

IRIS LIM

Once Upon a Time
In Millsbury

A Regency Romance

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Iris Lim

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*To my dearest husband,
A thousand books could not express
how blessed I am to be loved by you.*

P.S. I love you too.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Also by Iris Lim](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Stay Updated](#)

Chapter One

What if he never married?

In the privacy of his childhood bedroom, Lord Garrett Laurence, future Earl of Chattsworth, sank into his late grandfather's chair and contemplated the question with a heavy-hearted sigh.

Mother would have his head, for one. The idea of a future earl choosing not to marry was entirely outlandish, particularly to a woman as dedicated to appearances and social duty as the Countess of Chattsworth.

Bridget and Bella, his two lovely sisters, would no doubt laugh their heads off before resolving to dissuade their brother if they so much as heard a hint of his disinclination for marriage. The girls, for all their good sense and breeding, were still too young to be completely rid of their romantic inclinations.

They still thought of marriage as a grand adventure. Garrett, on the other hand, had seen enough of his friends in Town to see the imperfections that came with the parson's noose. Why anyone would give up the flexibilities of bachelorhood for matrimony without sufficient inducement was baffling at best.

The sound of stomping feet indicated an impending visitor. Garrett only sank deeper into his chair.

It was not as if he detested the thought of marriage altogether. There was some attraction in the general idea of matrimony, of the hypothetical allure of a loving wife and a brood of children. He would never have courted Miss Oliver for the many months he did if he hadn't at least been willing to consider the possibility of marriage.

But he rather liked his bachelorhood, and Miss Oliver had not been

entirely wrong to blame him for his inattentiveness. He never did try very hard to woo her.

The footsteps grew louder before Garrett's bedroom door swung open, the handle nearly slamming into the wall. Bridget stood at the entrance, towering taller than any young woman below twenty had the right to. She and Bella might be born twins, but no one who had ever laid eyes on the two sisters could ever possibly confuse them.

"Your presence is requested downstairs," Bridget announced, her voice as strong and crisp as her person. If a portraitist ever needed a model for a quintessential burgeoning English female aristocrat, Bridget ought to volunteer.

"Does Mother have visitors again?" Garrett barely made to rise. There were certain rules when it came to society, but he was not about to be held to them for the sake of his baby sister.

"You know that she *always* has visitors." Bridget's lips twitched. One day, someone would see her for the beauty that she was, even if male attention tended to flock towards the shorter, more classically pretty Bella in most cases. "I think Mother would faint the day she has no cards in our salver."

Garrett grinned. "I cannot disagree."

"But you really must go before she frets. I only offered to inform you since I was headed this way." Bridget turned around, her brown hair already half loosened. The girl could never stay still.

"And why am I to be offered as the sacrificial lamb when I have two perfectly serviceable sisters who can handle our callers with our mother?"

"Must you ask such an obvious question, Garrett?" Bridget raised a brow, her lips now curled into a smile.

Garrett groaned slightly. "Who is it this time?"

Bridget had the audacity to laugh. "Only Mrs. and Miss Sabine."

"Were they not here yesterday?"

"Yes, but last I heard—you were still unmarried today."

Now, Garrett groaned in truth. Reluctantly, he dragged himself to his feet. "Has it occurred to no one in this household that it might prove a slight to Miss Oliver if I carried on courting another so soon after she has declined my suit?"

"I suppose that depends, dear brother, on whether you ever truly intended to court her in the first place."

Bridget's perception was as impressive as it was discomfiting. Garrett glared at his astute younger sister. "If I must go to the lions' den, why have you and Bella, I presume, been spared? Would it not be all so much more proper with my sisters present as well?"

"Melodia has come to visit, and Father has allowed us to spend the morning with her instead." Bridget grinned. The rector's daughter was so close with his sisters that half of the residents of Millsbury considered the three of them a set over Garrett and his own siblings. Miss Reese might still be a child, but even her company sounded preferable this morning compared to enduring Mrs. Sabine's incessant and unsubtle hints.

Why Mother ever encouraged these women, he would never know. He doubted she would be happy to see him settled with such ordinary folks anyway, even if they were good and honest ordinary folks.

"Go to Mother before she frets. I have warned you more than is my duty," Bridget announced with a smile. "And I am off to pin my hair before our picnic."

Garret smiled and shook his head as his sister whisked her way out the room as quickly as she had entered it. The role of a future earl was not one of heavy labor or physical discomfort, but it was by no means an easy role to play.

He spent a whole minute inspecting his clothes, lest Mother have anything to complain about, and, having resigned himself to a half hour of entertaining, rushed down the stairs, one quick step after another, never one to do things slow. He never had been the most energetic child, often preferring the pretend play of toy soldiers over the mad dashes and tree-climbing of some other boys. His preference for quieter activities had led him eventually towards intellectual pursuits and academic success, feats that earned him his peers' respect, even if begrudgingly given. Not that those traits ever garnered women's attentions as much as his inheritance and viscountcy did. Even if he was Lord Laurence by courtesy only, the honorific itself was enough to draw plenty an eye in a ballroom.

His feet landed with a thud on the main floor.

As country houses went, Laurendale was spacious and dignified: stately, if a bit old-fashioned. Raised the daughter of a marquess, Mother had always insisted that any repairs or adjustments to the property be done with only the finest materials available, even for a house in far-flung Millsbury. Her commitment resulted in a home that was visible miles away, a landmark, if

you will, for neighbors near and far.

The Linus homestead of Highgreen Park was the closest Laurendale had to fashionable neighbors, but even the intricate, experimental architecture of that home never commanded as much gravitas as Laurendale did. People viewed Highgreen Park as a marvel and a curiosity. People revered Laurendale.

"Pardon me, sir," a house maid apologized before passing by. Garrett nodded absent-mindedly as he made his way towards the drawing room. Usually, he would smell the freshly steeped tea by now; and while he disliked entertaining in a personal sense, he did not quite mind partaking of the refreshments alongside their guests. Mother only ever served the finest things in life.

The footman moved to get the door when Garrett reached the drawing room, but the young lord waved the proffered help aside. It was one thing to be waited upon hand and foot during dinner. A young man who had survived Oxford and London alone all these years could well be expected to get his own door.

"I have been summoned, Mother," he announced upon entering. Perhaps it was not entirely considerate, but Mother was frankly getting a bit ridiculous.

"Bridget, have you—oh!" The bright, distinct voice of one Miss Melodia Reese exclaimed over the swish of the girl's own skirts as she turned to face Garrett. "I did not think it would be you."

Short and slight of frame, Miss Reese could well be invisible in plain sight if she ever cared to be, though her voice and outgoing nature ensured she was never overlooked. Garrett smiled at the memory of that one time the rector's daughter had been the first to greet him at Laurendale, before his own family did, when he had visited for the holidays. Such was the force of nature of Miss Melodia Reese.

"I did not think it would be you either." Garrett grinned.

"Oh, I'm so frightfully sorry," the girl gushed. "Did you mean to meet Lady Chattsworth here? I thought I saw her going to the library with Mrs. Sabine—oh, and Miss Sabine as well, of course. I was waiting for Bridget and Bella, you see, and Bridget said she had to have her hair rearranged first."

"I am aware."

"Bella said that she would join us later, and I did not think it would be improper for me to wait in the drawing room for Bridget. Is it very improper,

Garrett? I mean—Lord Garrett—that is, Lord Laurence." She curtsied belatedly, her head of light hair bobbing. Then she pressed her hands to her lips. "Now I *really* have been improper, haven't I?"

It probably would disappoint Mother to learn that Garrett found the babbling young girl far more entertaining than the staid and plain Miss Sabine. At least Miss Reese was not trying hard to agree with him at every turn. It was one thing for a woman to be agreeable by nature. It was another thing altogether for one to simply agree to everything because she hardly comprehended the thought in the first place.

"Do not worry. I am not so very old-fashioned."

"Oh, but Mama said that I must not be too familiar, even if I do think Bridget and Bella are like sisters to me. Your sisters are so very wonderful, my lord. You must have such fun together in Laurendale."

Garret's lips twitched. Should he illuminate the young lady that brothers do not have tea parties with their sisters' dolls or spend hours trying on strange clothes from trunks in the attic? He had heard the twins and Miss Reese giggling over their girlish games more than once in the past week. They had always sounded so carefree and happy, even if they had sounded silly at the same time.

"I'm afraid I must disappoint you, Miss Reese," Garrett spoke with a generous civility. "I fear brothers do not play as sisters do."

"But my brother does," she replied, without so much as a breath. "He played with all my dolls and toys with me growing up, and I read all my favorite books to him."

"A *younger* brother would, perhaps."

"Is that what makes the difference?" She paused as if to consider. She looked small amidst the gilded interiors of Laurendale's drawing room, but there was something sharp and bright about her as well, as if she were a small ball of captured lightning. "No, I don't think so. I think it is a matter of who a person is. If you wish to remain childlike in your heart, Lord Laurence, then you most certainly will—even if you were old and wobbly."

"I may be nine years my sisters' senior, Miss Reese, but I am hardly old and wobbly."

"Not wobbly, perhaps, but you aren't so very young, are you?" She met his eyes frankly, as only a person as close as family could. "Lady Chattsworth and Mrs. Ellis were saying at the Tanner wedding breakfast that you must be marrying soon if you did not wish to marry at Mr. Tanner's age, and Mr.

Tanner could not be any younger than forty."

Of course his mother and aunt would describe his age as a fact of desperation, and in public, no less.

"I am happy to inform you, Miss Reese, that I am merely thirty years of age and in no foreseeable danger of remaining single past forty."

"Oh, yes, I knew that, didn't I? I must have forgotten to count. I must admit I don't prefer arithmetic."

"But you like learning, don't you, Miss Reese?" Garrett had heard Father praise the girl's influence on his sisters—that the three liked to discuss educated topics as much as they did more common female concerns.

"Oh yes, I do. It would be frightfully tedious here at Millsbury without the opportunity to learn of greater things. I do envy you, Gar—my lord, that you have had the chance to see and learn so much in Oxford and in London."

Garrett could not deny that he had enjoyed those chapters of his life as well and chose not to refute her statement.

"I have been blessed with many opportunities," he stated instead.

"Yes, of course, it must be—"

"Garrett, what the heavens are you doing here?" Bridget whirled into the drawing room, her hair now aptly restored. "Mother and Mrs. Sabine are in the library, for Miss Sabine mentioned wanting to borrow a book."

"You never mentioned the library."

"Didn't I?"

"No."

"Well, even if I didn't, it was hardly proper for you and Melodia to stay in here without a chaperone."

Garrett winced at the realization that he had just done exactly what his sister described. He who had made every effort to avoid compromise or so much as a whiff of indecorous behavior in all his years away was playing the cad in his own home.

But, surely, things didn't count that way with Melodia? She was a child, really, a remnant of a friend from the twins' childhood; and she was almost as familiar to the family as anyone could be. Miss Reese was a bosom friend of his sisters', and Garrett had long since stopped considering the young girl a visitor at Laurendale. He would not have been surprised at all to be informed one day that Miss Reese's things were in Bridget's or Bella's closets

"The door was open the entire time," he countered aloud.

"I suppose." Bridget frowned. "But Mother would have my hide if she

thought I hadn't gone and fetched you as I had promised I would, so please do go to the library now."

"Very well. Enjoy your picnic."

Both Bridget and Miss Reese grinned brightly, their happiness as infectious as it was enviable.

"Oh, we will," they said together.

Garrett rued his luck the entire way to the library.

Chapter Two

The fire roasted a tad too warmly for the summer months as the family rested in the Laurendale drawing room, a month since Garrett's return to Millsbury. Father, the venerable Earl of Chattsworth, crouched over the chess set as his twin daughters colluded on the other end. It had started as a childhood tradition—two little girls playing together against one parent—but it seemed to be a tradition that Bridget and Bella enjoyed too much to give up and Father indulged too much to relinquish.

Garrett leaned into his favorite chair, a copy of his latest library acquisition in hand, wishing he had anywhere else to direct Mother's attentions except at himself. Given that his sisters either truly were engrossed in their chess game or did a fine job pretending to be, Garrett was on his own.

"You must marry soon, you know," Mother stated, for perhaps the third time in the same day. "Father and I had all three of you in the nursery by the time we were thirty."

It was a familiar tale, a *very* familiar tale; but Mother seemed to enjoy retelling it every few hours.

"If God had allowed it, we would have had more than one son," Mother remarked, her eyes set keenly on Garrett no matter how much he tried to ward her away by focusing on his book. "But as it is only you, you simply must do your duty."

Garrett sighed under his breath. "I am aware that you wish for me to wed, Mother."

"Then why do you not?" she asked as if he had stepped into a downpour without an umbrella. "We had expected your courtship with Miss Oliver to come to fruition—"

"And yet it did not," Garrett cut her off firmly. He leveled a look at his mother. To most of the people she met, the Countess of Chattsworth intimidated and loomed—a woman as powerful as she was outspoken. To Garrett, she was simply Mother. "I hope you have stopped expecting things to happen on that front."

"I only wish you would tell us why she ceased the courtship."

Garrett sighed. It was difficult to explain to the people who wished him to marry more than anything in the world that Miss Oliver had complained of how little he attended to her, of how the London heiress had rightfully accused him of acting as if he did not wish to marry her.

He had never wished to marry Miss Oliver, since he did not wish very much to marry at all. He had nothing against the woman. She was adequate in every way. But an adequate candidate for a bride was rather insufficient incentive for a man to suddenly warm towards matrimony, especially since the state of marriage was one he would likely have to bear with for quite literally the rest of his life.

"She had her reasons, and we ought to respect them," Garrett replied matter-of-factly. He made to continue his book, though he knew he would most likely not progress a single paragraph tonight.

"Well, if you so insist, then it must be time to find another lady," Mother responded immediately, never the sort to dally about a problem when she could sail forth to address it.

Bridget and Bella, the pretty little traitors, giggled from their spot. Father remained taken by the chess match.

Garrett sighed and set aside his book altogether. His curiosity for the latest economic perspectives would simply have to wait. He turned to face Mother more fully. "Is this about Miss Sabine again? I must have you know I have no reason to have any interest in her."

"Then perhaps her friend Miss Winfrey?"

"You called her a gossip yourself, Mother."

Mother shrugged nonchalantly. "People may change."

Garrett narrowed his eyes. "You are attempting to ward me off with your references. Who is it you truly wish to mention, Mother?"

Mother pursed her lips. On the other side of the room, Bridget and Bella shouted their victory, as if there was ever any chance Father would outsmart the two devious minds.

"Mother?" Garrett pressed.

"Mother wishes you to marry Miss Linus. Isn't it obvious?" Bella supplied, her round eyes twinkling in the firelight, proving once and for all that his sisters *had* been aware of Garrett's conversation with Mother. They merely avoided it for self-preservation, the imps. "She and Lady Linus were discussing it this morning."

"Are you trying to marry me off without my knowledge?" Garrett stared at Mother.

Again, their mother merely shrugged. "It would not be a horrible misalliance. A baron's daughter would make a decent future countess."

"Do you know anything about Miss Linus, Mother, apart from her family?"

"She has three brothers, and they all live at Highgreen Park," Bridget answered as she stalked over and plopped on the couch beside Mother.

"See? Your sisters are already well-acquainted with the family." Mother raised her chin.

"We are all well-acquainted with the *family*, Mother. That hardly counts as knowing Miss Linus herself." Garrett huffed.

"You can certainly do worse than Lady Linus's daughter, Garrett."

"And what is her name, Mother dearest?" Garrett raised a brow.

"Her name is—does it matter at all?" Mother shook her head as if exasperated. "A woman of good breeding transcends such trivial details. What matters most in your choice of a wife is upbringing and character."

"And, if at all possible, being born to one of your friends." Garrett grinned.

The twins, and even Father, chuckled at Garrett's words and successfully allowed him to avert Mother's ire.

Instead, the woman sighed. "Would you not at least consider it, Garrett? Miss Linus is as pretty and ladylike as they come."

Mother was not wrong, of course. Miss Linus *was* pretty, and her upbringing would indeed have given her a glimpse into what it would mean to lead the life of nobility, even if she always appeared too shy to befriend. But Garrett was not about to give Mother the satisfaction of agreeing with her.

"I can consider," Garrett conceded.

"Thank you." Mother nodded curtly. "And as Lord and Lady Linus have invited us to call tomorrow, I hope that—"

"I have plans tomorrow," Garrett blurted, having conceded more than he

was willing to for one evening.

"Do you now? Well, perhaps your plans—"

"My plans cannot change," he insisted.

"But who could you possibly be visiting?"

"The Seymours," Garrett said the first name he could think of. He wouldn't mind visiting the Seymours, of course. His cousin and her husband were the closest thing he had to friends of his own in Millsbury.

"Hillary's family?" Mother was quick to note, as usual. "Surely, you can ask your cousin to—"

"And the rectory," Garrett quickly added. "I have some particulars to discuss with Mr. Reese."

There—he had invoked the one person apart from Lord and Lady Linus, and perhaps the Prince Regent, that Mother would not wish to offend. The rector was an ordinary man, by most counts, but the Laurences had too pious of a legacy to ever dream of offending a man of God.

"Very well." Mother sighed. "I shall have to send your regrets."

Garrett did not particularly regret anything, but some battles were not worth the fight.



The ride to Seymour Lodge was pleasant, half routed in nature and half in the peripheral off-shoots of Millsbury's fast-growing number of roads. The house was comfortable in every sense of the word, and Garrett always looked forward to his calls there. The stricter and more traditional half of the gentry did not quite approve of the lodge's proximity to Millsbury, as if the stench of the butcher's stall could waft a good five miles away, and often exchanged hushed whispers about how Hillary, the granddaughter of an earl, had married beneath her by tying herself to a man merely one generation removed from trade.

Given that his cousin lived more comfortably than half the people in London, Garrett figured her choices had triumphed in the end.

"The Honorable Viscount Laurence," Seymour Lodge's butler announced stiffly upon Garrett's arrival. He had sent a note ahead of him, requesting for the Seymours' help in maintaining to Mother, in case she ever asked, that they had indeed an appointment this morning. Given the mischievous smirk on

Duncan Seymour's face upon Garrett's entry to the parlor, that fib would cost him plenty.

"Happy to know our company is to be preferred over that of a baron's," Seymour teased almost as soon as Garrett took his seat. The one person Garrett could count as a childhood friend in Hampshire flicked his newspaper nonchalantly. "Should I have that etched on my gravestone, you think? Mr. Duncan Seymour—preferred over a titled man."

"You well know it is not the baron I'm escaping," Garrett retorted before the men exchanged smiles. The drawing room at Seymour Lodge, much like the rest of the house and its occupants, exuded a pleasant mixture of modernity and warmth. The late, older Mr. Seymour had built the place, planning out every inch of the property's generous acres. Duncan had inherited it, and he'd used it wisely as a means of persuasion when convincing Garrett's Uncle Ellis and Aunt Miriam for Hillary's hand.

Duncan and Hillary Seymour were a famed love match in Millsbury—childhood sweethearts who had married before either had even turned twenty. Their home, warm and welcoming, reflected the happy results of their pairing.

"Had too much of the ladies fawning over you?" Seymour teased again behind his papers. "There are worse problems to have, my lord."

"Don't you dare 'my lord' me, Seymour."

"Do you prefer 'your lordship' then? We must keep up appearances, if only for the sake of my mother-in-law's nerves."

"Duncan, stop. You are incorrigible," Hillary chided her husband as she walked up to Garrett to hand him the tea with sugar, just as he liked it. "Must you drive my cousin crazy whenever he tries to seek refuge here?"

Seymour scoffed unrepentantly. "Are we to admit to being a safe harbor for lonely viscounts now? Are we not supposed to be saved by the nobility rather than the other way around?"

Hillary rolled her eyes and laughed. Garrett knew, even while she protested, that she secretly enjoyed her husband's irreverence. It was one of the things that he admired most about the Seymours. They always seemed so very well matched, whether they were attending a society event, running their estate, ordering about their five children, or teasing bachelors who dared to call on them.

"From what I know, you do not have any particular grievance against Miss Linus." Seymour finally set aside his morning papers. "Why did you

have to come over today? Not that we don't welcome you, of course."

Garrett sighed, thankful to have at least one pair of friends with whom he could be honest. His sisters had each other, and they had Miss Reese if ever the other was indisposed. Garrett never had much by way of confidantes.

"It is nothing against Miss Linus herself," Garrett admitted. He drank half his tea, enjoying the blend Cousin Hillary always managed to procure. Tea, while luxurious, sometimes had a harsh edge at Laurendale. It was balanced just right at Seymour Lodge, much like the company. "I merely dislike being pushed to marry so soon."

"So soon?"

"Yes, I am merely thirty, and I—"

"You are positively ancient," both Seymours blurted simultaneously, causing Garrett to stare.

The couple chuckled at each other before looking at their guest once more.

"Most men your age are married already," Seymour informed him unhelpfully.

"And you must settle down soon if you are to have time in siring your heirs," his wife added.

"Not everyone finds their spouse at three years of age," Garrett retorted. "You two *must* know you are an exception."

"A happy one." Hillary grinned.

"Indeed," Seymour agreed.

Garrett rolled his eyes in good humor. Was it any wonder he preferred visiting here rather than tarrying in Laurendale amongst Mother's guests? The atmosphere was always lighter, the conversations sillier, when there were fewer things at stake.

"Are you saying that you do not wish to marry at all?" Seymour asked then, cutting straight at Garrett's thoughts.

Garrett shrugged. "Must I be in a rush to marry?"

"You are a viscount."

"By courtesy."

"And a future earl."

"Just so."

"Does it not niggle at the back of your mind that you have yet to fulfill your life's purpose?"

"Which is what?" Garrett prompted.

"To marry, procreate, and die." Seymour grinned. "Preferably leaving an heir and a spare."

"I do not plan to leave as many spares as you, thank you."

"To each his own." It was Seymour's turn to shrug. He reached for his papers once more. Garrett wondered if the man ever read a word given how much he would rather talk instead. "I rather enjoy making the spares too much to bother stopping."

"Duncan!" Hillary chided just as Garrett struggled not to spit out his tea.

There was candidness, and then there was gracelessness. This conversation was fast becoming the latter of the two.

"Come, now, surely there must be *someone* acceptable in Millsbury." Seymour diverted his words back to matchmaking territory. "There is Miss Winfrey."

"Not my cup of tea." Garrett finished his actual tea.

"Miss Sabine then? I heard she calls often with her mother."

"Too often," Garrett grumbled.

Seymour grinned. "Very well, Miss Bethel then, who has no mother."

"The farmer's daughter?"

"I kid." Seymour grinned. When did the man *not* kid, anyway? He sank deeper into the back of his chair. "Miss Sera then?"

"You mean Mrs. Tanner."

"You could have had her if you wanted."

Garrett shrugged. He had considered the woman before, although he never chose to do much with the thought. "She was older, and too quiet."

"You wish for someone lively? Ah! Miss Reese then. Is she not always at Laurendale? What better way to court a girl unchaperoned?"

Garrett pondered, for a moment longer than he would care to admit, what it would actually be like to court the girl his sisters seemed to already treat as family. Then he winced. "She is practically a child."

"I was her age when I married," Hillary chimed in.

"And Seymour was not thirty."

She merely shrugged, unimpressed.

"What of the Misses Latimore?" Seymour continued his enumeration of every unmarried woman in Millsbury. "They are closer to you in age. You can court both at once during the parish picnic next week. I doubt Mrs. Latimore would even notice."

Garrett groaned, not quite in the mood to detail to the nosiest man in

Millsbury why he never liked the Latimore sisters, not more than he liked Miss Sabine, or Miss Bethel for that matter.

"Truly, Seymour, I came to your house to *escape* talk of matrimony. You must be at least perceptive enough to understand that."

The master of Seymour Lodge grinned. "Yes, but it is just so infinitely more fun to goad you."

Hillary, Garrett's traitor of a cousin, laughed.

Chapter Three

Millsbury was, by most people's objective evaluation, a small town burgeoning into a larger town, which might well in turn burgeon into a city. Its proximity to London ensured that its residents exchanged both goods and company with the capital quite often, and its sites were beginning to become nearly as popular as Kent, if not as prestigious.

For Melodia Reese, however, the town she had called home for her entire life was as dear as it was boring.

Papa, as the rector, cared deeply for his flock; and Melodia was privy to almost every detail of every parishioner's private life just by being present in the modest rectory during the majority of her parents' daily conversations.

She knew almost everything about everyone in Millsbury, rich or poor, male or female. Papa and Mama kept their secrets, of course. There were certain facts about certain people that they seemed to exert extra effort to guard. And Melodia was much too well-bred to pry.

But she knew that the butcher dearly wished he had a son while being blessed with five daughters. She knew Mr. and Mrs. Seymour were almost universally well-liked, even if Mrs. Seymour's parents did not think the match very proper at first. She knew that Bridget and Bella were the best friends one could ever ask for; and she knew that almost all the girls in Millsbury had, at one point in time or another, been lovesick over one of the handsome Linus brothers.

"Isn't the sunshine beautiful today?" Bella smiled with her face lifted into the air as the three of them pranced across the grass arm in arm on this particular morning.

On a day like this, when a parish picnic gathered the breadth of human

company in one place, Melodia felt almost overwhelmed with knowledge. Every face spread out across the field, from the lords and ladies to the tradesmen to the servants, carried its own story. At times like this, Millsbury was a fascinating place, even if nothing dramatic ever seemed to happen here the way it did in the novels Melodia so loved to read.

"There was a lot of praying for the weather this week," Melodia supplied in response to Bella's remark about the clear skies. The rector's daughter smiled at the gathering laid out before them. "It seems that God rather pitied us too much to refuse."

"You make Him sound so silly." Bridget sent a soft glare at Melodia. It only worked as a glare because the twins stood so much taller than Melodia. The two ladies were too kind to ever show real contempt.

"Not at all. God did become man once, didn't He?" Melodia replied. "I do think He feels everything we feel—the sadness, the joy, the anger, and even the pity."

"Wouldn't such glorious weather be a result of His good will?"

"Perhaps." Melodia shrugged, unbothered by the challenge posed to her. "It could well be a mixture of both, can't it?"

"I suppose that does make sense," Bella noted.

"Just like it's a mixture of both divine good will and a hint of mischief to place your mother with Lady Linus today." Melodia pointed out where the countess and the baroness enjoyed their picnic fare. It was amazing how they looked so refined in their beautiful dresses while sitting upon a blanket on the grass. "Do you think they are guessing which brother you like?"

"Melodia!" Bella cried.

"What? They are the best of friends, are they not? It would be natural for them to wish for their children to marry. Isn't that always the case with adults? And wouldn't it be better if they know you like Kingsley Linus? It would be rather awkward if they tried to betroth you to Kurt or Kenneth. The brothers may look alike, but they act so very different."

"I don't think Mother would ever betroth any of us without our agreement."

"I might concur at any other time," Bridget responded to her sister. "But her behavior with Garrett of late indicates that she really might be willing to betroth him without his permission if she didn't think he would storm off to Scotland and never come back."

"But Garrett doesn't like Scotland, does he?"

Bridget rolled her eyes. "Just an example, dear."

"I think it is meant hyperbolically, isn't it?" Melodia chimed in. "I read about the device the other day."

"Was it the book I lent you?"

"Yes, thank you so much, Bridget." Melodia smiled. "I am saved from having to read the rectory's books a fifth time over by Laurendale's library. And you have so many more novels. Papa and Mama favor sermons and hymns, which are good in their own way, I suppose."

"Then you must keep borrowing all the books you want. Father and Mother would be glad to see them used. They rather like to purchase books more than to read them."

"Does no one read the books at Laurendale?" Melodia felt horror at the tragedy of the mere suggestion.

"I do occasionally, and Garrett devours them." Bridget waved at Miss Winfrey as she passed them by. Melodia and Bella followed suit. "I think he would be happier reading all day than hunting or carousing like the other gentlemen."

Melodia winced at the suggestion of the twins' older brother ever *carousing*. The gentlemanly viscount was a good man, as far as she could tell. He was always kind to Melodia, and he didn't seem to mind her chattering away whenever she came across him while waiting for his sisters to come down. It felt almost irreverent to consider such a nice man carousing.

"Do gentlemen carouse often, you think?" she asked.

"I wouldn't know." Bridget grinned. "But Mr. Seymour likes to tease Cousin Christopher and Garrett about it all the time."

They reached the spot where Lady Chattsworth rested with Lady Linus, and the young ladies greeted the older ones.

"Come, Bridget. Come, Bella. Lady Linus would love to hear about your plans for London this fall," Lady Chattsworth ordered her daughters, who promptly and dutifully took their places on the blanket. "Miss Reese, will you join us as well?"

"Thank you, Lady Chattsworth. I do believe I must check on the baskets." Melodia curtsied. "Mama has asked me to help her today. Thank you for letting Lady Bridget and Lady Bella walk with me."

"You are such good friends that I would never hear the end of it if I refused." Lady Chattsworth smiled, a picture of elegance. "Do tell Mrs. Reese that the pies are particularly stellar today."

"Thank you, Lady Chattsworth. I'm sure she shall be glad to hear it." And she bid the group farewell with another curtsy.

Alone for the first time since the start of the parish picnic, Melodia wandered down the lane that had naturally formed between the spread blankets. Events like this were rare in Millsbury, never occurring more than once or twice a year, and she so dearly loved it when they did. There was something energetic about seeing the town gather together. And she always loved seeing her closest friends and the majority of her father's flock all enjoying themselves in one place.

"Ah, there you are." Mama caught onto Melodia by the shoulders once she neared the edge of the row of people. "Will you be a dear and remind the servants to replenish the pie? I did not think we would consume them so fast."

Melodia smiled at her mother, even if it meant tilting her head downwards at the jolly, short mother of Millsbury's flock. "The sweet or the savory pies, Mama?"

"All of them, I think."

"Lady Chattsworth said to let you know they are stellar today."

"Did she? Well, that is very kind." Mama smiled. With her portly frame, she always seemed to offer smiles that emanated more brightly than the average person's. "But can you hurry now?"

"Of course, Mama."

Melodia lifted her skirts an inch and bustled away.



"Are you quite certain, miss?" The Seymours' maid frowned at Melodia.

Trying to balance three whole pies between her small arms was perhaps a tad ambitious, but Melodia would rather not have the picnic guests waiting.

"I shall manage perfectly well," she promised the maid with a hefty dose of unfounded confidence. She had never been the most athletic person, and she had more than once broken precious china at home from accidents through the years. But the guests needed their pies. Surely, it would be rude to have the scrumptious dishes delivered late just because the other servants had been sent to tend to other errands.

"I hope you will, miss," the maid responded warily. It was perhaps

impertinent of the woman to speak that way, but Melodia never had been the sort to be overly concerned with propriety. A minister was a minister to everyone in the parish; and paupers and princes were welcome alike at the Reeses' door.

"I will be perfectly fine," Melodia promised as she proceeded to march forward with the treasured wares.

The grassy meadow where the parish picnic unfolded was mostly even ground, but the food and refreshments had been relegated to the hillier side of the area. Melodia tried her best to avoid stepping on her skirts, trusting her instincts to guide her when sight could not. This particular dress, a cast-off from Bridget, was so decidedly comfortable, even if it was a tad too long. The twins' old clothing used to fit Melodia like a glove all the years they had been gifting her from their wardrobe, but the Laurence sisters had reached new heights of stature in recent years that Melodia might never well attain. Soon, she would need to start hemming the gowns and dresses she received.

"Isn't the weather just perfect today?" Melodia gushed as they neared the clusters of picnic attendees.

"It is, miss," the maid replied behind her.

They successfully maneuvered a patch of uneven ground. Melodia smiled at their triumph. The pies were starting to feel heavy, but the trek was almost done.

"I don't think there could be a finer day, truly." She smiled at the sky as they continued their conveyance of the precious pies. "Papa often says that weather is the one true way to know God's will. There could be nothing more unpredictable, and there is little else that can enable or thwart man's plans than—oh!"

Her right foot tripped against a rock, setting her entire sense of balance askew. Melodia scrambled to save the pies, all while the third one she had so precariously balanced between the other two slid from her arms and began to dive straight for the patchy ground.

"Miss Reese!" the maid shouted.

"The pies!" Melodia screamed, leaning forward towards the descending dish. "Lady Chattsworth had said—"

Her exclamation, and her fall, were both promptly interrupted by two large, firm male hands—one at her arm and the other underneath the fated pie dish. Melodia gasped in relief before she looked up at her source of deliverance.

"Garrett, you saved the pie!"

Lord Garrett Laurence, whom Mama perpetually reminded her to call Lord Laurence, being a viscount and all, stood before her with a face that appeared both concerned and amused all at once. The lord cut a handsome figure with his morning coat hanging off his broad shoulders. He quirked a brow, looking more mischievous for a moment than Melodia ever thought him capable of looking.

"And I saved *you* from having your face in the pie as well, one might say." He chuckled. With a quick sense of agility, he righted her and her two safe pies back properly on the ground. "You really only thought about the pies?"

"Well, I had volunteered to bring them. I could hardly desert them because I had so artlessly tripped."

The maid behind her heaved what sounded like an exasperated sigh, her own pies still perfectly intact.

"Here, allow me to assist you to your desired destination," the viscount offered gallantly as he swept yet another pie off Melodia's hands, leaving her only with the custody of one.

"Thank you, Garrett—that is, your lordship." Melodia smiled gratefully as they sallied forth with the food.

"Must we be so formal?"

"I doubt Lady Chattsworth would like it very much if I acted overly familiar, your lordship."

"Now you sound like a servant. You know my mother would hardly care. You practically live at Laurendale."

Melodia smiled at his pronouncement, happy to have her familiarity with the Laurence home openly acknowledged. She did dearly love to visit Bridget and Bella.

"Well, I suppose I ought to do it for Papa's sake, then. It would hardly be beneficial for his ministry if his daughter goes around breaking all the rules."

"You are hardly a rule-breaker, Miss Reese."

"Perhaps not, but I would not want to start to be one. Papa likes to use our stories as examples in his preaching, and I would very much prefer to remain a good example rather than a bad one."

"I cannot ever consider you constituting a bad example."

"You are too kind, but I do wonder sometimes if I am making your sisters act too childishly for their age. We are nearly of an age, you see, but

they *are* three years my senior. I don't know if I am being the proper sort of influence, my lord."

"Again, such formality is hardly required."

Melodia shrugged. She knew more than most people did about the Laurence family. She knew that there was once another Lord Laurence before the one before her, a mere babe who never even lived long enough to learn his own name.

Mama had recounted the story to her one time, as did Bridget when six-year-old Melodia had found Lady Chattsworth crying during one of her visits.

More than thirty years ago, a boy had been born to the newly-wedded earl and countess. The child had been born to a throng of admiration, instantly heralded as Lord Laurence and the future earl of Chattsworth. But when the child had died at a mere six months, the Laurence family had mourned deeply until Garrett came along, upon whom they had promptly placed all of their hopes for a secure future.

"I can hardly call you Garrett the way Bridget and Bella do," Melodia protested when they reached the spot where they could lay down the pies. The maid sighed with obvious relief.

"You call my sisters by their names, do you not?" Lord Laurence countered.

"Well, yes, I do, but we are *friends*, you see. And it is so frightfully hard to start calling them Lady Bridget and Lady Bella when they have been Bridget and Bella to me for so long."

"Is it a matter of the length of one's acquaintance then?" Lord Laurence cocked his head slightly to the side, looking genuinely curious.

"Perhaps it is, or perhaps it is a matter of age or of sex."

"You consider your all being female a reason to take more liberties?"

"Is it not?" Melodia asked honestly. "Papa and Mama always say that I ought to be particularly careful with how I engage in conversation with young men, although they never have qualms when I talk to the young men's sisters. My parents can be so frightfully overcautious. They seem to think every single man is eager to court their daughter. And that is silly, isn't it? Who could possibly wish to court me when they can court Miss Winfrey or Miss Sabine? Oh, and there's Miss Linus too—who is ever so pretty."

"I suppose."

"Oh, and of course there is Bridget and Bella. One can hardly take note of

a humble rector's daughter when there are two such beautiful ladies before them."

"And you do not take offense at this sort of perception?"

"Should I?" Melodia frowned. "It is only natural for ladies who are older to experience courtship first, although I do wonder what sort of husbands your sisters would choose. Do you think they will marry amongst the gentry here? Or do you think they will each meet a duke of their own, who will sweep them off their feet? Oh, but I truly shouldn't say that about Bella."

"Why not?" It was the viscount's turn to frown.

"Well, it would hardly be kind to wish for a faraway duke for her when she has set her cap on—" Melodia clapped her free hand over her mouth, appalled at almost having spilled her dear friend's secret as she had the pies. She blinked, wide eyed, at a smirking Lord Laurence.

"I assume you've revealed a little more than you wished to, Miss Reese?"

Melodia lowered her fingers gradually. "I think I should stick to delivering pies, my lord."

Now, Lord Laurence laughed. "Somehow, I highly doubt that would be a wise course of action."

Chapter Four

The path between Laurendale and the Millsbury rectory was a well-tread one, no doubt rendered so by the daily treks Miss Reese and Garrett's own sisters liked to make to visit each other. The walk led one through a comfortable, pretty part of the woods before leading past the thick shrubbery to where the rectory stood nestled amidst its own prosperous property. Mr. Reese was, no doubt, a man of God. But with his capabilities in stewardship so clearly presented year after year in the rectory's yield, Garrett had no doubt the rector could well be a successful landlord in another life.

Today, however, freshly afflicted with Mother's latest round of high-handed arrangements of entertaining nearly every eligible young woman within a day's reach of Laurendale, Garrett was seeking guidance of the more moral and spiritual sort.

He presented himself at the rectory and was greeted by the family's unusual housekeeper. There was no written law that housekeepers ought to be of the short, plump, and bustling variety; but it was almost natural that nearly all of them fulfilled those expectations obligingly. Tall, thin, and severe—the woman in front of Garrett was proof that the Reese family most certainly did not hire their staff as regular people did.

"Is Mr. Reese in his study?" Garrett inquired when the woman let him in without so much as a welcome.

"He is, my lord," the housekeeper replied. The frown on her face looked halfway between harsh and annoyed, and Garrett wondered if the woman knew she was a servant at all.

"May I call on him?"

"This way, your lordship."

Garrett followed the woman like a dutiful guest, although he had been between these walls plenty of times before. There was something soothing and serene about trading thoughts with the minister. As much as he loved his own family, Garrett never did find himself fully able to embrace the abundance of female company in Laurendale for very long. His years away at school were precious to him, both for the instruction he had received and the independence he had wielded. Headmasters were rarely less harsh than his mother, but at least they never felt the need to hound him every minute about marrying.

"Ah, Lord Laurence." Mr. Reese rose when Garrett entered. The frowning housekeeper left the gentlemen alone, and Garrett quickly asked the older man to be at ease with him. They both sank into their respective chairs on either side of the massive, messy desk. "I hope the walk here was fine?"

"Very good," Garrett answered. He smiled politely at the minister. "I hope I am not disturbing you in your sermon preparations, sir."

"I am always preparing. There is nothing to disturb." The master of house smiled back casually. "Now, would you be so kind as to share what may be on your mind today, young man?"

Garrett took a moment to steel himself. As someone who had shepherded the Millsbury flock for nearly two generations, Mr. Reese most certainly did not dally with his questioning.

"I must congratulate you, sir, for the successful parish picnic last week."

"We thank God for His generous provisions through our loyal donors."

"Yes, of course." Garrett nodded. He ran his hands over his thighs, suddenly wondering if he would be considered weak for seeking counsel over something as trivial and sentimental as having a mother who urged him to marry every day. "My family enjoyed the picnic immensely."

Mr. Reese nodded, his head of white hair bobbing above his round belly. Garrett couldn't think of a more portly couple in his acquaintance than Mr. and Mrs. Reese. The two always looked so very much like jolly snowmen during the greeting line at church.

"But that is not what you wished to discuss this morning, is it?" Mr. Reese prodded, gentle yet firm.

Garrett smiled wanly. "Perhaps not."

"What troubles you, young man?"

Garrett breathed in deeply to clear his thoughts. His eyes wandered momentarily over the minister's domain. The study was neither small nor

large, a decently-sized room by all accounts. But there was hardly an inch visible underneath the endless books, letters, and writing utensils piled up all over the place. Father and Mother often said Mr. Reese was the most diligent minister they had ever known. The man must simply not like to dedicate his diligence to tidying.

"I hoped, Mr. Reese," Garrett answered a beat later, "that you would allow me to be involved in the lessons the parish will be giving the villagers' sons."

Mr. Reese's eyes lit up in surprise. "You know of the endeavor?"

"My sisters mentioned it after having heard of the project from Miss Reese."

"Ah, Melodia, of course." Mr. Reese smiled the fond smile of a proud father. "I hope she did not pester you about this."

"Oh, not at all, I promise." Garrett recalled rather pleasantly how he had always admired his tutors and teachers. "I only wish to offer my assistance."

"It would be greatly valued, of course. We would be happy if you could spare the time, my lord."

"What lessons are to be taught?"

"My wife and daughter plan to involve themselves in the teaching of basic literacy. I do believe, however, that the older boys would very much appreciate your insights in geometry and philosophy."

Garrett nodded. "Then please do inform me of the lessons I must prepare and the time I must schedule."

"Would this not interfere with other personal matters?"

"I have very few personal engagements in Millsbury."

"Not even the sort of events designed to help one find a wife?"

Garrett met the minister's knowing eyes, and he sighed. "I do not want to burden you with such silly matters, Mr. Reese."

"Ah, but it is my very purpose to be bothered by my parishioners. Anything that can cause a man to frown as you do cannot be a trivial matter."

Garrett considered how best to respond. He leaned back against the chair before he spoke, "Growing up in the family that I did, I'd always assumed matrimony to be a simple prospect if one were to wish to partake of it. My parents and grandparents, flawed as they might be in their own respective ways, never faced such dilemmas in their choice of a spouse."

"The late earl and countess had an arranged marriage, did they not?"

"Yes, a successful one, by all accounts. My grandparents showed great

preference and care for one another into their old age."

Mr. Reese nodded. "Is it what you wish for yourself then?"

Again, Garrett sighed. "I do think I would like to play a greater part in the choice of my own bride."

"Your parents were a love match—an unusual thing in their time."

"Yes, although they still met under the chaperonage of my mother's aunt, in a ballroom, as one was meant to meet one's spouse."

"Then it must be the lack of proper ballrooms in Millsbury that is hindering your potential marriage then."

Garrett smiled briefly at the humor on the older man's face. "Perhaps."

Slowly, the minister shifted his generous girth forward until he leaned over his desk. "What truly bothers you, Lord Laurence?"

Spurred by the sincerity in the minister's manner, Garrett searched his recent thoughts and intentions. He rarely expressed his deeper reflections, often leaving them be almost as soon as he had thought them. But one could hardly refuse to answer a man of God.

"I wonder of my purpose, at times," he answered. The chaos of Mr. Reese's study faded in the background as Garrett considered his words. "I have known since childhood that I shall have my father's role to play one day. I have learned all I can all these years of estate management and parliamentary duty. I strive to be an upstanding man, for my parents, my sisters, my family and my King."

"This is all very noble."

"Perhaps—and yet very unyielding as well. I never chose my name, or my title, or my role. My life path has been set even before I was born."

"Do you resent your position?"

"I do not deny its privileges or its potential for good." He met Mr. Reese's eye. "I wish to participate in the village lessons for that very purpose."

Mr. Reese nodded. "An admirable thought."

"Whatever little I can give, I wish to give. As lofty as a future earl's life might appear, it comes with frightfully little freedom."

"And that is the crux of the matter, is it not?"

"Perhaps."

Again, Mr. Reese nodded. The sagacious man paused before he stated, "You must understand that your parents mean only the best for you."

"I have no doubt of it. And Mother is trying, as best she can, to avoid imposing her choices upon me."

"And yet you worry."

"What if I were to choose poorly, Mr. Reese? For once in my life, a choice is mine to make, and it is a choice of such weighty proportions and of an irreversible nature."

"You worry over your own choice?"

"I worry that I may never find a woman I wish to marry. And while I would be perfectly content never marrying at all, I fear that Mother would have my head."

For the first time all morning, Mr. Reese chuckled. And Garrett chuckled along with him. Outside of the study, female voices and pattering steps indicated that the rest of the household was already milling about their day.

"There is something I often say to those in your circumstances, your lordship."

"Pray, do tell."

"Be the right person, and the right person will come along."

Garrett took in the simple words, his mind already cataloging the myriad ways their principles might be applied.

"And what if the right person never does come along?" he found himself asking.

"Ah." The minister sat back, propped his hands on his belly, and smiled. "Then you are already the right person."



Mr. Reese's advice, at once cryptic and straightforward, rolled in Garrett's mind like a persistent wave against the rocky shore. It was easy for the minister to make such a statement. The man was older, with a happy family and a growing flock to his name. Could his perspectives still be relevant for the youth today?

Garrett winced slightly as he stepped out the front door, the noonday sun catching him by surprise. He angled his hat to proffer himself better shade. He was often told by his sisters that men's fashion tended to be so much more practical than women's frivolous accessories, but Garrett begrudged Bridget and Bella their bonnets at times. His hats rarely offered half as decent cover.

"Lord Laurence!" A trilling, familiar female voice floated down the lane. "I didn't know you were here this morning. Were you here to see Papa?"

Garrett turned to his right and took in the scene upon the grass. Melodia Reese, in his sister's old day dress and with her bonnet askew, stood proudly in front of two neat rows of dolls and stuffed creatures. The items sat on a variety of broken stools, tree stumps, and folded blankets. Miss Reese's younger brother, who could not be more than ten years old, stood begrudgingly beside her with a stack of books in his arms.

"I did not know you had started a school here, Miss Reese." Garrett hardly knew to laugh or not at such a childlike display of pretend play. Was Miss Reese not nearly his sisters' age? Her softened feminine frame certainly indicated as much. "Are you accepting new pupils?"

"Oh! This is just for Wesley's benefit." Miss Reese pointed cheerfully at her brother, who rolled his eyes, hardly looking half as enthused as his sister. "He was complaining that the school room was too boring, and we thought to liven up our lessons with some friends."

"Friends."

"Yes, friends." Miss Reese smiled. She had an open way to her smiling that brightened up her complexion. She had either never been taught that ladies must smile demurely or did not care for such an expectation. With firm, solid steps, she marched towards her rows of pupils and began to point at them one by one. "This is Barnabas, who is twins with Barnacle. And this is Paul, who is, of course, Barnabas's friend. This is Deborah, due to her purple clothes. And this is Jacob with his twelve sons."

Garrett nodded earnestly. "The twelve brothers share little resemblance, do they?"

"They do have four different mothers." Miss Reese grinned.

"Of course."

"Can we start the lessons already?" Young Mr. Reese lamented loudly.

"Shall we do Latin or philosophy?" Miss Reese whirled to face him.

"You are your brother's instructor, Miss Reese?" Garrett asked in surprise.

"Not in everything!" Young Mr. Reese stomped his foot.

"Mama teaches arithmetic," she clarified. "And Papa teaches philosophy when he wants to."

"I believe you to be assisting with the village lessons then?" Garrett found himself asking.

"Oh, yes! And it will be ever so lovely, will it not? We are gathering all the supplies and the books we can. Do you think we can ask Lady Chattsworth? Would it be too presumptuous?"

Garrett smiled. "My family would be happy to offer whatever help we can. I myself will be instructing."

"Oh, will you?" The open smile returned. It was gratifying to have elicited it. "May I see your lessons? Mama thinks whatever we teach the village children must be kept for future use."

"I would be happy to share them, Miss Reese."

And Garrett walked back to Laurendale with a lighter step than he had at his departure.

Chapter Five

A lively jig filled the interiors of the Millsbury assembly hall with a buoyant, giddy atmosphere. Couples on the dance floor laughed and danced their way across and around each other. It had been more than a fortnight since the parish picnic, and people were eager to have something to do once more.

Underneath the largest portrait in the hall, Melodia smiled. She had danced the first set with the youngest Mr. Linus, and now she rested happily as she watched Bridget and Bella smile and sweat underneath the candles while weaving through the dance with the two older Mr. Linuses. Her friends always crowned every local event with their well-bred manners, pretty faces, and elegant movements. Bella shone in particular tonight as she danced with the man she liked, even if the adults seemed oblivious to it all.

"Are you not dancing this set, Miss Reese?"

Melodia looked up to see Garrett Laurence standing beside her, a pleasant and polite look on his face. He, like his family, was dressed to the nines tonight. And Melodia thought he rather looked more like a lord tonight than just her best friends' brother. Perhaps, compared to London fashion, the outfits displayed in their little country assembly would be considered almost plain. But Melodia had never been to London, at least not beyond a quick visit to a relative or two on the way to some other county, so she could only judge by the standards of Millsbury society. But, as far as she could judge, the Laurences and the Linuses were the epitome of prevailing good taste.

"I danced the first set," Melodia replied with a smile. "With the abundance of ladies present, I don't think it requisite that I dance *every* set."

"Ah, perhaps not."

Lord Laurence turned his eyes back to the room, and Melodia followed suit. It was almost funny for him to inquire about her partnerless state. Melodia was far from a wallflower, but it was a regular occurrence for young women, who outnumbered the men so greatly, to sit out a few dances on such an occasion, while it was the men who were expected to dance every set.

Across the dance floor, Melodia could spy the ever-delicate and beautiful Miss Cecily Linus also resting on the side with her parents. With her famed beauty and impressive dowry, Miss Linus was a perennial favorite amongst their neighbors, and her foregoing of this dance could only be a matter of choice rather than inevitability. Perhaps the jig was too lively for the elegant Miss Linus. She was always so very graceful.

"Ah, cousin, there you are!" Mrs. Seymour appeared in front of Melodia in a rush of skirts before clutching Lord Laurence by the arm, thereby preventing Melodia from completing her second perusal of the Misses Latimore's matching dresses. The sisters always dressed so similarly that those less acquainted with them struggled to tell them apart. "Miss Reese, you are not dancing this dance?"

Melodia rose to greet the gentlewoman. The Seymours were always so very fun to speak to. "Good evening, Mrs. Seymour. I enjoy watching Lady Bridget and Lady Bella and their partners."

Mrs. Seymour turned behind her and looked down the line as if committing every couple to memory before turning back to Melodia and Lord Laurence. "I suppose a girl cannot expect to dance *every* dance."

"Precisely." Melodia smiled.

"Even one as well-liked as yourself." Mrs. Seymour smiled at Melodia with a twinkle in her eye. Then she turned a harsher glare upon her cousin. "But you, Garrett, I see no excuse for *you* not dancing."

Lord Laurence shrugged, and Melodia felt a mixed urge of stepping away from the conversation and remaining around to witness it.

"I do not care to dance," he muttered.

"Social duties are beyond what you *care* for at the moment, Garrett." It was strange to see a woman of Lord Laurence's age display such matronly manners, sometimes. "You must take the opportunity to acquaint yourself with our neighbors."

"I know them all."

"Not one by one—no."

Lord Laurence winced, as if he knew what Mrs. Seymour meant and did

not like it.

"Is there someone you wish to be acquainted with, Lord Laurence? I know everyone here and can easily request my mother to make introductions," Melodia offered. She did so like to help. Bridget once teased Melodia for being as meddlesome as an old lady, but even Bridget knew Melodia only meant well.

Lord Laurence started, as if he just remembered Melodia's presence. He looked towards her. "Not at all, Miss Reese, although I appreciate the offer. As I just informed my dear Cousin Hillary, I *already* know everyone."

"Not in the way you should," Mrs. Seymour snapped, though not unpleasantly.

"And in what way is that?"

"You know what I mean, Garrett."

"Do I?"

Mrs. Seymour huffed and planted her hands on her hips. Now, she looked slightly like an angry cook. She leaned forward and whispered, just loud enough for their small cluster to hear. "You can never find yourself a suitable bride if you refuse to engage with any of the ladies."

Suddenly, the exchange between the cousins made much more sense.

"You mean to find a bride?" Melodia asked rather loudly. She hushed and lowered her voice at Lord Laurence's panicked glare. "That is—well, Bridget and Bella have often mentioned that your parents wish for you to marry. And we were all expecting you to return to Millsbury with Miss Oliver this year."

"You know of Miss Oliver?" Lord Laurence sounded perplexed.

"Oh, but don't we all? Lady Chattsworth was most eager about the match, and she mentioned it nearly every other week at church. We were all frankly rather surprised that you came back alone."

"I am unmarried. Of course I came back alone."

"Oh, but you were engaged, were you not? I think Bridget said you were to propose in London."

"I—" Lord Laurence frowned and cleared his throat. "I was not engaged."

"And hence your need to find another woman to whom you may be," Mrs. Seymour interrupted.

"I am here tonight as a Millsbury resident, not as a suitor needing somewhere to pitch his suit."

"Pish posh, every single man needs to be looking at all times."

"I am not your brother."

"Perhaps you can strive to be more like him in this respect."

Lord Laurence emitted a sound that seemed to be both a groan and a sigh. "Again, Hillary, I am not here bride-hunting. You are almost as bad as Mother."

"Oh, I most certainly am not."

"I cannot go around to have you re-introduce me to every woman I already know just because you wish to play matchmaker."

"I will have you know—that I am not *playing* matchmaker. The task happens to be a very noble calling." Mrs. Seymour winked.

Melodia wanted to laugh, but she stifled her chuckle for Lord Laurence's sake. He did look so very gruff, more than he usually did. Behind them, the dance ended with a loud, purposeful note, and the crowd broke into cheerful applause.

Mrs. Seymour clapped the requisite few seconds before grabbing her cousin by the arm once more. "Come, now, my husband's business partner has brought his niece tonight, and you cannot say that you already know her."

"I have seen her," Lord Laurence argued.

"Ah, but you do not *know* her." Mrs. Seymour sounded pleased with her own triumph. "Come, this is your chance—before your mother attempts to arrange a partner for you again."

The viscount groaned, almost like the way Melodia's brother did whenever he was told to tidy his things.

"Excuse us, Miss Reese." Mrs. Seymour smiled at Melodia. "It seems that I have to force my cousin to participate in at least *one* dance tonight."

"By all means." Melodia smiled back.

"And do not fret. You really should not be sitting. I shall have my brother dance with you next." And Mrs. Seymour stalked away with a grumpy Lord Laurence behind her.

Melodia would have thought the situation almost amusing, if not for Mrs. Seymour's parting kind offer about her brother.

Mr. Ellis—tall, thin, and relatively wealthy—was as close to being obsessed with marrying as was possible for a man. Melodia had it on good authority, in fact, that the thirty-year-old bachelor had attempted nothing short of at least a dozen proposals throughout the last ten years. Melodia did not hate the man, but she would rather avoid partnering him if she could. If skinny, excitable Mr. Ellis were an animal, he would most certainly be a grasshopper. And Melodia had no desire to be perceived as a possible *Mrs.*

Grasshopper anytime soon, or ever at all.

"I do believe I need to visit the retiring room," she announced to no one in particular. Then she slipped away before she could learn if Mrs. Seymour had made good on her threat.



"Bridget said when we left that she wouldn't dance another dance the rest of the evening, and I frankly do not know why she would need to say that. Just because Bella receives more offers doesn't mean they can't *both* dance every set." Melodia shrugged at Mama as their borrowed carriage rolled towards the rectory that evening. "Isn't she silly for thinking so?"

Mama smiled, her rounded cheeks highlighted by the moonlight through the carriage window. It was frightfully kind of the Laurences to offer the Reeses their second carriage when news arrived that Papa had to see to a dying parishioner urgently. Melodia wouldn't have chosen to leave the assembly early if they did not have to, of course, but such interruptions were common for a rector's family. And Melodia did agree that it would not do to leave Wesley alone at the rectory with Mrs. Caroway too long. Her brother was a dear, but Mrs. Caroway did not seem to think so.

"I think Lady Bridget is merely setting her expectations realistically," Mama replied.

"Oh, but must one be so realistic all the time?" Melodia sighed.

Mama continued smiling. It was nice to have a parent who smiled so often. Lady Chattsworth was everything good and elegant, but she rarely looked half as happy as Mama.

"I would like to agree with you, child, that one need *not* be tied to realism as heartily as most people are; but I fear I would do you a disservice in encouraging that imagination of yours."

"Isn't it good to have a proper imagination?"

"Indeed it is—until you believe the things you imagine to be true."

"Such as what?"

"Well, it is all well and good to think of dragons and unicorns dancing in our yard—but it would not do to run around town proclaiming such a thing, would it?"

Melodia grinned at the gentle reminder of her childhood fantasies. "You

forgot mermaids as well, Mama."

"Ah, yes, how could I forget. I must admit I recall rather fondly the time you argued with Wesley that all merpeople were female and that it would simply be uncouth to have *mermen* because they did not look as pretty as mermaids."

"Well, I have grown up since then, haven't I?"

"Indeed you have."

"I understand now that mermen are a necessary evil for the continuation of the merpeople's race—even if they are indeed a lot less appealing."

Mother and daughter laughed together. A gentle breeze whistled outside. The night might have ended earlier for Melodia than she had hoped it would, but it had been an altogether pleasant evening.

"Did you enjoy the assembly?" Mama promptly asked as the carriage slowed down to navigate the narrowing road. The rectory was, thankfully, close enough to the assembly hall for their conveyance to return in time for the Laurences to use for their own departure later.

"I did."

"Mr. Humbert was rather eager to claim your first set."

Melodia tried not to snort. "He was, and he danced rather decently, at least."

"Were your other partners not decent?"

"Some danced better than others. No one can fault a Linus for his dancing. I think Lady Linus would faint if any of her children failed to execute a perfect step."

"Ah, yes, you danced with Kenneth Linus."

"While Bella danced with Kingsley Linus *twice*." Melodia grinned. "I hope he courts her properly soon."

Mama smiled the indulgent smile of someone who knew things. Mama always knew whom the young people preferred. Between her keen sense for the village romances and Papa's deep confidences with the young people's parents, there was very little Melodia's parents didn't know. Couples who announced seemingly sudden engagements often caught the rest of Millsbury by surprise, but never their rector or his family.

"Who do you think will marry first?" Mama asked.

"In the village?"

"I refer to Lady Bridget and Lady Bella."

"Oh, them!" Melodia paused to think. "I would say that many would

expect Bridget to marry first, as she is older."

"By ten minutes."

"Yes, by ten minutes. But it would almost seem as if Bella might marry first, before her sister *and* her brother."

"And why would you make that conclusion?"

"Because Bella already has so many admirers."

"I do believe there is a fair share of people who admire Lady Bridget as well."

"Yes, I think so—but they are always so afraid to talk to her. I don't know why, as both twins are so lovely." Melodia sighed as she looked out the window. The familiar sight of the smaller road was coming into view. "It may be why Bridget is so hesitant to believe in love at first sight."

"Ah, is that so?" Mama sounded both sincere and amused.

"I was only saying at supper tonight that it would be ever so romantic to fall in love with a handsome stranger at a ball. Even Bella agreed, but Bridget laughed as if it were a silly thing to say."

"I cannot think Lady Bridget would be so unkind."

"Oh, of course not. She didn't laugh at *me*, but merely at the idea. She seems to think that one would have to know a man thoroughly, and have taken into account his entire character and life choices, to ever feel anything for him."

"And you disagree."

"Isn't love something you do not choose? It is something you feel—it just *happens*."

Mama's smile turned thoughtful as the carriage slowed down to the front of the rectory. They both gathered their things to prepare to alight.

Mama spoke quietly as they pulled to a final stop. "I think you might find, child, that love sometimes comes in the most unexpected places. It can be as unexpected as a stranger at a ball, or a long-time friend becoming dear, or even enemies finding common ground. Relationships that may appear to be ordinary can be almost thrillingly romantic when you find the right person."

"Like you and Papa?"

Mama smiled. "Yes, just so."

Melodia shrugged as the footman led Mama down first. She admired her parents and loved them dearly, but she would never have considered their practical partnership of a marriage to be romantic. Perhaps Mama's keen senses only applied to other people.

Chapter Six

The gathering of the Laurence and Linus families at Highgreen Park the following week was, at least overtly, for the express purpose of touring the Linuses' latest expansion of their orchard. The baron's family loved to make improvements upon their property, and one could always count upon witnessing the latest in mechanizations and automations at Highgreen Park. That the gathering was intended, covertly, to encourage a match between Garrett and Miss Linus was not lost on him, no matter how much Mother might have insisted on the way over that it was merely a visit of the friendly and neighborly variety.

No sooner had the Laurences and Linuses set foot upon the orchard path that the two mothers loudly announced that the younger generation ought to take the longer foot path amongst the trees while their parents treaded the shorter stone one. To Garrett's comfort, he had not been the only person present to have rolled his eyes.

His sisters, parted from Laurendale and Miss Reese for once, gladly started on the path arm-in-arm, prancing away in front of the small gaggle of gentlemen. Garrett was a private sort of man, but he did enjoy the right kind of company. And walking side by side with the three Linus brothers did almost make him feel that he had brothers of his own.

Perhaps that was Mother's intent—to show her son how easily he would get along with Miss Cecily Linus's family—and to allow that fact to induce him to courting the young lady. To be friends with one's family by marriage was not a bad thought, of course. But Garrett could hardly approach Miss Linus herself to share a single word when her brothers formed a veritable ring around him. And he was hardly so sure of pursuing her as to make an effort

to show preference beyond what was friendly and proper.

"We anticipate a smaller harvest this year, given the land we have yielded to the newer fruits." Kurt Linus, eldest and tallest amongst his brothers, gestured at the new additions. "But Father trusts we'll be able to cover the loss threefold next year."

"That is promising," Garrett said.

"One would certainly hope so, as we have invested no small effort into the procurement of these particular varieties."

Garrett nodded. His knowledge tended towards the philosophical and, occasionally, political; but he was not entirely devoid of interest in the comings and goings of managing the land. He would have to manage Laurendale one day, after all.

"Highgreen Park can do without the extra income for a year, I am certain. My father was mentioning to me only yesterday that one of your family's investments in textile has yielded a handsome profit." Garrett remarked as they rounded the edge of the orchard. A few yards ahead of them, Bridget and Bella glanced and pointed and smiled at the nature sights besetting them. Immediately after the twins, Miss Linus glided with the grace of a woman about to enter London's finest ballroom. Her youngest brother walked with her, a loyal sentinel.

To Garrett's surprise, Kurt Linus looked almost bashful. "Is that so?"

"By your manners, I expect you had a hand in this endeavor?"

Kurt Linus laughed. "I did, and it is encouraging to hear that others believe our work to have merit. It is my intent, after all, to soon begin to introduce our business partner as my father-in-law."

Garrett raised his brow, surprised yet not exceedingly so. Just because he himself did not particularly wish to marry did not mean that other young men his age thought similarly.

"Am I to wish you happy then?"

"I would like to think so, yes." Kurt Linus looked straight ahead again, a pleasant smile on his face. "Mother desisted at first, stating that it would hardly do for a baron's heir to marry in trade. But Miss Thompson's dowry rather added to the appeal of her person."

"And thus Millsbury loses another bachelor to the clutches of matrimony—while Ellis and I remain unattached."

Kurt Linus shook his head at Garrett's teasing tones. "You cannot be blind to our parents' wishes. They do not wish for any of us to remain single for

long."

Garrett hid his sigh as the eldest Mr. Linus cocked his head towards his sister. Their group had arrived at a small clearing, where they were meant to wait for the adults to arrive, and their party no longer stood strictly in sets of twos or threes. Kingsley Linus, at some point in the conversation, had managed to overtake his younger siblings and was now playing guide to Garrett's sisters. It was obvious that there was some sort of attraction on the young man's part. But Garrett couldn't quite decide, for the life of him, which twin Kingsley Linus was eyeing. It was difficult to discern such things, at times, when his sisters always remained together.

"If you will excuse me, Lord Laurence, I believe I must inspect the horses meant to guide our wagon later," Kurt Linus made his excuses before calling out to his youngest brother. "Kenneth, shall we see to the horses?"

Kenneth Linus looked up in surprise, murmured something to his sister, and followed Kurt's lead. With all three brothers gone or otherwise occupied, Garrett steeled himself and approached the only female member of the Linus clan.

"Miss Linus," Garrett greeted once he had stepped within a polite distance of the young lady.

"Lord Laurence." She curtsied, elegant and proper. There was an indubitable elegance to Miss Cecily Linus. Always and ever impeccably dressed and implacably fine, she bore herself with a noble air, even in the middle of an orchard in her own home.

"Your family must be quite proud of this new endeavor."

"They are," she agreed quietly. She offered no smile, no spark, and no rejoinder.

Garrett tried again. "We are most fortunate to have clear skies today, are we not? I had thought the village used up almost all our luck at the parish picnic."

"Most fortunate, yes."

Once more, they fell quiet.

Was it always this blasted difficult to talk to a woman? Garrett thought back to all the times he conversed effortlessly with his sisters and his cousins and their friends. What were the things they liked to discuss?

"Your dress suits you very much, Miss Linus," Garrett found himself saying, then regretting. He was hardly the sort to resort to flattery. He had in fact barely noticed the dress Miss Linus wore and had to examine for himself

just now whether it was blue or pink, lest the lady chose to continue on this vein of conversation.

"Thank you, my lord," she replied coolly.

Well, he supposed he didn't have to worry, after all.

Loud voices approached as their parents, all conversing merrily, descended upon the clearing. And Garrett felt, despite the glint in Mother's eyes at the sight of him and Miss Linus speaking together, that he had never been gladder of his parents' intrusion.

"Excuse me, Miss Linus, I believe I may have to attend to my mother," Garrett stated.

"Of course, my lord," she replied as civilly and quietly as she always did. And Garrett made good his escape.

Chapter Seven

"Is that so? I suppose my disappointment was rather unfounded now, wasn't it?" Melodia grinned at the shopkeeper's assistant. The young boy looked unnecessarily apologetic over their entire conversation. It was not as if Melodia blamed *him* for the fact that the shop had sold all remaining stocks of her favorite bonbons a week ago. "I should have known something so pleasant would have all been purchased off the shelves in a matter of days."

"Three days, miss," the boy answered shyly. He looked frightfully young, probably closer to Wesley's age than Melodia's. "Sorry we didn't keep 'em for ye."

"Oh, but you shouldn't apologize. I never asked for any to be kept for me," Melodia assured the poor fellow with a generous smile. She turned towards the rest of the sweets still on Mr. Banner's shelves. "Now, which ones should I get for me and my brother today? I did promise him sweets."

"The yellow ones are nice, miss," the assistant offered eagerly.

"These?" Melodia picked up a few of the suggested item. "Are they the same price?"

"Yes, miss—I mean, almost, miss. Mr. Banner'll give 'em to you for less if you asked."

Melodia smiled at the suggestion. "I suppose there's no harm in that."

She decided to take half a dozen before proceeding to the counter. She slid her few purchases onto the surface and waited for Mama to finish her list. These shopping trips in Millsbury were special for Melodia, even if they weren't anything out of the ordinary for the Laurence or Linus families. People who always sent servants to buy things for them never had the pleasure of perusing Mr. Banner's new wares or hearing all the stories Mrs.

Banner liked to tell Mama. Half of the stories were nonsense, of course, but Mrs. Banner was pleasant enough as the town women went.

Bridget and Bella, and Lady Chattsworth and her friends, liked to do their shopping in London. And while Melodia herself had never spent time in London, she wondered if shopping there was half as interesting as shopping in Millsbury. There would be more things and more people, she supposed. Miss Cecily Linus's clothes were always shipped from Town, and they did consistently appear a cut above everybody else's, even Bridget's and Bella's.

"Find everything you need?" Mr. Banner inquired with a kindly smile when Mama approached the counter as well. The shopkeeper's half-bald head shimmered in the dim interior of his shop, but his smile shone brighter. "I've sent in an order for the extra supplies you expect to need for the village lessons."

"You are very kind to do so, Mr. Banner." Mama smiled as well. The shopkeeper took stock of their purchases as they continued to converse. "It is our hope that the youth will be able to grow skilled in more than one way through these lessons."

"It is mighty kind of ye and Mr. Reese to arrange for such a thing."

"Oh, but we can hardly do it without all the help." Mama sent a proud-looking smile at Melodia, who mirrored it gladly. "Melodia here has been excellent in making sure we don't miss a thing—and the gentlemen who have volunteered to help with the lessons are most appreciated, of course."

"We'll have gentlemen teaching the boys then?" Mr. Banner handed off the purchases for his assistant to prepare. The shopkeeper poked his spectacles up his nose. "Getting a fancy education now, aren't they?"

"Only what would be useful, of course," Mama replied. "But with Mr. Seymour, Mr. Ellis, and Lord Laurence offering to do the lion's share of the teaching, Mr. Reese and I can focus more on nurturing the children."

"And feeding them when we can," Melodia added.

"Is that so?" Mr. Banner raised a brow at Melodia before grinning at her. "I dare say they shall be happy just to see you, Miss Reese."

"Me? Whatever do you mean, Mr. Banner?"

"Not many young boys are unmoved by that spirited smile of yours, child. Your father would have his hands full swatting away your suitors if you weren't living in a small town like ours."

Melodia felt warm, flattered yet confused. "You exaggerate, Mr. Banner."

"Oh, but your mother here knows I do not."

Melodia cast a glance at Mama and saw her sporting the same knowing smile as Mr. Banner. Why the adults liked to describe her as eligible was beyond Melodia, sometimes. She was only the rector's daughter, and small in stature and far too silly for most men's tastes. And while she *had* noticed that young boys, like Mr. Banner's assistant, liked to talk to her, that was hardly the same as courting.

"Thank you, Mr. Banner," said Mama when she had finished paying for all their purchases. She reached for the largest packet and tucked it beside her rounded bodice. Melodia quickly helped her with the rest of the items. "And do let us know if you hear of more families interested in having their boys participate."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Thank you, Mr. Banner." Melodia smiled on her way to the door.

"Good day to you, Miss Reese."

Mother and child emerged together into the busiest part of Millsbury and hoisted their recent purchases onto the cart. Their servant boy jolted, clearly having been napping in the middle of the day, and offered his apologies.

Mama sighed and shook her head. "Take these back to the rectory first and return for us right after. We have a few more visits to make."

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded, looking over-eager to atone for his lapse in duty. "Where should I meet you, ma'am?"

"At the Latimores, most likely. Now off you go."

The boy rushed to follow orders, and Melodia fell in step with Mama as they proceeded to their next errand. Melodia rarely spent a day away from Laurendale, but she was almost always assisting in some parish duty or another during the days she stayed with her own family. Maybe, if their errands ended early, she could drop by for tea with the twins today before dinner. The three of them never did need any formal invitation amongst them.

"Are we to visit Mrs. Bethel first?" Melodia asked as they skirted the side of the road to avoid any sudden horses.

"After we leave these with Mr. Humbert." Mama pointed at the papers in her reticule. "Your father wishes them to be forwarded today."

"Papa always has something for Mr. Humbert."

"More than most men of the cloth have any right to." Mama chuckled. "If God hadn't called him to minister, I am rather certain he would have become a successful tradesman himself."

"Well, I hope we can leave the papers without staying too long."

"Do you not like Mr. Humbert, child?"

"He is friendly—but sometimes overly so. He need not bend over backwards to entertain us just because we are the rector's family."

"The behavior you describe may be due to another reason altogether."

"What sort of reason?"

Mama stopped to let a cart cross the smaller road before them. Melodia followed suit. The cacophony of noises and smells that swirled through Millsbury was as discomfiting as it was exhilarating, at times. They continued their trek to Mr. Humbert's office once the cart, and the children laughing and chasing after it, had passed.

"If you do not like Mr. Humbert, child, you might wish to be slightly clearer about the matter," Mama whispered as they walked.

"But I do not *dislike* him. He is amiable enough."

"But as a husband?"

Melodia flushed. It was getting ridiculous—the way her parents seemed to think every other young man taken with her. "As a friend, perhaps."

"Then do make that clear the next time he asks you to dance."

"He does not truly like me that way."

"Perhaps not quite," Mama agreed, "but there are clear signs that he is considering it—and it would be much better if you were to make sure you encourage or discourage him accordingly. Don't egg on the poor man with false hopes if you can never see him that way."

Melodia let Mama's words linger in her mind before she answered, "It's not as if I find him entirely repulsive. It is only that he, well, he is almost always a tad too solicitous."

"Well, he *is* a solicitor." Mama grinned as they reached the office of the man they discussed.

"Well, one surely can't argue with that."

Chapter Eight

"Do you think we have enough?" Melodia lowered the box of used pencils onto the kitchen table. She took care not to shatter the already fragmented pieces further, even though she succeeded only partially in her endeavor. "There should be some more donations ready at Laurendale, though I don't think they shall be able to bring them over today."

"Thank you for not ruining our pencils, Melodia," Mama said with a twinkle in her eye.

Melodia scrunched her nose. "I am not *that* prone to accidents, Mama."

"Your history might beg to differ." Mama only continued to smile. "But, yes, I do believe we would have enough—although barely. The donations from Laurendale would help greatly."

The small table near the kitchen entrance was piled full with learning supplies, although not every box was full. The wagon was scheduled to transport the items, along with Melodia and Mama, to the village for the first lessons tomorrow. It would be auspicious to start well.

"Perhaps I can call on Laurendale to retrieve the donations myself?" Melodia offered, wiping her hands clean on her apron.

"Would it not be too much for you to carry?"

Melodia shook her head. "Bella said before they'd left for London that it all fit quite tidily into one small crate."

"You would make it back in time for dinner?"

Behind Mama, the two maids were trying their best to create the dish Mrs. Caroway had instructed them to. The aroma was good, if slightly on the burnt side.

"Of course I would." Melodia smiled. "It would be nice to walk the

woods again."

"You must miss your friends dearly."

Melodia shrugged. She did miss the twins dearly, as Mama said. But shopping and sightseeing trips to London were the lot of an earl's daughters, not their humble friends, even if Bridget and Bella themselves had never put on airs around Melodia.

"They will be back in a fortnight."

"A fortnight too long then?"

Melodia smiled wryly. "Bridget said in her letter that they would pool their pin money to buy me a new bonnet. I can hardly complain about that."

"But it is not the shopping that you envy, is it?"

For a moment, Melodia was almost afraid to meet Mama's eye. She cared deeply for Bridget and Bella, and she did rejoice for them when it came to their myriad opportunities to experience the adventures of Town. But it was a little lonely, sometimes, whenever their divergent lives took them on different rather than overlapping paths.

"I would love to see London and take in the sights I have always heard of," Melodia admitted. Then she tried her best to smile. "But then I would miss my chance to help with our village lessons, and that would be tragic, would it not?"

Mama's face seemed to oscillate between sympathy and pride. "Very good. Now off you go to Laurendale before the sun begins to set. Lady Chatsworth may not be present to be shocked by poor manners, but it would hardly be good faith if we did not try to at least display them as well as we could."

"She would have clucked her tongue sadly at the state of this dress." Melodia laughed as she removed her apron and straightened Bella's old day dress. "But at least the color has kept quite nicely."

"Indeed it has. Now off you go."

Melodia slipped out of the rectory and rounded the familiar path toward Laurendale with ease. It was sad to not have Bridget and Bella to visit, but at least she would be calling upon the Laurences for a good cause. Perhaps the servants might even slip her a spare tart or two. Mrs. Caroway had never been much of a baker.



The afternoon sun lengthened the shadows of Laurendale's walls, casting half the garden into the shade. Garrett leaned back against the garden bench as he perused the pages of the arithmetic book. He had thought to review how one ought to explain the more rudimentary calculations to new pupils for the sake of the upcoming village lessons, and he relished the ability to do so without the womenfolk's boundless enthusiasm for all social endeavors distracting him. With his mother and his sisters away, Laurendale was peaceful, dinner with Father calm, and the drawing room blissfully undisturbed. For once, Garrett truly felt that he had left the bustle of London behind.

Was this life not infinitely better than the one Mother so often aspired to for his sake? If he had not been born heir to an earldom, or if the brother before him had survived, perhaps the duty to marry and secure the next future countess would not be as urgent, or even present at all. Companionship in marriage was a desirable thing. Garrett had witnessed enough happy marriages to make such a conclusion. One could also hardly grow up cousins with Duncan and Hillary and not think that marriage was a status worth pursuing.

Yet marriage for marriage's sake felt rather a heavy yoke to bear—particularly when almost all the young women of his acquaintance presented themselves neither to be wonderful nor horrid, but only amiably, frustratingly adequate.

Miss Oliver had been adequate, but their London courtship had failed. Miss Linus appeared adequate, but she never seemed to have more than three words to say. After years lived with the energetic presence of his mother and his sisters, the idea of settling for a home with nothing more than muted conversation sounded oddly uncomfortable. Garrett might not prefer to speak much himself, but he would rather have a wife who did.

The sounds of skipping, feminine footsteps, accompanied by a pleasant hum, emerged from the footpath through the woods. Garrett lowered his book and turned to see Melodia Reese approaching Laurendale with a whimsical edge to her manners, dancing along as if she were ten rather than twenty. Or was the girl eighteen? Sometimes, he tended to forget.

"Miss Reese," Garrett greeted, rising to meet her as he tucked his book away in his pocket. He saw her stopping at his call to look around for her addresser. And he felt oddly happy, almost in a childlike way, that he had managed to surprise her. He strode towards her and repeated his greeting. "Miss Reese."

"Oh, Garrett! That is—Lord Laurence." She grinned sweetly. "I was wondering if a servant boy had managed to intercept me. Not that you, in any way, resemble a servant boy, of course."

Garrett laughed. "I could take offense at that, Miss Reese."

"Oh, but you wouldn't, would you?" She tilted her head, letting more of her face peek out beneath her bonnet. "Surely, you would not take offense at something so trivial."

"And if I do?"

"Then you would have long given up on my being friends with your sisters."

"It is not for me to say whom my sisters should befriend."

"But you can influence them. They do look up to you so."

Her simple, inadvertent compliment warmed Garrett into another smile. "I suppose."

He straightened himself back to his lordly height. They might not have greeted each other properly, but Melodia Reese was such a fixture at Laurendale that such trifling things hardly mattered. "As it is not the hour for morning calls, and as I am sure you are aware of my sisters' absence, I cannot help but wonder at your presence at Laurendale—not that it is unwelcome, of course. Is there anything with which we can help you, Miss Reese?"

"Oh, yes, I had nearly forgotten why I'd come!" She brightened instantly, chuckling to herself. It was strange how one small creature could have almost the same degree of zest of both his taller, statelier sisters combined. "We're collecting the items to be used for the village lessons, and we needed the one crate Bridget and Bella had promised was here."

"And you came all the way here, by yourself, to retrieve it?"

"It's not so very far from the rectory, and I was told it was only one crate."

"Surely, you could have used *some* assistance."

"Everyone was busy at the rectory," Miss Reese explained easily, as if a young lady running errands on foot was the most common thing in the world. It was not entirely *uncommon*, perhaps, Garrett had to admit. It was merely not the sort of thing he would ever have expected of his mother, or his sisters—or Miss Oliver, or Miss Linus. "And it is not so far as for me to be unable to be back for dinner."

Garrett glanced at the sky and reluctantly admitted that the hour was indeed early enough for Miss Reese's little trek to not be entirely dangerous. Still, she ought to be protected.

"Let us not delay then. I do believe the items are in the library."

He made to guide her indoors, though his guidance was hardly necessary. Miss Reese bounced along beside him, her presence as natural in his home as it was in his life. The servants who crossed their paths as they retrieved the promised items, in fact, greeted her almost more personably than they did Garrett.

"Ah, there they are!" She dashed forward once they had reached the library. "With a nice bow too! Your mother is so very elegant with her arrangements."

Miss Reese beamed over the crate of half-used graphite, brushes, paints, and papers as if they were family jewels. And Garrett smiled without a second thought.

"Should we purchase some more?" he offered as he stepped closer. "It would be a pity to run out of materials in a mere day or two."

"Oh, these should be more than enough." She smiled brightly. "We can always solicit more if the need arises."

She reached forward to embrace the brimming crate and lifted it off the table.

"Oh!"

Garrett rushed forward before she could topple completely to the floor, one hand on the crate and the other on Miss Reese's back. She was a spritely little thing, but she emanated warmth nonetheless. He righted her as gently as he could. "Are you quite well?"

"Very well, thank you." She panted, still grinning. "Thank you, Lord Laurence."

He shook his head. "Can you not call me Garrett like my sisters?"

She bit her lip and scrunched her nose. "It would make things easier, although I doubt it would be proper."

Garrett let her go and stepped back with a sigh. "I suppose not."

"Should I call you Lord Garrett then? Would that help, my lord?"

Garrett grimaced. "Anything but 'my lord.'"

Miss Reese laughed, as if amused by his discomfort. "Very well, though it is not *strictly* proper—we may settle on Garrett upon occasion."

"Thank you, Miss Reese."

"Melodia, please." She smiled. "You are, after all, very nearly a brother."

The thought of being familiar with her was pleasant—and yet the thought of their familiarity being established upon some sort of fraternal association

felt uneasy at best. He would examine that thought another time.

"Shall I escort you back to the rectory, Melodia?" He handily lifted the crate from her hands.

"Oh, but that would hardly be necessary. I can manage the trek well on my own."

"And spill the precious contents of this crate all over the woods? I think not." He hoisted the crate higher against his chest. It was not perhaps the most dignified pose for a nobleman, but the prospect of a walk to the rectory felt almost alluring at the moment. "Come along."

It gratified him that she did not argue and only fell in step with him the entire way back.

Chapter Nine

The fire in the grate hummed comfortably, warding away the increasingly chilly autumn draft, as the Reese family gathered to enjoy their dinner at home. Mrs. Caroway might be stern and unamused the majority of her time on earth, but one could never fault her when it came to her dedication in the kitchen. Her duties at the rectory encompassed many things, rendering her incapable of seeing to every meal herself; and Melodia was always extra thankful for the food on the evenings when their head female servant decided to cook directly rather than delegate the task to the two younger maids.

"I don't know whether to be glad or not that the mutton is so very tasty." Mama chuckled as she patted her belly after she'd consumed the last piece on her plate. Her eyes twinkled as they always did. "No one who looks at me now would believe me to have been even lighter than Melodia when we first married."

"A skinny calf shames its owner. I am glad to have our parishioners see that I have treated you well." Papa grinned, wine glass in hand. Papa always finished eating first at every meal, and Melodia always finished last.

It was not that she preferred to eat slowly. She did enjoy food, particularly Mrs. Caroway's. But there was always so much to say that she often forgot to eat at all.

"The meat is tough," Wesley complained with a pout, his countenance as severe as a ten-year-old boy's could possibly be. The boy had finished his potatoes, but the mutton lay mostly untouched on his plate. "I can't swallow it."

Melodia sighed. "You say that every meal."

"I do not."

"You even said the vegetables were tough last night."

"But they were!"

"They were not!"

"Children, don't quarrel." Mama shook her head with a sigh of her own. "Cut the pieces smaller, and they will taste excellent, child."

Wesley grumbled before complying, and peace reigned once more over the rectory dinner table. Papa, still smiling the contented smile of a well-fed man, piped up next. "Did we have any particular visitors today?"

"Only Mrs. Latimer," Mama replied. "She seems to worry over her daughters' prospects."

"Her health is failing her of late. I suppose it is natural for her to wish to see her children settled."

"Don't we all, Philip?"

Papa shrugged one shoulder. "It is a common concern, particularly when gentlemen are scarce in Millsbury."

"But you don't worry about such things for me, do you?" Melodia asked between her next two bites. "You always tell me not to marry."

"I only tell you not to marry *yet*," Papa corrected, though not unkindly. He smiled and shook his head. "We allowed your coming out early not for marriage's sake."

"But to allow me to help better with the parishioners, I know." It was a familiar story for Melodia. She liked helping her parents. She never harbored any displeasure in that regard. It was merely that the idea of one's societal debut sounded so much more exciting for people like Bridget and Bella, who had court presentations and London Seasons on their schedule.

"And you are an excellent help." Mama complimented with a smile of her own. "I don't know how I would manage half the things I do without you."

"I'm always happy to help, Mama."

"*Always*?" Papa scoffed lightly.

"Well, almost always." Melodia grinned a little sheepishly. "I admit I run away to Laurendale before I finish my tasks sometimes."

"You must miss the twins dearly," Mama said.

"I do, although I received another letter from Bridget and Bella today," Melodia announced happily before partaking of her next bite.

"Are your friends enjoying London?"

"I think Bella enjoys it more, as she prefers shopping, although Bridget

said she is thankful the fabrics in Town can drape her tall frame."

"They plan to return for Christmas, do they not?"

"Oh, definitely!" Melodia did not like the thought of Christmas without her best friends at all. "I do believe they are set to return next week."

"So soon?"

"They seem to have procured everything they needed this trip."

"Lady Chattsworth must be glad of it," Papa remarked.

"And they have done so very much in just a month in Town!" Melodia recounted the contents of her latest letter with gusto. "They had dinner parties and soirées or visits to the theater every night. They walked Hyde Park and promenaded so many places. And the balls! I think they have attended three in the span of two weeks!"

"Sounds very exciting," said Mama.

"So *very* exciting!" Melodia sighed at the mutton on her plate. What had easily cheered her up a mere hour ago suddenly felt commonplace in comparison to Bridget and Bella's adventures. She picked at the meat with her fork. "Do you think I shall ever go to London?"

"But you have, when you were just a babe," said Papa.

"I know—but to go—to truly go—to visit for the London Season and to see all the sights and the shops and the people."

"Melodia, you are aware we are not endowed with similar material resources as your friends." Papa's voice grew just a tiny tad stronger. "We are well blessed in our circumstances, and there are always pleasures to be had in every stratum of society."

"I know." Melodia tried not to sound too petulant. She usually never was. "It's just that the way they discuss the events in Town—it is all so very fascinating. And Bridget said the gentlemen were all so genteel and handsome and obliging."

"More than the gentlemen in Millsbury?" Papa's voice lifted as if he joked.

Melodia groaned. "You said yourself that there was a lack of gentlemen in Millsbury."

"Not entirely. I consider them scarce—not absent."

"And how can I ever marry someone from Millsbury when you turn away any boy with a modicum of interest in me?"

Now, Papa and Mama chuckled. Wesley continued to carve away at his mutton, unaffected by his family's apparent bemusement at Melodia's

situation.

"If your father were to do that, child," Mama said, "then he would have no time left to minister."

Melodia groaned again. "I do not understand why you think every passing servant, merchant, or gentleman is interested in your daughter in the romantic sort of way. They are only being friendly, as am I."

"Perhaps."

"And I don't think any of them actually wish to marry, least of all me."

Papa and Mama's mirth only seemed to escalate, and Melodia decided to refocus her efforts upon finishing her meal.

"I say you have no need to worry, child," Papa assured so confidently that Melodia just knew he had overestimated his daughter's appeal once again. "Besides, if all else fails, we can always marry you off to Mr. Ellis. The man is as eager to marry as a horse is to run free."

"You would have me be Mrs. Grasshopper?" The thought blurted out of its own accord.

"What's this about a grasshopper?"

"Nothing." Melodia quickly swallowed another bite.

"Would you not wish to marry Mr. Ellis?" Papa watched Melodia closely. "The alliance would make you cousins with your dear friends Lady Bridget and Lady Bella."

Melodia, her mouth full, shook her head vehemently. She had nothing against Mr. Ellis. He was cordial on most days. But she never thought of him as the sort of man one would like as a husband, and she most likely never would. The older ladies who swooned over Lord Laurence she understood. The ones who mooned over Mr. Ellis were always more baffling.

"Very well," Papa said nonchalantly before he rose. He rarely had patience to wait until both his children finished eating. "I suppose I shall have to tell him that we decline his suit."

Melodia's eyes opened wider of their own volition while Papa and Mama chuckled knowingly at one another. Sometimes, it was difficult to know when her parents teased and when they were in earnest. But she supposed she ought to finish the mutton before it went entirely cold.

Chapter Ten

"Garrett?" The call cut through his bedroom door before a gentle, almost apologetic, knock followed. Garrett sighed, stubbornly posed by the window, taking in the view of the neighboring woods as if it were the most interesting sight in all of England. He knew who was at the door, and by whose bidding she was there. Mother knew rarely anyone in the family ever said no to Bella. "Garrett, would you not join us for tea?"

Garrett huffed, closing his eyes briefly. When his mother and sisters had returned from London yesterday, he had dutifully approached the carriage to hand each of them down—only to be surprised to find a fourth woman accompanying them. The twins, to their credit, had tried to warn him with their odd, winking faces; but it was not as if they could have communicated anything with mere facial expressions to truly prepare him to come face to face with the woman he had once courted for two years, a woman he thought he would never have to see again.

"I have no interest in tea," Garrett replied when Bella called out again.

His sister paused briefly before talking again. "Mother insisted, Garrett."

Garrett groaned. Of course Mother insisted. She always insisted. And if she had taken pains to bring along Miss Oliver all the way from London, then she would not be thwarted in her efforts to rekindle whatever it was she thought might still exist between her son and the heiress. If only she knew there was nothing to rekindle. Garrett never disliked Miss Oliver. There was not much to dislike about a woman who barely knew him and whom he barely knew. But unlike Miss Linus, who at least seemed to acknowledge the awkwardness of their general lack of conversation, Miss Oliver had always tried a trifling too hard to include him in whatever it was she wanted to do or

say. It was only that Garrett never found her presence to be in any way engaging.

"Garrett, please," Bella pleaded, sounding almost hurt. And this time, the eldest Laurence sibling sighed with a hint of resignation.

"Very well, I'll come in a minute."

"Thank you. Mother might extend tea all the way to dinner if you don't come."

"I doubt it." Garrett walked across the room and opened the door. It was unfair to take his ire out on Bella. His youngest sister stood a handful of inches shorter than he did, her bright eyes looking more grateful than Garrett had any right to them being. "Why would she ever miss a chance to impress Miss Oliver with an example of what she could have as the mistress of Laurendale?"

Bella flushed slightly. "Garrett—"

"Fine, I won't make fun. Tell Mother I'll be down in a minute."

"She insisted—" Bella looked apologetic once more. "She insisted that I wait for you to come with me."

"I am not a child."

"No, but Mother seems to think it important that we accompany each other."

For a quick moment, Garrett indulged in yet another sigh. His mother, sisters, and unexpected guest had returned for all of a day, and he was already tired of Mother's matchmaking attempts.

With the sullenness of a boy being told to see the headmaster, Garrett traversed the hall and descended the stairs with a quiet Bella at his side.

"At least Lord Clairbridge is to come tomorrow," Bella mentioned when they reached the main floor. "You would not be so outnumbered by ladies then."

"Lord Clairbridge?" The two of them walked on.

"We met him in London, and he has been most solicitous."

"To you in particular?" Garrett raised a brow.

"No, to all of us." Bella did not seem the least bit affected. Perhaps his sister was too accustomed to admirers to note anything significant about having gained another one. "Although he always seemed to ask after Bridget more than anyone else."

"Ah, is that so?"

"See? We have so very much to talk about. Tea will not be insufferable, I

promise."

Garrett patted the hand Bella placed on his arm, feeling slightly ashamed for needing his younger sister's comfort. "I believe you."

"Thank you." Bella looked thoroughly relieved.

With one last fortifying sigh, Garrett entered the drawing room with Bella.

"Lord Laurence," Miss Oliver greeted immediately, rising to her feet. Garrett swallowed. Despite having known the woman for years, and having seen her in a dozen different settings, it felt odd to see her tall frame and rounded cheeks in the very center of Laurendale. She was dressed, as usual, with every bit of gentility. There was nothing in her faultless deportment to suggest that she did not belong in the room with him. But, somehow, her presence still felt foreign to him.

"Miss Oliver." Garrett greeted with a nod deep enough to hint at a bow. He regarded the other ladies. "Mother, Bridget, Bella."

"I am glad to see you have decided to join us, Garrett," Mother said so smoothly that Garrett nearly scowled. She gestured to the empty chair between her and their guest, and Garrett all but dragged himself forward before dropping into it. As far as he remembered, Mother never even particularly liked Miss Oliver, once even citing rumors that the Oliver family was in the market to shop for a title for their daughter. But all those petty concerns, it seemed, paled in the light of Mother's newfound urgency to have Garrett wed, as soon as possible, to anyone decent enough.

"Miss Oliver was just telling me," Mother spoke as she prepared Garrett's tea, "how much she is enjoying her stay at Laurendale."

"It is the most beautiful home, Lady Chattsworth," Miss Oliver quickly responded, her voice high and polished. "I am so very honored to have been invited."

"Then you must have Garrett and the twins show you every room in this place. There is much to explore here. I am glad that you shall be staying more than a month with us so that you may come to thoroughly appreciate Laurendale."

A *month*—the word dried Garrett's throat. And here he was foolishly thinking that he would only have to evade Mother's machinations within Laurendale for a few scant days. Unable to help himself, Garrett turned and narrowed his eyes at his mother. She smiled back with a glint of victory in her eyes.

"I don't think there is so very much to explore about Laurendale," Garrett said. He turned his head to face the room in general, unwilling to meet Miss Oliver's eager gaze. "But since I have spent years away, perhaps Bridget and Bella would be more equipped to present a detailed tour of the estate."

"There are a great many things to see in Laurendale," Bridget said with a ready smile. "If Miss Oliver were amenable to it, we could start with a visit to the music room this afternoon. You are an accomplished pianist, are you not?"

"I play rather well," Miss Oliver admitted.

"That's perfect! Our friend Me—Miss Reese is coming to see us this afternoon. Perhaps the four of us can engage in a quartet."

"That sounds wonderful."

"And Garrett would be more than happy to turn pages for you, Miss Oliver," Mother added.

Garrett shot her another glare. "Surely, you would not have me ruining the ladies' fun, Mother? What could I possibly contribute?"

"A chivalrous presence and an admiring ear, of course."

"Ah, but is not music a delight in and of itself? Must we make every session a performance?"

"Miss Oliver is so gifted on the instrument that she can make any song worthy of a London drawing room."

"You are too kind, Lady Chattsworth," Miss Oliver responded.

Garrett huffed under his breath. He very nearly pinched the bridge of his nose as he would if there were no guests among them. Thanks to Mother, there was.

"I hear a Lord Clairbridge is to join us tomorrow?" He abruptly changed the topic instead.

Mother seemed only slightly taken aback before responding, "Yes, the Marquess of Clairbridge has graciously agreed to visit us for a fortnight."

"A marquess?" Now, Garrett grinned. He spied a look at Bridget, who now had a shy look hovering on her usually confident face. "Illustrious company, I see."

"He is a kindly young man. Came into his title only early last year," Mother described.

"A young marquess then. I hope there was no great tragedy involved in his assuming his title so young."

"His father passed after years of suffering. I believe it has been said that it

was almost a relief to see the old man finally rest."

"I see."

"The rest of his family, of course, is most willing to assist with his affairs. I believe it was his aunt who introduced us in London."

"Only after we met at the theater," Bridget interjected, earning a frown from Mother and amusement from Garrett.

"We saw each other's parties briefly at the theater, yes," Mother amended, "but it is my belief that Lord Clairbridge rarely frequents such a place. He was most likely only accompanying his aunt and his cousins."

"Not his wife?" Garrett teased.

"No, the marquess is unmarried."

"Ah, how fortunate for some." Garrett looked at Bridget once more. His staid sister now blushed to the tips of her hair. There was certainly no doubt she was enamored.

"And, unlike *certain gentlemen*," Mother added in a firmer tone, "he seems quite keen on fulfilling his duty and finding a wife."

Garrett scoffed and shook his head. He smiled. "Well, it is a good thing for me, then, that my father is hale and hearty—for none of us could ever wish him otherwise, could we?"

It gave him some satisfaction that Mother had nothing to say to that.



It was one thing to have his schedule crowded with sundry matchmaking attempts; it was quite another thing altogether to have Mother's efforts infiltrate his home. And Garrett found himself seeking refuge at Seymour Lodge more often than he usually did, ever since the women of his family had decided to return from London with Miss Oliver in tow.

At least Duncan and Hillary, for all their teasing, never forced him to share company with women they recommended.

Garrett had to acknowledge that his tendency to choose escape was perhaps being a trifle negligent of his family, particularly given the obvious tenure of Lord Clairbridge's visit after the marquess's surprisingly early arrival three days ago. But it was not as if he had much to add by way of things. Unlike his own non-existent advancement towards matrimony, *that* courtship progressed rather splendidly uneventfully. Thin,

mannerly, and proper, Lord Clairbridge was clearly the sort to impress Father, and his successful stewardship of the vast holdings of his marquissate at such a tender young age endeared him to Mother completely. Given how besotted the usually sensible Bridget looked these days, Garrett was rather certain his sister, though nearly ten years his junior, would overtake him to the altar.

And he did not mind it one bit.

"Lost in thought today, aren't you?" Duncan Seymour's voice cut through the air. Garrett nearly startled at the sight of a cup of tea being held nearly to his nose. "If you didn't want any tea, you might have said so before my wife made it for you. Would save us a pretty penny given how often you appear at our door these days."

Garrett glared at Seymour as the man grinned back.

"You have enough money to buy tea by the galleon," Garrett muttered. He accepted the tea from Hillary, who only chuckled at the teasing between her cousin and her husband.

"I doubt Christopher would like me squandering his inheritance on *tea*." Seymour flipped the newspaper in his hand as he always did. How the man managed to run his trade so prosperously while sipping tea and reading the papers all day was a paradox that constantly eluded explanation. "Isaac might understand, given his affinity for all things edible and potable, but then I might have to sell the house to give the girls dowries, and that would be rather reckless."

"Perhaps they might be freer that way to marry whomever they wished."

"Is that bitterness I hear? I was sure Hillary put extra sugar in your tea."

Garrett grimaced as he drained half his cup before slipping it on the table nearby. Compared to Laurendale, Seymour Lodge was practically a modern monstrosity—but there was a coziness to the place that beckoned one to linger and to talk. Or, perhaps, it was the master and mistress of the lodge who did so.

Garrett sighed. "Surely you've heard by now that my mother has deigned to bring Miss Oliver with her back from London—and that she is to be a guest at Laurendale for the foreseeable future."

"And here I thought Aunt Chattsworth was hoping for you to marry Miss Linus," Hillary mentioned. Her eyes and hands stayed busy with some sort of needlework, though Garrett knew she heard every word.

"She does, or she doesn't." Garrett leaned back against the tall-back chair.

"I think she just wants me to marry anyone at this point."

"Not anyone, surely," said Seymour.

"Well, anyone decent, of course."

"Either a daughter of a peer or an heiress, I'd presume?" asked Hillary.

"Well, it may certainly look that way." Garrett paused for a moment. He considered the exhaustive list of women Mother had asked him to possibly court in the last few years. "But I am almost quite certain that she does not care too much for such things."

"That is surprisingly modern."

"Says the gentleman's daughter who married in trade."

"Don't forget my mother, the *earl's* daughter who married a mere gentleman."

"I gladly bear all blame for Hillary's fall from grace," Seymour said with an air of feigned apology. Husband and wife exchanged a look that hinted at some sort of private joke. "But she simply could not resist my charms."

Garrett chuckled and rolled his eyes all at once. Perhaps his parents *had* learned a thing or two from their siblings.

"Father and Mother are hardly liberal, of course," Garrett found himself adding. "They care plenty regarding a woman's upbringing and family. I could hardly countenance them ever granting their blessing if I were to seek a servant's hand or a foreign bride. But I suppose their concerns reach only to the extent of the suitability of a lady to be a future countess."

"That sounds as if it ought to simplify things for you," said Seymour.

"It would seem as if it should." Garrett paused and contemplated his tea cup. "But I wonder, at times, if it rather complicates things instead. Were our grandparents not happier with their arranged marriages than many younger couples are today with their alliances by choice?"

"Do you wish for us to arrange your marriage?" Seymour practically emanated mischief, looking much like a young boy eager to urge his unbroken horse into a gallop.

"I most certainly do not—least of all from you." Garrett glared at the man who had so graciously taken him in morning after morning these days. "I would not put it past you to contract me a betrothal to some loony tradesman's daughter."

"But think of the business it shall bring to Millsbury!"

"At the cost of my happiness? Some friend you are."

"I would never do you such disservice. If I but knew what you looked for

in a wife, I would be sniffing out the best candidate for you like the most dedicated bloodhound."

"You do like to matchmake almost as much as the matrons do."

"That he does," Hillary stated with no shortage of misplaced pride. The Seymours did make the most unlikely, happy couple.

Seymour smiled at his wife before addressing Garrett again. "So tell us, then, so that we may help you, dear cousin. What *are* you hoping to find in a wife?"

Garrett shrugged his shoulders, suddenly uncertain.

"I take it with your daily presence here of late that Miss Oliver is hardly whom you'd consider your ideal."

"She is kind, in her own way," said Garrett. He thought of his guest, of her colored cheeks and coiffed hair and over-eagerness to agree with his mother. There was nothing *wrong* with Miss Oliver. If he had ever found any reason to object to her, he would never have dutifully courted her for the years he did. "But she is—too tall."

Both Seymours sat up straighter than they did a mere moment ago.

"Too *tall*?" Hillary frowned. "You are aware that your own sisters—"

"Are nearly as tall as I, I know." Garrett shrugged. "It is only a personal preference, I suppose."

"And Miss Linus?" Hillary pried, not wasting a second.

"Too quiet."

"Miss Winfrey then?"

Garrett grimaced. "Too loud."

Seymour's jovial laugh boomed beside him. "So you wish to find a woman who is of genteel birth, of average height, and of the perfect balance between loud and quiet."

"I never said she must be average."

"Oh, then, pray, tell, what else must she be? Should she be accomplished in music, art, and social graces? Must she pander to your every thought?"

"Never." Garrett shuddered. "I need the farthest thing from a simpering fool."

"A woman with her own mind then?"

"And yet with the ability to agree with my thinking."

The Seymours were chuckling loudly now, and Garrett sighed at the futility of it all. He glared at his cousins as he finished his tea. "Now, I never said she existed, did I?"

"Well, in that, at least, we agree."

Chapter Eleven

"The duck is most remarkable tonight. This new cook from London, Lady Chattsworth, does the household great merit." Melodia watched Papa utter his praises to their hostess with a contented, sincere, well-fed look on his face. Melodia smiled. Mrs. Caroway was generally a competent cook, but her talents with duck were indeed sorely lacking.

"It is indeed delicious, my lady," Mama added cheerfully, "and my family would be the first to tell you that I have no usual preference for poultry."

"We are most grateful for her services, yes." Lady Chattsworth, ever dignified, smiled politely from the upper end of the table. "I prayed rather fervently that we would find a good replacement once we knew of our old cook's impending retirement. Why she had to leave for her daughter's house, I cannot imagine. She will not enjoy half the command she had here."

"She was getting on in age," Lord Chattsworth added from the other end of the table. "Her departure is a blessing, however, now that we have recruited Mrs. Peyton in her stead."

"I cannot agree more." Papa chuckled.

The dinner party at Laurendale was, technically, a formal event. As the people attending comprised only the Laurences, their house guests, their Ellis and Seymour relatives, and the Reeses, however, the gathering felt positively intimate. There could not possibly be anyone else in all the world more familiar with Laurendale and its occupants, after all. And even the fine china and the elegant table setting felt natural to Melodia's eyes.

"Lady Chattsworth, you are inordinately skilled at training your staff. I can only hope to garner such skills for myself one day," Miss Oliver shared her compliments next. Melodia regarded the handsome heiress with a round

of frank assessment. Almost as tall as Bridget, Miss Oliver sat straight as a queen at her spot beside Garrett, her elegant neck displayed to an advantage. Melodia knew, thanks to the twins' confidences, that this was the fabled heiress their brother used to court in London; and she could already hear the wedding bells pealing for two out of the three Laurence siblings. Bridget and Bella may have returned to Millsbury only a month ago, but Lord Clairbridge looked almost ready to whisk Bridget away forever.

"You are too kind," Lady Chattsworth responded to Miss Oliver with more civility than warmth.

Did Lady Chattsworth not like Miss Oliver? It was rather impossible given that it was she who had invited the heiress to Laurendale. Bridget and Bella were busy entertaining half the time these days precisely because of the two house guests Lady Chattsworth had invited. Not that Bridget ever complained about Lord Clairbridge's presence.

Melodia grinned as she peeked at the young marquess trying to whisper to Bridget underneath the din of the general conversation.

"Has he proposed yet?" Melodia whispered to Bella, who sat close by enough that the only person who could possibly overhear them was the jovial Mr. Seymour.

"I am all astonishment, Miss Reese. Who could you possibly be discussing?" Mr. Seymour unapologetically joined their little private conversation with his usual mischievous grin. "Am I to be made aware tonight that not one, but two, of my wife's dearest cousins will be engaged in the near future?"

Bella blushed prettily. She always did. But she was too polite to ignore her cousin Hillary's husband. "I think Miss Reese is referring to Lord Clairbridge."

"Ah, is that so?" Mr. Seymour surveyed the meal's participants freely, without so much as a hint of subtlety. "I had thought, for a moment, that you referred to old Garrett instead."

"My brother?" Bella frowned. Her lavender ensemble glittered under the chandelier, untainted by the consternation on her face. "I don't think he is courting anyone at all."

"Or perhaps he is courting several, with no one the wiser."

"Garrett would never—" Bella looked so affronted that even Mr. Seymour had to rein himself in.

"I kid, Cousin Bella. As far as we are all aware, there is only one true

courtship progressing at this table tonight."

"Indeed."

"So he hasn't proposed yet, has he?" Melodia returned to her first question.

Bella shook her head softly. "I don't think so. Although I think Father and Mother are rather eager to have him do so soon."

"And have Bridget married off all the way to Cornwall? I don't dislike the fellow, but I wish he lived somewhere closer."

"The marquise does have several properties."

"But he resides in the one in Cornwall, doesn't he?"

"I have to agree with Miss Reese upon this matter, Cousin Bella," Mr. Seymour interjected again. "Would it not be better if we all married our neighbors? Then no one ever has to leave family behind."

"You only say that because you knew Mrs. Seymour from childhood," Melodia argued.

"Ah, but we are happy, are we not? I would think our growing little brood shows ample evidence of our mutual devotion."

The two single ladies rolled their eyes and chuckled. There were things that only Mr. Seymour would ever dare to say. As their own conversation lulled, Melodia heard more of the other diners' discussions. Papa was deep in discourse with the elder Mr. Ellis regarding some matters of investment. Mama and Lady Chattsworth conversed about the successes and terrors over hiring new staff. Mrs. Seymour spent herself explaining with gusto to her brother and her cousin the various merits of marrying young.

And lost in their little corner of the world, Lord Clairbridge and Bridget continued their whispers.

Melodia smiled, a little ruefully. "I suppose it would be enough to have Bridget happy—though Cornwall is so very far away."

"They might spend more time in London than Cornwall," Bella comforted.

"Perhaps." Melodia sighed. "But then you would all see her in London while I do not—for we never travel to Town."

Bella's face lit up just then in a way that Melodia rarely saw. "Bridget and I meant to tell you at tea tomorrow, but I suppose there's no harm telling you now."

"About what?"

"We are to return to London after the new year, to spend the Season

there."

"Oh." Melodia deflated.

"Oh, but don't be sad, dear." Bella rushed to add. Melodia looked up just as Bella's smile brightened under the candlelight. "Mother said last night that we shall invite you to join us—for the entire Season!"

Suddenly, the simple dinner party felt more significant than anything Melodia had attended in all her years at Millsbury.



"And the shows at the theater, and the gowns at the modiste—oh, Papa, please say that I would be allowed at least a few new gowns for London?" Melodia paused mid-breath to await her father's answer, her hands clasped together in rapturous delight. It had taken every last drop of her self-control to act in a normal fashion in Laurendale after Lady Chattsworth had publicly affirmed what Bella had blurted to Melodia at the dinner party, and the minister's young daughter had had to wait until her family was alone in their trusty old carriage to begin her gushing in earnest. "The Season shall be mostly for shopping and entertainment's sake, of course, and not for scouring the marriage mart. Bridget is all but engaged, and Bella would much rather not marry some faraway London gentleman when Kingsley Linus still resides in Millsbury. But, oh, imagine the fun even then!"

Melodia glanced at her parents for a quick moment, anticipating their smiles, only to catch glimpses in the flitting shadows of Papa frowning and Mama sighing. Were they worried for her in any sort of way? Had she possibly made a mistake regarding the invitation?

She swallowed, her throat slightly dry. "Lady Chattsworth *did* invite me to join them this Season, did she not? I would think she would mean to sponsor most of the cost. If we cannot muster up the cost for new gowns, then I'm sure it doesn't matter. I can easily embellish the ones from Bridget and Bella."

Papa took another moment before responding. His voice sounded cautious as they eased down the familiar road to the rectory. "It is not a matter of money, child."

"Oh." Melodia felt herself sighing. She tried her hardest not to sound too disappointed. "Am I—am I needed to stay in Millsbury?"

All her life, she had dreamed of London. Every story of interest that she had ever heard or read had been inextricably linked with the fascinating capital. The thought of finally having the opportunity to witness the London Season for herself had been so intoxicating that the truth of possibly not being able to go dropped Melodia down from a height of lofty clouds to the earth below with a loud, painful thud. She never should have hoped otherwise. Millsbury was her life, and she might well never get to see beyond it.

"You are always needed in Millsbury." This time, Papa's tone sounded gentler. Melodia even discerned a small smile. "But your mother and I have yet to decide if it is wise for us to permit you this trip."

"I see." Melodia picked at her skirts as their carriage slowed, and the family soon stepped out of the carriage and wandered into their home with wordless familiarity. Mrs. Caroway had set out the requisite candles, lighting the entrance just enough for the three of them to settle in before retiring to their rooms. Melodia spoke again when they were all at their bedroom doors. "I—I hope that I can go, Papa. I have always wanted to see London."

"We shall see in the morning." Papa flashed a tired smile.

"Goodnight, child," Mama uttered.

"Goodnight, Papa. Goodnight, Mama."

Not that it was a particularly good night for Melodia. Bereft of sleep by the possibility of either attaining or losing her most precious dream, she tossed and turned the whole night through, images of packed ballrooms and fashionable couples pervading her mind. When she did sleep, she dreamt of parties and gatherings filled with beautiful ladies and fine young gentlemen—events she was forced to witness by peeking through the windows while she hid in the shrubbery. By the time she trudged downstairs to breakfast the next day, Melodia doubted she had slept even four full hours.

But then she was greeted by a reticule half filled with coins.

"This ought to cover any expenses the Laurences do not meet for you," said Papa while he took a casual bite out of his pastry. The small fortune sat on the table between Melodia and him. "We have but one condition for your visit to Town."

As if tugged by a strong horse, Melodia's heart nearly leapt out of her chest. Was she to go to London after all?

"It is a condition that I hope you will honor," said Papa.

Melodia nodded fervently. She would agree to anything—*anything*—to

allow her this trip. She might even promise to scrub the parish pews every week for the rest of her life or agree to tutor Wesley three hours a day for the rest of the year.

"Under no condition may you become betrothed to or form an understanding with a gentleman during this trip," said Papa. Mama nodded solemnly beside him. "There shall be no courtship with any particular gentleman, regardless of his background. That shall not be something you undertake without the counsel of your mother and me. Is that clear?"

"Oh, yes, Papa. Yes!" Melodia rushed off her seat and hugged her father. "I promise, Papa. And Bridget and Bella will keep me in line. Thank you. Thank you ever so much."

Papa patted her back gently as Melodia grinned over his shoulder. As conditions went, this was even easier than she had ever imagined. It was not as if she was off to London for romance.

Chapter Twelve

The cooling autumn air brushed against Garrett's cheeks as he walked back towards Laurendale. The Millsbury children had been attentive today, and he had lingered to instruct one or two of them further on the finer points of the story they had discussed. Melodia Reese had patiently waited, spending her time laughing and playing with the pupils' younger siblings, until Garrett had answered the older boys' queries to their hearts' content.

Now, the sky was dimming, and having taken care to ensure Melodia's safe arrival at the rectory, Garrett knew himself to be very nearly late for dinner. Mother might throw a fit, given that their dinners together at Laurendale were numbered thanks to the ladies' upcoming London trip; but at least there were no guests scheduled to join them tonight.

"The family awaits in the drawing room, my lord," the butler informed him quite as soon as Garrett had managed to squeeze himself indoors. The side entrance was hardly popular with other members of the family, but Garrett was rather too impatient to circle around just to enter the house more formally. It was a blessing that Mr. Arnold had been with the family long enough to anticipate Garrett's habits.

"Are they all dressed?"

"Yes, your lordship," Arnold replied, "rather formally, one might say."

Garrett sighed. It was the worst sort of night to disappoint Mother. She would excuse him, of course, for his tardiness, as it had occurred in the name of charity. Mother did not need to know that his late arrival had as much to do with the village children as it did with the fact that he had lingered extensively with Miss Reese as they had tidied up the temporary classroom

and walked her home. God forbid that Garrett rush the better part of his day to prolong the more tedious second half.

It was not Mother's censure that Garrett feared, exactly. Her complaints had always bothered his sisters more than they did him. If anything, Garrett winced at the possibility that if Mother so much as heard that he had voluntarily spent more time with a single lady, she might have the banns read the very next Sunday—even if said lady was little more than a child.

The fact that Melodia Reese was hardly a child any longer but rather a young woman invited to enjoy the London Season with his sisters was a fact Garrett had no time to dwell upon too extensively at the moment.

"Do I look presentable?" He lifted his arms as if displaying his attire to Mr. Arnold. The butler was by no means a fashionable man, but he *had* been Father's valet, once upon a time.

Mr. Arnold smiled politely. "You look every bit a professor, my lord."

Garrett sighed. "Is dinner to be served right away?"

"The soup cools as we speak."

"Very well." Garrett resigned himself. He turned to trounce up the stairs. "Mother shall simply have to make do with a professor at the table."

The few servants lingering in the hallway chuckled, and Garrett was rather too amused himself to mind the impertinence.



"Melodia would so love the theater. We do plan to see many plays, do we not, Mother?" Bridget asked first over dinner that evening, starting what apparently would become a mealtime conversation largely preoccupied by upcoming London plans.

"We may visit as often as you'd like to," Mother replied. "It may well be your last Season in our family's box."

Bridget blushed prettily, a rare occurrence for the more straightforward of the two sisters. Then Bella spoke right after she did, "And the modiste as well. Melodia said that her parents have permitted her two new dresses for the London trip, but that would hardly be enough."

"Of course not," said Mother, looking almost appalled. "I will write Mrs. Reese tonight about her daughter's wardrobe. She ought to know we would not expect a parson's daughter to dress herself."

"But Melodia dresses stylishly enough."

"For Millsbury, perhaps, but not for London. We shall sponsor at least five new dresses for the dear girl if she is to be seen about Town with you."

Bridget and Bella tutted happily, no doubt eager to share the happy news with their favorite friend, while Garrett ruminated on his beef. At least Mrs. Peyton was a decent cook. The women of the house might be taking their presence, their hosting capacities, and Garrett's favorite female neighbor along with them, but at least he and Father would still have palatable food.

Around him, the chatter continued about modistes and shops, Hyde Park and Elgin Marbles. Bridget mentioned the theater again, and Bella rhapsodized about the music they would get to enjoy in London's ballrooms. Garrett had liked his former visits to London. There were more choices to be had in the realms of fashion, food, and the company of fellow men. But as a quieter soul for the majority of his life, he had never fully embraced the ins and outs of London society, with its gossip and judgments and matchmaking ambitions. He had enough of the latter in Millsbury, thanks to Mother.

"Lord Laurence," another voice weaved through his sisters' animated conversation, and Garrett looked up to regard the only member at the table tonight who did not share his blood. Miss Oliver, unlike Lord Clairbridge, had not deemed it preferable to leave ahead of the family with her own conveyance, though God knew how many carriages her father could easily afford. Instead, she had remained at Laurendale, and Garrett could only hope that she would depart along with his mother and sisters the same way she had unceremoniously arrived with them. "Did you enjoy your time teaching the children today?"

Her query caught Garrett off-guard, reminding him that his lack of interest in the lady did not preclude her lack of interest in him.

He cleared his throat of his latest bite. "The lessons went well. The children are grateful to be taught and are mastering all their lessons."

"As they should be," said Mother, her voice covering all others. "It is a most striking privilege to be taught by you and your cousins, who have had only the very best education."

"It is not only Ellis and I," Garrett replied. "Several other young men, such as Mr. Humbert, have been assisting in the endeavor as well."

"But their training cannot come close to what you have experienced."

"Perhaps not."

"Millsbury is blessed to have the Reeses in residence. They never seem to

tire in their charitable efforts. I dare say one could never find another rector in all of England half as dedicated as Mr. Reese."

"I agree wholeheartedly." Beyond his respect for the dedicated minister, Garrett admired the cheerful Mrs. Reese and her children as well. There was a lightness to the Reeses' presence, whether he encountered them at the rectory, at Laurendale, or at any other venue in town. It was a lightness that Laurendale mostly lacked, for all its splendor.

"But do you not wish to see London as well, Lord Laurence?" Miss Oliver asked, her tone somehow both shy and firm at the same time. Garrett glanced back towards her as he felt the rest of the table still.

The hope in her eyes, despite the slight tremble of her lip, was a hope Garrett felt duty-bound to subdue.

He leaned forward to wipe the edges of his mouth before he set the napkin aside. "I do not have plans to visit this Season."

"But there shall be many things—many *people* to see," Miss Oliver pressed, her voice slightly more pinched now. She leaned forward, eyes shining above her rounded cheeks. Even seated, she was nearly as tall as Garrett himself, her anxiousness emanating off her person. "Do you not wish to join us—even briefly?"

Garrett frowned. If he had to admit it, he *did* somewhat wish to join his family in London this year. All his sisters' talk of their innumerable plans beckoned to him, and he did wish to spend some more time with Bridget before she was inevitably wed. But he could hardly allow his private confessions to present their guest with unreasonable hope.

"I'm afraid I shall be staying at Millsbury for the duration of the Season," he said, speaking as clearly and kindly as he could. "As for London society, I do not find it in myself to enjoy it these days, however much my sisters may seem to do so. I understand that your family holds great sway over London society, and I cannot help but admire you and your parents for it. Though our paths must thus diverge, I hope you find your happiness in Town, Miss Oliver."

There was a slight sheen to Miss Oliver's gaze that had not been there before. But then she lowered her gaze, and Garrett nearly sighed in relief. For a quick moment, the rest of the family ate in silence.

Then Mother came to the rescue. "It is kind of you, Garrett, to keep your father company this Season."

Father, to his credit, muttered his agreement with perfect cooperation.

"It is no chore, for I do like assisting in Laurendale's matters," Garrett replied.

"And I do not think you shall be overly lonely despite Millsbury's limited company."

"I do not either."

"The Linuses, I believe, shall not be in London this Season either. Lord Linus feels poorly and wishes to recuperate away from Town. If Laurendale were ever to prove too empty, I am quite certain that you would find quite a welcome at Highgreen Park instead."

Garrett struggled to hide his smirk over the irony of it all. "Is that so?"

"The younger Mr. Linuses and Miss Linus shall be in residence."

Garrett laid down his utensils with as civil a chuckle as he could muster. "And I presume that you have informed Lady Linus as well of the fact that Father and I would be remaining in Millsbury?"

"Of course."

Ah, yes, of course she had.

Chapter Thirteen

"Isn't London the most wonderful, splendid place in the whole entire world?" Melodia whirled into the Laurence sisters' shared sitting room, her feet dancing on clouds. Her bosom friends followed, bright smiles on their faces. A day spent in Hyde Park, followed by an evening soirée, and two days of luxuriating in all the latest wares of the London shops had opened Melodia's eyes so thoroughly that she could hardly imagine herself the same person she had been last week.

Who knew shopkeepers could be so solicitous to people before they had promised to buy a single thing? Who knew Gunter's ice could taste so good on her tongue while paining her teeth? The bookshop alone had more volumes than Melodia had ever seen in her entire life.

With all the things upon which to feast her senses, and with all the wonderful people she'd met at every turn, she hardly remembered pining over her lack of pin money just a few days prior. Lady Chattsworth ensured that all three girls lacked for nothing, and the best part of the London Season—that of observing and remembering new sights, sounds, and acquaintances—cost nearly nothing to enjoy.

She had always dreamed of London as a place to see what she had heard of all her life. Yet how little she had anticipated being fundamentally altered by every moment she spent breathing in the busy city air! People of every kind lined every single street. Every minute sizzled with possibilities. Was it any wonder that nearly every novel she had ever read pointed back to the bustling capital? Here was the place where paupers met princes. Here was the place where young ladies met their futures and never looked back.

"I'm sorry we took so very long choosing a shawl, Melodia," Bridget

apologized as the three girls dropped into various seats around the spacious sitting room. With Melodia assigned to the adjoining suite, the three friends had been well-nigh inseparable. "You must think me unpardonably fickle."

"I admit I've never seen you so reluctant about anything before." Melodia smiled, her head filled with fancies. "You hardly have to try so hard, you know. Your marquess is not going to look at anyone but you."

"Melodia!"

"We all know we are here because you are about to be betrothed and married off to far away Cornwall. Your mother would never have invited me otherwise."

"Well, that is not entirely—"

"Oh, don't worry about hurting my feelings. I know it's true." Melodia grinned as she snuggled into a luscious pillow. Around them, servants scurried left and right to put away the spoils of the day's efforts. Many merchants would be thanking the Lord for the Laurences today. "I am happy to benefit. Maybe I shall get to visit London again when it's Bella's turn to marry."

"I have no intention to marry anytime in the near future." Bella laughed, her voice sweet and her eyes bright as always.

"Only because you have set your sights closer to home," Melodia teased as the younger twin blushed. "I can't say I blame you. Even with such stylish men packing the London ballrooms, the Linus brothers still sport much handsomer features as a whole."

"Do you have an unrequited love we ought to know of?" Bridget volleyed back, smiling as well. "Kenneth Linus is close enough to your age."

"No one will look at me twice with the two of you beside me, so that is hardly the point."

The twin sisters shared a look Melodia had rarely seen them use.

"You underestimate your charms, my dear," said Bridget. "I know plenty of young men who would be happy to court you."

"Now you sound like my Papa. He seemed so keen to warn me about starting a courtship in London. As if anyone would offer to do so upon a few weeks' acquaintance!"

"Stranger things have happened."

"Are you talking about the scandals? Is it true that there is at least one compromise each Season?"

"I'm sure that's an exaggeration. But you really are more eye-catching

than you realize, dear."

"I don't think my best friends are quite the impartial authority to make such a declaration, but I thank you for the compliment." Melodia executed an elaborate bow with her upper body that had all three girls giggling.

"Mother says that Mr. Cambridge and Mr. Clydesdale are to call tomorrow morning," said Bella as the maids approached with the girls' evening dresses. It was strange to be changing clothes so many times each day, and Melodia was gladder than ever that Lady Chattsworth had thought to gift her at least two of each sort of dress for her use these few months. "She says we must wait until they finish their call before we go view the marbles."

Now it was Bridget and Melodia who exchanged their own knowing look.

"You know Mother said that mainly for your benefit." Bridget turned towards her sister. "I doubt Mr. Cambridge and Mr. Clydesdale would notice at all if Melodia and I were in the room."

"Or sprawled on the floor," added Melodia.

"Or plastered against the wall."

"Or snoring on the settee."

"Oh, you two. You know I like neither of them!" Bella exclaimed to much laughter.

"Mr. Cambridge is rather tall, and Mr. Clydesdale has a certain bearing about him," Melodia remarked. She shot a sly glance at a blushing Bella. "But neither of them are Kingsley Linus, are they?"

The sisters grinned, and the three young ladies continued to chatter until the maids all but insisted, as politely as they could, that the friends be dressed for dinner.



The London Season continued to unfold with its share of wonders. One evening at the theater would be followed by a ball. A ride in the park would precede a musical or another soirée. Dinner parties packed their schedules multiple evenings each week. The number of Melodia's London acquaintances grew from a handful to a few dozen to almost half a hundred. She was never considered a guest of honor or anyone particularly noteworthy, of course. But Lady Chattsworth's sponsorship earned her a level of respect that Melodia stewarded well, and she established herself as best

she could to the Chattsworths' friends, illustrious and common and otherwise.

She danced at least twice at each event, and she performed her music whenever called upon to do so. The innumerable Laurence cousins and associates swirling around Bridget and Bella caused at least the occasional grain of attention to spill over to Melodia, and she received whatever compliments she did with grace.

She was here to marvel at London and to broaden her horizons, not to catch a husband. And she was wholly content to stand to the side and observe her best friends bloom at each event while she chattered with the aunts and the spinsters—or, even, occasionally, the more engaging portraits on the wall.

It was during one such dinner party, after the sexes had reunited, when Bridget was being praised for her impending engagement and Bella being showered with inquiries about her availability, that Melodia found herself standing next to a relatively familiar face.

"Miss Reese, is it?" greeted the young man as they both stood by the draftier side of the Clydesdale drawing room.

Melodia smiled and curtsied. "Mr. Limbergh. If I'm not mistaken?"

"You are not." He nodded, a slight smirk to the edge of his lips.

The Limberghs were distant cousins of the Laurences. A whole third of London seemed to be distant cousins of the Laurences. And she remembered making the young man's acquaintance her first week in London. With her eyes still unaccustomed to the plethora of new faces at that time, Melodia recalled those earlier introductions better than others.

Mr. Limbergh had always struck her as the sort of character that strode straight out of a novel. He wore his hair longer than the men in Millsbury did and styled it rather generously. His clothes were fashionable and his bearing charmed. There was a sophistication to his manners that was clearly absent from the men she met at home, no matter how much poor Mr. Humbert tried. All in all, it was rather flattering to be singled out in attention by a person so clearly made for the worldly London scene.

"I hope you are enjoying the Season, Mr. Limbergh." Melodia had long learned that this was the proper way to start any conversation in Town.

"It is tolerable," the young man said in an almost tired tone. He glanced over the room as if surveying everyone's actions. "One grows weary of the same faces, at times."

"I have certainly met more new people in London these few weeks than I

usually do in a year. It is most fascinating."

The lazy half-smile returned. The man was charming, to a certain degree, even if his charm seemed a trifle too dramatic to feel entirely natural. "You find London fascinating then?"

"I cannot deny it. It is easily the most fascinating place I have ever been. I have always longed to visit, and I am ever so grateful for this opportunity to experience the Season alongside my closest friends."

"You are good friends with my cousins then?" Mr. Limbergh turned his eyes back to the room at large.

"I am, and I cannot be happier for them as I witness their social success."

"You seem quick to say such a thing. Are you not jealous, not even in the least?"

Melodia sniffed, affronted by such a daring assumption made by someone she barely knew. She almost glared at Mr. Limbergh, his charming manners be damned. "I am most sincere in my happiness for Br—for Lady Bridget and Lady Bella. I have always been close to their family, and they are the most deserving and admirable people I know."

"You know my Cousin Garrett as well then."

"Yes." The turn in conversation was a slight surprise, but Melodia maneuvered it readily. "I am acquainted with Lord Laurence."

"Ah, yes, Lord Laurence. He is a viscount, if only by courtesy."

"Are you close with your cousins as well, Mr. Limbergh?"

"I cannot say. I do enjoy the privilege of being included in their circles, yet I am rarely regarded with the same respect as my titled relatives, no matter how I might prove myself in my talents." Mr. Limbergh leaned forward on the empty couch in front of them and braced his hands on its back. His wide stance drew him slightly closer to Melodia. As it did not seem to bother him, she stood her ground. "It is almost as if I belong and yet do not belong—remaining an observer rather than a participant in the life of the upper crust. I thought you, Miss Reese, with your devoted support of my cousins this Season, would understand more than others."

He'd turned to face her with his last sentence, his eyes searching. And, for the first time since the start of their conversation, Melodia felt a spark of empathy for the fashionable young man.

"It can be lonely in a crowd at times," she said.

"Ah, yes. See—you do understand." Mr. Limbergh smiled, his countenance lighting up as he did. He straightened his posture once more,

standing a good foot taller than Melodia, and hovered much closer than he did before. "I hope that I have not made a mistake in confiding in you, Miss Reese. I have been observing you, you know, watching you as you watch the world happen around you with the patience of a saint. There is a spark about you—something unique that is rather wasted on the fringes of society."

Melodia wondered if she ought to be offended with his ungenerous description of her relationship to the Laurences, but his compliment was quite flattering enough to distract her. "Do you always speak so candidly with young ladies you barely know?"

"Only when they strike me as kindred spirits."

"Ah."

"Yes."

"And you think me a kindred spirit, Mr. Limbergh?"

"Please, we are to be friends, are we not? Call me Shane."

The suggestion was as improper as it was unwarranted. And yet, there was something tempting and thrilling about the fashionable young man before her. Mr. Shane Limbergh was the sort of man one could never meet in Millsbury. The good people of Millsbury were kind, wholesome, and delightfully sincere. But those very traits also rendered the vast majority of them entirely unremarkable.

Mr. Limbergh was a cousin of her closest friends. Surely, there was no harm to be had in indulging in his slight sense of danger when all of London accompanied them at every turn?

"Very well then—Shane." Melodia smiled briefly at her own daring. "I am honored to consider you a friend."

"Ah, Melodia," he answered, a mischievous glint to his eye that unsettled her. "I hope you shall consider me as much more than a friend by this Season's end."

And just like that, after little more than a month in London, Papa's one condition began to feel not entirely unfounded.

Chapter Fourteen

"Do you spend every ball like this? Because we could be dancing, if you wish." The now-familiar voice of Shane Limbergh nipped at Melodia's ear.

She smiled despite herself. Her hand stayed busy fanning away the unbearable heat of the packed ballroom, the third one the Laurence party had visited in the past week alone. The temperature was tolerable when dance steps and a flirtatious partner distracted her from the crush of it all; it was rather difficult to bear when one stood by the sidelines watching one's best friends dance the night away.

Melodia did not begrudge Bridget and Bella their popularity, of course. But there had been times in London, especially in the last few days, when the twins' ever-increasing engagements left Melodia, who had been surrounded with love and laughter all her life, standing alone to the side. At least, with Mr. Limbergh's constant attentions, she was mostly occupied.

"We have already danced twice, and you know it's not proper to dance again," she whispered back at the fashionably dressed man beside her. He stood closer than was entirely proper, although one might still forgive the proximity for close acquaintances.

"Never knew you to be so prim and proper, Melodia."

The words *shouldn't* affect her so much. What else was a minister's daughter raised to be if not prim and proper? She had always been the unconventional sort, of course, what with her head in the clouds and her tongue always talking. Yet, as a whole, Melodia Reese had led her young life thriving *within* the boundaries of her parents' instructions, not outside of them; and she had never felt particularly eager to overstep when she so

heartily enjoyed the favor of her family and friends by being exactly where she was.

But this was different.

There was a danger to Mr. Limbergh's teasing—a joke that could tip into an insult if she answered unfavorably. And the thought of letting someone down, especially someone so worldly and intriguing as Shane Limbergh, sat more ill with Melodia than the fear of stepping beyond her lifelong boundaries.

"I am full of surprises," she whispered back.

"Are you now?" He leaned closer, close enough to sniff her neck. The action shocked her, and Melodia's fan stopped for a quick moment before resuming its oscillation. "Should I be testing this theory?"

"You've seen me in every event in the past fortnight," Melodia sought to guide the questions to safer waters. At least she thought she did. "Have I not surprised you a single time every time we've conversed?"

"You have, perhaps, to a certain degree." He smirked against her cheek. Again, a strange and unsettling thrill shot down her spine. Was this what the novels meant when they described allure and passion? There was nothing objectionable about Mr. Limbergh, as a whole, for he was by definition a gentleman. If only he acted the part of one more fully, however, their increasingly murkier interactions would be a lot less difficult for Melodia to navigate. "But I have yet to see anything beyond what one might expect of a country rector's child. You pay respects when you must. You display all the correct manners. You are everything you *ought* to be, in every sense of the word."

To be what one *ought* to be was supposed to be a good thing, Melodia knew. But there was something about the way Mr. Limbergh made his statement that caused the description to sound almost degrading.

"Perhaps I may subvert your expectations yet, Mr. Limbergh," she replied.

"What did I tell you before, Melodia?" he breathed into her ear as his hand grasped her wrist. "Call me Shane."

And in the blink of an eye, he managed to whisk her out the doors behind them and into the dark terrace beyond.

"Oh!" Melodia gasped when he turned her around into the shadows. They were within reach of the ballroom and not entirely isolated. But with the darkness of the night and a few tall ferns shrouding them, Melodia felt

alarmingly unchaperoned. "Shane, perhaps we—"

Hot, firm lips landed on hers while equally firm male hands held her in place by the shoulders. Melodia felt her eyes open wide in surprise as the man she had flirted with all of the last fortnight bestowed on her what was to be her first kiss.

She'd used to dream of her first kiss—of stolen kisses in the carriage as she and her newlywed husband traveled from the Millsbury chapel to the rectory for their wedding breakfast—of kisses by the fire or under the sunset skies, with her safely ensconced in her husband's arms. Being kissed like this, in the shadows of the night, mere steps away from propriety, was hardly what she had ever imagined.

But was she so entirely attached to her former dreams as to refuse this variation of events?

Shane Limbergh pulled back, releasing her shoulders at the same time. Melodia struggled to catch her breath, unready and unwilling to meet his eye.

Then she heard him say, with the slightest quiver in his voice, "Perhaps you *are* full of surprises, Melodia Reese."

Melodia chuckled, rather hollowly. "That I am."

"Shall I escort you back into the ballroom?"

"Yes, please. Discreetly, of course."

This time, she could hear the mischief in his voice. "Of course."



It was two days later, during a lull in activities at Mrs. Shale's dinner party, when Shane Limbergh tried to kiss her again. He surprised her in the hallway, his quick hands pulling Melodia into an alcove just as she had been prancing her way back from the retiring room. After two days of battling her guilt and waffling constantly about whether or not to confide their recent exchange to Bridget and Bella, Melodia knew she ought not encourage him.

But whether it was the thrill of the illicit or the refusal to back down from a challenge spurring her on, she let him kiss her, and she returned his kisses as if she were wholly accustomed to such attentions.

"You—you are so fascinatingly alluring," he whispered when he pulled back minutes later, his hands still at her waist.

Melodia smiled and panted at the compliment. "You are not so shabby

yourself, Mr. Charmer."

"Do I charm you then? Is that what I do?"

"Of course," Melodia whispered. What else besides charm could have compelled her to act in such an unladylike way? It was one thing to steal kisses with a man promised to her. It was another thing altogether to act so casually with a relatively new acquaintance. She kept her voice lower than she usually did. "But you do—that is—do you intend—"

"I will court you, of course. That's only right, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course, I—" Her father's condition keeled Melodia back like reins against her neck. She sighed beneath her breath. "Although my father may need to be persuaded."

"Ah, of course." His dismissive tone caught her by surprise. "But that is not a problem now, is it? We shall convince him easily enough."

Melodia tried to imagine anyone, anyone at all, ever persuading the ever-serious Reverend Philip Reese to do anything other than his own bidding. The thought was much like trying to imagine what it would take to have elephants fly.

"Perhaps," she muttered.

"We have to go before we are missed." Shane peeked out the alcove before facing her again. "I'll meet you again at the next event. Just wait for me by the balcony door."

"I—I'm not sure if it is entirely proper—"

"No one checks the balconies, my dear. We are not living in a novel." He smirked at her, as if she were a child, and Melodia felt the familiar urge to prove herself more daring once more.

"Of course I know that."

"It will all be well if we marry, you know."

She knew that. Secret rendezvous were far more tolerable if they were with one's future husband. But it was not as if she had agreed to marry Shane Limbergh, and it was not as if he had asked.

"Come, don't tell me you regret it." He raised his eyebrow in almost incredulous manner. "I had thought you made of sterner stuff than that."

"I am, of course I am. That is—no, I don't—I don't regret it," Melodia muttered. What else was she to do except agree? She *had* allowed him his liberties.

"You mustn't, you know? Not when we have done nothing wrong."

He kissed her before she could respond about her misgivings, and the

distraction of his wandering hands prevented her from speaking or thinking of anything else.

"Now we truly must go." He pulled back and chuckled. "Wouldn't do to be compromised in my own aunt's home."

Why he should fear compromise if he intended to marry her—she couldn't explain—but she acceded anyway. She always seemed to accede to his demands. It was unusual behavior for someone so used to speaking her own mind, but London had a way of making her feel rather unlike herself. "Of course."

"I'll return to the drawing room first. You can follow when you believe it safe."

Melodia nodded mutely, noticing only as her companion slipped away that her gown was showing clear signs of wear. She would have to tidy herself rather cleverly to hide the evidence of what she had been doing. The sudden and overwhelming secret she was bearing clamped itself upon her with its full weight. She had never considered it possible to disappoint her parents before, but she was rather certain that they would keenly disapprove of where she was and what she had been doing just now.

Perhaps she needed her best friends' counsel. Melodia resolved as she slipped out of the alcove to confide in the twins tonight. Even with the difference in their stations, there were certain things that were universal when it came to matters of the heart.

Thus determined, she lifted her chin with confidence and re-entered Mrs. Shale's small but well-furnished drawing room—only to be greeted with a flurry of excitement from every corner of the room.

"What—what has happened?" Melodia blurted, neither loudly nor quietly. Jubilant faces surrounded her at every side, with Lady Chattsworth looking particularly radiant.

"Oh Melodia, there you are!" Bridget rushed forward in all her splendor to clutch her friend's hands with her own. Her eyes sparkled; her entire body emanated joy. "Richard and I just announced our engagement. We are to be Lord and Lady Clairbridge by the end of the summer. Isn't that splendid? Oh, how wonderful it is to be in love!"

Setting aside her own concerns, Melodia threw herself into her friend's happiness instead.

Chapter Fifteen

The walk between Laurendale and the Millsbury rectory was a pleasant one. The woods provided ample shade, and the slightly worn path that meandered through the terrain lay mostly on even ground. It was easy on days like this to imagine what the walk must be like for the people who traversed it regularly. While Father and Mother would take a carriage if they ever needed to call upon the rector's family, Garrett himself, his sisters, and the residents of the rectory more often than not traveled by foot.

Did Mr. Reese like to walk briskly down the pathway as Garrett did? The minister had always seemed the sort to remain ardently focused on his goals. Did Melodia and her mother chatter happily as they always seemed to be doing whenever they ambled down this way? Did Melodia like to soak in the pockets of sunshine that peeked through the foliage, or did she avoid them to preserve her complexion?

With the young ladies in both households away in London, Garrett had little to keep himself company these days. He did plenty of things, of course. He read, and he studied the best ways to nurture the estate. He visited the Seymours and the Ellises often. He continued his participation in the parish church's various programs, even though said programs tended to lose half their energy with Melodia gone.

He spent time with his father, and he conferred with Mrs. Meryl about the running of the household, often causing their seasoned housekeeper to look rather consternated at a young man taking such interest in domestic affairs.

And on days like today, when the quietness at Laurendale seemed more hollow than peaceful, and when manners dictated that he not disturb his cousins too often, Garrett found his feet striding towards the rectory almost

entirely of their own accord.

"Lord Laurence," Mrs. Reese herself greeted Garrett at the door today. "What a pleasant surprise."

Garrett bowed. "I hope I am not disturbing."

"Not at all." The ever-cheerful Mrs. Reese smiled. Her portly form seemed designed for jolliness. "But Mrs. Caroway is rather busy being frustrated at the new maid at the moment, so perhaps it might be best not to spread dirt on the newly cleaned floor."

"Your advice is duly noted, Mrs. Reese."

The matron chuckled. "Mr. Reese is in his study. I suppose I do not need to show you the way?"

Garrett smiled. "I'd like to believe myself perfectly capable of locating a room I have visited so many times."

"Good. We are a person short around here." Mrs. Reese let him in. When Garrett took extra care to admire the cleanliness of the floor, Mrs. Reese laughed again. "I shall pass your compliments on to Mrs. Caroway. Lord knows the woman needs to smile more."

"Has she been in a foul mood of late?"

"It is kind of you to inquire, my lord, but most of us have felt Melodia's absence rather keenly."

"Ah." Garrett almost found himself admitting to similar emotions—but he thought better of expressing them. "Is Mr. Reese doing well then?"

"He no longer broods like he did those first two weeks, but the man feels keenly in general. It would do him good to converse with you."

"I would be happy to be of service, although I doubt I can be as sparkling of a conversationalist as to take Miss Reese's place."

Mrs. Reese laughed. "Melodia does speak incessantly, does she not? Oh, the house has been frightfully quiet."

"Peaceful and quiet, perhaps?"

"Quiet, yes." Mrs. Reese smiled gently, in the sentimental way that only a mother could. "But not always peaceful."

"I see."

"Lord Laurence, if you don't mind my asking—have your sisters written much lately?"

Garrett paused to think. "Not in particular, although they rarely send more than a letter each month whenever they are in Town."

"Of course, of course."

"Is something the matter, Mrs. Reese?"

"Only that Melodia—" The minister's wife seemed to appear slightly worried for a moment. It was strange to see the usually happy woman be anything else *but* happy. "Melodia wrote much more often her first month away. Now we barely hear from her, but I suppose that is to be expected with her so busy in London."

"I see." Garrett tried to recall how things were for him during his first trip to London. He had only been a child, and while he had found the various entertainments interesting, he had never found them particularly intriguing after some time. The food was good at the dinner parties, at least, even if his mother's shopping and endless social engagements wore his nerves thin. "Perhaps the post has been delayed."

"I doubt it, although it is kind for you to say so." Mrs. Reese smiled and shook her head. "Never mind my melancholy. I shall leave you men to your discussions."

Garrett bowed. "I'm much obliged. Although, if it is your wish, Mrs. Reese, I would be happy to mention to my sisters upon our subsequent correspondence that they share more regarding what the three of them have been doing."

A grateful smile lit up the matron's face. "Thank you, my lord, that would be kind indeed."



"Mrs. Peyton has outdone herself." Father praised the cook as he sat back against his dining chair. For all his titles and responsibilities and standing in society, the Earl of Chattsworth was a simple man. It never took more than a well-sprung carriage ride and a well-cooked meal to have him exalted to great heights of contentment. "Your mother and sisters could hardly be having anything as good in London."

"I cannot imagine they would be." Garrett smiled. Dinners were simple affairs these days with only the menfolk at home. Mrs. Meryl made sure everything ran properly in the household as if her mistress were present, but evenings were decidedly quieter without Mother around to pack their schedules in the past two months. Garrett had welcomed the change at first, although things were beginning to grow slightly *too* quiet of late. "Have you

any special requests for tomorrow? I hear that Mr. Banner has been importing new wares."

"Old Banner is still working? I thought the man had retired ages ago."

"His father did. This is the son, though I think of him as little Jacob Banner's father."

"Still doing the village lessons then? How is that progressing?"

"They continue well enough, although the children are considerably less enthusiastic without Miss Reese around. I would not be surprised if some of those little boys decided to offer for her hand the moment their party returns. So smitten they are with the girl. I don't think I ever have a single lesson without one of them inquiring about her whereabouts." Garrett took a sip of his wine before sitting back himself. The elaborate ceiling of the dining room appeared considerably overdone hanging over the two of them, as did the fanciful carvings on most of the furniture. If he ever built his own house, he'd much prefer less ostentatious designs. Dared he hope his future wife shared his tastes?

Father chuckled, his own wine glass in hand. "Heaven only knows when your mother will return. She is always swept away by the London Season."

"No doubt encouraged by Bridget and Bella." Garrett gave his father a pointed look. "The energy of those two combined cannot be underestimated."

"Particularly when they are in the company of Miss Reese."

"Particularly so."

The two men sank into companionable silence. Life was less complicated without the womenfolk around, and there were benefits to be had in the stillness of it all—even if their absence meant that no one complained about the men's outdated fashions, fielded invitations for them, or planned more variety into the dinner menu. For all of Mrs. Peyton's talents, Garrett did prefer at least a new dish to take its place on the dining table ever so often.

"I received a letter from your mother today," Father said.

"Ah, did you? Did she enumerate all the balls they have attended since the last letter?"

Father chuckled. "It seems that Clairbridge has finally gotten his act together and proposed. Bridget shall be wed before the Season ends."

"Ah, well, that *is* news. Did he ask your permission?"

"He already did when he'd visited Laurendale. I only wondered what was taking the man so long to actually propose."

"Bridget is a gem. He is lucky no one stole her away from under his

nose."

"Some things are divinely ordained. Your mother is beside herself, of course. She had always wanted the three of you to be happily married. The fact that Bridget found her happiness with a marquise in tow was quite beyond anyone's expectations."

"I'd like to hope that anyone who marries me does not think of me as a someone with a viscountcy in tow."

"An earldom, son, you are heir to an earldom."

"Not that it matters, for you shall surely live a hundred years."

Father smiled benevolently at Garrett. Some people might say such things out of flattery, but Garrett meant every word. If ever there was a creature who deserved to outlive all his peers, it would be the ever-considerate master of Laurendale.

"I doubt there would be much joy in living so very long," said Father, "if I cannot at least see my grandchildren running the halls of Laurendale."

And just like that, the true intent of Mother's letter reemerged.

Garrett offered a wry grin. "Did Mother mention any fresh-faced debutantes she would like to kidnap to Laurendale this time?"

"On the contrary, your mother seems quite content not to play matchmaker for you with the London crowd."

"Color me surprised."

"She seems to be under the impression that you would prefer a less worldly bride, perhaps a good gentleman's daughter accustomed to residing in the country."

"She is not entirely off the mark, I confess. The overly sophisticated ladies of Town rarely would be content to settle near Millsbury."

"You are aware you would be residing in your own property upon marriage."

"Yes, but I would much prefer to choose one amongst the properties within Hampshire."

"You warm my heart, son."

"Happy to oblige."

"Now shall you proceed with procuring a mother for my grandchildren?"

Garrett chuckled, as did Father. "Should I court the shopkeeper's daughter then? Surely, no one would be better suited to be a country bride."

"If that is your preference, you know I do not object, although I wonder whether your mother would faint."

Garrett grinned. His mother would *surely* faint, but not before she delivered him the lecture of her life.

"Your mother mentions that Lord and Lady Linus have no plans to join this Season," Father added quietly, almost as if the words were half his own and half his wife's. He looked up at Garrett with gentle, sincere eyes. "Perhaps you can pay them a call one of these days?"

The implications were not lost on Garrett. He did not dislike Miss Linus, even if he did not feel any partiality for her. All in all, he felt he knew the lady so little that it was impossible for him to make or resist a preference.

He looked up at his father, the kindest person on the planet, and regarded the hopeful light in the aging earl's eyes.

"Very well," Garrett acceded, "Perhaps I might."

There was no harm in trying again, after all.

Chapter Sixteen

"Do you think you will miss London very much?" Bella asked as the three girls donned and draped their silks in preparation for the evening's activities. The Cambridge Ball was hardly the most formal event of the Season, but it was to be the last ball for their party before returning to Hampshire. As Lady Chattsworth had so delicately put only this morning: one could hardly be expected to make a marquess wait. Lady Bridget Laurence, now officially engaged, would not be allowed to cool her heels before securing her place as Lady Clairbridge. The wedding would be at Millsbury, of course, thus requiring their party to leave before the Season's end.

"I think I would miss Hampshire more," Bridget replied to her sister. There had been a glow on Bridget's entire countenance ever since the engagement. It was a glow that beautified her friend—and a glow that prevented Melodia from confiding her own troubles. What kind of friend would she be if she were to mar Bridget's joy with her own guilt and uncertainties? "I love Richard dearly, but Cornwall is much farther than I had ever imagined myself settling."

"We can visit each other often."

"Oh, but you *must*. I cannot bear the thought of you and Melodia enjoying all the sweet kindness of the people of Millsbury and not have the chance to enjoy it myself."

"Perhaps we can yet convince your wealthy husband-to-be to buy a property near Laurendale." Bella smiled.

"Oh, do not make me hope." Bridget sighed, starry-eyed and wistful. The jewels in her hair sparkled in the candlelight. "The marquise keeps him

busy. I can hardly have him refuse all his duties for my sake."

"It is frightfully inconsiderate of him to have his seat all the way in Cornwall, though."

"Not all of us can endeavor to find love from a mere neighboring estate." It was Bridget's turn to tease her sister with a knowing look, and Bella blushed prettily as she always did at any allusion, direct or otherwise, to one Kingsley Linus. "At least we will know how to plan by the time your wedding comes around. I've never seen Mother so eager yet so frantic."

"She has been rather ebulliently nervous." Bella smoothed out her dress. "Have you noticed the same thing, Melodia? You are frightfully quiet tonight."

Melodia startled from her seat on the bed. The maid had worked on her first, and she had allowed herself to wander in her own thoughts ever since she had lowered herself carefully onto Bridget's mattress in an effort to preserve the freshly-pressed dress. Lady Chatsworth had looked rather disapprovingly upon Melodia's rumpled attire at the last ball. The countess could not know, of course, that Melodia's dishevelment had been the result of yet another ill-advised interlude with Shane Limbergh—but the disapproval had stung nonetheless.

Was the thrill of stolen kisses truly worth turning away from all the principles with which she had been raised? With Shane's increasingly wandering hands the last time they had been alone, it might well be a matter of time before he tried to push her boundaries further. Dared Melodia hope that she would be resolute enough to refuse when he did, given that she had done nothing to dissuade him thus far?

"Melodia?" Bridget prodded from the vanity, her eyes bright and kind. "Is everything alright?"

"Of—of course. I am—perfectly fine," Melodia muttered. She sniffed and shook her head. Guilt was not a friendly bedfellow. Yet how could she burden her friends with her own foolishness when their family was at the height of their social triumph? She attempted a smile. "I don't think I have been sleeping very well."

"Oh, is it the pillow? I know Mother wished to use the latest sort after Lady Marianne mentioned that she had recently changed hers. Or is the new spice? Does it give you a megrin?"

"No, nothing like that," Melodia assured. Even with her best efforts, her smile felt forced. "I just think that perhaps—perhaps I have been homesick."

"Oh, you have never been apart from your family for so long, have you?" Bridget flew over to join Melodia on the bed. She gathered Melodia's hands as only a bosom friend could. "You must miss Mr. and Mrs. Reese dearly, and your brother as well."

"It has indeed been rather strange to have no one to order around." Melodia chuckled, though she felt oddly close to crying. What would Papa and Mama say if they knew of her recent behavior? Melodia hoped they never would. "And I hope the village children have been getting their lessons as they should."

"Oh, you need not worry on that account." Bella joined them with a fun little jump onto the mattress. Her maid scurried after her, loose locks of hair in hand. "Garrett said the children are thriving well."

"He did?" Melodia smiled. It felt rather relieving to have a more purposeful thing to dwell upon. "I'm glad to hear it. Did he mention if they needed any additional donations?"

"I'm sure Garrett will have it all in hand." Bridget smiled. "I've rarely seen him throw himself with such enthusiasm into an endeavor."

"Does he rarely express such interest?"

"Perhaps he did in university? We wouldn't know. He is a good brother, but hardly an exciting person."

"Bridget!" Bella chided. "That's unkind to say, isn't it?"

"I mean it in the best way, of course. Garrett is only—well, he is rather contemplative at times. He takes after Father more in this regard, even if Father doesn't love reading half as much as Garrett does. If one didn't know him well, one might even consider him a bore."

This time, Melodia chuckled for real. "I would hardly go that far. Lord Laurence has his humorous moments."

"Moments, yes—though one would not consider humor a striking characteristic of his."

Melodia shook her head, still grinning. "I would hardly consider it a striking characteristic of anyone in your family."

"Melodia!"

"I meant it in the best way, of course," she stole Bridget's own words. "You must admit that what the Reeses lack in wealth, we compensate with good humor."

The sisters laughed and teased, and Melodia found herself being truly cheerful again for the first time in weeks. Perhaps reminiscing about

Millsbury had its benefits, after all.

Chapter Seventeen

The exotic curves of Highgreen Park's oriental garden sprawled on both sides of Garrett as he drove the barouche up the main door. The knot in his stomach felt heavy, duty and uncertainty mingling in an unappetizing mix of anxiety. He had never been the sort to feel nervous around ladies, even if he never felt eager to surround himself with female company. His promised ride with Miss Linus today, however, brought along with it a lining of familial expectations that was difficult to ignore.

"Lord Laurence," Lady Linus returned Garrett's greeting upon his arrival, the baroness's seasoned smile tinged with a hint of eagerness as soon as Garrett completed his bow in the meticulously furnished drawing room. The ornate ceiling alone sported more colors than Garrett's entire bedroom. Behind Lady Linus, her daughter curtsied with practiced precision, her own smile subtle and almost reluctant.

Did Miss Linus dread this charade as much as he did? Garrett did not think he had ever done anything to earn the lady's ire, but he most certainly had never established any kinship with her either.

"I hope it is not too inconvenient for me to drive with Miss Linus today," he said politely.

"Oh, not at all." Lady Linus walked forward. She moved her hands as if she were about to clasp Garrett's before she pulled them back against her stomach. How much had the two mothers consorted about today's events? "We are most happy to see our dear Cecily entertained. It is so frightfully quiet here in the country."

"I suppose one might say so, particularly in contrast to Town."

"Of course, of course. You must miss your mother and sisters dearly."

"Thank you. They are missed, of course." Garrett smiled. He did miss his sisters, particularly the way the twins and Miss Reese filled Laurendale with their spirited chatter, but that was hardly the best choice of topic under the circumstances. "I do not wish for the hour to grow late. Perhaps Miss Linus —"

"Yes, of course." Lady Linus all but shoved her daughter forward. The usually serene Miss Linus frowned briefly at her mother before facing Garrett with her placid smile. Miss Linus was pretty. That fact was never in doubt. But it did not particularly encourage Garrett that she looked extremely indisposed towards the ride they had agreed upon—or, at least, that their parents had agreed upon.

"Miss Linus, Lady Linus," Garrett greeted each of the women before extending a hand to escort the younger one. He felt the baroness's eyes on their backs the entire way to the barouche. Where was a well-placed Linus brother to be found when one needed him? He handed Miss Linus into the barouche, where she settled as primly as she always did, before climbing in himself. As barouches went, the Chatsworth one was a spacious one, but the demure young woman still felt uneasily close by.

Garrett took his time to arrange the reins, a part of him oddly reluctant to spend solitary company with the considerably pretty woman beside him. He was not officially courting her, per se, but there was no doubt what both sides of their families hoped for given their eagerness over today's outing. An open conveyance was not a scandalous one to share in a place as humble as Millsbury, but it also allowed them to parade in full view of the townsfolk, essentially inciting the gossip mill to start turning.

He did not know if he would rather drive along the secluded woodlands adjacent to Highgreen Park or the main street leading into town. One route provided privacy while demanding more of him in terms of entertaining Miss Linus. The other offered plenty of sights to see, while inviting more speculation over their relationship or lack thereof. It was a distinctly undesirable dilemma. And Garrett thought long and hard before deciding upon the slightly longer route on the other side of the estate. It would cross some farm lands and the odd traveling inn or two, but it was neither too secluded nor too public for his purposes.

"Shall we?" He tried to smile at Miss Linus. The lady nodded her head primly, quiet as ever, before Garrett turned to drive.

The late winter air brushed crisply against their cheeks as they increased

in speed, and Garrett allowed himself to enjoy the quietness of the ride for a good ten minutes. Was this what his parents wished for him? There was no arguing that there was a certain peacefulness to Miss Linus. It was a far cry from the liveliness Garrett had grown accustomed to in Laurendale.

It was not until they had passed three large farms and drew close to the first weathered inn that Garrett attempted conversation. "Are you comfortable, Miss Linus?"

"As best as I could be," she answered. Garrett glanced to his side and noted that Miss Linus looked rather the worse for wear after the exciting beginning of their ride. With a sigh, he obliged by slowing the horses down.

"You do not ride often then?" he asked.

"I ride when I must."

"I see." Garrett racked his mind for another topic. "Do your brothers ride then?"

"They do."

Silence settled in once more just as the horses slowed. But this time, the slower pace rather *forced* them to converse. Garrett frowned. He ought to have come to this ride with a list of acceptable topics in hand, preferably a list created with Cousin Hillary's cheek and her husband's sense of humor. Why did some couples have things so easy?

He cleared his throat. "Is your family happy to sit out this Season?"

"Given that it is for my father's health," Miss Linus sighed as she paused, "I would say not."

"Of course." Garrett wanted to smack himself on the forehead. He had never been a charmer, but neither had he ever been this awkward in engaging with a woman. He distracted himself by eyeing the group of men right outside the inn. Despite the early hour, it was clear half of them were already deep into their cups. Garrett frowned at the sight of several uniformed officers bandying about with the other riffraff. Many merchants in Millsbury preferred it when the militia visited, particularly the business they brought along. But Garrett himself wondered if they brought along as much trouble as they did coin.

Busy with his train of thought, Garrett hardly noticed the lone redcoat approaching until he was all but upon them.

"Whoa," he quickly reined in the horses to a stop just as the young man reached the side of the barouche. The man looked to be an ordinary fellow, with average coloring and build, although he sported an admittedly charming

smile.

"Miss Linus," the soldier greeted the young woman, after sparing only the briefest of glances Garrett's way. "I was not aware you ever frequented these roads."

"I rarely do," she whispered back. Garrett noticed that her entire body had turned outwards by now, and she leaned forward slightly over the gloved hands she had perched on the side of the barouche. "But my family wished for me to take a ride, and I had no excuse to make, so I—but I am ever-so-glad to see you."

The man looked at Miss Linus with a decided warmth in his gaze. "And I to see you. I had hoped it would happen more often since being stationed here, but even a small place as Millsbury seems to like dividing its people by their social circles."

"Don't say that, Cardiff. I do believe that once we—"

"No, do not fret about it. There may be a public assembly soon, I've heard. There should be no reason we cannot both attend that one."

"That would be wonderful, of course." Her voice sounded brighter and lighter than Garrett had ever heard it. "I might have to consider how to present the matter to my father, but I do not think he could deny me for long."

"Cecily—"

"Hey, Cardiff!" another soldier hollered from near the inn door. "Are you coming for the next round?"

The soldier by the barouche volleyed his answer back to his colleague, and he turned to bestow a most reluctant look upon Miss Linus. "Perhaps I can call on you soon."

Miss Linus nodded, rather vehemently if the bobbing of her bonnet was anything to go by. Her visitor bid her goodbye, offered Garrett a quick and harsh nod, and trotted back to the inn.

Garrett waited a full minute for Miss Linus to return to her usual, quiet self—although he could never think of the withdrawn, poised version of the lady as her true self ever again. The route he had chosen for their ride today suddenly felt most fortuitous indeed.

"I take it, Miss Linus," Garrett spoke softly when they had resumed a respectable trot, "that you also have no wish for a marital alliance between our families?"

"I'm sorry." The woman sniffed. It surprised Garrett to see that she had

procured a handkerchief from her reticule and was already dabbing her eyes. "I have tried to tell my parents, but they refuse to even consider—I never meant to mislead you, and I hope that I have not done so inadvertently."

For the first time in the course of their acquaintance, Miss Linus met Garrett's eye. He tried his best to ease her panic with a civil smile. "Not to worry, for I must admit I find myself rather relieved to have observed what I observed today. I do not pretend that this path with Mr., uhm—"

"Mr. Cardiff. Lieutenant Cardiff," she supplied with pride.

"Lieutenant Cardiff, yes. I do not know his roots, though the man seems amiable enough, but I cannot imagine that his connections are what your parents have always wished for you to aspire to."

"Not remotely. They will never be content with anything lower than a viscount." Miss Linus huffed in clear resentment. It was the first strong emotion Garrett had ever seen her display, and it made her appear distinctly more human than she ever had. "But we intend to wait. Once Cardiff earns his promotion, which is soon, we have hope that he may at last be received by Father and Mother."

Garrett nodded, hoping for Miss Linus's sake that her desires would be granted, even if they were improbable.

"And since we have established that we shall most definitely not make a pair of this," Garrett suggested a moment later, "shall we at least allow ourselves to enjoy the rest of the ride?"

Miss Linus smiled, her face brightening in a youthful way. "I suppose we must make the most of it. And if our parents truly wish for the families to be connected by marriage, they may well go pester my brother about it instead."

"Your brother—Kenneth?"

"Kingsley, of course. Kenneth is rather too young to be thinking of marriage."

"Ah, and whom do you suggest we betroth Kingsley to?"

"I do not think you have any other sisters left single, my lord."

Garrett pondered an alliance between Bella and Kingsley Linus, and all the jokes and teasing over the years suddenly seemed much closer to reality.

He smiled at Miss Linus as he guided the horses around the bend, their ride already halfway done. "I do believe we could do something about that."



The second half of their ride unfolded much more easily than the first. Without the expectation of prospective matrimony to Miss Linus looming over Garrett's head, he found the lady a far more pleasant person with whom to engage. She rarely spoke much, but at least she did not appear as timid and withdrawn as she used to. How odd it was that they should finally find common ground only when they had mutually decided that it did not lie anywhere close to a path to marriage. They might disappoint their families, but at least they did not disappoint each other.

This arrangement, all things considered, was one Garrett found much more agreeable.

"I hope your parents will not overburden you with queries about today," Garrett said as they drove up the lane to Highgreen Park's main door.

"I do not think they will," Miss Linus replied. "They do not like to discuss things openly."

"Ah."

"And if you please—" She suddenly turned to face Garrett, surprising him with her sudden intensity. "Please do not tell anyone yet about Cardiff. He—we wish to wait until he is more established. Once he earns his promotion, he can prove his ability to provide for a wife."

Garrett frowned. Miss Linus's chosen path was not one he could wholly condone, but he could claim no expertise on such matters as a single man.

"You are aware, of course, that it will not be an easy path," he said.

Miss Linus sniffed. "I know. But what can one do when faced with true love? Love does not follow conventions. Wherever it goes, you follow. That is the nature of love, and it is something my parents must come to accept. I will make sure of it."

Garrett decided then that there was a rather thin line between love and foolhardiness. But, again, he had little right to criticize an emotion he might well have never truly experienced.

"Very well, you have my word," he said as they drew up the final few yards. "I shall not play suitor, for that is something neither of us wish. But, if you ever need it, I can offer to be your ally."

"Thank you, Lord Laurence."

Garrett nodded. "It is the gentlemanly thing to do, as your heart is clearly otherwise engaged."

"It is." Miss Linus offered a grateful-looking smile. A footman approached and assisted her down from the barouche. Then Miss Linus

turned, one last time, before she stepped inside. "Isn't yours, my lord?"

"Mine?"

"Are your affections not otherwise engaged? It would be much easier if I would be able to say so to my father and mother."

Garrett pondered the question. Were his affections otherwise engaged? He paused, thinking, teetering on the verge of a personal epiphany. The answer did not come quickly, but it did tug at the edges of his heart, like one would tug at the edges of a sheet stuck under the mattress. It tugged and it tugged with growing force until, eventually, the entire sheet came loose.

Then Garrett smiled. "Perhaps they might be as well."

Miss Linus smiled, clearly pleased with being able to report such a thing to her parents, while Garrett struggled to tread the deep waters of his newfound emotions.

"Good day, Lord Laurence." Miss Linus curtsied. "Thank you for the ride, and the kindness."

Garrett bowed his head. "You are welcome, Miss Linus."

Chapter Eighteen

With a departure date set for Monday next, Melodia watched the last Chattsworth soirée in London with an uneasiness she found difficult to explain. A large part of her rejoiced for Bridget. Her friend had managed to find love *and* prestige in one fell swoop, and the future Marchioness of Clairbridge was one lucky woman indeed. And then there was Bella, whose starry eyes at every passing mention of Kingsley Linus indicated that her own future happiness might not lie far behind.

As for Melodia, she tried her best to smile as Shane Limbergh cozied up beside her on the chaise, sitting far too closely than was strictly proper. But Melodia had to admit, however reluctantly and shamefully, that anything *proper* had long departed from their interactions a dozen stolen kisses ago.

"Must you go with the Laurences?" Shane murmured, his tone bordering on flirtatiousness the way it always did. "London shall be far too dull without you."

Melodia smiled a small smile. "I can hardly stay here without a home."

"Then make one with me," he answered flippantly. "I can marry you once the banns are read, and there shall be no more talk of your little town of Millsbury."

Words that might have caused her to swoon two weeks ago made Melodia's chest tighten in an uncomfortable way instead. She forced out another smile, though it felt tinged with a grimace. The other guests of the evening mingled freely, all familiar with each other. Their conversation remained as private as it could be, given the circumstances.

"Is that enough time to write my father?" she tried to aim for the same

nonchalance the man beside her seemed to always display. "I mean, I suppose if you write tonight—"

"Melodia, darling." He pressed a hand over the one she had on her lap. The touch felt as intimate as it was wrong. He waited until she peeked his way to continue, "Do you not trust me?"

It was unfair when he spoke like this—unfair for him to remind her of her own fault in their dalliance. He *had* offered to marry her, hadn't he? Was it so wrong to carry on the way they did when he would be her future husband?

A niggling voice at the back of her head told her that it *was* wrong—that whatever they were doing, even if they had not actually bedded each other, was the farthest thing from right. It was a voice that Melodia wished she could ignore, but it was a rather persistent little voice.

"Of course I trust you," she murmured. It was hard to answer any other way when he looked so wounded. "It's just that it has been weeks, and we—"

"Your father has no say over whom you love. You must know that."

"Of course I do. It is not a matter of *love*."

"You do not love me then? You know I love you dearly."

Again, Melodia met his eyes, her own heart swimming in an ocean of confusion and uncertainty. The initial sense of pride she had once felt at Shane's flattering attentions had long since disappeared, replaced instead with a sinking sensation of discomfiture and shame. But it was hardly fair of her to begin this relationship only to flounder now, was it?

"I love you, of course," she faltered half-heartedly. She flushed slightly. "How can you think otherwise when we—"

"When we what?" he pressed closer, stealing even more of the air she was already struggling to breathe. He waggled his brows suggestively, and Melodia almost hurled out the contents of her dinner.

"I hardly think it proper to discuss."

"Ah, and we are back to being prim and proper, aren't we?"

Melodia flinched. Was that not the hook with which he had drawn her in at their first acquaintance? The very idea of being baited successfully by the same overture sent a pang of guilt down the pit of her stomach.

She set her jaw. "And what is wrong with that?"

"Indeed?" Shane raised his brows again. It was difficult to think with him hovering so indecently close. "I can suggest a few ways we can—"

"Shane!"

"What?" He leaned even closer, a slight aggression to his posture. "Did

you not eagerly join me just two nights ago at the terrace of Cambridge House? I cannot be the only person to have wanted that."

Melodia closed her eyes and breathed in sharply. "I do not wish to engage with you tonight."

"Is that so?" Suddenly, his easy flirtatiousness had hardened into barely-concealed anger. "And what am I? A mere source of amusement to you then? Is a second son not worth the attention of Miss Melodia Reese when her bosom friend is about to become a marchioness?"

"You know that Bridget has *nothing* whatsoever to do with this."

"I doubt that, given the ties you seem to share with my lofty relatives." He leaned back slightly, though the rigidity of his frame remained. "Am I a plaything, a mere stepping stone on your quest for a title? Perhaps even your friendship with my cousins is a bold-faced maneuver to catch their brother, the ever-virtuous Lord Laurence."

"How can you paint me as such a schemer?" Melodia struggled not to raise her voice. "Bridget and Bella are my dearest friends in the world, and I would *never* think to use them for my benefit. Not to mention that Lord Laurence has never shown me any sort of preference. He is far too eligible for that."

"And I, the fool, have singled you out."

"I make no comment to that."

"How dare—"

Lady Chattsworth's voice, louder and clearer than it usually rang, peeled over the crowded drawing room as she replied in conversation. "My own Garrett, my lady? Well, I have it on good authority that he shall be betrothed to Miss Linus soon enough. They had just gone riding a few days ago, and my husband says our son came home frightfully late."

"Our double congratulations to the family then," said Lady Marianne.

"Oh, you are too kind."

Melodia met Shane's eyes, sighed, and fled from the room.

Chapter Nineteen

Her return to Millsbury felt as abrupt as it was comforting. "And who could it be when we turned around but Mr. Ellis, escorting the elder Miss Latimore, with her maid acting as the most surly chaperone behind them!" Mrs. Banner chuckled heartily as she relayed her gossip to Mama and, by proximity, to Melodia during the assembly the very first night after the Laurendale party's return. The shopkeeper's wife tittered with obvious excitement while the rest of the crowd whirled behind her. "We had always suspected an attachment, of course, but one could never tell with Mr. Ellis. He may well have promenaded every young woman within ten miles of Millsbury over the years. But this was the *third* time, the *third*, mind you, of him being sighted alone with Miss Latimore. I do believe Lady Miriam might have a daughter-in-law at last."

Mama smiled indulgently at Mrs. Banner, looking somewhere between bemused and uneasy. As the rector's family, the Reeses knew most of the comings and goings of the village occupants long before anyone else did; but it still would not do to encourage gossip, no matter how well-intentioned.

"It must have been quite the surprise for you, Mrs. Banner."

"Oh indeed!" the matron exclaimed. "I dare say time flies around here. Was it not just yesterday that Christopher Ellis was running around like my Jacob is? The boy was a veritable cricket! Soon, the young'uns will be married off with families of their own. Melodia, dear, it is good to have you back. The church is hardly as lively without you. We were all wondering if a London beau had whisked you away!"

Mrs. Banner's comment, however casually made, provoked a pang of guilt that Melodia swallowed. She tried her best to smile. "Papa would never

hear of it."

"Oh, never, I'm sure. Mr. Reese would hardly part with his darling daughter so easily." Mrs. Banner grinned back brightly. "We *are* glad to have you back, Miss Reese."

"Thank you, Mrs. Banner." Melodia acknowledged as graciously as she could. It was not the first time she had heard the sentiment tonight. While it was tiring to be thrust into a vibrant assembly a mere day after their party's return from London, she could not deny the wave of nostalgia and comfort that overcame her the moment she beheld the ocean of familiar faces. Whatever sense of adventure she had sought in Town seemed to pale in comparison to the joy of being home.

Home—the word was evocative. It brimmed of memories and warmth. It caused her young heart to swell and yearn with a hunger she did not know she professed. All her life, she had longed to be away from home, perhaps even to build a life far away from Millsbury, the way Bridget was poised to do.

But there was something strange about returning, as a slightly older and world-wearier rendition of herself, that made Melodia pause and consider if she could possibly be happily settled in Millsbury, after all. She blinked tentatively at the memory of how she had parted with Shane three days ago. He had vowed, passionately, that he would come for her, that his affections and vision for their shared future were certain. If she were any wiser, she would have told him not to promise such things until he was ready to make good on them. But alas, she wasn't *quite* wise enough for that.

"Do excuse me," Mrs. Banner said to both Reese ladies a moment later, "I see Mrs. Tanner, and I'd promised her a sample of this tonic. She does look radiant with child, doesn't she?"

Both Mama and Melodia readily agreed, and soon their little group was broken off for the sake of Mrs. Tanner and a quest for refreshments. Melodia hardly had a moment to sip her lemonade and ponder the state of her own spirits before Mrs. Seymour's quick footsteps brought her to Melodia's spot. The young mother exuded, as usual, her unique brightness of spirit as she greeted Melodia. And it was only after they had exchanged several quick notes about Melodia's favorite events in London that she noticed Lord Laurence looming behind his cousin.

"Lord Laurence." Melodia curtsied as he bowed. "A pleasure to see you again, sir."

"Indeed, Miss Reese." He smiled, his gaze sharp in the candlelight. "May I have the honor of the next dance?"

The request took Melodia entirely aback, and she hardly heard herself say yes before she was being led to the crowded floor, a grinning Mrs. Seymour behind them. She had danced plenty of dances in London, from the simpler country dances to the more lively jigs and reels. She hadn't had the chance to participate in a waltz, although she had witnessed it once, the thrill of the intimacy entrancing her.

But back here at Millsbury, surrounded by people who had known and loved her all their lives, the idea of standing up in public suddenly felt more intimidating than ever before.

"Are you enjoying being back home?" Lord Laurence asked, a gentleness to his tone, as they assumed their places in line.

Melodia scrambled for words for a moment, a rare occurrence for her. There were two possible responses to such a question. The first was a polite one, the one often offered to sweet, elderly matrons or less intimate acquaintances. It expressed a dispassionate pleasure to be back and assured its listeners that there was nothing different whatsoever about her after several months away.

The second response, the real one, would entail myriad nuances of emotions and thoughts. It would allude to how much she had changed while still remaining vaguely the same. It would reveal the warmth and joy she felt at her homecoming with the confusion she harbored regarding her future, particularly when it came to one insistent, volatile distant cousin of the Laurences.

For Lord Laurence, Melodia settled upon something in between.

"It feels so different from London that I hardly know what I prefer more." She smiled briefly. It was easy to smile. It was harder to continue smiling for a prolonged period of time when one's heart was so clouded. "I must admit it can be as comforting as it is jarring to be treated as a child at home again."

Lord Laurence chuckled, his lips broadening into a warm smile. "That I can understand, more than most people."

Understanding dawned on Melodia, and she smiled more readily this time around. "I can imagine, sir. To be away for so many years and to enjoy your independence, only to return to reside under your parents' roof—the change could not have been easy."

"No, easy would be the farthest thing from it," he admitted freely as the

musicians began to strike up their tune. "But I cannot deny that once one accepts one's God-given role in life, there can be unexpected rewards to be discovered."

His eyes met hers meaningfully just as the dance steps began. Melodia frowned slightly, puzzled, as the steps guided her to face away.

"Now you sound a little cryptic, my lord, and I did not think it was in your nature to be," she said when they faced each other again.

He laughed. "No, I suppose not. But it *is* in your nature to be candid, and I must admit myself thankful that London has not altered you entirely."

"It has altered your sister, however, for we shall have to curtsy to the Marchioness of Clairbridge soon enough."

"Ah, Bridget—she had too much good sense for such good fortune. She deserves all of it, of course, though I wonder if her fellow young ladies might think the same."

"Do you fear that she may be subjected to jealousy?"

"Not the overarching sort, perhaps." The dance allowed them to converse side by side. "But I have seen how easily young women can be swayed by petty feelings, at times, and I worry that Bridget may find it difficult to find genuine friends."

"She has never had trouble making friends here."

"No, and I believe that is thanks to you."

"Me?" Melodia chuckled. "I can hardly claim any credit for your sister's natural goodness."

"And *that* is why you are valuable to my family—you are able to see the goodness of others without ever allowing it to fester a resentment."

Melodia hardly knew what to do with such an unexpected compliment. "Thank you. Your family has been nothing but kind to me."

"Do not think of us that way. We do love you as our own, you know."

The music parted them slightly, and Melodia took the opportunity to calm herself from the sudden, warm sensation Lord Laurence was stirring in her. How many times had they conversed before without her ever feeling this way? She hardly knew herself anymore.

"Again, you are too kind," she muttered.

He smiled at her, she smiled back, and they continued to fulfill the dance steps with an easy grace that now felt touched by something stronger—a forceful undercurrent tugging at her feet and her chest, urging her to yield and come along for something she barely dared to name.

She had had her shares of admirers before, but never of the noble variety. It felt as strange as it was thrilling to think that a person she had always thought to be from a different class and generation could possibly find her intriguing to him.

So she prevaricated.

"There will be many changes coming to Laurendale now," she said, the dance steps leading them back towards their former place. "With Bridget marrying, and perhaps Bella soon as well—"

"Ah, are you about to inform me of an engagement I did not know of? I would not put it past my sisters to confide in you before they confide in me."

Melodia laughed. "Hardly. But we have reason to hope, have we not? You cannot be entirely blind to her preferences, and I do believe they might be largely reciprocated. And, now, with your families already joining in marriage, it would only ever grow the chances of Bella finding her happiness in Highgreen Park."

There was a short lull before Lord Laurence responded. "I must ask again, Miss Melodia, if you are about to inform me of an engagement I was unaware of."

"Regarding Bella, you mean?"

"Regarding whomever you believe would be joining the family *before* Bella."

"Ah." Melodia looked down, slightly abashed. So he *had* caught on to her allusion. "I promise you I am no gossip, sir, but Lady Chattsworth had declared, quite confidently, at London that you and Miss Linus were at the verge of an understanding. I had fully expected to return to Millsbury hearing the news of your betrothal upon every tongue."

He set his jaw and frowned slightly, causing Melodia to steal a sideways glance. He cut a dashing figure in this particular suit. It confused Melodia that she had never seemed to notice before.

"I'm afraid there has been a misunderstanding," he said, as the dance concluded. "I am not, nor ever will be, engaged to Miss Cecily Linus. Any rumors of a betrothal could only be attributed to the eagerness of our parents. I apologize for the misinformation."

"Oh, you hardly need to apologize for—"

"I hope that makes matters clear?" An unfamiliar hope seemed to spark in his eyes. His gaze seemed to beg her to agree to something, something different and unspoken. It tugged at her heart in a way that seemed new yet

welcome at the very same time.

Melodia smiled. "Clear as day. I'm sorry for almost congratulating you."

This time, he laughed. "Apology accepted."

He walked her back to her mother, even though she'd insisted that it was hardly necessary given her familiarity with the place and the people. He simply told her that it was the gentlemanly thing to do, and she allowed herself to enjoy the chivalry.

It was almost sad, really, that more men could not be like Garrett Laurence. He was old enough to be wiser and gentler, reliable and steadfast. Yet he was not so entirely old as to appear to be close to his dotage. And despite the parade of mothers and women who seemed to fawn over him at every turn, the man rarely appeared affected by their adoration.

Melodia smiled and curtsied her thanks as he restored her to her earlier spot. He greeted Mama and took his leave to participate in the next set.

Men like Garrett Laurence were proof that there were still true gentlemen out there in the world—people who did not make a show of courtship, who believed honor was an important enough treasure to uphold rather than risk. Miss Linus might not be destined to be his bride, but Melodia rather thought that whoever *did* end up marrying the young viscount would be a lucky woman indeed.

Chapter Twenty

The laughter of the Seymour children increased in volume, and the rumble of Millsbury faded behind him, as Garrett approached Seymour Lodge. He dismounted readily, as familiar with the place as he was with the rectory or even Laurendale itself. It may be where he sent his letters now, but Laurendale had never felt fully home for Garrett, not since he had left for Oxford. It was his mother's home and his father's home—a place of privilege, for certain—but hardly *his* home.

That, he supposed, would have to wait until he established his own household, with a wife by his side.

The thought made Garrett smile to himself. He had never considered himself the romantic sort. His rational, scholarly bent had always triumphed over any sentimentality he might occasionally feel. But with his sisters' return this spring, it was as if a new facet of him was being coaxed to emerge, a facet that rather liked the idea of having a woman by his side, to have and to hold, for better or for worse, for as long as they both shall live.

"Garrett." Cousin Hillary called out first when he entered the drawing room, as Garrett was already too familiar a guest to require a formal announcement. Garrett might well barge into Seymour Lodge in the middle of the night and still receive a welcome from the servants while all the masters were abed. "I had thought you too preoccupied with calling upon young ladies these days to pay us any more visits."

Garrett shot a look of faux exasperation at the grinning mistress of the house, an expression her mischievous husband mirrored readily. It was strange to think of the leisurely couple as one of the most materially prosperous of the local families, but life did like to catch people by surprise.

"You paint me as a ladies' man, which I most certainly am not." Garrett settled upon the chair closest to Duncan Seymour.

"Hardly. That title belongs to my hopelessly single brother-in-law," Seymour spoke as if remarking upon the weather. "The whole town of Millsbury shall break into great rejoicing the day the Ellises manage another wedding."

"Enjoy your teasing while you can," said his wife. "I have it on good authority that my brother may finally be induced to the altar by the year's end."

"After all these years of fretting by your mother, I would think it about time."

"He only wishes to be certain."

"Haste does not necessarily entail uncertainty." Seymour shot Hillary a fond look. "A man who knows what he wants may find his wife and secure her hand within the span of a few months."

Garrett was just about to concur when Seymour added, "Not all of us can be like Garrett here, flitting from door to door in his spare time, leaving a trail of broken hearts."

Garrett groaned, apparently, to the Seymours' great amusement. "I hardly know why I visit you two so often."

"Because of our delightful company, of course." Seymour stated, his tone dry as ever. "No young lady could ever be half as interesting as Hillary and I are."

"Nor half as conceited."

"Well, some people have the right to be conceited."

The three cousins laughed, filling the comfortable drawing room with a companionable warmth. It was a warmth Garrett looked forward to emulating in his own future home.

"And you are wrong, you know," said Garrett, his own thoughts a patchwork of hopes and expectations. "The right young lady can be far more engaging than a wearisome old couple."

"Hear, hear. The Viscount Laurence finally sees sense." Seymour lowered his papers. A knowing look spread over his face. "Come now, I'm sure you rode halfway through town just to confess. Who is this young lady?"

"I never said there was one," Garrett hedged.

"No, but your eyes did. As did your blush."

"I do not *blush*," Garrett decried.

“Say it one more time and your ears may give you away yet,” Seymour teased. He folded his papers on his lap. “Now, out with it. Is it Cecily Linus?”

“No,” Garrett said.

“The rumored ride was nothing more than rumor then?”

“I did drive her—on a large and spacious barouche, if you please—and we came to a very amicable conclusion that we would never marry.”

“Hardly a romantic conclusion.”

“No, but a very helpful one.” Garrett smiled. “At least, my parents cannot say that I did not try.”

“I think I saw a whole different sort of trying at the assembly last night,” Cousin Hillary said in a casual tone, her hands busy over the tea tray. “How was the dance with Melodia Reese?”

Garrett scoffed slightly, fighting his grin. He liked to think the dance went well. He’d never enjoyed one more than he did last night’s, in fact. But he was not about to give Duncan Seymour more fodder over which to goad him.

“It was pleasant,” he said.

“Pleasant with a side of blushing—how remarkable,” said Seymour.

“Again, I do not *blush*. Viscounts do not blush.”

“They also do not wear a silly grin on their face whenever one so much as mentions the name Melodia Reese. Your denial is growing tiresome. Why not court the girl and have done with it?”

“I—” Garrett hesitated. He *was* decided upon courting Melodia. His own reaction to her homecoming—and the joy he had felt at being able to see her and hear her again—had been enough to convince him of the feelings he had come to possess. But there were certain complications to acting upon sentiments that felt both so new and so embedded at the same time. “I am considering it.”

“Consideration—the stumbling stone of many a brokenhearted young man.” Seymour clucked his tongue and shook his head. “You are lucky no one snatched her up in London.”

The thought of Melodia meeting and marrying someone in London caught Garrett by such thorough surprise that he was compelled to ponder it for a moment.

“I suppose,” he muttered.

“You have no other reservations, do you? Is a titled family a necessity?” asked Seymour.

“Hardly. My mother has asked before if I wished to court amidst the local gentry, and Mr. Reese is well-respected.”

“Indeed.”

A lull of silence set over the three friends. The impending twist in Garrett’s near future dangled over them, glistening with its many implications. It brought him comfort to know that the people he cherished in his life right now were the very same people Melodia did. A marriage between the heir to Laurendale and the beloved rector’s daughter would be a celebrated one by many.

“I have a question, Garrett.” Hillary set down her teacup. “Why are you here and not at the rectory?”

And the three friends laughed again.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Ah, a letter for you.”

Melodia jumped at Mama’s voice. She turned away from her vacant staring of the path between the rectory and Millsbury. “There is?”

Mama handed her the sealed correspondence, the thickness implying a letter of a personal nature. Melodia swallowed. It was a letter she had been waiting on for weeks. Was Shane finally ready to begin his formal addresses? And did she even want him to?

“Go on,” Mama coaxed, a kind yet perceptive look on her face, “I know you have been asking for the post for weeks.”

“Have I?” Melodia breathed uneasily. “I suppose it would be nice to hear from my London friends.”

“Ah, yes, your London friends. There was a Miss Clydesdale, wasn’t there? And Lady Marianne?”

“Yes, all of them.” Melodia’s smile trembled. She hadn’t taken pains to hide Shane’s existence from her parents, but she had never alluded to him as anything more than a passing acquaintance either. Somehow, despite everything between them, things hadn’t felt exactly *right*. “If you’d excuse me, Mama, I think I might rest a bit in my room.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Mama’s smile was as caring as it was knowing. “Perhaps you’d wish to chatter a bit more about London? You seem to always take great delight in that.”

Melodia laughed nervously. “Perhaps later today. I feel rather unlike myself.”

“I would say so. You hardly say a word before dinner these days. And I

hardly ever see you visit Laurendale.”

“I do. I was just there yesterday.”

“For tea, yes. But I would think spending all those months together at London would have drawn you closer to the Lawrences, not farther away. Has familiarity bred contempt?”

“Hardly.” Melodia smiled. “I suppose a part of me wishes to let Bridget have her time with her family before her nuptials.”

“That is considerate.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

There was a warm simplicity to the way Mama talked to her, maternal yet light, as if they were friends as well as parent and child. The feeling only overwhelmed Melodia whenever she remembered her guilt over how she had conducted herself in London. The letter in her hand felt as heavy as lead.

She swallowed. “Do you need help with anything else?”

“Only if we have callers, though I doubt any more will come today.”

“Alright.” Melodia nodded before making her escape.

Claiming that she felt unwell was only partly a lie, for Melodia felt nearly sick to her stomach as she threaded her way through the modest rectory to her own room. What did the letter say, and was she ready for whatever its contents might be?

The thought of continuing their improper liaison made her nearly wish to empty her breakfast on her bedroom floor. What had felt intoxicatingly forbidden in faraway London now felt devastating and disgusting in light of the weeks she had been home. Millsbury was worn and old and commonplace, but it was also wholesome and loving and dear. Was she ready to toss away her life and loved ones for the sake of a man she barely knew? What had felt thrilling as a London adventure struck differently as the prospect of a permanent future.

Melodia locked the door behind her before sliding onto her bed. Her fingers shook slightly as she unsealed the letter.

My darling Melodia,

Have you been pining for me as I have for you? I cannot sleep as I dream of the touch of your body.

Melodia pulled away abruptly, as if singed by a stray candle. She blinked, her breath heavy. Had she truly acted so scandalously? The mere first line of

Shane's first letter would be enough to ruin any reputable woman. Shame sunk in her belly like a millstone.

She peeked at the letter again.

Have you spoken to your father? I bid you to hurry for my patience cannot withstand another month without your kisses or your hands upon my skin. If he withholds his blessing, then we fly for Gretna Green. I wonder if we can last until then.

The letter continued in a long, rambling, licentious tone—with lurid details of what Shane seemed to believe would unravel between them as soon as they could be reunited. He alluded to visiting Millsbury to claim her hand. But never was there any mention of courting her or wooing her or being willing to learn of the things or the people she harbored close to her heart.

By the time Melodia reached the end of the four pages she held, bile had already climbed to her throat.

She marched to the fireplace, ready to toss the sinful letter into the embers, her eyes and her heart stinging with the knowledge of what she had done.

As horrid and presumptuous as Shane's letter was—she could not deny, though she might wish to, that she *had* acted in a manner that allowed the man to think of her the way he did. She *had* disparaged Millsbury in their conversations, had dismissed her parents' rules, and had allowed his physical advances.

Shane Limbergh was no gentleman despite every appearance of it. But Melodia had hardly acted the part of a lady herself.

Drowning in self-recrimination, she collapsed on the floor in a mess of tears. She crumpled the letter, cursing its contents for proving Shane's guilt as much as hers. How had a moment's temptation, a flirtatious interlude, descended into such a horrendous turn of events? With Millsbury came the full reminders of all that she used to be, and all that she *could* be.

She rather disliked the alternative now.

For the better half of an hour, she wept away her guilt, her pain, and her shame. She wept for the innocence she had lost, even as she held onto the innocence she had managed to keep intact. The thought of the gentlemen, the true gentlemen, she knew in Millsbury filled her with even deeper guilt. How did she once think the worldliness of London to be an attractive thing? Why

did she ever think her life in Millsbury to be lesser than the lives of others?

She had learned many things in London, some of them good and some of them bad. But she wished she had managed to glean the former without having involved herself in the latter.

When she calmed at last, weary from her tears, she drifted to her writing desk. And with trembling hands, she crafted her reply.

One season of foolishness could not be permitted to endure for the rest of her life. She and Shane Limbergh would never see each other again, and she wanted to make sure that he understood every single word.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Is it not so very pretty?” Bridget sighed as she slipped the fabric of her freshly pressed wedding dress through her fingers. The dress *was* indeed very pretty, with delicate embroidery all along the neckline and a lovely overlay. Melodia had nearly been moved to tears when she had first seen her friend trying on the new gown. Not everyone could afford a new dress to be made just for one’s wedding, but a future marchioness was most definitely a cut above *everyone*.

“And the silver suits you perfectly,” Bella said, her own tone airy.

Moments like these—with the three friends gathered together in the twins’ Laurendale sitting room, giggling over girlish fantasies—would soon be a thing of the past. But Melodia was determined to enjoy them as best she could while she still could. Writing her farewell letter to Shane had been difficult. Even now, she wondered how her former suitor, if he could be called thus, had taken the news. She worried, at times, if she could truly so easily extract herself from her deepest bout of foolishness in her young life yet. But whatever she did feel over her London misadventures, she surprised even herself with her lack of sentimentality. There was plenty of remorse and regret to share. Yet there was hardly any sorrow.

She was glad to be home, glad to be safe. And she hoped she never had to relive her imprudence again.

“You look just as fetching in your new dress, Bella.” Melodia turned to her dearest friends with a smile. “I dare say Kingsley Linus will propose the moment he lays eyes on you at the wedding.”

Bella blushed, her cheeks and ears appearing even rosier than they usually did. Her chuckle sounded slightly forced. “I doubt he will.”

“If my sources are to be trusted, he is the only visitor to Laurandale who has been showing up at your doorstep even more often than I.” Melodia laughed. “And I am almost family.”

“Oh, you *are* family, you know,” Bridget gushed. Being hopelessly in love seemed to soften the older Lawrence twin, coaxing out her more sentimental impulses more than usual. “I wouldn’t doubt it if you were to move here one day.”

“Move to Laurendale? Why would I ever do that?”

Bridget and Bella exchanged what seemed to be a knowing look between them. It was odd to be left out of a secret. Melodia had never known the twins to do so to her before.

“Is your mother looking for a companion after you marry?” Melodia asked instead. “I do love your family, but I hardly know if I would wish to be under your mother’s employ.”

“Oh, it is not *Mother* who might want you as a companion.” Bridget giggled before Bella did. Their behavior baffled Melodia in a disconcerting way, and she soon found herself blushing too.

“Well,” she decided to tease instead, “I doubt Bella would need a governess, especially one so much younger than she—no matter how much she might miss her twin.”

“She won’t miss me at all!” Bridget laughed. “I sorely doubt Bella will remain single for long.”

“You are the one marrying first,” Bella retorted, though her smile betrayed her. It seemed that Kingsley Linus had indeed started courting in earnest since their London return.

“But I am not the one with a betrothal ring underneath her pillow every night!” Bridget squealed. The news had even Melodia all agape.

“Bella!”

“I—I—” Bella blushed as red as the crimson cushion beside her. “It’s only been a few days, and we didn’t want to overshadow Bridget’s nuptials.”

“You are engaged!” Melodia jumped up and clasped both Bella’s hands before pulling her in a hug. “Oh, how wonderful! Darling Bella, how could you not tell?”

“It’s all still very recent.” She smiled, looking even prettier than she usually did. “Although Papa knows, and I do think Mama will know soon.”

“The mothers must be beside themselves.” Melodia laughed. “No pair of parents have I ever met who have been keener to be in-laws.”

“Oh, you have saved our brother’s hide, for certain.” It was Bridget’s turn to laugh. “Once the Lawrences and Linuses have shared grandchildren to fawn over, they just might finally forgive him for not courting Miss Cecily.”

“I had always expected him to,” said Melodia honestly. “They do suit each other.”

“I don’t think my brother thinks so.”

“No, I think not.” Melodia mused momentarily over the conversations she had shared recently with the viscount. “He seems rather adamant to clarify that he is *not* courting her.”

Bridget’s chuckled, sounding almost sly. “Perhaps only to you.”

“Me? Why ever would he need to clarify anything to me?”

“Oh, why indeed?” Again, the Lawrence sisters laughed. The recent weeks with the twins had been diverting and sweet, if slightly filled with an unusual amount of secretive hints. Whatever they were implying, this looming secret that they seemed to harbor from Melodia was beginning to feel closer and closer to being revealed. It *had* to be something significant, if they were being even more furtive about it than about Bella’s surprise betrothal.

“But I am so glad for you, Bella darling.” Melodia turned to the younger Lawrence sister instead. “I am relieved that the poor man has finally come to his senses.”

The three friends laughed before proceeding to fuss over Bridget’s trousseau once more. More teasing ensued, given the nature of Bella’s admission. Soon, there would be *two* brides setting out from Laurendale, and Melodia was rather overwhelmed by the thought of the sweeping changes that were to come.

There was little time for nostalgia, however, as the three of them appraised item after item in Bridget’s new wardrobe and took notes on what to add for Bella’s. There were a few items at the bottom of the large collection that caused more giggling than usual, particularly when Melodia lifted the bright red *transparent* nightgown and pretended to drape it over her small frame. Half of the lace pooled on the floor, making it look as if Melodia was standing upon a giant wax seal.

“Do I look pretty? Perhaps even queenly?” Melodia joked, while the sisters laughed and clapped. “I think I look more regal than the Prince Regent himself.”

Melodia turned around to parade her borrowed regalia, just when the

sitting room door opened.

“Bridget, Bella, should I—” Lord Garrett’s words stopped short as he caught sight of Melodia. His eyes inspected her quickly, from head to toe and back. And then the poor viscount blushed, *furiously*. Melodia swallowed hard.

“My lord, I did not know—”

“Pardon me, I—”

The twins, for all their usual kindness, only rolled over themselves in a fit of giggles, earning themselves an impatient glare from Melodia. “It is not so *very* funny.”

“Is this some sort of female ritual that I’m interrupting?” Garrett asked after recovering himself in an impressive amount of time, though his ears still appeared slightly flushed.

“Yes, and you may be just the sort of person whose opinion we need.” Bridget marched across the room and tugged her brother farther in by the arm. “Mother has bought such an abundance of clothes that I hardly know what to keep and what to bring.”

Melodia watched with interest as the only surviving male Lawrence sibling eyed the mountains of fabrics strewn all across the room with a bewildered gaze. It was kind of him to enter the lions’ den, even as his sister gabbled on nonsensically.

“I fail to see how I could possibly help,” he muttered as Bridget deposited him in the center of the chaos, just a yard away from Melodia.

Melodia noticed, rather belatedly, that she still had the scandalous red nightgown clutched to her chest, and she hurriedly shoved the offending garment onto the pile of sheets behind her before glancing up sheepishly at him.

“See, don’t you make such a fine pair?” Bridget declared.

Melodia glanced uncertainly at her best friends, who now stood side by side as if they were admiring a portrait that featured their brother and their closest friend. Garrett, for his part, did not seem to protest, even if he did suddenly look a little bashful.

“This is not a ballroom, Bridget,” said Melodia, “and you do sound frightfully like your mother when you say that—that is, of course, not to say that Lady Chattsworth is *frightful* in any way. But she does have an aura about her that intimidates, at times.”

“She does,” Garrett came to her aid. “And grown men have been known

to be driven to obedience at her command.”

“Oh yes, I do not doubt it.” Melodia smiled. “You are quite lucky, sir, that you have not been marched to the altar against your will yet.”

He laughed deeply. “I am gentlemanly enough to let the ladies have their way, but even I draw my battle lines.”

“Is that so?”

“Societal manners may compel, for example, that a gentleman dance every dance at an assembly if partners are scarce; but no one can actually *force* a man to dance with anyone he does not wish to partner.”

“And yet insistent twin sisters *can* compel a viscount to stand amidst a veritable hoard of female finery to suit their whims.” Melodia grinned.

He took a moment before he smiled. “I’m afraid I am quite helpless against *two* of my sisters.”

“Three, if you include me.”

“You? A sister—hardly.” He lowered his chin and seemed to think for a moment before clearing his throat. “Though I cannot deny that your persuasive powers, added to my horrible, lovely sisters’, is a force to be reckoned with.”

Bridget and Bella giggled, seemingly very entertained by nothing at all.

“I doubt I can ever persuade you to do anything, my lord.”

“Perhaps I keep my cards too close to my chest, Miss Melodia.” Garrett met her eye. His gaze shone with something almost similar to interest, like what young men looked like before approaching a lady for her dance card—and yet there was a depth and softness to it that exceeded the shallowness of common admiration. It fanned a thrilling little sensation alive in her. “But I assure you that there is very little I could ever refuse you.”

It was hardly a declaration, more a hint of an implication than any sort of formal declaration. But his words and his gaze sent a tingle down Melodia’s spine, and the feeling lingered for the rest of the afternoon, from their continuous banter over Bridge’s ridiculous trousseau all the way to Melodia’s walk home.

It was a little odd, a little new—but hardly unwelcome.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“**A** veritable feast” The older Mr. Ellis, uncle to the bride, announced so loudly upon the unveiling of Bridget’s wedding breakfast the following week that all the other guests, comprising almost the entire neighborhood, murmured appreciatively for a good ten minutes before anyone proceeded to actually partake of the food.

Laurendale’s servants—from the veterans to the newly-employed—scurried left and right to ensure everything, from flowers to fruits to seating arrangements, be carried out to perfection. Lavish dishes the likes of which Millsbury had never seen before adorned the extended long table. A beaming new Marquess and Marchioness of Clairbridge adorned the seats of honor, while Lord and Lady Chattsworth exuded almost as much joy as the bride and groom did. Bridget, while usually modest, dazzled in her diamond-beaded gown, the very image of a fairy-tale bride. It was, perhaps, an impractical extravagance to embellish a morning gown so, but principles of frugality hardly applied to the daughter of an earl marrying a marquess. The event was altogether the most extravagant Millsbury had witnessed in ages.

Melodia watched the celebration unfold with so much lightness of spirit that any stranger who saw her then might wonder if it were her own wedding occurring. But there was something wonderful about seeing one’s dearest friends find happiness. In many ways, it might be even better than experiencing one’s own nuptials. For while the excitement and glamor and joy were comparable, one did not have to move away from one’s family or suffer other less desirable adjustments after another person’s wedding. Those consequences were reserved for one’s own.

“A most impressive wedding breakfast, my lady,” Mama complimented

when Lady Chattsworth approached their family.

The countess smiled brightly, family jewels dangling from her hair and her ears and her neck, as she clutched Mama's hand. "We are so very glad for everyone's presence. And Mr. Reese's shepherding all these years has brought great merit to our families. There can be nothing better than seeing our children thrive."

"Indeed." Mama smiled.

The two mothers continued on with their conversation, their hearts clearly full as they gushed and smiled and chattered. Lady Linus joined them soon enough, and Melodia stepped aside to allow the matrons their privacy as they heartily discussed another even more local match to be made in the near future. It was not that the mothers had expressed any desire for privacy, for so radiant they were in their joy that Melodia was quite certain they did not mind if the news made its way all the way to London.

If anything, it was Melodia who needed a moment's respite from the jubilation of the older generation. It was wonderful to be part of a community that rejoiced so thoroughly for its members, but there was a measure of loneliness that came as well from being the spectator of others' stories while waiting to see if one would ever have a turn as the protagonist.

Her withdrawal did not result in her solitude for long. For despite being engrossed in an animated conversation with the Seymours across the room just a minute or two ago, Lord Laurence somehow managed to wrangle himself away and whisk himself across the crowded space to appear right beside Melodia. "I hope you are enjoying the wedding breakfast," he inquired, a genial look of concern across his handsome features.

Melodia smiled. "It breaks my heart to think of Bridget leaving, although I comfort myself that Bella will only ever be moving near Highgreen Park. But I suppose it's a small price to pay to become a marchioness."

He chuckled. "Many women would die to be in my sister's shoes, I know."

"Hardly, for a dead woman cannot be a marchioness." Melodia grinned. "I can imagine plenty of people, however, who would gladly debase themselves readily for the chance at such a match."

"Debase themselves? What a novel idea. That sounds hardly proper coming from the rector's daughter."

Garrett's teasing tone was meant to cheer, Melodia knew, but the implication of his words only settled upon her stomach like a heavy stone of

guilt. How could she ever wash herself from the guilt of her past misdeeds if everyone continued to persist in their belief that she was a paragon of innocence?

“I did not say I was one of those women, sir,” she answered as calmly as she could.

“Of course. I can hardly imagine you ever acting in any way but proper.”

Again, Melodia wanted to sink into the ground in mortification. She breathed as deeply as she could, given the tight quarters Laurendale had somehow managed to become this morning, the entire main floor of the house feeling even warmer than it usually did. “I hope you do not mean that, Lord Laurence. I fear I may never live up to your expectations.”

“You need not fear on that account.” His hand eased against her elbow as he guided her away from a rushed footman trying to add more fruit to the breakfast spread. The infinitesimal touch was enough to fluster her more than she had ever felt around the young viscount, brief and chivalrous as it was. “I don’t think you could ever disappoint me, Melodia.”

The way he whispered her name, low and tender, was enough to send flurries down her spine. She looked up to meet his eyes, immediately feeling enveloped by the warmth of his gaze. Was this what she could have had all along? Was the admiration of a truly upstanding man waiting for her all this time, right at home in Millsbury, at the very place she frequented as often as she did her own house?

Melodia caught her breath as Garrett leaned the tiniest bit closer. A deep part of her soul flickered to life in response to the warm regard that suddenly seemed to emanate off him in waves.

“I have been waiting for days to speak to you alone, always thwarted somehow by something,” he spoke gently. Their corner of the room was relatively secluded, separated as they were by a small open lane between couch and curtains, a tiny pathway amidst the crowd. “Melodia, may I speak to your father tomorrow? Not of philosophy or ministry or any other things—but to seek his permission to court you?”

He wished to court her? The idea felt as surprising as it was wonderful. Here he was, the most eligible bachelor in the room—a man destined to marry an heiress or a lady with ties to a title. And instead, he wanted to court *her*? Melodia did not think herself beneath him, but the idea that he believed something more could burgeon out of their neighborly interactions almost made her chuckle, in an unexpectedly heart-warming way.

Yes—she longed to say. It was almost surprising to herself how much she wanted to consent. The possibility that a man she had long admired, even if initially as a neighbor and peer rather than as a suitor, actually preferred her over all the others he could pursue was moving in a way she could never have foreseen.

What did it matter if he was a decade older or if everyone else expected him to find a match elsewhere? She esteemed him more highly than almost anyone else she knew. It was almost freeing to realize that she could have him for herself instead.

But she *couldn't* say yes, not when he remained blinded by the belief that she was as innocent as he thought her to be, not when he thought of Melodia Reese as the rector's daughter rather than a disillusioned, foolish girl—world-weary before she had even turned twenty. The one thing worse than disappointing a man she respected with a pointed rejection would be to welcome his regard only to lose it once he learned her true colors.

“Unless, you would rather I don't?” His voice faltered slightly, almost understandably given her long private epiphany. A sense of uncertainty marred his features, making Melodia even more eager to reassure him, even if she had no right to.

She sniffed and found her voice. “May I speak to you first—separately—about it?”

The viscount seemed to relax ever-so-slightly, though his brow remained furrowed. “Of course. But I do not know how I could seek such an audience unless—”

“I plan to visit Bella tomorrow, perhaps rather early in the day,” she whispered, suddenly anxious if their interactions were being observed by the other merrymakers. “I intend to walk the path in the woods. Perhaps you have similar intentions to pursue such a habit, my lord?”

He seemed to withdraw with a slight wariness as understanding dawned, though curiosity still lingered in his gaze. He nodded. “Very well. I believe I have some errands to run tomorrow morning. A walk to Millsbury, by way of the rectory, might not be remiss.”

“Perhaps not.”

“Perhaps not.”

Lady Chattsworth obliged by calling for her son just then, and Garrett withdrew with a bow, leaving Melodia mercifully alone with her thoughts and her blushes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The sun shone brightly, its beams weaving between the tree branches, as it set a joyful trail from Laurendale to the Millsbury rectory. Having spent twice the amount of his usual time fine-tuning his attire for the day, Garrett strode with a mixture of confidence and nerves. He wondered what exactly Melodia might wish to discuss with him, but he was already heartily distracted by the thought of sharing a walk with her. Surely, a proper minister's daughter would never ask to meet him in private without intending to at least entertain his suit.

"Mrs. Reese," Garrett greeted as soon as he neared the rectory.

The ever-jolly matron looked up from her conversation with a scowling Mrs. Caroway. The mistress smiled. "Lord Lawrence, what an unexpected treat. I'm afraid Mr. Reese has been called to pray over a poor sick child and is not currently at home."

"Ah." Garrett stood with his hands behind him. It did not seem to be the wisest course of action to inform Mrs. Reese just then that he was not here to consult the minister.

"Melodia is just about to leave for Laurendale, I believe," Mrs. Reese thankfully continued. She handed a basket off to her housekeeper. "Perhaps you can walk her back?"

It felt rather too good of a stroke of fortune to be asked to do as a favor what he direly wished to do for personal gratification, and Garrett could do nothing except to bow and murmur that it would be his pleasure to do just that.

"Mama, if you would—" Melodia herself exited the rectory just then, a fetching image in her light pink dress. Garrett tried his best to hide his smile

as she paused to curtsy at him. “If I could perhaps leave this with you?”

She handed a parcel of herbs to Mrs. Reese, who took it perfunctorily from her daughter.

“Go on now. Lady Bella might be waiting,” Mrs. Reese prompted.

Melodia nodded before gliding down the lane.

“Do send Lady Chattsworth our thanks for the gift basket.”

“Yes, Mama,” said Melodia at the same moment Garrett said, “Yes, ma’am.”

The two of them regarded each other for a moment, and Melodia suddenly looked almost uncharacteristically shy. Garrett smiled softly.

“If I may take my leave, Mrs. Reese,” he called out.

“Good day, Lord Lawrence.”

“Goodbye, Mama.”

With a heart that threatened to skip in an unmanly rhythm, Garrett gestured for Melodia to walk ahead. She darted into the familiar woodland walk in a flash of pink.

For the first few minutes, they paced side by side on the narrow path, the edges of their clothing brushing upon occasion. The soft touches, however innocent, sent his stomach into somersaults, and Garrett struggled to remain composed.

“Is your family doing well?” he asked politely when they’d walked for a good quarter of a mile.

“I doubt any of us have an appetite after yesterday’s indulgences.” Melodia smiled, though it barely reached her eyes. “And your family? The house must inevitably be quieter.”

“Yes, though hardly as quiet as the days when all of you were off to London.”

“Ah,” she said, though her smile appeared slightly more at ease this time. “I admit it did not occur to me how lonely things might have been for you and Lord Chattsworth.”

“It was lovely, in its own way—to have some peace and quiet away from the chatter of the womenfolk.”

“I’m sorry to impose if that’s the case. I did not realize the noise we create as a cluster of females could be so offensive.”

“Oh, not at all.” Garrett fumbled slightly with his words. Was it always so difficult to talk to a woman? He had always liked how easily conversation flowed with Melodia. “If anything, I ended up rather missing all the noise

eventually.”

Melodia laughed. She picked her steps up slightly. “I doubt anyone could ever say the same about me. My mother claims that she finally managed to teach Wesley all his lessons when I was away. I suppose it helps to be able to instruct him without my constant interruptions.”

“I would hardly call your speaking an interruption.”

This time, she laughed even louder. “I thought you knew me better than to say that, my lord.”

“Please, again—call me Garrett.”

She halted slightly, her face suddenly more serious, before resuming her walk at a slower, more pensive gait.

“Thank you—for agreeing to walk with me today,” she said.

“I consider it my pleasure, Melodia.”

He’d said her name gently, anxious to express how much she had come to mean to him. She seemed to flush slightly, although her bonnet concealed most of her reaction.

“What I am about to tell you, my lord, is something I have never told anyone, not even your sisters, and most definitely not my family. My trip to London was a rare and wonderful privilege, for which I am ever grateful to your family for. It was a time of great learning—as well as some unfortunate choices.”

Garrett frowned, surprised by the turn of conversation. He had wondered, of course, what she might have wished to discuss before allowing him to approach her father. He had come this morning ready to prove his sincerity, anxious to convince her that he did indeed care for her and wish to explore the possibility of marriage between them.

To become privy to a personal confession was the last thing he could have expected.

“I met a great many people in London,” Melodia continued, her voice steady and low, unlike her usual bright tones. “Among them was a distant cousin of your family—and I hate to have to admit, lest you continue under a misapprehension of my character, that I managed to enter an entanglement with him.”

“An entanglement.” The word felt heavy and foreign and dangerous on his tongue. The implications grew gradually on his mind, chasing away the beauty of the day. Had Melodia Reese, the daughter of a man of God and his sisters’ dearest childhood friend, actually become—

“I never slept with him,” she said, “or allowed him that sort of liberties.”
Garrett sighed in relief under his breath.

Melodia’s voice hitched when she spoke next. “But, I’m afraid, I held back little else.”

Slowly, haltingly, with painful word after word, Melodia shared the accounts of her association with Shane Limbergh. She stopped at times whenever sobs overcame her, and Garrett would stand stiffly to the side, both yearning and reluctant to offer his compassion. Invariably, she would calm herself and continue her story, forcing her way through mortifying reveal after reveal.

“I knew I was wrong,” she admitted openly, her tears continuous, as they rounded the last bend in the path, “but when one begins to harbor secrets, it only becomes harder to confess them the longer the list of secrets grows.”

Bit by bit, she finished her tale, describing how she had chosen to end things when the scandalous letter had arrived—how its lewd contents had forced her to reckon with the implications of her actions. Garrett listened with half a mind, his thoughts racing a mile a minute in a mixture of censure, confusion, surprise, and anger. Had his sisters not told him of the pact Melodia had made with her father? He had been so certain that she had not been courted in Town. To learn that she had been embroiled in so much worse—pulled out the rug from beneath his feet, making him doubt if he had ever known her in truth.

“And that is the sum of the sordid tale,” she concluded as Laurendale came into view. She sighed deeply before turning to face him, her face tear-stained and puffy. Yet her voice had regained its usual strength. “You are now equipped with the knowledge to destroy me, as well as my father’s ministry, though I hope for the sake of the parish that you will not exercise that power. I know to share these things cannot do anything to recommend me, whether as a woman or a friend. But I hope, my lord, that you would have mercy enough not to allow my past wrongs to negate entirely the sincerity of my dealings with your family all these years.

“My family does not know, for I fear breaking their hearts. My friends do not know, for I was too much of a coward to have breathed a word to either Bridget or Bella, not when they were so blessed by their own happiness.”

“And yet you tell me,” Garrett said.

“Yes.” She inhaled deeply before meeting his gaze. “Because I respect and admire you—and I cannot in good conscience allow you to pursue a

possible courtship when you remain unaware of the depths of my depravity.”

“That is not—” Garrett cleared his throat. “You do realize that some might call your timing foolish. You could have waited until my honor was at stake before you revealed—”

“No, I wouldn’t.” She moved as if she would place her hands on his arm before pulling them back. She sniffed. “Because I cannot ever do that to you.”

Garrett flinched, emotion he could not name thick in his own throat.

“I am not perfect, you know,” he grumbled. “My past has its own shadows—my time in the gaming tables—”

“It does not matter,” Melodia whispered, the hint of a smile finally touching her face once more. “None of us are who we are today by being angels all our days.”

“Of course.” He did not know what else to say.

They stood quietly for a few moments, the subtle breeze the only sound around them.

Melodia sighed, sniffed, and straightened. “I do believe Bella might wish to rest some more after yesterday’s events. Thank you for your company, Lord Laurence. I wish you well.”

She slipped back into the woods, taking Garret’s begrudging heart along with her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"You are aware that you are scowling, are you not?" Cousin Hillary's remark could have been construed as a kindness, if not for the smirk on her clever, pretty face and the way she struck Garrett's arm with her fan.

Garrett scowled even deeper. "I fail to see how that information helps me, my dear Mrs. Seymour."

Hillary tittered before turning around to face the ballroom alongside Garrett. The floor was full of dancing couples, despite the number of people having decided to sit or stand on the sidelines after the opening set. The elaborate candelabras of Highgreen Park shimmered above them, illuminating Millsbury's best dressed in their most fashionable garments. Lord and Lady Linus were never the sort to shy away from a party, and the extra guests that had descended upon Millsbury due to Bridget's recent wedding only added to their long and illustrious guest list.

"You do plan to dance with Miss Linus, don't you?" asked Hillary.

Garrett grumbled. "Perhaps."

"Come now, I had thought you recently caught in the throes of love."

"Not for Miss Linus."

"I am aware, of course. Your attentions have always lay in a more *melodic* direction." Hillary grinned. Various relatives and friends, all members of the Millsbury gentry, discussed things avidly in clusters around them. Garrett himself felt unusually taciturn. Hillary leaned closer to speak in a quieter voice, "Don't tell me she rejected you?"

"She did not accept me, if that's what you are asking." Garrett tugged at his cuffs. It felt ridiculous to have had to dress so finely for an event he had no interest in attending.

It was nice to try some of the dishes, he supposed, given that Highgreen Park's cook was the only one in the vicinity capable of rivaling Mrs. Peyton's talents. It was also somewhat comforting to see Miss Linus's beloved lieutenant as a fellow guest, even if he appeared to keep mostly to the background. At least there was a chance for a happy ending on that front. Most of the attention remained with the beaming Kingsley and Bella as the couple weaved through the dance floor, given that this was widely understood to be their engagement ball.

There were plenty of reasons to find the event satisfactory. But none of those reasons seemed to be able to distract Garrett from the thoughts he'd been ruminating upon for the past two days—thoughts that seemed to trail the young woman currently twirling on the dance floor with Christopher Ellis, her eyes bright and her movements accentuated by her new lilac gown.

A part of him grumbled inside, anger bubbling at Melodia firstly for having held him to one standard and her London suitors to another, and then secondly for having passed onto him the burdens of her transgressions. He respected her for her honesty and admired her for her kindness in allowing him to preserve his honor before engaging it. But her secrets felt almost oppressive to bear in light of tonight's merriment.

"There, you have finally stopped scowling." Hillary grinned, fan aflutter. "But now you seem dejected. What exactly has happened with Miss Reese?"

"Nothing," Garrett grumbled.

"Surely you must know that there is no lie more obvious than a scowling person claiming the word *nothing*."

"What would you have me say?" Garrett huffed. His gaze drew once more towards Melodia's dancing form. "Isn't your brother courting Miss Sabine? Or was it Miss Winfrey?"

Hillary followed his trail of sight and smirked unsympathetically. That was what one became after being married to Duncan Seymour for more than a decade, Garrett supposed.

"So what if he is?" She smiled. "Surely, courting one girl cannot possibly exclude one from ever dancing with another."

"But so cheerfully, so eagerly—is it not an unseemly sight?"

Hillary laughed loud enough to have to smother herself with her fan. "I don't pretend to understand what has come between you and Miss Reese, dear cousin. But I can guarantee you that if you don't snatch her up while you can, someone else will."

Garrett sighed.

“And if it’s any sort of assurance.” Hillary’s fan tapped him on the arm once more. “I do think you and she would suit better than she and my brother ever would.”



The sight of Mr. and Mrs. Reese in Laurendale’s halls was an ordinary thing, so common that it almost did not warrant a second thought. The two families, being the most prominent spiritual and social leaders of the local gentry, interacted so often that every other dinner party in the area had to include them. The sight of the rector and his wife *without* their ebullient daughter, however, was a rather remarkable occurrence.

“Is Miss Reese faring well?” Mother inquired before Garrett could tonight, one mere evening after the ball at Highgreen Park. “I must say my Bella was rather looking forward to her company. The poor dear misses her sister dearly.”

“Ah, such attachment must be natural, given that Lady Bridget—that is, Lady Clairbridge—and Lady Bella have spent their entire lives together since the womb.” Mr. Reese remarked matter-of-factly. “Although, given the pending nuptials of Lady Bella, the separation might not be so keenly felt for long.”

“No, I think not.” Mother chuckled. “It is a trial, Mr. Reese, to have one’s children leave the nest so—but at least my Bella shall be residing close by.”

Garrett nearly scoffed at Mother’s professions. It seemed that the idea of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure could be well-applied to ambitious, matchmaking mothers as well. Not that he believed Mother regretted Bridget’s marriage, of course. It was altogether too fine of a match to be rued over.

“It is a blessing and trial, is it not—to be blessed with daughters?” Mr. Reese responded laughingly. “They are the nearest and dearest creatures to our hearts and yet the ones that must inevitably depart from us one day.”

Garrett cleared his throat. “Sons depart as well, to my knowledge, Mr. Reese.”

“Ah, yes, for they go to school and university and make their way in the world, of course.” The older man smiled back. “But the alteration of a

daughter's love—that eventual transference of affection—is something that goes well beyond the physical removal. A single woman's loyalty is to her parents, and a married one to her husband. It is as the Bible teaches, however, and is only right.”

“Of course, of course.”

As the adults continued to chatter, Garrett pondered for a brief moment what it meant to be the recipient of the love Mr. Reese described. He had glimpsed it before: the happiness of being the only audience of Melodia's smiles and giggles—the joy of serving and attending the various local events beside her, with her love for human society flowing out of her so strongly that one could not help but be infected by it.

He did not envy Mr. Reese for coveting Melodia's future affections, for it was a prize to be treasured. It was a prize that, Garrett had to admit, he keenly desired to possess for himself.

He had spent the first few days after their woodland walk raging with anger and disappointment. But those initial sentiments had since cooled to a more peaceful sort of regret. Who was he to make demands of Melodia, to hold her responsible for his own disillusionment, when she had never been so much as promised to him? Despite the breadth and depth of his newly discovered affections, he had never so much as hinted before at the possibility of courting the rector's daughter. What sort of arrogance could possibly make him the arbiter somehow of her choices?

Garrett had his pride, but even he would never claim to be perfect. The mess of things he had left behind in Town: from debts grudgingly settled to the muddle of things he had made with Miss Oliver were proof enough of his faults.

Beside him, Mother's voice asked loudly, rousing Garrett from his quiet epiphanies.

“And how is Miss Reese?”

“Our Melodia is nursing quite the headache, I'm afraid,” Mrs. Reese answered softly. “It is a pity, for I know she must long to see Lady Bella as much as the latter wishes to see her.”

“Oh, what a shame,” said Mother. “Well, if no one else shall be arriving, perhaps we may adjourn.”

Murmurs of agreement rumbled amidst the small party, and Garrett suddenly felt he would much rather be at the rectory than anywhere else.

“Mother, may I be excused?” Garrett blurted before he could think much

of what he was doing. “With Miss Reese unable to attend, I believe your numbers might be uneven.”

“Our deepest apologies, Lady Chattsworth,” said Mrs. Reese.

“Oh, do not fret about it,” said Mother, whose anxiety to assure Mrs. Reese seemed to win over her wonderment at her son’s sudden abandonment. “Garrett here has the solution, doesn’t he? And what reason might you—”

“Something urgent that had previously slipped my mind,” said Garrett. He looked genially at both mothers present. “I wish you all a most delightful meal.”

And he was gone before Mother could question him further, his steps already marching towards the path in the woods.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The megrim that had sentenced Melodia to an evening of quiet, personal contemplation while her parents dined at Laurendale confined her to her bedroom for the better part of the evening. But with the hour still early by the time her head had soothed itself somewhat, Melodia slipped downstairs to her favorite chair in the parlor, her latest novel from the circulating library in hand.

She'd been reading more again recently, almost as much as she used to as a child. An outgoing person by nature, she still preferred human company above all else. But there was something comforting, at times, in the act of curling up and disappearing into the world of a well-written novel—allowing the terrors and triumphs of fictional characters to take the place of her own trials.

She missed Laurendale. She had been particularly eager to discuss last night's ball. But she also found a small measure of relief over having an evening away from having to constantly wonder at Garrett's opinions.

He hadn't talked to her since their walk. They'd shared the same functions, had even been thrust upon the same card table the other day, but the viscount had refused to murmur a single word her way. She hadn't expected to continue to have his good opinion after her revelations, but she was rather baffled over what to do over his reticence.

Did he wish never to speak to her again? Was he so disgusted with her that he no longer wished to ever share a civil conversation again? Or was he afraid that she would expect him to continue his suit if he so much as looked her way?

Melodia sniffed. She didn't like being at odds with anyone. And she

particularly did not enjoy being at odds with Lord Garrett Laurence.

Her musings were interrupted by the abrupt arrival of a finely-dressed man, his familiar gait stomping into the rectory's parlor

"Garrett!" Melodia exclaimed, surprised to her very core, as she scrambled off the chair and onto her feet. "I had thought you would be at Laurendale."

The usually mannerly Lord Laurence stood before her frowning. "I was."

"Right." She fidgeted slightly in the worn old dress she was wearing. At least she hadn't changed into her nightclothes just yet. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I—" He met her eyes briefly before looking askance once more. "I was told you were suffering from a headache."

Of all the things she thought he would say, she had not expected that. "Ah, yes, I did. I—I rested in my room for a time and feel quite much more myself now. Thank you for your concern."

"Yes."

He continued to stand in the middle of the parlor, his shoulders and head bent forward, as if he needed to concentrate hard upon a certain thought before it escaped him. It occurred to Melodia that they were currently unchaperoned, even if the door behind him was wide open.

Should she caution him about their circumstances? She would not want him to regret anything if the servants were to whisper and gossip.

"I have been thinking—about us," he blurted. Then he sighed, as if he had finally come to terms with what he was about to say. When he looked up once more, the pained intensity that had marred his features upon arrival had been fully replaced by a softer, more reconciliatory look. "I—I am doing this all wrong. Shall we sit, Melodia?"

"Of course, my lord."

He seemed to wince slightly at her formal address, but he sat swiftly after she did, his chair facing hers while the light from the open window shone as a narrow strip on the floor between them

"I have been thinking," he said again, this time with a gentler tone. He even smiled at her as he looked up. Melodia ventured a small smile in return. "And I think I have come to a few conclusions."

Melodia swallowed as she strove to put on a brave face. Perhaps, he was gentlemanly enough after all to come inform her of the withdrawal of his suit. At least they had never told Papa or Mama yet. The disappointment only

needed to be hers alone.

“When you first shared with me your—confessions.” He seemed to stumble over the word slightly. Melodia sniffed at the memory. “I did not react as well as I ought to.”

“You were nothing but kind—”

“Perhaps initially, yes,” he continued in a staid, level tone. “But after your departure, after I had the opportunity to fully comprehend what it was that you had revealed to me, I fear that my emotions changed.”

“Thank you for keeping my confidence.”

“Of course.” He smiled at her, looking almost as rueful as she did. “That much, I was ready to do. A woman’s reputation is fragile, and to know that you have trusted me with yours moved me deeply, even if the contents of your revelations discomfited me.”

Melodia nodded. She tried not to frown too harshly.

“But in the midst of my gratefulness for your honesty, I felt angry.” He clenched his hand on his knee. “I felt displeased that you had expected the men of Millsbury to respect your father’s standards while allowing this London cad to have his way with you. Why should the law favor someone over another? Why should he be granted an exception if the rest of us were expected to keep in line? It felt distinctly unfair.”

“I didn’t—”

“I know, I know. I know that now. But I was angry and full of self-pity. I despised myself for not having stated my intentions before your London trip, and I despised anything that made me feel any worse than I already did.”

Melodia held her breath, uncertain how exactly she was supposed to respond.

Then Garrett looked up, meeting her eye with a gentle gaze, and smiled. “But then I realized—that you owe me nothing. You never implied, not once, that I was to wait for your hand. If anything, it was I who discovered within myself the desire to wait for you—and I could hardly hold you accountable for that.”

Her heart rose gradually from her chest to her throat as he reached over and gently took her hand.

“Whatever it was you did—was not for me to forgive. Whatever it was you chose—was not for me to judge. And whatever choices *I* happened to have made concerning you were only ever my own decisions—at least, not until you agree to share them with me.”

He lifted slowly to his feet, his gloved hand still enclosed around her bare one, and Melodia rose to meet him halfway. Garrett didn't stand quite as tall as some of his other relatives did, but she had to look up a fair amount to meet his eye from this distance.

"Melodia Reese, my dearest neighbor and unlikely friend, I hope you know that I care for you deeply—that my admiration for you was only ever advanced, and not tarnished, by whatever secrets you have been willing to share. I love you and respect you. I esteem you and adore you. And my regard for you rises with every day I spend in your presence. I've led my life for years without a woman by my side. But once I allowed myself to imagine that woman to be you, I could no longer ever picture my life in any other way. Melodia, would you do me the honor of—"

"And what is the meaning of this?" Papa's voice cut through the parlor, firm though not angry. Melodia jumped back and hid her hand behind her, as if the act would do anything except exacerbate her guilt.

"Mr. Reese!" Garrett said brightly, looking far happier than she had seen him in days. "I hope you enjoyed your dinner at Laurendale. Perhaps we may speak in your study? I would very much like your permission to court your daughter."

That Papa only frowned slightly before grunting his assent, and with Mama giggling almost delightedly beside him, made Melodia realize that there were perhaps more people who were hoping for this match than even she had anticipated herself. And that was an encouraging thought indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The days that followed melded the endearingly familiar with the wondrously new so seamlessly that Melodia wondered if she could ever stop smiling again. Walks between Laurendale and the rectory grew ever more common, usually with a frowning maid as a distant chaperone, as she and Garrett exchanged laughter and conversation about life, love, and everything in between.

Dinner parties between the two families, an almost weekly occurrence before, now took place almost every other evening; and Melodia relished the look on Garrett's face every time the gentlemen re-entered the drawing room after port, his eyes and his feet quick to find her wherever she was in the room. Bella, as expected, expressed every sort of enthusiasm for Melodia's newfound place in the family's life, even if she was a little distracted by love herself.

It was almost as if a new dawn had uncovered itself over Millsbury, a dawn of tenderness and feelings that illuminated whatever blindness might have persisted before.

News had it that even Mr. Ellis would be set to wed in a few months' time.

The thought that the perpetual eligible bachelors of Millsbury, such as Garrett and his cousin and all the Kingsley brothers, might soon be entirely off the marriage mart made Melodia giggle. Who knew one year was all it took to have them all willingly start courting their respective brides-to-be?

Not that Melodia considered herself a bride-to-be, not just yet. Despite their daily audiences, Garrett never came as close to proposing as he had at the rectory parlor more than a week ago, but his demeanor, no matter their

location, had never looked more like a man in love.

"Pray, tell, what amuses you so?" Garrett whispered as the families' revelries continued in the background. Never had Melodia fully appreciated before the spaciousness of Laurendale's drawing room. It was not easy to otherwise find places where one could have privacy and proper chaperonage all at once.

Melodia smiled. "It seems almost strange that all three of your parents' children were single a mere half year ago. And yet, here you all are, either having completed or are currently contemplating your respective removal from Laurendale."

Garrett laughed. "I don't know if I shall miss it very much."

"You do not like living in Laurendale?"

"I appreciate the comforts and the company. But I do sincerely look forward to establishing a household of my own."

"Is that why you thought it high time to start courting?"

"Hm, I suppose that would make sense given what you consider my pragmatic nature."

"There is hardly anything more pragmatic than courting someone from the nearest house, I'd admit."

"Yes, most heartily convenient."

"I do not know whether to be fabulously offended or to express that I am happy to be of service."

"And why must you be offended?" Garrett smirked in a manner that communicated he knew exactly what he had said.

Melodia huffed. "No lady wants to be chosen for mere convenience."

"True." He leaned slightly closer, the heat of his presence almost warm enough to surround her. "It is a good thing then, perhaps, that it's been so dashedly *inconvenient* to wait for you to grow up."

Surprised, Melodia laughed in a way that felt almost like sputtering. "I suppose you expect me to apologize for inconveniencing you, my lord."

Garrett huffed dramatically before sneaking her hand into his own—just the briefest of touches lest her father complain. "Nothing about loving you has proven convenient, Melodia. But I do hope you know that it's all been rather worth it."

Lady Chattsworth announced a round of dancing just then, sparing Melodia from having to scramble for something to say over the roaring of her heart.



"Don't you think they will trip?" Melodia called out as Garrett led the merry band of Seymour offspring towards the stream the next day. "The ground is hardly even."

"Not all of us are as hopelessly clumsy as you!" the viscount hollered back.

Melodia huffed, hands on her hips, as amused as she was affronted. "That is hardly a way to flatter a lady."

"Perhaps not." Garrett flashed her a handsome grin from his spot in front of the children. The youngest one, at least, was still tethered to the nursemaid behind Melodia. "But we must do *something* with the children. We promised Seymour and Hillary that we would watch them for hours."

"Can we not stay safely inside and read to them? Or play a parlor game or two?"

Garrett guided the two eldest children from Seymour Lodge safely across the smallest part of the stream before he ran back to Melodia. "But if we did, I would have no reason to do this now, would I?"

He promptly lifted her off her feet, sprinted them down the small distance towards the stream, and planted Melodia on the ground before she could protest.

"Hardly gentlemanly, my lord." Melodia teased, her cheeks warm, as she found her footing amidst the children's laughter.

"On the contrary, I consider the act most chivalrous."

It was hard to disagree when he looked at her the way he did.



"To think he's been courting Melodia Reese all this time, right under our noses!" Mrs. Latimer spoke so enthusiastically to Mrs. Winfrey after church on Sunday that it was hard for anyone in the congregation to miss their conversation.

Melodia tried to hide her smile as Mrs. Winfrey agreed so heartily and openly with her neighbor that other matrons soon joined them to concur. The banns were not being read quite yet, as Melodia had neither been asked nor given her consent to marrying the widely eligible Viscount Laurence. But

Garrett's attentions had been so marked in the last few weeks that it was quite impossible for anyone to misunderstand what exactly was unfolding between the occupants of the rectory and Laurendale.

"I suppose I'm not the only party awaiting some happy news," Garrett whispered, his presence a thrilling constant beside her these days.

Melodia grinned. "I suppose attending weddings can grow rather addictive. When is your cousin Ellis to marry again?"

Garrett laughed at her attempt to divert the conversation. "I'd like to think his wedding won't be the next one held in this parish."

"No, of course not. The next wedding would be Bella's. That is no surprise."

"Quite right."

"But Mr. Ellis might be free to marry after her."

"Unless he's waiting to stand up with someone else first."

"You would ask him over Duncan Seymour?"

"Did I say that he would be standing up with *me*?" Garrett raised a teasing brow, sending Melodia into a rush of giggles as she shook her head. She was fast realizing that a possible future with him meant plenty of laughter, even if a good portion of it might be at her own expense.

"Well, I'm sure any of your cousins would make a decent witness for Bella's wedding."

"Ah."

With bemused smiles all around, Garrett walked with her out the church. Her parents, as always, were busy greeting each and every parishioner. And having ensured that her brother was safely ensconced with the cluster of families whose children were his dearest playmates, Melodia was free to make her own social rounds.

Garrett squinted up at the sky when they entered the small garden leading up to the pretty little church. "It is a fine day, isn't it? Shall I walk you home?"

Melodia smiled at him. "I never took you for a walker, my lord."

"I admit I find the activity pointless for its own sake." Garrett shrugged. "But it could be improved with the right company."

"And am I to presume that you are referring to me? Or is this yet another conversation about Mr. Ellis again?"

Garrett laughed and extended his arm. "Shall we, milady?"

From another person, the words might have meant little. From him, a man

whose title ensured that his future wife would indeed become Lady Laurence, the simple invitation seemed to imply so much more.

Melodia nodded and accepted his escort, her words caught in her throat.

For the better half of an hour, they slowly picked their path across the outskirts of Millsbury towards her family home. They chattered and laughed, reminisced and joked and shared a dream or two. It was perhaps not the most remarkable or unique thing to do—but there was something meaningful in the quiet joy of it all. Staying by the main road meant that they were rarely fully alone, but it still felt very special to share such exclusive company on what could otherwise be considered a rather ordinary day.

"Are we already here?" Melodia asked, surprised, when they reached the entrance to the rectory. "We must have walked quite fast."

"On the contrary, I tried my best to take my time."

"That was taking your time, my lord?" Melodia laughed. "You must be running everywhere most of the time if that was to be considered slow. No wonder you dislike walking. You don't actually walk."

"I suppose I do tend to hurry."

"I suppose that is a fair assessment." She grinned.

He did not seem to respond in a similar mood this time. Instead, he gently reached for her hands and clasped them between his larger ones. Melodia felt her chest tighten, the air in her lungs depleting further with every inch he drew closer, his eyes gazing tenderly into hers.

"I am usually not a patient man," he said, his voice gentle and low. "Although I have tried, to the very best of my abilities, to be as patient as I can be when it comes to you."

Melodia swallowed. She blinked quietly, speechless for once.

"And while I knew from the moment I understood my own affections that I would want nothing more than to have you as my wife," he continued with the same tenderness, "I am willing to wait for as long as you bid me to wait, if only I can be assured that there is hope for such a day to come."

"Garrett, I—"

"I do not know how long this may take, though I hope for my sake that it would not require me to wait yet another ten years."

"You have not waited so long, surely!"

"For you to be born? Or for you to come of age? Or perhaps for you to come to your senses and accept my suit?"

Melodia laughed. Then she stepped closer, until only their joint hands

separated them. "What are you trying to ask me, Garrett?"

He swallowed visibly, a sliver of nerves peeking through his certainty. "My dearest Melodia, looking back, there have been so many times my heart whispered that I loved you, followed only by so many times I nearly lost you. And while there may have been surprises for the both of us, I wouldn't want to have things any other way.

"You are still the person I thought you always were, but even better. You have helped me to grow so much in my faith and as a person, ever since our first acquaintance. I knew from the first moment I asked to call on you that I wanted to marry you. That is still true now, and more so than ever before. I cannot imagine my life without you."

Her heart lodged in her throat, her breath coming in short, unsteady spurts.

"And I don't want to simply imagine a life with you," he whispered. "I want to *have* a life with you."

He lowered himself to one knee, a knight paying court to a princess more deserving than she.

"My darling Melodia, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She nodded eagerly, wholeheartedly, with a force beyond her own understanding. "Yes—yes. I—I wish I—oh dear, I have no words, and that is rather a miracle."

He laughed as he stood to embrace her, the warmth of his chest surrounding her in a beautiful cloud of happiness. Melodia had shed tears over less-deserving men before. But this time, the tears stemmed only from an overwhelming sense of love and blessedness.

"I must look frightfully ugly with all the crying." She chuckled when she pulled back. His hands remained braced on her shoulders.

"You are beautiful, always beautiful," he said with a smile. Slowly, he lifted a finger to trace her brow, her cheek, and then the edges of her lips.

The look in his eyes was all tenderness. Would he kiss her now? He most certainly looked as if he wished to. A sadness lingered, slightly, at the thought that he would not be the first man she kissed—though she most certainly wanted him to be the last.

Yet instead of pulling closer, he whispered, his tone reverential, "I cannot wait to kiss you when we marry."

Her eyes watered again—not from anger or disappointment or fear—but from something far deeper and bigger than she herself could describe. Was

this what it meant to be loved and respected in the same breath?

Garrett's smile turned wry, if a little rueful. "Far be it for me to kiss a woman who is not my wife." His hand grazed her jaw. "Though I hope you shall be exactly that soon enough. Please tell me you will not have me wait much longer, darling."

She was more than happy to assure him she wouldn't.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"I rather fear the waves of broken hearts I shall have to wade through in order to reach you at the altar," Melodia teased a fortnight later, as Garrett led her back to the rectory after Sunday morning service. "Did you not hear the gasps that permeated the entire church at the first reading this morning?"

Garrett shook his head as he smiled, his demeanor looking particularly dashing with him dressed in his Sunday best. "You like to tease, but I am quite certain that it was the young men of Millsbury who were shedding tears as your father read the banns."

"Ha! Surely, there was nothing so dramatic."

"No? Did you not see poor Mr. Humbert hiding his face behind his hat?"

"No, I did not. I was rather too distracted watching Miss Winfrey faint in her seat."

"No one *fainted*."

"Alright, *swoon* in her seat then."

Garrett rolled his eyes and laughed, a tenderness Melodia had grown accustomed to seeing lighting up his features. Who knew the neighboring viscount she had once thought an adult far beyond her years would grow to be the dearest person to her yet?

She leaned against his shoulder as they strolled the familiar path. With their wedding imminent, Papa and Mama had grown increasingly indulgent in their chaperoning, and Melodia was rather enjoying the newfound solitude they had.

"Do you think your family would mind very much if we stop by Laurendale first?" Garrett asked a moment later.

"Am I to be the one to walk you home now? Is that what happens when a woman allows herself to stop being courted and agrees to be engaged?"

"You make it sound like a chore. You are at Laurendale nearly every day!"

"Not for long, I hope. Bella is marrying next week, and you've mentioned that the new house would be ready for us before then."

"An old property refurbished, I'm afraid."

"I'm not afraid. I would be glad to live anywhere with you, Garrett. And I know whispers around town act as if I were so very fortunate because I am set to marry a future earl, but I don't care about any of that, truly. I'm just happy that I'm going to be marrying you."

Whatever she said seemed to have elicited a new wave of tenderness in her betrothed, and Garrett lifted her hand to kiss it with so much reverence and sweetness that Melodia herself almost swooned.

"Laurendale is a stone's throw away. I only meant to pick up something I'd forgotten this morning," he explained when they rounded the bend.

"And here I thought that I was the ever-forgetful one."

"Not always." He smiled enigmatically. "Now, if you would just wait for me in the drawing room, I shall be up and back down shortly."

"Don't run *too* fast now."

"Only fast enough to return to you as quickly as I can."

Melodia grinned as they walked up the drive, and she waited patiently in the hallway, her smile untamable, as her future husband dashed upstairs to retrieve whatever it was he deemed worth her wait.

Given that he came back with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes and a shining betrothal ring in his hands, Melodia rather agreed that the diversion was worth it.



"Do you like it then?" he asked as they approached the rectory properly this time.

"Is there any chance I wouldn't?" Melodia grinned broadly, lifting her bejeweled hand to let the gemstone catch the light as much as it could. "It's beautiful, and just right for me."

"My mother tried to convince me to offer you one of the more elaborate

heirlooms, but I preferred the clarity of this one."

Melodia grinned up at her betrothed. "You know just what suits me."

"By offering myself on a platter?"

"That's part of it, yes."

They chuckled together, arm in arm, as they closed the final half mile to the rectory. The woodland path would have taken them here faster, but efficiency was hardly the sort of thing courting couples valued.

"I shall miss our walks," Melodia whispered dreamily, her fingers still toying happily with her new adornment.

"We can still walk—every day, if you wish it. Though I thought we might both prefer curling up with books instead."

"And talk through the night, without ever having to say goodbye."

"I do like the way you put it, though perhaps without the promise of incessant talking."

She poked him in the side. He laughed, and she laughed along. And just when they were about to reach the rectory's front door, they came face to face with a glowering London gentleman dressed in a familiar blue coat.

"Shane!" Melodia stopped in her tracks. Her arms fell limp. "That is—Mr. Limbergh. On the Lord's day too—what a surprise."

Garrett's muscles seemed to tighten as understanding dawned over who it was currently standing on her parents' doorstep.

"I heard you were engaged," Shane Limbergh barked, a dark look in his eyes. "Had to see for myself if it was true."

Melodia swallowed. "It is."

"Melodia, dear," Mama interrupted before more could be said, her gaze resting warily on their unexpected visitor. "This gentleman was waiting for us at the door today when we returned. He claims a prior acquaintance with you. You do know him then?"

The perfection of the past few weeks shriveled and shook, threatening to crumble. Melodia bit back tears.

"I'm afraid I do," she whispered.



The shouting began almost as soon as the door of the drawing room closed. Garrett had offered, against his own inclination, to give the family privacy—

but Melodia had hung onto his arm with so much determination that he was glad his presence beside her was not up for argument. He had no particular preference to become acquainted with any man who had shared any sort of intimacy with Melodia before, but he was not about to abandon her if she needed his strength.

"Did you ever even love me?" Mr. Limbergh's first question held little back, his angry eyes fixed on Melodia. Garrett felt his betrothed swallow. Perhaps he did *not* want to be here for this conversation, after all.

"I thought I did," Melodia answered quietly. She sniffed. Her fingers remained entwined on Garrett's forearm. "I might have, perhaps, once upon a time—but there was never anything good that could have come from what we had begun. I've learned that now."

Mr. Limbergh scoffed, loudly—disdainfully even. The man was a good ten years younger than Garrett, and had the temper to show for it. "Because you've caught a viscount now, have you? Who needs a struggling distant relative when you've caught a future earl?"

"How dare you?" Melodia hissed, her voice and eyes on fire. Garrett was suddenly glad he had yet to have seen such anger directed at him. "I ceased our correspondence long before Garrett and I shared as much as a hint of a courtship."

"A likely story." The unwelcome visitor sneered. "The vows we shared, the touches and moments—did they mean nothing to you?"

Melodia flinched visibly, as did the rector and his wife. Garrett kept a steadying hand over Melodia's trembling ones.

"Must you make me say it?" Melodia whispered.

"Say it—say what you must." Limbergh stalked closer, prowling like a predator. Garrett narrowed his eyes. "Tell everyone in this room what you truly feel, Melodia—that you love me, that the rumors I heard of an engagement have been nothing more than the wishes of your family—nothing more than a fleeting moment of weakness at the luster of the idea of being a future countess. We do not need the world to approve of the love we harbor for each other. You do not need to lie."

"No, I don't." Melodia sobbed. She closed her eyes, looking more broken than Garrett had ever seen since their betrothal. He did not think it likely that the feelings Mr. Limbergh was trying to coax from her were reciprocated, but the question before them was not one he could answer on her behalf.

A moment passed, and Melodia's eyes shot open. She stood abruptly,

leaving Garrett on the couch, and glared at Mr. Limbergh.

"I do not need to lie," she growled, looking as tall as their visitor despite only being as tall as his shoulders. "I do not need to tell you the regret that I feel, with all my being, over every piece of my heart and my body that I had allowed myself to give away when my future husband deserves every, single one. I do not need tell you that the infatuation I felt at London fades completely in light of the tenderness and depth of feeling that I have discovered can truly be mine.

"True love does not always need to come in the form of an inferno, burning you for better and for worse, leaving scars in its wake. Love is forgiveness and kindness. Love is forbearance and faithfulness. And I consider myself blessed beyond what I deserve to have found a man willing to offer all of these things to me along with the respect, the concern, and the tenderness that my soul desires."

She stepped forward with so much force that Mr. Limbergh stumbled back.

"If I have hurt you, I apologize," she said, tears down her face. "I admit to having made promises I was never in the position to keep. But I have never regretted, for a single moment, ending whatever we thought we had begun. It was not what was right for us, and it would never have been made right by merely wishing to make it so."

She moved back a single step, inhaled, and then exhaled deeply. "I wish you every happiness in your future—a future that shall have nothing whatsoever to do with me."

Garrett stood and reached for her. Melodia turned to hug him tightly, burying her face against his chest. And neither of them looked Mr. Limbergh's way as he spat his curses, grumbled his words, and marched out the door.



"I must admit that was as dramatic of a Sunday afternoon as I've ever had." Garrett dropped to a seat beside her on the large rock that served as the rectory's garden bench. Melodia sneaked a glance at her betrothed, feeling unusually shy and unusually exhausted.

"I'm sorry to have subjected you to that," she muttered.

"I do not think I was the one most taken aback today."

"No, that would unfortunately be Papa and Mama." Melodia sighed. She kicked her skirts, watching the muslin fall against the tips of her shoes. "I do have to thank you for standing by me."

"Melodia." His voice felt as warm as his chest had earlier. He closed a hand around hers. "I will *always* stand by you. And whatever it is that we might have done in the past, and in whatever way God might allow it to re-emerge in our future, we shall face together. It is, after all, *our* future."

Melodia smiled, though her eyes blurred. She swiped away a stray tear with the edge of her sleeve. "You do realize you are not quite shackled to me yet."

She turned to face him, and Garrett held her gaze with so much tenderness and conviction that she nearly wept again. His hands rose to cradle her jaw, his touch more gentle than a man of his breadth and strength had any right to be.

"I do realize it," he whispered, a hint of a smile on his lips. "And I would very much wish to remedy that as soon as we can."

Melodia chuckled, the weight of his promise washing over her like the warmth of a heated blanket in the middle of winter. "We still have two weeks of banns to read."

"One can always purchase a license."

"My trousseau is only halfway done."

"I'm sure that is still plenty."

"The wedding breakfast might not be ready."

"Well, now, that might be a problem."

Melodia laughed. Of course, food would be the problem, wouldn't it? Laurendale was famed for its dinners for a reason.

"I suppose we have no choice but to wait." She grinned.

"Alas." He sighed. "I never liked exercising patience."

She smiled as he pressed a kiss to her brow and pulled her close. Melodia leaned contentedly against his chest. Her parents might be peeking through the windows anytime, but she hoped they wouldn't begrudge her this bit of comfort after the afternoon they'd all had.

"Can we marry on a Monday?" he asked against her hair.

"Monday? I thought our families had agreed on Wednesday."

"One does not need to wait three full days after the banns are read. I'm sure the townsfolk can be convinced to bring in their wares a few days early."

"The very Monday after the third reading then?" Melodia chuckled. She closed her eyes and breathed in the serenity around them.

"You can hardly fault me for not wanting to wait any longer than that."

It was rather encouraging to end a day of so much tears with a heartfelt smile.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The walk down the aisle was a familiar one. It was the same aisle Melodia pranced down as a child, tossing petals left and right. It was the same aisle where she'd run up and down in pretend play while waiting for her parents to finish their parish duties.

But today's walk was different. Today, she didn't run towards an empty pulpit or dash by the disapproving stares of the more severe town matrons. Today, her groom stood waiting, his smile bright and eyes teary, as she approached the altar to join him. Today, she entered the doors one woman and would leave it as another.

And she wouldn't have it any other way.

The ceremony itself passed by in a blur. Papa, in an unexpected move, requested his young curate to perform the actual ceremony, citing that he would prefer to focus upon being a father for the day. Given how much Papa wept, and Mama wept, and everyone in the overflowing chapel wept and cheered, often at the very same time, it was perhaps a fitting choice.

The wedding vows carried significant weight. To pledge oneself to love and have and hold and cherish one person over any others, no matter what the future might bring, was, by all measures, a deeply important vow. But there was no fear, only joy, in making them.

The curate stumbled slightly over Garrett's titles, and Melodia very nearly tripped on her train at least twice. But any imperfect moments only enhanced the joyfulness of it all. They barely lasted past the chapel doors before Garrett tugged her in to kiss her cheek. As for the rest of his kisses—Melodia was very glad to have their own covered carriage back to Laurendale.



"Do you think all of Millsbury is here?" Melodia chuckled by his ear as they greeted the endless parade of people filing into Laurendale for their wedding breakfast. It was, perhaps, not strictly traditional to have the breakfast at the groom's residence, but there was no possible way the crowd would have fit in the modest rectory. It was already a wonder they were fitting into Laurendale's ballroom.

"I think that and twice over," Garrett whispered back. It was warming and thrilling and utterly incomprehensibly happy to have her by his side, her body leaning against his. Melodia was his *wife*, and he doubted he would ever tire of thinking of her that way. "Your father and my parents do have the happy acquaintance of nearly half of England."

Melodia laughed guilelessly. "That they do. I wonder if I can name half the people in the room myself."

"Do you know them? Over there? The old lady looks familiar."

"I do believe that to be one of your distant aunts. They belong to a cadet branch of the family, I think. Do you not know them?"

"Why would I?"

"They are your family!"

"When you have as much family as I, my dear, you start to think that might not be justification enough to remember all of them."

Her laughter trilled beside him. She wound her arm more tightly around his. "Am I to be your man of business then? Tasked with remembering all your myriad acquaintances, connections, and appointments?"

"Hardly." Garrett stifled a smile briefly before he grinned. "You are my *woman* of business, of course."

"How unromantic!"

"Is it, now?"

He took advantage of a lull in the guest entrances to tug her a few steps back.

"Garrett, why would you—"

He kissed her squarely on the lips, relishing the fact that he could now do so without a single twinge of guilt. True, this was hardly the most ideal place to explore his wife's lips and limbs. But the carriage ride from church had been so woefully short, and a man could only be expected to have so much self-control.

It took only a brief moment for her to return his kiss, and yet another moment for her to drop back to her toes with a giggle. "I never took you to be so demonstrative, Garrett."

"People change."

"Only for the better, I hope."

"I certainly think so."

They were dangerously close to yet another round of public kisses when the ruckus broke out behind him. Garrett turned reluctantly, his hands still planted on his wife's bejeweled waist. Just how many jewels had Mother gifted her?

"Bridget!" He called out in surprise.

"Did you think I would ever miss such a day?" The new Marchioness of Clairbridge sailed towards them, her smile bright.

"Well, with Cornwall so far away, we didn't—"

"Melodia!" His sister had no time for him as she turned and gathered the new Lady Laurence into her arms. "Oh, darling, we are now sisters in truth."

"That we are." Melodia chuckled as she hugged the much taller Lady Clairbridge back. "Can you imagine? You a marchioness and I a viscountess. It will be so confusing to plan dinner next time."

"I shall happily take my place at the foot of the table." Bella declared as she joined the other two women. "I never did care about walking in first."

"Oh, but at least Bridget shall enter first. It is so much easier to follow the tallest person."

"Especially if we buy her more plumes," Bella teased.

"Oh, are they horrid?" Bridget tugged at her ornate headdress. "I asked the milliner to do whatever was fashionable, and now I look like a veritable ostrich."

The womenfolk laughed, and Garrett compelled himself a brief moment of sacrifice as he watched his wife—his *wife*—share smiles with his family.

"Not at all, dear," Melodia assured, her face bright and joyful. "Only a rather attractive giraffe."

Garrett smiled as Melodia floated back to anchor herself against him amidst his sisters' laughter. He pressed a kiss against her brow before he whispered, "And if my sister is a giraffe, what does that make you?"

"A wandering bird finally finding its home." Melodia smiled up at him, her eyes glistening. "Thank you, Garrett, for being my home."

He could hardly resist kissing her again after that.

Chapter Thirty

"Is she done?" Mother fretted, brow furrowed, her usual elegance as a countess all set aside in anticipation of her grandchild. Garrett sighed from his post outside the confinement room. He wished to be inside, with Melodia as she toiled, but tradition said otherwise.

"I think these things take time," he answered.

They had waited years for this child, years of loving and longing and weeping and praying. Bridget and Bella had already married. Christopher Ellis had married. Even Miss Linus and her lieutenant had married, as Garrett and Melodia continued to wait. Their friends and relatives all had their respective nurseries filled with multiple children before they dared to hope for one.

And now came the dangers of childbirth, and Garrett wondered if he ought to have wished so eagerly for a child when it put Melodia at risk the way it did. Were they not happy enough on their own—with five years of bliss between them?

More sharp cries shot out from the birthing chamber, and Garrett groaned.

"Melodia will be well," Mother announced, though Garrett could hear the tremor in her voice. "God could not have put you both through so much only to make you lose her."

"I certainly hope He would not."

More pacing and wincing and waiting ensued. It had been more than half a day. Was the long labor a sign of things going wrong? Outside their comfortable, happy home, storm clouds rumbled. Soon, it would rain. And rain meant that all the relatives currently gathered in the parlor would be staying the night. Garrett frankly did not know to think of their presence as a

blessing or a burden.

A soft wail pierced the air. Garrett caught his breath.

"Is that—"

A commotion seemed to be happening inside the room, and Garrett pounded on the door.

"Is she well? Has the child come?"

"Please wait, my lord," the midwife responded. She was a trusted midwife, the same woman who served all of Millsbury faithfully. She had delivered countless babies safely before. There was little chance of things going awry. Yet Garrett wished the entire ordeal could be done sooner.

Melodia cried out again, her howls cutting Garrett's heart like a knife. Was the child not already born? He could hear its loud wailing already. What else was there to be done?

"Just a little more, my lady," the midwife prompted. Garrett waited with bated breath.

Behind him, Mother and other concerned matrons mumbled and surmised all the things that could possibly go wrong. Garrett turned a deaf ear to them all.

And another half hour later, when Garrett wondered if he could hold his breath any longer, the midwife opened the door. He barely managed to stay on his feet.

"How is Melodia?" He blurted. "And the child—"

"Lady Laurence is well, although extremely tired." The midwife smiled, her confidence reassuring. "And I believe, your lordship, that you might wish to meet your son and daughter now."

"A son and—daughter?" Garrett frowned. "Which one is it?"

He could feel everyone else behind him waiting with equally rapt attention.

The midwife smiled, looking joyful. "Both, your lordship."



"Do you think they understand each other?" Garrett's arm wrapped around his wife while his eyes stayed trained on the twins toddling on the grass under the nursemaid's watchful eye.

Michael, younger by a good twenty minutes, jabbered happily at his sister

while showing off the leaf he had managed to pick up some time in the last five steps. Eliza, unintelligible though she might be to everyone else, commented extensively on her brother's discovery, and the two young children delved into a most animated discussion understood only by the two of them.

After years of quiet waiting, their house seemed suddenly full—full of messy floors and loud sounds and constant new memories to make.

"They most certainly seem to," Melodia whispered, her head tucked under his chin. "It seems almost a shame to compel them to speak proper English when they have such a fascinating secret skill."

"Well, they must learn eventually."

"They will."

The autumn wind tugged at the edges of their wrappings. Soon, the house would feel even smaller without the freedom to explore the grounds. They still visited Laurendale multiple times a week. But that was no longer Garrett's home.

Here, in their own cozy house, with his wife and his children, he was truly home.

"Do you think they are speaking of us?" Melodia asked when Michael pointed a pudgy finger at his parents, mumbled something at his sister, and burst into laughter.

"Perhaps."

"What can we possibly have done to amuse them so thoroughly?"

"Perhaps they are saying that their parents are such lazy old people who refuse to leave the shade."

Melodia laughed. "Or perhaps they are saying that they don't want to grow up like us."

"Or that they want to."

"Or that they wish they could eat what we eat."

"Eliza would."

"Oh, for certain."

"Michael would gladly ride all your horses if you'd let him though."

"Perhaps they are saying that we should buy them more horses."

"They already have ponies waiting, and they can barely sit!" Melodia nudged him, and Garrett took the chance to catch her hand and pull her closer. Her smile, tempered by the tender touches of motherhood, shone inches from his own.

"And have you any problem with my spoiling them?" He grinned.

"How can I complain when you spoil me just as much?"

He kissed her, relishing the taste of her more with every passing year. She hummed happily as she returned his kiss, their arms anchored around each other.

"I think I know what they were saying." She smiled when they parted.

"What?"

"That their parents are so happy that it is rather nauseating."

Garrett laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised."

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Acknowledgments

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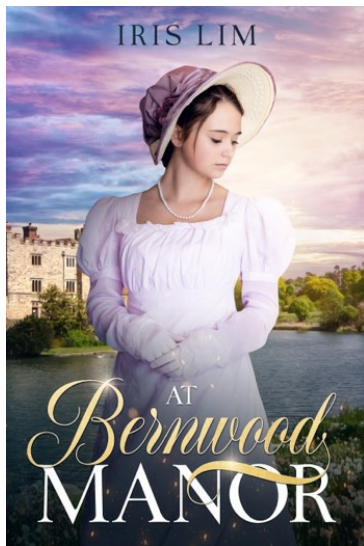
Thank you, dear reader, for going on this journey with Garrett and Melodia. I hope my heartaches and triumphs were able to broaden and

brighten your own.

And to Him who writes all things with sovereignty, wisdom, and unending love, I owe You everything. You are my all in all.

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