady, dance when asked, and smile at those I held in contempt.”

Her throat tightened as she fought to contain the tide of emotion swelling inside—the tide she’d kept at bay for three years.

“B-but—there was one thing I hadn’t considered.”

“Which was?” he asked.

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it firm.

“Tell me, Emilia,” he said, softly. “For I believe that if anyone will understand you, it is I.”

She averted her gaze, unwilling to expose her heart.

“I hadn’t considered the possibility that I might fall in love.”

“Nor I,” he said, quietly.

“For a brief moment, I believed in the dream—and I understood why my mother had never married another. You gave me that dream, Barrett, if only for a little while. And you gave me that understanding.”

“Are you really happy here?” he asked, softly.

She nodded.

“I’m happy right here.” Unable to help herself, she laced her fingers with his, relishing the smoothness of his skin. “I’m happy right now.”

“As I am.”

His voice caressed her senses and she was, once more, the giddy young girl who’d fallen irrevocably in love. She lowered her gaze to his lips—his soft, full, lips. He need only move a little closer...

Then she checked herself. What the devil was she doing, indulging in such girlish dreams? She withdrew her hand, and cut another slice of meat, then she handed it to him. His fingers slid against hers, slick with juices from the roast, then he took the piece from her, and bit into it.

“It may be the hunger talking, but I swear this is the best meal I’ve ever tasted,” he said.

“Then are you glad you lost yourself on the hill?” she asked. “Though, if you are to consider taking residence at Handleford House I’d counsel against aimless wandering about the hills until you’re more familiar with the terrain.”

“I was told there was a shortcut,” he said.

“But the road passes by Handleford House—it’s no more than two hundred yards to the door. Your journey would have been much easier had you remained in the carriage.”

“Not considering my fellow occupants,” he said. “Relatives of Sir Helmsley Field. Do you know him?”

“I do,” she said. “Sir Helmsley’s a pleasant enough man, but in small doses only. He’s invited me to stay for Christmas for each of the past three years, and I’ve refused every time. I’m afraid he sees me as something of a lost cause in need of salvation—a wild woman living in solitude, who must be in want of a husband to ensure she keeps to the path of righteousness. He told me last month that his brother and sister-in-law were coming to stay for Christmas, and that she would be ideal female company for me for many reasons, not least of which she had four unmarried brothers. Could the man be any more obvious? And while I have no wish to be critical of a member of my own sex, the more Sir Helmsley extolled the virtues of his sister-in-law, the more I was inclined to dislike her.”

“So it seems as if our purposes were perfectly aligned,” he said, “for I had the—ahem—*pleasure* of Mrs. Field’s company in the carriage. Hence my speedy exit. She was determined I

join them for Christmas. And when a woman is determined, a man ought to watch his back.”

Emilia should have been offended at his remark, but she found herself unable to suppress a giggle.

“Does your ideal Christmas not involve a large party with merriment and matchmaking?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “My ideal Christmas involves a quiet celebration with someone I love. Perhaps, rather than as the consequence of my own folly, I ought to view my being here tonight as the hand of Fate delivering me to my ideal Christmas.”

She cut another slice of meat, and offered it to him.

“Perhaps we ought to share this,” he said, his voice hoarse.

He moved closer, and she caught the faint aroma of wood and spices. Unlike the earthy aroma coming from the fire, she sensed an undercurrent of masculinity.

The heady scent of man.

He plucked the slice of meat from her hand, and tore it in two. Then he held a piece to her lips. She parted them, and he slipped the morsel into her mouth. His eyes glowed with hunger as she swallowed, relishing the taste.

“Delicious,” he growled. “And now, my love, ’tis your turn.” He handed her the other piece, and leaned forward, parting his own lips in anticipation.

She fed him the piece and he took it, his eyes flashing with desire. But when she began to withdraw her hand, he caught it.

“Oh, no, my love,” he whispered hoarsely. “There is more for me to taste.”

“What do you mean...oh!” she let out a low cry as he drew her fingers into his mouth. His tongue, soft and strong, curled around her fingers, running from the base to the tip, while low growls of pleasure rumbled in his chest.

She caught her breath at the wicked sensations swirling in the pit of her stomach, forming a maelstrom at first, before thickening to a deep pulse of pleasure.

Then he withdrew her fingers, and placed a feather light kiss on each fingertip.

Emilia squeezed her thighs together, to ease the ache swelling in her center.

Then he held up his fingers, still sticky from their meal, and her body threatened to explode at the expression in his eyes—the purest, basest, most primal need.

She eyed his fingers hungrily. Dare she behave with such wantonness?

Think of the pleasure...

A wicked little voice whispered in her mind of the pleasure she would give—and receive—from such an act.

And of the greater pleasures to come.

Boldly, she lifted her gaze to his and caught his hand in a firm grip. His eyes widened for a moment, then darkened with desire, as she drew his fingers into her mouth, tasting the smoky flavor on his skin. She ran her tongue along the length

of his fingers, then dipped it between them. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes, and let out a soft groan, his body seeming to vibrate with pleasure. Emboldened by his response, and relishing the command she had over his pleasure, she curled her tongue around the tip of his forefinger, then drew his fingers deeper in.

Then she opened her eyes, and almost cried out at what she saw—the raw, unbridled desire, together with the deepest love.

“Sweet lord, woman, you unman me!” he cried, hoarsely. “Never before have I shared such a feast! But I fear I must desist, lest we reach the point of no return. As much as I desire it, I have no wish to ruin you. And ruin you I shall, if I take what I want.”

He withdrew his fingers, but she caught his hand.

“You could never ruin me, Barrett,” she said.

He shook his head and when he spoke, he sounded as if he were gritting his teeth while he struggled to gain control over himself.

“Oh, Emilia, I fear I cannot control myself. The merest touch and I would be unable to prevent myself from taking you.”

“I am no longer bound by the rules of Society,” she whispered. “Would you not take that which is freely given?”

He shook his head. “You cannot understand what you’re saying. I would not be a gentleman if I took advantage.”

“Believe me, I do comprehend what I offer you,” she said. “And have you not realized by now, that the very last thing I

desire is a gentleman?”

“Then, my love,” he said. “Let us feast together.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emilia lay back on the pallet, her eyes glittering with need, and Barrett drew in a sharp breath to temper the surge in his loins.

There was no more delectable sight than a woman, flushed with desire, ready to give herself to a man. That it should be Emilia lying before him, her willing body thrumming with desire, was almost unimaginable.

And his body knew what his rational mind had been denying for the past three years.

She belonged to him.

“Come, my love,” she whispered. “’Tis the season for exchanging gifts, is it not? My gift to you awaits your unwrapping.”

He leaned over her body and brushed his lips against her chin. Her breath caught, and a whimper escaped her. She tilted her head, offering her lips, but he shifted position, moving his mouth close to her ear, smiling to himself at her mewl of frustration.

Sweet heaven—she was ready for him, and he'd barely begun!

“I find myself ravenous,” he whispered, in her ear. “But with such a feast placed before me, I will be replete before the night is done.”

“R-replete?” she said, her voice tight.

“Oh yes, my Emilia. But I am no gentle diner. I intend to devour you.”

She let out a low cry and shifted her body beneath him in a slow, undulating gesture—her body's instinctive search for pleasure.

“Tonight, my love, you are mine,” he growled. “Do you willingly give me everything that you are?”

“Y-yes,” she whispered.

“Do you give me your body?”

“Yes.”

He slipped his hand into her shirt, deftly unfastening the laces, then he dipped his hand inside, caressing the soft flesh, searching hungrily with his fingers until he found what he sought...

A deliciously smooth breast, and at its center, a taut bud—a perfect cherry pip that his mouth watered at the prospect of tasting.

Then he ran a fingertip over her bud, and she arched her back, letting out a mewl of need.

“Oh, my,” she gasped. “I have never felt anything, so—oh!”

She let out a cry as he flicked her nipple with his thumb, and she shifted her body, pressing her breast against his hand.

“Your body is mine,” he whispered. “This breast is mine...”

Her breathing deepened as he affirmed his ownership, and his manhood surged with eagerness, recognizing her instinctive need to be claimed.

He swept across her breast in a soft caress, then he slipped his hand below the waistline of her breeches, relishing the heat which intensified as his fingers reached their destination—the nest of warm curls at her center.

“What are you—oh!” she let out a cry as he slipped his fingers inside her curls, moving slickly across her flesh.

Ye gods, she was ready for him—so ready! He drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs with the sweet, sharp scent of raw female desire. His hand stilled, and she tilted her hips—a small, almost indiscernible gesture, as she offered her body to him.

“Do you feel the pleasure, Emilia?” he whispered.

She answered with a whimper as he drew a fingertip across her slick folds—a whimper that turned into a cry as he found the taut little nub of pleasure buried deep within.

“Barrett,” she panted, “What are you...”

“Hush, my love,” he said. “I am taking that which you promised. Your pleasure.”

Then he removed his hand, and smiled to himself as she let out a small huff of frustration. Tonight she was his, and her body knew that only he could bring forth the release she craved.

He began to undo the buttons of her breeches, and her breathing grew labored as he fumbled with his fingers. Frustration swelled inside him as his attempts to slip the button through the buttonholes failed.

Damn it—why had she not worn a gown, like other women, instead of cavorting about the countryside dressed as a boy? Then all he’d have to do was lift her skirts to claim his reward.

But, the greater the effort, the sweeter the prize.

“Do you need help unwrapping your gift, my lord?” she whispered, lowering her hand to his.

The light, teasing tone of her voice was accompanied by a low undercurrent of need and, with the same urgency as he, she slid her fingers around the buttons and, together, they slipped each button free and she lifted her hips while he pulled her breeches down.

Then she tried to withdraw her hand, but he caught it, and held it firm.

“Barrett...”

“No, my love,” he growled. “Did I not declare that you are mine? This hand...” he squeezed her fingers, “...belongs to

me, and I shall do what I wish with it. Let me show you the pleasure to be had at the touch of your hand.”

“B-but...”

“No buts,” he said, his voice firm. “You entrusted yourself—all of yourself—to me.”

He nipped her earlobe, and her body shuddered with need as the air thickened with the scent of her desire. Then he peppered her skin with tiny, nibbling kisses, tracing a line across her throat, and along her chest, flicking his tongue out to taste the salt on her skin which grew softer as he reached the valley between her breasts. He curled his tongue around her nipple, and she let out a long, low sigh, which turned into a cry of pleasure as he drew her nipple into his mouth.

“So sweet...” he murmured.

Then, his fingers still curled around hers, he guided her hand lower, toward her center. Need almost overcame him at the slick moisture he found there.

“Wh-what’s happening?” she panted, “I—I d-don’t know...” she broke off, her chest rising and falling as her breathing quickened.

Her innocence rendered her all the more delectable. The administrations of an experienced woman were always to be relished, but there was nothing more exquisite than the raw, honest need of an innocent—a woman who had nothing but her own body’s instinct to guide her.

And guide her it did. Under the tutelage of his hand, her fingers uncurled, and she drew her fingertips along her folds.

Sighs of pleasure escaped her lips as she moved her fingers slickly across the sweet flesh.

When she shifted her thighs apart, he knew she was ready. He dipped his head and placed a kiss on her belly. Her body was taut with anticipation, trembling and quivering with a need that she could no longer conquer.

Then he dipped his tongue into her curls, until its tip met her fingers. In an echo of their meal of earlier, he ran his tongue along the length of her fingers, relishing the taste of her.

“Finer than any banquet,” he growled. His voice vibrated through her body which seemed to swell before him, filling the air with her scent, as she reached the crest of the wave.

No longer able to control the need that burned from within, he reached for his breeches. His manhood sprang free—aching with the need for release—and he thrust forward, claiming her body as his, plunging into her welcoming heat.

She let out a sharp cry and stiffened, her body trembling.

“Easy, my love,” he whispered. “It will not hurt for long.”

He held her close and as she relaxed, her body stretched to accommodate him, drawing him deeper in. She lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck, clinging to him.

Then he withdrew, slowly.

“No!” She protested, lifting her hips. He caught his breath, his body threatening to explode at her eagerness to keep him inside her.

But her pleasure must come first.

He thrust forward, plunging inside her once more, and she let out a cry—this time of pleasure, not of protest. Then he withdrew and thrust once more—and then again, working to a steady rhythm while her cries swirled in the air, increasing in pitch until he felt her body ripple around him.

He increased the pace, the pleasure surging with each thrust—a great wave swelling higher and higher...

Then he plunged in once more, burying himself to the hilt. The wave crested, crashing over him in an explosion of light and color

“Barrett—oh, Barrett!”

She screamed his name, as her body shattered around him, pulsing and caressing him until he could withstand it no longer, until, finally, he disintegrated. Surging forward in one last thrust he collapsed on top of her while he rode the wave of pleasure, returning to the world with a sigh, and he continued to thrust weakly, relishing the echoes of the most powerful climax he had ever experienced.

He clung to her, placing his head against her chest where her heartbeat thrummed in his ears in unison with his own heartbeat. At length, her heartrate slowed to the steady, languorous rhythm of a woman well bedded.

“Oh, my Emilia...” he whispered.

He had claimed her as his—relishing her body and her pleasure, both of which she had freely given. But, as she lay before him, eyes closed, a smile of repletion on her lips, he

was struck by the revelation that it was not she who had been claimed by him, but quite the reverse.

He might have taken her body but in doing so, he had given himself to her, irrevocably, heart and soul until it was he, who belonged to her.

As the rush of his heartbeat softened in his ears, he heard another, steady rhythm—the soft ticking of his pocket watch.

He shifted onto his side, while the woman in his arms still clung to him, her breathing steady in sleep. Then he pulled out his pocket watch and flipped it open with his thumb. The hands gleamed in the semi-darkness, reflecting the orange glow from the dying embers of the fire, declaring the time to be just past midnight.

It was Christmas Day.

“Happy Christmas, my darling,” he whispered.

She let out a soft murmur, then nestled against him and gave a sign of contentment.

Would that he could spend every night like this, with the woman he loved in his arms! And, to wake each morning to see her beautiful gray eyes, pale and clear, looking at him with love.

As they had looked at him with love three years ago.

“I’ve been a fool, Emilia,” he whispered. “I let you go before, but I shall not do so again. I love you more than life itself. I think I always knew it, even after I let you slip through my fingers, but I was too proud to follow you and beg

forgiveness. Instead, I spent the past three years trying to forget you, and failing utterly.”

He placed a kiss on her lips, but she did not stir.

“I want nothing more than to have you in my bed—and in my life—forever,” he said. “But I fear you have no need of me—or anyone. You live your life on your terms, and shift for yourself in a way that can only be admired in a woman. And I love you all the more for it. A gentleman would offer for you out of obligation after what we have shared tonight. But I know you would reject me were I to make such an offer. Your very spirit which I love—your independence and strength—will give you no reason to cleave yourself to a man. And, poor specimen that I am, I will never be able to deserve you. But I *do* want you, Emilia. I want to marry you for no other reason than I love you, and because my life will be all the better for having you in it.”

He clung to her, relishing the feel of her in his arms. If tonight was all he could claim from her, then he must relish what little of the night there was left, rather than harbor regret for what he must inevitably lose.

Inhaling her sweet scent for one last time, he lapsed into a doze, lulled by the rhythmic ticking of his watch and the soft crackling of the fire.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

*B*raithwaite, Cumberland, December 25th, 1810

EMILIA'S BODY hummed with pleasure, whispered words of love echoing in her ears.

“Barrett...” she murmured.

She opened her eyes. She was lying on the pallet, cocooned in blankets. The warm orange glow of the fire had been replaced by the cold blue light of the dawn, which cast shadows across the stone walls of the cottage.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes and looked around.

The cottage was empty.

So last night...

Last night must have been a dream. Like the countless dreams she'd had of him, except this one had been so much more real—the strange fluttering in her stomach, the feel of his lips against hers. And...

Oh my! The wicked, wanton sensations of pleasure. What had given her cause to imagine all *that*?

She shifted position, and felt a soreness between her legs. Not altogether unpleasant—a slight ache with an undercurrent of promise. She squeezed her thighs together, and the ache morphed into a brief flare of pleasure.

Perhaps wandering about the hills alone had addled her wits.

Then she sat up and froze.

Beside the fireplace was a spit containing a rabbit carcass—the rabbit that she had shared with *him*, while they fed morsels to each other, licking their fingers. And afterward...

Sweet heaven!

She rose to her feet and wrapped the blanket around her. Then she approached the door and opened it.

The landscape stretched before her—the snow bright and glistening as if it contained thousands of tiny diamonds. The sun had risen well above the horizon already and she tipped her head up, relishing the warmth on her face.

“Good morning,” a deep voice spoke.

Barrett stood at the corner of the cottage, a pot in his hand.

“I’ve gathered more snow,” he said. “I can quench our thirst, even if I’m unable to furnish us with breakfast. But perhaps one day I’ll become proficient in catching and cooking a rabbit.”

“Is there much call for that in the drawing rooms of London?” she asked.

“I find that I neither know, nor care.” He looked out across the landscape. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a sight quite so beautiful,” he said. “Except,” he added, a devilish grin curling on his lips, “the sight I indulged in last night.”

Was he teasing her?

He approached, and held out his hand, and before she could stop herself, she took it.

Her body tightened at his touch, and she met his gaze. His expression showed no mirth. Instead, she saw contentment, wonder—and a yearning hope to match her own.

“The view from the top of the hill is even better,” she said. “On a clear day you can see as far as Scotland.”

“Might we go to the top today?” he asked.

The gentle plea in his voice stirred her memory.

I want to marry you for no other reason than I love you—and because my life will be all the better for having you in it.

It hadn’t been a dream. Last night, he had declared his heart, and he had done so when he thought her asleep, so that he might be spared the pain of her rejection.

“Perhaps another time,” she said.

The hope in his eyes faded.

“I heard what you said last night, Barrett,” she said.

He blushed and averted his gaze, but she pulled him close.

“No—look at me,” she said. “If you spoke the truth last night, you must look at me now.”

He swallowed, his throat bobbing, as if he were as uncertain as a young girl in her first Season. But he turned his head and met her gaze, his eyes pleading—as every creature in love pleaded—not to be hurt.

“I realize that I’ve been very remiss,” she said, “for I never gave you an answer to your proposal of three years ago.”

He raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

“I thought...” he began, but she interrupted.

“I would give you my answer now, if you wish it, Barrett. Though, perhaps you’d prefer if I waited until you were back home.”

“I am home,” he said. “My home, if you would permit it, is with you. In my heart, it has always been with you. That is, if you would be generous enough to give this—how did you phrase it—*pompous arse*, another chance.”

“Well then,” she said, lifting his hand to her lips. “With such an offer, how could I refuse?”

For a heartbeat he stared at her, as if uncertain of her answer. Then he took her hand, the hope in his eyes reigniting.

“You mean...”

“Yes, Barrett,” she said. “Yes, I will marry you.”

“Oh, Emilia!” he pulled her into his arms. “What better gift could a man receive at Christmas, than the hand of the woman he loves!”

“Then, my love, I look forward to giving you many more Christmas gifts in the future.”

A breeze swept across the landscape, and she shivered.

“Are you cold, my love?” he asked. “Perhaps we should return inside. I could light a fire. Or...” a wicked glint sparkled in his eyes, “...we could find another way to keep warm.”

She raised her eyebrows in mock innocence. “Are you suggesting, my lord, that we exchange more gifts?”

“I believe you accepted my gift last night with pleasure,” he replied. “I even recall hearing my name on your lips as you thanked me, most ardently. I am ready to bestow my gift on you once more. And, I assure you, that the pleasure—both in the giving, and the taking—increases each time.”

“Then, my love,” she said. “Let us partake of another exchange of gifts.”

He drew her close and placed a kiss on her lips.

Then, hand in hand, they returned to the cottage to indulge in their first Christmas.

The first of many.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Emily Royal grew up in Sussex, England, and has devoured romantic novels for as long as she can remember. A mathematician at heart, Emily has worked in financial services for thirty years. She indulged in her love of writing after she moved to Scotland, where she lives with her husband, teenage daughters, and a menagerie of pets including Twinkle, an attention-seeking boa constrictor. She has a passion for both reading and writing romance, with a weakness for Regency rakes, Highland heroes, and medieval knights. *Persuasion* is one of her all-time favorite novels, and she is fortunate enough to live within sight of a medieval palace.

ENCHANTING BY CANDLELIGHT

TABETHA WAITE



*For VJ Dunraven and the magnificent crew at Period Images
for turning my daughter into a true model at the Historical
Romance Retreat in San Diego in 2022.*

PROLOGUE

L *ondon, England*

December 1802

“MOVE OVER, Miranda! I can’t see!”

Miranda rolled her eyes and tossed her brown hair. Her glare pinned her younger sister where she was fidgeting on the staircase. They had both snuck out of bed in order to get a better look at the party taking place downstairs. Elaine was eager to see the finery of the guests and the dancing. Miranda yearned for something else.

“I swear, if you elbow me *one* more time—”

“That sounds suspiciously like a threat, Miss Applegate. What would your mother say?”

Miranda gasped as she pivoted her head around to see the speaker through the spindles of the railing. For a moment, she was unable to speak. Mr. Anthony Gravehill had long been the subject of her childish fascination. At least, that’s what some might claim it was, but she knew better. It was love. True love, and it couldn’t be distinguished by anything like age or

maturity. From the very first moment he had appeared on her family doorstep as the guest of her elder brother, Jacob, at home from school, she'd thought of little else.

But then, how could anyone be immune to that stubborn lock of dark hair that wanted to fall over his forehead, or those mesmerizing green eyes that captured her and pulled her into his very soul? He might have been the younger son of a viscount, but he was her future, and anyone who said differently would hear about it from her.

There was only one problem. She couldn't seem to speak around him. She knew she ought to respond to his teasing now, but words simply failed her whenever he was near.

Her younger sister, however, didn't have that problem. "Miranda is being mean!"

She spun on her. "Me?" she snapped. "Elaine, if you were any more annoying, you should be a fly next to my ear when I'm trying to sleep!"

"Come now, children..."

That brought Miranda's head back around. "Pardon me, sir, but I am nearly fifteen years old. Hardly a child."

His lips twitched, and she was held captive by how well shaped and masculine they appeared. He truly was magnificent. "I stand corrected. Forgive me for my error."

Miranda yearned to sigh, because of course, she would forgive him for any sort of transgression.

"She loves you."

Miranda's stomach dropped to her feet as she spun toward her ten-year-old sister. "Elaine!"

"What?" She shrugged. "It's true." She then proceeded to sing. "Miranda and Anthony sitting in a tree..."

With a gasp of outrage, Miranda lowered her voice. "Don't you dare finish that sentence if you don't want me to tell Mama what *really* happened to her pearl necklace."

Elaine abruptly closed her mouth tightly, although her blue gaze was mutinous. Miranda had no doubt that she would come to suffer the consequences of her actions toward her younger sister, but it would be worth it not to be completely humiliated in front of the man she loved.

"You love me, do you?"

Miranda's head swiveled back around to Anthony, who was wearing a crooked grin.

Rather than slink back to her room in embarrassment, she lifted her chin and said, "Of course. I care for you just as I would my brother."

"That's reassuring," he said softly, his gaze growing distant. "Because I shall be leaving to serve in the Royal Navy just after Christmas."

Immediately, Miranda's stomach dropped to her feet. She knew that Jacob was enlisting, which was heartbreaking enough, but to know that Anthony would be in danger as well... It was almost too much to bear.

She dared to reach a hand out to him through the spindles. With tears in her eyes, she spoke the truest words in her heart.

“Please say you’ll be careful.”

He smiled gently as he accepted her offering. “I promise. How else might I come back to you?”

With a tweak of her nose, he released her and returned to the party.

Miranda, on the other hand, was determined that she fulfill the part of her vow that remained unspoken between them. “I’ll wait for you,” she whispered to his retreating back. “Forever, if I must.”

CHAPTER ONE

*K*eswick, England

15 years later...

MIRANDA EXITED the carriage and breathed deeply of the clean air around her. She sighed, not realizing how much smoke lingered in the London air until she had made the harrowing journey to the county of Cumbria. Surrounded by white-capped mountains and a sparkling lake, it looked like something out of a painting from Sir Augustus Wall Callcott. She had spent quite a bit of money to acquire his works, but she considered money well spent when going to such a talented artist.

When her father had died shortly after Miranda had turned twenty-two, and Jacob had just recently wed, she decided that it was time she started thinking of finding a way to support herself. She could have married, but of course, her soul still pined for another. But by that time, her hope that she might ever reconnect with her heart's desire was quickly diminishing. She had exchanged a few letters with Anthony when he'd left for the war with France all those years ago, but

after a few months, they ceased and diminished completely, although she had continued to write, with the wish that he would eventually respond.

He did not.

Miranda always lamented the fact that they couldn't have continued to be friends, at the very least, but Anthony had cut off contact with everyone, including his own family. Jacob had told her Anthony had been injured, adding that the last time he'd spoken to his school friend, he had become a bitter shell of the man he'd once been, to the point he no longer bore any resemblance to the carefree lad from their youth.

Naturally, Miranda had been quite aggrieved by this news, but she hadn't pressed her brother for more information. Elaine, however, had done it on her behalf. Although they'd had their differences when they'd been children, she had become Miranda's closest confidante. Since most of her other friends had married and proceeded with their life, she knew it was time for a change.

She had always possessed a talent for watercolors and poetry, so she had put together a book of illustrated verses and dared to take a chance on getting them published. To her delight, she was accepted, but only if she remained anonymous. She had considered turning down the offer, until she found out how much they planned to give her. Realizing that her chances of marrying were slim, and with little other options for her, she had reluctantly agreed to the anonymity.

In the years since, Miranda had forced herself to put on a brave face for the rest of the world. She had become so adept

at it, that she seldom showed her true emotions anymore. With both of her siblings happily settled, and Miranda a spinster at nine and twenty, she told herself she was content. She had a steady income and had been a companion for her mother until her death nearly a year before. Miranda continued to feel her loss rather acutely and still wore muted shades of violet and gray in her memory.

Perhaps that was the true reason she'd decided to come to Cumbria this Christmas. Truth be told, she couldn't bear the thought of spending it alone without her. Her brother and his wife often came here during the year and had invited Miranda to join them several times before. She usually declined, but this time she'd decided that it was time for a respite from her lonely life. Maybe a refreshing, mountain retreat was exactly what she required to finally lay her morose feelings toward her mother's death—and her love for Anthony—to rest at long last.

Either way, she was determined to enjoy her time there, and intended to continue working on her latest illustrations. She had yet to write about a wintry scene, and with the scent of snow in the air, she had no doubt it would be the perfect inspiration.

As she waited for her trunks to be unloaded from the public coach, the front door of the King's Arms Inn burst open and her brother's eldest children came rushing toward her. "Aunt Randie!"

She gasped in dramatic delight and held her arms out wide to the twins. She adored Camille and Carter as if they were her

own and doted on them frequently when they were in town. However, they generally remained at the country estate, because Jacob and his wife, Catharine preferred the quiet, country surroundings best. “Randie” was the nickname they had given her when they were learning to talk. Even at seven years old, it continued to be their preferred endearment.

They threw themselves at her with an enthusiastic embrace, and she held on to them tightly, knowing that she might never have the same someday. She’d had the opportunity, but none of the gentleman who had asked for her hand had ever quite affected her like Anthony had. Thus, some sacrifices had to be made regarding her happiness.

“Give your aunt some room to breathe,” Jacob chided gently, as he walked down the steps to greet her. “You’re looking well, Miranda. I trust your journey was pleasant?”

“Very much so.” She nodded. “I had interesting company along the way, and the roads were not terribly rough.”

He nodded. “They have done much to improve them through the years, since Cumbria has become something of a popular destination for many.”

Miranda glanced at her surroundings once more and imagined the changes that the dawning age of industry would soon make. “Just imagine. Someday we won’t have to rely upon carriages for travel. Railroads will soon be making their mark.”

“Heaven help us.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “More smoke to fill the air. As if London chimneys don’t supply enough.”

She laughed. “That is true, but just think of the advantages when it comes to traveling. You will be able to be in Cumbria much earlier than you are now.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he reluctantly admitted.

She offered him a wink. “I know, but then, I generally am.”

Jacob snorted at that, and for a moment, she was transported back in time to when they were children. She saw the annoying older brother that he used to be. At times, she yearned for those days to return. But there was no use being upset over something that couldn’t be changed. That was a lesson she’d learned long ago.

Once her trunks had been unloaded, Miranda started to go inside the inn, but Jacob held her back with a light hand on her arm. He instructed the twins to go ahead as he turned to her with a solemn expression. Although she was curious as to the sudden change, there was also a frisson of alarm that snaked up her spine.

“I have to tell you something that you might not want to hear.”

Although her entire body felt wooden, she managed to ask, “Is something wrong?”

He hesitated, unknowingly dragging out the anticipation. “I thought you should know that Anthony is here.”

“I see.” She absorbed this information, although she wasn’t quite sure what to do with the knowledge. But then, a

rather important fact occurred to her. “I didn’t think you had spoken to him in years.”

“I hadn’t,” he admitted. “But a few months ago, he came to visit me at the estate.” He frowned deeply. “I was as surprised as you are now. We had a long talk and he told me that he was starting to drag himself out of the dark pit he’d been in for the past few years after the war.”

Miranda had never dared to ask how bad Anthony’s wounds actually were—both physically and emotionally—but she found the courage to do so now. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know the full extent of his injuries,” Jacob said grimly. “We weren’t in the same unit, but if it was anything like the men I saw fall around me...” He stopped and swallowed hard. He spoke very little of his time on the battlefield to Miranda, and if Catharine was to be believed, he was rather tight lipped on the subject with her as well. Perhaps that was his way of dealing with such a terrible tragedy. But everyone was different. Her brother had been spared most of the horrors, but not everyone had been so fortunate. Some might have been better off if they’d perished on the field. Or in Anthony’s case, at sea.

Miranda reached out and grasped her brother’s hand. “Thank you for letting me know. It shall be nice to see him again.”

“Indeed...” He nodded. “Just don’t be too... upset when you do.”

Her heart started to pound as she entered the hotel. Her eyes scanned the area around them, but she saw no sign of the

man she'd known. However, if Jacob was right, Anthony wasn't the same man anymore. She did, however, spy her sister, Elaine. With her small child on her lap and her husband of three years sitting next to her, she gasped in happiness and handed over her daughter, then got up and rushed over to embrace Miranda.

"I'm so glad that you were able to make the journey and spend Christmas with us in Cumbria this year! Isn't it magnificent?"

Miranda pulled back. "I daresay it is. Quite charming."

"Hello, Miranda."

That *voice*. It slid over her skin like a soft caress. Whatever else had changed with Anthony, that had remained the same.

She saw Elaine look at her expectantly, as if waiting for her reaction, and then she shifted her eyes toward the speaker. She saw the smile first. It was the same, carefree one she recalled from all those years ago. "It's been a long time," he said softly.

She lifted her gaze and that was when everything stopped. The noise from the other occupants in the hotel faded away, as a buzzing sound filled her ears.

That *face*. It was so similar to the young man he had been in his youth, but time and maturity had hardened some of the planes of his face and sharpened his jaw. Even his collar-length, dark hair was threaded with bits of silver, likely evidence of the hard life he'd lived thus far.

But it was his eyes that captured her. Or more particularly his right one. What used to be a mossy green was now pure white, a scar going down the middle of his face that reached from his forehead to his chin. His appearance was drawing attention from the casual passerby, many giving him a wide berth as they whispered when they passed.

All she could think of was how much he must have suffered.

Miranda could feel the earth start to spin as her vision eclipsed around her. But the last thing she was going to do was faint in front of him and give him the wrong impression. He would think it was his deformity, when it was merely the overwhelming sensation of seeing him again. *Alive*, after all these years.

Nevertheless, it was Elaine who said, “Are you feeling well? You look rather pale.”

“I’m fine,” Miranda reassured her sister, although she sat down in the nearest chair she could find. “Perhaps some water?”

“Of course.” Elaine scurried off to procure the request, while Miranda struggled to regain her composure.

“I’m sorry.” Jacob entered her line of sight. “I should have thought you might be exhausted after your journey.”

It was the perfect excuse for Miranda to latch on to. “Yes. I daresay it was quite harrowing.” Although moments ago, she had just remarked how pleasant it was, thankfully, he didn’t mention it.

“Maybe it would be best if you lie down for a spell. We can all catch up at dinner this evening.”

“Yes. I think that would be best.” She sent her brother a gaze conveying silent gratitude, because he had long known she wasn’t a wilting wallflower. She was probably the strongest one out of all of them. She hadn’t shed a tear during their mother’s funeral, preferring to spill her grief in private.

To be fair, she had known her mother was struggling at the end of her life, whereas Miranda had no time to prepare for this unlikely reunion with the one man who had never left her thoughts for long.

She knew she was being a coward, but she couldn’t even look in Anthony’s direction as Elaine put an arm around her and led her to her suite of rooms. Once they were inside, and the servants at the hotel had left her trunks, Miranda sank down in one of the chairs by the cheery fireplace.

“He looks quite fearsome, doesn’t he?” Elaine said softly.

Miranda shook her head and exhaled heavily. “It has nothing to do with his scars, but everything to do with the man I have never forgotten.”

Elaine was silent for a time, and then she said, “Do you still love him? After all of these years?”

Miranda took a moment to consider her words. “What exactly is love, Ellie? If you mean, have I always thought of him in my quietest moments through the years? Then yes, I suppose I do. At the same time, I never got to experience the kind of love that you share with Daniel. I’ve never had anyone

look at me with adoration in his eyes like he does you, and I haven't done the same for Anthony since I was fifteen years old before he went off to war."

Elaine's expression was empathetic. "Perhaps this is the season for miracles."

"If only that could be true, Ellie." She glanced down at her lap. "If only."

CHAPTER TWO

Anthony stood on the terrace in his room. It overlooked the mountains and the lake below. If there was any place he might consider for his final path to healing, this was certainly it. The air was crisp and clean, and nothing but tranquility as far as the eye could see.

All during his years on the ship, fighting under Admiral Nelson, one of the finest men he'd known, he had never imagined the tragedy that awaited them all at the Battle of Trafalgar. Not only did Horatio perish from enemy fire, but that was also when Anthony had been severely injured trying to hold off the enemy's embarkment by manning one of the ship's carronades. He'd been cut down by a bayonet, but his efforts hadn't been in vain. With the assistance of his fellow comrades, they had won a major victory for England that day, although it was bittersweet with the loss of their commander and so much more.

Anthony knew the battle ahead was far from over, for many of the men—and especially for him. When he'd been taken below deck to see the surgeon, he was told that he would never see out of his right eye again. When he'd heard that,

something inside of him had died alongside his commanding officer. He'd immediately thought of the letters he'd carefully kept in a bundle close to his bunk, the ones that had come from an infatuated child. But her kind innocence had helped him through the worst.

He soon realized that he couldn't continue to fan her childish dreams and stopped writing back, because he would never be able to offer her anything more than a ruined shell of a man. He would never be whole as he had been. It was best to let her hate him, rather than pray for his return and be disgusted by his monstrous appearance when he did. He would have to break his promise to a girl whom he had hoped would one day become his bride.

But no longer.

It had taken him weeks to recover, but those days encompassed the wounds that others could see. The personal ones ran a lot deeper than that. He'd soon fallen into a deep despair that he didn't dare pass on to anyone else. No one could help him, and he wasn't about to become a burden. He had to face these demons alone. He'd pushed everyone away because he thought it was for the best.

For years, he'd wandered in his own misery, traveling from one part of England to another, until he'd finally settled in the small town of Braithwaite, not far from where he was now. Of course, only his family knew that he'd managed to put together a quiet life for himself in this rugged part of the country. It was so different from anything that he'd known before, that he'd decided to stay, much to the initial dismay of

his mother. She had always wanted him to remain near London and return to the social whirl, but it was the last thing he needed. The peace he'd found here was worth more than any debutante with her enticing dowry that he might have wed. He hadn't told his mother that he was a working man now, she would surely faint from the idea that a gentleman was doing such menial labor, but becoming a fisherman and spending hours upon the sea had done wonders for his torn soul.

He had decided that he wouldn't darken any doors in London once he'd reconciled with his family, but that was before he'd received word from his sister that Jacob's mother had passed. On impulse, he'd gone to see his long-time friend. It had been a stilted reunion at first, but they soon started to laugh about the antics from their youth and he remembered what it had been like to be... normal. It wasn't until Jacob had invited him to spend Christmas with them in Cumbria that Anthony had been taken aback. He might have declined the offer, except Jacob mentioned *her*. Miranda—the girl he'd left behind with a broken heart.

Once he'd learned that she had mourned her mother quite heavily, Anthony knew he had to make amends for all those lost years. She had been the one bright light in his dismal world, and he had the opportunity to help ease her pain now... if she would let him.

He pondered their initial meeting and couldn't decide if it was the shock of seeing him again that had caused her to falter, or the shock of *him*. For a long time, he'd worn a patch over his eye, but it had started to become a bother, so he'd dared to discard it. People were wont to stare at him either

way, so they might as well solve their curiosity by finding out what had been hiding beneath the leather strap for so long.

He expelled a heavy breath. He should have known it wouldn't be easy for Miranda to see him either way. He certainly didn't blame her if she refused to do so. He had treated her badly, and for no other reason than his own upset.

But that didn't keep him from praying for a Christmas miracle.

When he closed his eyes, Anthony kept seeing the child she'd once been, and when she'd walked into the hotel, he had noticed some of the characteristics she had always carried, like her curly, chestnut hair and those bright, green eyes that sparkled with life. He noted that a bit of that sparkle had dulled somewhat, likely because she had become a disillusioned woman.

He clutched the railing in front of him. Oh, yes, that part had certainly changed. Her curves were perfect, made for a man's hands. And had things been different, if he hadn't been hurt and buried his head in the sand like the coward he was, he might have been granted the chance to court her upon his return from the Navy. He could have greeted her with a hero's welcome. Although he had been noted for his service to Crown and country, it was nothing compared to the prize he would have in Miranda Applegate.

With one last glance out at the scenic, winter view before him, Anthony told himself that he had one opportunity to repair things with Miranda. If he failed, then he wouldn't bother her any longer. He would leave the hotel and fade away

into the night without a backward glance. He told himself he should do that now, but he owed her too much to go now. He had to try to earn her respect, at the very least. He might not have much in this life, but he did have his honor.

It might very well be all he had left to give.

But it was hers.



MIRANDA TOLD herself that she was prepared to see Anthony again, but when she inspected her appearance in the mirror later that evening, she wondered if she hadn't been fooling herself.

She had dressed in her finest gown, a violet satin with black lace trim. She thought it was one of the few half-mourning gowns that complimented her features, but when she'd stared at her reflection with a critical eye, she suddenly felt so drab. And it didn't matter how many times she tried to style her hair, it wouldn't do anything but fly around her head, in an uncontrollable mess.

Frustrated, she finally pulled it back into a simple knot and pinned it at the nape of her neck. At least she didn't have to pinch her cheeks to add any color, because her anger was high enough to offer enough.

She grabbed her reticule and left her rooms but stopped abruptly over the threshold when she saw Elaine standing on the other side, her hand poised to knock. They startled each

other and began to laugh, which helped to ease some of Miranda's earlier tension.

With a sheepish expression, her sister said, "Jacob wanted me to come and check on you since you were running late." She didn't mention about how they likely all thought Miranda might not appear since Anthony was there.

It was nice that Miranda had a supportive family who would help her over any hurdle. They had always been there for her when she needed them most.

"I had a slight altercation with my hairbrush," she teased. "But everything is fine now."

"I'm glad to hear it." Nevertheless, her sister knew her almost better than she knew herself and threaded her arm through hers as they headed down the hall. After a moment, she said quietly, "I know it must be difficult to see Anthony again."

"Nonsense." Miranda lifted her chin in case there was any doubt. "It wasn't as if there was anything between us. I was a child when I saw him last."

"I know how much you adored him," Elaine pointed out.

"I shall always care for him because he was such good friend to Jacob. I appreciate his loyalty to our family."

"But you wrote to him—"

Miranda stopped walking, forcing Elaine to do the same. She looked at her steadily. "Please don't think anything more of it, Ellie. Whatever I might have felt toward Anthony—or

rather, Mr. Gravehill—has long since passed. He is merely an acquaintance now. Don't fret over me."

Elaine lifted a brow. "And yet, you nearly fainted when you saw him."

"The journey was tedious," she returned firmly. "And I'm not as young as I used to be."

Her sister rolled her eyes. "You are hardly in your dotage, Randie."

"And yet, there are days I feel much older." She paused. "Especially after Mama passed."

With a comforting squeeze to her hand, Elaine's blue eyes were sympathetic when she said, "It will be difficult for us all not to have her with us this year, which is why I think it's best we spend this time away from London. Even if we used to spend most of the holiday at Jacob's estate, there are too many memories all around to haunt us. A change of scenery will no doubt, help to ease any doldrums we might be feeling from her loss."

Miranda smiled. "No doubt it will." As she offered the assurance, she wasn't certain anywhere would keep her from feeling the pang of her mother's absence this Christmas. She had been the closest to their mother in her last days, since she had stayed with Miranda.

They walked into the private dining room together, and Miranda found that she was grateful for the support. As if eager to lay her eyes on him again, he was the first face she saw. He was standing and talking with her brother, his face in

profile. From that angle, he almost looked as he had the last time she'd seen him at her parents' Christmas party before the war.

However, as he turned his head upon her arrival, the sight of that white eye and the dreadful scar he would always carry with him was still quite shocking. Her heart ached for him, yet again, and she knew his recovery had been fierce.

She averted her gaze as her sister-in-law, Catharine, approached and greeted her warmly.

“Hello, Miranda. I'm sorry I wasn't able to greet you when you arrived.”

“It's perfectly fine,” she replied. “How is Mary doing?” Jacob had written her before she'd left London and told her that their youngest child had been suffering from a case of the croup. It had struck when they had been traveling to Cumbria, but with love and care from her parents, Miranda had no doubt she would recover soon enough.

The relief in Catharine's voice was proof enough of her assumption. “Better.” She glanced over to where the three-year-old toddler was playing with her twin siblings and Elaine's daughter, Elizabeth, who was a year younger. “She's actually starting to act like herself again.”

“That is very good, indeed.”

Catharine turned back to her. “We have much to be thankful for.” She put a hand to her stomach. “And with another one on the way...”

Miranda gasped in delight and reached out to hug her brother's wife. "Congratulations! I know my brother is thrilled to be expanding his family."

As if he'd heard his name, Jacob walked over and joined them. Anthony followed as well. "What's going on over here?"

Catharine glanced at her husband. "I told Miranda our news. I'm so sorry, but I couldn't wait."

"I'm thrilled for you both," Miranda said honestly. Although she always felt the pang of not having her own children, she was starting to accept the fact she would be alone.

"Do you have any children, Miranda?"

She looked at Anthony, and although he was reduced to seeing out of one eye, it was just as direct and piercing as she recalled. "No. I do not."

He studied her carefully, and she had to wonder what he was thinking. "Have you not been married?" he asked.

She smiled tightly. She found it uncomfortable to admit that she had given up all of her dreams in lieu of the fantasy that would never appear. "No. I'm content being the spinster aunt."

"Not a spinster. You can't be more than nine and twenty. Still plenty of time to find a husband and settle down."

She straightened her spine. "I find I no longer have the inclination to do so. I already have a household that I manage to run quite well in London."

Something sparked in that green eye. “Do you?”

Tension crackled in the air, and Jacob had the grace to intervene. “Miranda is quite well known in most literary circles. She is a prominent author of children’s stories.”

A dark eyebrow raised at that. “Is that so?”

She had the sudden feeling she should defend herself, so she said, “Yes. I am. I write anonymously, but I am paid just the same. It is a way I can showcase my talents with both watercolors and verse.”

Catharine’s eyes brightened. “The children have been looking forward to your next book.”

“I shan’t disappoint,” Miranda promised with a smile. When she glanced at Anthony again, his focus was still fixed on her. It was rather unnerving to say the least.

“Shall we eat?” Jacob announced. “I believe dinner is ready.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Elaine’s husband, Daniel, said with a broad grin. He walked over to Miranda and offered her a gallant bow, and then held out his arm. “Would you do me the honor, Miss Applegate?”

She laughed and set her arm on his. “I should be delighted, kind sir.” She had liked Daniel from the first time he had come to call on her sister. She always had adored a man with a sense of humor. At one time Anthony had been delightful as well, but something told her those days were gone with the war.

It was a shame. It was one of the things she’d first adored about him. The first time she’d met Daniel, she’d told Elaine

that she thought he was the one. She'd even taken note of how he'd regarded her sister, and his devotion had been real. Together, they had started a family that had made a world of difference in Elaine's demeanor. They balanced each other perfectly.

Miranda had once thought the same about Anthony. They had always had nice chats when he came to visit with Jacob during leave from school. Other than her siblings, he'd been the only other person she could open up to when something bothered her. But even then, he'd been so much more.

She withheld a sigh and pasted a smile on her face, determined to make it through the rest of the meal without allowing melancholy over the past to bring her down.

CHAPTER THREE

She was beautiful. It was the only word he could use to truly describe the woman Miranda had become. She had blossomed like a flower in the spring and brightened up the room with her brilliance. He was thankful that he had one good eye with which to see her, because to have missed her smile and her grace would have been a true shame. He would have lamented his wounds much more than he already did.

At times, he closed his eyes and listened. He had heard that, with the loss of one sense, one or more of the others became heightened. He could pick her laugh out of the assemblage, and it flowed over his skin like the finest spun silk. But it was nothing compared to witnessing her charm firsthand. He had long admired her courage and determination when she'd been young, but now, with the maturity of age, she had proven what a worthwhile lady she had become. No doubt her parents had been proud of her accomplishments.

“How long have you been published, Miss Applegate?” he asked. He hated using her surname, but he knew it was best if he gave her some proper space, some sense of normalcy.

“About five years,” she replied politely.

“How many books have you written?”

“Seven, so far, but I hope to complete the eighth while I’m in Cumbria.”

He smiled. “I’m sure you will be able to find the right amount of inspiration here.”

“Yes,” she concurred. “It is rather serene.”

As her sister slid into the conversation, Anthony wondered if she was similar to him, in that she was looking for a temporary escape from her life. He had also been searching for that blessed feeling of solitude, a place in which to restore his soul. He had found the answer to his long-awaited prayers in Cumbria. Perhaps she would as well.

“There’s two weeks until Christmas,” Miranda was saying. “That should give me ample opportunity to complete several watercolors for my next book.”

Before Anthony quite knew what he was about, he said, “Allow me to offer my assistance in showing you around Keswick.” As the table quieted, he cleared his throat. “I have become acquainted with the area in recent months and have found some rather interesting places that should be brought to life by your paints.”

He noted that Miranda didn’t seem all that thrilled to spend any more time in his company than she had to. Her sudden inability to speak when he had always known her to be quite vocal proved that. He just hoped her reluctance wasn’t because of his eye. If so, he would be willing to wear that dreadful eye patch, just to put her at ease.

“I think that’s a capital idea,” Jacob noted. When Miranda turned to him with an outright glare, he dared to add, “Think of all the benefits it would give you, Randie. Not only would you have an expansive area in which to paint, but it would give you and Anthony a chance to catch up.”

“I fear there isn’t much to catch up on, Jacob,” she returned stiffly. “You would surely have more to discuss with Mr. Gravehill. I was fifteen years old the last time I spoke with him.” As if realizing she was speaking of Anthony as if he wasn’t in the same room, she looked at him and said, “Pardon me if I sound crass. I just don’t wish to take up any of your time.”

He smiled in understanding. “It’s not a burden, I assure you. I would be glad for the distraction.”

After his explanation, she seemed to relax slightly. “Then I shall accept your generous offer.”



MIRANDA SIGHED as she set down her hairbrush. She was in her room, getting ready for bed, but her mind was elsewhere. She wasn’t sure if she would sleep a wink at all this night. More than that, she didn’t know whether she should start to panic now or later. Dear God, she was going to be alone with Anthony after all these years. It was almost too unimaginable to believe. She had long dreamed of this bittersweet reunion, but now that it was at hand, she wasn’t sure how to behave.

Her brother certainly hadn't helped matters. No doubt he was grateful to find a way to entertain Anthony at the same time he could be rid of her. This way, he could spend time with his family without being bothered by his spinster sister.

Miranda closed her eyes. Now she was just being unfair. Neither Jacob nor Elaine had ever done anything to make her feel as though she was set apart from them. They never failed to invite her to any gathering that they held.

And yet...

Miranda was the one who had started to slowly distance herself from her married siblings. They had families and responsibilities to see to, while Miranda had nothing but her books now that their mother was gone.

Although she might be terribly uncomfortable around Anthony again, she would deal with those dreaded silences, because she owed it to her brother and sister. She had always vowed that she wouldn't become a burden to them, and so she would remain true to her word.

She climbed into bed and turned down the lamp on the table next to her.

For a time, she stared at the flames in the fireplace, but when sleep would not come, she got back up and walked over to the terrace doors that overlooked the valley below. She was fortunate to have a room that faced the lake beyond, rather than the quaint village.

She gathered her art supplies and moved the desk before the window. Although it was nighttime, she was blessed with a

nearly full moon. With the snow helping to illuminate the countryside, it was the perfect way to begin with a magnificent, Christmas Eve setting. And that was when she knew she would write a holiday themed story. With a blank page of woven paper ready and waiting for her to create the art that her readers seemed to enjoy, she dipped her brush in the black pigment and after considering where she wanted to begin, she started to make a few strokes.

After a fashion, contentment settled over her. This was the only time that she could truly relax and allow the cares of her life to melt away. When she was painting, she could almost imagine herself transported inside the scenes she created. She was always enthusiastic to draw inspiration from other works of art and was eagerly looking forward for the Dulwich Picture Gallery to open to the public in London the following year. Of course, she had traveled to Paris after the war and visited the Louvre before most of the works inside were returned to their countries of origin, leaving only a few hundred left in France. But with famous pieces like the Mona Lisa, and the sculpture of Venus, it was no wonder she had found it fascinating. The connections she'd felt with these artists of the past were undeniable, and she vowed that one day, one of her books would be listed among the classics.

Miranda took care to make an appealing outline of her current painting, before she reluctantly washed her brush and left it to dry for the night, to be picked up again in the morning.

She glanced at the clock on the mantel and winced when it showed it was nearly half past two. Whether she felt as though

she could sleep or not, she needed to try. She was due to meet Anthony in the lobby around nine o'clock. Then again, she was used to rising early. Although she lived in London, she chose not to keep town hours. Her mother had enjoyed rising with the sun, and after a time, Miranda had started to as well.

This time when she climbed into bed, she had no trouble falling asleep.



IN HER DREAM, Miranda frowned, because she wasn't ready to rise, but that persistent noise in the background finally roused her. Her eyes opened slowly, but as soon as she realized that the sun was streaming through her window, she sat up quickly. She looked at the clock and saw that it was nearly ten.

Her mouth promptly fell open. She rarely overslept, and yet, she had done so today of all days.

As another brisk summons came from her door, she threw off the covers and grabbed her robe lying over a nearby chair. "I'm coming!" She quickly tied it about her waist, and with her hair flowing about her shoulders, she quickly opened the door.

She expected to see Elaine standing there, but when she spied Anthony, she froze.

His lips twitched as his gaze swept over her. "I'm either too early, or you're late."

She put a hand to her forehead, temporarily forgetting that she was in a state of undress. "Forgive me. I had trouble going

to sleep last night, and so I started to paint and—” She offered a sheepish grin. “I fear time got away from me.”

“It has a way of doing that,” he agreed.

She felt foolish standing there and having this conversation in the hallway, where anyone might come upon them. She opened the door wider. “Please, do come in.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then walked inside. She shut the door behind him, and then realized she didn’t know what to do with him. She wasn’t generally in the habit of entertaining gentlemen in her bedchamber. This was a hotel with a modest sitting area and a privacy chamber blocked off for bathing, but otherwise, it was very much the same, as the unmade bed was clearly in plain sight.

Her cheeks warmed when she thought of their precarious situation, but he didn’t seem to mind as he walked over and grabbed the poker and stirred some of the smoldering ashes of the waning fire, bringing them back to life and adding some much needed warmth into the air.

When that was done, he turned to where she continued to stand, unsure of what to do next. He smiled, as if understanding her hesitation. “Why don’t you make yourself more presentable, while I order us some tea and perhaps a bit to eat? I’ll meet you downstairs.”

She quickly latched on to the invitation to gather herself. “Yes. That would be ideal. Thank you.”

He inclined his head and walked out the door. When he had closed the door behind him, she reached out and attempted

to steady herself on the back of one of the chairs. She had to stop doing this. She couldn't fall apart every time she encountered him.

Steeling herself, Miranda gathered her things and quickly made herself ready. Again, all she had was muted tones, but she donned a simple, dove gray dress and told herself she wasn't there to impress Anthony. He was acting as a guide so that she could work on the paintings for her book.

After gathering her supplies in her valise, she patted her hair then walked out the door and headed downstairs.

She found Anthony sitting at a table for two. It also didn't escape her notice that people around them were glancing at him and whispering. That made her bristle immediately, because she knew what he'd gone through to get those scars. He was a war hero, had fought valiantly and nearly given his life so that these people could sit here and eat their breakfast without concern.

She set her valise down with a decided thump. Anthony glanced at her with a twitch of his lips. "Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

"No," she stated firmly. "It just annoys me that some people can be so rude."

"Ah."

Her brows furrowed. "How can you be so placid about it? Doesn't it bother you?"

He snorted. "I have been through more than anyone should have the right to bear. I've watched gallant men fall all around

me, lost my vision in my right eye, and as well I shall carry a scar with me for the rest of my days from an enemy's sword. What need do I have to worry about other people's opinions?"

Miranda swallowed. "You are absolutely right, Mr. Gravehill. I just wish people wouldn't be so judgmental when they see something they know nothing about."

"I have learned to live with it," he returned evenly. "It is in our human nature to peer at the unusual and extraordinary. What is the purpose of a freak show but to entertain with the oddities that certain people possess? It is intriguing to some people to try to understand the abnormalities of nature."

"You are not an abnormality," she returned heatedly. "And neither are those poor souls that are stared at and mocked by the general assemblage."

"And yet," he asked slowly, "how else might they support themselves if not by catering to the public's insatiable curiosity?"

Miranda had nothing to say to that, because, like it or not, he made a valid point. She sighed heavily. "I just wish there was another way."

"I'm sure if there is, you might find a solution."

She glanced at him. "I fear you are directing your faith in the wrong direction."

"I'm not," he countered. "I remember several times I came to visit your family and you were always solving some trial or another. I recall one instance in particular. There was a cat stuck in the tree and you had the idea of climbing the tree to

free the frightened creature. Jacob asked how you might manage such a feat, so you gained the assistance of the stable groom, who put a ladder next to the tree and allowed you to save the day.”

Miranda laughed. “Oh, my. I had nearly forgotten that. It has been so long ago. I couldn’t have been more than nine at the time.”

“I believe you were eight.”

She blinked. “I’m impressed by your memory to recollect such trivial instances in my past, when I fail to do the same.”

His eyes fell on her, and although one was white and unable to see, it caused her to shiver with intensity, just the same. As if he had more power to peer into her soul than with the ability of actual sight. “I remember everything about you, Miranda.”

She wasn’t sure how to reply to that, but she was saved by the arrival of a member of the hotel staff, who had brought their food. She turned her attention to the fare at hand. “It smells divine. Thank you.” She carefully concentrated on her plate, rather than the words that were still suspended in the air between them.

CHAPTER FOUR

It warmed Anthony's heart when Miranda got irritated on his behalf. When he had first gone out in public after his injury, it was the shock he'd seen on the faces of others that had made him don the patch. But when he saw them stare at him regardless of whether his eye was shielded, he had decided to suffer the consequences.

Now, he hardly even realized that he was the subject of such interest. In truth, it hadn't fazed him in some time, but through Miranda's eyes, he recalled the way it had initially felt, as though he was someone to be shunned, to be hidden away from the rest of the world. It had taken some time before he'd realized he had as much right to be there as anyone else. If anything, his differences set him apart from the rest of the hypocrites that ruled over the rest, the ones who believed they were doing God's work, while at the same time, warning those who were different to stand aside. Perhaps someday, he could open those closed minds to compassion and understanding.

Once they had finished their meal, he asked, "Are you ready to get started?"

“Of course.” As they stood, he reached down and grabbed Miranda’s valise just as she started to reach for it. “I’m quite capable of carrying my own things, Mr. Gravehill.”

He kept his firm hold on the bag. “I have lost sight in one eye, not my ability to act as a gentleman.” With that, he started walking, giving her no choice but to follow.

“If memory continues to serve,” he noted. “You are not averse to the water.”

“Not at all. I used to swim in the pond at the estate, and later, when Jacob was in London before he wed, we would sail on the Thames.” She peered at him askance. “Why do you ask? You don’t intend for me to paint in the water, do you?”

He laughed, surprised to find that it sounded a bit rusty, but then, it wasn’t often that he found much of anything very humorous anymore. But a few moments alone in Miranda’s company was vastly changing that. She truly had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. She had made him chuckle as a child, entertaining him with her various antics, but as a woman, she had the same delightful wit. “Do not concern yourself in that regard. Although I did have a certain area in mind. However, it is only accessible by boat.”

“I see.” She appeared to mull this over, and then she said, “I’m fine with that. I dressed warmly today, since I wasn’t certain what you had planned.”

He glanced at her attire—the fur trimmed pelisse in dark burgundy that easily complimented the chestnut curls peeking from beneath her black velvet bonnet. “Don’t worry. I would

have found something else to do if not. I wouldn't have allowed you to catch a chill."

They made their way to the river's edge, a short walk from the inn, where there was a simple, wooden boat, ready and waiting. "Is this yours?" she asked.

"No. I borrowed it from a friend." He didn't want to admit that it was his, because how would he explain why he traveled with a boat? And he wasn't prepared to tell her all about his life thus far. It had become complicated in areas that still were not particularly easy to discuss.

He climbed in first, set down her bag, and then offered her a hand to assist her. Once they were settled, he pushed off from the bank and then sat down and gathered the oars on either side. The day was bright, but a slight chilly breeze made the brilliance of the sun a bit deceiving.

"How are you doing?" he asked, hoping that she wasn't overly cold. Her nose and cheeks were starting to turn a bit pink already. He realized that he should have had the foresight to bring along a blanket.

"I'm fine. Don't concern yourself with me. I always preferred the cold to the summer heat." She tilted her head to the side. "I'm surprised you don't remember that about me."

He offered a crooked grin. "I suppose it would be impossible for me to recall every detail."

Silence fell for a time, and then she said, "I seem to remember that you liked the cold too."

He inclined his head. “The same is true now. With all of the layers that gentlemen must wear, it is much nicer to wear wool in the winter season.”

“I imagine it is just as tedious as wearing restricting undergarments,” she murmured with a teasing mien.

He smiled as their eyes met and held for a time. Thus far, it was the best time he’d had in a long while. But then, there had always been something about this impish lady that made his spirits brighten when he feared there was no hope of doing so again.

He thought about the bundle of letters he still kept at his modest house in Braithwaite and how they had kept him from doing something foolish more than once. Whenever the despondency in his heart had become too much to bear, he would take out every single letter and read them over and over again, until he told himself that he had to live long enough to see her—just one last time.

Now that she was here with him, he was very glad that he had kept that promise.



MIRANDA WASN'T sure what to make of the sudden spark that lit Anthony's gaze. She wanted to believe that he was enjoying their time on the water as much as she was, but he looked so... far away in that moment, that she wondered where his thoughts had traveled off to. But perhaps it was best she didn't know. If he had disappeared to some dark place in his mind,

she didn't want to disturb him. He would return to her soon enough.

They had been floating along the water for some time now, and she was wondering how far he intended to go. At the same time, she was reluctant for the day to end. It had been ages since she had spent time with anyone of the opposite sex, other than Jacob, and since he was her brother, it didn't really count. She had almost forgotten how much she enjoyed this sort of companionship. Perhaps after the holiday was over, she might consider returning to London and laying aside her mourning clothes and rejoining society, and perhaps even find a husband.

She had always said she would wed Anthony or no one at all, but those had been the ideals of young love. It was time to start thinking rationally. She enjoyed her books very much, but did she truly want to be alone for the rest of her days? Or did she desire to have someone to share these little moments with? Although she would have to leave the bittersweet memory of Anthony behind, at least she could do so knowing that they had shared a lovely Christmas season together. She might still ache for him, but at least she could close the book on their time together and move forward with the rest of her life. Perhaps it was time for her to start reconsidering her spinster status at long last.

As they came to a bend in the lake, Miranda caught sight of a hidden cove. However, it wasn't the initial scenery she saw that caught her breath, but rather, what lay beyond. It was as if she had caught a glimpse of paradise. "How did you find this?" she murmured in awe, her focus riveted on the tall, evergreen trees that lined the water's edge. Their branches

were covered with snow, but the most amazing part was the way the sun shone upon the side of the mountain opposite. It glowed with a sort of red fire that she was eager to paint.

“I thought you might like it,” Anthony said quietly, as he moored the boat next to the edge, and pulled it onto the bank. He got back into the boat and sat down, but Miranda was already digging out her materials to start putting this wonder down on paper.

She gathered her things and held out a glass for him to fill with water. She was already starting to mix some of the colors together to try to duplicate the glow before them. “I can’t believe how majestic it looks.” She shook her head. “I could stare at it all day.”

“As could I,” he returned. “In fact, I have.”

At this, she paused in her task. “I can certainly understand the appeal. It’s quite magical, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, it is.”

Miranda had the feeling that he was speaking of more than just the scenery, so she paused and glanced up to find that his gaze was upon her. She quickly lowered her gaze back to the blank paper she had set on the portable desk. “It’s regrettable that you won’t have anything to occupy your time while I’m painting.”

“On the contrary, I came prepared.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a miniature book. He also withdrew a set of glasses and perched them on the bridge of his nose.

Keeping her attention fixed on the landscape, she set her brush and made the first strokes.

There wasn't any sound for a long time while she created her latest masterpiece, other than the gentle lapping of the water, although it didn't rock the boat to the point she was afraid she might make an error. For now, all she was doing was creating a general outline. The fine touches would come later when she had a steady hand.



FOR THE MOST PART, Anthony hardly read a single word of his novel. He had read it so many times already that he could nearly recite it. He just held it now so it wouldn't be so obvious that he was observing her. There was certainly something enchanting about the way she carefully studied what she was doing. When he thought he might be caught looking at her, he would allow his gaze to fall back down to the page, which he occasionally turned it to make it appear as though he was fully engrossed in the story.

He imagined this becoming a habit between the two of them. It would be a calm, winter's night, and he would sit by the fire with a book while he was lulled into sleep by the gentle sound of her brushstrokes.

But then, that was wishful thinking. He knew it would never come to pass. His injuries in the war had made him unfit for any woman. Granted, he could still perform any marital duties with ease, if he were to feel the inclination again. His mentality had been too unstable for the past several years, such

that he hadn't engaged in a brief liaison. He was sure that no one would be able to stomach his appearance long enough to engage in an affair should he be struck with the urge. Although Miranda had been the first who had been able to look past his disfigurement, she had also been a friend long ago. No doubt she was coming to his defense on behalf of their former acquaintance, even if she had no reason to do so.

“I'm sorry for not returning your letters.”

He hadn't meant to speak aloud, had intended to keep anything intimate buried in his heart under tight lock and key, but for some reason, the words spilled forth.

She had been in the midst of a firm concentration, but now she paused abruptly and glanced at him. She said nothing, likely assuming that there was more to come.

He took a heavy breath and looked out over the lake, rather than meet her gaze and show his cowardice. It was bad enough that he would be relaying it in words. When he started speaking, he found that he couldn't stop the deluge. “I did enjoy writing to you at first. But once the severity of battle hit me, I couldn't find the proper words to send to a child. It was horrible, full of bloody violence. I wanted to spare you that.” He had to pause and gather himself, the horrors of that time still hitting him in the center of his chest. “When I got injured, I found that I didn't care about anything, or anyone. I wanted to die because I was in so much pain, and I hated to think that I would be a monster for the rest of my days. It took me a long time to get over that feeling of despondency. When I did, it

just didn't seem right to drag you back down into the mire of my existence."

For a time, the only sound was the slight breeze rustling the branches of the evergreens. But then there was the soft touch of a hand in his. Surprised, he looked at Miranda to see an empathetic expression on her face. "I admit that I was hurt when you didn't return my letters. I thought you had... forgotten about me. I suppose for a while you did, but through no fault of your own. I can't imagine the hardship you must have endured during that time." She paused, her voice lowering to a soft whisper, "I wish I could have been there with you."

He regarded her steadily and replied truthfully, "I wish you would have been there too." Their eyes held for a time, and then he gently pulled away from her with a lopsided grin. "I didn't mean to put a damper on such a lovely day."

She smiled. "It's time we should be getting back anyway." She turned the woven paper around to show it to him. "I got most of the landscape finished. I'll do the rest later this week."

He stared, spellbound, at the colors she'd produced. "It's remarkable. You have quite a talent, Miss Applegate."

"It was wrong of me to suggest we address each other so formally. Over the years you've been as close as a brother to me. I would like it if you called me Miranda again."

He tried to tell himself that when she'd referred to him as a brother it didn't sting, but then he would be lying. "If only you will do me the same courtesy and call me Anthony."

“Of course.”

He shoved off of the bank and set the oars into the water, steering them back toward the inn.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Miranda needed some time to think. It had been so much easier to hold on to her hurt over the years, to imagine that Anthony had forsaken her. However, to hear that he had never forgotten her, but rather he had lost himself—it was almost too much to bear. As he'd told her his story, the breath in her lungs had tightened. It pained her greatly to picture him in so much abject misery. She had always known he'd suffered, but she hadn't made herself face the harsh reality of it. She'd found a way to dupe herself into believing that it wasn't as bad as Jacob had claimed.

But it was.

She packed her things away in her valise as they returned to the inn; however, she kept the painting out to let it fully dry. Anthony offered to carry it for her as they walked inside. When they did, he asked if she would like to join him for lunch.

“I would like that. Just let me put my things in my room.”

She started to leave, but he fell into step beside her. “I'll walk with you.”

They said little on the way, mainly remarking on the inn. When she unlocked her door and went inside, he surprised her by following. She set down her things, but when she turned to go, he had found his way to the painting she'd been working on early that morning.

“Is this the reason you were still abed this morning?”

“It was,” she concurred.

He bent down to inspect the work more closely, and she wondered if it was because of his poor eyesight, or if he wanted to gain a better perspective. Either way, it was almost surreal to see him standing in the same room with her again after all these years. So much had changed, and yet so little. She still adored him as much as she had when she'd been a child, but now that she was a woman fully grown, the awareness of a man in her chamber was rather... unnerving.

“It's enchanting.” He straightened and looked out the window, as if trying to picture what it was she had seen. “You have a keen eye, Miranda.” He turned to her. “Did you always want to paint? Or write?”

She shrugged. “I never thought I was very good at poetry, but there is something about painting that brings the words to life for me. I might not have any idea of what I intend to say, but when I finish a scene, like the two I've started, it will start to come together, like the stories in my books.”

He smiled. “I imagine that many children are entertained by them.”

“And adults as well,” she pointed out. “I’ve had many women come up to me and tell me what an enchanting story I’ve written.”

“I’m not sure it has anything to do with your books, but more to do with the fact *you* are enchanting.”

Miranda’s heart faltered, but then she reminded herself that this was Anthony. He was merely being kind. She waved a hand with a laugh. “Don’t be nonsensical. Of course it’s the entire story I’ve put together that gathers the reader’s attention. Most don’t know me.”

“I do,” he returned softly. “And I guarantee that a part of you reflects in your work. You would not be as successful without the personality to match.”

She turned away, finding that this subject was going into deeper waters, more so than she was comfortable treading. “Perhaps. Shall we go?”

She started for the door, but a masculine hand covered hers. She closed her eyes as Anthony spoke at her back. “Don’t think so little of yourself, Miranda. You were the only thing that saved me all these years when I had lost the will to live. I read your letters countless times, and prayed for the day I would see you again.”

Miranda started to tremble. “It’s not wise to say such things.”

“Why? Because they are true.”

“That’s exactly why. What could possibly come from it, except to cause one, or both of us, further injury.”

She held her breath and waited as he reluctantly released her. The heat from his body slowly ebbed as he moved away from her. “Yes. I suppose you’re right.”

It was all she could do to hold back the tears that wanted to burst forth. This was all she’d ever wanted or dreamed about, and yet, she knew that he was still too raw to truly mean the sentiments. He was still healing, and with her mother’s death, she was too vulnerable to believe it all. “Let’s enjoy the rest of this lovely day.”

With that, she opened her eyes and walked out into the hall. As a single tear seeped from the corner of her eye, but she quickly brushed it away and pasted a bright smile on her face.



HE WAS A FOOL. He had never had any intention of pouring out his innermost thoughts to her like that, and yet, he was desperate for her to know how much she meant to him. How much she had *always* meant to him. But he could tell that he’d gone too far. He’d scared her. He could but hope that he hadn’t pushed her completely away.

Either way, he would have to live with whatever consequences arose from his actions. He’d had to do so for years, ever since he’d had the dream of fighting for the honor of his country.

When Miranda started to head for the hotel dining area where they’d shared breakfast together, he gently steered her toward the door. “I had somewhere else in mind.”

“Oh?” she asked curiously, although she allowed herself to be guided outside, thankful she had kept her coat on.

He shrugged as they walked down the street. “It’s one of the favorites of the locals. It’s not as well known, but the food is exemplary.”

She laughed, and he was glad to hear it. Maybe that meant the tension from earlier had dissipated. Or else, perhaps she’d decided to move past it. “You really do know your way around for someone who is a tourist like the rest of us.”

He grinned. “Not really. I just get around. “

They entered the establishment in question, a modest pub at the edge of the main thoroughfare. “Mr. Gravehill!” The bartender greeted him heartily, and he glanced at Miranda to see her eyeing him warily.

All he could do was lift his hands in supplication as the gentleman walked over and said, “Would you like your usual table in the corner? I reserve it just for you.” He glanced at Miranda and said with a wink, “He’s one of my best customers.”

“Don’t be trying to gain extra coin from me, Matthews,” Anthony said dryly. “But yes, the corner table will be fine for the lady and myself.”

As they sat down, Miranda folded her arms and set back in her chair. She lifted a brow. “Will we be granted the wine list as well?” she teased.

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you,” he returned. “Just relax and prepare to be amazed.”

As the barkeeper took their order and left to get their drinks, Miranda asked, “I find it rather unusual that... Matthews, is it?...seems to know you quite familiarly when you claim you are merely passing through.” She tilted her head to the side. “I have the feeling you aren’t telling me everything.” Anthony looked down at the table, because he couldn’t lie to her face, but when she gasped, he glanced back at her. “You have taken up residence here, haven’t you? That’s why you’re so familiar with the surroundings and why the barkeeper seems to know you so well.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. He had hoped to keep at least some part of his life a secret, but it appeared that was not to be the case. “I don’t call Keswick my home, although I spend a lot of time here. I make my home in Braithwaite, about four kilometers from here.”

She stared at him. “How long have you been here?”

He shifted in his seat. Something told him to be cautious of his answers, that it could mean his demise. “A while.”

“Long enough to have written to me?” she demanded. “Or come to London to see Jacob?”

He decided there was no point in dismissing the truth when it had condemned him. “I wasn’t prepared to—”

“So you allowed all of us to mourn you when you were—” She stopped, and then added, “Doing what, exactly?”

He swallowed hard. “I have a fishing boat.”

She barked out a laugh that was anything but humorous. “So, in essence, you were on holiday while you left the rest of

us to worry about you? Well done, Mr. Gravehill. I applaud your great selfishness.”

He frowned at that. “I wasn’t thinking of myself when I decided to remain here. I told you I was in a dark place for a long time—”

“And you believe you are the only one who has suffered in this life?” She snorted. “I have lost both of my parents and lived a lonely life, all while anticipating your return. You promised that you would come back to me. And I waited all that time—”

She clamped her lips together, because not only was her voice starting to rise with her upset, but she must have realized she had said too much.

She got to her feet. “Forgive me for not staying, but I find that my appetite has quite diminished.”

She stalked toward the door. By the time Anthony had recovered from the shock of everything she’d said, she was already halfway outside. He stood. “Miranda!”

She didn’t pause.

He slowly sank back down, just as the drinks were brought over. The barkeep looked at him in sympathy. “It seems as if you have a history with the lady.”

“Indeed,” Anthony muttered grimly, as he grabbed the ale and took a hefty swig. “But I don’t foresee a future.”



MIRANDA WAS furious enough to bite through glass by the time she had returned to the inn. She walked inside and nearly ran her sister over, who was on her way out with Daniel and their daughter. Elaine's eyes widened in surprise, either at Miranda's rush through the door, or the look of rancor that was likely plastered all over her face. "Randie?"

For some reason the sound of that sweet nickname suddenly grated on Miranda's nerves. She didn't stop to exchange pleasantries but kept walking.

Of course, Elaine wouldn't have left things like that. Miranda heard her tell her husband to go on without her, and she finally caught up to Miranda at the bottom of the stairs. "Dear God, what's happened?"

Miranda caught a flash of the door opening and saw Anthony walk inside. Their eyes met for an instant before she turned away. "Not here," she muttered to Elaine and then quickly made her way to her rooms. She checked the hall and was relieved to find it empty as she let Elaine inside then shut and locked the door behind them.

Elaine's eyes widened at that. "What is going on? Are you in some kind of danger?"

Miranda tossed aside her bonnet and her reticule, and as she was taking off her pelisse she said, "You can thank Mr. Gravehill for my current demeanor."

Elaine frowned as she slowly sat down. "What has he done?"

“First, he takes me out on a boat ride on the lake this morning. We were having a perfectly lovely time. I was painting and he was reading, and then suddenly, he tells me how sorry he was for not returning my letters.” She threw her hands up into the air.

Her sister must not have understood, because she said slowly, “And that is bad because...?”

“That part was fine. I accepted his apology, and actually felt bad for him.” She expelled a heavy breath as she started to pace the room. “What I got angry about was the fact he told me he lives not far from here and he’s been doing so for the past several years!”

She paused and set her hands on her hips, but Elaine still didn’t seem to comprehend what she was saying. Her confused expression said what words did not.

“All this time I was afraid that he’d died, or something equally appalling, but instead, he’s been here *fishing*! Can you imagine? He’s been on holiday while Jacob and I have been concerned over his welfare.” She shook her head. “I consider it the worst sort of betrayal. I daresay if I never see him again it will be too soon.”

A knock at the door intruded on her tirade. Elaine made to move, but Miranda put a finger to her lips and waved her back down. As suspected, she heard Anthony’s deep voice coming from the other side of the wooden barrier. “Miranda?” He paused. “Miranda, open the door. I know you’re in there.” Another pause. “Elaine? Perhaps you might be more reasonable and hear me out.”

Elaine turned to her with a beseeching expression, but Miranda was having none of it. “Don’t you dare!” she whispered hotly.

Her sister reluctantly obeyed. “I don’t think now is a good time, Mr. Gravehill. Perhaps we might discuss this over dinner this evening?”

There was a slight hesitation, and then, “Very well.”

Miranda waited until she could hear his footsteps walking back down the hall, and then she turned on her sister. “What on earth possessed you to say that?”

“What do you mean?” Elaine snapped in return. “He is Jacob’s friend and has been invited to spend the holiday with us, the same as you.”

“But I’m family,” she retorted. “While Anthony isn’t.”

“It never bothered you before.” Elaine stood, apparently to confront her on a more direct level. “In fact, there was a time when you prayed that he would become part of it.”

Miranda set her hands on her hips. “I can’t believe that you’re taking his side!”

“I’m not taking anyone’s *side*,” Elaine returned firmly. “I’m only suggesting that it would be best to talk out this little disagreement, rather than act like an ostrich with its head in the sand, unwilling to face its problems.”

Miranda’s mouth fell agape. “Out of all the people I thought might understand how much I’m aggrieved right now, I thought it would be you. Nevertheless, forgive me if I don’t come down to dinner this evening.” She crossed her arms.

Elaine shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re going to be this petty. It’s not as if you aren’t going to have your family around you for support.”

“Like you’re showing now?” Miranda put her hands to her temples. “I’m starting to get a headache. Please, just go.”

Elaine softened slightly as she walked over to her. She put a hand on her shoulder. “I knew this wasn’t going to be easy for you, but I didn’t imagine it would be so impossible.”

With a sigh, some of Miranda’s frustration ebbed. “It’s Anthony. The one true love of my life. Of course it’s impossible.”

CHAPTER SIX

Climbing the side of a hotel in the dark with only one good eye was not an easy feat to accomplish, but somehow, Anthony found himself at Miranda's terrace that night. He had hoped to find an audience with her after dinner, but he'd been told she wasn't coming. That had been disheartening, to say the least, and even more so when he'd gone to her room later and found that she still wasn't talking to him.

Thus, he'd had to resort to drastic measures to get past her stubborn nature. He had caught a glimpse of it when she was a child, but it knew no bounds as an adult.

Something told him that although it was nearly one in the morning, she would be awake. The landscape she'd been working on near the window in her room was a clear indication that she wasn't through seeking inspiration from the night sky.

That was proved moments later when he walked to the open doors and she glanced up and saw him, giving a brief shout of alarm, until he walked into the light and she instantly settled.

But that didn't stop her from putting a hand over her heart and setting down her paintbrush. "Are you trying to give me an apoplexy?" she demanded.

"If that's what it takes to gain an audience with you," he murmured as he stepped past the open drapes and walked into her room. He tried not to notice that she was attired in nothing but her nightdress.

She tossed her head, the long chestnut curls brushing her back. "Perhaps the reason I haven't sought you out is because I'm not ready to talk to you."

His dark eye flashed, while the one that held the scar caught the light of the moon and shone with an almost unholy light. "That is regrettable, since I intend for us to do it anyway," he pointed out. "You left this afternoon without hearing all of my explanation."

"I heard enough," she said uncharitably, as she moved away, as if trying to put as much distance between them as possible.

He withheld a sigh. "All you did was come to the conclusion that you wanted. I wasn't fit to visit anyone, let alone write and act as though nothing was wrong. I had tried to take my own life. I have the scars to prove it." He removed his jacket and tossed it aside, and then rolled up the lower sleeves of his shirt, where two white, jagged marks cut across his wrists.

Her face paled slightly. "Why didn't you let anyone help you?"

“I didn’t know how to tell anyone what I needed, because I had no idea myself. I wasn’t sure what it was that would help me through the pain of my injuries.” He crossed his arms and leaned against the mantel. “The single thing that seemed to help was going out on the lake and just... thinking. It gave me a chance to clear my head, something that the nightmares when I slept wouldn’t allow me to do.”

She lifted a brow. “It took years for you to clear your mind?”

He wasn’t sure how to explain so that she might understand the depth of his despair. “To fully comprehend it all, you have to imagine things from my perspective.” He found a focal point in the room and concentrated on it, while his mind returned to the past. “I was nineteen years old, eager to make my way in the world, to be someone other than a younger son of a viscount. I wanted nothing more than to carry the glory of being a war hero. What I wasn’t prepared for was the horror I would witness. Men I shared a meal with were cut down right next to me. I couldn’t understand why I survived and their family would be told they weren’t coming home again. It wasn’t always enemy fire that claimed the sailors, but various ailments. They would sweep through the regiment like fire. I saw more sea burials than I ever care to witness again.”

He put his hands behind his back when he realized they had started to tremble. “But no matter what, I persevered. It wasn’t until the Battle of Trafalgar that everything changed. When Nelson died and I was wounded, I thought I had let down the rest of my men. I felt guilty for losing an eye and being forced out of service and into the ship’s infirmary. Rage

poured through me like some sort of demon. I screamed in bed every night. I had delusions and thought for sure that I was suffering from madness, but it was the fever I carried from infection. When I was finally brought on shore, the doctor tried to remove my eye, but I threatened to run him through if he did. I had no compassion for anyone or anything. I wanted to continue fighting.”

He shoved a hand through his hair. “I was incoherent like that for weeks. Just before I was sent to Bedlam, the nightmares ceased and I was released on my own merit. But the stirring continued to burn within me. I grew restless. I was searching for something to ease the turmoil within me, to ease the despondency, but nothing worked.” He swallowed hard. “That’s when I turned to opium. I—”

“Stop. Oh, please, stop.”

Anthony’s gaze shifted to where Miranda was leaning against the post of her bed. Tears were trailing down her face. Shame washed over him, and he walked toward her. “God, Miranda, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I wasn’t. I should have known not to compare your life to mine. I had hardships and loss, it’s true, but nothing like what you endured. My God, how can you forgive my behavior?”

His chest warmed. “There is nothing to forgive. You were speaking from wounded pride. You thought I had forsaken you and moved on with my life while you were still trying to deal with yours.”

She slowly shook her head and lifted a trembling hand to rest on his cheek, on the side with the scar that he had abhorred for so long. “Pride had nothing to do with it. I was upset because I’d loved you.”

He froze. His lungs felt tight. He could hardly speak. “Meaning that you don’t any longer?”

She closed her eyes and whispered, “I don’t know. I care about you. That has never changed, but it’s been fifteen years.” She opened her eyes. “Things change. I’ve changed. *We’ve* changed.”

He couldn’t dispute the truth. He reached up and wiped away one of her tears with the pad of his thumb. “Perhaps all we need is a reminder.” His gaze dropped to her lips. “Can I kiss you, Miranda?”



SHE COULDN’T MOVE. She certainly couldn’t breathe. For so long, she’d dared to fantasize about this very moment. Now that it was upon her, she was terrified that what she’d hoped for all these years wouldn’t be as perfect as she wanted. It would be her very first kiss. She had vowed it would belong solely to Anthony. When she’d claimed she didn’t know if she still loved him or not, she was being truthful. The love that filled her heart was the dream of a girl who was besotted. But the reality of a woman might be vastly different.

Perhaps he was right.

She slowly nodded, the decision made. “Yes.”

She closed her eyes as his head began to descend to hers. With the gentlest of kisses, he pressed his mouth to hers. It was as if the ground shook beneath them. She raised her arms and tentatively placed them on his shoulders, as his hands went around her waist. He didn't try to touch her or ask for more than she might give. He kept the embrace chaste and innocent.

When he pulled back, she lamented the loss, but she knew it shouldn't go any further than this. There was still so much that they needed to learn about each other. Things that they had to sort out before further intimacy could take place.

He touched a lock of her hair. "You're just as sweet as I always thought you'd be."

And you're just as perfect, she thought, but she didn't dare voice the words aloud.

He released her with obvious reluctance and turned toward the terrace. "I should be going."

Her eyes widened. "You can't mean to climb back out the window!"

"I made it in just fine," he pointed out.

"That may be, but I don't want to be responsible should you slip and break your neck." She walked toward her door and unlocked it, then turned back to him pointedly.

He gave a lopsided grin and said, "I don't know whether I should be relieved or affronted that you think I can't manage such a feat a second time."

“I’d rather not take the chance since you’ve finally been returned to me in good health.” Her cheeks warmed as she met his eye and shifted her gaze away. “For the most part, anyway.”

He lifted her chin, bringing her gaze back to his. “I’m as healthy as ever. I just have a bit less sight now, is all.” He let go, but before he left, he asked, “Will you go on the lake with me again tomorrow? I have several other places I’d like to show you.”

Miranda considered his proposal and then said, “Actually, I should like to go to Braithwaite and see where you live.”

His gaze was steady, but then he inclined his head. “Of course. I would be honored to act as your host, but I should warn you that my tea cart isn’t prepared for guests.”

She smiled. “I think I’ll be able to manage for one afternoon.” She tilted her head to the side. “It might be something I should like to paint. I’m sure I could find a way to add a German Christmas tree and wrapped presents.”

“I have no doubt of it.” He gave a light bow. “I’ll come collect you after luncheon. You’ve seen the lake in the bright light of morning, but it’s best viewed at sunset, when the sun turns everything into fiery perfection.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she said softly, and she was. There were times she nearly forgot that her brother and sister were even there, especially when Anthony looked at her like he was now, as if he adored everything about her. She could only wish that someday he could come to terms with his past

and find that she was enough. That *they* were enough to combat anything.

“Sleep well, my lady.” He offered her a wink.

After he was gone, Miranda shut and locked the door to her room. She stood there for a moment and then walked over to the open window. She was reluctant to close it, but after giving the night sky one last, lingering look, and saying a small prayer for Anthony, she closed the doors and climbed into her warm bed, eager to wake on the morrow.



WHEN MIRANDA WAS INVITED to dine with Jacob, Elaine, and their prospective families for lunch, she knew the inquisition was going to begin. Of course, following her upset the day before, she knew that Elaine would waste no time in telling their brother what had occurred. Now, she had to explain that everything was well, and that she was going to be spending the day with Anthony.

“Are you?” Jacob said with a lifted brow. “Naturally, I don’t mind, so long as he won’t hurt you like he did yesterday. I was nearly prepared to have words with him.”

She instantly held up a hand. “Please don’t. The fault was mine. I overreacted out of previous pain and frustration. I shouldn’t have gotten so angry.”

Elaine set a gentle hand on her arm. “I knew you would find a way to work things out. You always do.”

Jacob hadn't looked as convinced, and Miranda was tempted to point out that he was the one who had invited Anthony to spend Christmas with them in the first place. But she wasn't going to start an argument. No doubt Jacob was still dealing with the way Anthony had disappeared without a trace as well, when they had been close friends. What made the sting a bit less biting was that he'd had a family to focus on, while Miranda's heart continued to beat for Anthony. Every other man of her acquaintance never quite measured up to him. It was why she had never married. He had quite literally ruined her for anyone else.

Now, as she stood in the foyer of the hotel with her valise of painting supplies and waited for him, she was surprised to hear her name called. "Miranda? Is that truly you?"

Miranda glanced up and saw a gentleman she was quite familiar with. Her mouth went slack with surprise, but then she recovered enough to reply. "Terrance! What are you doing here?"

He smiled as he walked toward her and she was struck by the genuineness of it. The sandy-haired gentleman, Mr. Barbour, was similar to Anthony in that he was the younger son of a viscount. The difference was, he hadn't gone off to battle but had become a solicitor. During the time she had known him, ever since her come out, he had made his fortune and become her devoted suitor not long afterward.

She had come close to marrying him at one point. He'd asked, but she had eventually declined. Her emotions just wouldn't allow it. She knew the same would still hold true if

he were to ask again. But that didn't mean they hadn't become good friends over the years. They often shared a cup of afternoon tea or a carriage ride through the park.

Most importantly, he had been there for her when her mother had passed. He'd helped her through the worst. He was a true, caring man. It was just a shame for him that he wasn't Anthony. He didn't stir her soul like the battle-weary hero did.

They embraced fondly, and then he said almost regretfully, "I'm on holiday with my fiancée and her family."

She smiled, although her stomach sank for some unknown reason. Perhaps it was because her friendship with him would soon be altered. Or that he hadn't bothered to tell her the news and she'd had to read it along with the rest of the population. "Ah, yes. I seem to recall reading about your upcoming marriage in the papers shortly before I left London. That's wonderful news. I'm very happy for you both."

He regarded her so intently that she could only guess what he might be thinking. "Thank you, Miss Applegate." He glanced around, as if expecting someone to appear. "I daresay you told me you were coming to Cumbria at your brother's invitation, but I didn't think we would be staying at the same hotel. I should think that's what I would call a rather ironic happenstance."

"Indeed, sir," she laughed. "I would heartily agree. Perhaps you and your fiancée might like to join us for supper one evening?"

"I would like that very much," he returned smoothly.

“You haven’t introduced me to your friend, Miranda.” She started as Anthony came up behind her and put a familiar arm about her waist. She noted that Mr. Barbour tensed slightly, although he merely bowed slightly as she made the introductions.

“A pleasure, Mr. Barbour,” Anthony said tightly.

“Likewise,” came the chilly reply.

Miranda quickly grasped Anthony’s arm and steered him back toward the entrance to the hotel. “I will talk to you soon, Terrance.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Anthony didn't like the sound of her parting promise. It seemed entirely too... intimate for his liking. "Who was that?"

She kept her focus ahead of her. "I thought we already established that it was Mr. Terrance Barbour."

"Indeed," he said evenly. "But what I want to know is his connection to you."

"I don't see that it matters, as he is to be married."

"Is to be married isn't married *yet*," he pointed out. "That could easily change."

She stopped walking and turned to him. "Don't say that you're actually jealous?" She snorted in disbelief. "It's been *fifteen years*, Anthony. I was a *child* when I saw you last. Do you think it impossible that I might have gone on with my life as you have yours? Did you imagine that I remained home, pining for you all that time?" She shook her head. "I hate to disappoint you, but Terrance has become a very important part of my life." She glanced away. "Although that will likely change now that he will soon be wed and starting a family."

Anthony tried to recover the proper amount of shame that he should be feeling for his behavior, but just as she was upset to learn he hadn't immediately returned to London after the war, he wasn't pleased to find out she had been a social butterfly about town. According to the letters of her youth that he'd pored over countless times, he was under the impression that there was no one else for her, that she would wait for him until her dying day, if that's what it took.

It was uncharitable of him to have actually expected her to do so, but at the same time, he wanted to be selfish and believe it, because other than a handful of liaisons during his darkest hours, he had reserved his heart solely for her.

However, he didn't need to upset her and send her scurrying away from him now, so he shoved aside his pride and swallowed down the regrets of the past and forced himself to be sincere in his apology. "I'm sorry, Miranda. It isn't fair for me to ask so much from you."

Some of the tension left her shoulders. "It's all right." She offered a chagrined smile as they continued walking. "I seem to get upset easily around you, although I can't say why. You just have a habit of saying the right thing to cause me to overreact, I suppose."

He shoved a hand through his hair. "You're not to blame for any of this. I am the one who took too long to come back for you."

They were silent for a time, and then she admitted, "I never stopping thinking of you." He glanced at her, but she kept her attention fixed forward. "When Jacob returned home,

I expected you to walk through the door with him as you had countless times before. When you didn't, I knew something was terribly wrong. After he told me you'd been injured, and he found it exceptionally difficult to speak about his time on the battlefields, a part of me feared you were lost forever. But even then, I couldn't seem to accept it. Every time a carriage stopped in front of the house, or the butler walked into the parlor with a silver salver, I imagined it was you."

"I wanted to come back," he said quietly. "But I wasn't sure how to face you with... this." He gestured to his face, not even knowing if she was looking. "Once I had recovered my senses, I felt like a monster, certainly one who was unworthy of you."

He paused when she laid a gentle hand on his arm. Her enchanting, green eyes stared deeply into his soul. "You forget that it isn't your appearance I always adored about you. It was your kindness, your ability to make me laugh, but most importantly, your loyalty. No matter how irritated you got with Jacob, you were always a good friend to him." She smiled in fondness. "And you were rather good at helping to keep me from getting too upset with Elaine."

He snorted. "You were both quite precocious as children."

She winked. "We still are."

With another laugh that sounded a bit less rusty than before, he offered Miranda his arm and led her to his curricle.



ALTHOUGH THE AIR was a bit chilly, and the threat of snow hung in the heavy, gray clouds in the distance, Miranda didn't complain all the way to Braithwaite. She had been curious to see where Anthony had been hiding all this time, because really, that was what he'd been doing. He'd called it healing, but it was a way to withdraw from society and retreat into his own suffering. Granted, she didn't deny that he'd had a difficult time after Trafalgar, but had it truly taken fifteen long years for him to finally gain the courage to return to the life he'd left behind?

To her?

So many unanswered questions flitted through her mind, but she didn't dare voice anything further aloud. She had this Christmas with him, and if this was her final farewell, she could at last return to London and grieve for him. She'd been denying herself the necessary part of her own healing process, but now she could shut the door on that part of her life and lock up her heart. Her parents' townhouse wasn't entailed to any sort of heir, so perhaps she might decide to strike out on her own. She had always yearned to travel to Italy, but she hadn't gone for fear that would be when Anthony finally appeared on her doorstep. But no longer. She wouldn't deny herself anything she wanted. While she might never have children, at least she would ensure that her life became her own. After seeing Terrance today, she wondered if she hadn't made a terrible mistake by turning down his proposal, but neither could she agree to marry him when she hadn't known where Anthony stood—or even where he was. She had hinged her entire life on him since before she was fifteen years old.

She had vowed to wait for him for eternity, but she was finding that eternity was much longer than she'd anticipated. Life was quickly passing her by, and if she wasn't careful, she would miss all the special moments she might experience. She had waited years for her first kiss to come from Anthony. Maybe that was as far as it would ever go.

A gust of cold air struck Miranda, and she snuggled deeper into her woolen pelisse. She was quite sure her nose was already red, and she could tell her cheeks were chapped from the cold, even though she wore a bonnet to protect her from the elements. Somehow, they always found a way to whip around and encase her in their icy hold.

“Here, take this.”

She glanced over at Anthony to see him holding out his greatcoat to her. She quickly shook her head. “I couldn't possibly—”

“Take it, Miranda. Trust me when I say I've suffered worse when it comes to being outside.” He shrugged. “Besides, I've grown quite accustomed to the cold while I've been here in the north.”

She hesitated only a moment more, and then she took the offering. Laying it over her lap like a blanket, she was instantly enveloped in his warmth. “Thank you.”

He turned to her with a solemn expression. “I know you may not believe this, because I certainly haven't given you much cause to trust in what I say, but I would do anything for you.”

Miranda wasn't sure what to say to that, so she just inclined her head and kept silent.

She sat on the side of him that showed his good eye, and if she didn't know better, she might not have realized he was injured. His jawline was strong, his gaze direct. Everything about his profile was quite admirable, and although a few more lines had made an appearance on his weathered face, he still looked exactly as she remembered. It was still hard to believe that he was sitting next to her again after all this time.

The years had seemed to pass endlessly, but now when she looked back, it had been a flash of memory and nothing more, nothing less. It was only her memory that told her everything that had transpired through the years, and a few words written in a journal, but otherwise, there was nothing to account for any part of her life.

It was quite disquieting, to say the least.

While most women her age had already left their mark by having children and filling their nursery, Miranda had a few paintings and some verse on a page. It might not be much, but perhaps her legacy would somehow live on through her books.

Miranda was brought of her woolgathering by the sight of a few cottages lining the path into the village. It was much smaller than Keswick but filled with various people going about their day and minding their own affairs. When Anthony's carriage passed, they might offer a wave or two, but otherwise, they continued about their chores. It was a far different scenario than in London where the sight of the two of

them riding together would cause several fans—and tongues—to start wagging with the desire for an impending scandal.

As they moved slowly throughout the dwellings lined with stone, and the tall, landscaped mountains in the distance, she turned to Anthony and said, “It’s quaint. I can understand how you found it so appealing.”

“Indeed. It’s as close to heaven on earth as I’ve found in England.”

She took note of the wistfulness in his tone, and she realized that he would never leave. This was the place he intended to call home for the rest of his days. She wasn’t sure whether she ought to be pleased or terrified by that. It would certainly mean that he wouldn’t return to London, and that was where she called home.

Deciding to push that aside for later, Miranda concentrated on her surroundings. It would certainly be quite easy to paint a scene about this place.

When Anthony finally set the brake in front of a modest cottage that resembled those around it, she looked at him curiously. But even before he confirmed it, she knew that this was where he lived. “Welcome to Gravehill Manor,” he jested lightly.

As he assisted her down, she realized that it was quite surprising to find the son of a viscount living in such unassuming surroundings. Another detail that would delight the gossips of London.

Anthony removed a lantern from a peg hanging by the door and lit it before he led the way inside. If anything, Miranda decided, it was just as chilly indoors as it was outside, but at least they had shelter.

“I’ll get a fire going. Feel free to look around.”

It was ironic, because Miranda thought he seemed a bit unsure of himself now that she was standing in the middle of his living area. She certainly wouldn’t call it a parlor. Or any other room that was there. She could almost look around the entire cottage, just standing in one spot.

Anthony was kneeling in front of the grate, but he must have read her mind, because he said, “I know it’s small, but it has been enough for me.”

She nodded her understanding and then started to meander about. She took note of the cot where he slept, as well as the copper tub, washstand, and shaving utensils that sat on top of his dresser. It was so... intimate, that she continued on her way. However, as she was about to make a circle around the backside of the chimney which also opened into his bedchamber, she spied something sticking out from his desk drawer.

Intending to shove the paper back inside where it belonged, she opened the drawer. Immediately, something caused the hair to stand up on the back of her neck, a subtle warning that she was poking around where she shouldn’t. However, curiosity compelled her to reach out and lift one of the papers out.

With trembling hands, she read the few, hastily scribbled lines.

I don't know where to begin with this letter. All I can say is that I'm truly sorry. I've been haunted for so long that I'm not sure I can differentiate between madness and reality anymore. I'm not sure how much longer I can take this pain, this misery that I hold inside of myself that has nothing to do with my outward injuries. If there was a way I could reverse time and never get on that ship, seeking honor and glory, I would. Instead, I fear it would have been best had I perished alongside so many good men with the same hopes and dreams...

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I never finished it.”

Anthony had known that Miranda’s curiosity wouldn’t go unchecked for long. He remembered that much about her. That was why she’d been on the staircase the last time he’d seen her, hoping to catch a peek of the festivities during her parents’ Christmas party when she should have been in bed. As she jumped guiltily and spun around with a gasp, he knew the same held true now.

The question that remained was—which letter had she decided to read?

However, any shame that she might have been feeling faded with the paper in her grasp. “Does this mean what I think it does?” she demanded.

He regarded her steadily. Even though he only had one good eye left to him, he could see the horror on her face clearly enough. “What do you think?” he asked softly. “I told you I was in a dark place for a long time.”

“But this letter is dated *before* you went to war!” She tossed the unfinished letter on the desk. “I might have understood your sorrow, your reluctance to come home after

the horror you witnessed, what you were subjected to, but not this. By your own hand, you weren't planning to come back to me. You don't get the right to choose if you want to live or not!" She was fighting a new wave of hot tears. "In the intervening years since you were gone, I buried both of my parents. Not only that, but I had to see the distraught faces of the women who received the news that their loved one wasn't coming home from battle. Each day I lived with the fear that my brother would be one of those men. You weren't the only one who suffered, but I wanted to mourn with you when you showed me those scars on your wrists. Now I feel like it was all a lie."

There was silence for a time, and then Anthony said, "You're right. But it still took me a long time to push aside my own agony and see it all around me. I still struggle with it, but I've found a new reason for living." *You*. Although he left that part unsaid.

Some of the tension receded from her shoulders. "I'm glad to hear it. Perhaps I won't feel so guilty about returning to London after the holidays."

She turned and continued her inspection of the cottage, which was why she didn't see the frown on Anthony's face. He didn't know why he thought she might have fallen in love with Cumbria as he had, but of course, she had lived in the city most of her life. Her publisher was there as well, so it made sense that she couldn't leave whenever she liked. Unlike him, she had responsibilities, while he was a ne'er-do-well. Or at least, that was how he saw himself these days. Perhaps he was the one who needed to make a change. It was time to stop

running, stop hiding; time for him to dare to walk out into the light again, to feel the warmth of the sun upon his scarred face.

As he moved into the living space, he watched as she removed a new, blank paper from her bag, along with several paints. “Surely you don’t mean to paint in here?”

She paused and glanced up. “Why not? It’s entirely too cold to be outside today, and that window makes a lovely winter scene.”

He glanced out the one she indicated, and with a bit of frost collecting on the pane, combined with the barren landscape beyond, it did portray a rather haunting imagery.

Once she had gathered her things and sat in a nearby chair, which afforded her a good view, she looked at him. “Should you like to read while I paint, as before?”

Since Anthony had hardly comprehended a word that he’d read, he asked, “I should like to watch you work, if it doesn’t bother you for someone to peer over your shoulder.”

She smiled. “Not at all. I am so used to my nieces and nephew doing it now that I hardly even notice.”

“Do you need me to bring the lantern closer so you can see better?”

She shook her head. “I prefer the natural light. I’ve found it is easier to shade that way.”

Anthony pulled up another chair and placed it a short distance behind her and waited. With a glance in his direction, she turned her attention back to the blank paper. After a

moment's hesitation, she started to draw an outline of the overall portrait.

While he imagined he might be distracted by the sight of her, it wasn't long before Anthony was captured by her talent. His heart fell, because he realized how much of her life he'd truly missed, time that they could have been together as soon as she had turned of age and made her come out. He would have courted her properly, taking her for rides in the park and waltzing with her at a society function.

Instead, he'd tried to escape everything because he couldn't accept the future as a disfigured monster.

But the truth was, Miranda had always been his everything. She was all that had mattered. It was too bad it had taken him this long for his eyes to open to the truth. He should have known her kind nature wouldn't have balked at his appearance as others had done. She accepted him, flaws and all. He'd been a fool not to return to her as soon as he'd healed.

But she was here now, so perhaps there was such a thing as a Christmas miracle after all.



MIRANDA COULD FEEL Anthony's eyes upon her as surely as if he'd reached out and touched her. A shiver crawled up her spine, causing gooseflesh to break out on her arms. If the fire he'd started hadn't chased away her earlier chill, then she

could have blamed her reaction on the weather. But the temperature outside wasn't the cause for this.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. The longer they were here together, the more word had a chance of spreading. Although Braithwaite wasn't the sort of place like London, where gossip ran rampant, there was still a lady's reputation to consider. It could falter anywhere at any time. She didn't need any sort of scandal to follow her after she returned to London. If so, she would risk her publisher's ire and, even though she wrote anonymously, they likely wouldn't accept anything further if they thought she had a tarnished reputation. It was best that she make her outline as quickly as possible and return to the hotel.

After a time, in the silence around them, other than the occasional log popping in the grate, Miranda was soon finished with the image she wished to portray in her head.

When she set down her brush, she looked at the work in progress with a critical eye. She was never truly pleased with the final project, feeling as though she could have done something different, but this one suited the verse that was starting to evolve in her mind.

Mama in her kerchief, and I in my cap, had just settled down for a long winter's nap...

"It's breathtaking." She looked over at Anthony, whose gaze was fixed on the object in her hands. "You truly have a vision when it comes to bringing something to life. It's almost as if I can reach out and open the window. And I certainly didn't think my cottage was quite so appealing before now. It

was just some place to lay down my head after a day on the water.”

She grinned broadly. “Now you can picture it even more fondly. Perhaps I’ll send you the original once the next book is published.”

“I would like that very much.” He paused. “But even more so if you brought it back in person.”

Miranda’s breath caught. She knew this was when things could get dangerous. He spoke of things that she might yearn to do but knew there was no way of doing. He surely had to know that. “I’m afraid that’s impossible.” She gathered her things and then got to her feet. “We should be getting back before it’s too late.”

He regarded her with something that looked oddly like longing, but then he dropped his gaze and said, “Of course.” He walked over and kicked some ash over the smoldering logs, ensuring that the fire was out before he grabbed the lantern and led them out of the cottage.

As they stepped outside, a few, white flurries drifted down from overhead. As Anthony put her things in the carriage, Miranda noticed a boy in short pants and a woolen coat and hat running up and down the lane with his tongue stuck straight out. She smiled, because she could remember trying to catch snowflakes the same way when she was young.

Feeling the sudden urge to mimic his actions, she stuck out her tongue and waited patiently for a single drop of moisture to touch the tip.

“What *are* you doing?”

She shifted her gaze to Anthony and drawled in return, “Don’t tell me you never did the same when you were a child.”

He crossed his arms, his brow lifting. With his damaged eye, he looked rather rakish in that moment. “Did what?”

She laughed. “Caught snowflakes on your tongue.” She proceeded to demonstrate.

“I never did anything so ridiculous,” he lifted his gaze heavenward.

She narrowed her gaze. “While I don’t fully believe you, there’s no time like the present to start.”

She waved a hand and with a heavy sigh, he reluctantly extended his tongue.



ANTHONY HAD NEVER FELT SO UTTERLY foolish in his life.

Or so utterly fascinated by Miranda.

He knew she had always been a free spirit, but he was starting to wonder if that girl was still in there somewhere. Now he knew that she was, and it warmed his heart to know that she hadn’t been completely broken by the losses and disappointments she’d had in her life.

Suddenly, he didn’t feel nearly as idiotic as he had a moment ago. If doing this caused that broad smile on her face, then he was more than willing to oblige.

Seeing that he was willing to play along, she went so far as to throw her arms out wide and spin in a circle with uninhibited joy. The laugh that came from her made him stop and stare, spellbound by her magnetism. She exhibited a youth that he thought had perished in battle, but he was finding it bubbling back up inside of him, the devil-may-care rogue that he'd once been.

He started to laugh, and together, as the snow started to fall in earnest, they stood there amid the swirling flakes and had the time of their lives.

Until Miranda twisted her ankle.

She fell forward, and Anthony didn't think, but rushed toward her and caught her before she could fully hit the ground, although they ended up on their knees. Her eyes were sparkling with life and exuberance, and Anthony quickly sobered. There was little to separate them. It would be so easy to lean forward and take her in his arms...

With a surge of apparent mischief, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his.

He was lost.

Anthony didn't heed the snow, the cold, or even their surroundings. Time itself seemed to stand still as he held Miranda in his arms. Never before had he felt so complete, so... whole. After Trafalgar, he wasn't sure he would be able to overcome the torment that had become his constant companion, but with this woman at his side, nothing else mattered.

As Miranda's eyes fluttered open moments later, he looked deeply into her enchanting, green eyes and whispered, "Marry me."

Although she was still attempting to recover her equilibrium after their embrace, she had the wherewithal to pull away from him. She was shaking her head as she got to her feet. "Don't say things that you don't mean."

He rose and started toward her, but she held out a hand. He stopped.

She turned back to him, tears glistening in those enchanting eyes now. It cut him to the quick. "You have no idea how long I yearned for you to return and say those words to me. For years, I waited, I prayed, I hoped, I *dreamed*, for that day." She put a fist over her heart. "But when all those days turned into weeks, and then months, and eventually years, I started to realize that I didn't need anyone in my life, that the only one I could truly depend on was myself. After coming to this conclusion, I wrote my first book, and found something that I could do to earn a respectable living, while remaining a spinster. I've learned one thing in all that time. I was a fool to have ever wasted so much time on a fantasy." She straightened. "I'm not sure what you expected when you decided to join Jacob and our family this Christmas, but if it was merely to try and win my hand, I'm afraid you have wasted an endeavor. I'm content as I am and I won't allow my harmony to be disturbed when you don't truly know what it is you want."

When she was finished, Anthony didn't quite know what to say. He certainly wasn't going to admit that he had reconciled with Jacob all those weeks ago in the hope that he *might* have a chance in winning Miranda's hand. Of course, he should have known it wouldn't be so simple as to say those two little words and she would come tumbling back into his arms. He had wounded her deeply. Those emotional scars tended to heal much more slowly than outward ones.

As far as claiming that he didn't know what he wanted, perhaps there was some truth to that as well. When he'd seen Miranda again and she hadn't shied away from his disfigurement, a brief bit of light had been spun in his soul. She had reminded him of what he'd been like in the days before he'd enlisted in the Royal Navy. But if she accepted his proposal, who was to say that they would be able to embark on a happily ever after? Nightmares still plagued his sleeping hours, and more than once he'd woken in the middle of the night with a scream on his lips and a blade clutched in his grasp without knowing how it had gotten there.

The harsh truth was that he might always be damaged. It wasn't right of him to ask her to accept someone so broken.

"You're right," he said softly, although he didn't choose to elaborate on that score. With his brow creased in a frown, he said, "We should be getting back."

CHAPTER
NINE

Miranda was sitting in the hotel foyer, staring off into the distance when Elaine found her. “There you are.”

With a start, she turned to her sister with a smile as she set aside the painting she was supposed to be working on, but yet, was still a blank sheet of paper on her lap and nothing more. Not even a rough sketch. It was as if all inspiration had vanished. But it was no wonder. Anthony hadn’t come by the hotel for the past few days. It was Christmas Eve, and at this point, she wasn’t sure she would see him. Regret over their stilted parting still washed over her. She hadn’t meant to allow her emotions to take over, but again, she’d found herself speaking before she gave thought to her words. That was turning out to be quite a habit for her. At least, where Mr. Gravehill was concerned. Before Anthony had returned to her life, she had been capable of holding her tongue.

Withholding a sigh, she patted the empty seat of the settee. “You act as though I’ve been in hiding,” she teased lightly.

“Well,” Elaine said with a shrug. “You have been rather withdrawn for the past couple of days. I thought for sure that

our shopping excursion the day before yesterday might have brightened your spirits, but even that failed to do so.”

“If you recall,” Miranda returned dryly, “you were the one who always demanded a new ribbon for her bonnet. I never particularly cared for such fripperies.”

“Yes, I do realize I’m the one who finds her weakness is a lovely watered silk,” Elaine said with a dramatic sigh. “But this is one Christmas that you’re going to be wearing something other than the drab half-mourning attire you insist on wearing.” She folded her hands together in her lap and announced, “I have ordered a new gown for you, and I am assured it shall be ready by this afternoon.”

“How do you know my measurements?” Miranda wondered.

“We’re nearly the same size. I took one of my gowns to the local seamstress earlier this week when you were spending time with Anthony, and she was able to create one specifically for you.”

Miranda had to applaud her sister’s quick thinking, but it did little to erase her melancholy. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Elaine, but truly, the only gift I need is sitting right beside me.” She reached out and took her sister’s hand in her own and gave it a slight squeeze. This time, she allowed the sigh from earlier to escape. “If only I could figure out a way to paint something worthy of note. Although this is a lovely scene—“ She waved her hand to indicate the window in front of her. “I can’t seem to gain the proper amount of

enthusiasm for it, even now that it is covered in fresh, sparkling snow.”

Elaine regarded her steadily, and then she said, “Perhaps what you need is a change of scenery then.”

Miranda rolled her eyes. “And where do you think I might go?”

“It depends. Do you trust me?”

With a laugh, Miranda lifted a brow. “I suppose that depends on if you plan on leaving me somewhere in the wilderness.”

Elaine rolled her eyes. “That was *one* time, and I’ve told you repeatedly that it wasn’t on purpose.”

“So you say.” Miranda’s lips twitched.

“I’ll be back.” Elaine left, and then she returned a short time later with her pelisse draped over her arm. “Gather your things. Let’s go.”

Miranda put her painting utensils in her valise and said, “Where did you run off to?”

“To tell Daniel that I wouldn’t be around for a bit and that he would have to watch Elizabeth until we returned.”

Miranda’s brows lifted. She recalled the days when they were younger. Although she had loved their father dearly, he seldom spent any solitary time with anyone other than Jacob, and that was because he was speaking of business matters. “And he didn’t mind?”

“It’s becoming a new world, Randie,” Elaine said with a broad smile and she looped her arm through hers. “Why, I shouldn’t be surprised if someday, men ran the household while ladies went to work.”

With a laugh, Miranda said, “That would be something to see, I agree, but I don’t think it will happen in our lifetime.”



MIRANDA RETURNED to the King’s Arms later that day and found that her smile had been restored. After the winter storm, some of the chill had passed with it. But even if her teeth had chattered the whole time, it would have been worth it to gain the incredible view that the Castlerigg stone circle offered. Smaller in scale than the infamous, Stonehenge, Castlerigg was still quite remarkable. Not only were the mountains in the distance enough to make her breath catch, but the circle itself was quite extraordinary. Like Stonehenge, no one seemed to know how long it had been there, or even how it had appeared. Either way, it had become something of a curiosity that added to the town’s allure. From the carriage, Miranda had drawn an outline of the stones and the landscape beyond, and then she had gotten out and walked amongst them with Elaine for a time.

“Daniel cares nothing for archaeology or science,” Elaine noted, “while I have been particularly fascinated by it. Is it that we can’t recall anything about these stones, or were we not meant to remember?”

Miranda had merely shook her head. Elaine had always been more involved in mathematics and how things worked, whereas Miranda preferred the arts. That was why it made no sense that Elaine should pore over the new fashions when they arrived in London. Miranda wondered if it was the fabric itself that intrigued her sister, the way it was woven into an intricate design or specific material, rather than the latest plates at the modiste's shop.

"I would prefer to remain ignorant if that's the case," Miranda murmured with a shudder. "God only knows what we might uncover should our memory resurface."

"But it might give us a glimpse into the unknown, like what lies beyond the stars." She glanced toward the heavens, as if she might be granted the answer right then.

"I regret to disappoint you," Miranda said, "But I don't believe you shall receive divine intervention for your own curiosity."

"No," she agreed softly. "But perhaps there will be an exception for love written in the stars?"

Miranda had instantly stiffened. She generally confided in her sister about most things, but Anthony was a strict line that she refused to cross, especially now. "Don't be nonsensical. The next thing I know you'll be spouting off such ridiculousness that if I did a dance among these stones it will grant me my heart's desire."

Elaine shrugged. "It might be worth a try..."

“No.” With that, Miranda had headed for the carriage. Again, Anthony had managed to upset her just by the mere thought of his name and nothing more.

As Elaine joined her and they headed back for the hotel, she asked, “What happened between you and Anthony?”

“I don’t wish to discuss it,” Miranda returned flatly.

“But perhaps if you talk about it, it might set your mind at ease.”

Miranda lifted her chin almost mutinously. “There’s nothing to say that hasn’t already been said.”

Elaine’s mouth turned down in the corners as she gave a heavy sigh. “I should think I am smart enough to know when you’re lying to me.”

“Don’t worry.” Miranda glanced out the window. “Whatever ails me should pass soon enough.”

At least, that’s what she hoped.



THAT NIGHT, as she sat down to dinner with her siblings and their families, Miranda shoved the food around her plate and realized that she had never felt more alone. She had always believed that she was immune to marriage, that she could be happy alone, but after spending the last few days with Anthony, her heart yearned to claim otherwise. Although she enjoyed the candles, and the evergreen boughs and holly berries that the hotel had set up to make a festive atmosphere

in the public areas, when she entered her rooms, it was nothing but a reminder of the stark, empty house that awaited her when she returned to London.

She'd had to stop herself more than once from running back to him and begging his forgiveness. But then she reminded herself that it would be a mistake. She wanted to know that he wouldn't regress into that miserable shell he'd been in, the one who had been so close to ending it all. She wouldn't be able to leave with the fear that he might do something foolish and she was powerless to stop him. That was why she'd had to refuse him. If she thought he was truly sincere, she wouldn't hesitate to accept his hand. But knowing that he'd always struggled with these ideas, told her that there was still a long road ahead of him, and he might never reach the end of it.

“Miranda?”

She blinked at the sound of her name, and when she glanced at Jacob, she noted that he had a look of consternation on his face. A glance at Elaine showed that her expression mirrored that of their brother. She forced a smile. “I’m sorry. I fear I was woolgathering.”

“Indeed. You seem to be doing that a lot lately.” His voice was firm, like that of their father when he was about to deliver a stern lecture. She feared she was in for the same. Naturally, as the head of the household, Jacob likely assumed it was his responsibility, but she was well past the age of her majority, and made her own way, so he had no reason to tell her what to do. Nevertheless, she considered what he was about to say as

the caring nature of an older sibling. “I realize that I made a mistake inviting Anthony to spend the holiday with us. I think it would have been best if I hadn’t reintroduced him back into your life. I feel it was the wrong thing to do, and for that, I’m sorry for causing you further pain. Please believe that it wasn’t my intention.”

Miranda sat there, unsure of how to respond. She hadn’t been expecting an apology, but she was grateful for the gesture. Thus, she replied truthfully. “I hold no regrets for seeing Anthony again, and I certainly don’t hold you responsible. It was nice to see him, and I can return to London with the relief that he shall continue to heal.”

Her brother inclined his head. “Very well said. I just hope that you will be able to enjoy the festivities with us this evening.”

She smiled broadly. “I’m looking forward to it. And with all the free time I’ve had lately, you will be happy to know that I have nearly all the sketches I need for my next story. I believe only one remains, and I shall finish that tomorrow. What better way to celebrate the holiday than by capturing the innocence of a Christmas morning?”

“I think that’s a lovely idea,” Elaine chimed in, and gave Miranda an encouraging grin. “Someday, you shall be famous, dear sister. When you walk down the street, it shall be impossible to escape from all your adoring admirers!”

Miranda laughed. “I’m not so sure about that, but it is a way for me to do something I enjoy and live by my own means.”

“And we are all very proud of you for it,” Jacob said, and there was a murmured assent around the table.

It warmed Miranda’s heart, and that was all she needed to remember in her darkest moments: she still had the people who cared most of all around her.

After dinner, Miranda started to return to her rooms to continue working on her watercolors, but she was stopped by Mr. Barbour in the hallway. “Terrance,” she greeted him fondly. “I trust you and your fiancée are having a nice time in Cumbria?”

“Indeed,” he replied somewhat distractedly. “I must speak with you on a most urgent matter.” He glanced around and then took her hand and led her to a slight alcove, presumably out of the distance of prying eyes.

Warning bells sounded in Miranda’s head, but she heeded them too late. Terrance had her trapped against the wall, his hands upon her face before she quite knew what he was about. “Terrance...”

“Shh. Don’t speak. Just let me say what I have to.” He placed his forehead on hers and kissed the side of her temple. “I have been in misery ever since I came to this place and saw you. I convinced myself I was going to be happy with Delia, but now I know it can never be. I have been fooling everyone, but I know the truth.” He pulled back far enough to look deeply into her eyes. “My heart will always be yours. Is there any way at all that you might reconsider a life together with me? Dear Miranda, put me out of my misery and consent to be my wife.”

Miranda blinked. She didn't know what to say. She had noticed the lingering glances he sent her way for a long time now, but just as she'd set aside her deeper emotions toward Anthony, she assumed that Terrance could do the same. She wished with all of her heart that she could grant his desires, but then she would be the one fooling everyone. She regarded him with empathy, hoping that he could read the regret in her gaze. "I'm sorry, Terrance, but my answer will always remain the same, because you see, like you, I shall always bear the cross of unrequited love. I don't want to hurt you by entering into a union that would eventually make us both miserable. Me, because you wouldn't be him, and you, because I could never fully allow my heart to engage with another the way I long for him."

He was still for a moment, and then he allowed his hands to slip away. A hard glint entered his gaze. "Is it the man you've been spending time with here? Mr. Gravehill?"

Miranda neither confirmed nor denied his claim, but the damning evidence in her silence was just as bad.

He stepped back. "I see." He lifted a brow. "I assume he's made you an offer then?"

Again, Miranda said nothing, because although Anthony had proposed, it wasn't the declaration of love she'd always yearned for.

His mouth kicked up at the corner, a look of reluctant acceptance filling his gaze. "I guess neither of us shall ever be truly happy in this life then." He bowed in a formal manner. "Goodbye, Miranda. I wish you nothing but the best life has to

offer. I'm sure you will understand if I cease calling from this point on. It will be wise for both of us, I think."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode back down the hall.

Miranda exhaled a shaky breath when he departed. With trembling hands, she retrieved the key to her rooms. She shut the door and leaned against it, as she tried to draw a full breath. Tears filled her line of vision, causing everything to waver. She slowly slid down the length of the hard wood. By the time she'd slumped to the floor, the tears were falling in earnest. Heaving sobs, the feeling of a wasted future filled her. Had she just made a dreadful mistake by turning down Mr. Barbour's proposal for the last time? She had long admired him, and with his companionship, she had made it through the last few years of loss with his steady presence at her side. But now, she'd lost even that—all for a man who was tormented by his own demons, who might never be whole again.

Miranda buried her face in her hands and sat alone, while the storm washed over her. Sorrow poured through her soul until it felt as though it was being ripped from her body. Tomorrow, she would put on a brave face and partake of a joyous celebration of the season for her siblings and their families. She was determined not to ruin this holiday for them, even if she might wish for nothing more than this miserable season to end.

Once it was over, she could finally go back to London and hopefully, find a way to convince herself that this nightmare had never occurred.

CHAPTER TEN

Anthony was a coward. For a war hero, he wasn't very smart when it came to matters of the heart. He knew this, and yet, he continued to stay away from Miranda, sequestered as he was in his small cottage in Braithwaite as Christmas Day came to a bitter close. He was feeling the sting of rejection, but he knew it wasn't because of his appearance. Miranda loved him. He'd known it ever since she was fifteen years old and looked at him with stars of hope in her innocent eyes. And yet, he had asked her to save him when he couldn't manage to do it himself.

He sat with his head in his hands, the fireplace glow as his only light source, and called himself every derogatory name he could recall. He hadn't wanted things to end this way, truly he didn't, but he didn't know how to come back from the brink of despair. He was terrified that he would falter and find himself going down the same dark path he'd been on after he'd been released from service. Like a dead leaf falling off the tree in the autumn, he was adrift on the breeze without any clear indication of what to do. People went out of their way to give him a wide berth on the street and because of his hideousness,

he knew he couldn't return to his family. To Miranda. He would be doing them a disservice.

He had considered ending it all so many times.

But then, he would remember the letters. Like a drowning man on the sea searching for some way to lift himself out of the mire, he would tear the worn ribbon off of the stack and read each one over and over again. They had started out in the handwriting of a child, but as the years passed, he could see the differences in the style. He would long imagine how she had matured, and looked forward to the day they were reunited once more. All of that was before his battle wounds, of course, but even afterward, he would be comforted by the warm homecoming he might have received. He pictured dancing the waltz with her at her come out ball, and coming by to pay an afternoon call, perhaps taking her riding in the park.

His chest ached, because he knew it would never happen. The pain would rip him apart as acute as the day that bayonet had removed the sight from his eye.

He looked at the letters sitting on the floor between his feet. They were still tied with that worn ribbon, each page barely held together, the folds carefully preserved in permanent creases. There were faded splatters of mud, blood, and his own tears that coated the outside. They were a reminder of everything that he'd yearned for, prayed for, but could never have.

He glanced at the fireplace and could feel the familiar well of emotion rising up within him. If he destroyed these letters, he knew it would all be over. There would be no other beacon

of hope to guide his way to Miranda. But what was the point now that she was gone? He no longer had anything to live for.

And yet, as he stared at that pile of papers, he couldn't find the strength to do even that. He was consumed with Miranda, with the love that he felt for her but was unable to express for fear his sleeping demons would resurface with a vengeance.

It was time to let go.

He closed his eyes tightly, and then opened them again when he heard a brisk knock at his front door. He shot to his feet, expecting to see Miranda on the other side. He shoved the letters under his chair and then strode forward and threw open the door.

Jacob stood there.

With a mutinous expression on his face, Anthony should have been prepared for the fist that came crashing toward him and set him on his backside, but nevertheless, he knew he deserved it.

“You deserved that.”

Anthony hung his head at the sound of disgust in his friend's tone. “I know.” He slowly picked himself off the floor and faced Miranda's brother once more. He held his hands up in supplication as a trickle fell from his nose. “You still have a mean right hook.”

“I've learned more than that through the years,” Jacob shot back. “But most of all, I know how to tell if my sister has been sobbing all through the night.”

Anthony hadn't thought it possible, but his heart sank even further. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Jacob looked at him expectantly, but when nothing was forthcoming, he demanded, "Is that all you have to say for yourself?" He shook his head in disbelief. "When you came to see me at the estate and I invited you for Christmas, it wasn't just because I was glad to see you among the living again, but because I felt sorry for you. There, I said it. But I *never* intended for you to make the holiday this terrible for my sister. She's suffered enough, but all you can do is think about your own selfishness."

Instead of retaliating, Anthony accepted every barb that was thrown at him, because he knew Jacob was right. "I don't know how to fix this," he admitted miserably.

"Why don't you start by telling her you *love* her? That you have for years, that you never stopped loving her?" he suggested.

Anthony shoved a hand through his hair. "I don't want to condemn her to more upset. What if I can never get past this?" He waved a hand at his face, but they both knew, as former military men who had fought a difficult battle, that the scars went much deeper than that.

"We don't know," Jacob returned evenly. "I may not bear the outward appearance you do, but when I say I struggle with what I saw, it gets very difficult to endure at times. It's not as if I can confide in my wife, because she wasn't there. She doesn't understand, and I certainly don't want to offer all the horrific details." His gaze was firm when he continued. "But

neither was I going to let those hard emotions take any more away from me than they already had. I decided I was going to be stronger than that. I wanted to live, when so many around me had perished, so that's what I'm doing. I have a family now, and although I won't lie and say it goes away, the innocence and love I have surrounded myself with has made it bearable. The same can be said for you if you will allow it. But it has to be your choice. I could hit you all day long and demand that you see the error of your ways, but that would accomplish nothing except to pacify my own upset in seeing Miranda so despondent, although she does her best to hide it, I know my sister well enough to see she's unhappy. More so, I think than when our mother died, and I thought that might very well destroy her. Would you condemn her forever because of your own reluctance?"

Anthony frowned. Jacob had given him a lot to consider, but it wasn't anything he hadn't already discussed on his own. "I... will have to think on it, Jacob. That's all I can promise."

"The problem is you've done too much thinking. You have imprisoned yourself in this place. You might have thought it was a safe haven, but we both know the truth. I hope you do the right thing—for your sake, as well as for Miranda's." With that, Jacob turned on his heel and left.

Anthony slowly closed the front door. But it was a long time before he removed his fist and pushed away from the frame. He returned to his chair and gathered the letters in his grasp. He considered them for a long time, and then he lifted his chin, squared his jaw, and entered his chamber.



MIRANDA WALKED inside the front door of the townhouse she'd once shared with her parents. After spending the holiday season among excited family members and a populated hotel, the silence and calm of home was almost deafening, but all for the wrong reasons.

Jacob and Elaine had chosen to remain in Cumbria through the new year, but Miranda had left on Boxing Day, the morning after Christmas, finding that her enjoyment had waned drastically. Of course, they had urged her to stay, but she wasn't sure she would be able to keep a brave face any longer.

Both her brother and sister had given her a lingering hug upon her departure with the promise that they would visit her as soon as they returned.

As Miranda glanced about the expanse, she almost wished she'd remained, but it would have been impossible. Her nerves were taut, because she kept expecting to see Anthony—who never appeared. At least here, she could take heart with the certainty that he wouldn't suddenly be standing in front of her.

Deciding that a bit of holiday spirit might lift her own, Miranda sent the housekeeper on an errand for some greenery, a few extra candles, and even a pink poinsettia, that had been her mother's favorite. When the servant returned, the evergreen bough with its few pine cones were draped over the parlor mantel, the flower placed on a side table, and a wreath

with a bright red ribbon hung above one of the floor-length windows.

With the gentle glow of the fireplace and the flickering candles, Miranda decided that it did help a bit. She decided to dress for dinner that evening, in the new, blue satin gown with its gold ribbon about the bodice that Elaine had given her for Christmas, along with a lovely peacock shawl. She'd even asked her maid to style her hair, and donned a small, diamond tiara and teardrop earrings to complete the ensemble. It had been so long that she'd worn anything other than half mourning, that she was almost surprised by her appearance. There was a certain glow about her that had been lacking until then, but a morose heart would surely be exacerbated by dreary attire. It was almost a shame that she had dressed up for nothing. No one would see her looking the best she had in a long time. Then again, she wasn't doing it for anyone but herself.

She went downstairs with a hint of a smile on her face, just as there was a knock at the front door. One of the footmen opened it, and although Miranda couldn't see who was on the other side, the sound of the murmured, deep voice carried across the marble foyer.

“Who is it, Evans?”

The footman reluctantly stepped aside as a well-dressed gentleman walked into view. “I don't believe I need an introduction.”

Miranda was halfway down the stairs, but she stopped and clutched the railing with her gloved hands. She started to utter

Anthony's name, but if it hadn't been for the sight of his wounded eye, she might not have believed it was him. He was dressed as fine as any gentleman of the *ton* in black trousers and a matching jacket, a white cambric shirt and cravat and even a maroon waistcoat. She had always thought he was handsome, but standing there in tall, shiny black boots, he was devastating.

When the silence lingered, he smiled slightly. "May I come in?"

"Of course," she returned breathlessly, already forgetting that he'd broken her heart. She slowly descended the rest of the stairs as the footman disappeared from view. When she reached the foyer and she stood staring at Anthony on a more intimate level, she offered, "Would you care to join me in the parlor?"

He extended his arm to her. "It would be an honor."

As they headed that way, he glanced back at the staircase. "I have good memories of that banister," he noted.

"Do you?" she said, her voice still little more than a whisper.

"Indeed." He turned her to face him in the middle of the room. His focus roamed over her face. "You have always looked so enchanting by candlelight."

Miranda's heart was pounding. "I didn't think you'd noticed me all those years ago."

"I've always noticed you." His smile grew. "That precocious girl who dared to take a risk, who wrote to a poor,

aggrieved soldier on the battlefield, to the woman who brought a man back from the depths of hell.”

“But...” She swallowed hard. “You act as though you’ve never left.”

“I didn’t think I had either, until I read your letters again.” He reached into his jacket and withdrew a packet of sad looking papers in a bundle of faded ribbon. He set them on a nearby table. “When I actually looked past my own grief, I started to comprehend yours. You didn’t just write to me to try to make me feel better, you did it so you could deal with your own sadness. I’m just sorry it took me all this time to finally push aside my upset to help comfort you when you need me.”

“Is that why you’re here now?” she whispered. “To comfort me?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “But so much more than that. To start, I want a dance with you. The one I should have guided you in on the day of your come out ball.”

She tilted her head to the side. “But there’s no music.”

“Then we shall have to make our own.” He took her into his arms and, using his smooth baritone to hum a familiar tune, he guided her about the middle of the parlor. He never took his gaze from her face, and Miranda wondered if she was dreaming, for surely this couldn’t be real. It was as if every fantasy she’d ever entertained was coming to fruition. After such a devastating departure, she was convinced she would never see him again, and especially not in London looking as he did.

As they danced, she asked, “What made you decide to visit in such formal attire?”

He lifted a brow in the coy way she had long remembered. The sort of action that had first caused her heart to melt around him. “How else might I court you properly?”

She stilled mid-stride. “Court me?” Again, her pulse picked up pace. “Do you mean to say that you’re going to stay in London?”

“It would be deucedly inconvenient to court you otherwise, don’t you agree?” he teased.

She blinked. “Does that mean you intend to return to society?”

He laughed. “I would be sorely disappointing my mother if I went back on my word now, not to mention the exorbitant amount of funds I used to procure all of the items I’m wearing at present.” He leaned forward, as if to impart a secret. “I even employed a valet.”

She found all of this quite unbelievable. “Where are you staying?”

“With my parents for the time being, but I intend to secure my own lodgings very soon.”

“This is impossible...” she breathed. She put a hand to her forehead wondering if she was dreaming, or if she’d suddenly gone mad.

He reached out and gently lifted her chin. “Not when it comes to proving how much I love you, Miranda. You were there with me during my darkest days. It’s only fair that you

should be a part of it during the light, because that's what you are to me. I stayed away, thinking that I would drag you down, but the truth is, I drag myself down. You are the one who lifts me up. I don't want to try to survive without you. Please tell me I'm not too late to win your regard. I won't ask for your hand again, not until you're ready. If you never are, then I'll be content to just be near you, to be your friend, but just don't let me go."

The fresh sting of tears assaulted Miranda's eyes, but this time, it was joy and happiness, not melancholy. "Oh, Anthony..." She reached up on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his for a chaste kiss. "I loved you then, and I love you still. I always have, and I always will."

EPILOGUE

*C*hristmas 1818

“ARE YOU SURE WE HAVE EVERYTHING?”

Miranda glanced about the bedchamber she shared with her husband of two months and had to smile when he reached behind her and enveloped her in his arms and nuzzled her neck.

“If we don’t, then we’ll just purchase it on the way to Cumbria.”

She turned in his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. With a pensive look, she said, “Are you sure you don’t mind going back there? It won’t cause any bad memories for you?”

“Why would it?” he asked. “It’s where I reconnected with you.”

“It is,” she agreed. “But you always spoke of such fondness of the mountains and the lake and—”

He kissed the tip of her nose. "It all pales in comparison to you, my lovely wife." His smile grew. "Besides, the last book you wrote about the night before Christmas was so well received that you said you wanted to try to duplicate its success."

"Try being the main objective," she noted.

"You doubt yourself far too much, even though I do my best to convince you otherwise."

"That you do." She nodded. With a sigh, she said, "I did like it there very much. Perhaps someday we might go there in our dotage and decide to stay."

"Only if you are done writing, and something tells me that will never happen."

She smiled a bit sheepishly. "I enjoy it almost as much as being your wife."

"I'm glad to hear it, Mrs. Gravehill." He lifted her in his arms and this time, he kissed her soundly on the lips. "We should go before your brother comes pounding on the door demanding to know why we haven't left yet."

"I suppose you're right." She snuggled closer to him. "But then, he might just have to wait."

Her husband threw back his head and laughed, and Miranda realized that she would never tire of the sound. Just as she would never tire of him and their everlasting love for one another.

It was surely a Christmas to celebrate.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALTHOUGH MIRANDA'S SISTER, Elaine, starts to torment her at the beginning of the story with the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song, the actual origin is unknown. However, it does mention a baby carriage, and they were invented in 1733 in England by a man named William Kent for use by the Duke of Devonshire. So for true, childish gain, I decided to use it in my story.

I based Miranda's Christmas book on the popular "'Twas the Night Before Christmas.'" This poem originated in New York in 1823, published by an anonymous author. It wasn't until 1837 that a professor by the name of Clement Clarke Moore came forth and accepted credit for the piece.

The poinsettia didn't come to England until the mid-1800's, but for the sake of the story, I wanted to add a bit of Christmas cheer that embodied my childhood, and this flower was my grandma's favorite!

The quote that Miranda utters to Anthony has long been immortalized in modern art, but when it comes to finding the origin, it was difficult for me to determine. Either way, when it is generally used for anniversaries, I thought it was perfect to end Miranda and Anthony's road to love. Whichever path you take, love always finds a way!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tabetha Waite began her writing journey at a young age. At nine years old, she was crafting stories of all kinds on an old Underwood typewriter. She started reading romance in high school and immediately fell in love with the genre. She gained her first publishing contract with Etopia Press and released her debut novel in July of 2016 - "Why the Earl is After the Girl," the first book in her Ways of Love historical romance series. Since then, she has become a hybrid author, published with both Soul Mate and Radish Fiction, upcoming works with Wolf Publishing and Dragonblade, as well as transitioning into Indie publishing. She has won several awards for her books. She is a small town, Missouri girl who continues to make her home in the Midwest with her husband and two wonderful daughters. When she's not writing novels filled with adventure and heart, she is either reading, or searching the local antique mall or flea market for the latest interesting find. You can find her on most any social media site, and she encourages fans of her work to join her mailing list for updates.

<https://authortabethawaite.wix.com/romance>

A GOVERNESS
SHOULD NEVER...
KISS AT
CHRISTMASTIDE

EMILY WINDSOR

The Governess Chronicles Book 5



ABOUT A GOVERNESS SHOULD NEVER KISS AT CHRISTMASTIDE

*“So tell me, Miss Webster, why should I employ you as
governess?”*

The penniless Miss Charlotte Webster needs employment.

The miserly Duke of Shawdale needs a governess.

What could be simpler?

*Yet when it involves a long-ago love, a wager, a wandering
uncle and Christmas... Nothing is simple.*

*Inspired by ‘A Christmas Carol’ and set in the beautiful
Lake District, Charlotte must remind the duke of his past,
show him the present and let the future unfold...*

CHAPTER ONE

Shawdale Manor. Ambleside, Lake District. December 1817

“SO TELL ME, Miss Webster, why should I employ you as governess?”

Oh, for heaven’s sake...

And rolling her eyes, Charlotte reached across the study desk for another mince pie.

“For so many reasons, Marcus...” She ignored the lift of ducal brow at her informality. “It’s a mere ten days till Christmas Eve. You cannot leave your fourteen-year-old ward alone with the servants. My previous employment has just ended. And no one else would be available at such short notice.” She munched the pie – such a luscious crust. “Indeed, I’m your only option.”

A grunt emanated from across the desk. “I suppose,” he began in a low rumble. “I ought to be thankful you’ve brought your references at all.” And he set to perusing them as though a contract with the cloven-hoofed devil himself.

Withdrawing a threadbare handkerchief from her threadbare reticule, Charlotte patted crumbs from her lips. Since her eighteenth year, she had worked as a finishing governess for families within the Lake District and was therefore well aware one should remain patient and demure throughout an interview.

Yet that was rather arduous when the duke conducting said interview was the neighbouring boy she'd played with as a mischievous child, the earnest young man she'd waltzed with as a wistful girl, and the handsome gentleman she now...

Well, at present, Charlotte was uncertain what her feelings were for Marcus Scarcliffe, the Duke of Shawdale.

Nigh eight years past, that earnest young man had disappeared to London for some Town polish and oh, how she had eagerly awaited his homecoming...

But a haughty pinch fist had returned to them in his place. A nobleman who'd appeared to care for naught but the state of his coffer.

Perhaps after the sophistication of the city, he'd considered his rural Westmoreland district neighbours beneath his ducal rank? Or had a broken love affair changed him?

Charlotte had seen him on occasion since his return, and although she treated him the same, his manner towards her had become as distant as the night-time stars.

She inhaled deeply to clear such timeworn musings. "And why are you not staying here in Ambleside with your ward for Christmas?"

That chestnut head of hair leisurely lifted and hazel eyes pierced to her very heart – so familiar and yet...not. As a younger man, a green tint had danced within them – carefree and trusting. Now they remained brandy-brown with the occasional fleck of pure gold – a hint as to where his true passions lay.

“You would not understand, Char... Miss Webster.” He cast her a patronising smile.

She simpered her own in return.

Pompous presumptuous lackwit.

“But I am a busy man and Christmas Day is like any other day. I am to depart for Carlisle on the Eve of Christmas to discuss a canal venture with Lord Crockett.”

“Grief, any more canals and England will sink. And Lord Crockett? Truly?” Charlotte tutted. “He has a reputation amongst his house maids as a debauched cove. They call him Lord Cockbawd.”

He shrugged those broad, finely clad shoulders. “His personal circumstances are no business of mine.”

“There’s no worse time of year to be leaving home either.”
The joy of Christmas. The need for family and–

“I know. It might snow.”

That wasn’t what she’d meant and he dratted well knew it.

Her lips thinned, eyes meandering to the study window to note that the crest of Wansfell Pike, the summit which

shadowed the town of Ambleside and this manor house, was hidden by a deep stratum of fog.

With each day of advent, the weather worsened, the nights as icy as this duke's heart.

When a girl, this neighbouring house had been so full of festive spirit, for although Marcus' father had died young during these winter months, his mother had insisted on celebrating Christmas to the utmost, lighting candles for remembrance and decorating every room with greenery.

Marcus' gaze returned to her references, so Charlotte returned to the mince pies.

The monies from her work as governess just about kept her own family home from falling around their ears. The roof leaked above her bedchamber. The attics were troubled with mould, and her uncle Marmaduke had thrice escaped his nurse by climbing out the shoddy library window, ending up in the duke's rose garden and calling for Martha.

But more of that later...

"Have you a new school lined up for your ward after Christmas?" For Charlotte knew that Miss Dinah Lovecott had just finished at *Miss Fanshawe's School for Young Ladies*.

"No."

"Perhaps you should employ me as a full-time finishing governess then and not just for the Christmas season?"

His lips thinned, high cheek bones so taut one could bounce a sage dumpling off them. "You are...expensive."

Charlotte spluttered mince pie crumbs. “Your starched cravats for a week must cost more than my wages.” And no, this wasn’t the best manner in which to gain employment but she was fast losing patience.

He straightened said cravat. “I have a certain deportment to project.”

“A starchy one?”

The duke slammed down her references, at last showing some passion. “I am coming to believe Mrs Mossop could look after my ward quite ably over Christmas until I find a new school.”

“Mrs Mossop’s job is to housekeep this vast manor, not also be governess and teach young Dinah etiquette and the reasons why the earth does not simply wobble about the universe.” She cocked her head and huffed. “Surely you can stay home for Christmas to keep your ward company? Canals can wait. There are more important matters than business deals and glossy guineas.”

His brow wrinkled. “Such as?”

“Laughter? Compassion? Joy? Family? The spirit of Christmas?”

Those wrinkles formed crevices of condescension. “Absurd, Cha— Miss Webster. Perhaps you’d be too fanciful a governess for my ward as what do you think life is? Some romantic fairy tale drivel.”

Grief, if anyone knew life was no fairy tale, it was herself. Since her baronet father had died leaving a trail of vowel-

waving creditors and a damp untailed house, she had scrimped and saved, worked till her eyes drooped, and had even been forced to try smog-ridden London for employment.

For Charlotte, no fairy-tale prince had ridden to her rescue atop a golden stallion. Or even a donkey.

“No, Marcus, I do not.” She smiled and his eyes hooded. “But there is more to life than ledgers and—” She bit her lip as a thought occurred. It would be bold, perhaps foolish, but... “You used to enjoy a wager, did you not?”

His visage hardened to stone. “Not any longer.”

“A deal then.” She broadened her smile. “If I can persuade you to stay home for Christmas Day, you’ll—”

A snort. “You’ve not a chance.”

Charlotte ignored him. “You’ll employ me as governess until Dinah reaches seventeen years of age. And you will have my roof fixed. And stop pestering me to sell you my home.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms. Narrowed those hazel eyes. “And when I depart for Carlisle still? What do I receive?”

Charlotte swallowed. There were no other jobs. She had less than a month’s worth of wages for Uncle Marmaduke’s nurse and the roof leaked in her bedchamber – as she’d stated before.

But if she succeeded, she’d be living here on this neighbouring estate to her home and Uncle for nigh three years, be able to pay the wages of his nurse for nigh three years...

“If...if I fail, I shall still work for you as governess until a school is found but...unpaid.” At least she’d have a dry bed. “And I’ll...consider selling my house to you.”

“Consider?”

“Consider.”

But had she caught a flash of green in that gaze?

The old Marcus had never been able to resist her wagers – to climb the highest tree, to race to the tinkers, to dance with her at that last Christmas Ball...

“And how do you propose to persuade me to stay?”

He was contemplating it!

“You will give me three chances. At three Christmastide events that you must attend.” All she had to do was think of them.

“Hmm. Is that worth so much of my precious time away from ledgers?”

Charlotte munched another mince pie. If one had nothing clever to say, it was better to stay quiet and hence enigmatic.

He drummed his fingers on the mahogany desk. “*If* I were to agree to such a ludicrous proposal, I’d want you to start as governess on the morrow.” The drumming ceased. “If you happen to win, I will pay you at month end, but when you don’t...” The drumming commenced anew. “As part of your governess duties, I’ll also require you to eliminate a yet more ludicrous idea that my ward has got in her noggin to become

an...” He nigh choked in that tight starched cravat. “...an authoress.”

To be commended, surely?

“I could start tomorrow,” she merely stated, prodding the mince pie plate back across the desk. “Come along, Marcus, what have you got to lose?”

IN ORDER TO instill calm and reason, Marcus inhaled deeply but those two eminently sensible states refused to surface, likely due to that scent of bloody heliotrope that filled his nostrils.

Charlotte had forever smelled of sweet heliotrope.

With eyes blind, he stared at her references, his mind coldly calculating. If he agreed to this ludicrous proposal, he’d have a governess for free until he found a new school for Dinah. He’d be at liberty to visit Carlisle and broker that deal.

What had he to lose?

She’d never get him to stay for Christmas, short of tying him up.

Which wouldn’t be without its merits but...

From beneath his lashes, he studied his sometime neighbour, Miss Charlotte Webster.

A spinster with twenty-six years, auburn-haired and slender, she had eyes the colour of mountain fells in spring. Tall for a female, she rose above most local men.

But not himself.

For eight years, he'd quashed any insipid sentiment – for both their sakes – but as soon as she'd perched on the chair and treated him like a man rather than a duke, teased him and licked her lips of mince pie crumbs, all his boyish yearnings had returned – a sensation akin to indigestion after too much venison.

And why was she forever so damn content? Broad lips curving. Through no fault of her own, she'd been reduced to a mere governess with a mad uncle and derelict house, yet she sat there munching pies like a blithe Marie Antoinette while the mob rioted outside.

Mind you, she was correct in that Mrs Mossop lacked the time to care for Dinah, and even he was not so heartless as to leave his ward utterly alone for Christmastide. A twinge of guilt punched his gut that he'd not put aside the hours to find a new school for her, but this canal venture would make him a mint.

His gaze twisted to the wall and met the portrait of his elder cousin Thomas who'd been a couple of years above him at Eton. A carriage accident in a storm had taken the lives of him and his wife two years ago, and Marcus wondered what they would now make of his cow-handed guardianship of their daughter.

Ostensibly shuffling papers, he debated Charlotte's proposal.

If he was to agree, should they have a written contract? Signed? Ask his man of affairs to scrutinise for any loopholes?

A name on her references caught his eye and he glowered. “You worked for Cadwalader?” He’d met the London reprobate on a few occasions, most recently at a boxing club: women swooned over his handsome mug; gentlemen feted his droll deeds.

But not himself.

“Hmm. Solely in an...advisory role.”

His glower became a scowl. “A glowing reference too.”

“Such a charming employer. If only all were similar.”

His scowl became a sneer. “Do you provide additional services now, Charlotte?”

The silence was extensive.

One could hear the wind buffeting trees at the end of the upper lake.

He cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean—”

“Yes. Yes, you did, Your Grace.” She rose and patted her skirts. “And if you would care to review the reference, you will see it was written by Amelia Cadwalader, his new bride. They were most helpful to me whilst I was in London and I count them *both* as friends.”

Marcus got to his feet also, aware that in Charlotte’s company all his control and restraint fell like damn dominoes. Emotion began to steer him and that must never happen again. He would refuse her proposal. It was best for all concerned. But first... “My apologies for the errant conjecture.”

She nodded, and it was at that moment he became aware of several matters.

Charlotte had always been slender but her wrists were... too thin.

Her woollen skirts were patched. And re-patched.

Skin pale as milk.

And for all that her lips smiled, the dusky shadows beneath her eyes conveyed utter weariness.

He knew she lacked money but...

“I agree to your proposal,” his mouth said without his mind’s approval.

Mrs Mossop could at least feed Charlotte up.

“I...” She nibbled her bottom lip.

He shifted. “Not that you’ll win.”

Those words were taken from their past and memories drifted in like dust motes.

When young, they’d wagered over the most nonsensical matters at Christmastide: what weight the plum pudding would be; the hour of the first snowfall; who’d trip when they waltzed together.

He’d state those same arrogant words and she’d always reply...

“We’ll see about that.” And those broad lips grinned. “Shake?” Her bare hand waggled over his desk.

He clasped it – warm, silken and too bloody slender.

“May the best *man* win,” he murmured, releasing it as though it were fire.

“Three Christmastide events, Marcus. No hiding in your bank vault, although I doubt there’s much room amongst all the guineas.”

His fists clenched. “If we could avoid the most mawkish seasonal events, I would sleep better at night.”

“You’ll not have time to sleep at night, Your Grace.”

He allowed not a twitch of eyelash, not a tremor of lip, not a quake of groin at such words – innocent or not. For so long, he had successfully purged Charlotte from his mind and body, and he refused to regress. Now he was a man of three decades with his desires firmly in check.

So he gave a ducal nod.

“I’d best pack for tomorrow then.” A curtsy. “Your Grace.”

Marcus watched her depart his study, frowning as he noticed all the mince pies had gone, but before returning to his ledgers, he wandered to the window. Wansfell Pike had now been smothered in a mantle of fog and drizzle and he could only hope that snow would not hinder his departure for Carlisle and those canals.

For he never lost a deal.

CHAPTER TWO

The drab brown or the snuff brown?

Charlotte held up her two finest teaching gowns and perused them. Hideous, both of them, but the snuff had become so loose on her, she resembled an empty sack of flour.

“The left one,” mumbled her uncle from the tatty sofa within her bedchamber. “It brings out the green of your eyes.”

“Thank you, Marmaduke.” So she folded the drab and thrust it to her portmanteau along with two other frightful frocks – a dismal grey and a dingy corbeau – although considering her garden abutted one of the duke’s paddocks, she could always nip back.

“Next...”

Two petticoats, three pairs of stockings, stays...

“Will you bring me back a present from your travels?” asked her uncle.

No matter how many times she’d told him about her being a governess, dearest Marmaduke never remembered and instead thought her leaving to gad around London or visit the coast for some air.

“What would you like?”

Two brown ribbons, Mama's hairbrush, the necklace Marcus had gifted her on her sixteenth birthday, three combs...

“A cat. A black one.”

Charlotte blinked, twisted and took a step forw—

A drop of water landed on her nose. She shifted the bucket with her foot. “Why a cat?”

Uncle scratched his white beard with gnarled fingers, hair standing in tufts. Today he wore a banyan of jonquil yellow. “I kept one in India and I do believe I rather like them.”

Fair enough.

And for once she may be able to grant his wish as there were numerous cats in the barn, and numerous mice, not that he'd likely remember by Christmas. She sighed and went to stand beside him, placing a soft hand to his shoulder. “I shall try my best, dearest Marmaduke.”

He seized her fingers and squeezed. “Thank you, Mary.”

Charlotte closed her eyes against the twinge of tears as he often called her by her late mother's name.

“Although,” he continued, “I don't see why you have to wear such shabby gowns. I've pots of money.” He frowned. “Somewhere.”

Biting her lip, she crouched in front of him. If there had been any money, it was all gone now. A meagre pension from the Royal Society was the sum total. “No matter, Uncle. I

wouldn't want to get ink all over expensive silk gowns, would I?"

"S'pose," he muttered, patting her fingers with blue-veined hands.

She rose to buss his forehead and resumed packing. Marmaduke had once been a great explorer, travelling the world – Brazil and India – but as his hair had whitened, so his mind had started to drift.

At first, he'd lived with a cousin, but two years ago Marmaduke had been dropped off by the stagecoach at her then employer's abode in the next valley, scared and confused, a note in his trembling hands stating that the cousin was to marry and there was no room for him.

With his lapses of memory, a nurse was required, and she knew some would send him to an asylum. But he was gentle and kind, and during her childhood he'd always brought her a present from his travels – maps and shawls. In more lucid moments, he was a joy to talk to and she wished she could spend more time with him. His nurse, Hannah Munro, was a good companion for him though, with family in Ambleside; all of which meant Charlotte refused to sell this house to Marcus, who likely just wanted direct access to the River Rothay which ran along the boundary.

Why she wasn't sure.

Perchance he was panning for gold.

A knock came and their one maid-of-all-work poked her head around the door. "A lady to see you, Miss. A young

lady.”

Charlotte frowned. “A young—”

“I hope you don’t mind!” And a diminutive storm of blond curls and white skirts rushed into her bedchamber trailed by a harassed-looking lady’s maid. “But I couldn’t wait to meet you, Miss Webster. A governess! Just what I need!”

Charlotte had not seen Dinah Lovecott for all of six years. She’d certainly grown and gained some boldness at that school. “Let us enact a formal introduction, do you not agree?”

The young lady paused, blue eyes wide and comely as a doll’s. “Oh. Yes, of course.” Her lips pursed but she gave a credible curtsy. “Please excuse my interruption but when I heard the news, I thought to come and see you straight away. I am Miss Dinah Lovecott, the Duke of Shawdale’s ward.”

“And I am Miss Webster. This is my uncle, Mr Wainwright.”

Marmaduke rose to unsteady legs and bowed with a cavalier flourish.

“Yes. We met last week,” declared Dinah with a further curtsy to Charlotte’s uncle. “Looking for someone called Martha in my guardian’s rose garden.”

Charlotte groaned. For some reason that she had yet to deduce, Marmaduke made a regular habit of absconding from the house to wander the duke’s rose garden calling for some unknown woman. Most often clad in only his nightshirt.

“Did you find her?” Uncle asked, hands rubbing together.

“No one was there, Mr Wainwright.”

“Harrumph.” And he rose to toddle from the bedchamber.

“Well,” Charlotte began, “I am pleased you are so eager for lessons.”

In point of fact, never in all her years of being a governess had a pupil appeared so enthusiastic.

“Er...” Dinah’s retroussé nose waggled. “Well...I mean, I am, of course. But it’s more...more that I’m planning to write a book about being a governess.”

Charlotte blinked. “An instructional guide for the profession?”

“Oh, no!” Dinah held dainty hands to heart. “A novel of... romance, the trials of a working woman, glamorous balls and grand dinners and dukes and...romance. Like *Pride and Prejudice* or...or *Emma*. But with more dukes...and more romance.”

Charlotte’s lips wobbled.

Little wonder Marcus had choked in his stiff cravat, but if being a governess had taught her anything, it was that the more one denied a young girl, the more they wanted.

“Well, I will try to impart what I can, but a governess’ life rarely includes glamorous balls or grand dinners.” *Or romance*. “Indeed, a fictional novel of romance might be rather difficult as the day-to-day just involves...lessons.”

“Oh...” Dinah’s lashes batted, rosebud lips pursing – she was ridiculously pretty. “But do you not work for haughty yet

dashingly handsome dukes or...or arrogant yet dashingly handsome gentlemen, like Mr Darcy?"

She wished.

"More like Mr Collins, I'm afraid."

"Eugh."

"Well, help me gather my clothes and we can chat about the school you attended. Did you enjoy it?"

Or did Marcus pack you off there against your will?

"I adored it!" Dinah prodded at the drab brown in Charlotte's portmanteau with curiosity. "It's so...quiet here in Ambleside, especially the winter. Did you not find it lonesome growing up here?"

"No, not that I recall." But then she'd had Marcus. They'd stomped the crags and fells, breathing in the fresh air whipped up from the lakes, and run to the waterfalls close to town, cooling their toes in the pools during warm summers. She missed her fell walks, she realised. The freedom of tramping around, wind whipping her skirts.

Perchance there would be time this Christmas if snow held off.

Snow would come though.

It always came in the Lakes. It was just a question of when.

"Does your guardian still walk or ride the hills?" Charlotte asked, nosiness getting the better of her.

Incredulous eyes gazed up. "Not that I know of, Miss."

“Attend the Ambleside fairs?”

A shake of head.

“The annual Christmas Ball?”

“Is there one?”

Charlotte perched upon the bed and folded her four handkerchiefs. “Many moons ago, a Christmas Ball was held at your guardian’s manor house each and every year. All the gentry were invited.”

“Were they? Did you attend, Miss Webster?” The girl wandered to the wardrobe and peered in.

“Twice. The last when I was seventeen. It was...magical.” She smoothed her grey skirts, recalled Marcus spinning her around, hazel eyes ardent and... “I believe it’s now held at Mr Fitzwilliam’s manor.”

“Are you attending this year?”

“No. A governess does not...” She paused, tapped her lip.

What better way to show Marcus what he was missing than to attend the Christmas Ball? And he was bound to have received an invitation. Not only that, but Dinah was old enough for a first social foray – it would be an excellent lesson.

“Miss?”

“Yes, Dinah?”

“I think you should pack this also.”

Charlotte turned to the exquisite gown held up by her new charge that had been a thank you present from Mr and Mrs Cadwalader in London.

With a grin, she hastened over to finger the delicate silk.

Her first event decided.



MARCUS SCRATCHED his quill nib beneath the name of Mrs Brockbank. A widow for five years, she'd not paid rent for five months. His lily-livered steward forever made an excuse for her – broken legs, poor harvest, deceased husband – and yet one could hardly let tenants live scot-free.

A month should be enough for Mrs Brockbank to find new lodgings.

He totted up the rents and came up sixpence short.

Damnation, and he resumed counting again to–

Squeals of laughter from the corridor.

Disrupting his numerical tabulation and he scowled.

Resumed cou–

There it was again. Dinah's squeal of mirth and Charlotte's husky chuckle.

She bloody haunted him. In fact, when he'd returned home earlier, he'd sworn her face had materialised in the large brass door knocker, those green eyes flashing.

With a grumble, he re-embarked at the top figure to count–

A clanging echoed through his house, like...chains dragging across a floor.

Giggling.

More chains.

He shoved hands through his hair.

Giggling.

Chains.

“Could you not be quiet!” he bawled.

Silence.

Giggling.

Chains.

He slammed the ledgers shut, stormed to the door, threw it open and glared.

A held chain clanged to the floorboards.

“Sorry, Cousin Marcus,” whispered an un-sorry Dinah. He knew she was un-sorry as her lips quivered with suppressed laughter and her feet waggled about like her father’s always had when he’d been fibbing to the Eton housemaster.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” simpered an unapologetic Charlotte. He knew she was unapologetic as she never simpered. “Are we disturbing you?”

Yes, they damn well were. Charlotte’s auburn hair had partially fallen with whatever exertions were taking place, chest rising sharply in that hellishly unpleasant gown.

“What on earth are you doing?”

Charlotte straightened. “My portmanteau lock broke, so we had to bind it shut with a chain but it’s too heavy to carry so we are dragging it.”

“I employ footmen for that, no?”

“They are helping Mrs Mossop with the decorations.”

He narrowed his eyes. “*Decorations?*”

“Just a few, Cousin Marcus.” Dinah batted her lashes, hands in a clasp of prayer. “Pleeeaaaase.”

Devil take it, the girl would have London at her pink slippers in three years.

He strode forward; they stepped back.

Was he that much of an ogre?

Heaving the bloody portmanteau to his shoulder, he stifled a groan as it weighed more than his red-lacquered Chinoiserie desk, but refusing to display any unducal sign of discomfort, he stomped down the corridor with it, booted the schoolroom door open and dropped it to the bench.

“Er...” murmured Charlotte. “I wanted it in my bedchamber.”

He muttered, heaved it to shoulder, then stomped across the corridor with it, booted the bedchamber door open and dropped it to the floor.

Twisting, he noted Charlotte’s eyes were riveted on his neck. His *bare* neck as he’d cast his cravat aside earlier in the eve when the ledger calculations had caused a certain perspiration.

“Forgive my state of déshabillé. I was not expecting to be disturbed by chains and giggling.”

Dinah giggled.

Charlotte curtseyed. “You are forgiven, Your Grace.”

Inhaling deeply, he stabbed a finger out. “A word, Miss Webster.” He strode into the corridor and back to his room, shoving the door wide.

She shilly-shallied in the corridor.

“If you would? My time is expensive.”

“A governess should never...enter a duke’s bedchamber,” she at last spluttered.

“This is not my bedchamber. This is my second study. Thus, I can work before sleep. I moved the actual bed to the valet’s room.”

“How...industrious,” came a mutter before she strode into his second study and peered around. “It’s most...” She trailed off into an exhalation.

Frowning, he peered around also. What was wrong with it?

Shelves with ledgers. Folders. Deeds. Maps of the estate with the lands circled that he’d still to acquire. Including Charlotte’s house.

“Most what?”

She wandered to the bookshelves, placed a finger to the spines of books concerning business. “Do you never read for pleasure anymore?”

“No.”

“Dinah says you never go walking the fells either.”

“No. Do you?”

A wry smile pulled at her lips. “A governess rarely has leisure time, Your Grace. And when I happen to have a day free, I return home to visit Marmaduke.”

“Doubtless he misses you when you are working.”

Her smile dimmed. “I do not know. Time... Time has no meaning for him anymore. A blessing and a curse. But his mind oft lives in the past. Some days, I am a little girl, other days my mother.” She twisted. “Do you recall when we climbed Wansfell Pike on the longest day of the year?”

How could he forget?

The view of Lake Windermere and the fells spread before them had been stupendous, hues of every imaginable green, the waters glittering beneath the ever-shifting skies. Charlotte had been just seventeen and stood upon the summit like a pagan goddess, wind loosening her hair to a stream of fire.

“No.”

“Shame.”

“I asked for a word,” he abruptly stated, “as I wanted to inform you that your chamber and the schoolroom will be moved. To a differing floor than my own quarters.”

“I remember your mother moving them down so she could have you close and not shut away on the gloomy third floor.”

“Times change.”

She skewered him with green eyes, evoking that day on the summit – the grass had been scant but mountain sorrel and wild thyme had bordered the shepherd’s path to the top.

“Yes, they do,” she whispered. “But never so much as that year we climbed Wansfell Pike.”

Marcus comprehended her meaning. For that same year, with just over two decades to his name, he’d left for London. To gain some experience and Town flair.

“Good night, Miss Webster.”

She returned a sad smile. “I shall allow you to continue in your tedium.”

The cheek of the saucebox!

“My ledgers,” he drawled, staring down his nose at her, “are not tedious.”

A quirk of brow. “I wasn’t referring to the ledgers.” And she swished – if one could swish dreary grey skirts – to the open door but then turned. “Oh, and we have our first event one night hence.”

Damn. He thought she might have forgotten about that.

“We are to attend the Ambleside Christmas Ball at Fitzwilliam’s.” She stalked back to him and leaned near – musky heliotrope causing the hair upon his bare nape to stand on end. “Don’t forget your starched cravat.” And after a pat on the arm, she stalked back to the door and closed it softly behind her.

He prowled to his desk, shoved himself to his chair and glared at the ledgers.

Counted.

Numbers darted like restless fruit flies on spoiled apples and he slammed them shut.

Shoved his elbows to the leather inlay and thrust fingers through his hair.

“The Christmas Ball,” he growled. “A past best forgot.”

CHAPTER THREE

Pure-white ribbons of silk and deep-green lengths of ivy hung from the Fitzwilliam chandeliers, a draught eddying them to resemble windswept branches and drifting snow.

Charlotte endeavoured to remember that she was only at this ball in order to persuade Marcus to stay for Christmas, to remind him of laughter and joy, but she'd become swept up by the festivity, by recollections of the past.

She'd chatted with childhood friends, now with their own children; she'd laughed with bachelors who'd a little more breadth to their stomachs; the past was everywhere.

"Oh, Miss Webster," Dinah gushed as she gulped lemonade, impossible blond curls spiralling. "This is wondrous. And I've made so many friends." And before she could take another breath, Lucy from the next valley seized Dinah's hand, and giggling, they skipped off towards the orchestra.

Charlotte smiled and sipped her champagne. As Christmas was approaching, she'd dispensed with the more arduous lessons and focused on singing, art and menus. Dinah was a

delight, keen and intelligent, although with an impetuosity that could one day cause grey hairs for all concerned.

“She’s too young to attend this ball,” grumped a voice over her shoulder.

Instead of whirling, Charlotte took her time. For the vision of Marcus in evening wear took its toll upon a woman.

A damson tailcoat clad his slender frame, a silver-grey waistcoat his chest. Black breeches snugly fitted and he wore a cravat that was indeed thoroughly starched.

Clean shaven, his handsome aspect was set to a scowl.

“It’s important for Dinah to gain experience at local affairs such as this, Your Grace. I was just sixteen at my first Christmas Ball. I recall my aunt wouldn’t let me dance.”

“But you did,” he stated low. “I saw you twirling alone on the balcony.”

She swallowed. “I hadn’t realised you saw me.” And how pathetic she must have appeared. Then, at the next year’s ball, they had danced together thrice and she’d thought his eyes had declared such emotion... Yet it must all have been in her fanciful young head. “I suppose this hasn’t the sophistication of a London Christmas Ball.”

But, oh how beautiful it was.

Silver and white swags of silk curled and flowed around the Pomona-green walls, cosseting the many portraits in its embrace. Holly, rosemary and laurel burst from vases while hothouse roses of white floated in crystal bowls, the many candles setting the ballroom to a glistening paradise. And the

final flourish... “Wansfell Peak, I noticed, had a dusting of snow this morning.”

“Bugger,” she thought to hear him mutter, so she gazed to the dance floor, a riot of shades and gaiety.

Along with the magical décor, there was also a jovial informality to this ball as the Westmorland district gentry and their families all knew one another. She’d spied Fitzwilliam’s young son snaffling rum butter crackers from the refreshments table.

Yet there was no informality to Marcus. He endured at her side with a nigh bored expression, still and taciturn, although...

The stiller he appeared, the more a...tenseness seemed to resonate from him. It was akin to standing next to a tuning fork.

Charlotte wondered at its cause and if—

“Miss Webster! What a pleasure! And why have we not seen you here for so long?”

Charlotte’s gloved hand was seized, kissed, and she smiled at their host, Mr Fitzwilliam. A handsome gent, his blue eyes twinkled with merriment. Now a widower of five years, it was rumoured he was on the hunt for a wife.

“Mr Fitzwilliam. A pleasure also. But nowadays I am only a gov—”

“She’s my guest,” Marcus cut in silkily, thrusting forth his hand. “How are you, Fitz?”

“Exultant to see you, Shawdale, it’s been too long. I was just telling my boy about the Christmas you persuaded me to gift my tutor with a frog.”

Charlotte was sure Marcus’ lips had twitched. “A toad, I think you’d find.”

“Well, of the amphibian class. And if you don’t mind, I would very much like to whisk your *guest* off for a waltz.” He proffered an arm. “Miss Webster?”

For all of a moment, she hesitated, wishing Marcus had asked her first. But his face held that expression of ennui once more, so with the broadest smile she had within her repertoire, she took Mr Fitzwilliam’s arm and wended to the dance floor without a backwards glance.

BALLING HIS FISTS, Marcus glowered as Charlotte whirled within Fitz’s embrace. They suited one another – forever smiling the both of them. If they popped offspring, the whelps would be born with upturned lips.

But the thought of them indulging in such coital behaviour in order to beget said offspring caused him to grab a glass of champagne from a passing tray and glug it down in one.

Damnation, what was the point to all this?

Why had she brought him here?

To drive him to Bedlam?

Charlotte’s slender body was garbed in a gown of the most exquisite silk – the colour of autumn leaves. He wondered how

she'd afforded it as it looked costly. Had some other fellow gifted it to her?

He recalled the last time they'd danced. At this Christmas Ball when held at his own estate, eight years past.

And how he had ached to kiss her.

Plunge his hands through her fiery hair and touch her.

Yet she'd had but seventeen years and even though he'd been a young lad full of raging desire, he'd also known she was too young, too innocent.

And then he'd gone to Lond—

“Oh, that was too much fun.” And Charlotte tumbled back into his sphere and being, leaf-green eyes bright. “And Fitz has such stamina.”

Marcus grunted. “Also had his lips nigh at your earlobe and his hand on your derriere. A governess must be heedful of her reputation and ascertain ways to mitigate such advances.”

Her smile dropped and he felt an utter dullard.

“Your Grace...” She sniffed. “I have worked in many households of the *Ton* and am not innocent—”

“What!” he roared, causing a countess to drop her champagne.

“Shush! Not that...” She tutted at him as footmen arrived with brushes. “Not innocent to the ways of fending off gentlemen, I meant. One viscount pinched my derriere so often, I took to wearing a cushion beneath my skirts.”

“What was his name?” he queried casually, fists balled once more. “I’ll break his fingers.”

She pursed her lips. “Bad for one’s references that.”

“Oh, Your Grace!” A lady togged in more ruffles and tassels than the ballroom curtains barged forward, clasped her hands together and squealed in delight. “How wonderful to see you! Lady Paggett, you remember me?”

“No.”

“You’ll remember my daughter though. Agatha.” And from behind the ruffles, a girl of approximately seventeen was dragged forth – short and with even more ruffles. “We are off to London this year for her first Season, and I imagine her *vast* dowry and *docile* manner will establish her as a diamond of the first water.” She batted her lashes. “And not on the market for long.”

Ah, now Marcus remembered.

Lord Paggett owned land to the west and had hinted the girl’s impressive dowry would also include a few acres. She’d be the perfect bride. Money and connection. And he wasn’t getting any younger.

“May I have this dance, Miss Paggett?” he mechanically requested.

The girl simpered, so with a nod to Charlotte, he led Miss Paggett onto the dance floor for a quadrille.

“Are you enjoying the ball?” he asked while they stood awaiting the music to commence.

“Oh, yes, I adore it.”

From the corner of his eye, he noted Charlotte now stood awaiting the same dance one couple down with Sir Edward, a bachelor with a ten thousand a year income.

“And are you looking forward to the Season?”

“Oh, yes, I shall adore it.”

“And are you looking forward to Christmas?”

“Oh, yes, I adore it.”

He frowned.

The quadrille commenced and when he briefly crossed paths with his dance partner once more, he felt compelled to ask, “Do you enjoy walks?”

“Oh, yes, I adore them.”

“Where do you adore walking? The hills? Meadows?”

“The drawing room,” she replied. “I adore walking around the drawing room. Outside is so...undomesticated.”

Marcus stared down at her tepid eyes and wondered what the devil he was doing?

And why hadn't he asked Charlotte to dance yet?

As the couples circled and the music dipped, he heard her low chuckle, mocking his asinine choice of dance partner based on wealth and land.

Charlotte had nothing, no coin or habitable house, and yet she brimmed with such life.

When they'd first danced at that ball a lifetime ago, she'd been like a flame in his arms, full of vibrancy and repartee, slender body curving with his, so in step with one another.

He stared down to Miss Paggett. She was most pretty, no doubt had hidden talents, and would make someone a perfect wife.

But that someone was not him.

It never was.

The dance came to a welcome end, so after delivering the girl back to her mother, he strode through the crowd, dodging acquaintances and ruffles to make his escape through the French doors and to the terrace.

Bloody freezing.

Deserted.

Lamps had been lit along the wall of the house and frost crystals sparkled off the stone, but the candlelight barely penetrated the night.

Out here was bitter cold and solemn whilst inside all was genial warmth and cheer.

He paced the flagstones.

Agreeing to Charlotte's proposal had been a mistake. He ought to call the whole matter off. After all, he was a duke and so—

“Your Grace?”

And why had she stopped calling him Marcus?

“Miss Webster. I will be departing shortly but will send the carriage back for you and Dinah. Return inside. It’s too bitter out here.”

“But you promised to attend my events.”

“And I have attended.”

He could sense her just behind him. Heliotrope. Warmth. Honesty.

“Not for long. But...how has it made you feel?” she whispered. “Surely it reminds you of the Christmases with your parents, when we were young. The fun and laughter?”

He breathed deep. Gritted his teeth. “Return inside, Miss Webster.”

“I do not understand. Have you not enjoyed it? The dancing and—”

He swivelled. She was too close. Torrid fire before a backdrop of frosted stone. The only damn warmth in this cold night.

“Oh, yes,” he growled, “it reminds me of all that. And moreover it reminds me...”

A line creased her brow, the lanterns lighting her eyes to stars. “What?”

“You have no wish to know.”

“Yes, I do.” And then she sealed her fate as her gloved hand touched his sleeve. He could see her skin pebbling with the chill, the necklace he’d gifted her so long ago encircling her throat, breath misting with his own – entwined.

“Damn it, Charlotte, this is what it reminds me of.” And he yanked her into his arms and kissed her.

Kissed her how he’d wished to all that time ago.

But he was no longer a boy and so instead of some naïve brush of lips, he ravished.

Despite the cold, Charlotte was anything but.

She was molten and everything he’d thrown away.

Desire coursed its way through his body, hardening loins in a moment, thawing all restraint.

His hand grabbed her rump to drag her nearer – not close enough – and another hand clasped her nape, to–

Laughter gushed as the French doors opened and glacial reality slapped his cheeks.

He stepped back, breath panting, arms dropping to his sides.

Hell and bloody damnation.

“That is what it reminds me of, Charlotte.” His fists clenched, nails biting into his palms, and he willed his body to calm. “But no one can go back,” he hissed. “So leave the bloody past where it belongs.” And he strode off to the corner of the terrace where steps led to the courtyard and the awaiting coaches.

Charlotte was vibrant and warm and everything he was not. He would only quench her flame with his cold heart.

FANNING HERSELF WITH A HAND, Charlotte watched Marcus stride away, her skin rampantly hot, mouth tender, body pulsing.

What on earth had just happened?

Not that she'd minded in the least but—

A hushed sprinkle of snow drifted before her and she stared up to the heavens, watched the way the scant flakes fell within the realm of the lantern light like diamonds from the darkness.

“He’s right,” she whispered to the night, “the past should stay where it belongs. That cannot change or waver. But the future... That is anyone’s to embrace.”

CHAPTER FOUR

A crisp wind gusted through the cobbled streets of Ambleside, sweeping it clean of the smattering of snow. With his business meeting concluded, Marcus briskly strode past the clattering hosiery mill, which had been rebuilt fifteen years previous with modern machinery. The noise of industry, although profitable, was damn deafening.

His pace held, cane swinging, despite a tip of hat for a lady and a nod for an acquaintance, but his boots did pause by the ancient slate-roofed Bridge House. Once an apple store, the minuscule dwelling was built upon an ageless bridge spanning the Stock Ghyll beck, the waters that were the lifeblood of Ambleside. He recalled how he and Charlotte used to dash through its tiny doors to the far bank.

Now a family lived there.

With a grimace, he hastened on up the gently sloping street. As a rule, his man of affairs would come to the manor, but today Marcus had felt the need to depart the house – to escape the scent of heliotrope, to avoid the holly that twined the bloody banisters and to flee the seasonal piano music that

drifted from the schoolroom he'd yet to relocate to the third floor.

The town bustled like a well-paid housekeeper, the mills and market employing a goodly number of workers, and although he attended St Anne's Church each Sunday, he rarely walked the Ambleside streets anymore or attended the fairs. He'd even missed the Rush Bearing Ceremony in July, when they gathered sedges from the lakeside to replace the old with the new upon the church floor. In fact, it had been at least... hell, six years?

The chill wind fluttered his greatcoat capes while the sky threatened with lucent white cloud. Would it snow further, he wondered? Would he be snowed in and unable to leave for Carlisle?

And if that happened, would he be able to resist kissing Charlotte again?

Damnation, he should never have touched her.

All it had done was stoke the fire within that he'd thought extinguished. Now his imagination was not required to know how she'd feel in his arms, so vibrant and alive, twisting like flame.

But they could not go back.

He was a different man.

Although one who must apologise, for though he'd purged all sentimental emotions long ago, he was still a gentleman. The uncomfortable deed of an apology, however, would be akin to birching the bare soles of his feet.

The Salutation Inn lay ahead, a stagecoach impatiently waiting in the yard for the passengers to embark, but Marcus passed the main door with the old lintel proclaiming the establishment's birth of 1656 and made to collect his horse from the stables.

If he didn't dally, there'd be time for the quarry ledgers as they were merely clawing a twenty per cent profit, and he could...

A shaft of sunlight dared to penetrate the cloud and he twisted, leaning on his cane to stare back down the street.

Struck by further shafts of sunlight were the distant hills beyond – browns and greens flecked with snow, hues blending as though an artist had taken a brush to them.

How he used to adore striding the countryside. To feel the air in his lungs.

Memories stirred and bubbled, Charlotte asking whether he walked the fells anymore, and he wondered... He wondered if an hour away from his ledgers might not...hurt.

So, before cold logic could argue, he swivelled and hastened for the narrow lane that ran along the side of the inn, where one met the Stock Ghyll beck once more as it headed down into town. On the far side, bobbin mills roared their might, harnessing the now faster-flowing water, but as he continued up the lane, little by little the way became...quieter.

Nude winter branches kissed overhead like greeting lovers, the bank rising steeply to his right, and now one could at last hear the rush of water over stone. A few beech trees shone

amongst the bareness, their copper leaves refusing to submit to winter's gelid hand, and a robin, finding refuge amongst them, sung for all he was worth.

The sounds of nature.

Nothing was more...precious.

Clearing his throat at such whimsical waffle, he hastened on, losing the beck for some time as the lane ascended until an earth-tamped path veered left.

Smiling, he continued through woods scented with autumn past – damp leaves and lichen-clad stone. Ancient roots ripped the earth asunder but moss smoothed the wounds, slippery and magnificent in its intricacy.

And ahead, he could hear it.

The first waterfall.

Rains had been abundant this year and a glorious wide cascade gushed over a twenty-foot drop, white streams of beauty tumbling into the stone bed of the beck. He watched for a while, this endless feed of life-giving water, but then turned to head on up the steep path.

For the best was yet to come.

Further up the wooded ravine, the beck divided into three channels and a crash of water attested to the next set of cascades. The way was of beaten earth and sodden leaf, nature at its rawest, and he would have it all to himself. No need to be the duke or the businessman.

The water became louder and–

His boots halted.

“But sometimes it must be exciting being a governess? Do you meet famous people?”

Dinah.

“Well, no, but I once saw Lord Byron as he came to a house party at my employer’s estate.”

Charlotte.

“Ooooh, did he speak to you? Did he fall in love with you?”

A man’s laughter.

Not a clue.

Marcus narrowed his eyes and crept closer.

“I’m afraid not,” replied Charlotte. “In fact, he failed to even glance my way.”

“Oh, dear.” A thespian sigh. “What a shame, Miss Webster. My readership might be disappointed at that, but one should never let facts get in the way of a good story. I can embellish.”

Utilising his cane for balance, Marcus leaned forward to peer around a tree...

A hatless Charlotte and a wrapped-up Dinah were watching the cascade while a gentleman to their side perched on a small stool, easel in front of him.

Marcus hummed and hawed. Should he make himself apparent or just slope off and—

A snap and all three of them turned to gawp.

“Cousin Marcus,” cried his ward. “Is that you behind that tree?”

His cane had shattered under his weight. Purchased in London, the shoddy stick was clearly not up to the rugged Lakes countryside, so he swiftly discarded it, sauntered out and tipped his hat as though dukes fell from trees every day.

“What are you doing here?” his ward asked with a frown.

“I was just...passing.”

Dinah peered this way and that. Charlotte’s eyes crossed in disbelief. And the gentleman rose from his stool.

“Your Grace. A pleasure. We met at the Association of Ambleside Businesses.”

“Ah, yes, Mr William Green, is it not?”

“Indeed.” And they cordially shook hands.

The gentleman was in his fifth decade or thereabouts and Marcus knew he had quite the talent for art, selling his paintings in a gallery within town.

“Look at this, Cousin Marcus. Isn’t his work a marvel?”

He perused the drawing. In just a few strokes of charcoal, the gentleman had caught the might of the waterfall and the bareness of winter. “It is beyond doubt a marvel.”

A ruddy hue gathered in Mr Green’s cheeks. “I am compiling a *Tourist’s New Guide to the English Lake District* and this might be included. There are so many special wonders here on our doorstep, are there not?”

Marcus' eyes had drifted to Charlotte who'd wandered nearer to the waterfall, her gaze fixed on its three channels of seventy-foot meanders down the ravine.

Parting, crashing, meeting and separating.

"Yes, indeed," he murmured.

"I wish I could draw." Another thespian sigh. "Then perhaps I could be a famous artist as well as an author."

Mr Green chortled. "Here, have some fresh paper and my charcoal and I'll show you some basic lines."

"Most kind," said Marcus.

With a wink, Mr Green led Dinah by the hand back to his stool and easel.

Ignoring that cold logic which again nagged him to return home, Marcus strode over to Charlotte and stared to the falls also.

"I haven't been here for years," she said softly, "and so thought we might make it before the snows come."

"I had the same notion," he answered. "Charlotte, I must apolo—"

"No." She twisted, gaze lowered. "I could have pulled away. And it was just a...just a kiss. Don't fret."

Just?

It had given him a restless night of turbulent dreams. So much so, he'd been forced to rise and re-tally some variant sums in his ledgers.

Thoroughly vexed, he leaned close. “Did it not...” Both his breath and the breeze gusted the tendrils that had escaped her chignon. “Disturb you in the least? Did you not lie awake...”

Her lashes raised, eyes as green as the bedewed moss.

“Yes,” she whispered. “But that was because I was trying to think of a second Christmastide event for you to attend and came up with naught.”

Minx.

Though perhaps some small mercy as he could travel to Carlisle before any more of his wits were stolen by Charlotte. Before she roused further passions. Before he told her of London.

“But thankfully,” she continued, “Mr Green reminded me about Fred and Kitty.”

“Who?”

“The baker’s son Fred. And Kitty who works in the town dressmakers.”

Oh hell, please no, not—

“It’s their wedding tomorrow. What better event to celebrate Christmas than—”

“Mawkish sentiment and an excuse for them to demand costly gifts?”

She wagged her finger. “I expect you to be on your best behaviour. They are a fine young couple and destined to be together.”

Marcus briefly closed his eyes in sufferance.

Christmas *and* a wedding.

What could be worse...

CHAPTER FIVE

“Did you enjoy the ceremony?”

Marcus stretched his arms. “Very moving.”

Charlotte disregarded the somewhat sarcastic tone. “I thought so too. Fred and Kitty are so perfect for one another.”

He yawned. “Delightful.”

With a roll of eye, Charlotte clutched her thin scarf close about her neck. The wedding ceremony had taken place in the cold of St Anne’s Church, with many an askew glance that the duke had deigned to attend.

Now they followed the jubilant procession through town. Children dashed, farmers chatted and even the dogs appeared to bark with joy.

A feast was to be provided within The Unicorn inn on North Road, and as the groom’s father was the famed baker of Ambleside’s breads and delicacies, the procession was considerable.

Dinah had been given permission to walk with her new friends which left Charlotte alone with the duke, and although her arm was latched through his, today it was akin to holding

on to a plank of wood. Indeed, as Marcus was also at his most laconic, a plank could be deemed to have more personality.

Maybe she should...prod a little.

“Have you...never been in love? Like they are?”

The plank of wood creaked. “Perchance...once.”

Was that the reason he'd returned from London so cold, closing his emotions to joy?

“A-and? Did it end badly?”

“I found that...” The plank imperceptibly shivered. “I found I was not worthy.”

Charlotte frowned and nigh tripped over her boots. *Not worthy?*

What bird-witted gooscap would find Marcus unworthy?

She was about to interrogate further but The Unicorn came into view. Two lines of guests stretched out from the ribbon-strewn door and waited for the bridal couple who'd been obliged to tarry in the church and sign the registry.

Amongst the babble and excitement, she and Marcus joined a line.

Everyone wore their Sunday best: velvet bonnets and beaver hats, finest woollen skirts and worsted waistcoats, although many a sturdy boot could be spied beneath an elegant petticoat trim as the roads were icy.

The duke's attire was pristine, of course. Top boots were shined to a mirror, fawn buckskins held not a crease, and his cravat was white as frost.

Cheers and applause erupted as the happy couple at last arrived on a hay cart. Heather and laurel were tied to the wooden slats and even the stout workhorse had green ribbons twined in his mane.

The groom with his boyish looks descended, cheeks ruddy as he held forth slender arms for his bride.

With brown pretty curls and bright-blue eyes, Kitty tumbled into them with a laugh and a kiss.

Whoops abounded, along with some rather ribald suggestions from the farmhands, so the bride drew away with a blush, keeping a death grip upon her new husband's hand.

One could tell her dress and coat were patched but the fresh ribbons that curled her hair, the white lace at her cuffs and the sheer jubilation that shone in her eyes meant it mattered not a jot.

The morn sky was a hoary grey but all were in high spirits as the wedded couple embarked down the corridor of well-wishers to arrive at the decorated door, applause heralding their entrance to the inn. Guests followed suit, a lengthy line of stamping feet and hungry mouths.

"I should not be here," growled the duke. The plank of wood was no longer quite such a plank but more akin to a wind-blown oak as he leaned near. "This is for the townsfolk."

"There are other gentry here," assured Charlotte, "and I told the townspeople to ignore you. We are merely here to bear witness to their happiness."

Removing his hat, he scowled but dipped his head to pass beneath the inn's lintel before a barmaid showed them to one of the best-laid tables.

"This is not ignoring me," he grouched, as although the wedded couple and family were seated at tables, most of the townsfolk had to make do and stand.

More guests piled in and soon it was chock-full: lads sitting on the stairs, Dinah and her friends giggling in the corner, the handful of local gentry discussing horseflesh at the bar.

This inn was said to be the oldest in town, and a few lucky horseshoes and acorns had been added to the usual dried hops hanging from the low beams.

At the clang of a pan lid by the beaming but exhausted-looking landlady, a host of kitchen lads brought forth the food: game pies with perfect curled crusts; a roast of the local Herdwick Hogget sheep – somewhere between tender lamb and strong-flavoured mutton; a vast curled sausage spiced with pepper and nutmeg; Windermere char fish; thin oat clap-breads; and roasted chestnuts.

A sizeable game pie was placed upon their table, along with roast potatoes and bread sauce.

Charlotte nigh slavered at the sight but felt a nudge to her side.

"The guests are placing coin into a pot on the newly-weds' table. What's that about?"

She frowned. “As in the old Lakes tradition, the couple have asked for money not presents.”

“Hah,” the plank muttered. “And you claimed that glossy guineas mattered not.”

“Don’t be preposterous, Marcus. I meant they should not be...not be what defines us.”

“Well, I say it’s not right of them to take money from relatives and townsfolk and then spend it on hell knows what. Even poor Blind Will has put coin in.”

Charlotte blinked.

Surely he knew?

MARCUS HELPED himself to the baker’s game pie that had never been matched by his London chef, despite the additions of *mangetout* and *herbes de Provence*.

Maybe those additions were where he was going awry.

“Your Grace! What a kindly and pleasant deed to grace us with your graceful presence, Your Grace.”

Rising to his boots, Marcus shook the baker’s hand with fervour. “No need for that, Luke. I filched enough of your pies as a cub to rid us of formality.”

“Aye, that you did. I remembered game was your favourite, so made sure Nussy brought the largest one over.”

It was so kind and Marcus felt an absolute curmudgeon that he’d not visited townspeople and tenants for some time, leaving it all to his steward.

He picked up his glass of ale and raised it forth. “I toast your son and his beautiful wife. To many, many years of happiness.”

The baker’s eyes dropped, skittered to Charlotte. “Aye, well, Your Grace. We can only hope. There but for the grace of God, eh...Your Grace?”

Blinking at all those graces and feeling as though he was missing something important, he nodded. “Just so.”

As the rotund baker ambled to the next table, Marcus sat and gripped Charlotte’s wrist before it could fork another roast potato into her mouth.

“What are you not telling me?”

“I thought you knew...” She sighed. “You used to be so perceptive, Marcus. Look around. What do you see?”

He perused the scene.

Lads fought over bowls of pork crackling; men propped up the bar and discussed the harvest – it’d been abysmal; women of the town crowded the fireplace, cradling babes; and a hound chomped crusts that a tot was feeding it under a chair.

His eyes shifted to the newly-weds’ table where various children squabbled, an uncle was two sheets to the wind and the bridesmaid was flashing her ankles at the best man.

All in all, a normal wedding.

Then he looked anew.

His gaze fixed on the bride who refused to release her husband’s hand. Then Luke the baker whose mournful eyes

flitted back and forth to the couple. The mother of the bride's lips smiled yet held a tremble...

"It ought to be a scene of elation," he said quietly. "The groom's cheeks are glowing more than the bonnie bride's but...there's something not quite right. A hint of melancholy."

"Indeed, Marcus. But that's not a glow," she murmured. "Fred has a lung illness. The doctor says he must leave this damp Lakes climate or he won't live to see next Christmas. The townsfolk are giving money to pay for their travel and board further south. Even then, it might not be enough."

Marcus felt as though he'd been punched in the gut.

Now he could sense it. See it. The guests laughed and gambolled but with the knowledge that happiness could be too fleet.

"Why didn't you tell me? This did seem an odd month for a wedding."

"I thought you knew up until you grumped of the money. Fred is a tenant of yours."

"I don't interfere in their private matters," he bit out. "And how can they be so damn cheerful? Why is Kitty marrying him? She could be a widow in six months, left with child."

Charlotte stared at him, and he could not look away from the hurt in her green eyes.

"She loves him, Marcus. If Kitty has but a few months with him, then I believe she considers it worth the pain. *He* is worth the pain. And besides, did not the bard say, 'What is love? 'Tis not hereafter: Present mirth hath present laughter.'"

With mind awhirl, Marcus stared to his plate, the table stuffed with food, a cost that could contribute towards their travel, and he couldn't consume a damn morsel.

"I need... I need some air." He rose and with a curt bow, blundered through the throng and escaped out the side door.

There, he leaned back against an outer stable wall, shoving hands through his hair.

What the hell was Charlotte doing to him?

This was why he couldn't involve himself in the lives of the townsfolk. It affected him overmuch and a detachment was necessary in order to run a profitable estate for everyone's benefit.

"No! He's no skinflint," a girl shouted from within the stable courtyard.

"Is so," a lad retorted. "The steward says he wants Widow Brockbank out her house within a month. Not her fault her eldest broke his leg with that old tiller."

"I'm sure he doesn't know that. He's not a skinflint, just... just careful."

Dear heaven, and Marcus closed his eyes as his ward defended him as best she could.

Why did she bother?

He was the curmudgeon who was going to leave Dinah alone for Christmas. Who'd asked his secretary to choose presents for her birthday.

"Pah," said the lad. "He's a tightfisted—"

“My father said he was the kindest boy at school. One who fought the bully-ruffians and...and—”

“Tightfist. Penny-pincher. Muckworm,” jeered the lad before...

A splash and...

“Oy, yer little bitch, I’m gonna—”

Marcus tore around the corner and hauled the lad from the horse trough before he could lay one finger on Dinah.

“Away with you,” he hissed. “Never use such language with ladies.”

The young lad scowled but Marcus released him and he scarpered.

Dropping one knee to the muddy courtyard in front of Dinah, Marcus patted her ruffled curls and flushed cheeks. “Are you well? Did he touch you?”

“No, Cousin Marcus. I-I didn’t mean to push him in the trough.”

He crushed her into a hug. “I’m not worth it, Dinah,” he whispered into her hair.

“But...but...” She patted his shoulder. “Papa said you were good and kind, and Papa was always right. But he’s not here anymore so you need someone else to stand up for you.”

Damnation, he felt tears burn at the back of his eyes. “You mustn’t...” He cleared his throat. “I’m not worthy of...”

“To us you are, Marcus,” a soft voice said from behind. “Come, the both of you, before we miss the special mince pies

Luke has baked.” They both twisted to Charlotte who smiled. “Or miss the jug-bitten uncle who’s about to make a speech. Or miss the search for the bridesmaid who has disappeared... as has the best man. Or miss Fred and Kitty who are to dance their first jig as a wedded couple.”

Marcus got to his feet, breeches besmirched, boots likewise, cravat skew-whiff and hair doubtless at all angles.

But he held out a hand to Dinah. “Shall we, my lady?”

She giggled and lifted her skirt hem, even though it was soiled and sodden, to give a dainty curtsy. Then she reached out to clutch his hand.

Marcus turned and thrust forth his other hand, bare and somewhat soiled.

Charlotte clasped it and his fingers curled around hers.

“Let us ‘do nothing but eat and make good cheer,’” he said with a smile. “For time is precious and fleet.”

And Marcus led them both from the cold and into the welcoming warmth of the inn.

CHAPTER
SIX

“Uncle Marmaduke?”

“Yes, Charlotte?”

“Why are you walking in the duke’s rose garden?” With one hand, she wrenched her cloak tight against the teeth of bitter cold that sought to nip her. With the other, she lifted her lantern. “It’s almost midnight.”

Wearing a green woollen banyan, Marmaduke frowned, twisting his beard to a spiral. “I must find Martha. Before it snows.”

In sadness, Charlotte smiled and brought a hand to his arm. “I do not believe she is here, Uncle.”

A dejected sigh flowed from him. “I am beginning to fear the same. Perhaps...perhaps she is no more.”

“Perhaps so.” She squeezed his arm. “Shall we go home now?”

Marmaduke shivered. “’Tis rather nippy, isn’t it? Colder than the Himalayas, I’d say. And darker.” He twisted and held her freezing cheek. “You are the best sister I have, Mary.”

“Mary is your only sister.”

“Isn’t she just.” He chuckled to himself. “Oh, look. Who’s that? And what’s she doing out in this frosty weather, eh? She’ll catch her death.”

Wrapped up in a housecoat, two cloaks and a scarf, Hannah Munro came dashing into the rose garden, lantern swinging. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Miss Webster. He must have left through the kitchen. Some of the door frame has rotted clean away.”

Marmaduke tutted.

Charlotte closed her eyes. “It’s my fault, Hannah. I’ll...I’ll try to fix it in the New Year.”

“Don’t yer fret, miss. I’ll have one of my lads nail some wood over it. They’re home for Christmas.”

“Thank you, Hannah, you’re a blessing. I’ll walk you back and—”

“No need,” came a low rumble from the darkness. “I’ve instructed the stablemen to ready a carriage to take Mr Wainwright and Mrs Munro home.”

Charlotte swallowed. *Oh no.*

“Your Grace!” gushed Hannah. “Thank you, but you mustn’t put your stablemen out this late. ’Tis not far if we nip through the hedge and we’ve done it a few times now.”

Charlotte winced while the duke frowned.

Uncle Marmaduke merely raised a bushy white brow. “I remember you,” he said to the duke. “Such a thoughtful lad. Nice to see you haven’t changed.”

The thoughtful lad nodded. “Charlotte, go to my study as the fire there is still lit. The terrace doors are unlocked. Mr Wainwright, Mrs Munro, it’s no bother at all and a carriage will be warmer. If I may escort you to the stables? This way.”

Hannah beamed while Marmaduke followed along, enquiring if the duke had seen Martha anywhere about the place.

Charlotte loitered, watching their lantern disappear into the dark before with a weary trudge, she made for the terrace. A gust of wind blew, chill and bitter, and she paused to stare into the foreboding night sky that brooded with the scent of snow.

What was she to do about Uncle?

Some quarter of an hour ago, she’d been lying in bed upstairs unable to sleep, when she’d heard footfall on the gravel of the duke’s garden outside.

A thief? A badger?

She’d crept to the window, drawn back the shutter, and in the weak moonlight that seeped through the clouds, she’d spied her uncle, looking somewhat like St Nicholas on his Christmas rounds.

Throwing on her woollen cloak, she’d prayed the duke was safely tucked up in bed as she still worried he may use Uncle’s trespass in his gardens to tell her she should sell the house and use the money for his care at some asylum.

Or tell her the obvious: that her beloved home was crumbling away.

Once it had been a beautiful house, when Mother had been alive, but she'd died when Charlotte had reached twelve years and her father had increasingly stayed in London – drinking and gambling. Years' worth of repairs had not been made and now Charlotte couldn't afford any either.

The stairs had woodworm, the chimney breasts percolated smoke and the roof joists were rotten. Her governess pay was not enough for its upkeep. Yet it was her home – her constant haven and future security. And now Marmaduke's place of refuge too.

She stared to the cold night sky, watching her breath mist and vanish before wiping away a foolish tear. She never cried – what was the point?

“Charlotte? What the hell are you doing?”

Twisting, she was caught up in a black cloak, warm and scented with leather and Marcus. “I...”

“You're freezing.”

She watched him reach for her hands but could hardly feel them. “I-I...” Her teeth chattered.

“Damn it, why are you still out here?” And she was hastened to the terrace door, the handle was twisted and she was propelled none too gently inside.

A fire crackled in the study hearth while a half glass of amber liquor sat on the desk aside reams of papers and documents.

Cosy warmth, shelter and protection.

The terrace door was bolted, a hefty curtain drawn across, a leather-upholstered chair lifted with little effort and placed beside another by the fire. She was thrust into it before he shook off his greatcoat and a glass of similar amber liquor appeared in her hand.

“Drink.”

Charlotte obeyed. Well, sipped at least. The glass clattered on her teeth and the liquor seared her throat.

“I-I’m fine. I was just wool-gathering.”

“You were crying.”

One tear. That’s all it had been, hadn’t it?

“The c-cold made my eyes water,” she grouched, opening a palm to the flames.

He grunted and kneeled before her, flipping her hem upwards.

“What are you doing?” she nigh shrieked.

“Your feet are wet.”

In truth, she could not feel them to know they were wet.

“A governess should never reveal her ankles.”

“Charlotte, I have seen them before. I used to deliberately lose our wager of running to the tinker’s cart so I could lag behind and watch you hoick your petticoats.”

“How contemptible,” she said, wagging her toes as he eased off her frost-sodden boots.

“I know. I felt all sorts of lecherous fiend but your ankles caused me odd sensations at that stage of boyhood.”

“Harrumph. And I suppose you moved on from ankles when you went to London.”

He glanced up, scowled. Then stood.

Oh, why had she said that?

Her glass was refilled before he turned to loiter in profile to her, staring into the flames.

His throat was bare of cravat, shirt loose and waistcoat unfastened, and yet he seemed more aristocratic than ever.

Not the eager boy she'd known but a formidable man of command and strength.

“Thank you for offering the carriage, Marcus.”

“You need a footman at your house.”

She stayed silent.

“And the doors fixed. It's not safe. If you sold me the place—”

“It's my home,” she railed. “And that of Marmaduke. Where would he go? I suppose you'd send him to some madhouse.”

He spun. “But if you sold that colossal old place, you could buy something smaller. In the town, perhaps? With neighbours to help you. My intention is to assist you when I offer to buy your house.”

Oh.

She closed her eyes. “I suppose...perhaps, you’re right.” She opened them and sipped the brandy. “It’s just... It’s my home too. So many memories are there.”

“Memories are not in the fabric of a house, Charlotte. They are held within yourself, never to be forgotten. Even ones we’d rather forget thrust their way to the damn surface to catch us unawares.”

Her lips curved to a smile. “Such whimsy sounds like the old Marcus.”

“No.” He grimaced. “He is no more.”

“What... What happened to him?”

The fire spat, his shirt rustled, but he made no reply.

“When you came back from London, Marcus, you...you’d changed. I... It was as though we were all too lowly for you. Country bumpkins that—”

“Leave it be, Charlotte,” he growled. “Leave it in the past.”

“But...” The brandy had compelled a boldness and she stood, her thin cloak and his woollen one tumbling to the leather chair. “You left Ambleside as a...a carefree, l-lovable young man and returned a haughty duke who seemed to think only of money.”

He twisted, nostrils flaring as he took in her déshabillé of solely a night-rail. “I do not wish to discuss it.”

“But—”

“Not now, Charlotte. You wouldn’t understand.”

“I thought you hated me and—”

“Bloody Hades, Charlotte, it wasn’t you I hated but myself!” He pinched his forehead. “Content now?”

“I don’t understand.” She reached for his sleeve. “Why would you—”

“Because I lost it all!” he thundered, grabbing hold of her upper arms, bringing her so close to him – warm skin and leather.

“Lost...” She frowned. “What do you mean?”

Shaking his head, he abruptly released her to pace the rug, muttering, fingers thrusting through his hair. Then he paused, placed hands to hips. “Oh, why not? Why the bloody hell not?” And he swivelled, eyes fierce.

Charlotte lowered herself into the chair.

“When I went to London, I was so cocksure of my future. Mother wanted me to go, to take my place in society, but I was keen also to gain worldly experience, have a lark, attend the theatre, balls and have a bushel of friends. I would drink and carouse while young.” He scowled. “Then, I told myself, after a year or so when you were old enough, I would return and whisk you off your slippers. We’d...”

He inhaled sharply.

As did she.

For so many years, she’d thought that emotion in his eyes at the Christmas Ball had been youthful folly. “Why didn’t you?” she whispered.

His lips twisted to bitter.

“Because it was *me* who’d been the country bumpkin in London, Charlotte. Green as a sapling. I had no elder to guide me and I was...” He snorted. “I was fleeced at every turn. Plucked and hustled. My new exciting crowd of friends took me to gaming dens and we’d wager on the most preposterous contests. At first, it was just a bit of fun. I was rich and the dukedom had enough money. I told myself it was only a few quid.” He quaffed his brandy in one gulp. “But those cardsharps can smell a gullible young fool of a newcomer at thirty paces. They beguiled me. Befriended me. Duped me. I’d no idea. And it spiralled. I lost guineas and guineas. I got... scared. So, I gambled more to recoup the losses. Except one never does, you know. I started to offer my untailed lands and deeds to businesses. I was likely hoodwinked lock, stock and barrel. And I...I bankrupted the estate.”

Charlotte closed her eyes. “Oh, Marcus, why did you not tell us?”

“Why?” he almost yelled. “I’d returned to hell. Mother was ill, your father had died, and I so wanted to help you all. Damn, how I wanted to help. But there was no money, nothing, and I was still drowning in debt and creditors. I was...”

“If you’d told us...”

“No.” His voice was hoarse. “I was shamed. A disgrace to you. I could not bear to look at all the people here who relied upon me, whom I’d betrayed. Tenants and townsfolk. I’d nigh thrown away their future. And then there was you, my dear

Charlotte, who in my absence had been left destitute through no fault of your own, while I..." He fisted his chest. "I had thrown away any future we might have had on the turn of cards and roll of dice." His breath heaved. "I could not look you in the eye because... Because there was worse..."

Charlotte hugged arms around herself, eyes moist.

"Because when I was desperate," he continued in a whisper, "and full of cheap liquor, when I was so afraid and drowning, I..." He turned to the fire and she strained to listen. "At a card game of deep play, I... I cheated."

"Cheated?" She'd never known anyone as honourable as Marcus.

"You recall our venerable butler who taught us some tricks?"

"Y-yes. Old Lanton?"

"I-I thought if I could just...gain some back, I could make a new start. So, I... I cheated."

Charlotte swiped away a tear. She knew the gentleman's code. Beat your wife and the *Ton* shrugged but if one was labelled a cheat... You and your family would be ostracised from society forever.

Another tear fell. Because for Marcus to do such a thing was so contrary to his nature, it meant he had been in an exceedingly desolate place.

With no other hope.

"And?"

“Old Lanton’s tricks were for children. I was caught.”

“Oh, Marcus.”

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the mantle. “The...the man I cheated... I shall forever see that moment in my mind’s eye. He looked at me with such... distaste. And then he leaned forward and slapped my cheek with his glove, demanding recompense, and no apology I could stutter out was enough, so...”

“No, Marcus, not...” She rammed a fist to her mouth.

“So, two days later,” he rasped, “at a dawn full of drizzle and mist, I found myself in Saint James’ Park, readying to face a duel of honour with Lord Woodford, a man twice my age. All my so-called friends had deserted me, of course, and only Thomas stood at my side.” Marcus twisted, his face stark with pain. “My hand was shaking so badly I could hardly pull the pistol from the box. I was sick to the stomach. I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to kill.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Soldiers say that when you think your life is to end, you see past memories flash before your eyes, but that wasn’t so with me.” He shook his head and stared to her. “I saw the future I’d thrown away. I saw a prosperous estate. Our Christmas Ball. My mother smiling. I saw you.”

Charlotte let the tears flow. Could picture it all. Marcus scared and alone in a fog-cloaked field, a pistol in his young trembling hand. Back-to-back with his opponent. Ready to walk, turn and shoot.

Or...

“Did...did you...”

“I stumbled those twenty paces whilst with each step I vowed... I vowed that if I lived, then I would never cease until I had recouped all the monies. I vowed to work till I dropped.” Marcus lowered himself into the chair beside her. “But I knew I could not do that with a man’s death scarring my soul. So, I turned, straightened my trembling arm. And I...I shot in the air.” His lungs heaved. “Then I waited. I waited for death. Or another chance at life. I waited for pain. I saw Lord Woodford’s pistol rise. Aim.”

Charlotte held her breath.

“And he too shot in the air.”

She let it flow.

“I fell to my knees as Thomas rushed to me. And I promised there and then on my father’s grave to fulfil my vow.” He flung his head back in the chair. “Hell, Lord Woodford could see the state of us both, dragged us to his carriage, and I found myself blurting all that had happened to me. He listened, told me he admired my honour during the duel and so...so he...lent me money, with conditions, a lot of conditions. But he aided me in brokering plans of payment with the creditors, guided me on business and gave me a chance, took me under his wing and I swore to him... I swore I would pay him back. Every single penny.”

Charlotte struggled with emotions so fierce and overwhelming. “Did-did your mother know of...”

He slammed his eyes shut. “I never told her of the duel. I...couldn’t, but I had to tell her of the monies lost as we needed to economise. Hell, the look in her eyes, Charlotte. She was so disappointed in me. You could see it.” He pinched his brow. “I begged her forgiveness.”

“And she did, no?”

“I think so,” he whispered. “You remember Mother, a kind word for everyone, and she told me she’d no doubt I’d regain it. That it was only money.”

“And you did regain it. So she must have seen—”

“No, Charlotte.” He grimaced. “The losses I made could not be recouped in those years alone. She died while I was still struggling, interest still mounting.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I know I project an aura of wealth and attend all the right clubs in order to broker deals as money begets money, but the truth of the matter is that although the estate is just about running in credit, I still have one more year of debts to pay. It’s not over. Even now.”

Lines of fatigue furrowed his brow, eyes glazed in pain as though the past was here and now.

Charlotte swiped at her wet cheeks. How wrong she had been. And she kneeled on the rug aside his chair, to clutch his hand.

She brought his knuckles to her lips.

What could she say?

“It sounds to me,” she said at last, “that throughout your despair, those who truly knew you had faith in you to rebuild

what was lost. Your mother, Thomas, Lord Woodford. They saw the good in you that I see. The kind man who only wants to ensure the estate's future. The honour during the duel that saved your life. They all forgave you. But...it seems to me that you have not forgiven yourself, Marcus. The young man who made a mistake, like we all do. I understand—”

“Can you?” His eyes sought hers. “I threw away our future. I should have been able to help you when your father died. Instead you had to leave your home, become a governess and...”

“I have managed, Marcus. I... It has not always been easy but I have made a life for myself. And I now understand what drives you and your need for more but... Do not forget who and what you work so hard for – Dinah and the tenants. The memory of your mother and Thomas. Do not lose sight of that honourable and kind man who we are all...all so fond of.”

He rubbed his stubbled cheek. “I’m not sure he’s inside me anymore.”

“Oh, he is. I have seen him.” She smiled. “I’ve seen him being kind to my uncle. I’ve seen him care for Dinah.”

I’ve felt it when he kissed me.

“And,” she continued, “I waivered my proposal.”

His head shot up. “What?”

“It was unfair of me to suggest it. If you need to go to Carlisle for the prosperity of the estate, then...you must go. I shall be governess here unpaid until a school is found for Dinah.”

“Charlotte... No...” He clutched her arm. “You need the money. And what about your last Christmastide event?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“I wish to attend it,” he said firmly. “And you will be paid no matter what. After all, we...we are friends, are we not? Always have been.”

Charlotte forced a smile. “Of course. And...very well. Tomorrow night then.”

“Tomorrow night.”

So with a nod, she stood and slipped from the study before she did something foolish.

Like tell him she loved him. That she’d always loved him.

That she always would.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beak.

Desolate.

A shadowed spectre seemed to hover over the manor house as dusk fell, clouds gathering apace, the air harsh with cold.

Marcus frowned from the carriage window before twisting to Charlotte. “Why the devil are we at old Grimslee’s place?”

“You wished to attend my third event, so this is it.” Her eyes shone bright in the coach’s lantern light. “The Duke of Shawdale, that’s you, and a guest, that’s me, have been invited to dinner. With a few other neighbours.”

“He sends a yearly Christmas invitation which I always refuse. The wine is watered down and the meat unidentifiable – likely the corpses of his servants.”

Charlotte smirked. “Too late to be lily-livered now. You agreed.”

With a growl, Marcus threw himself into the squabs. “If you’re not careful and I leave here famished, I’ll have my governess for dinner.”

Silence fell as Marcus ruminated on nibbling Charlotte's nape before the carriage came to an abrupt halt.

He peered through the window once more. The manor was straight out of some Radcliffe novel – not that he'd read them, of course. Nude twisted creeper stems smothered the stonework and the steps looked mossy and dank.

“Did you know,” Charlotte said whilst gathering her cloak about her russet dress, “that Grimslee is Lord Crockett's second cousin? The man you are to deal with regarding canals.”

“I did. But then everyone seems to be related somehow in this area.”

The coach door opened and a meagre globe of light shone forth.

“Welcome,” declared a rasp, “to Roachford Manor. The master is awaiting you in the parlour.”

They followed the skeletal butler up the steps, through the front door and down a hallway, dingy as Hades and reeking of mould.

Marcus cast a glance to Charlotte, his emotions a shimmering cascade.

After raking up the past last night, he'd expected to sleep poorly as nightmares still tormented him on occasion – of himself as a callow youth, scared, trembling and facing death.

Yet instead, he'd dreamed of Charlotte, of chasing her over fells trimmed with snow. She'd hoicked her petticoats, flashing her ankles with a laugh, and he'd felt...young again.

Joyful.

Last night, she'd listened. Understood why he'd become the man he was. But he was aware she would need time to assimilate his revelations. In the cold light of day, she might well feel resentment towards him for ruining everything.

The funereal-black parlour door was opened and they paused on the threshold.

In utter silence stood five people, as though attending a wake and not a Christmas dinner – the dour host, his dour wife, the vicar who hoped to save Grimslee's eternal soul, Sir Edward Spratt who would attend a sacrifice if there were free victuals, and a young Mr Slater who was new to the Lake District having inherited a goodly sum; he looked petrified.

“Shawdale,” crooned Lord Grimslee, gliding forward, a gaunt hand appearing from his black sleeve. “So pleased you could attend this year. And I hear you are to do business with my cousin Crockett.” His lips formed a line – possibly a smile? “Welcome to the family.” A hacking laugh sprung forth.

It gave Marcus the shivers.

“Grimslee. A...pleasure to be here. And nothing is signed yet. May I introduce my guest, Miss Webster?”

The lord gave a shallow bow and then raised an eyeglass. “Ah, John Webster's chit. A governess now, I hear?” His magnified eye lingered on her décolletage. “Lucky you, Shawdale, eh?”

Marcus gritted his teeth and stepped forward to–

“No longer a chit, my lord,” replied Charlotte with a pull on Marcus’ coat-tails. “And yes, I am a governess.”

“The best,” interrupted the vicar, rubbing his hands together for warmth. “Miss Webster was governess to my brother’s daughter in Keswick for a year and wrought miracles.”

Charlotte curtsayed with a broad grin. “How pleasant to see you again, Vicar. And Rosie is an adorable girl, just...”

“Has feathers in her head, you can say it, Miss Webster. We all adore Rosie but she just gets in such a fluster.”

“I fear she is quite shy, Vicar, and reacts as such when people focus on her. We sought ways for her to feel calm in company.”

“Pah!” croaked Grimslee. “Sounds like she needs a sound beating and a school for correction.”

The young Mr Slater nervously chuckled. “Oh, goodness, you shouldn’t joke, Lord Grim...” No one else joined in and he cleared his throat. “It wasn’t a joke?”

“No,” said Grimslee, pitch-black eyes narrowing. “I never joke.”

Marcus cleared his throat. He’d once thought nothing could be worse than that carriage journey home after London.

“Your ward?” Grimslee muttered. “Have you a suitor in mind?”

He frowned. “She’s fourteen.”

“Marry her off as soon as you can. My cousin Lord Harris is hunting a wife.”

“He’s in his sixties. And has gout.”

“Your point? Our daughter married Blakley. Fifty-eight years to his name but with two hundred acres to the west and robust loins. Thought you were seeking to broaden your land?”

Marcus thought of Dinah’s youth and vibrancy sold off for a couple of fields. “My ward will marry whom she chooses.”

Grimslee’s brow wrinkled. “Crockett must be mistaken about you.”

Silence fell, and Marcus cast a glance at Charlotte who was peering to the cracked ceiling architrave. Her expression appeared innocent enough...until he noticed her lips trembling.

Mercifully, the creaking butler announced the commencement of dinner and they all filed in as if for the reading of a will.

A nudge in his side.

“This could have been you.” Charlotte winked. “In a few years.”

His lip quirked. “I’d never water down my wine.”

Although truth be told, he did have to admit a certain unease.

Grimslee’s tenant houses were in a state of disrepair and he evicted non-payers within a fortnight. Known to be a miser, no

one would work for him except the desperate and everyone loathed him.

Marcus had never been that bad, surely?

Grimacing, he recalled Widow Brockbank whom he'd instructed to vacate her tenant cottage within a month.

They all sat upon non-cushioned chairs, Charlotte opposite, while a soup was brought forth. White and thin, it had floating...

“Well,” cried the young Mr Slater, joyfully raising his glass. “Here’s to Christmas. I’m so glad to attend an event where I can become better acquainted with my new neighbours. Anyone fond of fishing?”

Lord Grimslee’s lip rippled. “This isn’t about Christmas,” he hissed. “Or being neighbourly. And certainly not fishing. It’s about business. Shawdale is undoubtedly here to discuss the deal with my cousin. The vicar wishes a contribution to church roof repairs – no, by the way. And you are here because you have a five thousand a year income and want to know where to invest it.”

“Actually,” Marcus found himself saying with glass in hand, “I agree with you, Mr Slater. Here’s to meeting new neighbours. Welcome to the Lakes. I hope you may call upon me soon? We could talk of investment, if you wish?”

“Oh, oh, yes.”

“Good. And... I used to enjoy fishing. Haven’t been in years but I’m sure all the equipment is somewhere. We could try the Rothay River.”

“I would enjoy that.” Mr Slater smiled. “And this inheritance is all rather...daunting, to tell you the truth.”

“I also inherited when young and made more than a few mistakes...” He glanced up to Charlotte’s soft smile. Mr Slater reminded him of himself all those years ago – young and trusting – and Grimslee would doubtless hoodwink the chap into investing too deeply.

Charlotte’s foot reached out to his under the table. He was sure she meant it as a simple gesture of understanding but it caused every muscle to tighten in unrelenting desire and want.

“And the church roof doesn’t need repairs,” stated the vicar. “Our congregation raised enough last year.”

“And I’m not here for business,” mumbled Sir Edward Spratt, peering at his empty bowl. “Just the food... Although, is this wine watered down, Grimslee? Hey, butler fellow, hie to my coach, will you, and you’ll find six bottles of Chablis in the box seat.” He pursed his mouth. “I never travel unprepared.”

Charlotte giggled, the vicar grinned and Mr Slater’s young lips wobbled.

Grimslee glowered.

Second course arrived.

Marcus watched as Charlotte sliced into the scraggy meat with gusto, savoured the meagre three carrots as though they were sugared bonbons and sipped Sir Edward Spratt’s wine with a pleasurable sigh.

The candlelight made her skin glow, her hair a soft auburn with strands of fire, and young Slater looked enamoured.

Who could blame him?

She lit any room she stepped into with her joyful nature. She laughed even when matters were dire, kept that smile, that warm flame lit within.

And he envied it.

No longer was he the carefree boy.

The one Charlotte had known and been fond of.

He knew he was a curmudgeon on occasion, dare he say dull with his ledgers. But he also knew he would have to continue to work all hours for the sake of everyone. Had learned the hard way that the estate did not run itself.

He'd changed.

Overmuch.

Her red-tipped lashes flitted up, eyes catching his.

Every muscle tightened once more.

But Marcus forced his own eyes away...



“WELL, that wasn’t quite so bad as I’d feared.” Charlotte tugged her cloak close.

“No.”

“In fact, one could almost call it joyful.”

“Yes.”

“Mr Slater is an asset to the town.”

“Indubitably.”

Oh, good grief.

During dinner, Marcus had been most talkative with the guests, but for some reason, a gloom had descended upon him. After their farewells had been bid and they'd clambered into the carriage, he'd proceeded to huddle in the corner, tip his hat south and pretend to sleep.

Doubtless he was still haunted by his past.

Perhaps the young Mr Slater had reminded Marcus of himself as a trusting young man? Or...or had Grimslee bestowed a vision of where a focus on guineas alone could lead? She had to confess that had been her original intention but now it pained her.

A sigh escaped her, for all she wished was for Marcus to be content. To forgive himself for his youthful folly and start to...live life again.

The carriage rumbled on through the wrought-iron gates of the Shawdale estate but as it did so, she snatched his walking cane from the seat and clattered the ceiling. “Stop, please, George. We'll walk from here.”

“It's freezing, Charlotte,” the duke muttered beneath his hat. “Don't be absurd.”

“Stay, if you wish, but I want to walk and enjoy the night. Like we used to.” So after unhooking the lantern from the

corner, she opened the door and descended the icy steps that George had unfastened.

It *was* freezing, but also still and beautiful. She startled but then smiled as an owl flew from a nearby tree, no doubt taking an aversion to her light.

“Drive on, George,” she heard Marcus command but she did not turn.

The door slammed and she watched the carriage trundle on past her towards the house.

How foolish to hope Marcus would—

“Come on then,” a rumble of a voice grouched, “before I freeze my ballocks off.” Boots tramped to her side. “Hand me the lantern and you’d best hold on to me or you’ll go ars— er... skirts over.”

With a small smile, she hooked an arm through his and glanced up to him, yet his expression was hidden in the weak light.

“Thank you, Marcus.”

For a while, they walked the path to the house without words, and she revelled in the deep quiet that enveloped them. No other mammals scurried and ’twas as if they were the sole two people alive. Their breaths misted and swirled as Jack Frost silently went about his nightly business, anointing the land with his slumbrous but beautiful rime.

The mausoleum of the Shawdale lineage lay just beyond the trees but she sensed no restless spectral presence. Indeed,

his mother and all those interred there would rest soundly knowing the estate was in Marcus' safe hands.

“Remember when we buried the stable dog in the mausoleum?”

A grunt.

“You cried.”

“I did not.”

She smiled. “I knew not how to cheer you. You were morose for days.”

“I adored that dog. And you were there at my side. Always there for me. That was all I needed. But...”

“Hmm?”

“How do you stay so...cheerful, Charlotte?” He paused. “You never seem afeared by anything.”

She blinked.

Was he cracked in the head?

“I...I am afeared more times than I can say, Marcus. Being a governess is not easy. Interviews still scare me. And first days with new pupils. Sitting at dinner tables where I know no one, am not one of them. Overhearing a scathing aside. And one girl bit me.” She shivered. “But I will not be cowed because I've also had generous kind employers and adorable pupils whom I've not wanted to leave. It is all...part of life, the good and the bad. But I prefer to hold on to just the good, 'tis all.”

A breath gusted white. “You are a better person than me, Charlotte.”

Yes, he was cracked in the head.

“Marcus, I have no doubt whatsoever that you will pay off your last debts, honouring the memory of your mother, and go on to bring the estate to full prosperity. Mr Slater wants your advice. Dinah adores you. Don’t be a numbskull.”

They came to the steps of the house and he paused to stare down at her.

His head stooped.

Charlotte stilled.

Dared not move.

Would he—

Cold lips brushed her cheek, soft but fleet.

“Thank you, Charlotte.” He smiled but she sensed it held a sadness. “I will likely still visit Carlisle on Christmas Eve.”

She glanced up as something soft and crystalline drifted, another feathered her cheek in a cold caress.

Snow.

“I understand.”

He drew back, countenance shadowed. “We must not tarry. The weather is worsening.”

Charlotte nodded, clutched his arm and ascended the steps.

Marcus considered her perennially cheerful and full of laughter yet...

She'd not told him of the nights she'd cried for him when he'd returned from London, her girlish yearning for the boy he'd been and her own shattered heart.

And she'd not tell him of her love now.

For the man he was today with his strength in adversity and his wry humour, for his protectiveness of Dinah and his unwavering honour.

Marcus was a peer of the realm with all the responsibilities it brought. He could choose any debutante he wished as his duchess. One with a dowry that would ensure the future prosperity of the estate and all those who depended upon it. Depended upon him.

She was just a governess.

Their time had passed. He considered her a friend.

The butler opened the door but once inside, she did not linger and with a nod of goodnight hastened up the staircase.

While outside, the owl screeched low and alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'T was the day before Christmas Eve and Marcus had packed the majority of his bags.

He was leaving on the morrow.

No doubt at all.

Best for all concerned.

The snow last night had been considerable but nothing a ducal carriage couldn't overcome, and the townsmen were even now clearing the roads for the mail stagecoach as they did every year. Life and business would not cease for either snow or Christmas.

Stood before his study desk, he gathered documents together but today couldn't seem to garner any enthusiasm for this canal project that would see half the countryside dug up.

So, with folders in hand, he stalked to the window, stared to the hills painted in white.

"Cousin Marcus?"

He swivelled to his ward hovering in the open doorway.

"Yes, Dinah?"

“Did you have a nice evening at Lord Grimslee’s last night? Miss Webster has been most...quiet.”

Marcus pulled at his too-tight cravat. “It was delightful.”

She curved an eyebrow, just like her father used to. “Hmm.” Then twirled her skirts. “Will I see you tomorrow before you leave?”

“For certain.” Dinah would be staying with her friend Lucy for the night, which had seemed to involve her packing for a fortnight. “Where is Miss Webster? Sorting your clothes?”

“Gone walking.”

“What!” He swung back to the window. “It’s bitter out today. And there are perilous drifts of snow.”

“She said she might head for the hills.”

Marcus strode to the desk and slung the folders down. “Which hills?”

“Erm...east-ish?”

“To that bench on Wansfell overlooking town, no doubt.” And he tramped into the hall. “Greatcoat,” he ordered. “Boots and scarf. Dinah, until tomorrow.”

She smiled limpidly. “Yes, Cousin Marcus.”

Muttering to himself, he shoved on his outerwear.

Just wait until he caught up with Miss Charlotte Webster.



“DINAH?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Do you know where the duke is going?”

From the schoolroom window, Charlotte watched with increasing trepidation as the figure of Marcus stomped off in an easterly direction, fists clenched and greatcoat flapping.

“He seemed a little...upset, Miss Webster.” Dinah peered out the window also. “Said he was going walking in the hills.”

“What! It’s bitter out today. And there are perilous drifts of snow.”

“I know, Miss.” Dinah sighed deeply. “He appeared most... What was the word you taught me. Perturbed? Yes, perturbed. He also said not to expect him back till late.”

Charlotte slung Miss Appleton’s book to the desk. “Which hills?”

“Er... Some bench overlooking town.”

“Wansfell, no doubt. I’d best follow and ensure he is safe.”

“A fine idea, Miss Webster. I shall read until the coach is ready to take me to Lucy’s.”

“Yes. Mr Goldsmith’s *Grammar of Geography*.”

Her rosebud lips pursed. “Oh.” Nose scrunched. “But I’m still trying to identify where *Pride and Prejudice* could include more romance.”

Charlotte raised a brow but the girl batted those ridiculously long lashes and there was no time for debate. “I

shall see you on the morrow, then. We will have a fine Christmas together. Mrs Mossop is baking for a feast of five hundred.”

“Cousin Marcus still might stay.”

Charlotte forced her lips to curve and kneeled by the young girl, clutching her small hand. “It... It is possible but we must not be disappointed if he leaves. It has to be his choice.”

“I suppose,” Dinah replied, before a fierce hug was exchanged.

Charlotte then rose to her feet, crossed to the wardrobe to haul out a cloak and laced her sturdiest boots. “Until tomorrow, dear.” And she hastened from the schoolroom.

Just wait until she caught up with that Duke of Shawdale.



MARCUS CURSED low as the bench he and Charlotte used to sit upon many years ago was occupied by a slender middle-aged gentleman. A notebook lay in his lap, pencil poised.

Once outside, Marcus had realised the snow was not so deep for the most part, and the sun had decided to make an appearance, turning the landscape to a glistening creation of ice and wonder.

Not one trace had been found of Charlotte, not a single boot print in the snow, and he concluded she'd likely returned home, that they'd somehow missed one another.

But just in case...

“Sir? Forgive me. But could I ask you? Have you seen a lady up here? Auburn hair?”

The chap peered up. Long nosed and dark haired, he looked vaguely familiar. “Not I. Solely has nature revealed herself to me this day.”

Marcus smiled. “And ’tis at its best, there is no doubt.”

In accord with his words, he turned and lifted his eyes to take in the vast landscape before them – the hills swaddled in snow, Ambleside nestled within its embrace, the glittering lakes like a cracked shifting mirror to the sky above.

He breathed – crisp and clean.

This land was in his very bones and blood, a part of himself he’d forgotten in the need to regain his pride and refill the estate coffers. And how he’d missed the sheer pleasure of stomping along deserted paths, admiring the beauty of nature. It filled one with such a sense of harmony and yet...complete insignificance also.

The hills would be here for all time.

But his time here was short.

And if he worked himself into an early grave, he would miss this essence of life – the beauty, hope and...love.

Marcus twisted. “May I?” And at the gentleman’s nod, he sat on the bench, removing his beaver hat. “I’d forgotten how...beautiful this can be.”

“Glad to see a younger man who enjoys it,” grumbled the fellow aside him. “Too many wish to cover our country with industry. I know it’s essential progress but I fear a way of life is disappearing.”

Marcus winced and peered at the gent’s notebook. “Are you a writer, Sir?”

“I am. Although on a day such as this, the glory of nature overwhelms me and I find my pencil has stilled.” He turned. “And you are looking for a lady, yes? A...friend, perhaps?”

“No. Yes.” He shook his head. “But a fool’s errand as I fear...”

“Hmm?”

“It’s naught.”

“I have known much loss and much love, thus far in life, and never is it naught.” The gent nudged Marcus’ shoulder with his own. “Why not tell me what you fear? Doubt you’ll see me again.”

Marcus debated, drumming his fingers on his hat brim. The gentleman appeared not to know him, and perhaps it would be good to talk to a stranger.

“I...” Marcus breathed deep. “I...I am in love with this lady with all that I am. Yesterday, today and tomorrow. But I fear she does not feel the same. I fear she loved the young man I was, when we grew up together. I fear she cannot love what I am now. I fear she considers me a...friend.”

A man of business might say those fears were absurd. That his most pressing fear ought to be that of bankruptcy. Or

falling prey to swindlers once more. Perhaps he should fear losing out on the canal deal.

Yet now they all paled in comparison with the fear that Charlotte would never love him.

“What are fears, eh?” the gent declared. “But voices airy? Whispering harm where harm is not—”

“I suppose you’re—”

“Don’t interrupt. I dislike it when people interrupt.” He cleared his throat. “But voices airy? Whispering harm where harm is not and deluding the wary till the fatal bolt is shot.”

Marcus smiled. “Never a truer word said, Sir.”

“I know. I wrote it the other day. Although I think it needs some work. But what I’m trying to express is that we should not lose precious time imagining fears that may or not be valid, or they will drive us to Bedlam. You say you love this lady?”

“Yes,” he said simply. And Marcus closed his eyes. *Always*. He saw her in his mind’s eye – lips smiling, green eyes laughing.

“Well then,” said the gentleman, “you’d best tell her as it appears she is stomping up the path towards us with rather a perturbed expression.”

Marcus’ eyes snapped open and he scrabbled to his feet as Charlotte was indeed stomping the fell towards them, seemingly in a fit of pique, fists balled, head down and muttering.

His companion rose to his boots and slapped him on the back. “Remember this – serene will be our days, and bright and happy will our nature be, when love is an unerring light...”

Marcus nodded, felt the words fill his soul. “You are a man of true poetry, Sir.”

“Some say so.” He plopped his hat upon his head. “Good tidings, Your Grace, and a merry Christmas to you.”

Marcus frowned.

“Good day, Mr Wordsworth,” hailed Charlotte.

“And to you, Miss Webster!” he hailed in return. “Do sit and admire it for a while.” And with a jovial whistle, Mr Wordsworth ambled off down the path.

With a groan, Marcus bowed to Charlotte. “I failed to recognise him.”

Auburn eyebrows raised in incredulity. “Where have you been, Marcus?”

He swallowed, let his eyes wander Charlotte’s features – her ruddy nose and red lips.

“Adrift for some while.” *Without you near.* “Come, sit with me.”

CHAPTER
NINE

Charlotte complied, the bench dry beneath the morning sun.

In the past, they'd sat here many a time to witness the seasons shift – spring in lush green finery, summer in looser hues, autumn in a coat of copper. And winter with her bequeathment of lucent snow, roofs white and fields swaddled tight.

Winter brought the harsh bite of cold yet also the beauty of stardust.

“Why are you here, Marcus?” she asked as he lowered himself to the bench. “Should you not be packing?”

“I was searching for you, Charlotte.” He fidgeted with the band on his beaver hat. “I worried you might come to harm in this snow. I couldn't believe you'd walked out in such weather.”

“Me?” She frowned. “But I was searching for you. I was worried that...”

She narrowed her eyes, recalled Dinah's batting lashes.

The little so-and-so.

Yet she could not be angry: the scene of Ambleside below was one of splendour and furthermore, Marcus was sat at her side.

Yet he abruptly stood. Breathed deep. "I must..."

"You must go?"

"No, no..." He paced in front of the bench.

Back and forth.

Forth and back.

"Are you well, Marcus?"

He paused, breathed deep again. Opened his mouth. Closed it. Continued to pace. "I'm just going to say it," he mumbled.

"Say what?"

He straightened his shoulders. Paused. "I... Are you warm enough?"

"Yes."

"Good." He pinched his brow. "I... How did you know I was here?"

"Dinah."

"But she told me that... Ah." He paced once more. "Well, I... You see, Charlotte, I—"

"Marcus, have you had too many glasses of Mrs Mossop's mulled wine?"

"Don't interrupt,' as Wordsworth would say." He threw his hat to the bench. Heaved another breath. "Charlotte, I'm

not going anywhere.”

“Well, no. You just keep pacing back and forth.”

“No, I don’t mean...” He peered to the sky. “Oh, for hell’s sake, I’m just going to say it and be damned.” His fists clenched and unclenched. “I mean, Charlotte, I am not going anywhere without *you*. Not this Christmas or ever. I... I love you, Charlotte. I’ve always loved you. I know you were fond of the boy I was but he is gone, and I just hope...I hope the affection you feel for me as a friend may grow in time. I hope it’s not too late for me to find a better equilibrium. With life. That you might help me do that and come to love me as I am. That you might give me that hope.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, tears pricking like nettles. Maybe she was still asleep? Dreaming. If so, it was a cruel dream.

“Say something, Charlotte,” he demanded. “Even if to put me out of my misery.”

She opened her eyes, words lost.

Marcus’ gaze was a meld of gold and green.

His jaw gritted. “I wanted to give you the world eight years ago,” he rasped, “but all I had were the clothes on my back and a debt-ridden dukedom. I am still in debt, but now I will not give you up, Charlotte, unless...unless you tell me there is no hope.”

She rose to her feet. Touched his arm. It was no dream.

“Eight years ago,” she whispered, “I wanted naught but you.” She watched her hand travel to his cold cheek. “And

today, I still want naught but you.” A tear fell. “Of course, I love you, Marcus. I always have. I love the man, the duke, the boy, my friend. The man who makes my heart sing. And I always will.”

He smiled, eyes fierce yet vulnerable, and his throat bobbed. “Charlotte... Are you sure? I still fear I may let you down as I did when we were young. Fail you.”

“I love you, Marcus. In failure and success. In magnificent victory and ignominious catastrophe. For love is not love if it solely endures in triumph. In fact, it is the support through failure that makes it love. You could never fail *me*. Only yourself. And then I would seek to lift you up.”

“Char—”

She pulled him close and kissed him.

Broad hands cupped her cheeks, lips fervent and forever.

He drew back, but only to touch her forehead with his own. “That boy loved the girl you were, but this man loves the woman you are yet more.”

“I thought you considered me no more than a friend,” she whispered, voice a quiver.

He shook his head. “And I feared the same.”

And then, right there, on the snow, he kneeled.

“M-Marcus?”

“Friends, yes, always, but also lovers and confidants. I want it all.” He clasped her hand. “Charlotte, will you marry

me? Be my duchess? Let us not wait. For time is fleet, I've learned."

A duchess would doubtless act with restraint and decorum but at this moment, Charlotte was still a governess, so she flung herself into his arms, knees hitting the icy snow.

"Yes, yes and yes," she cried. "I love you so, Marcus."

He kissed her, fierce and tender, within the fells and lakes that had reared them, shaped them, words of love exchanged, breaths cold but hearts warm, the years they'd been apart melting like the snows come spring.

"I love you, my Charlotte," Marcus whispered. "Past, present and... Eternity."



CLANK.

Thump.

Thud.

Charlotte peered to the ceiling and frowned.

What *was* that noise?

Shaking her head, she endeavoured to read her book, but...

Thump.

She placed her book to the sofa and sipped her wine instead.

Today had been one of utter joy – walking the fells with Marcus to discuss their future. Sitting by the fire and sharing

kisses.

Some two hours ago, after dinner, Marcus had given his apologies and said he had some matters to attend to in his secondary study. Charlotte had kissed him, replying she understood. After all, he was a duke and had to—

Thud.

But what was he doing? Digging a canal to Carlisle himself?

Placing her glass of wine to the side table, she rose, wandered from the library and up the stairs.

A grunt.

Thump.

“Bloody hell!”

Crash.

With a frown, she wandered down the corridor. Marcus’ bedchamber door lay open and...

A leather chair was moving across the room, ostensibly of its own volition. Charlotte blinked, peered closer and then saw muscled forearms gripping its sides.

Halting at the threshold, she swallowed. “Erm...”

He placed the chair down with a thud.

And stole her breath.

For Marcus wore no waistcoat or cravat, merely open shirt, breeches and boots. The déshabillé displayed his physique – slender but muscular, imposing and magnificent – but...

“What *are* you doing?”

“Ah...” A smile crossed his lips before he strode over and rubbed his stubbled cheek against her neck.

Charlotte allowed a whimper to escape her.

“You look beautiful,” he murmured. “Like a fire sprite with your hair down. And to answer your question, I am making my bedchamber a bedchamber again. One study is enough for any man and I’ve decided to never work after dinner.”

“If you had to, I woul—”

“No.”

She smiled before peering into the room.

A footman must have helped him, as now the desk had been replaced by the original bed, its drapery and linens the colour of autumn. A new rug had been lain and all the papers had been cleared away. The walls held portraits instead of maps.

“Come see, Charlotte.”

“A governess should never enter a duke’s bedchamber.”

“You’re no governess now. You’re a soon-to-be duchess.”

Charlotte grinned and closed the door.

Marcus cleared his throat.

“It’s charming,” she said. “Especially the bed. It must be like sleeping in an autumnal forest canopy.” She ambled over to it and sat. “Very firm. Sit by me, Marcus.”

“Charlotte...”

She stretched and fell back, knew her skirts had hoicked above her ankles.

“I...” She heard Marcus clear his throat again. “I had no intention of... But you are making it exceedingly difficult, Charlotte.”

“Am I?” She leaned up and fluttered her lashes.

Marcus had approached the bed and was watching her with hooded eyes, neck bare, and a button had gone astray on his shirt, displaying dark hair. She leisurely rose to her feet and with one hand, caressed his linen-clad chest, heard the hitch of his breath. She watched her own fingers trail his bared throat and cup his stubbled cheek.

Time was fleet, as he’d said.

So she leaned forward. “I love you, Marcus. Always. Forever. Come what may.”

If she’d known what those words would unleash, perchance she would have...said them before.

Marcus growled and put a firm hand to her nape, crushing her lips. His other palm cupped her rump, pulling her so close, and she moaned as she felt her body sink into his muscle.

His kisses roamed her throat, her sleeves falling to his demand, teeth nibbling and tongue laving.

And then her view upended as she was tumbled backwards upon the bed, Marcus looming over her, chest rising and crashing in bursts.

“If you wish to greet dawn unravished, Charlotte,” he rasped, “then you have this one moment to leave the room.”

She reached out a hand and trailed it down his chest, stomach and to where his breeches betrayed his arousal. He caught her fingers.

“One moment,” he repeated.

“At this moment, Marcus, all I want is you. I want you so much it hu—”

Words were smothered with his lips, passionate and wrenching.

Her bodice was tugged down, stays unfastened and flung aside, but Charlotte was aware she was no buxom girl and she sought to cover—

“No,” he snarled. “Hell, you’re so beautiful.” And his mouth trailed to her breasts, her bashfulness dissipating beneath his ardent touch.

Skirts were discarded but the unfairness of her state of undress brought her to her senses, and she yanked at his shirt, tearing it from the band of his breeches.

“Too much damn material,” she grouched, but Marcus laughed and tore the thing over his head.

Oh.

His chest was beautiful – a classical statue at a museum that she’d once stared at far too long – and she pressed her palms upon him.

A grunt emanated before he twisted, discarding boots and breeches with curses and clonks.

And then he was there, above her, hands sliding down her body with such reverence that breath failed her.

“Please,” she whispered, and his hands sunk betwixt her legs, palm grinding and fingers pressing as he kissed her throat, stubble abrading and heightening her every sense.

Fever.

A fever coursed within her that wove and writhed, and just as it soared, his hand was replaced by...something more demanding.

Insistent.

Persistent.

She cried out as he thrust.

“Charlotte...” Her name was growled, eyes fierce and impassioned.

It felt both strange and wondrous.

She shifted; he groaned.

And then he lifted on his forearms, stared into her eyes and thrust again.

Her breath hitched.

He did it again.

Her leg curled around his waist.

And again and again and again and she was lost. To his eyes lit green, to his panted growls and thrusting possession.

That fever scorched once more as he claimed her. So many years of waiting and wanting.

It was too much to bear and as his lips crashed upon hers, pleasure seized her, igniting her, unrestrained and endless.

MARCUS ABANDONED WHATEVER remnants of restraint he still had as Charlotte's body tightened around him, wild hair gushing like fire upon his bed, writhing and seeking.

To take it all in this moment.

And hell, she did, hips cleaving, fingers at his nape, nails scratching his back and his spine arched as his own pleasure – brutal and sudden – rent him asunder.

He shoved his head to the lee of her neck and shoulder, shuddering and loving and never ever leaving. Not this Christmas or any other they were blessed with.

His hips jerked, not wishing it to end...

But breaths slowed, his body slumped, energy spent – for now – and he shifted, bringing his beloved with him, to lie upon his chest.

Charlotte sluggishly stared up, eyes languid and leaf green. “And that’s why a governess should never enter a duke’s bedchamber.”

He laughed, the carefree laugh of his youth, and gripped her tight. “Enter any time you wish, my duchess.”

EPILOGUE

*C*hristmas Day

THE BELLS RANG LOUD as the gleeful congregation gushed from St Anne's Church like the Stock Ghyll beck after the autumn rains, babbling and dashing, joyous and eager.

Overnight, further snow had cloaked the town and now lads dashed with snowballs, girls shrieked with delight, and ladies tottered with muffs the size of fully grown sheep.

Christmas.

And Marcus was here with them, feeling jubilant and at ease, with an excited Dinah on one arm and his precious Charlotte upon the other.

There could, he knew, be no doubt amongst the townsfolk as to his intentions towards her and many nudged one another or waggled an eyebrow.

With a wink, Mr Wordsworth doffed his hat and Marcus returned a sheepish smile.

Their stroll followed the flock down into town, and they breathed in the chill air, absorbing the anticipation of the day.

Rather a racket was ensuing outside Ambleside Bakery, and they twisted to observe Kitty and Fred embracing to whoops and cries from an assemblage of well-wishers.

Marcus merely raised a brow. “Bit raucous for Christmas Day, no?”

“I heard in church from their neighbour Mrs Whidley,” said Charlotte, “that Fred discovered a purse full of guineas beneath their door this morning.”

“Really?” said Marcus with eyes wide. “Do you think old Grimslee has seen the error of his ways?”

Dinah sniggered.

“No.” Charlotte swatted his arm. “I think the spirit of Christmas has been engaging in dawn visits to local tenants as I also heard that Widow Brockbank has been offered work in the stillroom of Shawdale Manor which means she may remain rent-free in her cottage.”

“Has she?” Marcus widened his eyes further. “I wouldn’t know. Though I was led to believe Widow Brockbank has a formidable pride and would not stay in the cottage rent-free without paying some dues.”

Charlotte tutted. “Next you’ll be kissing the foreheads of babes.”

He leaned down, lips close. “Oh no,” he murmured. “The sole person I shall be kissing is you, Charlotte. Who has brought such warmth and joy back into my life.”

“Oh, such romance.” Dinah broke her hold to clasp her hands together and sigh. “You told me, Miss Webster, that a governess’ life was just lessons. That she never attended grand dinners or glamorous balls or had time for romance.”

His beloved laughed and how it filled his soul.

And Marcus made a new vow to replace the one he’d made that dawn in London.

A vow that every Christmas would be thus – a time for merriment, feasting, thankfulness and love.

With Charlotte by his side.



QUITE CONTENT, Marmaduke sat by the fireside, warming his toes.

It had been quite a day.

Just this afternoon, the thoughtful young duke next door had invited him to this manor house, taken him to his study and asked for permission to marry Charlotte.

He’d had to ponder a while as his sister, Mary, had been here only yesterday, but the duke had shown him a miniature of Charlotte from when she’d been a tot and, of course, he remembered her.

Lovely girl.

And without a shadow of a doubt, she should wed him. After all, Charlotte had always been besotted with that boy next door.

Marmaduke himself would also move into this manor house which had caused him some consternation as he disliked change, but then the duke had reminded him of the rose garden. He could look for Martha whenever he wished. And young Miss Dinah Lovcott had said she would help him.

“Uncle Marmaduke?”

He peered up into bright joyous eyes. “Yes?”

“I had a thought last night so...” A wicker basket was placed in his lap. “Happy Christmas.”

“What on earth is this, Mary?” For the basket had a will of its own as it waggled and wiggled. He flung open the lid and saw...

“Martha!” And he brought forth the mewling black kitten. “Where did you find her?”

She kneeled at his side. “This is Martha then, Uncle?” she whispered.

“Well, of course.” The little kitten squirmed in his arms but appeared to like his woollen blanket best. “Rescued her from a river in India and brought her back with me. Kept hiding amongst the rose bushes.”

“Oh, Uncle.” And he was enveloped in a fearsome hug.

He returned her embrace, and in that moment, a brume lifted and all was clarity. This was Charlotte who worked so hard for them all.

“Thank you, my niece,” he murmured, “for all you do for me.”

She swiped her cheeks of tears and nodded before turning to his nurse, Hannah, and presenting her with a gift also.

Marmaduke cuddled the kitten who purred and kneaded the blanket on his lap with her paws, marking time. A time he now knew never moved in a straight line. It wound and weaved, sometimes ending up where you started.

“Hmm,” he said as the kitten clawed her way up his woollen scarf to sniff his cheek, “If you had a collar, you wouldn’t get lost again. And I have one...somewhere...” He felt around in his pockets with one hand and at last found the pouch that had been there for so long, waiting for Martha.

The kitten sniffed at it while Marmaduke’s fumbling thumbs loosened the ribbon bow and upended the pouch.

A collar tumbled out, something set within it glinting and gleaming in the firelight.

“Well, damn me,” he muttered. “That’s where I put those blasted diamonds.”

He peered over his shoulder to tell Charlotte about them but she was now sat upon the sofa, softly smiling at that thoughtful duke from next door, their hands gripped tight together.

Marmaduke didn’t think she’d have need of them now.

So with a frown, he swivelled.

Mrs Munro was admiring her gift of a new velvet shawl. His nurse was such a cheerful woman who’d only ever treated him kindly. She worked all hours without complaint and hadn’t minded that the roof leaked in her bedchamber.

“Mrs Munro?” he enquired. “Have I ever asked you if you like cats?”

“I adore them, Mr Wainwright.” Her rotund face lit with a smile. “I have one named Boots, and since I lost my Mr Munro, he keeps me such company.”

“Well, I think Puss in Boots deserves a little present too, do you not think?” And he placed the diamond-studded collar into her lap. “Happy Christmas, Mrs Munro.”

She gasped and stuttered but Marmaduke winked at her and then returned his gaze to the fire, waggled his toes and reached for a glass of the duke’s exceedingly fine claret.

He cosseted Martha and within the flames watched time itself leap and curl. Past Christmases melded and scattered, but some of life’s finest moments remained throughout...

A couple in love, whispering to one another.

A young girl with her life ahead of her.

An infant kitten mewling in wonder.

A woman with naught but kindness in her heart.

He raised his glass.

“Merry Christmas,” he whispered, “to one and all.”

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Thank you for reading ‘A Governess Should Never... Kiss at Christmastide’.

I truly hope you enjoyed Marcus and Charlotte’s tale.

To read others of this series or any of my books, explore them here...

<https://books2read.com/Emily-Windsor>

The Governess Chronicles:

Book 1: A Governess Should Never... Tempt a Prizefighter

Book 2: A Governess Should Never... Deny a Duke

Book 3: A Gentleman Will Never... Forget a Lady

Book 4: A Governess Should Never... Lure a Spy – Coming soon.

All of Emily’s books are written with British English spelling.

To get in touch or to receive news of future releases, become a Lady of Windsor! And sign up for my newsletter:

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Emily grew up in the north of England on a diet of historical romance and strong tea.

Unfortunately, you couldn't study Regency slang, so she did the next best thing and gained a degree in Classics and History instead. This 'led' to an eight-year stint in engineering.

Having left city life, she now lives in a dilapidated farmhouse in the country where her days are spent writing, fixing the leaky roof, battling the endless vegetation and finding pictures of well-tied cravats.

Happy Reading,

Love, Emily xx

THE DESIGNING DUCHESS

ELIZABETH ELLEN CARTER



UNTITLED

*“One must always draw, draw with the eyes, when one cannot
draw with a pencil.”*

- Balthus

To Lorna

Because I couldn't get you Henry Cavill for real...

CHAPTER
ONE

*S*eptember, 1818

Bath, Somerset

IT WOULD APPEAR TO AN OUTSIDER – or at the very least to the over-protective mothers of this year’s debutantes – that this salon was the very model of propriety.

In an elegantly appointed drawing room of a well-to-do townhouse in Bath, eight young ladies, some of whom might be described as diamonds of the first water, were attending the drawing class of Madame Geraldine de Bouchon, a French émigré and a watercolorist of some renown.

The day-long class had long been a fixture on the social calendar for five years now, and the young ladies of quality were allowed to be minimally chaperoned.

After all, what could possibly be scandalous about improving one’s technique with a pencil, charcoal, or a brush?

Nevertheless, when Lady Grace Tyneford stepped through the doors of Madame’s salon, she had to own to a little rush of exhilaration.

“*Bienvenue mes élèves*, welcome,” the older woman greeted them with Gallic expansiveness.

“She’s not what I supposed,” whispered Lady Isabelle Dumphries.

“What did you expect?” Grace hissed back. “A courtesan?”

Lady Isabella shrugged her shoulders and turned her attention to the lessons the woman was beginning.

As light refreshments were served, the young ladies were instructed to begin drawing the cornucopia that lay on the table disgorging its bounty of fruits, while Madame de Bouchon evaluated the portfolios they’d brought with them.

After a couple of hours, the subject changed. Two ballerinas from a touring Italian opera posed in costumes.

Grace used a pencil to lightly sketch out the stance of the younger of the two women. The model stood stock still, her arms in third position – right arm parallel to the floor, left arm raised and slightly curved towards the girl’s head. The dancer’s feet were in the fourth position – fourth croisé, to be precise – one foot in front of the other, each turned out.

It took a lot of discipline to hold a pose like that for a long time, Grace reflected.

She worked on capturing the girl’s lithe limbs, using shading to define the play of muscles on arms exposed by the sleeveless costume she wore.

The human form was wonderful to draw, and having one in the flesh, so to speak, was much, much better than the wooden

posable mannequin that sat in Grace's little studio at home in Keswick.

She felt Madame Geraldine looking over her shoulder, and glanced back to see the woman nod in approval.

For the next hour, the girls worked diligently at their easels anticipating what was to come.

OVER THE NOON MEAL, there was a lively discussion about the merits of various artists, the miniatures of Adam Buck, the landscapes of Turner, the artwork and the intriguing life of Margaret Bingham, Countess of Lucan.

Grace leaned to Isabella. "How on earth did you get your mother to agree to let you come today? She was so set against it when at Lady Bromley's at-home the other day."

The girl shrugged, the pale blonde ringlets of her hair wobbling.

"I simply appealed to father, of course. I forced a tear from my left eye and bemoaned that I wouldn't be able to get a husband if I lacked the accomplishments of other young ladies."

Grace laughed. "You already have Lord Charlton eating out of your hand, so I can't see that you have any cause for complaint."

Isabella had the good grace to blush.

Mark my words, there would be an offer of marriage there before the year was out, Grace noted to herself.

Madame rose to her feet and clapped sharply to attract the girls' attention.

“*Mes eleves*, I have a treat for you,” she said. “Ah, it is one I know you have been anticipating. Follow me, *mes petites*.”

Dutifully the girls followed their art teacher up to a large light filled studio on the second floor. There, the woman's own works in progress could be seen, and the girls stopped and studied them for a moment, identifying the techniques they had learned that morning.

Further in the room, already set out in a line were a set of easels, placed to maximize the light falling on the pristine white pages of the sketch books they carried under their arms.

The center of the studio was hidden by three screens.

“It's so unfair to tease me about Lord Charlton,” whispered Isabella as she opened the small box of pencils on the tray below the easel. “Tell me none of the handsome young eligibles have caught *your* eye, and I shan't believe you.”

Yes, there was *one* man – Henry Cavandish, Duke of Egremont. But Grace would prefer to bite her tongue than admit as much. He was the man most of the girls had set their caps at – handsome, eligible, titled, and wealthy.

It was not uncommon to hear whispered confessions from girls that they'd fallen in love with him at first sight. Grace was ashamed to admit even to herself that she was one of them, although, it had to be said, she and Cavandish were a little better acquainted than most.

They'd danced a couple of times during this season, had even been seated together for dinner at a couple of soirees where she found his conversation was quick and amusing. But that was all. Never had he shown her any attention that was beyond the ordinary.

And why would he, when he had beautiful women, tempting mistresses, and bored wives to choose from?

Grace managed to evade Isabella's enquiry thanks to the timely arrival of three liveried footmen who entered the studio with all the gravity of judges. The room fell to silence as they approached the center of the studio and removed the Chinoiserie screens.

There, sitting on a stool in all his glory, was a completely nude man.



HENRY CAVANDISH HEARD the gasps of the young ladies in the room as the screens were removed.

He cursed his friends with every foul name he could think of, and then cursed them again.

It had to be conceded that it was his own fault. It was a stupid bet – he knew so at the time, but there was something of a little devil on his shoulder that accepted the wager even though he knew that poor Donald stood no chance to pot a sixth billiard ball in a row.

He'd given no thought to the forfeit if he lost, and that devil Robert Charlton had made sure the punishment had been

planned in exquisite detail.

Which was why he was here, completely naked, with only a gauzy hood over his head to conceal his identity. And to add a touch of piquancy to his ‘torture’, his best friends had dressed up as footmen, complete with ridiculous powdered wigs, to watch his embarrassment.

Oh, there *would* be a reckoning, that he would make certain.

At least he was seated, his tackle hidden from view. He held the pose required of him by Madame Geraldine – torso twisted just so, one foot on the stretcher of the stool on which he sat, and his other leg extended out onto a footstool.

The pose was, Madame had explained, reminiscent of the male nude painted by fellow Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Isabey. As if that was meant to make him feel better...

In truth, Madame Geraldine had been quite nice to him, having kenned quite quickly his embarrassment at being foisted upon her. As a prospective life model, he’d been required to strip down in front of her, but she regarded him with a physician’s eye which, oddly enough, made him feel a little bit better about the predicament he currently found himself in.

“Ah, you will find this experience a revelation, *mon cher*,” she had told him. “Remember, when my students are here, they will not see *you*. You will be but a body, a representation of the male form for them to peruse and to sketch.

“You must learn to relax, or it will be hard on you. Posing is more physically taxing than you realize. You must know your body and know your mind. Do not pay attention to my students; pretend they are not there. Let your thoughts go where they wish – it will make the time pass more quickly.”

Now Henry took a deep breath and forced his muscles to relax which lessened the tension in his back and nervousness in his gut, as the young ladies began to sketch.

AFTER SOME PERIOD of time - it might have been five minutes, or an hour for all he knew - he was handed a plate and told to pose in the second planned position, a stance in the manner of an ancient Greek discus thrower. Henry recalled a statue he'd seen on his Grand Tour and adjusted his position accordingly.

At least his bollocks weren't too much on show.

Again, he let his mind wander, listening to the scratch of pencil on paper, and the low hushed tones of conversation here and there. At least there had been no giggling. He could bear anything but giggling.

Time passed...

“TRÈS BIEN,” Madame announced. “Your final pose, monsieur. Michelangelo's David.”

Henry closed his eyes and groaned inwardly. He relinquished the plate to someone – he didn't bother to look at who – got to his feet, and rose to his full height.

Through the gauzy hood he sought out his erstwhile friends. There they were, still dressed in their ridiculous footmen costumes, but they stood at the back of the room, too far away for him to discern their expressions. No doubt they were still laughing at him.

Bastards.

He tried to ignore the gasps and smothered giggles of the young women in front of him. Well, at least he didn't have to worry about little Henry standing to attention any time soon. Mockery had a habit of shriveling sexual interest.

Hmm... Did he know any of these young women? Did their parents have any idea what they had been exposed to?

No pun intended...

He rolled his shoulders to ease the ache in his muscles, accepted a cloth, and settled himself into the pose – weight on right leg, left leg apart, left foot turned in. Right arm at ease. Throw cloth over left shoulder and hold the edge with the left hand. Head looking left.

It had him looking directly into the eyes of one young *artiste* who regarded him frank interest.

Did she recognize him? Dear God, he hoped not.

Did *he* know her? She seemed familiar, but then he'd not exactly been a wallflower this season. He'd attended his fair share of balls, soirees, dinners, at-homes, card parties, routs, rides, picnics, and excursions.

He closed his eyes once again and drew a deep breath.

Well ladies, look your fill because this is never ever going to happen again.

CHAPTER TWO

“Do you think they all look like that underneath their breeches?” Isabella whispered.

Grace didn’t answer.

The man was looking right at her.

The hood hid his features from view, but, as he turned his head, the layer of black gauzy material shifted enough for her to see a firm jawline and perhaps the shape of his mouth. There was something mesmerizing about him that went beyond the idle observation of his naked form.

Did he *know* her?

For a horrible moment, she fancied he did.

Grace hid behind her easel a moment to compose herself.

That idea was perfectly ridiculous.

No gentlemen would allow himself to be displayed in such a manner. It was likely one of Madame’s footmen, or an actor hired for the task.

She sighed. Of course it was.

With that decided, Grace picked up a pencil and began an outline, starting with his broad shoulders and working lower.

She glanced across to Isabella who mercifully was too engrossed in her own drawing to pay attention to her.

Grace ignored the man's covered head and worked on capturing the shape of his squared pectoral muscles, the tapering of his waist to his hips, then the shape of muscular thighs and calves. Satisfied, she picked up a charcoal stick to add depth to shapes and create definition to muscles that were in ready abundance.

Good Lord, it had to be said that he was a fine specimen of a man. He seemed to radiate perfection. Even a faded scar on his upper thigh couldn't detract from his masculine beauty.

Using a heavy stroke, she added the smattering of chest hair and, below the navel, the thin line of hair that led directly to the dark curly bush between his legs.

Grace gripped the charcoal firmly to prevent her fingers from shaking as she drew the man's penis and scrotum.

Oh, you're being such a goose, she told herself firmly. Every man looks like this beneath his clothes – more or less. One day you'll have a husband of your own, and you'll see him undressed every day...

Isabella's question came back to her.

Did every man look like this?

She hoped not. The effect on the female population would be devastating.

Perhaps she should pay attention to another – *safer* – part of his anatomy.

His hands.

Yes, his hands would be safe enough to study in fine detail. Her eyes moved his right hand; his fingers loosely curled in a relaxed pose. They were nice looking fingers too.

Grace's thoughts took her back to a ball several night ago when she felt the strength emanating from the firm but gentle grip of her dance partners.

The hands she was drawing were attached to powerful arms.

What would it be like to be enfolded into such an embrace and being in such close quarters to his maleness?

Something primal woke within her, a recognition that she had desires also that could only be ultimately satisfied by a man's touch.

For a moment, she allowed the sensual vision full form in her imagination.

That men enjoyed the female form was a given considering the number of odes, poems, and prose dedicated to the female form divine, and the equal number of depictions of her in complete undress.

What a naked man and woman did together was out of her direct knowledge, but she could guess. She knew where babies came from – she was hardly naïve in that respect – but there was a difference between an academic knowledge of the act of love and the actuality.

What would be like to stand skin-to-skin with a man?

Grace made the mistake of looking into his hidden face once more.

He was looking at her. She was sure of it. Not just looking in her direction, but actually *looking* at her.

For a brief moment, she felt as though he had touched her, could almost feel his arms around her. She would turn her face to his. His lips would lower. She'd return his kiss, and—

“Very good, you have captured *le bel homme* very well.”

Grace just about jumped out of her skin, narrowly avoiding ruining her sketch as she pulled back her arm. She turned to Madame who was making a close examination of her work.

“You have a particular gift for capturing anatomy. Your proportions are very well observed. I would like you to pay more attention to finishing the left hand, and do not be afraid to spend more time between his legs.”

Isabella started to snigger, but pulled herself together when Madame Geraldine came to turn her attention on the girl's own work.

Grace gritted her teeth. She started with the man's left hand, focusing on the tendons that ran across the back of it, the length of his forefinger as it held the cloth over his shoulder.

She swallowed hard and turned her gaze down to his nether regions. She picked up a pencil.

She gasped.

It twitched! She saw it twitch!



FUCK! It twitched.

Henry closed his eyes yet again and summoned up the most deflating things he could think of – cold rain dripping down his collar, the smell of the sewers around the Thames, that time in Cambridge when he got throwing up drunk and had a hangover that lasted three days.

The girl in his line of his vision had looked directly at him. Through his covering, he was sure he saw her brow pucker as she tapped the end of a pencil against her lower lip then proceeded to nibble it as her gaze dropped lower.

Unbidden, he had a vision of what he'd like those full lips to wrap around.

Did Charlton and the others have any idea how difficult it was to be a gentleman under such circumstances? The protection of good tailoring allowed for such things to go unnoticed by polite society, but here he had no fig leaf to spare his blushes.

The poor girl would no doubt be scarred for life at the sight of a flaccid penis beginning to stir.

With a slow exhale of breath, Henry trusted himself to open his eyes once more, making sure this time to keep them focused on the small painting on the back wall behind the young woman.

Centuries passed. Perhaps a millennium. Then Madame clapped her hands sharply and told her pupils to put down their

pencils and return to the salon for afternoon refreshment.

He held his pose until the door of the studio closed behind him before ripping off the hood with one hand and using the cloth over his shoulder to wrap around his loins. He drew a deep breath and pivoted on heel to glare at his friends, Lord Robert Charlton, Lord George Bateman, and Lord Daniel Edwardson.

Two of the three grinned at him like idiots, Charlton at least had the good grace to look shame-faced.

“Well done, old sport!” Bateman enthused. “We thought you wouldn’t come. You certainly proved us wrong.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t place a bet on it,” Henry snapped.

“Now see here, Cavandish,” Edwardson protested. “You were quite happy to take the wager at Mistress Olympia’s the other night.”

“That was before I knew the class was full of debutantes and ingénues!”

“And you gave them all a thrill to be sure,” said Bateman.

“You don’t see that being a problem? We have to dance with these girls, potentially choose brides from them. I thought this class was going to be for middle aged matrons. Had I known—”

“—Isabella was here.”

Charlton’s words were softly spoken, but heard clearly by everyone.

“What?”

Henry wasn't sure which one of them spoke. Whoever it was spoke for all of them.

“Are you *sure*?” asked Bateman.

“I am *very* sure. She was stood right over there,” he said, pointing near to the position where Henry had posed.

Henry knew exactly who he meant – the blonde with large doe eyes that turned most men into quivering wrecks. She was next to the intriguing girl who seemed to look straight through his disguise.

“Did she recognize you?” Edwardson demanded of Charlton.

“No, I don't think so. I did my best to stay where she couldn't see me, and, besides, we were in these ridiculous get ups.”

Henry took in the three ‘footmen’ in their salmon pink jackets and breeches.

“Well at least you had a costume,” said Henry. “Come on, let's find my clothes before I die of a chill.”

Edwardson slapped Charlton on the back.

“I wouldn't worry, old bean, no one takes an especial note of servants.”

Henry rolled his eyes and headed for the door. He glanced left and right before crossing the hall into another room that had been set aside for dressing.

He said nothing while he slipped on his clothes.

“I hope not,” Charlton continued glumly. “I really like Isabella. If her father caught wind of me being involved in a stunt like this, he’d refuse my suit.”

Henry had just donned his shirt in time to see Charlton look sheepish.

“I had no idea it was that serious between the two of you,” he said.

“I’ve become quite sweet on her in the past month, and I’m pretty sure she feels the same.”

“And that means there’s wedding bells in the air?” asked Daniel.

Charlton flushed red, but said nothing more.

“And her friend?” Henry demanded. “The one to her right?”

“You didn’t recognize her? No, of course you wouldn’t, not with the head covering. That was Lady Grace Tyneford,” Charlton answered. “She and Isabella are completely inseparable.”

CHAPTER THREE

Robert Charlton only worried about his love life; Henry was concerned about his reputation. It presented him with a double dilemma.

It would be bad enough if Lady Grace and Lady Isabella worked out his identity on their own. It would be even worse if, in a fit of candor, Charlton confessed the whole lot to his would-be fiancée. So, for now, until the end of the season, he intended to stay by his friend's side to make sure the man didn't spill it at the first batting of eyelashes.

The fact that it would also put him in close quarters with the intriguing Lady Grace Tyneford of the full lips had nothing to do with his interest.

Nothing at all.

Their first opportunity was a few days later at Lady Arndt's intimate soiree of only fifty guests – large enough in Henry's mind for them to circulate without making their interest in two particular young ladies not so obvious.

Apparently that wasn't Charlton's plan. He made a beeline for Lady Isabella the moment he spotted her being welcomed

by their hosts which meant *he* had to trail in the lovestruck swain's wake.

Good grief, man. Play it a bit closer to the chest, will you?

Any doubt the interest was not mutual was immediately put to rest as soon as Isabella spotted Charlton. The girl giggled, clapped her hands, then concluded her conversation with the host, and met the man half way across the room.

Lady Grace followed three steps behind. She caught Henry's eye and gave him a smile that seemed to suggest she knew exactly what he was thinking and was of a like-mind.

Just like that, Charlton and Isabella were arm-in-arm, deep in conversation, and walking away from their friends.

"Ah, these young persons today," Lady Grace intoned gravely, yet with a twinkle in her eye, "no decorum whatsoever."

Henry shook his head slowly. "I despair of them, Lady Grace. Truly I do, but what can be done?"

His response elicited a genuine smile from her. A spot of warmth like a patch of grass on a sunny day rose in his chest. He liked it.

"There is only one thing for it, your Grace," she answered. "We shall have to act as examples of propriety and rectitude."

"Then take my arm, Lady Grace, and we'll show these young persons how it is done."

She placed her hand lightly on his, and they followed Charlton and Lady Isabella toward the dance floor.

“Do you dance tonight?” he asked her.

“I would be honored, your Grace,” she answered.

“And since we are to be chaperones for our friends, might I be presumptuous and invite you to call me Henry – or Cavandish at least?”

The request seemed to take her by surprise.

Had he overstepped himself? He would not want her to think that his interest was more than it was.

His thoughts must have displayed themselves on his face because she patted his arm before removing her hand.

“I shouldn’t like to be so presumptuous,” she said. “Perhaps a little later in the season when we know each other better.”

“Do you always do things by the book?”

Lady Grace inclined her head, thinking about the question. “Perhaps not *always*,” she said. “But fences are there for a reason, are they not? I believe it is wise to know what the fence is enclosing before crossing the stile.”

Before he could fashion a suitable response to *that*, Lady Grace nodded acknowledgement to the dowager Countess of Laidley.

“If you will forgive me, my lord, there is someone I need to speak to, but I shall rely on you to keep our two charges well within view.”

Just like that Lady Grace Tyneford left him standing in the middle of the room.

And in that moment, Henry wondered whether he might not be a little in love.



GRACE HID her shaking hands within her skirts. She must be more unsophisticated than she thought if a handsome man's full attention could turn her into a quivering wreck.

The Duke of Egremont was flirting with her, but why?

She fought a grimace as she followed the Countess of Laidley across the room.

She knew why. What she didn't know was *why her?*

Henry Cavandish was, well, as she had summarized before, handsome, eligible, titled, and wealthy. And there was the embarrassing matter of admitting to herself she'd fallen for him at first sight like all the others. But it didn't prepare her for being the full focus of his attention. It was like looking full-faced at the sun.

It was flattering. It was disconcerting.

By the time she reached the Countess of Laidley's party, Grace had talked herself out of Cavandish's interest. It was merely back-and-forth banter – a piece of amusement, and she would be a fool to consider it more than that.

Grace did her very best to keep him out of her mind for the rest of the evening. She accepted her fair share of dances while keeping her eye on Isabella and Charlton who had somehow attracted a small clique of young people around them.

At the moment, Charlton was holding court, entertaining the group by regaling them with a tale.

Meanwhile, Isabella sat at Charlton's side looking utterly enraptured by him

Grace couldn't help it, she shook her head in exasperation, before finding herself locking eyes once more with Henry... er, Cavandish... um, *His Grace*... who was stood behind his friend. He quirked his lips in a half smile and raised his glass in her direction.

She found herself turning red, but managed enough prepossession to offer him a nod of acknowledgement.

“Oh, how exciting! There may be a wedding announcement before the end of the season. Lord Dumphries will be so pleased as well. Very pleased.”

Grace turned to watch Lady Hildecote fan herself with vigor. Lady Badgerson nodded in response.

“They seem to be getting on very well indeed, Frannie,” the other lady agreed.

Lord Arndt called the small assembly to order. There was to be an unannounced extra dance this evening - a waltz. Isabella and Charlton applauded gleefully as one.

As this was a private party rather than a ball sanctioned by the sponsors of Almacks, it was permitted for the debutantes to accept an invitation to waltz. To no one's surprise, every young person determined to pair up.

“Permit me this dance, Lady Grace,” asked one young hopeful.

“I’m afraid the lady has already promised me,” a voice interrupted.

They both turned. Henry Cavandish stood before them, looking every inch the Duke.

Immediately, Grace’s junior would-be dance partner withdrew out of deference to Cavandish’s elevated position. Well, *that* didn’t impress her that much, and she had half a mind to call Cavandish out on his lie. However, before Grace could do more than open her mouth, he took her hand and led her out to the line of dancers.

The presumption of the man!

And yet here she was, placing her arm on his shoulder, her left hand in his, and she’d raised not a word in protest.

“Ah, suffer my presence for this one dance, Lady Grace,” he said so softly that she had to take half a step closer to hear. “There are some who still disapprove of this dance. Whether it is fair or not, my status does provide me with certain privilege. If I sat out this dance it could be seen as censure and that would affect the standing of Lady Isabella and Charlton.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Grace admitted.

But I should have done.

The dance started before she was prepared for it, forcing her to trust Henry’s lead. That in itself was a novelty. How many times had she had to watch her partners’ feet as well as her own?

Now she found herself looking into the man’s warm eyes and trying to fathom the thoughts behind them.

Suddenly she became conscious of her own body – the way it moved, the subtle pressure of his hand on her waist that provided little cues as to the next step in the dance. And her hand in his – strong, yet not overpowering. But it was his eyes...

Oh my!

How could anyone with hair as dark as his have such beautiful blue eyes?

But there they were, framed in lovely dark lashes that would make a woman green with envy.

Why was her mind wandering?

Why did her hand feel so good on his shoulder?

Why did she want to stroke his shoulder and explore the strange dichotomy of something so hard feeling so soft at the same time?

Was it the champagne she had drunk?

The music?

No, it was none of those things.

It was pure physical attraction.

And the look he was giving her in return revealed it was more than mutual.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**S**he doesn’t know we were there,” Charlton whispered over supper.

“I know that.”

Henry’s reply received an amused expression in return.

“How would you? You’ve been making eyes at Lady Grace Tyneford all evening,” he retorted. “My goodness, man – could you not make your affections so readily obvious?”

Henry just about choked on his wine and swallowed the liquid down by sheer force of will. He felt his face flush with the effort.

Charlton regarded him thoughtfully.

“You do have it bad, don’t you? Your face has gone red. There’s no shame in it, you know. You like the chit, and, dash it all, anyone who doesn’t know you as well as I do might even consider you somewhat eligible.”

At that, Henry cocked an eyebrow in surprise.

Charlton grinned.

“Perhaps there will be a double wedding for Christmas.”

“That is *not* going to happen.”

His friend’s grin broadened.

“Would you like to bet on it?”

Henry offered him an expression that silently threatened the direst of consequences.

As it was a stand-up supper, Henry took a plate and headed towards another table to browse its contents. He picked up a few morsels and ate. Charlton followed him and did likewise before he started scanning the dining room.

It didn’t take a genius to work out why. Charlton spotted Isabella in conversation with Lady Grace and another couple of girls, and sighed.

Henry looked at the group.

“Have you ever seen a more beautiful woman, Henry?”

At that moment, Grace tilted her head back and laughed at something one of the other girls said.

“No, Robert,” Henry admitted. “I don’t think I have.”

While there was no question that Lady Grace was an attractive young woman, there was something about the flash of a sudden smile on her face that made her seem radiant. His body remembered how she felt in his arms during the waltz where he felt the first stirrings of desire.

He was not a callow youth, unable to master his sexual urges. Nor was it the first time he’d had a woman in his arms. Far from it. He’d had his share of female companionship, both clothed and unclothed.

So, what was it about this particular girl that he found so attractive?

Beside him, Charlton chattered away, unaware that Henry's attention was elsewhere.

"...anyway, I made sure I was clever about it," he continued. "I asked her how she was enjoying her season, and the types of things she enjoying doing, and not once did she mention drawing."

What?

Henry shook his head.

"You didn't expect her to tell you the *truth* did you?"

Charlton set down his plate and crossed his arms.

"I'll have you know that Lady Isabella is completely without guile!"

Henry laughed. "And it's for that very reason she is not going to tell you that she attended a drawing class where a naked man was the subject of her sketchings."

Charlton deflated before his eyes.

"I suppose not. But short of asking her outright if she recognized us, how are we to know?"

"I know they didn't."

"So you claim. But you haven't said how."

Henry sighed. "I just know, shall we leave it at that?"

It was Charlton's turn to look skeptical, and Henry had to admit that he couldn't fault his friend for it.

Personally, he was confident that Grace hadn't recognized *him* – how could she really through the hood he wore? – and he was equally confident that Isabella hadn't recognized Charlton or the others in their footmen disguises. But he couldn't say *how* he knew.

In the case of Lady Isabella, she didn't seem the kind of young woman who could keep such knowledge to herself.

As for Lady Grace, all Henry could point to was the fact that there was no look of particular recognition from her at the time, nor this evening. There was no look of embarrassment, or – potentially worse – forward wantonness. No. When they danced together, the recognition of mutual attraction between them came in that moment and not before.

And nothing that he knew of Lady Grace Tyneford suggested she was an actress accomplished enough to mask her true feelings.

So he was confident.

Fairly confident.

Not at all sure.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to make sure that he was always was in Grace's company.



FIVE DAYS later

“You’ve made an absolute conquest of the Duke of Egremont,” said Isabella.

Grace glanced down at her pastilles of watercolor paints and picked a shade of green that seemed to match the color of the lily pads on the lake before them, rather pleased that Isabella's silly remark hadn't distracted her from making a curving arc of just the right form on her sketch book.

"I don't think I've heard such utter rubbish in my life," Grace responded gravely.

"Don't you dare come over all coy with me!" Isabella huffed. "Let me tell you as only a woman who is in love can that I recognize the look Henry Cavandish casts in your direction. It is the same one that my beloved Bobby has on his face when he sees me."

"Perhaps it is indigestion," Grace muttered under her breath.

"Harumph!"

Grace set down her brush and turned to her friend.

"I don't mean to tease, and certainly not belittle your love for Robert, nor his for you. Everyone with eyes can see that you are made for one another," she said. "Have you set the date yet?"

Isabella's face brightened. "We're getting married as soon as the banns are read," she said.

Grace smiled to herself. Getting Isabella to talk about her upcoming nuptials was the quickest way to distract her.

She turned back to her painting and added a blue wash over the surface of the lake before loading the brush with a

darker blue to begin to add shading and texture while Isabella continued to speak at length.

Then her friend stopped to draw breath.

“You think you were so clever in trying to distract me,” Isabella announced abruptly. “No, I don’t wish to speak further about my wedding. Not until I know the truth about you and Lord Cavandish.”

With a long, put-upon sigh, Grace continued with her painting. “I’m sorry, I cannot see this as you do. The Duke has been kind and very courteous but there is nothing more to it than that.”

“He dances with you on every occasion – sometimes even twice. That’s a mark of favor.”

Grace set down her brush again and leaned over to Isabella, noting that her sketch pad had no paint on it.

“I can tell you something I’ve never breathed to another living soul,” she intoned.

Isabella clapped her hands and giggled.

“The Duke and I have been keeping an eye on you two.”

Her friend’s eyes widened.

“Us? Why?”

“To ensure that you didn’t elope to Gretna Green.”

“Why would we need to—” Isabella’s eyes widened.
“Oooh...”

“Now that your engagement has been announced, more people are forgiving of your... *enthusiastic* displays of affection.”

Isabella showed enough self-awareness to blush and look a little shamefaced before shrugging.

“When one is in love, one does foolish things. It’s to be expected.”

“I shall have to take your word for it.”

“And you don’t have a *tendre* for Henry? Not even a little bit?”

Unbidden, heat flared in her cheeks, and Grace looked away to the watercolor in front of her.

“You *do!*” Isabella breathed.

Grace waved her hand dismissively. “It hardly signifies – half the girls this season have a *tendre* for Henry.”

There was silence between them for a few moments, and Grace ventured a look back to Isabella. Her friend regarded her thoughtfully, but said nothing.

It was an unusual turn of events because, God bless her, Isabella was better known for saying exactly what was in her head, heedless of the consequences.

CHAPTER FIVE

*N*ovember

Henry was content to stand back and watch Lord Robert Charlton receive the congratulations of the assembled group on his marriage.

He shouldn't be surprised, but he was. Charlton always had a poet's heart and fell in love with a new girl every season, so his infatuation with Isabella was nothing new, except in one regard. Lady Isabella Dumphries was different.

She was just as silly as Robert was.

But Henry had to admit, at seeing the two of them together, they made an impressive whole, and though they were not even wed a day, already she had made a better man of him.

He was showing more diligence and attentiveness, which boded well for his appointment to the House of Lords. And, as for her, she was, apparently, adept at managing money. This surprised him because she seemed to have extravagant tastes, but Isabella's father was overheard to mention to a friend that he had every confidence in his daughter's ability to manage a household.

On Henry's part, it had been a stressful couple of months to be sure. But now the twin burden of saving Isabella and Robert from themselves, and ensuring that the secret of his naked escapade remained undiscovered, Henry found himself feeling restless.

He sipped some particularly fine brandy and watched the newlywed couple make their way around the room.

He spotted Grace who, like him, stood alone. Did she feel as he did?

As though he willed it, Grace turned in his direction and offered him a smile before nodding over to where Charlton and Isabella were speaking with the Marquis of Featherstone.

Henry took that as an invitation to approach.

"We've done it, your Grace," she said with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. "I believe it can be said with little fear of contradiction that you and I have steered the match of the season to a happy conclusion."

Henry couldn't help it; he responded to the levity in her voice.

"Matchmakers par excellence, I would agree, my Lady," he replied.

She gifted him a smile, and it happened again, that same something which had first occurred at Lady Arndt's soiree, not to mention a dozen times since whenever Grace smiled at him. It was the sense that she was the most beautiful girl in the room.

Not precisely the same thing this time though, In this moment, something had changed.

At first he thought it was a moment of light-headedness brought on by brandy, but he'd only had a few sips. It was only when Grace's expression, seeing the look on his face, altered to one of concern that he recognized what it was – he was in love.

“... Cavandish?” Grace leaned in and discreetly touched his arm. “Henry? Is there something ailing you?”

He pulled himself together.

“I was overcome by a serious case of sentimentality,” he said lightly.

“Oh, I see,” Grace answered with a deliberately amused tone to her voice. “Is there a remedy for such a thing?”

He added a suitable amount of gravity to his voice. “I’m afraid not.”

“This may have serious repercussions for your reputation, my Lord,” she responded.

“How so?”

“You might now be seen as an easier target to steer the altar yourself.”

Henry set an astonished expression on his face and took pleasure at the returning grin Grace offered him.

“Good grief!” he replied. “I believe you’re right. Whatever should we do about the parlous state I find myself in?”

“We?” Her rise in inflection was accompanied by a raising of one eyebrow.

“Yes. If you’ve identified my weakened state, then others will surely.”

Grace shook her head as though he were a child who she had just finished indulging, and she took half a step back from him.

“You’ll live, I’m sure,” she said.

Henry was about to continue their banter when Lady Isabella called her over. Grace offered him a parting smile and went to join her friend.

He enjoyed watching her move as gracefully as her namesake. He took in the way she walked, how she engaged in conversation, the curve of her neck as she looked up at Lady Isabella’s father, and how she laughed.

He simply enjoyed looking at her. And conversing with her. And dancing with her.

Avoid the parson’s mouse trap?

Too late my friend, he told himself. You’re already caught.



GRACE LEFT Henry where he stood and joined the group of people who buzzed around Isabella and Robert.

Truly, the man was impossible. How on earth was she supposed to maintain her equilibrium when he would joke and

tease her as he did, as if he regarded her as something more than just a friend?

“You’ve made a total conquest of the Duke of Egremont.

Isabella’s words echoed in her mind. She hadn’t believed her friend then, and she didn’t believe her now.

No matter how much she wanted to.

Alone, she allowed herself the indulgence of recalling how nice it felt to be held by him as they danced. To add to her guilt, she had begun returning recently to her sketchbook from Madame Geraldine’s salon. She had created a new drawing, but this time the figure was no longer masked, and the face of her naked Adonis looked a lot like Henry Cavandish.

Oh, dangerous thoughts indeed.

That’s why she had to limit the amount of time in his company. If she did not she might begin to speculate if such a perfect physical specimen could exist outside the world of art.

But he did seem intent on provoking her tonight.

While she danced, he watched her with a leonine intent. And when it brought them together, every touch necessitated by the dance seemed like a caress.

And yet, he’d make no attempt to get her alone, and...

Grace’s overactive imagination eagerly speculated on what he would do next, and it ranged from a chaste kiss to the cheek to her writhing beneath him in ecstasy. At *that* unbidden image, her face flushed.

She excused herself from the next dance and sat down, fanning herself furiously. She should be grateful that no one could see the direction of her thoughts.

Now it was her turn to observe Henry. She liked the way he listened attentively as people spoke to him, and the easy way he smiled freely, sharing his time with people, regardless of rank, as he made his way around the room.

Then he stood before her.

Please don't ask me to dance, she silently pleaded. *I fear my shaking legs might betray me.*

And yet, he didn't have to say anything – his grey-blue eyes said it all. He held out his hand, and she accepted it. She rose, and, to her relief, her legs did not shake. Still, he said nothing, but she trusted where he led. It was not to the dance.

As if she had thought it into being, Grace found herself alone with him in a library dimly lit by a few low wicked lamps.

Henry closed the door softly behind him, it seemed so as not to disturb the quiet of the room.

His eyes were mesmerizing, and she found herself falling into them. The intensity of his gaze ignited a fire within her. He raised her hand and turned it over, then touched his lips to the exposed flesh at her wrist.

Her small gasp became a sigh when his lips touched the inside of her elbow as he stepped forward. Quite naturally, that arm, and its partner, wound around his neck to give her exactly what she wanted. No, *needed* - his lips on hers.

He seemed in no hurry, Through the silk of her gown, she felt the spread of his fingers at her ribs before they slid around to her back, pulling her closer as he deepened the kiss.

She opened her mouth to his, mimicking his actions, their tongues exploring. She pushed herself closer, feeling the hardness of his body against her own. A fresh rush of desire surged through her.

The kiss drew to a close. Henry rested his forehead on hers. There was something satisfying in hearing that his breath was as ragged as hers.

“I want you,” he whispered. “But I didn’t know how much you wanted me. Now I have my answer.”

CHAPTER
SIX

D*ecember*

Toward Castlerigg Hall

Keswick in the Lake District

There was a distinct disadvantage to sitting in a carriage across from newlyweds, Henry decided. He glanced to Grace who seemed well aware the blanket that Robert had thoughtfully wrapped around himself and his bride was not just to keep her warm from the chill air on their northern journey to the Lake District.

Wandering hands may be hidden from view, but what couldn't be hidden were Isabella's rosy cheeks and the occasional soft sigh. And from Robert there was, from time to time, a look of marked concentration or a groan disguised as a cough.

Henry shifted in his seat to distract himself from a growing erection. Beside him, less than a handspan away, was Grace, and it was all he could do to stop himself pulling her into his arms and doing to her what he imagined Robert was doing to Isabella, especially when Grace's glance at him revealed invitation in her soft grey eyes.

And Henry wanted to. Oh, *how* he wanted to. But there were proprieties to observe which was why they were on their way to visit Grace's brother – a newlywed himself, as it happened – to formally announce his intention to marry Grace and sign the contracts.

Then there would be three weeks for the banns to be read.

Yes, it was quite within his prerogative as duke to arrange a special license, but he wanted Grace to have the wedding she wanted, and that was in the chapel at Castlerigg Hall where her late parents were married.

A sane, civilized man should be able to wait three weeks before taking his bride to bed, surely. However, now on day five of their journey, Henry was beginning to question his sanity *and* his civility.

It seemed the air grew colder every mile north they travelled from Bath. Now, an hour on the road out of Manchester, the grey skies above hinted at early snow. Grace pulled her travelling cloak around herself, but it was clearly inadequate for the task.

Henry stood awkwardly in the confined space and pulled down the leather blinds to hold back the chill seeping through the glass, then removed his great coat.

“Here,” he said to Grace. “Come close to me to stop yourself getting a chill.”

He thought she might object, considering the proprieties of it, but the practicality of remaining warm for the remaining

miles to Lancaster followed by the winding roads through Windemere, made up her mind.

She settled into his arms with a whispered thanks as he arranged the woolen coat around them. The tension in his shoulders eased a little. He was much more content with Grace in his arms. Now all he had to do was to distract himself from the tension that arose elsewhere in his body.

After a few more miles, the swaying of the carriage lulled them all into a light doze.

Henry opened his eyes. The lowered blinds had reduced the light in the coach, and the snow-laden clouds further dimmed the interior of the carriage.

He glanced down to Grace who rested her head on his shoulder, his arm around her.

His chest tightened with sudden emotion.

He loved her. He was to marry her, and would remain her devoted servant for as long as he lived.

He was conscious of the placement of his hands. One was just below her right breast, the other rested across his lap. But, if he reached across, his fingers could touch the top of her thigh. The restraint of his higher self slept, allowing arousal to steadily grow.

He envied Robert and Isabella who now slept soundly opposite him. After a long day in the carriage, the married couple would retreat to their room where they could enjoy each other as well as a good nights' sleep. He and Grace

would part with no time or privacy to offer her more than a chaste kiss at the end of the evening.

The fact his dreams were filled with all the things he would like to be doing with Grace did not give him the rest he craved, and, now he was holding her, more of those thoughts took hold.



GRACE FELT warm and secure in her fiancé's arms – well, her *almost* fiancé. Their engagement was not official until contracts were signed by her brother and Henry.

And she might have been content to simply be held by him, except she wanted more than that.

She hadn't felt it appropriate just yet to interrogate Isabella for knowledge of what congress between men and women was like, and, in some respects, she didn't need to. Just the dreamy satisfied look on her friend's face was enough to give her the answer.

And now Henry's hands were on her. One just below her breast which anticipated his touch with a soft tingling that made her nipples erect. His other hand rested on her lap, so close to that place between her legs which grew warm.

She wanted him in every way possible.

Would it be wrong to encourage it? Grace didn't consider herself a seductress, but she knew enough to trust her own instincts. Still feigning sleep, she sighed and turned in, snuggling up closer and pressing her breasts against him. Her

left hand eased its way to his lap where she let her fingers stroke the top of his thighs. After a moment his hand fell on hers and pushed it up until she cupped the bulge in the front of his trousers, his left arm around her pulling her even closer.

She looked up at him. Desire had now taken on a dangerous edge. Her heart pounded with it, and the tingling between her legs grew.

“Do you imagine what’s going on beneath their blanket?” he whispered, his hand covering hers causing it to slide up and down his erection. “She would be doing this to him. Yes, just like this – firm, but not too hard.”

Henry’s hand left hers and moved across her lap. Her legs parted without instruction, and his hand pressed against the junction of her thighs.

Grace sighed.

“He’s probably pulled up her skirts, and is touching her there. His bare hand on her flesh, touching, stroking,” he continued. His hand left her lap and slipped higher until he cupped one breast, squeezing it gently so she gasped in arousal. “And his hand is already through the opening of her chemise, caressing her breasts, her nipples hard for him as yours are for me.”

“More Henry, give me more,” Grace whispered in return.

“If we were alone, I would have you sit on my lap with your legs over mine and my cock inside you, my hands on your breasts, letting every jostle and jolt of the carriage bring

me deeper inside you. I'd touch you, and you would cry out for me while I bring you the most exquisite pleasure."

Grace let her head drop on to his shoulder, his words arousing her as much as his roving hands. She visualized his words as he spoke his hands hinting at the wicked promises he poured into her ear.

"Oh God, Grace I can't tell you how much I want you, how I want to see your face every time I make you come."

"I can no longer wait," she said. "Come to me tonight. Please Henry, I beg you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The anticipation of a warm welcome beside a hearty fire revived the party a few miles from their destination. There was animated discussion within the carriage of plans for their month-long stay and a winter wedding in the old chapel.

Henry sat back, enjoying hearing his bride-to-be talk enthusiastically about the place she called home.

“Derwentwater is one of the most beautiful places in England,” said Grace. “I’ve often taken my sketchbook there. In summer, the hills overlooking the lake are grassy green with the most beautiful purple heather, but it is stunning in every season. It would not surprise me if in the morning we see snow capping the peaks that overlook the lake. If we do, we are sure to have snow for Christmas.”

Isabella clapped her hands.

“I’ve not seen proper snow – not like you see in paintings,” she said. “Father always insisted spending the winter season in London. Of course, there is Hyde Park and Hampstead Heath, but now in the city is not the same, is it?”

Grace leaned forward and squeezed her friend’s hands.

“There are standing stones near the Hall that date back many, many centuries. They ought to be as famous as Stonehenge, but we are quite content to have them all to ourselves,” she said. “And the markets in Keswick are more than five hundred years old! We shall buy something there for Christmas.”

So, this was what love was like, Henry mused. It wasn't just one feeling, but many all rolled into one – all of the virtues, all of the *best* feelings – desire and yet contentment, joy and delight all mixed together. What more could a man long for than a beautiful, kind, and intelligent woman to love and who loved him in return?

“Do you sketch often?” Charlton enquired.

“Oh, she does darling, Grace is very, very good,” Isabella exclaimed before Grace could answer. “Much better than me, I'm afraid.”

Grace blushed. “You're being far too kind, Isabella.”

“No, no! Madame Geraldine said you have true talent. Madame Geraldine is a sublime artist,” Isabella continued. “She holds the most wonderful classes.”

Grace's look of embarrassment turned into alarm, and Henry was now on alert.

He glanced over to Charlton who lifted his chin a little, returning a look that suggested he knew what was going on, and it was more than just Isabella being overenthusiastic.

The bastard! He's gone and told his wife!

But the annoyance that flared up in Henry disappeared just as quickly.

Did it matter if she knew? Would it make any difference if Grace became aware that he was the man she had sketched that day?

He supposed not, but *he* wanted to be the one to tell her.

Memories of that warm September day came back to him, the look of studied concentration as she regarded his body. The bite of her lip that sent a charge straight to his groin. Now she was to be his bride, his reaction to the memory was even more potent.

His mind was made up. The next time she saw him naked, he would be sitting in the same pose he'd been in when the screens were removed at Madame Geraldine's studio to see if Grace remembered – and realized.

That settled him into a manageable but pleasant low-grade arousal for the rest of the journey to Castlerigg Hall.



THE GREETING the party received at Castlerigg Hall was in sharp contrast to the bitter cold that descended on their journey.

She was swept into a warm embrace by Georgette, her sister-in-law, while her brother David welcomed the rest of the party.

“It is so wonderful to have you stay for Christmas – and hosting your wedding will make it extra special,” said the pretty, petite brunette. “We will speak about this after dinner. We’ve invited Reverend Heyton and his wife to lunch after church on Sunday. They say they are both honored to be meeting the duke. And if you don’t mind, I’ve taken the liberty of throwing a ball for New Year’s Eve, and we will introduce you as the new Duchess of Egremont., I’m so excited!”

Very quickly Georgette slipped her arm in hers and Grace found herself steered toward a drawing room where a cheering fire blazed.

“Your rooms will be ready shortly, so let’s have a sherry to toast your arrival, and you can tell us of your trip up from Bath.”

After being in such close quarters to Henry for five days, the distance that was now between them in the charmingly appointed room seemed like a gulf. And yet every time he looked at her, it felt like a caress. Her body remembered his touches today, and she wanted more of them. More of him.

Her love for him was full to overflowing, and she couldn’t wait to show him how much he meant to her. How fortunate they all were – her brother married for love, her best friend married for love, and it was soon to be her turn.

The butler entered the room to announce that dinner would be at seven o’clock. Lady Georgette Tyneford stood and suggested that the guests might like to rest after such a long journey.

Isabella and Robert were shown their rooms. Henry's was two doors down from them. Grace gave him a lingering look before she went to her own room at the far end of the hallway.

The bedroom was as she had left it, but somehow it looked different – distinctly feminine. What might it look like to share a bedroom with Henry? She imagined his accoutrements alongside hers, the scent of sandalwood, cinnamon, and bergamot of his cologne.

The maids had already unpacked for her and left a ewer of steaming hot water for her to wash away the worst of the travels. She considered ringing for a bath to be brought up, but, right now, a few hours' sleep in a comfortable bed after so long in the carriage would be more than welcome.

She removed her travelling dress and poured hot water into the washbowl, using a washcloth to wipe herself down, then slipping a flannel nightdress over her chemise for her nap.

Recalling that she intended to give Georgette some of her watercolor scenes of Bath as a gift, Grace took note of her sketch books, wrapped in oilskin to protect them on their travels, and placed by the maid on a small table.

Grace untied the leather strap and pulled out the pictures she had earmarked for Georgette .

She set them aside and idly flipped through the sketches and studies that filled the other pages. She stopped at her male nudes.

They seemed like a lifetime ago. So much had changed. *She* had changed.

“Ahem.”

Grace started, bumping the folio with her hip. Loose pages fell to the floor.

“Henry! What are you doing here?”

He put a finger to his lips and closed the door behind him.

“You asked me to come to you, and now I have.” His voice, a low rumble, ignited a spark of arousal.

Those hypnotic eyes of his kept her immobile as he approached. He was only a pace away when he in turn bumped the folio from the table and more loose sheets of paper tumbled to the floor.

Henry squatted down to retrieve them.

“Oh!” Grace cried out. “I’ll do that!”

“I have them,” he told her.

She bit her lip as he examined the pencil and charcoal sketches. He slowly rose to his feet.

He set down one sketch. She glanced at it. It was one of the nudes from Madame Geraldine’s studio.

Of course it was.

She swallowed against a lump in her throat, recognizing the sketch as one she redrew later. Henry was looking at his head on another man’s body.

This was beyond mortifying. Then he spoke.

“Very good, you have captured *le bel homme* very well.”

The words were familiar and yet not.

You have a particular gift for capturing anatomy... pay more attention to finishing the left hand and do not be afraid to spend more time between his legs.

Grace gasped. "It was *you!*"

"In the flesh."

Henry grinned at her and, standing, put the remaining sketches back on the table .

Grace put her hands onto her heated cheeks.

"But.. how? Why?"

There were even more questions she wanted to ask, but she couldn't make her mouth say the words. She dropped her gaze from him.

He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to look her in the eye.

"It was my forfeit for losing a wager, a silly prank which harmed only my dignity, but when Charlton saw Isabella there, he panicked."

"*Robert* was there?"

"He was one of the footmen."

Grace closed her eyes and recalled the event. She'd not paid any attention to the footmen...

"We had no idea the classes would be attended by young ladies. Robert was afraid of losing the support of Isabella's father, and I was afraid of the damage to my reputation if it became known that I had posed naked for an art class."

Henry enfolded her into his arms. “I needed to know whether you’d guessed my identity.”

Grace shook her head. “I hadn’t. I had no idea, and then when you started paying me attention and more serious courting, I couldn’t help but think about the naked man... what it would be like to touch him – touch *you* – in the flesh.”

Henry put a finger under her chin, inviting her to look up at him. In his eyes she saw affection, love, and desire.

He lowered his lips to hers, and she drank in the tenderness that made her heart ache with love for this man.

Henry released her and took a step back. He shrugged off his jacket and started unbuttoning his waistcoat.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you what you asked for.”

He removed that garment, and loosened the string at the neck of his shirt to pull it over his head. Now he was bare chested before her.

“Touch me, Grace, my darling. I trust I meet with your approval.”

She stepped toward him, unable to resist. Grace ran a hand up his arm, across his shoulder, and cupped his neck.

“You exceed my approval in every way,” she told him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

You must learn to relax, or it will be hard on you. Posing is more physically taxing than you realize.

It was torture of the most exquisite kind. Henry fought the urge to seize Grace, to plunder her mouth and arouse her as much as he was being aroused by her soft, tentative touches.

Despite his own desire, he didn't want to frighten her, but there was still every chance that his arousal could turn to agony very quickly. She stepped closer to him and nibbled her bottom lip once more.

He inwardly groaned.

Every sense was heightened. The press of her body beneath the flannel nightdress against his chest set off sparks across his nerve endings, her soft floral perfume was thoroughly intoxicating, and the thought of tasting her was almost more than he could bear.

Then she put his hand on his cock and rubbed it as she'd done in the coach today. He let out a long breath.

"I want to see it, Henry," Grace whispered. "I've never seen one aroused before."

“Get used to it, sweetheart, because you’ll be seeing a lot more of it, especially if you keep stroking me like this.”

Henry was surprised to find his fingers shaking slightly as he released the buttons of his fall-front trousers and guided her hand to him.

Once again, her fingers gently stroked him, her thumb rubbing the tip, hardening him even further.

To his horror, or his delight – in his sex-filled mind, he wasn’t sure which it was – Grace dropped to her knees, taking the breeches down with her. Now he could feel her breath on him. The anticipation became agony.

“Does it always stand so proud?”

“Yes. No... Oh Grace, I think you’ll be the death of me.”

She giggled. “I don’t think so.”

He thrust forward, his restraint almost at an end when he felt the slightest of kisses on the tip.

“Grace, you’re killing me.”

“Tell me, how I can revive you?”

That was too much, the final straw. Henry hauled Grace to her feet and kissed her, tasting her like the starving man he was. His hand slipped around her waist, then lower to cup her bottom before swinging her up into his arms and shuffling the short distance to her bed, his trousers round his ankles.

Putting her gently down on the virginal white bedcover, his attention grazed over her still covered breasts heaving with her heavy breathing.

Clothing, that which maketh the man, restrained him from the beast he was about to become. He sat heavily on the bed and worked the laces of his boots so he could remove his trousers, only half-aware of her movement behind him.

Raw need governed his actions now as he divested himself of the rest of his clothing. He turned back to her and his breath caught. There lay Grace, her flannel nightdress removed, chestnut brown hair tumbling down her shoulders, the ends curling across the front of her cotton chemise.

He took in the sight of her and hardened more. But it was more than lust that fueled him. He wanted to worship her with his hands, with his mouth, with his whole body.

Her expression full of desire made him want her all the more.

He moved beside her. Her attention fell on the scar on his thigh. She touched it.

“Ah-ha... Proof!” she said.

He frowned. “Of what?”

“That it *was* you I drew at Madame Geraldine’s studio.”

“Was there any doubt?”

She shook her head, then cupped his cheek, and drew him down for a kiss.

Henry forced himself to go slow and take his time to explore this exquisite creature who had agreed to be his wife.

“You have me at a particular disadvantage,” he whispered between kisses.

“How so?”

“I am naked, but you are not.”

“Let’s remedy that.”

Grace got up from the bed and removed her chemise. Henry left the bed also and pulled back the covers before climbing back in.

“Join me,” he said, holding back the covers for her.



SHE DIDN'T HESITATE; the slight chill of the room made her more conscious of her nakedness than Henry's intent regard.

She wondered if she was supposed to feel shy, embarrassed, or nervous about making love for the first time, but she was not.

Her love for the man before her filled her heart with joy as well as wonder. His body had warmed the sheets they now lay on, and she moved closer to where his body radiated heat. Henry pulled the blankets over, cocooning them both.

Henry enfolded her into his arms, and he held her like that for a long moment, as though he sensed her need to go slow, not because she was skittish, but because she needed to savor this moment. Besides, they had all afternoon.

He seemed content enough to let her set the pace. She touched him first, drinking in his kisses while she ran her hands over the contours of his chest. Firm, yet soft. Warm, but

when she lightly ran her fingers down his chest and down his stomach, his skin turned to gooseflesh.

Feeling bolder, she lay partly across him, her breasts tickled by the hair on his chest, her legs falling open over his. Her mons pressed on his leg, marking the beginning of a deep restlessness in her that was only partly satisfied by rubbing herself up against him.

Henry growled, and she quickly found herself on her back, his body looming over hers.

She stretched languorously, her breasts thrusting upwards as she arched her back.

His answer was to capture one of her nipples between his lips. She gasped with the pleasure of it, and still it wasn't enough.

His hands and mouth teased her. The soft rain of kisses on her mouth and neck, the first grasp of his hand on her breast, while the other searched lower, grazing her waist, her hips, getting closer to the center of her need, but never quite there.

She pushed herself against him once more, seeking satisfaction.

"You're doing this deliberately," she gasped between kisses.

"Yes."

"You're driving me mad."

"That's the intent."

His fingers grazed across the soft folds of her sex.

She groaned. Her legs seemed to part of their own accord.

“I’ve dreamed of making love to you for months. I’ve spent my waking hours thinking about how I would do it,” he said. “I would tease you, make you mad with desire for me, and, in my wildest imaginings, you would cry out my name over and over.”

“Henry, my darling...” she breathed as those fingers returned and found that sensitive flesh in those folds and brought it to life with his fingers – touching, rubbing, bringing pleasure with every stroke as she climbed higher and higher until the pleasure exploded like fireworks through her.

“Henry!”

The rest of her cry was trapped between his lips as he kissed her passionately once again. Over and over again, he kissed her lips, her cheeks, that sensitive spot on her neck that she didn’t realize she owned.

In the meantime, his hands roved over her body as though he was learning her by touch and taste as well as by sight.

What a good idea that was, she thought fleetingly as she identified the beginnings of another surge of pleasure building.



HENRY NOTICED A SLIGHT CHANGE, and his heart sang.

No passive bed mate was she. Grace became bold in her exploration of his body. She touched him with confidence and

kissed him with assertiveness. He loved her, poured his heart into every caress.

He moved down her body, his mouth trailing his fingers as they returned to between her legs. He flicked out his tongue. She cried out in pleasure. His fingers stroked her, readying her to accept his body. With practiced movements, he stoked the fires of passion until she cried out his name once more.

He rubbed himself against the sensitive flesh, and she gasped with pleasure once more before he entered her. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him close.

Henry lowered his forehead to hers. He panted, keeping his body as still as possible until she was used to the feel of him.

“My beloved,” he whispered.

Grace returned his gaze, those beautiful grey eyes regarding him with wonder.

He made one tentative thrust to see her reaction. Her mouth formed a perfect ‘o’. She rocked against him, and he responded in turn, and together they established a rhythm that heightened awareness of themselves and each other, driving forward the exquisite anticipation of desire fulfilled.

He warred between his pleasure and hers. He took her hand and placed it at her center.

“Touch yourself,” he whispered.

She frowned a moment, then acquiesced. The frown melted away, and the look on her face was a priceless revelation as she brought herself fresh fulfillment. The sight of

her under him, creamy white breasts with their rosy nipples jostling as she moved her hand between their bodies.

The surge of his own arousal became too much to fight. It pounded him like a wave.

Henry cried out her name at the peak, until he could think no more, and he was carried away by the tide.

CHAPTER
NINE

He hadn't realized he had been dozing until he felt a chill. Still, with his eyes closed, he stretched. He was no longer under the blankets. No wonder he was cold.

He raised his head a little to find Grace curled up in a wingback chair. She was wrapped in pretty pink robe, one toe peeking out. On her lap was a sketchpad.

She glanced up at him, then continued at her work. Over the crackling of the fire was the soft whispers of pencil on paper. "You moved."

"I didn't know I wasn't supposed to," he replied easily, now stretching his arms above his head then placing his hands behind his head. If she wanted to look at him, he was not going to be disobliging.

"Why am I naked in your bed?" he asked with deliberate insouciance and his best wicked grin.

Grace snorted. "Do you need a reminder?"

"I suppose the question should be why are you not naked in bed with me?"

“Hmm, because you look so beautiful sleeping, and I wanted to capture you just like this.”

“Beautiful? Women are beautiful. Men aren’t.”

Grace looked up; her gaze seemed to take him in from head to toe.

“You prefer the word *handsome*?” she asked.

Her frank regard of him commenced a renewed stirring.

“Get into the bed before you catch your death of cold.”

“I’m not cold,” she teased.

“Then my death of cold,” he replied, pulling the blankets up over him.

Henry received a mock pout in response, followed by a put-upon sigh as Grace removed her wrapper and returned to bed just as naked as he.

He took the opportunity to enfold her into his arms. She *was* slightly chilled. He gently rubbed her arms and back.

“I should leave soon. Your maid will be calling to dress you for dinner. And your brother may be an amiable man, but I think he would balk at my flagrant liberty.”

Grace sighed and raised herself up on one arm.

“Will you come to me tonight?” she asked, drawing a finger lightly along his chest.

The sensation was too much, he felt another stirring and knew if she continued, he would make love to her again, right

now. Tempted though he was, there would be time enough later.

In the meantime, there was nothing on heaven or earth that would stop him from kissing her now. One long lingering kiss became another, and his resolve almost all but vanished when she pressed herself against him.

Henry secured her hands and gently disentangled himself.

“You didn’t give me an answer,” she whispered.

He leaned down to her ear.

“Yes, I’ll come to you tonight, and every time I look at you across the dinner table, you’ll know I’ll be imagining you naked and thinking about all the ways I can make love to you.”

“There’s more than one way?”

He chuckled.

“Oh, my beautiful Grace, you have no idea how many.”



GRACE RECALLED those words hours later when they were down in the drawing room enjoying aperitifs before being called to dinner.

She watched her new sister-in-law looking adoringly at her husband. How glad she was that her brother found someone who loved him as he deserved. In truth, Grace hadn’t known Georgette well when her brother suddenly announced his intention to marry, but the more she saw of them together, the more she was pleased for them both.

And as for Isabella and Robert, the term ‘love birds’ was made just for them. They were endlessly fascinated by one another. Even when Georgette encouraged Isabella to play something on the pianoforte, Robert stood by her side to turn the pages of the music book.

Henry, on the other hand, stood beside her brother David. When she had emerged from her room for dinner she learned that both men had already spent an hour behind closed doors signing the contracts.

Grace had not had a chance to speak alone with Henry since, but, every time he looked at her, she fought a blush.

How did he do that? Just a subtle lift of his brow felt like a tangible caress on her skin, which in turn brought back memories of their lovemaking. Still, she was not unaware of her own sexual power.

She returned his look with one of her own and continued her conversation with Georgette who had already taken the liberty of making suggestions for the wedding breakfast, mindful of Henry’s eyes on her.

There was something to be said for the tease and anticipation, the banking up of the heat of desire to make the eventual fire all the hotter. As the evening continued, every touch, every look seemed more potent than the wine they consumed.

After the men returned to the drawing room after port, Henry challenged her to a game of chess and quickly discovered that she was no novice at it. And it was to no one’s surprise that Isabella pleaded fatigue from the journey and

begged their hosts' forgiveness for retiring early. Naturally, Robert escorted his wife up to their chambers.

A few minutes later, David cleared his throat and rose to his feet. "We tend to keep country hours at Castlerigg," he said. "So, if you'll excuse us..."

"But don't feel obliged to retire," Georgette hastened to add as she stood. "Finish your game."

They bade Grace and Henry goodnight.

Returning to their game, Grace placed her knight on a black square, holding her finger on the piece in consideration before committing to her move.

"Have I told you you have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen?" Henry whispered across the board.

Grace lifted her finger.

"I notice you've been staring at them all evening," she replied, keeping her eyes on the board as Henry moved his queen to in front of her bishop. "You're deliberately trying to distract me."

"Is it working?"

She used her knight to take his queen. "No. Checkmate."

Henry sighed, and she giggled in return as he accepted the hopelessness of his position.

"Another game?" he enquired.

She shook her head.

Henry reset the board then leaned across the small table and kissed her softly, sending another erotic charge through her.

“We’re thoroughly alone now,” he said.

“So, I noticed,” she answered. Henry got to his feet and held his hand out to her. She accepted it and rose from the table.

“If we’re not to play chess, then how else would you like to occupy our time? I don’t feel in the least bit tired.”

Henry hauled her roughly into his embrace and kissed her with raw animal passion. His hands roamed her back, loosening the stays enough to slip his hand beneath the fabric of her dress.

“I’ve been thinking all evening how much I want to make love to you again,” he said.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, Grace, and I devote my whole life to showing you how much...”

CHAPTER TEN

24 December

Just a mile from Castlerigg House were the standing stones – forty of them by most counts, placed in more or less a circle in a meadow, the largest more than seven feet tall.

This morning, white frost covered the ground, presaging the snow expected to fall overnight.

“Each year we get everyone from antiquarians to poets here – particularly in September,” explained David. “They seem drawn to the autumnal equinox. They say the druids performed rituals here more than a thousand years ago.”

The party broke up into couples as they explored the stones’ circle.

Grace took Henry by the hand, leading him along the southern section. She knew these stones well, as they bordered her family’s lands.

She found a sheltered spot, pressed a gloved hand on one of the immovable stones, and closed her eyes.

Henry said nothing, but she could feel his warm presence beside her.

“When I was young I was told that fairies had put these stones in a circle,” she said. “I thought if I came here and was very quiet, I might see one, and they might grant me a wish.”

Henry slid an arm around her and drew her close. “Is that what you’re doing now? Asking for a wish to be granted?”

She opened her eyes and stepped into his embrace.

“No, I came here to thank them, because they’ve done it.”

A warm glow went through her as she watched Henry tilt his head in mute enquiry. She cupped his chin, then drew his head down for a kiss.

Here, sheltered from the wind, they kissed for long moments.

“We should find the others,” she said. “Otherwise, they may come looking for us.”

Henry rubbed noses with her. “I imagine they’re doing exactly what we’re doing.”

Grace took his hand and led him to the landau. Henry seemed content to follow where she led, carrying her easel and sketch pad.

She stopped and took in the view before her. Grace knew she faced east, looking at the familiar sweep of Blencathra, its ridgeline edged in snow. Here was the backdrop she wanted to capture. The tendrils of mist that clung to the stones lingered and turned into wisps as the December morning sun brightened the cerulean blue sky.

The sun highlighted dips in the yellow-green grass, and, here and there, sheep grazed. This landscape would be for her, a reminder of her idyllic childhood among the peaks and breathtaking lakes around Cumberland.

It was stunning in every season, but she'd never before captured it in winter. She was glad she had the opportunity to now for her future home would be over the Pennines where a different landscape awaited her. A different life too as Duchess of Egremont.

As the sun rose a little higher in the sky, the rest of their party emerged from their walk and sought the sunshine.

She was soon joined by Isabella who stationed her easel next to hers.

“You are to be wed in a week; are you nervous?” Isabella asked.

Grace cast a glance toward her friend and chuckled. “Everything is as it should be. I could not be more content. Are you going to give me some advice from your vast repertoire of knowledge as a married woman?”

“I should think you need no advice from me. You and Henry will not have been the first to anticipate your vows. The expression of contentment on your face, and the look of satisfaction on his is plain for all to see.”

Grace's face heated, but she said nothing. Isabella laughed.

“So, it *is* true! I thought so, but Robert told me not be to so silly, or to mind my own business, I'm not sure which, but I ignored him, of course.”

“Of course,” Grace intoned gravely.

Isabella set down her brush and took Grace by the hands.

“I am thrilled for you both,” she said. “I wish you as happy as Robert and I. Imagine! We’ll have children, and they’ll play together...”

Grace listened to Isabella spell out the next twenty years of their lives together – a spun confection which was as sweet as the girl herself. And she hoped that the fairies among the standing stones she imagined as a child were still real and granted Isabella’s wish.

As for herself, Grace was content to take each day as it came – Christmas tomorrow, then her wedding, and the life she and Henry would enjoy together for as long as they both lived.



WARM CANDLELIGHT SPILLED from the chapel at Castlerigg House. In addition to being a place of worship for the Tyneford family for the better part of two centuries, it was also the church that served the surrounding farming families too.

Tonight they had also gathered under its vaulted ceilings for the Midnight Mass. Henry noted to himself that the intimate gathering of about one hundred was more affecting than many cathedral services he had attended in London.

The choir of eight were clearly members of the local community - men, women and youths, rather than being

professional choristers __ yet they sang with beautiful harmonies.

It was not lost on him that in a few more days' time he would be standing at that altar with Grace beside him, and he had no doubt that many of the same people here tonight would also attend to offer their best wishes.

Beside him Grace, dressed in a lovely wine-colored velvet gown, sang the Christmas hymns, and his heart felt glad. Too few of his aristocratic peers had the opportunity to marry for love. For some love came later, but, alas, for others it came not at all.

But here he was with the woman he loved beside him. So very soon they would declare before all their love and pledge vows to one another.

The thought sent a wave of contentment through him.

Grace caught his eye, and she smiled up at him.

After the service, some left to ensure they made it safely to their homes before any further snow fall made it too difficult. Their party lingered as David and Georgette spoke to some of the other villagers about the plans for the upcoming mid-winter.

Soon it was their turn to leave. The light dusting of snow that had fallen thus far had now stopped, and a breeze had blown away much of the clouds to leave a very cold but clear night overhead.

At the house, a warming feast awaited them.

Could there be an evening more perfect than this?

However, the difficulty being in a party of two newlywed couples and one nearly-wed was, Henry concluded, that, as much as the couples enjoyed being in one another's company, the allure of being alone with one's spouse was stronger.

Following an impressive Christmas dinner, talk turned to the evening's entertainment. David's suggestion of snap dragon – in which one plucked a brandy-soaked plum from a bowl that had been set alight – was quickly extinguished, pun intended, by his wife.

She suggested charades, which seemed to be safe enough, but after a while that had run its course.

Outside, snow returned, bringing to pass the anticipated white Christmas.

The clock chiming two seemed to break the spell, Grace announced her intention to retire for the night. That was soon followed by Georgette and Isabella. The three men remained in the parlor, smoking a last cigar and enjoying another snifter of brandy until lethargy caught up with them, and they too climbed the stairs.

Henry entered the antechamber of his room. Bright light leaked under the door to his bedchamber which surprised him. He would expect only a single lamp to be lit. He opened the door, and found the view to his bed obscured by a large easel.

There was something on the easel. His eyes fell on the sketch of a naked woman lying seductively on a bed. He recognized her instantly.

“Grace?”

There was no answer, but the rustling of bed sheets.

He stepped around the easel to find her lying on his bed in the same pose as had been drawn on the sketchbook. His breath caught, taking in the alabaster skin turned golden in the lamplight. The shapely legs, the tapered waist, her beautifully-shaped breasts bared for him, and those eyes, those beautiful grey eyes which silently demanded he draw near.

“I thought it was only fitting since I had sketched *you* naked that the favor be returned,” she said.

“I don’t draw,” he said, taking off his jacket, then unbuttoning his breeches.

“I know, so I did it for you. Consider it a wedding present.”

“Drawing is putting a line around an idea.”

Henri Matisse

THE END

BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Ellen Carter is a USA Today bestselling author and an award-winning historical romance writer who pens richly detailed historical romantic adventures and thrillers. A former newspaper journalist, Carter ran an award-winning PR agency for 12 years. She lives in Australia with her husband and two cats.

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