

MEN
OF THE
SQUADRON




PRIDE
of
ARMS

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STEIN

PRIDE OF ARMS

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Pride of Arms
Men of the Squadron
Book VII
By Andrea K. Stein
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Thank you so much for choosing to read “Pride of Arms,” seventh in the *Men of the Squadron* series.

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CONTENTS

[SYNOPSIS](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [December, 1834](#)
2. [Westmont Manor](#)
3. [Westmont Manor](#)
4. [Early Christmas Eve](#)
5. [Christmas Eve](#)
6. [Christmas Day](#)
7. [Boxing Day](#)
8. [December 27, 1843](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

15. [December, 1839, EPILOGUE](#)
16. [Pride Of Honor](#)
17. [PRIDE OF HONOR EXCERPT](#)

[Andrea K. Stein Bio, Books, & links](#)

SYNOPSIS

12 Days of Christmas, 4 well-intentioned matchmakers, & a chorus of ghostly cats



Widowed headmistress Grace Phippen seeks a mature husband for her niece Lucy to help tone down the young woman's obsession with volatile science experiments.

Lucy can't give up concocting dangerous chemistry in her tiny closet laboratory, but she'll do whatever it takes to help her aunt keep their London young ladies' academy afloat.

Cupid's arrow may run afoul of an excess of mistletoe, but true love strikes wherever it may...



An earl mourns the woman who walked away on the arm of his best friend and forsakes his gambling hell to come home and rebuild his family estate.

A broken Royal Engineer struggles to regain his hearing, and his wits, after a career of blowing things up and vows to do whatever it takes to repay the earl for his kindness.



Generations of lively (or not) 6-toed ship's cats round out the cast.

Will it take a Christmas miracle to convince these two couples where their hearts actually lie?



Will these lonely, misguided matchmakers find happy endings beneath the mistletoe before the clock strikes midnight at the Twelfth Night Ball?

PROLOGUE

July, 1816 **Bombardment of Algiers**

Twenty-three-year-old Captain Duncan Mackenzie, R.E., snapped his spyglass shut and shook his head slowly. He'd suspected as much even as they'd been conscripted at Gibraltar to join Admiral Exmouth on his expedition to bombard Algiers from the harbor. Their mission was to liberate the hundreds of European men and women being held prisoner by the Barbary pirates who sheltered in Algiers. A previous attempt at release through diplomacy had failed miserably.

The Admiral was a very forceful man and had convinced Duncan's regiment major to send a small contingent of engineers along with the combined English-Dutch fleet. His plan included rowing small shore boats away from the main ships with a Congreve rocket mounted on each one. Exmouth, who believed in being thorough, had worried that his sailors would need help to make the rockets work. He'd been wrong. The midshipmen assigned to the rockets, and the Navy

gunners, were more than sufficient to figure out how to work the special munitions.

In fact, the Royal Navy sailors were doing a cracking good job of putting the Congreve rockets to excellent use, without the help of the engineers. The ships were loosing every bit of firepower from all of their guns at once, and the sound was so deafening, shouting out orders of any sort was an exercise in futility. So, with the use of hand signals, Duncan ordered the small contingent of men under him to spread out and help with the guns on Exmouth's ship, the *HMS Queen Charlotte*.

As it turned out, they ended up fighting like hell next to their Navy comrades in the bloody battle. More than nine-hundred British sailors were dead before the smoke cleared from the massive bombardment. Duncan was lucky. He escaped with his life, but without the full use of his hearing. A degree of deafness plagued him from that day onward.

DECEMBER, 1834

VICINITY OF ROMFORD, ENGLAND

Major Duncan MacKenzie, Royal Engineers, not quite retired, but on half pay, ran for his life and dived into the nearest drainage ditch. The crumbling old bridge had to go, but his calculations as to how quickly the wick would burn on the fuse had been a bit off. He landed with a thud against Lord Hugh Elliott, Earl of Westfalia.

The explosion, when it came, literally rattled his teeth and made his ears ring for long minutes after the blast. He'd landed nearly atop his benefactor. The earl had commissioned him to destroy a few aging structures on his estate so that they could design and build new edifices the following spring.

After the percussion of the blast had subsided, he managed to take a deep breath and gave a start at the sight of his companion. The earl's face was covered with dirt from the blast, and his fine linen shirt was in tatters. Duncan suffered a momentary twinge of regret. He never should have let the man help him set up the explosives to take down the bridge. Christ. He could have killed a peer of the realm. Fears in that department, however, disappeared in the next few seconds.

The earl's eyes fluttered open and he shouted. "Good Lord Almighty, I've never felt anything like that in my life."

Duncan thought, but did not say, said peer should have been with him at Algiers. This destruction of a country bridge was nothing compared to the ceaseless battering of the guns that day.

With their faces covered with dirt and mud and their clothing in tatters, they strolled back toward Hugh's country house. Midway there, they decided to detour to the inn situated in the small village of Westfalia, the source of Hugh's title. They had no more than cleared the last rise in the road before the village when a carriage stopped. Two women piled out and raced toward them.

"What in the name of Hera happened here?" the younger woman demanded.

The older of the two women said nothing but walked directly toward Duncan. She took his grubby hand, turned over his palm and pressed her thumb against his wrist. "You look as though ye've come back from the devil's own door. Sit down before you faint dead away and fall like the giant tree you resemble." Duncan, usually in charge of everyone and everything around him, lost his voice. He moved involuntarily backward at the gentle shove of her hand and collapsed his backside against a large rock at the side of the road.



"LUCY—." The appearance of the Duchess of Montfort's old friend and her former governess, Lucy's Aunt Grace, set Hugh back on his heels. And reminded him of how much he'd missed Mina, the duchess. She'd always be Mina to him, though he supposed when she got back from her wedding trip on the continent, he'd have to observe formalities and address the former madcap Lady Wilhelmina as "Your Grace."

Lucy produced a handkerchief from within the folds of her traveling carriage dress and dabbed it against her tongue before reaching up to scrub furiously at his face.

"Stop—. What are you doing?" He grabbed her hands before she could continue ministering to him like old Nanny from his nursery days.

"Do you have any idea what you look like?" she demanded. "If you walk down the streets of Westfalia resembling a brigand with his clothes hanging in charred shreds, you'll likely end up in front of the JP."

“Horace wouldn’t care...nor would he be particularly surprised. He’s become accustomed to seeing me cause trouble in all forms of deshabile ever since I was a nasty schoolboy home for the holidays.”

“For heavens sakes, Hugh, stop twiddling until I get all the soot off your face. And you’re not a naughty schoolboy anymore. You’re the Earl of Westfalia.” She stopped chattering for a moment and gave him an odd look. “Wait.” She ceased scrubbing at his face long enough for him to snatch away the soot-covered handkerchief. “Why are you here? You never come home for the holidays.”

By that time, Hugh noticed Lucy’s Aunt Grace had no more than stepped down from Rummy’s carriage than she’d turned Duncan into something like a befuddled snake lured in by the charmer’s flute. His partner in pyrotechnic explosives sat stunned at the side of the road, ensconced on a flat rock. The great hulk of a looby stared at Lucy’s aunt, who was prodding and studying his hands and wrists as if they represented a map of the heavens. The truly odd thing, though, was that Major MacKenzie quietly tolerated her ministrations. Hugh couldn’t believe the opinionated Scotsman he knew had turned into an obedient lapdog.

Hugh slapped his soot-covered forehead. “Where are my manners?” He swept an arm toward the major. “Miss Lucy Phippen and Mrs. Grace Phippen, I’d like to present my good friend and engineer extraordinaire, Major Duncan MacKenzie, lately retired from Her Majesty’s Royal Engineers. He’s now my man of the odd explosion or two whilst we clear out ailing bridges on my estate.”

He continued introductions. “Miss Phippen is Lady Wilhelmina Tyndall’s closest friend, and Mrs. Phippen was Lady Tyndall’s long-suffering governess for many, erm, challenging years.”

Grace laughed at Hugh’s awkward introduction. “I’ve heard much about your exploits, Major MacKenzie. You’ll be joining us, I hope, at the Abbey?”

He cocked a brow at Hugh.

“Oh, boulders and nails. I forgot about Rummy’s invitation. We’re to join his house party through Twelfth Night.”

Duncan quirked a stern frown his way, which Hugh chose to ignore.

“You should come,” Lucy insisted, and clapped her hands. “There’s nothing like Montcliffe Abbey during the holidays. It’s a wonder there’s any holly or evergreen trim left in the entire valley after the Tyndalls’ footmen and Mr. Halsey get done.”

When Lucy stopped for a breath, Grace added, “I think Lord Rumsford has invited everyone he knows to join the party so that he won’t miss Mina so much.”

Hugh gave her a distracted look. “I know how he feels.”

Lucy turned away and pretended interest in one of the horses in Lord Rumsford’s team of grays.



DUNCAN SAT SQUASHED against Hugh in Lord Rumsford’s carriage after Grace and her niece had forbade them from even thinking about their planned side trip to the tavern in Rumsford.

Since the bridge they’d been hell-bent on destroying was at the edge of Hugh’s estate, the two women had insisted on seeing them safely home. The horses they’d ridden out upon earlier that morning were tethered to the back of the carriage.

Duncan’s lids were heavy with fatigue but he still managed to stay awake for the duration of the trip, if nothing more than to assess the competent, bossy woman across from him. Grace Phippen’s skin was still glowing and petal-soft, much like that of her younger niece. The only details that gave away her age were the silver-shot black curls escaping from the sides of her bonnet. Her gloved hands were rarely still. She constantly gestured as she talked to her niece and pointed out sights along the way to Hugh’s manor house. Her simple woolen, deep wine-colored carriage dress hugged her curves in all the right places. Duncan jerked to full wakefulness. What the hell was

he thinking? He shook his head hard, waking Hugh who'd been napping next to him. His employer gave him a sharp look and then furtively strayed his attention to Mrs. Phippen. The look he slanted back toward Duncan was full of meaning.

He gave a low growl, which caused Mrs. Phippen to give him a questioning look. "Did you say something, Major MacKenzie?"

"Yes," Hugh answered for him. "He was wondering if the two of you would join us for supper." Duncan's discreet jab at his ribs didn't stop him. "It's too late for a carriage ride back to the Abbey at this hour. Lord Rumsford will understand. I'll send one of the stable boys with a message so he doesn't worry."

"But..." Grace started to protest.

Hugh held up a lordly finger. "I insist."

Lucy's eyes widened. "You mean for us to stay the night?"

Hugh's cheeks reddened, but he forged ahead anyway, hoping no one would notice in the shadowed carriage. "Of course. Can't have Rummy's driver running off the road in the dark."



GRACE LEANED back into the squabs of the comfortable carriage and tried to study the major without anyone noticing. Lord, but the man took up all the oxygen in the carriage with his height and broad shoulders. She tried to guess at his age but finally gave up.

His hair was entirely silver streaked with slashes of stark black, but he had the physique of a man in the prime of youth. She supposed serving with the army as an engineer was a strenuous job, though, which would have kept him from aging in the manner of most English gentlemen. When she turned suddenly to point out something to Lucy in the last slanting rays of sunlight, the expression on her niece's face spoke volumes. Lucy knew she'd been taking in the physical splendor that was Major MacKenzie.

Lucy turned toward Hugh. “What plans do you have for your estate now that you’ve returned home? Are you going to continue to participate in the management of your, um, club now that your partner will be spending more time back here in the countryside?”

Grace nearly swallowed her tongue in embarrassment. “Lucy—. Lord Westfalia’s business is no concern of yours.”

Hugh extended his hand to quell her apologies. “Lucy’s honesty is refreshing. I miss that now that Mina’s not around.”

“You’ve been close to Her Grace ever since she was child, haven’t you?” Grace tilted her head toward him.

“Yes. I tagged along with the duke and her brothers on most of their adventures. With her brothers away at school, and Rummy serving in Parliament, Mina spent a lot of time alone.” He paused for long moments before continuing. “Julian and I made it our business to check in on her whenever we were at home.”

Grace leaned back again and took in what the earl hadn’t said. He’d been in love with the current Duchess of Montfort before she chose and married the duke. Unrequited love. That explained a lot.

Grace was sure Lucy harbored feelings for the man. But her niece was no starry-eyed dreamer. She knew Hugh Elliot, the Earl of Westfalia, was not for her.

“Where do you and your niece keep your boarding school in London?” The major interrupted her thoughts about the earl.

“Kensington,” she answered absently, her mind still on the puzzle of saving her niece from a terrible mistake.

“Kensington? Are there that many families there who can afford to send their daughters to school?” Major MacKenzie seemed genuinely surprised at the idea of educating women.

Her attention snapped back to the great Scottish looby of a man seated across the carriage from her. “You’d be surprised at what wealthy merchants are willing to do to make their daughters presentable in society so that they can secure a decent marriage.”

He finally seemed to have the presence of mind to quit staring so intently and divert his gaze out a side window. Thank the gods she didn't have to keep being drawn into the piercing blue of his eyes. She gave out a deep sigh and gazed out the opposite side. She supposed he'd do as a match for Lucy. He was certainly a better man than that ferret, her landlord Silas Miller. The officers of His Majesty's army certainly wouldn't elevate a man of poor character to the level of major. Would they?

WESTMONT MANOR

ESSEX, ENGLAND

The chiming case clock in the hallway outside Hugh's shabby sitting room gave Lucy an excuse as good as any to avoid staring into the clear aqua depths of Hugh's eyes. He seemed to miss nothing and even one look could be deadly to her insides. Zeus! A night in his house, knowing he lay in his bed only a room or two away...the mere thought made her heart pound as if it were flailing its way out of her chest.

After lingering her gaze awhile in the direction of the sounds of the clock, she carefully swept her regard back toward the furnishings. Every piece of furniture in the room was covered with a large cloth, and the dust and cobwebs were everywhere, screaming neglect. She knew he'd turned his back on the excitement and draw of London life to set his family estate to rights, but heavens above, she'd had no idea the extent to which the earl's father had let Westmont Manor fall into ruin. The settee on which she and her aunt now sat was still covered in old, tattered bed linens that themselves were laden with dust.

Even the now ripped, drab work clothes he'd donned for his work with Major MacKenzie failed to dampen the image Hugh projected to the outside world. The current expression on his face was full of the usual forced good humor she'd come to associate with the earl. He carried a perpetual expression of guarded mirth, as if he were privy to some great ludicrous secret no one else knew.

But those eyes. She'd studied them now for many years as companion and best friend to Mina who'd grown up under the tutelage of Lucy's Aunt Grace.

Whenever Mina's unfeeling brothers and their friends had been home over the holidays from school, both Hugh and Julian, the Duke of Montfort, had been in constant attendance. She'd always assumed they were there because of Mina's brothers. Apparently, she'd misjudged them. They'd both been there for Mina.

"A nightingale's trill for your thoughts, Lucy?"

Hugh's sudden question caught her so off guard, she nearly fell off the settee. She'd been balancing a cold cup of tea his housekeeper had provided earlier whilst teetering on the edge of the seat to avoid an avalanche of dust.

She glanced back and was caught in the web of his regard. "I was only wondering why we couldn't just as safely return to the Abbey for the night and not inconvenience your housekeeper."

Her aunt shot her an intense glance, which Lucy returned with a mutinous one of her own.

"She has her minions busy as we speak, ensuring the guest rooms are devoid of the cobwebs and dust of this space." He spread his hands wide to encompass the sitting room. "I apologize for the state of the old family pile, but the former servants apparently decided that 'out of sight' meant out of mind. And of course, my father hadn't been paying the poor souls, either, for some months before he died." A sudden shadow obliterated his usual mocking smile.

"I'm sorry," she quickly amended. "I'm sure your new army of servants will set things to right quickly."

His cheeky grin returned. "An army? I certainly wish they were. Maybe then I could get old Wellington to put them through their paces." He pointed to his own cup of cold tea. "Maybe he could get them to manage a hot cup of tea for my guests."

When Lucy spied on her aunt out of the corner of her eye, she noticed she was nearly grimacing in an attempt not to notice Major MacKenzie who had moved his chair rather close to hers. The tall, muscular Scot was still in the clothing he'd worn when their attempt to blow up the bridge had nearly blasted him and the earl to kingdom come. If Lucy were truthful, she was a little jealous of the men's access to explosives.

If only she had a bit of the gunpowder they'd used, she could finish the experiment she'd been working on back in her tiny improvised laboratory at their boarding school. She wondered...

"Lucy-." Her aunt's abrupt call pulled her out of her thoughts. "Why don't you come over here and entertain Major MacKenzie? He was asking about what can be done about the garden at the front of the manor house. You're much better at cultivating plants than I am. I believe I'll check on Mrs. White in the kitchen. Perhaps she could use some assistance with the tea."



IT HAD NOT ESCAPED Hugh's notice that Lucy's aunt was in danger of exploding from trying so hard to throw her niece and the major into close proximity. He'd considered the possibility that a home and family might help his friend deal with his hearing loss in a much more appropriate manner than his current habits which included launching into fights in taverns with fellow patrons whose conversation he inevitably misunderstood. However, Hugh wasn't sure Lucy was quite the right partner he'd had in mind for MacKenzie.

She was much too lively, not to mention likely to terrify the man with her erratic laboratory experiments. Once she'd become obsessed with the study of chemistry as a young woman rambling about the Montfort library with her cohort in crime, Mina, there'd been no holding her back. He shuddered when recalling the time she'd filled the Abbey with the rotted egg smell of sulfurous fumes in an experiment gone awry.

He'd been at the Abbey on holiday from school with Julian at the time of the incident and remembered the Viscount Rumsford staring at the ceiling for long minutes before calling Mrs. Phippen into his office. He'd instructed her to secure a proper tutor for young Lucy's peculiar interest. The science tutor who'd been duly hired had included both Lucy and Mina in the classes, but Mina had promptly declared she cared not a whit for science. Instead, she continued to read all the volumes of classics she could reach in Julian's Edgewood estate library. The two girls had been supported in all of their crack-pot endeavors by Julian's old steward, Beesley, who'd never been able to say no to either one of the young women.

Hugh shook his head slowly and eyed MacKenzie uncomfortably pulling at his tattered cravat and practically leaning away from Lucy's chair in an effort to distance himself from the ebullient, bubbling creature next to him who was trying to explain the secret of making English roses feel welcome in a garden. When she offered to mix her personal combination of potash and soil for him to spread around the new bushes planned for the the following fall, Hugh feared the man might actually pop a vein.

He excused himself, making apologies for the long wait for a decent refill of hot water for tea. He headed out of the sitting room toward the lower cave-like kitchens. Straightening his shoulders, he prepared for a bout of arguments with the elderly cook he hadn't had the heart to let go, but who seemed to feel she answered to no one, especially Hugh.

He'd no more than cleared the doorway than he was jerked to the side of the long, cavernous hall. "We have to talk, milord." Grace Phippen demanded in a hoarse whisper close to his ear." She pulled him with her two doors down to the dusty library. Once inside, she closed the door softly behind them. "You have to help me save Lucy from a terrible mistake," she insisted, before plopping down on a cloth-covered settee, causing a huge cloud of dust to billow around her.

Hugh coughed and waved a frantic hand in front of his face, clearing the air. "What the devil has she done now?"



GRACE PHIPPEN HAD no illusions about any sway she might have over Hugh Elliott, Earl of Westfalia. However, for the sake of Lucy's future, not to mention the survival of their girls' academy in London, she had to make him see sense.

After her husband had died at a young age, she'd begun her lifelong, determined path toward solvency for herself as well as her young, orphaned niece. Her long years as a low-paid teacher at the first academy where she'd been employed were difficult, but she'd saved every penny she'd made and eventually had been able to afford to bring Lucy to the school to ensure her education.

Hugh's clear blue eyes seemed to bore a hole into her very soul when he suggested, "There's a hard-backed chair over here by the window. It's not very comfortable, but at least you won't be swallowed in a cloud of dust when you sit down." He stood, leaning against the window frame and looking out across the expanse of the unkempt park grounds surrounding his family manor.

Grace gingerly took his advice before tucking her slippers beneath the sweeping hem of her dress. A fire had not been laid in the room's fireplace, but no one had expected them to take over the library, either. She finally spoke. "Lucy has taken this wrong-headed idea that the only way she can help me keep the academy afloat is to marry Silas Miller, the owner of the building we rent."

"What? He's asked Lucy to marry him? Why?"

Grace's eyes widened. "She's an attractive young woman, he needs a wife, and he's been threatening to raise our rent for the last year." She straightened her back and gave him a proud look. "Lucy insisted she'd marry Mr. Miller to make sure we don't lose the academy, and now I can't talk her out of such a wrong-headed idea."

A strange look passed across Hugh's usually carefully controlled face. "Why would she do such a thing?" He paced to the fireplace and knelt down, stacking kindling and firewood from a nearby box. He struck a match against the

bottom of one of his boots before coaxing the lot into warming flames.

Grace pressed her forehead against the palm of one of her hands. “You know her as well as anyone, milord.” She lifted her eyes to his face and pleaded with him. “Would you talk to her? Could you...perhaps suggest she might be happier with your friend, Major MacKenzie?”

Hugh nearly banged his head against the heavy marble mantel as he straightened from building the fire. “Me? You want me to play the matchmaker and suggest to Lucy she ought to marry a man nearly twice her age?”

“But...but don’t you see? She could help him with his disability, and he could be a steadying influence on her. She’s been entirely too wrapped up in her addle-pated ‘experiments.’ I never know when she’ll do something that might blow up the academy quarters.”

Hugh threw her a wry grin. “You do know Major Mackenzie is a munitions expert. Perhaps you ought to re-think throwing the two of them together.”

WESTMONT MANOR

FAMILY PARLOR

In a show of examining the state of the crumbling ceiling in the earl's sitting room, Major Duncan MacKenzie stared upward for as long as he dared before returning to polite conversation with Hugh's other guests. He made to pull at his cravat, but realized too late there was little left of the tattered item which could endanger his windpipe.

To be honest, he engaged in polite conversation only by inserting the occasional "Is that so?" or, "Yes, indeed." The truth was, he had no idea what the hell the young woman and her devilishly intoxicating aunt were saying. When he'd resorted to his usual tactic of trying to decipher what was being said by studying lips, he'd been totally undone by Grace Phippen's lips. They were plump, glistening from her incessant licking with her tongue. And of course, the tongue, pink and glistening as well, making a man wonder...

When she turned her head toward him and those lush lips opened to speak, all Duncan heard was the sound of a summer's eve with thousands of insects buzzing. Damn munitions work to hell. He wished he'd ended up bloody and sightless in the mud like so many of his friends that day at Badajoz. The French guns had been relentless, hour after hour, until you couldn't even hear the sounds inside your own head. He'd shouted himself hoarse to make his men hear him above the relentless thump of the godless frogs' cannons.

He'd been one of the Royal Engineers in charge of the artificers digging trenches for the third and final siege of Badajoz, which finally drove the French out of the Spanish

city. Wellington's troops had succeeded despite the incessant thumping of the damned French guns. All of the field surgeons and physicians at the military hospitals since then had been unable to give him a satisfactory reason as to why many men came through much worse battles with their hearing intact. But not him. They'd all assured Duncan his fate could have been much worse and never failed to point out he'd emerged from his many years of service with all of his limbs, and his sanity, intact.

He'd still like to be able to settle in at a tavern and have a simple conversation without all the frustration that unfortunately often ended in him resorting to fists after several tankards of ale. Perhaps he ought to change his drinking habits to solitary ventures in the safety of his rooms in London, or in his quarters at Westmont where he'd be spending the next year or so helping the earl rebuild his crumbling estate. That is, unless he wasn't called back into active service sooner than that. A man could hope.

The delectable Mrs. Phippen had arisen from her chair and was tapping on his shoulder while asking a question, or so he suspected from the upward lilt of her voice at the end of whatever she was saying. When he whipped his head around, her keen eyes bored into his.

"I'm so sorry. Could you repeat what you said?" He hoped he could read her lips without losing his way and wondering how she tasted. Puzzling out what someone said while looking at their lips required total concentration. Unfortunately, focusing his full attention on what Mrs. Phippen was saying was impossible while watching the movement of her pink, glistening lips.

He was fairly sure the first few words were "I know what..." After that, he was lost, but she was intent of pulling an answer from him. His face heated, and he hung his head, hoping she'd leave him in his misery. Suddenly, she shoved a piece of paper into his hands. She'd hurriedly scrawled a terse message across the scrap of foolscap: "I know what you're hiding, and I can help."



GRACE'S STOMACH LURCHED. The man on whom she'd thought to wager all of her hopes for Lucy was nearly stone deaf, not just hard of hearing, as Hugh had explained. He was still a bright, capable man, a major in the king's army and an engineer for heaven's sakes. But he wouldn't go far denying he had a problem and refusing to take the initiative to do something about the chink in his armor. Drowning his sorrows in ale and engaging in fights at taverns would not end well. She had to do something, strictly for Lucy's sake, of course.

The flush of embarrassment on his face gave him away. She wasn't telling him something he didn't already know. As a teacher and the owner of a young women's academy, she'd met a woman who was carrying on her father's methods of teaching hand signs to the deaf. She wondered, though, if that would be of any help to someone like Major MacKenzie who might have to return to the ranks of the army at some point where no one would be able to understand the code of signs created by various positions of one's hands. Perhaps she should help him learn the art of reading lips. Suddenly, the idea of having the major study her lips caused her own face to flush. She covered the moment by bending to scratch out another note for him: "Perhaps I could help you practice reading lips."

After she'd written the last message, passed it to Major MacKenzie, and turned back to Hugh and Lucy, both of them were giving her odd looks. "I was just writing some suggestions for Major MacKenzie to help with his, um, hearing situation."

Hugh's wide grin and the skeptical expression on Lucy's face made Grace's face flush even hotter. She didn't dare look directly at Major Mackenzie, but he silently handed her a message of his own on the back of her original missive: "I would be eternally grateful for as many lessons as necessary in studying your lips."



LUCY COULD BARELY CONTAIN her laughter. She knew her Aunt Grace was trying entirely too hard to guide the major's interest toward herself, but it was apparent even to Lucy that

the man was smitten with her aunt. The smile Hugh was trying to hide meant the man's attraction was apparent to him as well.

She had to abstain from rubbing her hands together in glee. When they returned to Montcliffe Abbey in the morning, she knew there would be ample opportunities to maneuver her aunt and the major together. Foraging out in the vast woodlands at the Abbey for just the right yule log would be the perfect way to throw the two of them together for a long, cold afternoon. All the more excuse later to snuggle before a roaring fire.

Hugh leaned close to Lucy whilst her aunt and the major were engaged in frantic note-writing. "What do you think?" he whispered.

Lucy turned her head toward him only to realize his lips were within kissing distance. If only... "What do I think about what?"

"Does she know?"

Lucy wrinkled her nose and gave him a puzzled look. "You mean does she know he's hiding his hearing impairment?"

Hugh grinned like a naughty school boy. "No, silly girl. Does your aunt know the major's cow-simple about her?"



THE NEXT MORNING dawned bone-barking cold, and Hugh helped Mrs. White ravage all the chests throughout Westmont's many empty bedchambers for spare, clean blankets for his guests to wrap up in and fend off the cold on their trip to Montcliffe Abbey. Although the Marquess of Rumford's carriage was roomy and comfortable, it was also damnably drafty.

Hugh had tied on his roan Bess to the rear of the carriage as well as a gentle gray for Duncan. He wanted to be able to return to Westmont in case the 12th Night festivities became interminably boring. There was so much work to be done on his family estate, he resented even a little time spent away in frivolous pursuits.

He was even more concerned for the major. Who knew what madness the man would get up to when assailed by a veritable army of young misses overwhelmed by the Scotsman's, erm, burly charms? All of their chattering chatter the maddening engineer would not be able to hear, but would make up whatever he thought they might be saying. God help them all if he got on the wrong side of one of their suitors. His old friend Rummy, the viscount, would never forgive him if a full blown shindy broke out at his 12th Night festivities.

At that moment he was distracted by a flash of crimson. It was Lucy racing down his rickety staircase (that was first on the list of must-fixes) in a bright red carriage dress, her cheeks rosy from undoubtedly having stood close to the fireplace in her bedchamber to warm up, he'd wager. She looked the very picture of a Christmas surprise awaiting a man craving a sweet on a cold December morning. He had to haul himself up short from going any further with that fantasy. Lucy was not his to think about and crave.

According to her aunt, she was practically affianced to their landlord, whom Mrs. Phippen did not particularly care for. In fact, she was so opposed to Lucy's impulsive agreement to marry the man, she was trying to shove the young woman beneath Major MacKenzie's very nose.

He shook his head hard to clear the dangerous thoughts swirling about there. "Are your belongings ready for stowing in the carriage?" His aged footman, James, was carefully negotiating the creaking stairs, a trunk balanced on one shoulder. Hugh met him halfway to avoid any disasters. "I'll take this one. Why don't you fetch Mrs. Phippen's trunk to save time?"

James favored him with a look that said he knew what the young earl was up to, but would not question either Hugh or his own extreme good fortune in having been blessed with a kind employer.

"That's it," Lucy trilled. "That's all I brought."

Hugh set the trunk down with a thump and did a mental hiccup when he recalled the last time he'd headed to Ascot for

the races with his former mistress. He'd needed an extra carriage for all the fripperies she'd traveled with to accompany him to the races. Something about Lucy's offhand explanation of the paucity of her belongings didn't sit well with him. She deserved more finery...Zeus's cod...she should at least have *two* trunks of fine things, like silk stockings for her lovely legs. Well, he hadn't actually seen her legs, but there was that one time a gust of wind had turned her full skirts into a sort of sail and he'd gotten a glimpse of her ankles. Extraordinary ankles which must surely be attached to a superlative pair of legs...

Suddenly Lucy's voice turned sharp, knocking him out of his forbidden thoughts. "Lord Westfalia, have you lost your voice now? It will never do for two guests at the 12th Night festivities to be at such a disadvantage. One can't hear and another stays mute for long periods of time." She clapped her hand over her mouth then when she realized how cruel her light dismissal of the major's hearing difficulties must sound. "I am so sorry. I didn't mean to say that, I mean I didn't think how unfeeling and hurtful my words would be." She looked around furtively to make sure Duncan had not noticed, but then he wouldn't, would he? Even if he'd been there with them.

"I'm sorry," he said abruptly. "Did you ask me something?"

"Yes," she said. "I asked if you and Major MacKenzie would be staying through until the 12th Night Ball."

Hugh wanted in the worst way to say "No," emphatically, but he didn't have the heart to disappoint Lucy. "Of course we'll stay," he reassured her.

"What costume will you wear?"

God, this woman was relentless. "I suppose I could rummage through Lord Rumsford's collection and find that ratty old bear costume Julian used to wear."

"Oh, goody." She clapped her hands and did a little dance in his cavernous hallway which would surely miss the sound

of her voice as much as he would when she went back to London. "I'll go as Goldilocks."

Hugh sighed and stared up at the elaborately carved, crumbling medallions across the ceiling of the entrance to what must be one of the most decrepit, lonely manor houses in England.

EARLY CHRISTMAS EVE

MONTCLIFFE ABBEY

Essex, England

E Duncan couldn't decide whether he hated headmistress Phippen's intense interest in his hearing woes which caused her to frequently stick her face close to his to show him how a particular word looked on her lips, or whether he actually yearned for her attentions. Right now, he was leaning toward the pleasurable side of having those plump, glistening lips hovering close by. The scent of her breath alone was enough to drive him insane: a touch of cinnamon overlaid with pure woman. He wondered how long he could keep his attention, erm, purely academic.

The carriage abruptly lurched to a stop, and they were at the side portico of the Abbey. They'd been on the road for hours, but he'd totally lost track of time. He was surprised to see the soaring arches of another ancient pile. This one, however, seemed to be in much better state of upkeep than Hugh's manor which seemed to be crumbling out from under them whilst they watched.

He could tell by the condition of the nearby stables and the dairy they'd passed on the way toward the main house that this was a well-loved, well-maintained home estate. Never mind the havey-cavey architecture which had evolved from the original Abbey probably built around the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The vaulted cloisters remained as they had for centuries around the entry courtyard, but it looked as though two stone towers had been added at some point to

accommodate the growing families of the residents over the years.

When Duncan stepped down out of the carriage and then turned to hand down Lucy, the earl was there ahead of him. He couldn't help noticing his usually stand-offish employer was holding Miss Phippen's hand just a touch too long. When he noticed Mrs. Phippen frown behind her niece, he had to stifle a grin. Her matchmaking efforts apparently were being sent on a detour.

A strikingly handsome man strode toward them from inside the house, a welcoming smile on his face. "Happy Christmas," he intoned in a deep, booming voice before embracing Lucy for a long while. After sending her and her aunt into the Abbey, he moved on to Hugh and clapped him on the back before sending a friendly, quizzical look toward Duncan.

Hugh turned back toward Duncan. "Lord Rumsford, I'd like to present Major Duncan MacKenzie, on furlough from his majesty's Royal Engineers. Major Duncan, your host, Lord Rumsford"

Duncan nodded in acknowledgement. "I look forward to seeing the improvements you've made here at Montcliffe Abbey. Lord Westfalia wants to do some similar things at Westmont."

"Ah...the new stables. You'll have to talk to my colleague, Sir James." An involuntary smile crossed his lips. "He's the mastermind behind the modern design for our new stables, not to mention our fine stock. You'll not find the like anywhere outside of Dublin." He swept his arms toward the newly constructed buildings. "Go explore what we've done any time you like. Although, I must warn you, since today is Christmas Eve, Mrs. Phippen and my housekeeper will probably appropriate you, and those broad shoulders, into gathering greenery and the Yule log for the Abbey's celebrations." He winked at Hugh. "Lots of mistletoe and kissing boughs, my friend. You'd better stay on your toes if you two bachelors are determined to stay unattached. Every marriage-minded mama

from London will be here with their latest daughter on the hunt for single male fodder.”

After Hugh gave out a theatrical groan at the warning, the viscount turned, and they followed him into the fortress-like Abbey.



GRACE BIT down hard on her lower lip. Drat the viscount’s maneuvering. Instead of being able to send Lucy and Duncan off on their own to find just the right Yule log, Lord Rumsford had ordered Grace to join Duncan because, he claimed, her efficiency combined with Duncan’s broad shoulders would make the time go faster. She stared down at the hem of her dress with a start when she felt something pushing at her ankles. One of the endless six-toed cats that Lord Rumsfeld sheltered at the Abbey was swirling back and forth against her legs. She watched the feline closely.

She would never admit this to anyone else, but there had been times when one of the Abbey’s many spoiled cats had turned out to be able to vanish through the old stone walls. She shuddered to think the one swishing at her skirts was one of the ghostly crew. They never showed up randomly, however. They usually had something to tell the unwary Abbey visitor. She reached down tentatively to rub behind the ears of the current creature interested in her low boots and was rewarded with a loud, rumbling purr. Grace let out the breath she’d been holding in. Ghosts did not purr. Did they?

Viscount Rumsford kept a great many six-toed cats at the Abbey as a result of Sir James’s friendship with the owner of the well known Bellingham shipping firm, Mrs. Honore Bellingham. She was a delightful French woman who had kept the cats for years, and one of her especially, um, aggressive toms had spread litters of kittens throughout her Mayfair neighborhood over the years. Also, in an odd coincidence, a man who’d owned the Abbey over a hundred years earlier was a very wealthy sea captain who’d erected an elaborate sculptured monument to his favorite ship’s cat in one of the estate gardens. According to the legend, his beloved cat’s ashes were enshrined within the monument.

“Grace...”

She whipped around only to find Duncan entirely too close to her lips.

“Please say ‘you’ again? I’m not sure I recall how your lips looked when you were showing me how that word formed.”

She shot him a glare that said she knew exactly what he was up to. However, she patiently repeated “you” several times before glancing around the entryway anxiously.

“Are you looking for the earl and Lucy?”

“Yes. Aren’t they coming along to collect greenery for tonight? And the Yule log. That will take a long time to find just the right one.”

“They’ve been given an equally important task.”

From the superior look in his eyes, she suspected he knew more than he was saying about whatever was afoot to destroy all her carefully laid plans.

“And what could that possibly be?”

“They’re scouting out the banks of the River Rom to see if the ice is safe enough for skating later in the week.”

Grace jammed her hands at her hips. “Then just who is in charge of bringing back greenery to decorate before tonight?”

Duncan retrieved his his coat and Mrs. Phippen’s heavy woolen cape from a nearby footman. “Looks like it’s just you and me. We’d better get a march on.”



LUCY GAVE HUGH A CONSPIRATORIAL GRIN. “Aunt Grace seems to have met her bossy match in the major.” They hid behind the heavy curtains at the floor-to-ceiling windows in the front sitting room, watching her aunt and Major MacKenzie head toward a horse-drawn sleigh being managed by one of the grooms and two footmen. A wagon with metal runners was attached to the back of the sleigh for dragging back the massive amounts of holly and mistletoe as well as the

huge Yule log that would need to be large enough to burn throughout the twelve days and nights of the festivities.

Hugh stood close behind her, and when his hands casually cupped her elbows, she didn't pull away. It felt good to see Hugh happy again, away from the worries of his former gambling hell and forgetting for a few moments the absence of Mina. The Duchess of Chelmsford, also known as Captain El, whose Goodrum's House of Pleasure had stood next to Hugh and Julian's gambling hell on Duke Street for many years, had purchased their establishment the minute Hugh had offered her the enterprise.

When he pulled Lucy gently around to face him after the sleigh had disappeared across the Viscount's fields, Lucy stiffened. He still held her by her upper arms, and his mocking lips were within kissing distance, but she forced herself not to assume feelings she knew Hugh didn't share. She stared up into the teasing light of his blue eyes and realized they were good friends, nothing more. Trying to make her thumping heart accept that reality, however, wasn't easy.

"You, my fine girl, have a job to do."

Lucy's eyes widened. "What have you gotten me into now?"

"You will accompany me on the most important task of all."

"And that would be...?"

"Our job is to find the most perfect spot along the River Rom for a moonlit night of skating."

Lucy's mouth dropped open. "You chose the easiest task of all and stuck Aunt Grace and Major MacKenzie with a full day of hard labor?"

"Yes, I certainly did." He rubbed his hands together whilst favoring her with a dastardly grin. "And I'm not sorry."

"Because?"

"Because my dear friend and necessary force in the reconstruction of Westmont, the major, has not tried to hie

himself off to a tavern to get into Zeus knows what trouble ever since he's been around your Aunt Grace."

Lucy's eyes opened wider. "You think the two of them...?" She trailed off, unwilling to hope.

"Oh, yes. And, as you well know, I've become somewhat of an expert at divining the signs of a man in love. Heaven knows I spent years watching Julian fall in love with Mina, all the while denying he was lost and acting like a perfect prat while he was at it."

For a brief moment Lucy considered asking him exactly what the signs were of a man in love, but dismissed the idea out of hand. She had no idea what they might entail, but she was fairly sure Hugh was not exhibiting any of them toward her own plain self.



HUGH WAS CONVINCED he was a cad of the worst order, and would have kicked himself if he could have reached his arse. Maybe he should hire a kicking footman to follow him around and give him a good, swift kick whenever he needed reminding not to hurt Lucy's feelings.

They'd known each other ever since Lucy and Mina were children together at the Abbey under the tutelage of Mrs. Phippen, the governess Rummy had hired to take wild young Mina in hand. When Lucy had been brought to the estate to give Mina a more reserved, well-behaved sort of companion, the opposite had occurred. Instead of civilizing Mina, Lucy had succumbed to Mina's exuberant ways. The two of them had once managed to fall out of the old tree outside Mina's window and Lucy had broken her arm. And then there were Lucy's ill-fated, smelly lab experiments. Gad.

The many times he and Julian had joined Mina's brothers for the school holidays at Montcliffe Abbey, they'd become accustomed to seeing the girls and teasing them for fun. Boys at that age were absolute beasts. He dreaded the eventual task of raising a son of his own. He supposed eventually, he'd find a decent woman he'd rub along with well enough to give his family entailment an heir. But first, he had to make his estate

reasonably habitable so that an as yet undesignated countess would deign to live there. From the looks of the old pile, he figured that day was still far in the future.

He stole a glance at Julia riding next to him in the one-horse sleigh they'd commandeered from the stables. Lucy was bundled up in her crimson carriage dress, plus piles of blankets as well as a fur throw she'd wrapped around her so that only the upper part of her pink cheeks and a bit of her pert, turned up nose were showing.

The groom expertly guided the sturdy pony along the path that wound along the river, stopping occasionally so that they could assess occasional clearings where the river might be accessed with enough open space for a roaring bonfire to warm the skaters.

If the current cold continued, Hugh wondered just how many of Rummy's dignified holiday house party guests would be brave enough to not only venture forth, but lash on skates and glide along the river. He loved to skate and had haunted the river banks in the winter as a boy. He had no idea if Lucy had ever skated, let alone whether or not she wanted to try.

It was hard to be heard above the rushing wind and the jingle of the horse's harness, so he tapped Lucy's arm beneath the blankets to get her attention. When she looked toward him, his heart nearly broke at the look of joy on her face. He put both of his hands above the blankets and rubbed them together to signal a question. Did she want him to warm her hands through her gloves?

Her glowing smile was the only encouragement he needed. Once he had both of her hands covered with his, he forgot all about the riverbank, or why he was there. The groom finally pulled up to a likely looking clearing. While a second groom managed the horse, the first servant tramped around the open space and then sent a questioning gaze toward Hugh. When he nodded, the man pulled out several long ribbons from inside his jacket and proceeded to tie them around the branches of several nearby trees. He then tested the ice near the shore with an exploratory poke of his boot, followed by a long slide out a ways toward the center of the river where he stamped around a

bit, testing the strength and thickness of the ice covering. Seeming satisfied with what he'd found, he took a long, running slide back toward the bank.

The two grooms clambered onto the sleigh and turned in a wide arc back toward the Abbey. Hugh never broke his contact with Lucy's hands.

"Shouldn't we have gotten out of the sleigh and inspected the clearing?" Lucy frowned a bit.

"Did you really want to leave your nest beneath the blankets and abandon my warm hands?"

"Of course not." The blazing glow of her smile returned.

Hugh delved deeper beneath the blankets and put one of his arms around Lucy, while keeping his other hand clasped around hers all the way back to the Abbey.

He finally accepted what he'd known for some time. He was doomed to care for women whose hearts belonged to other men.

CHRISTMAS EVE

MONTCLIFFE ABBEY

Essex, England

E Duncan spied the perfect Yule log in the guise of an old-growth beech tree that had been felled no doubt in one of the early-season, wind driven blizzards that year. He'd actually seen two or three others over the course of the several hours they'd been scouring the countryside. But by tacit agreement with the groom and footmen, they'd said nothing and kept looking. All the better for Duncan to spend a few more hours keeping Grace warm.

He tapped the driver's back, and when he pulled up the team of horses, Duncan pointed out the location of the huge tree resting among three others that had resisted the fierce storms. Next to him, he could almost feel the relief escape with Grace's sigh.

"Thank the heavens we finally found a log thick enough to burn through the twelve days of Christmas." Grace pulled her woolen bonnet tighter over her silver-streaked black curls and snuggled farther down into the pile of blankets they'd been sheltering under all afternoon.

Duncan's fingers itched with the need to hold her to keep her warm, but he was terrified to move close enough to touch the woman for fear of giving offense. He knew she was determined to pair him off with her niece, but he wished she could see what was plainly in front of her. The two of them fit together like two rabbits burrowed into the tastiest end of a garden.

Instead, he carefully re-arranged the blankets around Grace while he stepped out of the sleigh to help the other men with the two-sided saws they'd brought to cut a heroic-sized section of the tree trunk for their Yule tradition. At the last minute he inquired, "Will you be warm enough whilst we wrest this old king of the woodland back to the sleigh?"

Grace stared at him for a long moment before finally extending one of her woolen mitten-covered hands to place it over his. "Bless you, Major MacKenzie, for doing this great service for Viscount Rumsford and his guests."

Duncan so wanted to protest that he was indeed pleased to help, but he was helping out mostly to earn her affections. He wisely refrained from blurting out the truth bubbling up in his heart but in the end simply gave her hand a lingering squeeze.

When he joined the others, he was pleased to see one of the footmen had also located a large supply of mistletoe climbing throughout the surrounding trees. "Good man," he said. "Can't have too much of this around to celebrate the season." He gave the younger man a slow wink.



GRACE WAS STRUCK by something she'd rarely faced during her long career as governess, teacher, and headmistress. She was failing. And she was failing in the worst way. She'd thought Lucy would abandon her mad scheme to marry their landlord when she got to know Major MacKenzie better. Well, they all knew the major better now, but Grace had ended up being the one to know him best.

She knew, for instance, that his favorite dessert was strawberry trifle in the spring, and he missed his regiment when he was away on half pay, and she knew even better the way he'd squint a wee bit when he was trying to hear what was being said, but didn't quite understand the entire conversation.

Worst of all? She knew how the warmth of his body felt beneath all the blankets on the sleigh whilst she'd shamelessly pushed herself close to his heat earlier. She also suspected he reciprocated her shameful feelings. Whenever his hand had

brushed against her, he'd lingered a bit too long, even after he'd apologized for accidentally touching her.

She'd touched his forearm at one point, under the pretense of being rocked against him by the movement of the sleigh along the snow-covered, uneven river bank. Now she knew the feel of the taut muscles beneath his shirt. And this was only the first day of the viscount's holiday house party. How much better might she know the man after twelve more days? And twelve more nights?

Also, she'd spent too much time in the countryside as a governess to not have noticed all the suitable felled trees the major had encouraged the viscount's servants to pass by. He'd wanted to spend more time with her. And she wasn't sorry she'd had this day with him. She suspected she'd savor the memory long after the day was over. But she'd failed Lucy miserably and vowed to rectify the situation by staying as far away from the tempting Major MacKenzie as she possibly could for the rest of the holiday house party.



LUCY SWEEPED a hand across her forehead. She'd been working so hard with the viscount's servants to make sure every bit of Montcliffe Abbey's halls were covered with Christmas greenery that she was actually sweating despite how cold she'd been only that afternoon while searching for the perfect ice skating spot along the river.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see her aunt at the huge formal dining room table, constructing kissing ball after kissing ball with mistletoe and holly twined around a center of apples held together with small bits of wooden sticks. Once finished, she festooned each ball with yards of red and green ribbon so that no one would be able to miss their strategic placement throughout the Abbey.

Working alongside her was Sir James' mother, the Dowager Duchess of Fitzroy, Maddie James, who served as the benevolent hostess for the holiday house party.

The dowager duchess moved through the heart of Mayfair tonnish society and had the power to make or break denizens

of the ton with a wave of her hand. No one dared comment on her third son Sir James and Lord Rumsford's, um, arrangement or risk his or her own reputation. She'd ruled the rich and powerful levels of society for decades along with her good friend since childhood, Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby. Maddie protected her son, and Camilla did the same for her beloved nephew, physician to the poor, Lionel Carrington-Bowles. Because of her advancing age and the extreme cold weather, Camilla would not be joining them this year. And of course, she doted on her nephew's small wards at their London St. James Square home over the holidays.

Viscount Rumsford personally made certain each Christmastide that the kissing balls were placed strategically throughout the hallways so that all of his female guests would end the holiday having been thoroughly bussed.

Sir James assisted him, making sure he always saved at least one for a private spot in the viscount's study. The men made a thorough project of selecting locations, taking two footmen with them - one to climb the ladder, and another to make sure the other man didn't fall.

Although Sir James had a grand estate and stables at Clifford Park in Middlesex, he always spent some time each year at the Abbey with Lord Rumsford. The friends gave two enormous house parties each year at the Abbey, a masque in the autumn around Samhain, and a Twelfth Night masque at the end of an extended Christmastide house party.

Lucy held the last bit of greenery in place in the library whilst one of the footmen pounded a tiny nail into the wood trim a few feet down from the ceiling. When she carefully backed down the steps of the ladder, a familiar pair of hands lifted her down the last few steps. She started and twisted her head around to chastise Hugh for frightening her when he held his fingers against his lips. "Shush. I have something to show you."

When she followed him across the room, he whirled suddenly and captured her lips in a firm kiss. "What are you doing?" she demanded. He said nothing but simply gave her his usual mocking grin and pointed upward to the last kissing

ball she'd had the footmen hang from the lintel above the door to the library.

Lucy could not stop the feelings of fury reeling through her. How dare he make her think he'd stolen a kiss when she'd actually walked into his trickster's trap? She was just another Christmas reveler on which he'd bestowed a kiss. Why was she angry? She could tell from Hugh's fading grin that he was wondering as well. Instead of explaining, she held her head high and walked past him without another word.



THANK the gods Hugh knew where Rummy kept his brandy. He marched there immediately, not even stopping to check on whether Duncan was behaving himself or picking a fight with one of the guests over a misunderstood conversation. He did spy him just before he tapped on the door of Rummy's study. He was guiding a veritable army of servants in dragging and placing the huge Yule log into its place of prominence for the duration of the party - the fireplace in the large formal front drawing room. The hearth there was so enormous, a tall man (like Duncan) could stand up inside without his head hitting the top of the fireplace enclosure.

Hugh sucked in a grateful breath. Placing the Yule log and getting the fire going would be enough physical exertion to keep his friend busy and occupied for the rest of the night. Since Duncan had seemed to give Grace Phippen a wide berth ever since they're returned from their afternoon labors in the estate's woodland park, Hugh could only assume the poor rotter had run afoul of one of the Phippen women as well.

Hugh was surprised when the door to Rummy's study opened quickly, and he was unceremoniously dragged inside.

“What are you up to now, you sly badger?”

He looked up into the smiling face of Sir James and said, “Brandy,” without prologue.

“I should think so. What took you so long?” The other man paused for a moment and gave Hugh a long, assessing look. “You've been poncing about pretending to be nothing but

friends with Lucy, and now you've bollocks'ed up your chances. Am I right? Or am I missing something?"

Rummy drew up behind Sir James with a crystal tumbler gleaming with the amber contents he needed immediately, without preamble. When he extended a hand to take the drink, Rummy smiled and pulled the brandy away. "Tell us what's going on. Just who is courting whom in this latest yuletide farce to cross our doorstep?"

Hugh lunged and neatly snatched the drink before taking a deep draught and sitting down in the overstuffed chair nearest Rummy's warm study fire. His host took a long metal rod and poked the coals around so that the flames leapt back to life.

He settled into the comfortable chair and stuck his booted feet straight out in front of him, toward the fire. He raised a sort of toast toward them and tried to give them a no-nonsense, shortened version of the Christmas drama of star-crossed lovers that seemed to be playing out before his jaded eyes. "Lucy, ever the madcap like her idol Mina, decided to try to save their girls' academy in Kensington by agreeing to marry their threatening landlord.

"Grace, being Grace..." He paused then with a nod toward Rummy who nodded in agreement in return. "She's too proud to let me help them out."

"And then," he continued, "the two of them came upon the aftermath of an explosion in which MacKenzie and I nearly ended up playing harps, or perhaps being jabbed by devils' forks all because of a too-short fuse. Since it was by then late afternoon, and they insisted on fussing over us and taking us back to Westmont...in *your* carriage, I made sure they spent the night for safety's sake. The roads from my abode to yours are untenable in the daytime, let alone after dark."

"To avoid making an endless story interminable, Grace latched upon a notion to throw Lucy and the major together to save her from the evil landlord. But in the process, she apparently made herself indispensable, desirable, etc., etc., to said Major MacKenzie." He paused for another deep draught of brandy.

“From the looks of what transpired in the library, I don’t think that’s the end of your little farce.” Rummy gestured toward Hugh with his glass.

“If you must know, your friend the knight errant...” He stabbed a finger toward his own chest. “Ever charging to the rescue of distressed maidens, I seem to have tried to cheer up Lucy and in the process have exposed my poor, misguided heart once again.”

All three men were silent for long minutes while they all contemplated whatever they were seeing in the flames.

Rummy finally broke the silence. “You know, Westfalia, love is messy and tends to be a many-faceted puzzle.”

Sir Thomas added his thoughts. “You have to tell her how you feel.”

“But she’s chosen another man, like all of the women with whom I seem to fall in love.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Rummy intoned. “Don’t make the mistake of listening to your pride instead of your heart.”

CHRISTMAS DAY

MONTCLIFFE ABBEY

E ssex, England

Duncan scuffed his boots along the snow blanketing the Montcliffe woodland path and sneaked a sideways look at Grace. They'd spent long hours that morning at the Abbey's chapel sitting through a special Christmastide service, and now they'd escaped to get some fresh air and exercise.

Hugh and Lucy had run ahead of them and from the sound of the shrieks, he'd wager they'd stopped to throw clumps of snow at each other. A lot of the painful shouts were coming from Hugh, so he surmised Lucy was giving as good as she got.

Grace, walking slowly alongside him, suddenly stopped to face him and reached up to move his chin around so that he could see her lips. She mouthed something new he hadn't practiced yet.

'Bring me a garland of holly,

Rosemary, ivy, and bays;

Gravity's nothing but folly.

Till after the Christmas Day.'

He'd been practicing watching Grace's lips a lot over the last few days, even when she wasn't demonstrating lip-reading to him, and he was fairly certain he could get the sense of the popular holiday poem. However, Grace's lips were a particularly fetching dark pink from the cold, and he pretended ignorance so that she moved closer and carefully mouthed the

poem again. When she pronounced “rosemary” with exaggerated pouty lips, he struck like a selfish snake and claimed a kiss.

Grace’s eyes opened wide with surprise, and she pushed him back so hard, he slipped in the slush and fell to the ground. She stood over him with a serious expression as if she were going to chastise him, and then she tried to hide a giggle bubbling up. He began to laugh as well and when he pushed himself back up, she grasped his arm to steady him. That was all the encouragement he needed. He pulled her close for a proper kiss that went on and on until she pushed him away again.

“We have to stop. This is not what I...” She trailed off with a look of guilt and acute embarrassment.

He gave her a stern look. “Tell me what it is we have to stop.”

“Well...this.” She spread her hands wide. “You need a younger woman to make your advanced years more comfortable, not an older woman like me.”

He laughed again and pointed to himself. “Do I look like I’m in the midst of my advanced years and require a young woman to bring my slippers and lap robe? Fix me my tea and push me around in an invalid’s chair?” His voice grew louder with each question.

“No, of course not,” Grace replied in quiet tones. “I am so sorry to have suggested such a thing. I just thought...”

“You thought you’d save your niece from her impulsive, wrong-headed, but well-intentioned promise to marry your landlord by offering her up to an old soldier like me.”

Grace hung her head and didn’t answer.

Duncan tipped up her chin, gazed down into her eyes, and promised, “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure Lucy doesn’t fall into a dangerous situation. And Hugh has been her friend for years. I’m sure he wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her. You can count on us. But you have to remember your

niece is her own person. Perhaps she has feelings for this man and is happy to be his wife.”

“You’re right,” she admitted. “Lucy certainly has known her own mind for quite a while now. I should trust her judgment.”

With that, they quickened their steps to catch up to Hugh and Lucy ahead of them on the walking path.



GRACE SUCKED in a sharp breath and tried to tamp down the feelings Major MacKenzie had awakened in her. She’d been a widow on her own with huge responsibilities for so long, she hadn’t allowed herself to open her heart to romantic impulses.

And he’d brought her up short with the reminder that she had no idea of Lucy’s true feelings about Silas Miller. She was certain, however, that her niece’s decision had come entirely too quickly to have been thought through carefully. She’d have to have a serious talk with the young woman after they returned to London at the end of the holiday.

At a sudden shout, she looked up only to be hit with a ball of snow thrown by Lucy. “Come look, Aunt Grace. We’ve built a soldier to watch over the Abbey.”

Hugh was tamping down two huge balls of snow, one on top of the other. There was an old groom’s hat on the ground, as well as a carrot and a tattered scarf. Lucy was bent over, busily gathering and rolling snow for a ball to serve as the head.

“Lucy, have you lost your senses?” Grace threw her a stern look. “There are lots of ladies and gentlemen of the ton who will be spending the holidays here. Do you want them to think you’re some sort of hoyden or rattle pate?”

“I don’t care,” she shouted into the cold winter air and then immediately clapped her hand over her mouth. “I didn’t mean that, Aunt Grace. You know I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Grace walked slowly toward her niece and pulled her into her arms. Lucy laid her head on Grace’s shoulder and began to

sob.



LUCY BROKE down into her aunt's arms, just as she'd done as a child. She suddenly realized she'd been lying to herself. She'd been indeed acting like a high-spirited, thoughtless young woman. She knew at heart her behavior reflected on their academy, and gossip about what happened at the Abbey during the house party would travel to the London gossip sheets like wildfire.

A lowly schoolteacher cavorting with a peer of the realm like Hugh was just the sort of fodder the gorgons of the ton loved to spread. By the time the gossip reached London, everything about what she'd said and done would be magnified a hundred times. She and her aunt could not afford a misstep like that. And then there was their landlord. She'd promised him she'd marry him on an addle-pated whim. It had seemed the only way out of their predicament at the time. But now she wasn't so sure. She knew nothing about the man other than his penchant for boundless greed.



HUGH WAS out of his element. He despised the feeling of helplessness, and he especially hated the sound of a woman crying when he was totally in the dark as to the source of her torment. He always wanted to fix things. He was used to fixing things. He wanted to help Grace and Lucy with their academy, but Grace wouldn't let him. He knew Julian and Mina had invested in the school before they'd left for the continent, but he couldn't see why he couldn't help as well.

What the hell good was money if you couldn't leverage it to help your friends? He and Julian had made enough money off the unwary gamblers of Mayfair to take care of all of them until damned near the end of time.

He tentatively gave a gentle pat to Lucy's shoulder which only caused her sobs to intensify. He flicked a frightened look at Grace, but she waved his concern away. She and Lucy turned their backs on Hugh and Duncan and walked slowly

back toward the Abbey. Lucy's bright crimson carriage dress stuck in his line of vision so long as he watched her trudge away that he could still see the bright color when he closed his eyes, even though the two women had already disappeared through the side garden gate.

At a weird rustling at his feet he looked down to see three of the blasted three-toed cats undulating in circles around his boots. He shooed them away so he wouldn't accidentally step on one of them.

Duncan joined him to stare after Grace and Lucy and after a long few moments finally spoke. "Some things are better left unsaid. Let's give them some time by themselves to work out how they're going to move forward. You and I should visit the long hall to sample some of the syllabub and biscuits Cook was going to put out this afternoon."

"So you're not going to have tea first, but proceed directly to the alcohol?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, and you'd be well advised to keep me company. We can guard each other from avaricious mamas showing off their daughters on the marriage block. It's damnably cold out here." Duncan lengthened his steps into a brisk trot down the path toward the warmth of the Abbey, and Hugh followed suit.

BOXING DAY

26 DECEMBER, 1834

Montcliffe Abbey

Duncan thanked the war gods for all the Christmastide celebrations he'd been forced to miss. He'd nearly forgotten the bustle and mayhem of Boxing Day in English homes he'd been in a guest in over the years. However, in his own home, his family had celebrated only Hogmanay, consisting of a few days before New Year's Day, and after.

A glass of whisky, a bit of Yule bread and an early morning viewing of the sunrise were about the only things he and his physician father had celebrated over the years, whenever the two of them could snatch a bit of time together after he'd entered the King's army. Most holiday seasons had been spent in one station after another, all over the world, mostly countries along the Mediterranean. He tended to follow along with whatever his comrades considered a proper celebration, but he'd never given up his wee dram of spirits to welcome the new year's sunrise.

The confusion and noise this Boxing Day in the Viscount Rumsford's household was well above what he'd ever experienced before. He'd arisen early to take a mind-clearing walk before the rest of the household was up and about. However, the sounds emanating from the lower kitchen level did not bode well for whomever was the object of all the shouting of oaths. Damn the besotted English. He'd better investigate before Rumsford's household of guests were without sustenance for the day.

He walked to the very end of the Abbey's long, echoing hallway and finally spotted the stone steps circling down to the kitchens below. All of the Rumsford ancestors lined up along the wall seemed to be mocking the tall Celt walking past them.

"That's right, we're all beneath your contempt, but we do a damned fine job of fighting your wars." He was glad the hall was empty at that hour so no one heard his muttered oath, but then he started and nearly fell over when he was joined by three of the damned six-toed cats. Christ. Did the creatures have no sense of self-preservation? Despite his long strides, the feline devils kept perfect measure with him, even trying to thread their way between his boots. "Away ye beasties," he ordered. A shiver ran down his spine when they obediently disappeared. Where the hell had they gone?

As he approached the bottom of the steps, the shouts grew louder and the sounds of battering pans entered the mix. When he finally cleared the bottom of the winding servants' passage, the scene in the kitchen was utter chaos. A young man sat cross-legged in a corner near the pantry holding his hands above his head, trying to defend himself against Cook, who brandished one of the heavy sauce pots behind her and was about to clout the lad with all her strength.

Behind Cook, at least a half-dozen maids and footmen brandished a variety of "weapons," ranging from carving knives to a huge walnut crusher.

Duncan's military instincts kicked in. "Halt—." He bellowed out the word. "Who's in charge here?"

Cook charged toward him, the sauce pan gripped tightly by her side, as if she hadn't decided yet if he were friend or foe. "I am," she bellowed right back. "Who are you?"

"Major Duncan MacKenzie, at your service. What has this young scamp done to incur your wrath?" Duncan settled back against a nearby wall and folded his well-muscled arms across his chest. He let his gaze travel lazily over all of the would-be combatants. Suddenly, the former cacophony subsided to a silence not unlike that of the crypt.

“He came to the merchant’s entrance as if he’s Father Christmas himself and demands to see his mum, and would we please see to a meal for him while he waits?”

Apparently not sufficiently cowed as yet, the young man in question shouted out his version of the events, pointing rudely at Cook. “She thinks she’s the viscountess or sommat.”

Duncan strode easily to the side of the mysterious young man and grasped him firmly by one of his ears.

“Owwww—.” He screeched in pain.

Duncan leaned down and quietly explained. “I’ll have you before the Romford magistrate before you can say Jack Robin if you don’t quit your caterwauling and explain politely what you’re doing - uninvited - in this lady’s kitchen.”

“Mrs. Phippen’s my mother. I just wanted to see her for the holidays.”

“Then why, young man, did you not knock on the door and ask to see her like a proper gentleman would?”

“Because I can’t knock on the front door like you lot. My mother’s always been nothing but a servant here.”

“I do not believe your mother has ever been treated as such at Montcliffe Abbey. She and your cousin Lucy are like members of the family.”

“You don’t know nothing about my mother.”

Duncan did not know where to start, and he was afraid to unleash his own temper on the greenhead, so he dragged the young ruffian by his ear back to the servants’ dining room at the rear of the lower level kitchens. He settled him onto a chair with a thud and a warning. “If you leave that chair and cause any more trouble for the Rumsford servants, I will personally see you receive a sound flogging, with your mother’s permission. Duncan walked back into the kitchen area and begged Cook for a plate with a crust of bread and a slice of ham. At the last moment, she also slid a hefty slice of Christmas pudding onto he plate.

“Bless you,” Duncan said, and took the food back to the boy.

Once he’d settled the plate in front of the young man, he began tearing off pieces of ham and shoving them into his mouth. Once the ham disappeared, the bread and pudding followed shortly thereafter. The boy obviously hadn’t eaten in awhile. Duncan wondered if Grace knew what a state her son was in.

He didn’t have long to ponder the mystery, because Grace soon poked her head into the doorway to the servants’ dining hall and demanded, “John Henry Phippen, what have you done now?”

Duncan noted the boy immediately stiffened, his face flushed red, and he hung his head. He remained quiet for a long time before speaking. “The wheelwright, Mr. Hallewell... he told me to leave.”

Tears filled Grace’s eyes. “That was your last chance, Johnny.”

Duncan had been unable to work out what the boy had replied, because his head hung down too low to read his lips, but he got the gist of what was said by Grace’s reaction.

Duncan leaned close to young Phippen. “Are you still hungry?”

The boy shook his head slowly, shame written on every feature.

The bluster and fighting in the kitchen had been all bravado. He was a broken young man. Fortunately, broken young men had been Duncan’s speciality in the army. He knew exactly what to do. “If you’ve finished, then we’ll find something for you to do to earn your meal.”



GRACE’S VOICE stuck like a lump of lead in her throat. In everything else, she was a capable, hard-working woman. She always knew what to do for every eventuality in the schoolroom. Her son, however was a complete enigma to her.

She had no idea how to go on with him, how to make sure he grew into a capable man who could take care of himself. She'd even foolishly hoped he might one day help take care of her and Lucy as well.

The fleeting joy she'd felt the previous day in the arms of Duncan fluttered like a bird with an injured wing. Apparently, she was one of those women who did not deserve joy. She'd been the worst kind of fool. What must the man think of her now with her troubled boy before him?

At a light tap at her shoulder, she turned to see Sir James. He said nothing, but gave her a warm smile before advancing across the servants' hall to join Duncan and her son. Sir James, who'd encountered young John numerous times over the holidays in years past when Grace had been Mina's governess, had a little experience with the boy's black moods.

"Lord Rumsford is meeting with his shepherds this morning, but he asked me to welcome you and said you'd be doing him a great favor if you could help clear snow along the path to Calypso's memorial grotto so that the ladies can visit later this week without soaking the hems of their coats and dresses."

"Follow me," Duncan said, "I know where the gardeners hide the shovels for the winter."



LUCY ATTACHED another loop of light blue tulle from the chandelier in the enormous, third-floor Abbey ballroom. She'd volunteered to help decorate for Lord Rumsford's annual Boxing Day dance and party for the servants. He'd passed out presents to everyone who worked on the estate early that morning, but the afternoon dancing complete with musicians was the crowning event of the day. Everyone who worked on the Abbey estate would be there while Lord Rumsford's holiday house party guests would attend a grand tea served in a private room at the Romford Inn.

Once the revelers from below stairs filled the ballroom, one could almost squint one's eyes and imagine the servants had turned the tables on the fine lords and ladies who usually

dominated the Abbey. All of the women would be in their finest wear, which many planned and worked to complete throughout the year. The afternoon party would last until the hall clock struck nine, after which an extravagant dinner will be provided in the dining hall. By eleven, like Cinderella and her mice, they would all return to the roles of servants for another year.

Lucy felt the same way at this last Christmastide house party at the Abbey before she'd have to fulfill her commitment. She was duty-bound to marry the man who held the fate of their girls' academy in his hands. She knew becoming Mrs. Silas Miller was the only way, but beneath the surface her heart seethed with the injustice of forever being on the brink of genteel poverty, the injustice of never being able to marry the man she loved.

To help dispel her negative thoughts, she made some extra kissing balls and hung them at various vantage points throughout the ballroom. She felt better just knowing that the army of servants who took care of the inhabitants of Montcliffé Abbey the rest of the year would enjoy the added opportunity for stolen kisses.

DECEMBER 27, 1843

MONTCLIFFE ABBEY

E ssex, England

Hugh gritted his teeth and tried to pretend interest in the inane conversation with Lady Tillotson and her daughter, Alexandra, who had a terrifying overbite. However much he pretended aloof disinterest, he could not for the life of him keep his gaze from straying back to the poor girl's unfortunate disfigurement.

Rumor had it Baron Tillotson was someone important at the Exchequer, but Hugh couldn't manage to conduct a simple, polite conversation with the man whilst keeping his gaze from sliding back to the poor girl's protuberant front teeth.

The word was at White's that the baron was settling a substantial dowry on his daughter to make up for her, um, shortcoming. He hoped the baron and baroness hadn't honed in on him because they assumed he needed the money. He tried to keep his business affairs as discreet as possible over the years, but that didn't stop the gossip sheets from their endless speculation. The rumors they'd published over the years had ranged from him falling victim to his own high stakes card games to stories proclaiming him rich as Croesus.

The house party guests had just finished an elaborate supper featuring a Twelve Days of Christmas favorite - French hens, capons that is, actually roasted and enclosed in luscious, buttery pie crusts with gravy over all and surrounded by at least fifteen other dishes on the sideboard.

They'd moved to the formal sitting room for tea or ratafia for the ladies, brandy for the men, and conversation for most of the company before breaking up for a variety of games planned for the evening. And then there was the ever popular gentlemen's refuge in the card room.

He was saved finally by a soft tap on his shoulder. Thank the gods for Lucy. "Pardon me, Lord Westfalia. I hate to interrupt, but we need your assistance in the card room. There's been a rules dispute which I'm sure you're more than qualified to settle."

She apologized profusely to the Tillotsons before whisking him away.

He waited until they'd progressed far from the Abbey's formal sitting room and down a dark hallway before asking where she was taking him. It was painfully clear they were *not* headed toward the card room.

"I need help, and you were not only bored to tears but in danger of doing damage to your neck to keep from staring at poor Alexandra," Lucy explained simply.

"But where are we going?"

"We're going to set up the games in the family sitting room."

"What games?" He was immediately suspicious of what she was up to.

"Charades, Hoodman's blind, and perhaps a bit of Snapdragon. We'll put out all the candles in the room and set the brandy on fire..."

"Wait. Who decided you should be in charge of anything remotely connected to fire?"

"Calm yourself. What I have in mind is perfectly safe... and besides, that's why I need you."

"For what exactly?"

"You'll be the one to keep a large container of water handy to put out any, erm, unfortunate fires."

“What do you have in mind that would require an assistant to put out a fire? Snapdragon is clearly already a highly dangerous game...plucking blazing raisins and almonds out of a flaming bowl of brandy. What could you possibly add to an evil concoction like that designed to maim anyone mutton-headed enough to try to play?”

“You have absolutely no imagination, Hugh. You could sprinkle in some—.”

He cut her off. “*You* won’t be sprinkling anything into a flaming bowl of brandy.”

“But just think of how wonderful all the sparkling colors would be...”

“No, Lucy. And that is final.”

“Very well.”

“That was too easy. What are you really plotting, Lucy Phippen?”

She lowered her voice, but her tone was still excited. “I have an idea to add a twist to Hoodman’s blind to make the game more interesting.”

Her sudden shift of intention made him immediately suspicious. “Hoodman’s blind is one of the simplest games in English history. What could you possibly do to make that more interesting?”

“Here’s my idea. Once we blindfold one of the guests, I’ll have everyone leave the room, except for me of course.”

“That’s the most wooden-headed idea you’ve come up with yet. The purpose of the game is for the Hoodman to be blindfolded whilst hitting the other players with a small bat.”

“But don’t you see? They’ll be slicing through the air without finding anyone. They’ll be unnerved.”

“And probably breaking Abbey crockery. What will you be doing all that time?”

“I’ll be making strange noises to confuse them.”

Hugh gave an exasperated sigh. “Of course you will.”



December 28, 1843
Montcliffe Abbey
Essex, England

Duncan flew down the ice with Grace's son Johnny keeping close by, the blades of their skates making hissing noises while slashing into the ice in time with their rhythmic strides. In the distance a giant bonfire blazed high in the sky, beckoning them back after they'd raced a good mile down the River Rom.

Only the diamond-like stars winking daggers through the deep midnight sky witnessed the two of them streaking across the ice, both alone in their thoughts. Days of tense exchanges between Grace and Johnny had left Duncan drained emotionally. But in the previous hour flying free along the river ice, he'd felt as though he'd regained his sense of peaceful contentment. He'd been surprised when he'd jokingly challenged Johnny to a race and the boy had immediately taken him up on the offer. Without a word, they'd seemed to begin to bond in the midst of their silent streaking through the night.

Gradually, the other skaters came into view in the area of the ice near the warming bonfire. Grace was circling slowly, gaining more confidence bit by bit. Lucy, however, was having a more difficult time. Hugh, along with two of the Abbey's footmen were struggling to keep her upright. Hugh skated backwards, encouraging her to follow his lead, whilst the two footmen stayed close to either side of her.

Duncan felt the tiniest bit of guilt at having left everyone to race free down the river, but on second thought, he realized Hugh was probably enjoying pulling Lucy up into his arms each time she fell. Johnny pulled up beside him and gave a short salute in acknowledgement of his win before joining the others huddled around the bonfire warming up before attempting another round of skating.

When he joined Grace, he grasped her mittened hands and pulled her across the ice in a circling sort of dance on skates. When they reached the darkened far side of the river, away from the bonfire, he pulled her close and claimed a kiss. He covered her lips with his and refused to back away, deepening the kiss and exploring her tongue and mouth. She pulled away suddenly. "Duncan—. Someone will see us."

He leaned back just enough to cradle the back of her head and gaze into her eyes before claiming her mouth in another long kiss. Much later, he replied: "They're not paying any attention to us, and even if they were trying to spy on us, they couldn't see anything in the dark this far away from the fire."

"What are we doing here?" Grace asked, a complaining tone creeping into her voice.

"We're kissing and giving each other pleasure, Mrs. Phippen. You're a widow, and I'm an old soldier. No one will be scandalized, let alone suspicious of what we're doing out here on the river in the dark. Hasn't anyone ever told you the true purpose of house parties is for romance and intrigue?"

"That's what *you* think. You're not a single woman trying to run a respectable academy for young women."



LUCY BATTED away Hugh's beckoning hands. "Why don't you abandon me to my misery and go off to skate on your own? There's no hope for me."

Hugh could see the truth of what she said reflected in the faces of the two footmen staying by her side to pick her up after her frequent falls.

"Really, Hugh, I've had enough tumbles onto the cold ice. Let me go back to the bonfire so that you can enjoy yourself." The expressive look of pleading in her eyes finally convinced him.

"We'll both sit by the fire. I believe the footmen brought along a large jug of spiced hot wine. That should warm your fingers and toes before we head back on the sleighs."



LATER THAT NIGHT at an informal supper prepared for the skaters, Hugh snuggled close to Lucy and told himself he was only there to keep her warm. When four footmen carried in the heavy silver tray with an enormous pie balanced in the middle, both he and Lucy held their breath in anticipation. Even if the family and many of the guests had seen the nearly century-old traditional display before, the release of four live "Colly" birds out of a hollow pie crust elicited many cries of awe and delight.

Hugh watched her clap with glee and fairly vibrate with excitement at the annual Abbey tradition, passed down from earlier times. The contents of the pie shell were actually blackbirds trapped earlier that day on the estate, and no one would have tried to bake them in the pastry shell. Truth to tell, the meat would probably be as tough as the clever scavengers themselves.

As a young man home for the school holidays, he'd been endlessly curious about the bizarre spectacle and so years ago had sat in the kitchen one full day watching Cook and her assistants create the illusion. The huge crust was baked early in the day with an extra-thick layer of dough, *and* there was a large hole cut in the bottom after the pastry had cooled thoroughly.

The birds had been caught the day before by the estate gameskeeper and had been fed a mixture of grain mixed with a bit of rum to mellow their usual swift antics. At the last minute before serving, the blackbirds were settled onto the large carrying tray with a team of footmen and pot boys lowering the crust over the lot of them.

Cook stood by with spare slabs of pastry...just in case there were a last minute attempt by one or more of the birds to escape to freedom before they could be carried up the servants' back staircase. The few minutes of the dramatic release for the benefit of all of the Abbey guests had taken a full day to accomplish.

Just knowing what went on in the kitchens below made Hugh somehow feel part of the spectacle that thrilled Lucy. His heart lurched as if trying to escape his chest just before he calmed in acceptance of what he was feeling and laid his hand over hers beneath the table, hoping to God no one would notice in the excitement of birds soaring frantically over their heads. The gameskeeper and a few of his beaters for the hunt came in and recaptured the lot of the screeching birds for release outside the Abbey.



December 29, 1843
Montcliffe Abbey
Essex, England

Grace followed Lucy toward the Abbey grounds' eerie grotto memorial to a long-dead ship's cat belonging to a similarly long-dead Royal Navy admiral. The tall column commemorating "Calypso," was so massive, it could be seen from the side portico. Once at the site of the grotto, if one craned one's head all the way back, one could see a cat curled atop an elaborate Greek-styled urn. Legend had it the famous feline's ashes rested inside the urn.

The former owner of the Abbey had been an admiral in the Royal Navy at least a century before and had battled Spanish ships laden with riches on the far side of the world. His incredible wealth from prizes he'd taken was the basis for all of the improvements to the Abbey which had converted the old pile into a luxurious family home. Grace had always smiled to herself about a curious secret she'd discovered on one of her many long, rambling walks about the estate.

Although a famous oil painting of the man now hung in a portrait gallery in London, the long-ago admiral's grave had only a small stone marker in the family cemetery whilst his beloved feline companion was memorialized in a huge grotto and sculpture. Since the day she'd found the small stone tablet, she'd cut away the grass obliterating the memorial whenever she was in residence at the Abbey. She couldn't say exactly why, but she felt a bit of kinship with the lonely man of the sea now locked in the ground, many miles away from the raging seas from whence had come his fortune.

Lucy turned suddenly and in a low voice asked, "Do you see what a neat job Johnny's made of a path through the snow so that we could take the ladies for an outing today?"

Grace looked around with a start. The path was neatly trod down with a wide area for Abbey guests to walk toward the grotto. Since the site was a good fifteen-minute walk from the Abbey portico, her son must have been working hard over the last few days, due in no small part to Duncan's urging and tutelage.

She'd never seen her argumentative son take so quickly to an older man. His usual reaction to men in positions of power, or merely men who were senior to him, was mulishness. She feared that was the main reason Mr. Hallewell had dismissed him so suddenly without give a reason, or references so that her son could find another apprenticeship. Although she did find it interesting that, according to Johnny, the wheelwright had immediately replaced him with a Hallewell nephew.

It had warmed her heart to see her son immediately recognize the extent of Duncan's hearing loss and adapt to making sure he spoke directly to him, so that he could read his lips. She hadn't had to explain the situation. Johnny had seemed to understand instinctively from the beginning. Watching the two of them together was almost comical in that they rarely spoke, seeming to need only gestures and looks to communicate.



LUCY STRODE toward the statue at the entrance to the grotto and turned to face the small group of women who'd elected to learn about the grotto and monument while their husbands and sons were being feted at a shooting party led by the Abbey gameskeeper. Their efforts hopefully would lead to the "Five Golden Rings" part of the Twelve Days of Christmas festivities. The beautiful ring-necked pheasants would be stewed in veal gravy with artichokes by the Cook and her army of extra kitchen workers brought in for the house party.

"I'm sure you're all already to turn around and walk briskly back to the Abbey." She swung around and pointed with her gloved hand toward the circle of stone benches which had also been cleared of snow. "I'm also fairly certain none of you is interested in sitting on those benches today to hear what I have to say." The women indulged in a bit of brave laughter. All of them were bundled in layers of woolen shawls and scarves over top of heavy carriage dresses, but those layers were no match for the Essex countryside's bone-thrumming winter cold. "So I'll make the tale of the most famous Abbey cat brief."

"Over a century ago, the man who owned this home was a Royal Navy admiral who spent years chasing Spanish ships laden with treasure around the world. The wealth he accumulated from those prizes made this home the comfortable abode you all enjoy today." She turned then and pointed up toward the enigmatic carved cat perched atop an urn at the very zenith of the slender column of marble. And the ashes in that urn over which the haughty ship's cat is draped belong to the infamous 'Calypso.' Some of you may have encountered her this week."

There were a number of titters amongst the ladies.

"She still rules the Abbey much as she ruled the Admiral's ship, and I'm sure you've all heard the rumors about the Abbey being haunted..." She waited a few minutes for her words to sink in. "Well, they're nothing more than kind feline souls who do, however, like to interfere in, um, romantic affairs of the heart." Lucy waited for the sighing and laughter to end before she continued.

“I’ve seen her many times, and I’m sure some of you have as well.” She clapped her hands suddenly and gave them all a conspiratorial smile. “And now, I’m sure you’re all ready to follow me back for hot cocoa or wassail in the family drawing room.”



December 30, 1843
Montcliffe Abbey
Essex, England

Hugh was careful to stay a discreet distance away from Lucy while she escorted Lord Rumsford's guests through the tents of the Romford's annual village Christmas Fair. He had to watch from afar while she exclaimed over some trinket she fancied and not be able to gift it to her right then and there. He also had to watch from afar whilst she exhibited sensual pleasure from biting into seasoned hot roasted potatoes the footmen purchased in small paper cones for the ladies from the food vendors.

He'd cornered Grace in a quiet corner the night before whilst most of the guests were engrossed in games of cards. He'd once more carried on a quiet conversation with Lucy's aunt and begged her to allow him to pay the rent on the building in which they had their young women's academy.

She'd demurred once again and had further warned him to try to avoid public displays of affection for her niece. She'd

reminded him firmly that even though Lucy's feelings for the man might be lukewarm, she'd indeed promised Silas Miller she'd be his wife when they returned to Kensington after the holidays.

Grace had further warned him that even though he might have been friends with her niece since she was a small girl, society would judge Lucy harshly if word of undue familiarity on his part made its way back to the London gossip sheets. Even though he'd railed at the very idea of how his friendship could hurt Lucy, he knew Grace was right. That was the way of the world.

The small fair at the edge of Romford had engaged the ladies for less than an hour before they piled into two of Rumsford's carriages and headed back toward the center of town where the few fashionable shops could be found. Some of the women headed toward a haberdashery to try on hats while another group found the jeweler's shop.

Hugh had come along at Rummy's behest, to make sure the women remained safe from pickpockets or other nefarious characters of the like while in town. He stamped his feet to rid his boots of some of the hard-packed snow he'd picked up at the open field where the fair had been held. Although most of the snow had been packed down by fairgoers all week, he'd had to help the women climb in and out of the carriages. He'd held his breath whilst he helped Lucy each time, praying he wouldn't say or do anything to give away his true feelings to the hawk-eyed women in the carriage, or bustling around behind him at the fair. He refused to knowingly do anything more that might end up hurting Lucy.

Since they'd returned to Romford's group of shops, he'd had an odd feeling of being watched, but he'd been unable to pinpoint anyone on the street paying undue attention to him or the women. He felt as though the women had lingered in the jewelry shop an inordinate amount of time, so he pushed away from the side of the building where he'd been waiting for them to eventually come out and return to the carriages.

A cursory glance into the window as he passed by the jeweler's shop revealed all of the women circled around Lucy

who had tried on a beautiful emerald ring and was holding her hand up to the light pouring through the window to see the fire produced by the emerald when the rays of light surged through the precious gemstone. After gazing with longing for a while, she finally shook her head and handed the ring back to the shopkeeper.

Something snapped inside Hugh. Damn the ton and damn the gossip sheets. Lucy would have that ring and damn the consequences. After he'd safely delivered all of the women back to the Abbey, Hugh strolled toward the stables, trying to keep a sedate pace and a nonchalant look. Once inside the stables, he raced to the end of one long path through the stalls and grabbed a young groom. He produced a guinea from one of his pockets and held the coin beneath the lad's nose. "This is yours if you can find me a fast horse, and have him saddled and ready for me to ride as quick as you can."

The boy grabbed the coin and raced away, leaving Hugh staring at his empty hand. He was worried for a few moments about what had just happened, but was gratified a few moments later when the same young man motioned for him to join him outside the far end of the stables.



LUCY COULD NOT SHAKE the feeling that she was being watched. She'd peered out her bedchamber window several times during the previous hour, certain she'd see someone beneath the sturdy oak outside. She knew how easy it was to climb down that tree. It was just as easy to access her window by climbing up the ancient oak. She shivered and tried to rid herself of the unfounded feeling.

After spending an entire day with Hugh watching over her but keeping a safe distance to avoid unwanted gossip, she wanted to scream. She would return to the freezing cold and humiliation of the ice skating party earlier that week if only they could steal a few more private moments away from the judgment of the ton.

The one bright spot of the afternoon had been the time spent inside the jeweler's shop. When she'd been perusing the

wares displayed in the shop, the shopkeeper had eyed her hands and the crimson carriage dress she was wearing before beckoning to her to come closer to the display counter. He pulled out a box from beneath the counter and opened a new world of beauty she'd never considered before.

The minute the shopkeeper had placed the simple gold band crowned with a huge, glowing emerald on her hand, the gemstone spread its warmth, and the longer she left the ring on her finger, the more the stone seemed to whisper, "I belong here, I'm home." The rest of the women had crowded around and marveled at how well the gemstone suited her and complemented her glowing crimson carriage dress.

Lucy had never owned anything that fine, nor would she, but for a few minutes at Christmastide, in a shop full of beautiful things, that perfect ring belonged to her, and her alone. She was grateful her aunt Grace hadn't been there to see her preening over such an expensive ring. She would have had apoplexy at the mere thought of contemplating such an expensive bauble on her hand.

Lucy giggled at the memory of the impossibly expensive ring on her finger and submitted to the fussing of the lady's maid Lord Romsford had insisted she and her aunt should share. It was her turn to have ringlets fall down the sides of her face from her neatly coiled dark hair, but she was more excited at the prospect of the elaborate supper Cook would prepare that night. This was the night that the centerpiece of the elaborate supper would feature roasted plump goose with applesauce and silver boat dishes up and down the table filled with steaming gravy as well as plates piled high with freshly baked bread.



1 **January, 1844**
Montcliffe Abbey
Essex, England

Duncan beckoned to Johnny Phippen to help him load one of the sleighs with some supplies he thought he might use to shore up one of the bridges on the estate, about a mile away from the Abbey. He planned to make a temporary repair using of a load of rocks, which might keep the bridge open and safe until it could be rebuilt the following spring.

When Grace's son offered to come along and help, Duncan told him he should stay at the Abbey and check with his mother later if she needed any help with entertaining the guests, or perhaps she'd send him to Cook to help with lifting the many heavy pans required for the preparation of food for more than fifty people a day in the kitchen.

Duncan had eschewed bringing along a footman or two because it would take longer to explain to the men what needed to be done than it would for him to do the work himself. The first, cursory look he'd had at the bridge had led

him to believe a minor, temporary fix was all that was required to keep the bridge safe through the winter.

When he finally arrived at the site, and had a chance to take a longer look at the stones underpinning the bridge, he realized the structure was in much worse shape than he'd first estimated. As long as he'd brought a load of rocks, though, he figured he might as well wedge a few in here and there to at least keep the crossing safe until he could come back with a more permanent solution. The first few small boulders he placed into gaping holes around the side of the bridge abutments seemed to stay secure with a bit of pushing. When he stood back for a more thorough assessment, he decided he should wedge in a few more from the opposite of the fortified abutment beneath the land side of the bridge.

He'd no more than wedged himself beneath the stacked rocks than he realized his mistake. He could see that virtually nothing was holding the rocks in place from that vantage point. Too late he sensed and then heard a major shifting of the old rocks, just before everything came tumbling down over the top half of his body.



GRACE HAD BEEN busy making sure all the guests had something to read or were directed out on short walks for exercise and contemplation. She also kept the footmen apprised of the state of the sideboard laden with numerous dishes to welcome the New Year. She kept the housekeeper apprised whenever one of the particularly popular dishes was empty. Lord Rumsford and Sir James circulated amongst the guests offering good wishes and solicitation for the coming year.

When she spied Johnny bringing up more large bowls of punch from the kitchen, she pulled him aside after he'd deposited the bowl on the sideboard. "Where is Duncan? It's been hours since he left this morning."

"He's not back yet? Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. I haven't seen him anywhere. Where did he go?"

“He was going to shore up the bridge.”

Grace’s veins turned cold. Something must have happened to Duncan. She could feel the certainty in her soul but didn’t want to raise an alarm needlessly.

Johnny shifted restlessly next to her. “Do you want me to check on him?”

“No, not yet. Where was he going?”



MINUTES LATER, Grace had thrown on multiple layers of clothing and had a footman bring a pile of blankets to the sleigh she’d commandeered.

“Mrs. Phippen - are you sure you don’t want me to come along with you?”

“No, Lord Rumsford needs you here to attend to his guests, but make sure that if I fail to return within three hours, send help to the first bridge along the river.”

With that, she touched a whip to the horses pulling the sleigh, and they leapt out across the field toward the river.



LUCY PULLED Johnny over an hour later and asked if he knew where his mother had gone.

“She went looking for Major MacKenzie when he didn’t return this morning, and she didn’t want me to leave my kitchen duties to go with her. She didn’t want to alarm anyone, but went on her own to find him.”

Hugh came up behind Lucy. “Where is he?” he demanded.

As soon as the description of the location was out of Johnny’s mouth, both Hugh and Lucy threw on heavy coats and headed toward the stables.



WHEN GRACE PULLED up next to the bridge, the first thing she saw was Duncan’s legs sticking out from under a heavy pile of stones beneath the bridge and next to the crumbling abutment.

Fear nearly froze her voice, but she shouted anyway. “Duncan —.” When the silence of the cold winter air was all she heard in reply, she wanted to throw herself into the snow and scream. And then there was a slight groan from beneath the pile of rubble. He was still alive. Her heart hiccuped at the faint hope, but she went to work, first tying the lead horse’s harness to a nearby sturdy bush.

After squatting down into the mud beneath the abutment and assessing the best way to proceed, she began pulling stones off of his chest and throwing them to the side. Just as she thought she’d cleared enough of the rubble so that she could free his head, another avalanche of rocks hit her on the back and threw her on top of her patient.

When she took a tentative breath seconds later, she realized that although she was trapped by the weight of the stones, she was still able to breathe. Directly beneath her, Duncan moaned again and moved stiffly. But he was still warm at the core of him, and she could hear the steady thud of his strong, stubborn heart beneath her breasts. Even encased in layers of warm coat and scarves, she could still feel the heartbeat of the man she loved. He was alive for now, and she’d take that. Thank the gods she’d alerted the footman to come looking for them if they didn’t return in a reasonable amount of time.

What seemed a lifetime later she could hear the hoof beats of several horses with riders. By the time Hugh and Lucy and tossed stones away from her back and freed Duncan from beneath, the Rumsford carriage loaded with footmen had managed to make it by way of the winding road.



DUNCAN STARED up at the ceiling in his bedchamber and shook his head slowly. He’d narrowly escaped a bridge collapse that morning that might have ended his life in a way none of his Army skirmishes had ever managed to do. He marveled that he’d escaped being buried beneath so many heavy, crumbling rocks with nothing more than minor cuts, bruises. Fortunately, one of their guests, Dr. Torrance, was a physician who had

pronounced him complete healthy and recovered from his ordeal when they'd dragged him back in the carriage.

His pride had turned out to be the greatest casualty. The woman he loved had come to rescue *him* and had nearly died herself in a second pounding of loose bridge support stones.

He wanted to tell her how sorry he was that he hadn't been able to protect her, that his inability to ask for help had endangered both of their lives. But he couldn't, because... there was his pride, standing in the doorway, just daring him to leave his bed and go apologize like a proper gentleman should.

Suddenly, a wraithlike cat walked through the doorway, as if she'd entered from the hallway outside the door. She jumped up onto the counterpane and walked directly to Duncan's chest where she began a relentless kneading of his chest. He tolerated her ministrations for a few minutes but then swung his legs over the side of the bed and placed her on the floor. She turned her head back toward him and gave him a fierce look that made him find an dressing gown in the armoire in his chamber, open the door, and fall in behind her when she pranced through into the hallway beyond.

He was not certain where in the hell the cat wanted him to go, but he hoped to hell no one was about at this hour of the night who'd see him following a creature with a penchant for walking through solid Abbey walls.

When the cat stopped in front of a door and then walked on through, like a wisp of smoke, Duncan tapped lightly on the door, intrigued by what the ghostly feline was up to.

He couldn't say he was surprised by the person who opened the door, but he was terrified of the next words that flooded unbidden out of his own mouth. "Grace, I love you more than life itself. I can't bear the idea of wasting the rest of my life without you by my side. Would you do me the honor of agreeing to be my wife?"

The next words emanating from Grace's mouth were not so romantic. "Have you become touched in the head from all those rocks falling on you?" She yanked him into her room and locked the door behind them. "I'm going to have to

examine you more closely to determine whether or not you can be trusted to walk back to your room tonight.” With that dire warning that made him stiffen in all the right places, she relieved him of his banyan and marched him back to the warmth of her just vacated bed.



3 **January, 1844**
Montcliffe Abbey
Essex, England

When Lucy joined the rest of the household at breakfast the next morning, both Lord Rumsford and Sir James were beaming when they greeted her. “You’re just in time for an amazing announcement.”

Musicians had been placed throughout the Abbey at various open corners and staircase landings and warm strains of Mozart filled the air.

After she’d filled her plate from the sideboard in the family sitting room, she looked up to see Hugh walking through the door with a sly smile on his face as well. “What is going on behind my back?”

Hugh pointed toward the front of the room. “You should ask them.”

Major MacKenzie and her aunt Grace were standing awkwardly, waiting for everyone to get settled at their breakfast tables around the room. Lord Rumsford rose and

cleared his throat. “Since there are no longer any surviving fathers to make the announcement, then it is left to me. My good friends, Mrs. Grace Phippen and Major Duncan MacKenzie, R.E. are going to begin publishing bans in our chapel beginning this Sunday.” He raised a glass of champagne and Lucy noticed there were filled glasses at everyone’s place at the tables, so she raised hers in a toast as well.

“To the happy couple, a long and happy life.”

“A long and happy life...” everyone else in the room echoed.

Lucy wondered just how long she’d been sleeping that so much had happened without her knowledge. Across from her at the table, Hugh raised his glass toward hers and gave her a wistful smile before draining the champagne in honor of the couple.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Sir James and Lord Rumsford sat by the fireplace in the Rumsford study and discussed the status of their holiday matchmaking strategy.

Rummy raised another glass of champagne he’d spirited away from the breakfast room and said, “One down, one to go.”

“You think you’re going to accomplish the other one before Twelfth Night as well?” Sir James sent him an impish, knowing smile and raised his own flute of champagne, pretending to study the bubbles as they rose in the glass.

Rummy reached down onto his lap and rubbed Calypso’s back just the way she liked it. She purred and rumbled at him a bit before jumping down and disappearing into the fireplace flames.

Sir James gave a hearty laugh. “She must know something we don’t. I’d wager she’s off to fix someone’s mortal woes.”



LATER THAT NIGHT

Lucy tossed and turned in her huge bed and regretted her earlier harsh words that week with Hugh when she'd warned him they had to be more circumspect in their interactions with each other. They'd both agreed that their paths forward had to be separate in order to preserve both Lucy's reputation and that of the young women's academy on which both she and her Aunt Grace depended for their livelihood.

At the end of the holiday, she and Hugh had accepted that she'd become the wife of Silas Miller and Hugh would return to the rebuilding of his estate.

But that was not the end of the searing want tearing Lucy's heart apart. She wondered if turning his back on her had been any easier for Hugh. The searing looks she caught him sending her way when he thought she wasn't looking told a different story.

She sat up, suddenly alert when she smelled the faint whiff of smoke, then saw small trails of smoke emanating from the wall facing her. Suddenly, the lithe six-toed cat she'd seen everywhere that week was suddenly jumping up on her bed to join her. Instead of joining her on the pillows, the cat began insisted clawing of Lucy's toes through the covering at her feet.

"Ow, stop." The cat leapt down from the bed and looked back at her expectantly until Lucy relented and pulled her dressing gown from the back of the chair near her bed where she'd left it. She followed the cat out the doorway and down the hallway. When the cat shifted directions and whisked down the back servants' stairway, Lucy became suspicious. Where was she going?

Finally, at the bottom of the steps, she led Lucy to the lower kitchens and on through to the pantry. There were sounds emanating from inside, so she held her breath and peer around the door. There sat Hugh atop the marble counter where Cook rolled out endless batches of dough. He'd taken a trifle from one of the cooling racks and was eating the sweet custard-like dessert directly from the bowl...with his bare hands.

He crawled to the edge of the huge counter and extended his hand toward Lucy without a word. After grabbing a tin of biscuits on the way, she climbed up to join him and began scooping trifle out of the bowl with the biscuits. After they'd emptied the bowl and made a huge mess of the counter, Hugh crawled toward her and claimed her lips, licking off the trifle as he went. Where a blob of the sweet dessert had fallen and still clung to one of her breast through her dressing gown, Hugh leaned down and sucked the sweetness from the tip of her breast. She groaned and moved closer to him, wrapping her legs around his waist.



MUCH LATER, when the embers had died down in the fireplace in Sir James and Rummy's private bedchamber in a far corner of the Abbey, they were joined by Calypso. When she first claimed Rummy's lap, he stroked her back gently and whispered close to her furry ear, "True love is worth every risk, isn't it, my darling, when you find the missing piece of yourself." She lay there quietly for a few minutes before leaping down and disappearing into the last embers of the fire.



5 January, 1844
Twelfth Night
Montcliffe Abbey

On the morning of Twelfth Night, two momentous things happened. First of all, Rummy declared Sir James would serve as the day's "Lord of Misrule," and the second occurred when Hugh surprised everyone. They'd had a huge breakfast feast provided in the large sitting room for all their guests while they exchanged a few personal gifts in private.

This had been Lucy's favorite part of the holiday forever. And even though she was now an adult, she still woke up excited to see what the day would bring. A stunned silence filled the friendly chatter in the room when Hugh suddenly dropped to one knee at her feet and held out a tiny box that looked suspiciously like the one from the jeweler in Romford. Stunned, Lucy couldn't speak for a moment, let alone breathe.

"Please," Hugh whispered low. "Open it. Let me know you love me and you're mine."

Fear fluttered up from her chest, making her heart race and speech even more difficult to form. Finally, she took the box from his outstretched hand and opened it. Tears flowed immediately when Hugh took the emerald ring and gently placed it on the middle finger of her outstretched hand.

“You don’t have to promise me anything, Lucy. This ring belongs on your hand no matter what you decide.” Hugh stood and walked back to his table, oblivious to the loud reactions from the rest of the people in the room. Sir James and Rummy looked over-the-moon happy for her, but she was afraid to turn her head to see the reaction from her Aunt Grace. When she finally had the courage to face her aunt, her face was so pale, Lucy rushed to her side to comfort her.



THAT EVENING, Lucy let the lady’s maid help her put on her Goldilocks costume as companion to Hugh’s bear disguise. The floppy yellow braids were hot over top her already thick hair but she reasoned she could stand the discomfort for just one night. The minute she walked out of the door to find Hugh and the others, he was standing right there waiting for her.

She smiled broadly and was surprised when he roughly jerked her hand to him and ripped the emerald ring from her finger. When she gave out a cry of pain, the bear leaned close to her and spat out, “I suppose he’s made you his whore already in exchange for this?” With that, the man who no doubt was Silas Miller posing as the bear she’d expected to be Hugh jerked her along the hallway to an outside door to the garden.

Lucy took a deep breath and steeled herself for whatever would come next.



HUGH REGRETTED his choice in costumes as soon as he put the giant bear’s head over top of his already heavy, furry costume. He was drenched in sweat just getting from his room to the drawing room below where he was going to meet Lucy and the

others to go in to the masque Twelfth Night Ball up on the third level of the Abbey together.

When he met the others, there were: Grace as a witch, complete with a small cauldron; Hugh as a huntsman with his axe; Rummy as a Venetian nobleman; and Sir James costumed as his gondolieri; and Sir James' mother, Maddie, dressed as Diana, with her bow and arrow. But no Lucy. Hugh was hit with sudden clarity. His sense of being followed, being spied on, all made sense now.

Rummy sent footmen running throughout the family quarters searching for Lucy, but Hugh knew they wouldn't find her. Apparently, their landlord Miller had decided to claim his bride early. He allowed himself a few seconds of doubt before he knew in his heart Lucy had not gone willingly with the man.

Duncan was faster in coming to a conclusion than the rest of them. "Whoever has her wouldn't risk these roads back to London in the dark. He must be keeping her at the Romford Inn. That's the only place they could be." He exchanged a look with Hugh. "We'll ride in. To find out if he's holding her there."

Lord Rumsford insisted, "We'll be right behind you in the carriage with as many armed outriders with guns we can muster. The poor girl is probably terrified. She'll need a comfortable, private way to come back home."



LUCY'S CUT lip bled onto her handkerchief while she glared at the hateful Mr. Miller pacing back and forth in the room at the Romford Inn into which he'd forced her. She knew his agitation stemmed from the fact that he hadn't planned beyond snatching her from the Abbey. He now obviously realized there was no way he could escape back to Kensington over snowy, rutted roads...in the dark.

He stopped suddenly as if he'd been struck by inspiration. He pointed a grubby finger at her and proclaimed, "You're ruined now, you know. You're as good a mine to do with as I wish. Since you've already probably crawled all over that high

and mighty earl, I don't want you whelping one of his brats and calling it my own. I think I'll just put you up in one of my houses down in Seven Dials and use you whenever I've a notion to have you."

She wondered idly if realized how ridiculous he looked playing the part of an evil villain dressed as a bear. But she'd learned early on not to say anything lest he decided to hit her again. She should be horrified at her situation, but somehow she was not worried in the least.

At a sudden sharp rap at the door, he gave her a brutal look as if she'd somehow conjured someone at the other side of the door to the cheapest room at the Romford Inn.

He chose to ignore whoever was demanding entrance. The second set of raps was infinitely harder and set the door to heaving against its hinges. Finally, an apparent human surge at the opposite side of the door finally flattened it off its hinges and a whole crowd of fairytale characters crowded in, surrounding the hapless bear. As each was trying to talk above the other, she advanced toward the newest bear who had led the charge. She opened her arms and he tugged off the heavy, furry head. He gathered her close while the other bear was marched out of the inn toward the local magistrate who was a close personal friend of Lord Rumsford's.

Her bear simply stared in wonder before carefully helping stanch the flow of blood from her lower lip. "I'm going to kill that godforsaken excuse for a human being," he insisted, and moved as if he was going to follow the angry, costumed crowd.

"No you're not," she said.

He drew himself up to his full height and demanded, "Why not?"

"Because we have better things to do, milord," and she drew him down onto the lumpy bed for a long kiss.

After he came up for air, Hugh insisted, "You know, once you're the Countess of Westfalia, I'm never going to let you leave Westmont without me."

“I can’t imagine why I ever would, you great looby of a bear.”



- THE END -

DECEMBER, 1839, EPILOGUE

WESTMONT MANOR, ESSEX

Grace MacKenzie dandled the squirming next Earl of Westfalia on her knee and gave Duncan a cross look.

He raised an angry brow and returned a similarly annoyed gaze. “How easy de ye think these blasted stable stalls are to put together?” Her beloved, albeit stubborn, husband was on his knees on the floor of the nursery at Westmont Manor surrounded by piles of neatly cut and painted wood blocks. She’d bullied him all of the autumn to build a miniature stable identical to the full-sized one he’d built for the current Earl of Westfalia the previous year. Her nephew was about to turn four but was absolutely horse mad already.

Lucy had insisted on taking young Hugh’s nursing baby sister, Victoria, along with them to the Twelfth Night house party at Edgewood Estate hosted by their good friends, the Duke and Duchess of Montfort. Hugh Alexander Josiah Elliott, however, was staying home, because he was an adventurous, fast-moving, tiny devil who could not be trusted to play on his own without close supervision by his nurse, his parents, and the entire household.

After he’d given all of them the slip, there would be sounds of indignation, anger, outright terrified screams, and shouts throughout Westmont Manor followed by a thorough search of the new stables where the imp would always be found. He’d crawl into the stall of his favorite stallion and curl up in a corner, oblivious to the creature’s lethal hooves. One of the grooms would usually find him and deliver the angelic, sleeping boy to his frantic father.

Once after small Hugh had disappeared for over an hour, Lucy had asked Grace pitifully if there were any way to keep such a child safe. If punished, he inevitably fled to Cook who would cosset him with warm cookies and cocoa by the fire before she'd finally alert the rest of the household.

Grace had assured Lucy and Hugh that she and Duncan would not for a minute take their eyes off the wee devil. So far, they'd been successful in keeping him occupied, but his parents had left only the day before, on Boxing Day, after a long round of gift giving in the morning. The remaining days until January fifth yawned long and precarious ahead of them. She'd thought the stable and a set of hand-carved and painted horses would keep small Hugh busy enough to stay out of trouble. However, she hadn't counted on how difficult putting the whole finished stable together would be.

She and Duncan had been working on the toys for months in the comfort and quiet of the small hunting lodge on the estate that Hugh had gifted them at the time of their wedding five years earlier. They'd been busy restoring the structure into a cozy home ever since.

She'd thought being married to an engineer would make the constructing of things much easier. But, somehow, all the many other projects Duncan had been involved in since that time had seemed to take priority, such as rebuilding the many failing structures around Westmont Manor, not to mention Grace and Lucy's pride and joy, the schoolhouse for the children of the workers and tenants of Westfalia Estate.

"Stop, Poppet," Grace commanded, whilst young Hugh extended his arms and kicked out his legs, struggling to escape her lap.

Duncan turned and gave her a wicked smile. "Let that naughty boy go."

"What?" Grace momentarily loosened her grip, and the child vaulted into the middle of the room, scattering the carefully organized piles of wooden pieces in a hundred different directions.

Duncan gripped him gently but firmly by the shoulders and pointed him in the direction of the mess he'd made. "Now that you've made a discombobulation of the blocks, Uncle Duncan needs you to stack those scattered wooden pieces into piles of equal sizes."

Young Hugh gave his uncle an assessing look out of his father's mocking blue eyes before squatting down on the nursery floor and immediately becoming absorbed in placing similar sizes together in neat piles.

Duncan quietly crawled to the settee where Grace still sat, mesmerized by the first calm endeavor she'd ever observed in the child. Her husband carefully stood, took a seat next to her, and snaked his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. She breathed in the woodland spices that were Duncan's alone and sighed. "How long do you think he'll stay occupied over there?"

Duncan gave the boy a long look. He'd turned away from them in his absorption in putting piles of painted wood pieces together, and seemed not to notice they were there. Her husband turned back and pulled her in for a long kiss.

She pushed hard at his well-muscled shoulders. "Stop—He'll see us."

"I don't think so," Hugh insisted, and brushed the pad of a finger over the swell of her breast. "I think that endlessly curious, annoying lad has the makings of an engineer."

Grace grasped his hand and pushed it away. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"He's not going to know we're here for at least an hour." With that assessment, he resumed his gentle but insistent brushing of the tops of her breasts.

She leaned back into his arms with a sigh and after long minutes of eyeing her nephew who seemed ignorant of anything, or anyone, around him, she had to agree. "And he's doing all your work for you."

"Um-hmm," he whispered and took a long, licking nibble at one of her ears.

Grace suddenly whipped around and stared into his searing blue eyes. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you?” she accused.

“Um-hmm,” he repeated and kissed her throat at the indentation at the base of her neck before working his way a bit farther down with his tongue.

“Clever man.” She stretched her arms above her head and gave a bit of a purr, like one of the many six-toed cats now roaming Westmont Manor as well as Montcliffe Abbey. “I’m so glad I decided to marry you.”

16

PRIDE OF HONOR

Book 1 in the Men of the Squadron Series

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PRIDE OF HONOR EXCERPT



5 1°30'35.5140"N, 0°7'5.1312"W
London, England

April 1820

Miss Sophia Brancelli fidgeted and shifted from one foot to the other. She was as fond of ribbons as the next young woman, but her friend, Lydia, was a slave to the silken trim.

Other shoppers crowded around them in the tiny milliner's shop on old Bond Street. "Why can your friend not choose?" one woman demanded with an angry hiss into her ear. Sophie ignored the complaint.

This was their third trip to the milliner, and Lydia seemed no closer to a decision than on their first visit. A pale rainbow of rolls lined the wooden counter, their curled tails cascading over the edge.

After sneaking a stealthy look at her friend, Sophie slipped a much-folded piece of foolscap from her reticule. She worried her bottom lip and wondered whether she should change *cloudy* to *stormy*.

Just as Sophie pulled out a worn pencil stub, Lydia finally sighed and chose another shade of green. A green so similar to the one she'd chosen the day before, Sophie would be hard put to tell the difference unless both lengths were side by side. The cost of Lydia's ribbons would pay the butcher for a month of

the cheap cuts Sophie had made do with in her father's topsy-turvy household.

As soon as Lydia paid the shopkeeper, Sophie strode toward the doorway and sunlight outside. The minute her boots touched the pavement, she was lifted from her feet. For a moment, it seemed as if the world had inexplicably shifted on its axis.

Time slowed, and she viewed what was happening as if through a fog. A strange man grasped her arm in a grip so tight, she could almost feel the fatal squeeze of the coil of one of the jungle snakes in her grandmother's novels. The smudged slip of paper and pencil slipped from her hands to the pavement.

Abruptly, Sophie remembered the parasol Lydia's grandmother had insisted she carry to shield her from the sun. She'd looped the handle's ribbon onto her wrist while reworking her lines. She grabbed the parasol with her free arm and swung hard. A satisfying thump and scream sounded as the weapon connected with her attacker's lower limbs.

As quick as he loosened his grip, she pulled a hatpin from her bonnet and jabbed in the vicinity of his eyes. Another scream, but this time her aim landed far off the mark and only slashed his chin.

With a bellow of pain, he pulled back a fist, rage darkening his face. In spite of the threat, Sophie refused to back down. Lydia's screams echoed down the quiet street. Just as the stranger's knuckles neared her face, he and his accomplice dropped from her line of view.

For one addled moment, she wondered if the ghost of her dead grandmother had risen to her defense. She thrust again hard with her hatpin toward where the attack had begun.

Sophie lost her balance and sat down with a thump at the edge of the street. Shaking, she sank her elbows to her knees and rested her head in her hands. Her parasol had rolled to the edge of the walkway. At a sharp cramp in her hand, she realized she still clutched her trusty hatpin. After a restorative

breath, she looked up into the deeply tanned face of a Royal Navy officer in full uniform.

He knelt in front of her, asking question after question. “Are you hurt? Who did this to you? Are you with a chaperone?”

Blood dribbled from his wrist, staining his white glove. Zeus! The hatpin. She knew she should provide him with some answers, but couldn’t. She could barely breathe properly, so shaken was she by the encounter with the unknown men who’d tried to drag her toward a waiting hack carriage.

He grasped her by the shoulders. The warmth of his touch seeped through the thin muslin of her dress, and his solid competence fortified her courage. The runaway terrors slowed, allowing her to breathe normally again.

The first thought to pop into her head once she’d settled a bit was: Respectable women of the *ton* did not find themselves in situations like this. This was the sort of turmoil that might befall the actresses who had kept company with her late father.

“Are you hurt?” The naval officer shed his gloves and ran his hands down her arms as if seeking injuries. “Holy St. George! Is this your weapon?” The hatpin rolled into his hand from her slackened grasp, and he tucked it safely within a pocket. His frown softened a bit, he shook his head, and gave a low chuckle.

He clasped her hands as if he feared she might break and smoothed his thumbs over the soft pads beneath her thumbs. If the stranger continued his exploration for injuries, Sophie feared she might expire from pleasure. If only he knew the ink-stained fingers her white gloves hid.

Lydia for once had nothing to say, but watched over them, her eyes wide. Sophie thanked the gods Lydia’s lady’s maid had not been able to accompany them on the latest ribbon expedition. She would have been horrified and sent the gentleman packing. The thought of the uncompromising older woman spurred her to action. Damn the pleasure.

“No.” Sophie snatched back her hands. Only then did she notice his eyes. They were an extraordinary shade of blue, the sort of blue that didn’t belong in such a stern, dark face.

That pleasant discovery, however, did not stop her shout of frustration. “Why did you help me? I was getting the better of those scoundrels when you showed up, and, and now—” She refused to cry, but moisture leaked from the corners of her eyes which she imagined were a reddened fright by now. “Not only is my sleeve torn, but my reputation is probably ruined as well, and I’ve lost the final lines of my—”

She stopped short of finishing her wailed lament. Her predicament was none of this young officer’s fault. He could not help she had been born a bastard, and he had nothing to do with the *ton’s* attitude toward a young woman who’d spent time in a gypsy-like home with her profligate poet father.

Bereft of its handy hatpin, Sophie’s tippy, over-embellished bonnet leaned precariously to the side before toppling to the pavement. Her long, dark curls tumbled free.

“What have you lost?” the stranger asked and pulled her to her feet, guiding her toward a nearby tea room. Lydia scooped up Sophie’s lost bonnet and followed.

“My last two lines,” Sophie said, and batted at his hands. “Please, leave us.”

“You’ve no reason to fear me,” he insisted. “I’m Captain Arnaud Bellingham. My mother lives near here, on Hanover Square. Now please tell me where your carriage waits.”

Lydia moved closer. “Thomas said they would keep rounding the park until we were finished. The carriage is all black, with a team of grays.” She leaned even closer. “I fear this is not completely proper, but under the circumstances you should at least know our names. I’m Lady Lydia Howick, and this is my friend, Miss Sophia Brancelli.”

Captain Bellingham made a small nod of acknowledgement. “I regret the circumstances, but I am pleased to make your acquaintances, and to be of service.”

Although Lydia gave him a silly, flirtatious smile, Sophie could not meet his gaze. She knew she should show her appreciation for his brave intervention, but all she could do was pretend to study her boots. She'd been unsettled at his unexpected kindness and valor. Sophie was not used to being the center of attention. She'd learned to take care of herself out of necessity and was uncomfortable with the acceptance of assistance of any sort.

The owner of the millinery shop, roused from the commotion at her front door, hurried to Captain Bellingham's side. "What has happened?"

"The ladies were accosted outside your shop by ruffians who tried to spirit Miss Brancelli away in a hired carriage."

"Please let me help," the small woman pleaded. She shook her head so hard, her tight curls bounced. "I have never had anything so terrible occur at my doorstep. I will arrange for a tea tray at my neighbor's shop."

Once Lydia and the captain helped her to a chair in the small shop, Sophie began to shake and was grateful to be able to sit in a comfortable, cushioned chair and have others cosset her with a steaming cup of tea and sweet tart provided by the milliner who had returned to her shop. Thankfully, there were only one or two customers at a table near the front of the shop.

Captain Bellingham bent low over their table and spoke to Lydia. "She appears to be in shock. Wait here. I will find your carriage and have your man, Thomas, come for you." He headed toward the door, but turned at the last minute. "What did she lose? What does it look like? I'll try to find her lost 'lines' if I can."

"Her poetry," Lydia said. "She's been trying to finish her latest poem. It was on a worn piece of foolscap she must have been holding when they tried to grab her."

He nodded thanks to Lydia before heading out into the street.



CAPTAIN ARNAUD BELLINGHAM returned to his friend, Dr. Cullen MacCloud, who still paced up and down Bond Street outside the tea shop, making sure the men who tried to abduct Miss Brancelli did not return. “Thank God we happened by when we did,” Arnaud said, and let out a whoosh of breath. “Those footpads meant that poor woman harm.”

“Harm?” Cullen said with a sputter. “They wanted more than just her reticule. Those bullies meant to rip her from the very street.”

Arnaud shook his head. He’d acted out of instinct and could only imagine how terrified Miss Brancelli had been. Hell, he was still shaking and almost light-headed at the memory of the terror in her dark eyes. He checked himself at the forbidden line his mind had taken. He was back in London for only a month or so until his ship was refurbished for his next assignment off the coast of Africa, his first posting under his own command. He could not afford an entanglement with a young woman like Miss Brancelli. He’d already made up his mind on his life’s path.

As if reading his thoughts, his ship’s surgeon added, “And such a fine lass. I can tell she turned your head.”

“No,” Arnaud said with emphasis. “This is not what you think. She’s an innocent. I did what you or any of us would have done.” He did a quick, surreptitious look at the walkers along the street to make sure no one could overhear their conversation.

“Yes, of course,” Cullen said, with a quirk of a smile. “Was she injured?” he asked, his teasing tone gone. “Should I see to her?”

“No,” Arnaud said, his voice hard. “She’s just badly shaken. Could you walk to my mother’s townhouse and get that beast, Achamé, out of the mews? Since the young woman seems uncomfortable in my presence, I’ll ride behind the carriage to see them safely home.”

“Of course, I’ll fetch him,” Cullen said, and headed out at a trot, northeast toward Hanover Square.

After Cullen disappeared, Arnaud thought over the fast-moving series of events as if looking through the wrong end of a spy glass. Everything seemed off, small and faraway instead of up close and precise.

He and his ship's surgeon had walked to Bond Street from the Admiralty where they'd received orders for their next ship. They'd planned on being fitted for new shirts at a tailor's shop before they parted ways, Arnaud to his mother's townhouse, and Cullen to his father's house on Savile Street.

From the time the two villains had jumped out of a hack and grabbed the young woman, to when he and his friend had rushed across the street, he hadn't paid much attention to what she looked like.

She had a bit of an unusual accent, perhaps French or Italian. Arnaud cursed the direction of his thoughts. All he wanted was to see her safely home. After that, he would forget the depths of her dark brown eyes, move on with the refit of his ship, and return to his squadron.

After her attackers escaped, she'd turned on him, probably assuming he was one of them. His hand still ached, and blood dribbled from the stab of her hatpin. She'd put up a hell of a fight. He smiled at the memory of her wild pummeling of her attackers, and him.

Two street urchins approached with brooms and one asked, "Save your boots, sir? Let us sweep a path across for you."

Arnaud knelt down to their level. "I have a better idea," he said, and spun a coin between his fingers. "Were you two here when those fellows tried to grab the young lady?"

The small boys gave each other a look and then seemed to come to a decision. One reached for the coin and said, "Mebbe."

"There's another one in it for you if you can describe them and say which way they went. If you lie, I'll know, and we'll be back," Arnaud added, rising to his full height.

"Cor," one of the boys finally mumbled. "There be three of them. The one, short and dark, waited at the hack. 'Ad a

mustache, ‘e did. ‘E stayed with the carriage while the other two coves ‘ad a go at the ladies. Oh, and one of them limped, like ‘e was in the wars, or summat.”

Arnaud flipped them an extra coin. “If you see that lot again, get word to Captain Bellingham at Number Nine Hanover Square.”

As an afterthought, Arnaud turned back toward the boys and balanced a third coin between his left thumb and forefinger. “One of the ladies lost an important bit of foolscap with some poetry. There’s another reward if you can find it.” He turned away and headed toward a lone horseman trotting from the direction of Hanover Square.



LYDIA STIRRED another lump of sugar into her tea. “What do you suppose Captain Bellingham does in the Royal Navy? There was a great deal of braid and polished medals and buttons on his jacket. Perhaps he’s a hero, or something.”

Sophie pressed her fingers against her throbbing head. If only Lydia would stop asking so many questions. The ornate tea room table where they sat seemed to shimmer as if about to spin, and she couldn’t stop her mind from re-playing the horrible events outside the milliner’s shop.

Sophie placed her hand over Lydia’s. “Please, your imagination is making my head and stomach do strange turns. In any event, it barely matters. We shall never see him again.”

“Oooh,” Lydia babbled on. “Of course we will. Did he not say he was off in search of our carriage? Did you not notice how beautiful he is? All that dark, curly hair, and fine eyes? I’m sure he’ll attend some of the better balls, or maybe even the theater, if he’s in town for long.” Lydia finally sucked in a breath. “Or maybe we could ask Teddy if he knows him.”

“Leave Teddy out of this,” Sophie said. “You don’t even know the man’s name. And besides, he’s probably forgotten us already.”

“He did tell us his name. Don’t you remember?” Lydia said. “He’s Captain Arnaud Bellingham. His mother has a

townhouse on Hanover Square. Honestly, Sophie. Did you hit your head when they grabbed you?"

No more had she spoken than the dark stranger reappeared inside the tea shop.

Sophie stared a few seconds too long, and their eyes met.

He walked straightaway to their table and said, "Your carriage is outside. Your coachman and footman have been warned of the danger and will see you home. I'll ride along behind to assure you're not harmed."

"We live near St. James Park," Lydia blurted out.

"Sir, I am sorry," Sophie interrupted, "but we do not know you that well." She moved her hand toward her friend's mouth to forestall any further outbursts.

He gave her a strained smile. "Captain Bellingham, at your service." He gestured to his friend, also in uniform, who had followed him through the door. "This officer, my ship's surgeon, Dr. Cullen MacCloud, will vouch for me and my family."

"Ladies," Dr. MacCloud said, "I promise no harm will come to you from association with this man. I would trust him with my life." Then the surgeon gifted them with a smile so warm, even the dark corners of the tea shop seemed to glow. "He has in fact had my life in his hands many times," he added.

"Now your carriage awaits. Let me see you safely home." Captain Bellingham ushered them out to their waiting footman.



SOPHIE LEANED back into the comfortable squabs of Lady Howick's carriage and stared forward, past Lydia's concerned face. She picked at one of the buttery tearoom biscuits stashed in her reticule just before the strange captain hurried them out the door. When she tried to swallow, a small piece caught in her throat, bringing on a coughing fit.

“Here,” Lydia said. “Suck on this lozenge and calm yourself, or I’ll have to knock for Thomas to stop and find you something to drink.”

Sophie popped the peppermint into her mouth and her throat soothed immediately. If only she could calm her heart as easily. The poor thing pounded as if in time to a military tattoo. She couldn’t decide which unsettled her more, the surly men who’d tried to snatch her off the street, or the naval captain and his friend who’d come to her rescue.

Much worse, however, was the black terror of waiting for the next disaster to fall. What if a highly placed gossip had seen her struggle with the kidnappers? The rumors might make it impossible to fulfill the terms of her grandmother’s will.

The will stipulated her marriage to a gentleman of the *ton*, but her heart rebelled. Why could Grandmama not have trusted Sophie to live life on her own terms, with her books and her poetry?

Unfortunately, she knew the answer: her irresponsible father. Sophie had no choice but to live with him after her grandmother’s death two years earlier. The duchess had feared his influence would corrupt Sophie and send her into an unsuitable alliance when she came into her inheritance.

Sophie had never considered what an “unsuitable alliance” would entail, but she suspected the wickedly handsome captain trotting behind the carriage might be what her grandmother had feared.

Both her mother and her grandmother had lived unconventional lives. Her mother had abandoned the protected life of a duke’s daughter to run off with Sophie’s Venetian poet father. Her grandmother had written romantic novels, successful across the continent, under an assumed name. But then she had been a duchess.

Lydia interrupted Sophie’s tortured thoughts. “Why are you frowning and still sucking on that peppermint? You’ve been sitting like that for so long, you’re going to give yourself permanent wrinkles.”

Sophie flashed her friend a sudden smile and giggled at the thought of wrinkles. If only minor facial imperfections were the worst of her worries.



ARNAUD RODE ACHAMÉ` behind the ladies' carriage and worried. When two workmen stepped into the street, he gave an involuntary jerk on the horse's reins. Would there be another attempt to seize Miss Brancelli? He relaxed when the men darted behind the carriage to the other side of the thoroughfare.

They passed a small park where two boys rolled hoops along a path before disappearing among the trees. The sun peeked cautiously through a hole in the clouds, making him feel foolish for his dark thoughts.

He worried about the consequences of the dark-eyed beauty's misadventures. He worried about the hazards of interjecting himself into her life. He couldn't intercede on her behalf without making her situation worse.

Even more, he worried about himself. The memory of her lilting voice prowled his thoughts. Tonight, he vowed, he would tell his mother about his plans to marry the widow.

But surely it wouldn't hurt to ask his mother to call on the young ladies' guardian in the morning. She could express his concern for their well-being and find out if Miss Brancelli had recovered from the incident. He was merely concerned, nothing more.



HONORE BELLINGHAM SANDED off the last note and added it to the pile of thank-you's for patrons of her school for orphans of merchant sailors.

She stretched her arms above her head and turned at a sound from one of the carved, wooden doors on the bookcase behind her. One side creaked and opened slightly outward.

She stood and crept toward the opening. This time she had him. She jerked open the door and pounced on the culprit.

“I have you now, you old runabout,” she said, and wheeled back from the dark opening, claspng the guilty party by the nape of the neck.

“Bad boy,” she mouthed, and lugged the struggling cat across her comfortable morning room to a miniature, overstuffed couch piled with plump pillows.

Honore knelt in front of the huge tom now ensconced on his throne and waggled a finger in his direction, taking care to avoid his waving, clawed paws. “Where have you been?”

He answered with a long, bored yowl.

“I’ll have to turn you over to Cook,” she threatened and rose to pull the bell for the footman.

When the young man arrived, he gave a disparaging look at the unrepentant cat, now lying flat on his back on the cushions, all four six-toed paws splayed in feline insouciance.

“He’s back,” Honore said, with a weary sigh.

“The usual, madame?”

“Yes, of course. Supper by the fire...and perhaps take a cloth to those paws. God knows where he’s been.”

The tall footman nodded, walked to the couch, and slung the cat beneath one of his arms.

Young Charles was the only one in the household who could manage the bully. She suspected the two might be kindred spirits.

Vagabond did not complain but instead rumbled with purrs while they headed back into the corridor and down the winding steps toward the kitchen. Cook would scold the creature, followed by an inordinate amount of cosseting, including hand-fed bits of the day’s find from the fish market.

The difficult cat was the latest generation descended from her original, beloved Epi. Also six-toed, Epi had been the gift of a sea captain friend of Honore’s father when she was a child.

She shook her head at how spoiled this descendant had become and turned back to her notes. She took the top sheet from a large stack of stationery, dipped her pen into ink, and began the long task of writing an address on each one.

Another tap sounded at her door and she looked up with a frown. “Enter,” she said, and her housekeeper leaned through the doorway, her pale face flushed with excitement.

“Captain Bellingham,” she announced, and backed awkwardly into the hall. Arnaud walked in, picked up his petite mother, and whirled her around. “I’ve missed you, *Maman*.”

“I’ve missed you too,” she said, and gave him a light kiss on each cheek. When she drew back, she asked, “How long this time?” half-dreading the answer.

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ANDREA K. STEIN

BIO, BOOKS, & LINKS

The daughter of a trucker and an artist, Andrea never knew it would take the hard-work ethic of her father to achieve the light-filled magic of her mother's art. She grew up a scribbler. The stories just spilled out. A newspaper and publishing professional for thirty years, she ran away to sea for three years, delivering yachts to the Caribbean, earning a USCG offshore captain's license. Now, she writes about love and high adventure from her writing room in Colorado. The first of the Men of the Squadron series, *Pride of Honor*, was a finalist in the RWA Beau Monde Chapter's coveted Royal Ascot Contest. *Secret Harbor*, a prequel to the Men of the Squadron, snagged First Place in Romance in the Colorado Pikes Peak Writers Fiction Contest.



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