

ALL THAT
Glitters
SERIES

THE

Viscount



TO AVOID

USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TAMMY
ANDRESEN

THE VISCOUNT TO AVOID

ALL THAT GLITTERS

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Hugs!

THE VISCOUNT TO AVOID

TAMMY ANDRESEN

What if this princess didn't wish to leave her tower?

Fern has always enjoyed being alone, tucked away from the rest of the world. People have a way of disappointing her.

But when a viscount knocks at her door, he makes her an offer she can hardly refuse.... Help him gain revenge on her evil stepsister, the very one who chased her into the tower, and he'll give her the means to pursue any future Fern wishes.

It's the perfect solution except for one detail. Leaving her tower means facing the demons of her past. And as attraction crackles between her and her new partner, the viscount with a vendetta of his own and a million reasons to double cross her, she has to decide, is the adventure worth the risk?

And what if all her reasons for hiding away from the world turn out to be exactly right?

There is only one way to find out.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BELL by the door rang. Fern's head snapped up as the sound pulled her from the book she was reading.

Who could be here and why had they come?

This wasn't her weekly delivery of food, that had been yesterday.

And her sister had made her bimonthly visit, scheduled Fern might add, just three days ago. Despite living on the same property and considering her sister to be her best friend out of necessity and choice, Fern preferred time to herself. So who... who would be ringing at her door?

Rather than answer, she crossed to the window peering out, her long hair streaming out the third story window as she peered around the curve of the tower to see the locked door below.

At least for the summer, she moved from her sister and her husband's large estate to an outbuilding on the property. This tower had likely been attached to an old monastery, the ruins and foundation of the building still strewn about the lawn. But the tower had remained.

Tucked in the woods, and unknown even to Fern until recently, it was the perfect hideaway.

Some repairs had taken place, enough that the stairs were usable and the main living area clean. It was too drafty to stay for the winter, but for the summer...

She'd needed a bit of healing. Time to herself. After living under her stepmother's tyranny and her father's death, she just wanted to collect herself and perhaps work through some of the anger that remained.

And decide what she wished her place in this world to be. That was the most important part. Did she wish to rejoin the world? Would the world have her if she did?

Her brother-in-law, the Earl of Sanbridge, stood at the door, a missive in his hand. Drat. Correspondence rarely meant good news.

Nor did an unannounced visit. "Eric." She waved from her window, hoping that he could deliver the news quickly and without a formal visit. She was in the middle of an excellent chapter of her recent most read.

A mystery titled, *House of Whispers*, the story was about a young heiress who inherited a home that she lived in alone. A detail Fern could really relate to, until strange events began occurring in and about the fictional house, including several deaths.

"Fern," Eric replied with a smile. "Would you do me the kindness of unlocking the door?"

“Must I?” she asked, knowing she was acting like a petulant child. Eric was the best of men and a wonderful husband to her sister. What was more, he’d saved both her and Ella from a horrid future and Fern would be forever grateful. She’d just prefer to show her gratitude from a distance.

Eric let out an easy chuckle. “Fern.”

“Coming...” she sighed, leaving her window and making her way down the winding wooden steps that led to the bolted door. The air grew cooler as she moved lower, a dampness clinging to her skin as she reached the ground level and turned the heavy lock to yank the door open.

Even the tower didn’t want to let anyone in, the door having swollen in its frame.

But it finally gave and stepping back, she swept her hand for Eric to enter.

Tall, dark haired, and extremely handsome, Eric was the dark to her sister Ella’s light. She and Fern shared the same blonde hair, same blue eyes.

But where Ella was effervescent and outgoing, Fern was broody and quiet.

Eric closed the door and then gestured for her to return up the stairs first. She led the way, breathing easier as she entered her tower room.

Her bed, a simple mattress and rope frame, was pushed against one curved wall, stacks of books next to it for easy access.

A small stove had been installed for cold nights, which doubled as a surface to cook on, and two chairs sat on one side, small enough to fit up the stairs and just right for her.

Eric took one, looking ridiculously large in the slender piece of furniture.

“You’re eating well, I see,” he said as he attempted to settle into the seat, shifting several times to get comfortable.

“What makes you say that?” she asked, taking the seat next to him.

“You’ve put on some weight. You and Ella were both so thin before...” He tapered off as Fern remembered how her stepmother would starve them as punishment. It was a reminder of how horrid her life had been, but also of just how much Eric had done for her.

“I suppose I have.” She curled into the chair, tucking her feet under her. “I know I have you to thank for that.”

He waved his hand, even as he stood, abandoning the chair and crossing to the stove. He opened the door and stoked the fire then set the kettle on the burner above.

Which was so Eric. Ever kind. “I could have made you tea,” she said. “My apologies for not offering.”

He gave her another of his charming smiles. “It’s quite all right. I don’t fit in that chair, and I’d rather be moving anyway.”

Eric was so pleasant, it was easy to forget that he’d likely come here for a purpose. “Tell me, dear brother, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

He laughed again. “We both know you are not pleased to see me.”

She shook her head. “I am always pleased to see you. You might be the most likable person in all of England.”

“Thank you,” he said with a wink, pulling down two mugs from the shelf and placing the tea leaves in the pot for steeping.

“What I am less enamored with is whatever business has brought you here. I’m certain I won’t like it.”

He shook his head, pouring the hot water from the kettle into the steeping pot. “You’re right. You won’t.”

Her stomach clenched as he fetched the dish that held the cubes of sugar and staring down at the pot as though watching it would make it steep faster.

“Just tell me.” She brought a hand up to massage her forehead.

“You remember Miss Emily Cranston? She attended our wedding.”

“Of course,” Fern said, her hand dropping. She’d liked Emily immensely. She’d been so kind. She’d reminded Fern that not every person within the elite class was a conniving witch. Only most of them.

“Her brother has finally returned home,” Eric murmured. “And he’s coming here to pay his respects.”

“Respects?” Fern asked, her spine straightening with suspicion. “For what?”

“I don’t rightly know,” Eric confirmed. “But as he is a viscount and part of our inner circle of friends, I’d like for you to return to the main house for the duration of his stay.”

She grimaced. She didn’t want to go to the main house. She was happy here. But Eric had indulged her in nearly every request she’d made since becoming her benefactor and she had no right to refuse him. Still, she tried. “Must I really? I’ve so many more volumes to read.”

“Fern Cartwright.” A touch of sternness crept into his voice. “You can’t completely retreat from the world. We’re going to London for the next season, and as the sister of a countess, I still expect you to participate.”

Eric had this silly notion that they needed to be seen amongst the *ton* after the way their stepmother had hidden them away from all of society for the past ten years. Even worse, he’d intimated she ought to allow men to court her. How did she even begin to explain to her wonderful brother-in-law that neither society, nor individual lords were likely to want her? Years of living in solitude, away from society, had made her sharp-tongued and rather unladylike.

“Eager to marry me off?” she asked.

He snorted, giving her a glare. “You know that isn’t true. You’re welcome to stay with us forever. I’m just not certain that’s what would make you happy.”

She drew in a deep breath, calming the panic clawing its way up her throat. Being worried didn’t give her the right to be mean to Eric or to make that accusation. Eric wanted her to have all the options in the world that were available to her. The

problem was, she didn't want them. She'd be happiest just living in this tower forever.

"Fine. I'll come to the house for his visit. When does he arrive?"

"The day after tomorrow. He'll be here for a week."

Her tongue clicked against the back of her teeth. An entire week of conversation and lawn games, and lengthy boring dinners.

How dreadful.

ASH DREW in a deep gulp of fresh summer air while slowing his horse as he made his way to the Earl of Sanbridge's estate.

He'd been lucky that it hadn't rained in the three days it had taken him to make the trip, though he would have happily gotten soaked rather than ride in a carriage. Couldn't stand the bloody things anymore.

It was one of many changes his life had taken on in recent months. Changes he hoped to correct shortly...

Funny how life moved in tight circles, players drawn together by happenstance and fate.

How odd was it that the very villains who'd held him captive for ten months were related to the earl and his new wife? People who had met Ash's sister, people who would willingly open their home to Ash.

Staying in their estate was very convenient, indeed. Ash swiped a hand through his recently shorn hair, kicking his horse a bit faster.

He'd left over a year ago for a four-month tour of Europe. But just as he'd been about to come home, his tour over, a group of men had attacked him on the docks in France. They'd knocked him out, stuffed a bag over his head, and loaded him on a ship. He'd awoken in a tiny closet where he'd barely fit.

And though he hadn't been beaten, and hadn't been harmed, he'd gone slowly mad in that tiny space without reprieve.

The first few weeks had been a blur but then...he'd begun to listen, to mark the days, to collect information. A difficult endeavor when one was fed intermittently from a tray stuffed under the crack in the door.

Ash had begun to wonder if he'd ever be released and then one day, after nearly six months, the door had opened.

He'd immediately been knocked out and then awoken to find himself on the docks of London.

Thin and weak, he'd rushed to his family home only to discover that his parents were dead, and his sister gone.

Panic had filled him. Weak after months of starvation and confinement, he'd attempted to take a carriage to his sister's side, only to find that he couldn't tolerate the bloody thing. Instead, he'd climbed on a horse and arrived just in time to watch Emily wed his childhood best friend.

Jake had taken on Emily's care after the death of his parents and had ended up marrying Ash's sister.

Which was wonderful, after one got over the shock.

He was happy that his sister had found love and that his friend had cared for her when she'd been her most vulnerable.

And as much as he had a viscountcy he needed to learn to run, not having Emily to care for meant that he was free to search out what he most desired...revenge.

And with his mind clear, he'd set down to write all the details he'd overheard through the tiny window in his below deck closet.

The name of the ship had been Windswept and its captain, Jack. What was more, for part of the journey, Jack had taken a lover. He'd heard her on deck and below. Her name... Melisandre.

The crew didn't like her. They'd called her *Princess* and *Lady* the way most men said curses, with rough hard voices.

But she'd brought them several items, the sale of which had meant they tolerated her. And Jack...

Jack had plans to wed her. Daughter of an earl...Ash had heard murmured about the crew.

He didn't know what either of them looked like, but he learned that Melisandre had once been the stepdaughter of the Earl of Sanbridge.

Jack was harder. Likely because Captain Jack wasn't his real name. And then the man had gone and married Melisandre

and so both were now protected by a new name, whatever Jack's real name was, and that meant that Ashton didn't know how to find either of them.

But he would. And when he did, he'd finally learn why they'd done what they did and then Ash would see them punished for their crimes.

Lucky for him, he knew people who knew Melisandre and one way or the other he was going to track the couple down and then Jack would pay for what he'd done to Ash.

A looming home rose above the trees, its spires and peaks out of a fairytale as a river wound its way around the property.

It looked idyllic, and for the briefest moment, a pang filled his chest to know he was coming here to disrupt that perfection but then he waved his hand. Nothing was ever as it appeared.

Not even himself...

CHAPTER TWO

FERN STOOD ON THE STAIRS, pressing out the skirts of her gown as a lone horseman made his way up the drive.

Frowning, she looked down at herself, wishing she'd worn something else.

Ella had chosen the gown.

When Eric had proposed to Ella, and their stepmother's and stepsister's crimes had been revealed, Ella had confiscated their stepsister Melisandre's massive collection of dresses.

Melisandre had managed to escape with a few of her precious items, all of which had been purchased by their father. Their stepsister's shopping habit was part of the reason the earldom had gone into such debt. Fortunately for them, many of the items remained and some of them had been sold to help repay the massive debts left behind.

Only a few of items of value remained. The ones that did were either of exceptional value or had some sentimental pull for Fern and Ella.

They might have been able to sell the gowns too, but Fern and Ella had been dressed in near rags. And Melisandre had

possessed a queen's collection of clothes. And so they'd taken the gowns for themselves.

For Ella, Fern suspected, reusing Melisandre's dresses was its own form of revenge. And Fern could understand. Not only did it save them money, but it also robbed Melisandre as she and Ella altered the gowns to fit themselves. Despite all of that, she hated the frocks. They were another reminder of the past, the one she was trying so hard to escape and feared she might never succeed.

And so, wearing a gown she knew had belonged to her stepsister...

She tugged at the fabric, wishing she could rip the fabric to shreds. Pale blue muslin, it would likely tear easily.

Ella had insisted that the color would highlight Fern's eyes. But she thought the dress might underscore her inner rage most. And the fact that she'd accomplished nothing on her own. Not even dressing herself.

Her fists had clenched the skirts, and she very slowly unfurled her fingers, smoothing the fabric as their guest stopped his horse in front of the stairs.

His rich brown hair was the first feature that Fern noted, the color warm and friendly. His eyes were next...

Also a dark brown, they had warmth to the color that wasn't matched by his expression. Every line of his face was etched into hardness.

Only accentuated by the fact that he was exceedingly thin. Was he ill?

It was odd for any person of the peerage to be that underweight. She and Ella had been, but that had been because of forced abuse.

He swung down from his horse, his body lithe and fluid as he turned toward them. Despite his thin features, his was still a handsome man, his jaw square, his cheekbones adding a ruggedness to his face.

Fern dipped her chin, knowing that she was staring. Was it rude when he was their guest? Socializing came easily to Ella but between Fern's natural inclination for quiet and the sheer number of lessons she'd missed in her formative years, she feared at the age of twenty, she wasn't likely to develop the skill.

Which made this entire visit and Eric's plan to parade her about society ridiculous.

She'd never be a success and she'd be miserable the entire time she stayed in London. Better to just leave her in her tower.

She sighed, knowing that she couldn't live her entire life in that drafty little tower.

But a cozy cottage...there was potential there.

Viscount Cranston made his way up the stairs, stopping in front of Eric and giving a quick bow. "My lord. My sincere thanks for allowing me to stay."

Eric gave the other man a smile. "We're glad to see you home safe after your disappearance. Life has truly granted you a great miracle."

Fern's head snapped up once again. She'd been embroiled in a drama of her own, the details of Emily's brother having escaped her. But they came flooding back now.

Emily's parents had been killed in a carriage accident and her brother, having gone on a tour of Europe, couldn't be found for months. Emily had been afraid he was lost forever.

Fern had assumed that her brother had just been having fun, got intentionally lost in Paris or Rome. But Eric's words sounded far more sinister than that.

"I suppose it is a miracle." But the viscount grimaced rather than smiled.

Fern knew all about grimaces and unspoken words...

Most people thought her change in fate a miracle as well. But she saw it more as a very small reward after years of struggle and strife.

"Welcome to our home," Ella said with a smile as the viscount bowed to her as well.

"Thank you, my lady."

He continued down the line, until he reached Fern. Notching her chin, she met his gaze evenly.

"May I introduce my sister-in-law, Lady Fern Cartwright?"

"My lady," he murmured, his eyes holding hers with their intensity.

"My lord," she managed to say evenly though something in his gaze stole her breath. He was even more handsome this

close, but also, there was a part where he seemed to be assessing her. Calculating.

Ella had that look often when they'd lived with Melisandre and their stepmother. Fern would recognize it anywhere.

Eric and Ella led the way inside, Viscount Cranston offering his arm. She threaded her hand around his biceps, and he led her inside.

“What brings you to Castledon?” she asked, keeping her voice light. Benign.

“I’m making the rounds, visiting everyone who helped my sister while I was delayed in returning home.”

That sounded nice enough. But she felt his muscles tighten which belied his words or his feelings. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“Thank you, Lady Fern.”

“Truly, I prefer just Fern.”

He glanced over at her, his eyes lit with surprise. “My lady?”

Her story was no secret. “My stepmother did not allow us to do much socializing. I’ve spent very little time in society, and I find much of its strictures to be...” she paused, searching for the right word. “Confining.”

Or was that her own behavior? Either way, she knew for certain that she’d likely never fit in, even if she wished to. And she didn’t. But still...

“I do not enjoy confinement myself.”

His tone held bitter notes and she glanced at him again to see that his jaw had turned to granite.

Viscount Cranston was a complete mystery. Perhaps if Fern were further along in her own recovery, she'd be truly curious. But as it stood now, she'd spent too long trying to order her own life to worry about the affairs of others.

Still, a few questions pestered her thoughts as they made their way inside.

FERN WAS FAR TOO PRETTY for Ash's liking.

Despite her comment about not caring for society, beautiful women received their share of attention. And she was gorgeous. Which meant she'd likely not fawn over him.

She was near angelic looking with her fair hair and large blue eyes. The four of them sat together making small talk and Fern neither giggled, nor talked overly much.

Instead, she gave him the occasional curious glance followed by large lapses of silence on her part.

It was the first time he'd ever hoped to meet a female who might be chatty. He'd come here to dig information out of one or both of the sisters. Something that would lead him to a clue that would help him find their stepsister.

But neither woman had been forthcoming and the earl...he talked of newly bestowed titles, farmland, and the joys of a

bucolic life, everything but the drama that had unfolded in these very walls.

Which was understandable. They'd only just met. But Ash had hoped one of the sisters might be an open book.

Was a vapid female who gossiped too much to ask for?

He turned to Fern and then glanced away again, bringing him back to his original thought. She was far too pretty for his liking.

Her looks were...distracting to say the least, and he was here for an explicit purpose. The last thing he needed was to have some silly boy-like infatuation.

After the circumstances of this past year, he was as far from boyhood as a man could possibly be. And he'd never wanted an emotional entanglement less.

Fern delicately cleared her throat as she folded and unfolded her hands, but it was Ella who spoke. "Tell us, Viscount Bancroft, what shall we do while you visit?"

"Good company is a welcome gift, and for that I am grateful. Please don't put yourself out planning activities."

Lady Sanbridge gave him a wide smile. "Most gracious but surely we must entertain you in some fashion."

He supposed a few outings would help facilitate conversation. "Anything out of doors is very pleasant. Beyond that..." He suppressed a yawn, knowing it was rude, but blast, he was tired. The ride here had been taxing, especially considering he was still recovering from his confinement.

Perhaps he could use this visit to both garner information and rest the smallest bit. He could say one thing for this family. A calming energy flowed between the three of them.

“We can most certainly plan some rides about the country or some picnics...” Lady Sanbridge leaned over to pat her sister’s knee. “Can’t we, Fern?”

“Of course,” Fern answered, with a slight frown. “Nothing would make me happier.”

Ash caught the slight tinge of sarcasm that laced her voice, and honestly, it made him warm the slightest bit. He wasn’t much for participation these days either. “What do you prefer to do with your time, Lady Fern?”

“I like to read,” she answered, her gaze casting down.

Reading...he’d not enjoyed that luxury in ages. “Sounds wonderful. What are you enjoying currently?”

She shifted in her seat. “A book of mysteries about a detective who solves murders and a woman who lives alone in a cursed house.”

Interest made his pulse beat the slightest bit faster. “Fascinating.”

“Do you really think so?” Lady Sanbridge asked, her brows knitting in disbelief.

“I do,” he answered, sincerely meaning it. As he was embroiled in a real-life mystery himself, the plot of her book seemed to mirror his own life.

Fern gave him a real smile that lit her face and transformed her from a beauty to an angel... She stole his breath and he quickly turned away.

“I’m sure Fern could allow you to borrow the book while you’re here,” Lady Sanbridge offered. “Wouldn’t you, Fern?”

Fern’s smile disappeared. Obviously, she did not wish to allow him to borrow the book, and he nearly laughed out loud.

This year had left him raw and angry. And something about Fern’s honest expression of her feelings was... refreshing.

Fern took several seconds to answer and when she did, she pushed the words out through clenched teeth. “I’d be happy to.”

“Oh good,” Lady Sanbridge answered. “Perhaps you could fetch—”

“I can’t.” Fern held up a hand. “I’ve left the book elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere?” The question popped out before he could hold it in because Fern was not only beautiful, but he found her quite...intriguing.

She straightened her shoulders and then she looked at him, her eyes blazing with a challenge. Not only was she not vapid, or chatty, she was straightforward, and she had an inner strength there that he greatly admired.

“I too enjoy the outdoors and I’ve a lovely reading spot on the property.”

His brows raised. Because this was an interesting opportunity. A walk might be just the thing to ask some particular questions. But he didn't even have to make the request.

Lady Sanbridge did it for him. "We should allow our guest a rest and a meal and perhaps we can take a walk this afternoon to retrieve the volume."

Fern's lips thinned but she didn't protest. But even Ash could see that she stared at her sister with daggers in her eyes.

Perhaps Ash shouldn't bother with the book. Fern was unlikely to divulge any information she didn't wish to share if she were irritated with him. Then again, a little time for just the two of them might be exactly what he needed.

CHAPTER THREE

ELLA, her sister, was Fern's favorite person in the entire world. When no one had loved Fern, Ella had been there.

Her sister had literally stolen food to keep Fern fed. She'd give her life for Ella's without hesitation. But Ella was famous for creating schemes that wreaked havoc on everyone around her. Which was why Fern felt completely justified in saying that whatever plot Ella had hatched this time, Fern might have to kill her.

And there clearly was a plot.

She recognized the gleam in Ella's eyes. She had a plan, and this walk was the first step in executing it.

The last plot had heaved them out of abuse and into Ella's marriage to Eric. And Fern was forever grateful.

But for every success Ella had with one of her schemes, there were many, many failures...

And Fern was in no mood to experience another.

The Viscount left the sitting room, retiring for a repose. He'd no more stepped out of the room when Fern spun on her sister. "What do you think you're doing?"

Ella, an excellent liar, was the picture of innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t even.” Fern wagged her finger. “I know you better than anyone and I know when you’re plotting.”

Ella placed a hand over her heart, her blue eyes wide. “Whatever would I wish to plot?”

But the answer was completely obvious. “You’re trying to play matchmaker.”

Eric had the decency to look guilty, though Fern hadn’t needed the giveaway.

Ella didn’t have the decency to look anything other than pleased with herself. “There is no pressure for you to do anything. We simply wish for you to be happy.”

“I will be happy if the two of you just leave me be.”

Ella dropped her façade of innocence, her hands coming to her hips. “If I leave you be, you’d let yourself rot alone in that tower. It’s not natural.”

She glared back at Ella, glad to at least be having a real conversation. “After all that happened, I need time.”

“We’ve given you—”

Fern held up her hand. “You don’t get to decide how much.”

Ella’s jaw snapped shut.

“Please do not try to match me with the viscount. I’ll do my duty when required, but you can’t force me take steps I’m not ready for.”

“Of course, we can’t,” Eric soothed. “And we’re not trying to. But doing a bit of socializing, perhaps learning to flirt a bit—”

“Flirt,” she cried, her hands tossing up in the air. “I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but I was never going to flirt with anyone. Ever.”

“This is likely true,” Ella nodded. “Unless flirting involved sarcastic quips.”

Fern opened her mouth to argue further but she heard a quiet laugh, quickly covered, from the hall. Who was out there listening? “I too find I am in need of a repose,” she announced, turning back toward the door.

She made her way out into the hall, to find it empty. Lifting her skirts, she started down the corridor at a near run. She knew someone had been listening and while she’d not revealed anything that wasn’t common knowledge in this house, she wanted to know who had been eavesdropping. She liked her privacy even more than the next person.

Taking the corner quickly she just caught sight of the viscount’s back. Surprise jolted through her. “You can stop your retreat,” she called out. “I know you were listening.”

He did stop, and then he turned, brushing a hand through his hair. “My sincere apologies, Lady Fe—”

“Just Fern.” She cocked her head, waiting for his explanation. Why would he care about the particulars of her personality. Then again, they had been discussing...him.

He gave her a small smile that softened everything about his face. “My name is Ashton, but my friends and family call me Ash.”

Ash. She liked the name. It had a nice ring.

“And I do apologize for eavesdropping. It was very rude, but I seemed to be the topic of conversation and my curiosity got the better of me.”

Heat filled her cheeks as she continued to move toward him. “I am not much for societal rules, but I do believe in basic manners.”

He had the decency to wince. “Again. My apologies. I can only offer up this as my recompense. I’d like to assure you that I am also not interested in courting either.”

Fern stopped, her stomach twisting. Was that a niggles of disappointment? Surely not. Why would she care if the man she didn’t want, didn’t want her either? “Good to know.”

“You’re lovely, Fern, but I…”

She tipped her head to the side, studying him as he grimaced. She’d sensed he had ulterior motives in the morning room.

“I have had the most difficult year of my life, and I’ve no intention to make any more changes. Enough have been foisted upon me to last a good long while.”

His words rang with sincerity that helped put her at ease. “That is most certainly something I can understand.”

“Do you?”

She nodded, coming to stand in front of him. “I do. My father died not a year ago, my stepmother took her tyranny over Ella and myself places I never dreamed she go. Only Ella was able to fight her off.” Fern looked to the floor. Guilt stabbed at her, shrinking her heart. She ought to have helped Ella more. Much as Fern put up a front of anger, it was Ella who’d been spurred into action.

“Tyranny?”

Her eyes lifted to Ash. “You’re very thin.”

“So are you.”

She nodded. “My stepmother frequently withheld food.”

He drew in a sharp breath. “You can’t mean it.”

“I do. Now, it’s your turn. Why are you so thin?”

“I was held captive by a pirate.”

She gasped, her eyes growing wide. “You’re jesting.”

“I am not,” he said as he scrubbed a hand through his hair. “He locked me in a cupboard for actual months.”

Fern felt a wave of sympathy wash over her. This man had known real suffering. She’d meant what she’d said about courting. She wasn’t interested. But she wouldn’t mind having a friend. Someone who wasn’t related to her who might actually like her. Even understand her a bit. “We’ve a fair bit in common then.”

“Indeed, we do.”

ASH COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED A BETTER moment with Fern. It was everything he'd hoped. She was already speaking of her family, their tragedies.

And she talked of a kinship. That was something he might be able to use...

"I'd very much like to read your book."

Her blooming smile faded again.

He lifted his hands in a show of assurance. "I promise to return it in short order. I just think we might share more in common than recent tragedy."

"Oh," she breathed, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. Blast, she looked beautiful like that. "Perhaps we do."

Triumph surged through him. He'd had a moment in the sitting room where he worried he'd made this trip in vain. Now, hope filled his chest. A friendship with Fern was all he required. She'd tell him what he needed to know if he were careful not to ask too many questions at once. She was opening up already. "Then, I look forward to our walk and borrowing your book. I promise to read it quickly, return it with haste, and make our discussion of the content lengthy and enjoyable. It's been a while since I last shared such dynamic exchange with someone."

Even more color flooded her cheeks. "Oh, a book discussion sounds wonderful. Not very many people like to talk about literature with me."

The slightest tinge of guilt tightened his chest. But it wasn't as though he lied. And he would make the entire interaction as enjoyable for her as possible. He just had a secondary motive.

One that wouldn't harm anyone. With everything straight in his mind, he returned to his room and, after removing his coat and boots, lay down on the comfortable bed.

He ought to be exhausted. A day of riding, a year of suffering, but he found his mind wide awake as he considered the beauty he'd met today.

And when it was time to return downstairs for their walk, despite his lack of sleep, there was a spring in his step.

The lord and lady waited for him at the bottom of the stairs, Fern just to their left.

He stopped at her side, offering his elbow and her fingers threaded into the crook of his arm. They were small, and feather light, and he had the urge to cover them with his other hand.

A footman trailed behind them with a basket tucked under his arm.

Ash looked back and Fern did too. "A light snack for the walk."

His brows lifted. "It looks heavy to me."

Fern gave a small shrug. "Eric is used to fattening people up. Ella and I were exceptionally thin when we first met him. But I think you're his new project."

Ash winced in legitimate regret. That was kind beyond measure and these people were not only welcoming him, but they also nurtured too. “The earl has taken care of you.”

She nodded. “Both of us. I’ve been exceptionally lucky that he has been so kind after...” Her voice trailed off as she looked out over the bucolic landscape, the river threading in and out of view.

“Your stepmother?”

“That’s right.” They passed through the back door to the courtyard and started across the sweeping lawn and down toward a large pond.

“Did I hear you had a stepsister too?” He tried to keep from holding his breath. He wanted to hear of her pain, he did. It would just be nice if he also collected useful information.

Fern gave him a curious glance before she answered. “That’s right. I did. I do, as far as I know. Melisandre.”

Melisandre. The name sat bitter as he forced himself to relax. “Was she any better than your stepmother?”

“Better?” Fern grimaced. “No, not better. Just different.”

“How so?”

“My stepmother was able to mask her intentions and keep up appearances. Melisandre never tried to hide anything. She was an unrepentant spoiled wretch.”

A thrill passed down his spine, curling his toes in his boots. That sounded exactly right.

Fern plucked at the gown she wore, a frown creasing both her mouth and her brow.

“What is it?” he asked, looking at her skirts to see if some insect plagued her.

But she let the skirt go again. “It’s nothing.”

“It looks like something.”

Fern shook her head. “Melisandre had an immense number of dresses, jewels, and accessories.” She cleared her throat. “When Eric inherited the title, it came with a mountain of debt created by Melisandre and my stepmother. Rather than spending money, we’ve been repurposing...” She plucked at the skirts of her pale blue gown once again.

He sucked in a quick gulp of air. This was Melisandre’s gown. “She never came back for her things?”

Fern snorted. “No. She wouldn’t dare.”

His brows lifted. He wished to know so much more. But he could only ask so much before he appeared oddly interested. Which he was...

And he’d learn more. But he had to be careful not to arouse suspicion.

CHAPTER FOUR

FERN LOOKED AT HER TOWER, realizing that the narrow building did not have quite the same draw that it had earlier that day...

She sighed, squinting up at the window. She still loved being alone.

But she had to confess, she liked spending time with other people too when it was with the right person. She looked over at Viscount Bancroft. Ash.

Talking with him had been wonderful. He stimulated her mind, and with him she forgot about how unfit for society she'd become. She didn't feel awkward or less than. She felt... just right.

"This is where you read?"

There was an edge to his voice, something hard as granite. "Yes," she answered.

"It's so small..."

"Makes it cozy," she said, looking up at her window. "And it discourages visitors."

That made him laugh. “Very true. It would be difficult to fit more than one person in there.”

She nodded as she made her way to the nearby tree, finding the key that she’d carefully hidden in the low branches.

Quickly, she returned to her tower, unlocked the door, then climbed the stairs. Rather than take her current novel, she reached for a stack of periodicals that held Charles Dickens’s monthly installments of his mystery story. Ash would likely prefer them anyway and she’d read every one multiple times. But before she left, she gave a quick glance around with a sigh.

Perhaps Eric was right. It might be time to start branching out in her life. She didn’t wish to marry, or even court, but she wouldn’t mind having a few friends...

Making her way back outside, she handed the periodicals to Ash. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, inspecting the pile. “Six months without books has starved me for literary escape.”

“Six months...” She shivered, hugging herself. “In a cupboard.”

He looked away, then, his gaze far off as his free hand trailed over the stack, a vein jumping in his jaw. “It’s a long time to spend in a very tiny space.”

Fern swallowed down a lump of sympathy. “It is.”

He tucked the periodicals under his arm, turning away. Fern could practically feel his pain, a pain she recognized. For

she too had been trapped in a situation that barely sustained life with no idea when or if it would ever end.

She drew in a tremulous gulp of air. Did she share that? “How did you escape?”

“I didn’t...” he pushed out through gritted teeth. “One day they just let me out.”

Fern blinked in surprised. That seemed odd. “Really?”

“I know. You’d think that pirates would have killed me.”

Eric and Ella were laying out the picnic as she and Ash slowly made their way toward them. But Fern placed a hand on his arm. “They must have thought there was some advantage...”

“Likely.” He looked at her then, his eyes glinting with fire. “Though I don’t know what it would be.”

“Do you intend to find out?”

He stared into the distance. “I do intend to find them, but I’m not sure I care about the why.”

Them... She just caught the use of plural. Did he mean the entire boat of men? And if he was looking for them but not for answers, what did he wish? But Ella interrupted them, calling them over. “Come eat.”

Fern frowned as Ash kept walking toward the blanket. She trailed behind, lost in thought. She had so many questions about what he’d just told her, but she suspected he was also short on answers.

Her story wasn't really done either. Her stepmother was in prison, but Melisandre was still out there, and she could return. Fern shivered. Ella had conquered their stepmother and stepsister, but what had Fern done? Nothing. If she ever had to, could she best Melisandre on her own or would she always be her stepsister's victim?

Fern looked at her tower. Did she think the structure would protect her from her stepsister? Hardly...

She wasn't exactly afraid of Melisandre. But what her stepmother and stepsister had withheld from her was the knowledge to walk comfortably in this world. What was more, she'd never stood up for herself. Could she if she needed?

Did Melisandre still hold the power to rob Fern of her confidence once again?

She sat down next to Ash, quietly picking at her food as the other three people conversed.

She saw Ash's gaze move to her a few times until he finally leaned toward her. "Fern, I'm sorry if I was too harsh. My wounds are still raw and—"

Fern waved his words away. "Not at all. I was only thinking about your circumstances and mine."

His eyes widened in surprise. "And what conclusions did you come to?"

She stood, shaking out her skirts. "I fancy a bit of walking."

"You?" Ella asked but Eric gave her an elbow to the side and her sister's mouth snapped shut again.

Ash stood as well. "I'd be happy to escort you."

She slipped her fingers into the crook of his arm as they began to move along the edge of the trees, staying in sight of Ella and Eric.

Fern checked over her shoulder, looking back at Ella to make sure her sister wasn't paying attention before she began. It wasn't that she thought Ella wouldn't approve. It was more that Fern wished to have this one thing separate from her sister.

So much of her life had been completely intertwined with Ella's. "Melisandre took everything from me that she could get her hands on and then she attempted to take some more."

His mouth thinned and he pulled her a touch closer. "How charming."

"She's lovely..." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "But the thing about living in that place is that I'm fairly certain there isn't another thing she could steal from me and so...what is there to be afraid of?" She could only hope that were true.

"Interesting..."

"Do you think your pirate could ever capture you again?"

"Here on English soil? I doubt it. He only caught me in Paris because I didn't speak the language and he tricked me into thinking a Frenchman was attempting to swindle me."

Fern held her breath, sympathy lancing through her, as she remembered about how they'd all been taken in by her stepmother before her marriage to their father. "Then don't

fear him. You'll be your most powerful when you don't feel anything toward him at all."

"You don't fear Melisandre? Truly?"

"No," she shook her head. "But I do think I'm afraid of myself and the box I allowed Melisandre to put me in. Does that make sense?"

ASH BLINKED DOWN at the beautiful Fern in complete shock, her words echoing about his head. They rang with a sincerity and insight that stole his breath.

"You'll be your most powerful when you don't feel anything toward him at all." He repeated, looking at her. It made his revenge plot feel...petty. Her other words echoed in his head. *I'm not afraid of her but of the box I allowed her to put me in.*

The words tickled at some unnamed fear in his own heart.

"That's how I see it," she said softly.

She was right. But what sort of man would he be if he didn't find the pirate and make him pay? Then again, what sort of man was he for using the wounded Fern to gain that revenge?

The thought stung.

He had a sister, a woman that he wished all the best for in the world. A woman he'd go to great lengths to protect.

Who protected Fern?

He glanced back at Eric, deep in conversation with his wife. Of course, the earl saw to Fern's welfare.

But was it the same? Fern had no brother, no father, no husband. He winced, not liking himself all that much.

And here she was offering him honest, insightful, and well-intentioned advice. She was attempting to care for him. "Thank you, Fern. I appreciate your words of wisdom."

She shook her head. "Not wisdom, I don't think. Perhaps understanding."

He stopped walking to look down at her. Why had his plan dimmed so much in half a day? Her face was turned up to his, her smile soft.

With a woman like this, could he forget the past? Begin moving forward? He shook his head. He doubted it. His wounds were so fresh, and he'd missed so much.

The death of his parents, his sister's struggle all alone while he'd been held captive... Those sins needed retribution.

"If you saw Melisandre, would you be understanding? Sympathetic?"

Fern wrinkled her nose, "I'd like to punch her right between the eyes."

He chuckled, relaxing a bit with those words. "I'm not the only one who wants a bit of revenge then." Belatedly, he realized he was sharing more than he intended.

"Is that what you want?" She cocked her head, studying him in a way that he thought she might see all his darkest

secrets, including his ill intentions toward her. “To get back at the people who held you captive?”

“They took a lot from me.”

She nodded. “And they, whoever they are, continue to steal your time and your energy.”

They. She’d landed on another of his weak points. This woman was incredibly smart and very perceptive. He’d bet she’d make an excellent companion in his investigation...

Why did his mind keep going to places that involved he and Fern spending more time together? “I suppose that’s true.”

“It is.” She nodded. “I read this work by a philosopher who detailed the art of war.”

His brow quirked. “You are interested in war?”

“Intimately,” she said, dropping her voice and leaning in closer. “In many ways, I felt embroiled in one myself.”

“I feel that way too. And for both of us, we never really got to fight, did we?” That might be the heart of his hatred. He’d never even had a chance to defend himself.

“The odds, in each of our cases, were always stacked against us.”

“But we’re in a different place now...” And until this afternoon, he’d known exactly how he wished to use his place. Here in England, he was a viscount while his enemy was nothing more than a common criminal.

“We are,” she answered with a nod. “Would you like to borrow my book on philosophy?”

“I would.”

She began tugging him toward the tower. “Excellent. I shall fetch it for you.”

They were nearing the door and he felt himself tensing as they moved closer. He didn’t have to go in but when they were feet from the entrance, he stopped, not moving any closer.

“What’s wrong?” Fern asked, turning toward him. But his eyes were glued to the structure before him.

“I don’t...”

She looked at the tower, then back at him. “You were locked in a cupboard.”

“Yes.” He couldn’t say more, or she’d hear just how afraid he was and how he hated himself for it.

“You don’t like small spaces.”

“Not anymore.”

She nodded. “So strange.”

“What is?”

“I don’t like people. I never really got a chance to have friends and I’m not even certain I know how to make them now.” She reached up and touched his cheek so that he finally turned his gaze from the tower to look down at her. “We bear our scars, don’t we?”

Something in his shoulders unwound. He still wasn’t going in there. But he felt less out of control knowing he wasn’t alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

FERN SAT at the dinner table, genuinely enjoying herself. Conversation had been lively, the food far better than what she cooked herself and the company was excellent.

Eric and Ella were already her two favorite people in all the world and Ash was quickly making that list.

Kind, intelligent, and understanding, she felt an ease around him she rarely experienced.

Her success in making an actual friend had her considering Eric's other plans for her. She'd been resistant to joining society and she was still certain she didn't wish to be in a crowd.

But he might be right that it was time to expand her world. Much as she loved her books...

She looked over at Ash, the sight of his sharp masculine features causing her stomach to roll in the strangest way. She felt as though she was weightless for a moment, her head swimming and her thoughts fuzzy and unclear.

She looked back down at her food, trying to discern the emotion that thrummed in her veins. She'd wished for a friend,

no more.

Still, what was this strange feeling pulsing through her? Swallowing down a lump, she lost track of the conversation around her until Ella's voice penetrated the fog.

"You ought to join us."

Join who? Where? Fern's attention focused back on the group.

"I'd like that." Ash's gaze flicked to her, a small smile playing about his lips. "What about you?"

Her lips parted as she tried to formulate an answer.

"Would you be willing to attend, Fern?" Ella asked, amusement lacing her voice.

Fern swung her gaze to her sister, her brows shooting up. "Er," she started.

"The beauty of a masquerade ball is that you can hide while still being seen," Eric offered.

"Masquerade?" she asked softly, knowing that she was admitting to everyone that she hadn't been listening. Her cheeks heated with color. It was one thing to be distant and quiet. It was another to be floating off in a bubble all her own.

Everyone laughed and she dipped her head, sure her face was bright red because heat flamed across her cheeks. Under the table, a foot gently kicked hers. She met Ash's gaze, and he gave her a wink.

Had she been hot before? Her entire body radiated heat at the intimacy of a secret touch under the table.

“Our neighbors, Lord and Lady Wrexham, are having a masquerade ball on Saturday. They’ve invited all of us to attend. Mostly locals but a few guests will be coming from London as well.” Ella leaned forward. “It will be an excellent opportunity for you to socialize a bit.”

Ash would be going too? She looked across the table at him, his eyes sparkling back at her. “What do you think?” he asked.

She nodded, knowing that she was acting odd. She’d normally put up at least some sort of fight. But today, she couldn’t. The idea of attending a soiree with Ash at her side... her blood rushed through her veins, pulsing in her ears. “I agree.”

Romantic fantasy began to swirl in her head of dancing with Ash, of being on his arm, of him leaning close, and...

She drew in a sharp breath, realizing she’d been fantasizing about kissing him.

What had happened to her?

Ella gave her an incredulous frown. “Are you feeling all right, Fern?”

“Why do you ask?” Did she sound slightly breathless?

“You agreed to a social event without even a hint of an argument,” Ella said, sounding both worried and stunned.

The corners of Fern’s lips pulled up. Her sister was absolutely right. Heat still radiated from her cheeks as she nipped at her lip to hide the smile. “I’ve decided that you and

Eric might be right. It's time for me to move forward rather than remaining stuck in the past."

Ella squeaked even as Eric gave her a beaming smile and Ash...he looked at her with a twinkle in his eye as though they shared a secret. It made her insides dance again and the intimate spot between her legs pulse with an ache.

"Are you reminding me of our earlier conversation?" Ash asked, leaning forward.

She leaned forward too, her heart racing in her chest. "I was speaking for myself but if it also applies to you..."

They shared so much already...

His smile grew. "We shall forge into the future together?"

Was that the promise that her heart hoped it was? "Together," she murmured, holding his gaze with her own. In that moment, she made a wish...

Together.

ASH'S HEART squeezed in his chest. Because he liked Fern and he wanted to move forward as well.

But part of his journey forward meant clearing the past and an idea had just occurred to him.

Melisandre and Fern were locked in a battle all their own. Which meant when Fern came to London for the season, she might very well draw out Melisandre.

And if he remained close to Fern...

His gut twisted. Using her sounded awful. But if he made certain to also help Fern, be a friend to her and see her adjusted to society, then they'd both win.

But the word friend stuck in his throat, leaving a bitter taste.

He didn't want to be Fern's friend. A beautiful woman who understood him...why would he want to be just friends?

Another voice argued that he'd have to choose. He could not use Fern to get to Melisandre and then ask for her heart.

And he sincerely didn't know which was more important in this moment.

But either way...it was in Fern's best interest to attend the masquerade. That he knew...she'd locked herself away, created her own cupboard and she'd have to break herself out.

But as he looked up Fern's shy smile, he noted that both Ella and Eric were giving him curious stares, their questions evident in their eyes.

He needed to consider more than just Fern here. The earl and his countess would also develop expectations. He shouldn't lay too much favor at her door in case the opportunity for revenge against the pirate and his bride presented itself.

Fern's blue eyes flashed to him again, the shell pink of her lips matching the blush in her cheeks as her lashes fluttered.

The candlelight caught the light blonde streaks in her hair, shimmering as her lashes rested on her cheeks.

She stole his breath with her beauty and in it made him want to give up his plan for retribution and do as she'd suggested this afternoon...let go of the past and move into the future. A new beginning.

What would it be like to have a wife who would enjoy the winter with him while they read and discussed literature? And to have a companion who liked long walks in the summer and who didn't need to fill every moment with ceaseless conversation?

After the year he'd had, that sounded idyllic.

Not that Fern was a wilting flower. No. He sensed her strength, the challenge of a strong personality and the depth that could keep a man satisfied for years to come.

He sat back in his chair. "A masquerade..." He scratched his chin. "What shall we wear?"

A laugh went round the table, and the conversation began in earnest about costume ideas.

This time, it was Ash who remained silent. Because he already knew the costume he'd choose.

And it wasn't in the spirit of moving forward. Instead, it had everything to do with the past.

CHAPTER SIX

FERN SMOOTHED the skirts of her ball gown one more time, as she looked in the mirror, hoping she'd made the right choice in attire.

Saturday evening had arrived, and she was nearly ready for the masquerade ball.

She'd chosen a gown of pale purple silk, fitted in the bodice all the way to the waist with voluminous skirts.

Her hair had been swept back, and ribbons had been threaded through the locks to make her hair appear much longer than it actually was.

She'd once read a story about a girl named Rapunzel who'd been locked in a tall tower. Fern had chosen her hideaway but, in some regards, it had been her stepmother's actions that had forced her into the choice.

Rapunzel hadn't an easy time of it, but she did eventually escape her tower and she found love too.

The word *love* made her sigh, Ash's image dancing through her thoughts. She'd not spent as much time with him as she might have liked the past few days.

He'd been in Eric's office, combing through ledgers. Eric had had a difficult time adjusting to his title and learning how to manage it. He struggled with the keeping of the books. It had been Ella who'd taught him.

And it seemed that Eric was intent upon passing that knowledge to Ash. Which Fern thought was wonderful. But she'd missed spending time with their guest.

His company was so much more entertaining than her beloved books even and she'd struggle to be content on her own.

Her maid entered the room, having left to collect a final piece for Fern's costume. In her hands, she held a wooden box, the lid still closed. "I believe this is the one you wanted."

Fern turned away from the looking glass to better assess the box. She didn't even need to have it opened, to know what was inside.

The Gladstone Genevieve Tiara had been a gift to Melisandre on her sixteenth birthday. Encrusted with diamonds, it had a large amethyst in the middle and several more at each of the points. Fern had always loved the piece for both its beauty and history. It was rumored to have been made hundreds of years ago at the time of King Arthur.

It was one of the few pieces they'd yet to sell, having stabilized the earldom's finances and Fern had always wished to wear the glittering tiara.

Melisandre had never liked the piece. In fact, she'd wrinkled her nose, stating that she far preferred sapphires.

Fern had no idea what the piece was worth, but she assumed a fair bit. To her knowledge, Melisandre had not worn it. Which made it feel less like Melisandre's and more like her own.

Her maid carefully removed the piece from the box and positioned it in Fern's hair, pinning the sparkling tiara in place.

Fern had never felt more beautiful as the mask was placed over her eyes and tied at the back of her hair, the ribbons wound through her coif and then pinned into place.

She'd not seen herself like this before and her hand fluttered over her heart. Would Ash think her beautiful? Would he find her as irresistible as she found him? Her pulse jumped at the idea even as she rose from her chair and started out the door and then down the stairs.

Ella, Eric, and Ash already waited at the bottom and her heart skipped several beats. Ella and Eric were dressed in matching costumes of a knight and a damsel...

But it was Ash who stole her breath.

He was garbed as a pirate.

He looked dashingly handsome, and dastardly enough to steal a woman's heart. But also...

Fern knew that this was not an accident that he'd dressed as the very man with whom he wished to seek revenge.

And as breathtakingly wonderful as he looked, she knew what the costume meant.

He was still very much attached to his past. Her heart gave a painful thud as she started down the stairs once again.

“Oh Fern...” Ella gasped. “You look devastatingly beautiful.”

She touched the jeweled piece on her head. “Is it all right that I used this?”

“Of course,” Ella answered. “It’s yours as much as it’s mine.”

Even with the mask, Fern noted that Ash’s brows rose in question. But he stepped forward, offering his arm. “Allow me, my lady.”

She gave a nod, threading her fingers into the crook of his elbow. “Thank you.”

“Your costume is stunning.”

She glanced up and down his frame. “As is yours. And a statement too.”

He grimaced his mouth tightening as he fell in step behind Eric and Ella. “There was nothing else I wished to pretend to be.”

It wasn’t her business. She’d just hoped that he’d taken her words to heart about putting the past behind them...

But it likely wasn’t fair of her to even ask. First, Melisandre had been gone for nearly a year. She’d had a great deal more time to recover than he’d had.

And second, he didn’t owe her anything. They’d had one heart-to-heart conversation. A rarity for her, which made it feel significant.

But perhaps for him, ladies opened their true feelings to him often. And why not? He was easy to converse with, exceptionally pleasant in his countenance, and liberal with his praise.

She made a note not to allow herself to imagine emotions that weren't there. This was one of the many dangers to opening up to new people. What if they didn't return your feelings? What if friendship was enough for him?

"Are you excited?" he asked as Eric began to help Ella into the carriage.

"I am," she answered. "And nervous." It was difficult to articulate her fear. But Melisandre had always made her feel like she didn't belong.

What if the other ladies of the *ton* did the same? Would it mean that Melisandre had been right all along?

That was her real concern. She held her breath as her hand tightened on Ash's arm.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stopping before they'd reached the carriage.

She didn't need to tell him. She'd shared enough. But she found herself shaking her head and answering, "It's nothing. Just..."

"Tell me."

"I just worry that I'll never quite fit in society." Why was she even revealing this with him? Real ladies knew how to keep secrets.

“You’ll be fine,” he said, dropping his head so that he might whisper in her ear. “Don’t talk much and give them that stare you have where you say with your eyes you think they are silly. They’ll bow to you without question.”

“Is that how I look? Like I think everyone is silly?”

He chuckled. “I quite like it. And honestly, I’m sure it’s that strength that has pulled you through. Use it now.”

She swallowed down a lump as she looked up into his eyes. It was wonderful advice that she hoped was true. But either way...she appreciated his help and his confidence in her.

And all her talks to herself about not falling for a man who was clearly on another path evaporated as she looked into the dark brown of his eyes behind his mask. If she weren’t careful, this man could become her whole world.

FERN, dressed as she was, could make a man forget. The pale lilac gown hugged her curves, accentuating her small waist and her slender figure.

Her smooth skin, exposed by the low neckline, begged to be kissed and the sparkle of the jewels crowning her hair...

They made her sparkle too.

His gaze fixed on the tiara again. He’d seen Fern’s grimace at the piece. Was it another item that had belonged to Melisandre?

She'd asked permission from the countess, who'd replied that the piece belonged to Fern as much as herself. That had to mean that it was once their stepsister's.

He recognized quality work when he saw it and the tiara must be worth a king's ransom.

Even in the pale light of the carriage lamp, the tiara glittered, catching the errant rays of the swinging lantern. Fern's hand fluttered up to touch one of the spikes, the delicate touch of her small finger making his breath catch.

Did she realize how appealing she was? It didn't seem so. But every swish of her skirts held him captive as she sat across from him, Ella chatting amicably while Fern smiled and nodded.

He'd like to run his thumb down her jaw and then his forefinger over the plumpness of those lips.

He shook his head. He was here to support Fern, not romance her. Help her gain her footing in society so that she might help him draw out Melisandre.

They reached the ball, the queue of carriages waiting to drop off their occupants.

Fern peeked out the window and trembled, shrinking into her seat.

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees so that his hand nearly touched her legs. "Fern."

"Yes?" she whispered, not looking at him.

"Do you remember what I said?"

She turned toward him then. “I should be quiet and look at all of them as though I am not certain I like them.”

Ella snorted. “That will come very naturally to you.”

Fern wrinkled her nose, pushing up her mask. “Very funny.”

“I wasn’t being funny.” Ella poked her sister. “You look at everyone with barely contained disdain.”

Ash’s brows rose. She didn’t look at him like that.

“I do not. Only most people because they deserve it.”

“That’s the spirit,” he interjected with a chuckle. “Your goal is not to make everyone like you, it’s just to gain some measure of comfort while moving through the crowd.”

She drew in a trembling breath. “What if my goal *is* to make them like me? If only to prove to myself that I’m perfectly capable? Likable even?”

Was she afraid she was unlikable? Didn’t she know that she had him tied up in knots? Perhaps not... “Don’t put that sort of pressure on yourself. Tonight is not about taking society by storm. It’s simply to get out and have a bit of fun.”

“Fun...” she replied on a strangled cry. “That very idea is ridiculous.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“How about as painless as possible,” Ash corrected, reaching for her hand. He knew he was creating expectation with this sort of intimacy but in the moment, he couldn’t help

himself but to touch her, comfort her. “And we’ll all be there to help you.”

Eric cleared his throat and Ella shifted next to her sister even as Fern’s fingers curled around his. The gesture was so endearing, her smaller hand in his, that he had to clench his other hand to keep from touching her with both.

That would certainly alert everyone to his interest.

They finally made their way to the front of the line, the door to the carriage snapping open. Eric helped Ella out, the couple starting up the stairs. Ash trotted down the steps, and then turned to help Fern.

She slid her hand into his, the other holding up her skirts as she exited too. When she reached the ground, she gave him a small smile, sweet and soft, tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Without thinking, he brought her fingers up to his lips and brushed a soft kiss across her covered knuckles.

She sucked in a breath, their gazes locking. The crowd about them quieted and he knew they all saw what he felt. Chemistry.

He forced himself to turn, tucking her fingers into his elbow as he followed Ella and Eric.

Fern took several fortifying breaths next to him as they made their way up the stairs.

“I’ll stay by your side,” he found himself murmuring close to her ear.

“Really?”

“Absolutely.” He leaned even closer. “And we can step outside if you need a break.”

“Thank you,” she whispered back, her fingers squeezing his arm. She had leaned so close her breast pressed to his arm, his body tightening in response. “I don’t know what I’d do without you here.”

He gave a small jerk of his chin in acceptance. He truly hoped he was helping her. Otherwise, he was just a selfish bastard.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR FERN, the ball was...dreadful.

The noise, the crush of the crowd, the coy looks other women sent her as they feigned interest and then rolled their eyes behind their fans.

“Lady Fern,” one of them trilled.

If Fern remembered correctly, her name was Daffodil. Or perhaps it was Daisy. Some flower...

“Yes?” she replied, giving the other woman a wary glance. There was something sinister in the syrupy tone of the other woman’s voice.

“Have you been in contact with Lady Melisandre?”

The hair on the back of Fern’s neck stood and she found herself looking behind her, to see what had caused such a reaction. Surely it wasn’t just the mention of her stepsister.

Only the solid feel of Ash’s arm under her hand kept her grounded. She cleared her throat. “Melisandre?”

“She got married, you know.”

“Did she?” Fern’s fingers tightened on Ash’s arm until she was surely leaving divots. She’d meant it when she’d said that she wasn’t afraid of Melisandre, and that she was moving on from the past. But to think of Melisandre living a good life, having successes, it cut some deep gash in her heart. Here she was, just trying to take a tiny step forward while Melisandre galivanted about.

Why should Melisandre be happy after what she’d done to Fern and Ella? Why shouldn’t she pay for her mistakes?

“He’s so handsome,” the flower gushed, letting out a long, exaggerated sigh.

“What’s wrong with him then?” The words slipped out of Fern’s mouth before she could hold them back and the flower started, her hand coming to her chest.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said...” Fern had started it now and she never was one to mind her tongue. “There must be something wrong with him if he is handsome and married to Melisandre.”

Several other women tittered and even in the dim candlelight, Fern noted that the flower’s cheeks had filled with color.

Ash silently laughed. She might not have known but his body shook with the chuckle, and she was close enough to feel it move through her.

She pressed slightly closer, the intimate knowledge as intoxicating as the support he’d given her all evening.

The flower flounced off, the other women drifting away until only she and Ash remained.

He took that opportunity to start toward the open doors of the terrace. The cooler night air brushed her skin. She sighed in relief at the repose the fresh dark air offered.

A fair number of partygoers mingled about in the lamp light and with slow deliberation, Ash steered them toward the shadows.

Which suited Fern just fine. She'd had enough of people. "Is everyone always so...fake?"

Ash slipped into the darkness, checking behind him that no one had noticed. "I'm afraid the answer is often yes."

She let out a small huff of breath. "Perhaps the quiet life in my tower is better after all."

His hand came to her waist then, his face dropping closer to hers. "Don't say that."

"Why not?"

"Because..." His forehead rested on hers. "Worthwhile things are often difficult. You might have to sift through a sea of people to find the ones that suit you, but not only will you be glad you put in the effort, the struggle will also make the victory that much sweeter."

Appreciation coursed through her. "Ash that was beautiful."

The tip of his nose just brushed hers. "Thank you. You've given me some excellent advice, and I thought I should try and

reciprocate.”

She nipped at her lip. “Have I?” But inside she warmed with pleasure. Ash hadn’t been difficult to find, he’d just appeared in her life when he’d arrived at the estate, but she still appreciated his presence in her life more than she could possibly say.

He skimmed a finger along her jaw, his lips so close to hers, her mouth tingled with anticipation. Would he kiss her?

Should she let him? Was that even a question? There was a part of her that wondered if this was all too much too fast, but then another voice promptly chimed in that Ash, in the sea of people that surrounded her, was special.

And it didn’t matter that she’d found him quickly, to her, he was still the sweetest victory.

His lips tipped even closer, just barely brushing hers in a touch so light and gentle, it might have been a feather glancing across her lips.

“Ash.” His name came out on a soft breath of air, almost a prayer, as she held his biceps to keep the world from spinning away.

“Fern.”

Her pulse beat faster as she waited to see what might happen next. Would he kiss her again? Tell her how he felt? Pull her closer?

But the clattering of something falling nearby startled them apart.

Ash had her behind him in a second. “Hide around the corner of the house,” he whispered.

Fern didn't hesitate. She'd been in enough crises to know when to listen and to act. Letting go of Ash's arm, she slipped along the exterior of the wall, going around the corner. Once there, she pressed her back to the brick, her eyes closing and her breath coming out in a long rush of air.

“Well, don't you look darling,” a feminine voice she instantly recognized, called from the darkness. Melisandre.

“Hello sister dearest,” Fern answered, pushing off the wall. She might not be a fighter, but she wasn't a wilting flower either. And this was her moment to face her fear, a fresh kiss on her lips. “I should have known you were here that way that vapid chit spoke about you. What was her name...Daffy?”

Melisandre snorted, appearing from the shadows. Her gown, as always, was impeccably fit over her lush curves, her dark hair sparkling and glossy in the pale light. “It was Daisy and aren't you as caustic as ever.”

“And you are still being kept in the manner you demand.” Fern glanced down her stepsister, her lip curling into a sneer.

“Not quite.” Melisandre did not look down Fern. Instead, she looked up. Right at the tiara. “I could be doing better.”

And then Fern saw the flash of steel in Melisandre's hand.

ASH STOOD FROZEN around the corner, attempting to decide what to do.

He could hear Melisandre, and he knew without a doubt it was her. He'd recognize that nasally razor-sharp voice anywhere.

Part of him wished to rush to Fern's aid. But another part held him in place. Was this his chance? If he were very careful, could he follow her and find Jack?

Guilt stabbed at him, but he clenched his fists, pushing it back down. Fern didn't sound frightened, and he'd spent the last two months attempting to create this very opportunity. Why should he give up now?

"Melisandre."

Fern's voice rang with a warning that shivered through him. Was she frightened now? What had changed?

"It's mine," Melisandre said. "I will not feel guilty."

"Yours?" Fern's voice had taken on notes of irritation. "What wasn't yours? Everything was *always* yours."

"Much as I'd like to continue to discuss how your own father didn't love you enough to provide even the most basic care for you, I'm going to need you to give me that tiara."

"No."

He sucked in his breath, understanding what was happening. Or mostly. Because the next words still caught him off guard.

“Yes,” Melisandre replied, hard and mean. “Don’t make me hurt you, Fern.”

“You’re actually going to stab me?” Fern scoffed. “Come try, Melisandre. It would be refreshing to see you do something other than have a tantrum.”

He heard the rush of skirts and his fear for Fern wiped out any other hesitation. He bolted around the corner just as the hard sound of a smack split the night.

He found Fern standing, her back to him, and Melisandre crumpled on the ground.

“I’ve been properly fed, sister dear,” Fern’s hands came to her hips. “You’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Give it to me!” Melisandre shrieked. “It’s mine.”

“It’s mine, now.”

Melisandre pushed up and Ash slunk back into the shadows, not wanting to be seen. He’d never seen Melisandre’s face before, but staring at her now, he could admit the other woman was attractive in a cold, calculated way.

She rose, keeping a safe distance between herself and Fern. “When Jack hears about this...”

Jack. His breath froze in his throat. Would he come? Now? The need for retribution rose like bile in his throat.

“Is that your husband?” Fern asked, cocking her head to the side. “Who is he?”

“Never mind.”

Fern snorted. “Not of the peerage then? You think he’s going to take on Eric?”

“Eric can go to the devil,” Melisandre answered, pressing her hands down her skirts even as her chin notched up. “You’re all going to get what’s coming to you.”

A laugh bubbled out of Fern’s mouth. “We already did. It’s your turn.”

Ash had to agree with that.

“This isn’t over.” Melisandre waved the hand holding the knife and he had a moment of fear. He worried that he’d left Fern unprotected, but then Melisandre began backing up rather than advancing. “That tiara, along with any of my other possessions, will be mine again.”

Fern crossed her arms. “Tell Jack I say welcome to the family.”

Melisandre disappeared into the shadows, and he had a moment where he wished to follow. He could find Jack right now...

He could end all of this. But Fern was moving toward him and if he left, she’d know something was amiss.

And besides. Jack was about to come to them. Of that Ash was certain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FERN HARDLY CONTAINED her nervous energy on the ride home from the ball. It didn't help that Ella and Eric asked her to repeat the story no less than seven times.

“You hit her?” Ella asked, her mouth agape. “You actually hit her?”

“She was rushing me with a knife,” Fern repeated by way of answer. “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Eric chuckled. “Indeed, it certainly was.” Then he looked at Ash. “And where were you again?”

Ash cleared his throat. “I was searching for whatever or whoever had made that noise. It had come from the other direction...”

Fern watched Ash, wondering at his nervousness. Was it because of that kiss? “It's true. We were on the veranda, taking in some air and when the noise occurred, he told me to hide behind the house.”

Eric rubbed his jaw but said little as Ella continued. “And you knocked her to the ground?”

“It was a slap and a push,” Fern said. “Much as I try to move on with my life, even I can confess, I’ve got a bit of pent-up aggression where Melisandre is concerned. She deserves to know how it feels to be the one under someone’s heel.”

Ash shifted again. “Completely agree.”

They arrived home, the hour late enough that everyone made their way to bed. But Fern found that she could not sleep.

She wished, if she were honest, to be in her tower tonight. Tucked away from the world, alone, cocooned by its walls. Her interaction with Melisandre had been... unsettling.

The things she’d said about Fern’s father... they rang with a truth that hurt deeply. How could her own father have favored Melisandre over her?

He’d pretended not to, acted fair. But he had allowed all the resources to go to his new wife and her daughter. Fern and Ella wasting away...

Rising from her bed, she reached for a candle and left the room. Feet bare, she padded along the hallway and down the stairs until she reached the library.

Entering, she scanned the shelves for the only thing that might comfort her now. A book.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” Ash called and she jumped as she spun, warming to see him sitting in a chair in the dark.

“Ash. I didn’t see you there.”

“Apologies.” he stood, moving toward her. “I did not mean to frighten you.”

She waved her hand. Perhaps a book was not the only thing that might bring her comfort. “It’s not your fault.”

“Are you all right? After tonight?” He stopped a few feet in front her and her hand skimmed down her night rail, aware of just how scantily clad she was when she’d left her room. She was used to living alone.

“I’m fine. Just restless. I never actually imagined seeing Melisandre again. I know that sounds silly but...”

He reached for her hand then. “It doesn’t sound silly. I admire how you’ve risen above anger and resentment. We should all be so lucky.”

“You haven’t...” She’d known that. He’d gone tonight dressed as a pirate.

“I don’t think I have. No.”

She reached for his other hand, holding them both in hers. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

His mouth pinched into a frown. “Fern. You shouldn’t make such offers.”

That completely confused her, and she pulled her hands from his, cocking her head to the side. “Why not?”

“Because...” He looked away, then, one of his fists making a tight ball on his thigh.

“We are friends...aren’t we?”

“Of course.”

“And correct me if I am mistaken but friends do offer to help one another?”

He shook his head his fingers relaxing until they reached for hers again. “Ladies should not offer to help gentlemen gain revenge against pirates.”

She laughed, relaxing at those words. That did make sense. “I’m afraid I’m going to be a dreadful debutante. I’m likely to be ruined within the first few events. I’ll never keep the rules...”

Ash pulled her closer before she could finish, and his nearness left her deliciously disoriented.

“Do not allow a man to take liberties like you did with me tonight.”

She opened her mouth and closed as she tried to think of something clever to say but finally came out with, “Why?”

“Because.” He ran the back of his fingers over her cheek making her shiver with need. “He may not be well-intentioned nor inclined to stop when he ought.”

Fern’s brows furrowed in confusion. Was he talking about himself or someone else? “Ash...”

He stepped back then, his fingers slipping from hers. “I shouldn’t have kissed you tonight. Or perhaps I should offer for your hand. I...” He raked a hand through his hair and suddenly she understood. He felt guilty. He’d not acted strictly as a gentleman should.

She moved toward him, closing the distance between them. “I don’t wish to speak for you, but I am not a normal

lady and I'm not entirely certain all the rules apply. I need to know that you value me, it's important."

"I do," he answered, staring into the depths of her eyes. "Fern I—"

Whatever he was going to say, she lost as she closed the distance between them and pushed up on tiptoe to kiss him again.

She knew it was artless, not like his touch earlier had been, but somehow, kissing him was more important than slapping Melisandre. She wished to move forward and that meant finding value in herself.

He hesitated for a moment, frozen, and then his arms wrapped about her, pulling her close, their mouths coming together so tightly, that it stole the air from her lungs.

And when he kissed her again, his tongue sliding between her lips, it felt so wonderfully delicious against her own that all reason left her head.

Twining her arms about his neck, her fingers laced into his hair as the kiss went on and on. They turned and then she was backing up as he moved forward, his arms still about her.

For a moment she didn't understand why and then, when her back hit the wall, and his front pressed even tighter to hers, it all made sense. This was even better.

On and on the kiss went, lengthening until she could hardly breathe, barely think with the want that pulsed through her.

She tugged at the hair at the base of his skull, wanting something more.

While one of his arms was like a band about her waist, the other pressed against the wall as he lifted his mouth, creating the smallest bit of distance between them. “Fern. We shouldn’t—”

“No,” she cried, not wanting to hear whatever he had to say. “I don’t want to think about all the reasons we shouldn’t move forward. I’m so tired of never taking a chance—”

But her words stopped too.

Because a noise just above her head pulled her attention away.

And the knob on the wall that Ash had been holding, suddenly sank into the wood paneling.

Before Fern could even process what was happening, the wall behind her gave way and then she was falling...

ASH TUCKED Fern’s body into his, twisting so that he took the brunt of the fall. How they’d been against a solid wall that had disappeared, he couldn’t say, and he didn’t have time to question it, as his shoulder hit the ground hard, even as he cradled Fern’s head into his chest.

He shouldn’t even have been kissing her. It was a dastardly thing to do after he’d abandoned her to face Melisandre alone,

but her lips had been so soft, earnest, and wanton that he'd not been able to help himself.

And now they had fallen...

He rolled, his other shoulder hitting a wall and that's when his eyes popped open. There was just enough light from the candles in the library for him to realize...he'd fallen into a very small space.

He sucked in a giant gulp of air, rolling so that Fern was on her side before he let her go and began scrambling out of the tiny room.

"Ash," her voice was soft, soothing as he made it just outside the entrance. She sat up and leaned out, taking his hand in hers. "You're all right."

She threaded her fingers into his, but she didn't attempt to pull him back into the room, a gesture he really appreciated as he laced her fingers through hers. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to slide away from you. I just panicked—"

"It's all right," she replied, scooting closer. "You protected me from the fall. That was the real danger."

Regret twisted in his stomach. He hadn't protected her earlier either. He was the worst sort of cad. "I don't deserve your comfort. I—"

"Hush." And then she crawled over to him, wrapping her arms about him. "I understand."

He couldn't help himself. Selfishly, he wrapped his arms about her waist, bringing their bodies together, his face resting against her chest.

She placed her cheek on top of his head and just held him tightly.

When was the last time someone had comforted him like this without asking anything in return, not even an explanation?

Fern was special...

And if he wasn't careful, he'd drive her away with his own greedy agenda.

He rose then, lifting her with him. "You need some sleep."

But once they'd stood, Fern wriggled from his arm, a very pleasant experience, and crossed to fetch a candle. Lifting the light up, she shined it into the tiny room, standing in the entrance. "I've lived at Castledon my entire life and I never knew this was here."

He peered in from his spot outside the room. "Is there a lever to open it from the inside?" He suddenly understood that his fear of confined spaces was a fear of being trapped in one, not able to get out.

"I don't know," and then she stepped inside.

"Fern," even he could hear the sharp edge of fear in his voice. "Come out of there."

She turned to him, cocking her head to the side. "It's perfectly safe."

"What if the door closes and..."

But that only had Fern shining the light on the door. "It's hinged. The raised paneling covered the seams so I never

noticed.”

He hadn't asked and he didn't care. His breath was shallow as he reached out his hand. He just wanted...

He swallowed down the bile rising in his throat. This was like a nightmare come to life. He wanted Fern safely in his arms and not in that coffin of a space. “Please, Fern.”

She stepped out again, raising her free hand to touch his cheek. “I'll look at the space again tomorrow in the light of day.”

“Good idea,” he murmured, placing his hand over his. “We've had enough adventure for one night, don't you think.”

“I do.” She reached for the panel and closed it over so that it looked almost closed and then the two of them started for the entry. But when Ash reached the doorway, he looked back at the hidden room so like his cupboard.

If he got his revenge, would he lose this fear? His mouth twisted into a frown. There was only one way to find out.

CHAPTER NINE

FERN WOKE LATE the next day and dressing quickly, made her way downstairs, where she found Ash, Eric, and Ella in the library, staring into the tiny room.

Ash turned toward her first, and as Ella and Eric book looked into the space, he raised a finger to his lips.

Fern understood. Finding the room while passionately kissing was not a story that should likely be repeated. “What’s that?” she asked, causing both Ella and Eric to turn.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty.” Ella waved to Fern. “Ash has found a secret in our home.”

Fern approached, scooting past Ash with only the slightest blush before she entered the small space. She carefully inspected each wall, running her hands along them. “If you close yourself in, how do you get out?”

“Oh, good point,” Ella began to look too, but after several minutes of searching, neither could find a method of escape.

Eric looked at the walls, frowning. “It’s a room that you can go in but can’t get out?”

“It’s like hell on earth,” Ash whispered, not looking at anyone though they all heard him.

Fern stepped back out, moving to his side. “It would be frightening for anyone. How would anyone even know that you were in there if you were trapped?”

“Only one way to find out,” Eric said as he stepped into the little space. “Close me in.”

“What?” Ash gave a strangled cry. “We’re not doing that.”

“I’ll be fine,” Eric said with a single jerk of his chin. “I’m going to yell and bang to see if you hear me. If the lever sticks opening the door, get an ax and break the panel down.”

Ash gave a terse nod as Eric stepped into the tiny room. Even Fern felt her pulse flutter at the idea of Eric being trapped in there.

“Are you sure about this?” Ella asked, her hand coming to her throat.

“Someone has to test it,” Eric said by way of answer. “We can’t have it in the house and not know its potential and its danger.”

“What do you think it was originally built for?” Fern asked, nipping at her lip. If there was no lever inside...

Was it meant to be a hideout? A jail?

Then she gasped, an idea coming to her.

“What?” Ella asked even as Ash pushed up the lever, closing Eric inside.

“I’ll tell you after,” Fern said watching Eric disappear.

For a moment, silence filled the library before Eric's muffled voice filled the silence. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes!" Ella cried. "Me?"

"Barely," came his distant answer as he knocked three times on the inside of the wall.

Ash pushed the lever back down, the door sliding open again. Eric appeared, a frown marking his face.

"What was it like?" Ella asked, stepping into her husband's arms.

"There was a small amount of light through the cracks, and I could hear you distantly."

Fern ran her fingers over the hinges in the door. "It would be an excellent place to store valuables we didn't wish for others to find."

Everyone turned to look at her, Ella's brows cocking. "You're right. It's much better than a loose floorboard under my bed."

"What does that mean?" Ash asked, looking first at Fern, then at Ella.

Fern winced, not wanting to tell her sister's secrets. But Ella only shrugged. "I used to steal things from Melisandre just to infuriate her. I'd hide them and watch her tantrum with glee."

Ash gave a dark chuckle. "A woman of action."

Ella winked at Fern. "I like Fern's method better. Just knock her in the face."

Everyone laughed at that, even Fern. “It’s not my usual style.” She looked in the room again. “Which is why I’m going to advocate that we return to Ella’s method and take every valuable item still in this house that belonged to Melisandre and...” Then she waved toward the room.

Ella’s brows lifted. “You don’t think Melisandre would dare come here and try to take them?”

“She came at me with a knife at a ball,” Fern answered with a frown. “We know Melisandre. She lashes out when she doesn’t get her way. Odds are, she’ll do so again, even at great personal risk.”

“You know her well,” Ash murmured near her ear.

“We lived with her long enough.” Fern turned to him, their eyes locking. “And even I took stock of my captors.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Captors?”

“I was in a prison of a different kind. But still a prison.” She waved Ella forward. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

But Ella hesitated. “Do you really think that Melisandre might come here?” Her hands fluttered down her front. “I don’t like having to wait for the snake to strike.”

Fern agreed. “We could attempt to bait her out...”

“How would you do that?” Ash asked his fingers grazing her upper arm. Fern had a moment where she wished she could be held by Ash the way Eric pulled Ella close.

“By attending another event,” Fern answered.

Ella nodded. “You’re right. Melisandre always did respond to taunts.”

Eric shook his head. “I don’t like it. Melisandre is dangerous. And we’ve no idea who her husband is and what he is capable of. Knowing Melisandre, he’s no good.”

Ash’s fingers dropped from her arm as he softly coughed and then cleared his throat.

She turned to him, her brows drawn together in question as Ella replied to her husband, “The alternative is to wait and allow her to choose the time and place.”

“You’re right, baiting her is better, but I’ll do it,” Eric offered. “I’ll not put you in any more danger, Fern.”

Fern shook her head, turning back to her brother-in-law. “We all know it should be me. She’s bound to be hellishly angry at me after what I did last night.”

Eric winced, and Fern knew he heard the truth in her words. For a moment, silence fell about the group and Fern took a steadying breath. “So. When’s the next social event everyone will attend?”

ASH’S ARM was incredibly stiff as he escorted Fern into the Longtree garden party. He didn’t want her here.

She should not be bait to Melisandre and Jack, and he ought to have said that and far more two mornings ago as they’d stood outside that room.

But he hadn't known how without admitting everything.

His prior knowledge of Melisandre, his motives for coming to Castledon.... What would Fern think of him after she knew he'd intended to use her?

He cringed, turning his face away from her. That kiss had shifted something deep inside him and for the first time in the last year, he truly felt how some things in life could be more important, more fulfilling than revenge. Friendship. Family. Love?

"Let's sit under the trees," he murmured, looking back at Ella and Eric.

Fern shook her head. "We're here to be seen."

"You'll be seen either way," he said, speaking the truth. Fern was far too beautiful to be ignored. Even now, the eyes of several men watched her cross the garden.

Jealousy tightened his chest.

Fern was too beautiful to be alone if she chose not to...and he saw with clarity that he wished for her to choose him.

Was that even possible after all that had happened? The choices he'd made in the beginning? His gut twisted with regret.

They found a spot under the line of trees and spread a blanket, Fern and Ella sitting next to one another.

Eric took the spot on the other side of his wife as Ash sat next to Fern. The group said little, everyone's eyes scanning

the crowd. Would Melisandre be here? What if she was? Wasn't?

Ash sincerely hoped not. As he watched the crowd mill about, he knew he had to tell Fern the truth.

He wished to kiss her again. Hold her in his arms. But he couldn't keep omitting his knowledge of her stepsister or his motives. It wasn't fair.

He reached for her hand then, his fingertips skimming over the back of her glove. "Fern."

"Yes?" She stopped searching the crowd, turning to him, her blue eyes filled with concern. An emotion he hardly deserved. "Are you all right?"

He gave a quick nod. "I still don't think this is a good plan. You wished to move forward and now you've been embroiled back with your stepsister." Which was his fault. He'd pushed her to attend that masquerade for his own selfish purposes.

But she gave him a soft smile. "I appreciate what you're saying. And I do wish to move forward instead of living in the past, but I can't do that knowing that Melisandre might be waiting in the shadows."

"I understand. I think that's part of what's been motivating me too." He relaxed a bit as he explained, "They let me go and part of me worried that they had some ulterior motive. Some reason and that my release was a temporary arrangement and they'd be back again."

"You keep saying we and they when you talk about your captivity..." She cocked her head. "Do you mean the gang of

pirates?”

He sucked in a breath, knowing this was his chance to begin the confession.

“No, not exactly—”

But a nasally, feminine voice cut him off, filling him with dread. “How quaint.”

On the edge of the blanket stood Melisandre. It wasn't dark, he was in full light, and he had no mask this time. Did she know who he was? Understand why he was next to Fern?

That was a chilling thought.

CHAPTER TEN

FERN'S HEART ceased beating as Melisandre lowered herself to the blanket, her skirts pluming out about her, spreading in a perfect bell.

Melisandre had always known how to make an entrance. Her smug smile had Fern shifting in discomfort.

But Fern straightened her spine. "Lovely to see you again. I see you still have your social connections, that you seem to be at every event. Or are those your husband's?" Fern hoped to catch Melisandre off guard, but the tactic fell short.

Her stepsister ignored the question for one of her own. "No tiara today, princess?" Melisandre might have a smile pasted on her ruby red lips, but her eyes were ice cold as she stared.

Fern straightened, glaring back. "I only wanted to wear it once before I sold it."

Melisandre's smile turned black. "You didn't."

The tiara was carefully hidden away in the room that she and Ash had discovered, but Melisandre didn't have to know that. "I did, along with every other jewel you didn't manage to pilfer when you disappeared like the criminal you are."

Melisandre's fist clenched so tight, her knuckles turned white. "They were mine. All of them. You had no right. And honestly, if one of us is a thief, it's you. You stole my future."

A man appeared behind Melisandre, tall, broad, and dangerously handsome. Little shivers of apprehension rolled down Fern's spine. There was some razor edge to him that made her wildly uncomfortable.

Next to her, Ash started. She didn't understand his reaction either and she turned to him studying the lines of tension that pulled his features taut, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"Don't upset yourself, darling," the man said with a sneer. "We'll get what's yours."

Melisandre relaxed her shoulders, her facial expression softening a bit. "Jack, love, I've been dying to introduce you to my sisters. Ella, the new countess, and Fern...the always nothing."

Fern's head whipped back at the taunt, but she forced herself to relax. She was used to Melisandre's insults. "And who is Jack precisely? An earl like Eric?"

Color flooded Melisandre's cheeks and Fern knew she'd found her mark. Melisandre had always had high hopes and lots of big plans for the man she'd marry. A titled lord, or a man of immense wealth.

"A merchant at least?" Fern leaned forward, her gaze narrowing on Melisandre. "Tell us all about him, sister dear. We want to know everything."

For a moment, Melisandre looked as though she might erupt in flames but then her features calmed. “Why should I? Didn’t your friend here, Viscount Cranston, tell you all about him already?”

Fern felt the blood drain from her face as she turned to Ash. He glared at Melisandre even as her husband spit. “Melisandre, don’t be a fool.” His hand clamped down hard on Melisandre’s shoulder.

Melisandre waved her hand. She never was one to allow someone else to change her direction. “He already knows who we are, my love, I’m not spilling any secrets. In fact,” and then her stepsister leaned forward, shaking off her husband’s hand. “If I were to guess, he’s hanging about Fern to find out information about us. Did you know she’d lead you right to me?” Melisandre gave that trilling laugh as she looked at Ash.

The sound sent sparks of fear coursing through Fern. She’d not taken her gaze from Ash and what she saw only made her throat clog with emotion.

He didn’t appear shocked or confused. No, he looked... guilty, his head hanging down. Emotion burned down her esophagus as her head spun.

Ash was supposed to be her friend. The person who just liked her for...her.

Because while Melisandre’s words rarely hurt, the self-doubt she’d planted in Fern from years of living without anyone’s admiration had left a wound that Fern had been trying to heal.

It was the reason she'd hidden away because she feared that Melisandre was right. No one who knew Fern would really care.

She'd not been able to say that about anyone, not even her own father, and suddenly, she realized the truth.

Ash, Viscount Bancroft, had only ever wanted to use her. He'd told her he wished for revenge...

She'd just had no idea that that revenge had been on Melisandre.

There was a small part of her that sympathized. Melisandre was capable of inspiring incredible amounts of anger.

But Fern...she'd trusted Ash.

And she'd thought in him she'd found some hope that she might have a place in this world and people who would care for her.

Her breath caught, like she might cry, when she drew it in. Ash had been using her all along.

Ash ripped his gaze from hers, looking at Melisandre's husband. "I never did get a last name."

Jack scowled. "You'll have to find it out from someone else. And do it quickly. Because the next time we meet I'll not just walk away. The third time will be the charm." Then he bent down, gripping Melisandre's elbow and yanking her up. She cried out, looking furious.

"How dare you."

"I dare, wife. I'm not interested in your petty squabbles."

“What are you interested in?” Ash stood too, his body so erect, he looked almost unnatural. “Why did you let me off your boat?”

Jack’s lip curled. “Because I was paid to. That was the job, keep you until your sister’s jewels were found—” But he stopped, pressing his lips together.

Ash’s eyes widened.

Fern had been trying not to cry but a jolt ran through her. Melisandre and Jack, they had come back for the tiara, they’d stalked other women for jewels too. They were nothing but petty thieves.

“I meant what I said.” She looked at Melisandre, forcing her chin up despite the pain of Ash’s betrayal pulsing through her. “The tiara is gone. Find someone else’s jewels to steal.”

“I don’t—” Melisandre started but her husband’s hand clamped down hard on her arm.

“You’ve said enough.”

And then he began dragging her away.

Which should have been a great relief, but as she turned to face Ash, all she could feel was the sharp pain of loss.

She’d never meant a thing to him.

ASH OUGHT to have foreseen this moment. The time when Fern learned the truth.

If he had, would he have prevented the pain he could see written all over Fern's face?

He'd never seen such sad blue eyes, swimming with a bit of water that only accentuated the beautiful color.

And the pain etched in her features had his own gut twisting into knots. "Fern."

"Don't you dare," Eric spit, his hands coming under Fern's elbows. In a swift movement, he lifted her, spinning them both and set her lightly on her feet before he turned back to face Ash, creating a wall between himself and Fern.

Should it have been a relief to not see the pain in her eyes, the very hurt he'd caused?

He ought to stare into that pain, really feel the hurt that was his fault. "Eric."

"Lord Sanbridge to you," Eric snarled. And then he grabbed Ash by the collar, pulling him into the cluster of trees. He let the man pull him, not fighting. Eric had every right to be angry.

A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that Fern and Ella followed.

His heart pounded as his gaze met Fern's. She looked away, her mouth pinching.

His stomach plummeted to his toes as Eric pushed him to the ground. "Explain yourself."

What did he say other than the truth? He pushed his torso off the ground, sitting in the dirt. "I was held captive by Jack."

“I know that,” Eric spit. “Why did you come here?”

He winced, scrubbing the back of his neck, his elbows on his knees. “Melisandre was on the boat while I was there...” It wasn’t an answer exactly, but everyone understood.

“You came here to learn more about her.” Fern spoke with so much pain that he cringed.

“I didn’t expect to like you and your family so much—”

“Don’t.” The high-pitched sound of her voice cut through him. The sound filled with so much pain.

“Fern,” he tried again, partly rising. He needed to explain that his motivations had been shifting. That she’d been teaching him slowly but surely that love was more important than revenge. The possibility of building a future meant much more than righting the wrongs of the past.

But Eric pushed him back down again, snarling in his face. “Her name is not for your lips.”

Ash caught her gaze, a single tear leaking down her cheek. It would have been better if a whole flood of them stained her cheeks. Something about that one tear ripped him apart. “I care about you.”

She shook her head. “Don’t.”

His jaw clenched shut.

She swiped at the tear, her shoulders pulling straight and her chin notching up. “I hope you got what you came for.”

He actually had. Which made him feel worse. Because what he’d wanted, he now realized wasn’t nearly enough.

A victory against Jack and Melisandre would be completely hollow without Fern.

“I came here for information and revenge...” He tried to step closer, but Eric blocked him. He’d not fight with the earl. He’d done enough damage. “But I’ll leave with only half of my heart.”

“Shut up.” Eric grabbed his jacket, shaking him. “Don’t you dare manipulate Fern anymore.”

“It’s the truth,” he answered quietly. “I have never lied.”

“You just omitted the truth,” Ella accused, hugging her sister while she stared at Ash with hard eyes. “You should be ashamed.”

“I am,” he said honestly. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I have never lied, and I am not lying now when I say that Fern—”

Eric’s hand came down hard on his cheek. “Keep her name out of your mouth.”

“Is the best person in the entire world.” He finished trying to catch Fern’s gaze again. He needed her to understand that he meant every word.

But Ella had her arms about Fern, Fern’s face buried in her sister’s shoulder.

He wanted to call out to her again. He tried to break away from Eric, but the other man held on fast to the lapels of Ash’s jacket.

So he looked at Eric instead. “They held me captive for months. Attacked my family. What would you do in that situation? Can’t you understand?”

“I understand,” Fern said, her voice shaky but clear.

Eric stilled and so did Ash, his eyes finding hers, Red and puffy already. “You do?”

She gave a quick nod. “But I need you to understand. In my whole life, no one has ever chosen to love me.”

A knife to the chest would have hurt less.

“I love you,” Ella whispered to her sister.

Fern looked away. “I was all you had for many years. But no one, not even our father, ever chose me.”

The air sucked from his lungs. “Fern.” His voice came out ragged and uneven. Eric didn’t bother to chastise him this time, his eyes also glued to his sister-in-law.

“I thought you were the first person who truly liked me for me and now that I know you did it all for her...” Fern’s voice broke, and his own heart shattered.

Eric gave him one more push and then in two strides, he wrapped both Fern and Ella into his arms, the three of them a family, a solid unit, Ash standing several feet away.

“I do care about you, Fern. So much. You have been teaching me what it means to reach for the light instead of allowing the dark—”

“Please,” Eric grit out. “Fern has known darkness. What you went through was a pittance by comparison. She’s spent

years being abused. Neglected. And yet you still attempted to use her for your own selfish gain. Fern,” Eric spit on the ground. “Your mistake was in ever trusting this snake.” He gave Ash another hard glare. “Go fight Melisandre and Jack, you all deserve each other.”

And then Eric started lead both women away. None of them looked back.

Inside, he cracked into a thousand pieces. Because Eric was right. He was no better than Melisandre and her selfish ways.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FERN HAD SPENT most of the afternoon crying. She hadn't shed this many tears when her father had passed. Then again, when he'd died, she'd not held very much hope.

And that had been one thing that Ash had filled her with. That feeling had been a lie, of course. Her heart gave a painful pulse.

Night had fallen, and she'd convinced Ella to go to bed with her husband.

Fern needed time alone to process and to wallow. And to escape.

She had mentioned retreating to her tower, but both Eric and Ella had refused, saying she was safer in the main house.

But Fern yearned for the quiet comfort of her tower now. So she'd packed several precious belongings into a sack and left the manor house while carrying it over her shoulder.

Slipping into the darkness, she treaded the familiar path to her tiny hideaway. The weight of the sack made her steps slower than usual, but she didn't mind. The night was cool and

quiet. No moon lit the way, though she knew the steps well and she was glad for the cover of darkness.

She found the key, unlocked the door, then slipped inside. Climbing up the familiar steps, she reached the top of the tower and sighed with a mix of sadness and contentment.

It was good to be here, but she was here because she'd failed.

Dropping her sack in the corner, she opened the shutter of her window, taking in the familiar view.

Fern wasn't worried about Melisandre finding her here. Despite living on the property for a decade, she knew that Melisandre had never ventured this far away from the manicured lawns and polished courtyards of the estate. Her stepsister wasn't one for the outdoors...

A bit of resentment toward Eric and Ella rose in her throat. She'd told them she wasn't ready.

But that wasn't fair...her heart said that she had been ready. She'd opened to Ash with a heart so eager for affection, she'd nearly tripped over herself to give it to him.

Scrubbing her face with her hands, she grabbed the sack again and made her way back down the stairs. That was the thing about living in such a small space.

She'd lived in the main house all her life, never knowing there was a secret room. But the tower was much easier to learn its little tricks.

Earlier in the summer, she'd discovered a false wall on the first floor. She'd known that it was likely meant for the bones

of some saint, but the mortar had worn thin, and she'd peeled back four or five bricks, enough to see an empty space two feet high and two feet deep.

She'd carefully replaced them then, but lighting a candle, she made her way back there now. Taking out the bricks once again, she lifted each of Melisandre's jewels from the sack, each wrapped in a bit of cloth and laid them on the bottom of the small vault then replaced the bricks.

She doubted Melisandre knew about the little room off the library, but Ash did. And who knew if he could be trusted?

Her heart beat with painful thuds as she replaced the bricks and then carried the empty sack back to her room.

She reached for one of her beloved books, hugging the volume to her chest. Laying on her small bed, tears soaked into her pillow. She'd thought she run out of tears, but the walls of her tower had never judged her, only held her close when the world failed her.

At some point, she fell asleep, the volume still clutched to her chest. She remembered the story but, in her dream, she became the victim, Melisandre the killer who chased her through the streets with a bloody knife.

She tried to scream but her voice wouldn't work.

Running faster she could feel Melisandre moving closer and she knew what was about to happen. Melisandre was about to take the very last thing from her...her own life.

ASH SAT with his back resting against a tree, the sounds of the night filling his ears as he stared up at Fern's tower.

He knew she'd come, knew that this is where she'd retreat after the pain he'd caused. And he'd followed because he needed to know that she was safe.

He'd hurt Fern, he knew that. But that didn't mean that he'd let Jack pull her into this war in which they were locked.

He'd give his own life before he'd let that man hurt her.

He would have stopped her from leaving the house, but he was afraid that if he showed himself, he'd only make the situation worse.

So instead, he skulked in the shadows like the wraith he was.

He let out a heavy sigh. How could he have been such a fool? The night didn't answer as he continued to stare.

The candlelight had died, the blackness leaving him to hope that she'd fallen asleep. He'd not rest. Not tonight.

He had this nagging fear that if he fell asleep, Jack would attack her.

Minutes slipped into hours, and he finally found his eyes growing heavy, closing of their own accord.

And that's when the scream ripped through the night.

He bolted up, knowing it was Fern. Knowing she was in trouble.

Pushing off the hard ground, he crashed through the door and up the stairs, not even thinking...

He made it to the room above, Fern's outline clear in the faint light of the first rays of the sun. "Fern."

She bolted up with a gasp and he was next to her in an instant, wrapping her in his arms. "Fern, what's wrong?"

"I had a dream," she said between gasping breaths, her face burrowed into his shoulder. "Melisandre was chasing me and—" Then she jerked back. "What are you doing here?"

He winced, still holding her. "I know I have no right to ask for forgiveness. But I was worried about you. What if Jack or Melisandre attacked you here? You're all alone."

She shook her head. "Melisandre would never have ventured this far, and she certainly never found this place or knew of its existence. I suppose they might have followed me tonight, though. But it was dark, and I know the way well." Then her hands tightened on his arms. "But I meant... what are you doing here? In my tower. You don't like..."

And her voice trailed off...

Ash sucked in a breath, even as he looked about him at the slanted walls. They started to close in on him a bit, but he forced his gaze back to Fern. "You screamed. I thought you were in danger."

She blinked up at him. "You came in here to rescue me?"

He slid a hand up her arm, cupping her cheek. "Oh Fern... there isn't anything I wouldn't brave to protect you."

Her lips parted as she searched his gaze. "Really?"

By way of answer, he leaned forward, brushing a light kiss over her lips. “I will tell you the truth. When I first met you, I wanted information on Melisandre. But the longer I knew you...”

He trailed off when her eyes shuttered, and she turned away. “My whole life has been about her.”

He winced. He couldn’t do anything about how they’d met. What had motivated him to seek out Fern. “But the longer I know you, the less I care about revenge and the more I just want to live my life.” He took in a steadying breath. “With you.”

“With me?” Her hands gripped his biceps, her gaze going wide. “What do you mean?”

“Fern.” He leaned his forehead against hers, keeping their gazes locked. “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

She gasped in a breath. “You broke my heart today. You can’t just come in here saying things like that.”

“I know,” he said, gathering her closer. “You’re right. You don’t have to trust me. Just please don’t completely cut me out. I’m only just beginning to understand what I’d forgotten in my time in that cupboard.”

“What’s that?”

“That love is far more powerful than hate. That it fills a man rather than draining him dry.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

FERN STARED up at Ash trying to sort his words and her feelings.

It would be so tempting to fall into believing all the pretty things he'd just murmured. But she'd been his fool once already.

Then again, he sat in her little tower, a place he'd been so afraid to go because he'd thought she was in danger.

And he'd claimed to want a future...

She pulled herself to sitting and scooted away from him. "Try to understand..."

He winced, looking away. "I do."

Fern nipped at her lip as she carefully set the book she still held in her arms beside the bed. "Books never let you down. They always give you the exact emotion you were searching for."

"True." Ash reached for the volume, flipping it over. "Then again, they always end. Relationships with people are harder...I can confess that, but..."

She thought of her sister. Ella had rescued Fern. “I suppose you’re right. When a person cares for you, they can enrich your life in a way my mystery novel never could.”

His fingers slid down her arm. “I want to make you a promise.”

She looked at him then, their gazes locking together. “What is it?”

“I promise to put your needs first.” He took her hand then. “I’d forgotten what it meant to love, but I’m ready again, Fern. Whatever you need, however much time to forgive me and trust me again, I’m here for you.”

She stared at him, lost for words. She’d spent the day mourning his loss, the loss of feelings she’d thought he didn’t share. “I don’t know if I can ever trust—”

“I know,” he said. “But I’ll prove to you that you are more important than anything else, especially the revenge I’d hoped to seek. I’m going to put that aside for you, my love. For us.”

Hope swelled in her chest and before she could think too much, she leaned forward, their mouths crashing together.

His arms were around her in a moment, pulling her into his lap as his hands ran up and down her back. The kiss lengthened, their tongue tangling together until Fern forgot every objection she’d harbored, her body pressed tight to his until she was so filled with longing, she shifted restlessly in his arms, wanting more.

But instead of meeting her movement, Ash moved back. She let out a frustrated huff of air. “Ash.”

He chuckled appreciatively. “Trust me, the last thing I wish to do is stop.”

“Then why...”

“Because Eric has kicked me out, and you have reservations, and I will not touch you more until there is a firmer commitment between us.”

“Firmer commitment?”

“An offer of marriage.”

She gasped in a breath. “You mean that?”

“Every word,” he said, then he kissed her again.

This kiss was soft and sweet, which was both so wonderful and frustratingly short before he was setting her back on the bed. He rose and she pushed up on her knees, not wanting him to go.

“Ash.” Her head spun with everything he’d just said. “I don’t know how to feel.”

He reached down, touching her cheek. “That’s why we’re going to give you a bit of time to think.”

And then he started for the stairs.

She watched him go, wanting to call him back but also needing time to think. Was all he’d said too good to be true?

ASH WOKE EARLY, lifting himself from his spot against the tree and started for Castledon proper.

He needed to speak with Eric, and this was sure to be an unpleasant conversation.

He deserved Eric's anger. He'd taken a fragile woman, one he'd cared about, and he'd been callous with her feelings. He had a great deal of amends to make.

The part that really made him ache was that he'd grown up in a loving family. He should have understood the gift that Fern had been offering him this entire time.

Making his way to the estate, he watched the nearby river snake through the forest, the early morning light sparkling off the surface for a few minutes before he made his way down to the bank.

It was too early to visit yet, and he could do with a bit of freshening. He'd spent the night on the hard ground. With the exception of those few minutes in Fern's arms.

After stripping to the waist, he dunked his head in, the cool water clearing his thoughts. Last night, focusing on Fern, he'd tolerated her little tower. It was a major step forward and even more clear evidence he was on the right path. By letting go of the past and focusing on the future and Fern, he was moving further away from the fear that had gripped him. Scrubbing his chest and face, he dressed again, grimacing at his rumpled clothes, and then made his way back to the house.

The sun now shone higher in the sky, he climbed the stairs and rang the bell at the front door.

He'd become accustomed to using the less formal entrance off the kitchen but because of the altercation with Eric

yesterday, and what he wished to discuss today, he opted for a more traditional entrance.

Would that save him from being punched in the face? He wasn't sure.... Likely not.

Drawing in a deep breath, he scrubbed a hand through his hair and then down his face.

The butler showed him in, and Ash sat in a familiar sitting room, waiting for the earl. Would Eric keep him waiting?

He didn't. Minutes later, Eric walked into the room, his eyes sporting dark circles as though he hadn't slept. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Ash rose, knowing he was already off to a poor start. "I came to speak with you about Fern."

"I told you yesterday to keep her name out of your mouth."

"I can't," he said, shaking his head. "I love her."

Eric stared at him for several seconds before he snorted. "A man who loves a woman, protects her. He doesn't use her for his own gain."

Sharp guilt sliced through him. "You're right."

Those words did not pacify Eric. "Of course, I am."

"Which is why..." Ash drew in a breath. "I'd like to ask you to allow me to stay."

"No."

"I know what Jack's capable of. I want to protect her."

Eric squinted his eyes, a dark expression crossing his face. “You want to be close in case Jack and Melisandre return.”

“My presence would help.”

“Not if your goal is your own revenge. You’d do more harm than good, just like yesterday.”

Ash shook his head. “My goal is not to seek revenge, not anymore. It’s to marry Fern.”

Eric’s head whipped back. “You can’t be serious. Not after what transpired yesterday.”

Ash lifted his hands in surrender. “I admit freely that when I first arrived, I wished to make Jack pay. But the longer I knew Fern—”

“Lie! You had valuable information you didn’t share. Those are not the motives of a selfless man.”

Ash spread his hands wider. “Eric. Everything you’ve said is true. I don’t blame you for not trusting me. But when I saw Fern’s face yesterday...” He drew in a ragged breath. “The truth about myself and my feelings came into sharp focus. I don’t deserve a second chance, but I’d like the opportunity to prove to all of you that I am here for Fern and no one else.”

Eric scowled. “I don’t know why I’d even let you under my roof today, let alone the same one that Fern is under.”

Ash’s brows rose at that. “Rest assured, she’s not under your roof.”

“What?” Eric practically spit the words.

Ash had to give the man credit. He'd been completely lovable until crossed. The man was a good protector of his family.

“Late last night, she slipped out and went to her tower.”

“How do you know that?”

Ash dropped his arms, giving Eric a long stare. “I slept against a tree near its base. You think I'd leave her unprotected with that witch and her pirate husband throwing around threats?”

Eric's face turned granite hard and then he was spinning. “She went out there alone?”

Ash thought it best to say no more but he did follow Eric as the other man spun around again and headed toward the back of the house. He tramped down the back stairs and passing through the kitchen, he grabbed a stick of bread from the counter where they cooled, ripping it in two and tossing half to Ash. “You look like shit. Eat.”

Ash gave a quick jerk of his chin in answer. The very fact that Eric was feeding him, was an excellent sign. “Should we bring some for Fern?”

Eric cursed and spun back around, grabbing a second loaf and some dried pork. “What was that woman thinking, going off alone?”

Ash winced, he felt responsible for her decision. “I'll convince her to come back. Do you think I might have a cot in the garden to keep an eye on her in case she does this again?”

Eric snorted but didn't answer as they both ate their bread in silence, walking back over the ground they'd only just covered.

"Are you being truthful? Marriage is your goal?" Eric said when he'd finished his breakfast.

"Marriage is my goal," Ash answered. "After I've convinced Fern that I deserve another chance."

Eric grunted in answer. "First convince her not to go traipsing off in the dark. Both Ella and Fern have a well-earned independent streak, which I admire until it jeopardizes their safety. You should have seen the things Ella did before we were married."

"I heard something about stealing?"

"Oh, she tortured Melisandre. Made it her mission to get under her stepsister's skin. Outsmarted her stepmother too, who is now rotting in jail."

Ash shook his head. "Admirable."

Eric stopped. "Don't get any ideas about pulling my wife into some plot that jeopardizes her safety. We both nearly died in the pursuit of Ella and Fern's freedom."

Ash's teeth clenched together. Eric was right. It wasn't worth risking Fern's life. "I hear you, I believe you, and I heed you."

Eric clapped him on the back. "Good." They kept walking, turning the final bend as Fern's tower came into view.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FERN HADN'T FALLEN BACK to sleep until the sun had been peeking through her window, so she was still asleep when a loud banging woke her, though her thoughts were so muddled, she couldn't place the sound.

She cracked her eyes open, blinking into the light as the pounding continued.

"Fern," Eric yelled from outside. "Open this door or I am breaking it down."

"It's unlocked," she called back.

She heard her brother-in-law make a low rumbling noise deep in his throat, unlike anything she'd ever heard from him before. "A pirate and a thief are after your tiara, and you not only left the house where I can't protect you, but you didn't even bother to lock the door?"

There might be a few sound points in there. She'd just assumed that Melisandre would never find her way to her tower in the woods.

She yawned and then stretched, sitting up in the bed as the door opened and then multiple sets of boots clomped up the

stairs.

Eric appeared first, looking furious. Ash was next, his eyes roaming over her exposed skin in her sleeveless chemise.

He shrugged off his coat, and moving over to her, he dropped the garment over her shoulders.

Eric cast them a deep frown. “Well?” he said to Fern. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

Fern could not bring herself to be afraid of her brother-in-law. Ought she pretend so as not to wound his pride? She went for apologetic instead. “I’m sorry, Eric. I won’t do it again.”

Eric’s gaze cast between them. “Did you plan this as a tryst?”

Fern’s nose wrinkled. “Of course not. I spent all day yesterday crying over Ash’s rejection.”

“Then how did he know you were here? And why are you not surprised to see him?” Eric tossed a stick of bread at her.

Ash caught it, gently handing it to her. “She had no idea that I was nearby last night.”

Eric lifted his chin, a flicker of challenge in his eyes. “Really? Then why isn’t she upset still? Why do you two seem rather cozy?”

Fern took a bite of the bread, more to delay answering than anything else. She finally swallowed. “I had a nightmare about Melisandre last night.”

Eric’s face softened, going from anger to concern in a span of seconds. Lord, she loved her brother-in-law. For a man of

his strength, he had one of the kindest hearts she'd ever known.

“She screamed in her sleep,” Ash added, his fingers brushing her arm. “I had fallen asleep against the tree and when I heard the scream...”

Eric's gaze flitted between them, his mouth hardening again. “I see.”

Ash's hands lifted. “I tried to tell you this morning. I'm prepared to do the right thing. Eager, in fact.”

Eric gave a curt nod, but it was Fern's turn to look between them. “The right thing?”

Ash reached for her hand, squeezing her fingers. “We'll talk later.”

She gave a nod, even as she squeezed his hand and then pushed out of the bed. “I brought clothes, if you both will give me a moment, I'll dress and then we can return home.”

“Home?” Eric asked, cocking a brow. “Do you think of Castledon as your home again?”

Castledon had always been her home. “Of course,” she answered. “The tower is my escape.”

Ash winked at her then. She shrugged off his coat, handing it back to him. But he didn't put it on. Instead, he fished in the pocket and pulled out the volume she'd allowed him to borrow on the *Art of War*. “I don't need this anymore.”

Hope swelled in her chest as she took the book and returned it to the pile next to her bed. Then, grabbing her

mystery novel, she crossed back to him. “Take this one instead.” She handed him *House of Whispers*. “It’s my very favorite so I’ll look forward to a rousing discussion when you’re done.”

He took the book, slipping it in his pocket and then placing the coat back on. “Thank you, and you can count on that.”

She would. That and so much more...

The two men left, leaving Fern to dress. Once done, she stepped outside, finding them both waiting just outside the door. Carefully, she locked her tower once again.

They made the walk back in silence, Eric in front of her, Ash behind. It wasn’t until they reached the garden, that Ash came up next to her, taking her hand in his. “I’d like a bit of your time this morning.”

As they crossed the terrace, Fern’s steps slowed. The library had a clear view of the garden and terraces. “Why don’t we stop here?” She looked to Eric who turned back to give a nod of approval before he kept walking, turning about the corner to enter through the kitchen door.

He reached for her hand, silence settling between them as they waited to be alone. “I just want you to know that I’m prepared to wait for as long—”

But Fern didn’t actually want to talk. She stepped closer, her cheek coming to his shoulder. “Thank you for being patient.”

“Does patience include not speaking now?”

“It does.” She laughed softly against him. “I think what we need now is just a bit of time to let things settle between us.”

He nodded, placing his chin on the top her head. “Fortunately for us, we’ve got plenty of that.”

“What if Melisandre and Jack do come here?” she asked. “What if they try and take the jewels?”

Ash’s arms wrapped about her as he pulled her tight to his chest. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

Doubt niggled in her stomach. He said that now. But when faced with the opportunity of revenge, how would he react?

Would he keep his promise? Did she allow herself to hope and risk him breaking her heart a second time?

THE DAY PASSED SLOWLY, Ash feeling unsettled for reasons he couldn’t quite explain.

He was happy to wait for Fern, and he knew it would take time to build the trust back that he lost.

So he wasn’t quite certain what caused the tension filling his limbs. He’d hardly slept the night before, he ought to be exhausted.

He took a long bath, hoping a soak would ease the tension in his limbs, but still restless, he finally gave up on sleep and headed down to the library.

He loved this space, especially after his passionate kiss with Fern in that very space.

Stepping in, he looked at the decorative piece of the cornice that acted as lever to the secret room.

What he wouldn't give to have Fern tucked between him and the wall once again.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Her feminine lilt drifted from the shadows. Turning toward the sound, he found her curled in a chair with a book to her chest.

He smiled, touching his breast pocket where the novel she'd given him earlier still rested. Honestly, it was quite thick and he ought to have removed it, but he liked having an item from her right next to his heart.

"Not a wink," he answered, moving toward her. "What are you reading?"

She sighed, setting the book aside. "I'm not even certain. I can hardly concentrate."

"Why is that?" he asked when he reached her side. She'd curled her legs up so that her feet also rested on the seat of her chair, but her tiny toes peeked out, looking completely adorable.

"Well." She set the book aside, tapping her chin. "Let me see. I received my first marriage proposal today."

"First?" He crouched down, resting his elbows on his knees as he reached out and ran a fingertip over the top of her toes. "Is that why you didn't accept my offer? You're holding out for another?"

She let out a nervous giggle, leaning closer. "I suppose I am."

His heart stuttered in his chest, regret lancing through him. It was too soon, he ought to have left her alone. “I see.”

“Are you going to ask me again?”

His heart kicked back in full force as his pulse rushed in his ears. “What would you say if I did?”

She drew in a breath, his own stalling in his lungs as he waited to hear what she might say.

“Well, isn’t this just so cozy.”

His head snapped up. Melisandre stood in the doorway, a pistol in her hand, and Jack just behind her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FERN JUMPED FROM THE CHAIR, pressing to Ash's back. His arm wrapped behind him, pulling her even tighter to his body.

"We've not been formally introduced," he said to Melisandre as he stood straighter, covering even more of her body with his own.

"We're past all that," Melisandre purred, moving deeper into the room. Fern peeked around Ash and nearly snorted, some of her fear melting away.

Melisandre wore an elaborate gown and pelisse with a hat pinned jauntily to the side and pure white gloves. "Is that how you think thieves should dress?" she called over Ash's shoulder. "Do you fancy yourself in some sort of novel?"

"You tell me," Melisandre snapped back. "You're the one with your nose in a book all the time."

Was that supposed to be an insult? Should she bother to tell Melisandre that if she fired the gun, her gloves would be covered with incriminating powder? Best not...

Still, Fern stood straighter, calling over Ash's shoulder. "I don't know why you're here. I told you that the jewels are

gone.”

“Really?” Melisandre asked. “Because according to Eric’s solicitor, no jewels have been sold recently.”

That’s when Jack appeared behind his wife. “And we know he’s telling the truth. Sang like a bird after a few broken bones.”

Those words made Fern shrink back down. While she wasn’t afraid of Melisandre in her elaborate costume, her husband was another matter.

This was the man who’d imprisoned Ash. Anger and frustration pounded through her veins along with a healthy dose of fear. What else was he capable of?

“Which means,” Jack continued, moving closer. “You are lying.”

“Neither of them ever tells the truth,” Melisandre said. “You can’t trust anything that comes out of their mouths. Ella’s the worst, but Fern has clearly learned a few tricks since I left.”

Fern’s fingers fisted in the back of Ash’s jacket. Nearby stood the rack of fireplace tools. Perhaps if she could reach the poker...

“Now.” Jack lifted his pistol. “If you both want to live, you’ll tell me where the jewels are.”

Ash drew in a deep breath. “The problem is that you and I have other matters to discuss.”

Fern started against his back. What was Ash doing?

“Such as?” Jack sounded amused rather than confused, his voice laced with a chuckle.

“How we’re going to even the score between us.”

She squeaked, wondering what Ash would do next. Was he more concerned about their safety or about his plans for revenge? Had he spotted his moment and Fern had lost him...

“The only score we need to settle is the one where you die. I told you that we the next time we met—”

“Kill me and you’ll never get the jewels.”

“He’s lying,” Melisandre hissed. “After yesterday, they’d never trust him with valuables.”

Ash shrugged. “Fern and I are getting married. Of course, she trusts me.”

Fern looked up at his profile in confusion. What was he doing? Was this the moment that he betrayed her...

“Let Fern go first,” Ash said. “And I’ll show you where they are.”

Her stomach dropped clear to her toes. He was attempting to save her, and in the process, putting himself back under Jack’s thumb. Gads. She wouldn’t forgive herself if he got hurt because of her. She needed to act fast. *Think, Fern.*

Her pressed her cheek to his back, tears stinging at her eyes. “Don’t,” she whispered. “We’ll do this together.”

The pistol in Jack’s hand wavered. “What to do, what to do. On the one hand I’m tempted to believe you. I heard the way you begged to be let out of that cupboard, so I’m sure you

don't wish to go back." Jack tapped his chin. "On the other, you seem fond of her, and men can be such fools when they fall in love."

Jack stepped closer, his eyes on Ash as Fern's skin crawled with indecision. Could she help? What should she do?

Drawing in a deep breath, she let go of Ash's jacket. With a final press of her cheek to his back, she stepped out from behind him.

ASH FELT the moment that Fern changed course. It was in the straightening of her body, the slowing of her breath.

Silently he begged her not to do it and as she came out from behind him, his arm automatically tightened to hold her back.

But he couldn't stop her words... "Promise not to hurt us and I'll show you where the jewels are."

Melisandre snorted, "I told you Fern was the one to press. She's never been the strong one of the pair. That's Ella."

"She's the brains too," Fern said, no anger in her voice. Ash looked back at her, his features surely displaying his incredulity. Did she not know how wonderful she was? "If she were here, she'd likely think of a way out of this..." Fern's voice tapered off as Melisandre gave a loud, grating laugh.

"Right. Show us then."

Fern shook her head. “Your husband has to agree to the terms first.”

Jack’s gaze found Fern’s, his hard eyes making Ash tighten his grip even more. He’d pulled Fern into this mess of a situation. He’d get her out.

Jack’s gaze slid up and down Fern. “You know...of all the times that Melisandre spoke of her stepsisters, she never mentioned your beauty.”

Ash grit his teeth together. He’d kill Jack with his bare hands before he let her lay one finger on Fern. “She offered you a deal.”

“I liked yours better.” Jack looked back at him. “The question is, which of you actually knows where the tiara and the necklace are located.” He pointed the pistol at first Ash and then Fern.

Ash moved a few more inches in front of her.

“I’m going to go with her.” Jack swung his arm toward Ash again and then the deafening blast of the gun echoed through the house.

Pain exploded through Ash’s chest a moment before the blast pushed him back with such force, he hit the floor with another thud. And then the world went black.

Fern’s screams filled her own ears as she stumbled to the side, Ash’s weight knocking her down too. But she’d hardly hit the floor when she was being yanked up by her hair.

“The jewels,” Jack spit. “Now. And maybe I’ll let you live.”

Both of Fern's hands clawed at Jack's hand as he yanked her toward the library door. "No. Wait."

"No more waiting," he snarled back. "My patience is thin, and we've only got a few more minutes before the whole house arrives."

"No. I mean..." Fern tried to catch her breath, tried to calm the rising sobs filling her chest. "The pieces are here. In the library."

Jack stopped, pushing his face inches from hers. "They are not."

"They are." She tried to slow her racing heart, attempted to think rationally. Her gaze darted to Ash still lying on the floor. "Here. I'll show you."

Jack's fingers eased on her scalp. Letting her go, she waved him forward. Swallowing down a lump she said a small prayer for calm and strength.

"You had better not be lying."

By way of answer, she pulled on the arched support of the candelabra, the door to the secret room sliding open.

"Well, I'll be," Jack crowed as he rushed forward.

Fern could see the boxes right where she left them...sitting empty.

But Jack didn't know that. Not yet.

He raced into the room, picking up a box as Melisandre let out a cry of surprise. Fern held perfectly still. She might not be

as smart as Ella, but if she were careful, she could spring a trap all her own.

“Are they really there?” Melisandre cried, taking a single step forward.

Jack unlatched the hook that held the box closed and Fern knew she only had a single moment. With all her strength, she heaved the ornate candelabra up again, the door snapping shut.

Jack’s muffled roar filled the room a moment before another blast went off. Fern curled in on herself, blocking her ears as her eyes squeezed shut. Slowly, she opened them and straightened. Melisandre still stood several feet away, smoke curling from her pistol.

“Did I hit you?” Melisandre asked as though she requested a pot of tea.

Fern blinked in surprise, not sure how to answer. She looked down at herself and then let out a large sigh of relief. She was whole and unharmed. “No.”

For a single moment, Melisandre’s face went slack. Then her jaw snapped shut as her features flushed with color. She charged at Fern in a stance that might have been laughable if the situation weren’t deadly serious.

But her stepsister had not made it three steps when Ash was up, poker in hand, charging toward Melisandre.

Melisandre froze again, and then instantly crumpled to the ground before Ash had even reached her. She cried out just as Eric filled the doorway. “What in the—”

“Get the doctor,” Fern cried, racing to Ash’s side. “And then the constable. Jack the pirate is locked in our little room.”

Ella came up behind her husband. “Fern. You didn’t.”

“I did.” But she couldn’t explain. “Ash,” she cried, reaching him and tossing her arms about him. “Take off your coat. I need to see...”

“I’m fine,” he answered, wrapping her in a hug. “Besides the blow to the head when I hit the floor.”

“But he shot you. I saw it.”

“Jack shot Ash!” Eric erupted.

But from Ash’s coat, he pulled out her copy of *The House of Whispers*. It was sporting a hole dead in the middle. “Saved my life.”

Fern stared at the book shaking her head. “I always knew books were the best of friends.”

Ash let out a chuckle. “I shall have to get you a new copy.”

But with a relieved cry, she tossed her arms about him. “I can’t believe you’re all right.”

He winced but held her in his arms. “Do you want to be the one who ties up Melisandre?”

“I’ll do it,” Ella called. “I’ve been waiting for this opportunity for the last decade.”

“And Jack?” Eric asked, one brow cocking as he looked at Ash. “What do you want to do about him?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ASH STRAIGHTENED UP, Fern still in his arms. He looked down into her concerned expression and cupped her face with his palm, swiping his thumb over the velvet of her cheek.

Behind them, the entire staff filled the doorway and the hall beyond, everyone roused by the noise.

He ignored them all, his gaze fixed on Fern. Jack had made him a promise at the picnic. *The third time we meet, I will end you.* The pirate had given it his best shot. Literally.

And now it was Ash's turn.

“Ella, are you done with Melisandre?”

Ella tugged at the thick ribbon she'd used to subdue her stepsister. “Nearly.”

She pulled the ribbon even tighter, causing Melisandre to cry out. “Ella. Why?”

Ella only snorted as Fern raised her brows. “The very fact you have the audacity to ask that question is why.”

Ash leaned down and brushed a kiss across her forehead.

“Done,” Ella announced, a bit of sweat beading her brow, but her mouth curled into a satisfied grin. “Though you could convince me to undo the ties and retie her again. That felt even better than I’d dreamed.”

Eric and Ash both chuckled, but Fern stepped out of his arms and walked over to where Melisandre lay tied on the floor, her face pressing into the thick carpet.

Fern slowly lowered herself until she knelt just in front of her stepsister.

For a moment, Ash wondered what she intended to do. Hit Melisandre? Spit in her face?

But Fern reached out and carefully removed the hatpin from the elaborate boater from Melisandre’s head. “I like your hat,” Fern whispered. “I think I shall wear it to my wedding.”

Melisandre let out a cry of outrage, finally beginning to struggle against the bonds, only managing to tighten them.

Fern ignored her stepsister’s struggles, crossing back over to Ash. “Fine,” she murmured on a sigh.

“Fine? I don’t understand?”

But the small smile she gave him was mischievous and sexy as sin. “You were right. A little revenge does feel nice.”

He gave a deep laugh at that. “Noted.”

“But not too much,” she gave a meaningful glance at the closed room. “Too much darkness tears at the soul...”

“And it’s time to let the light in,” he finished, reaching for her and wrapping her in a large hug.

She curled her arms about his neck, burying her face in his shoulder.

When he let her go, he let out a long breath of air, his eyes fixed on the hidden door. “You and Ella should leave before I open it.”

“We could wait for the constables...” Eric said, giving Ash a meaningful stare.

But Ash gave a quick shake of his head. He needed to do this. Jack had bested him twice. It was time he proved he wasn't under the man's thumb and that he could be the protector Fern deserved.

Eric jerked his chin in confirmation, even as he waved two footmen forward. “Take Melisandre to the next sitting room and don't let her out of your sight.”

Ash ran his hand up Fern's back. “And you take Ella upstairs.”

“I should be with you.”

Ash shook his head. “You'll not be in anymore danger today. I insist.”

Her gaze was filled with uncertainty but finally she relented. As she stepped back however, he pulled her close one last time and pressed his mouth to hers. “You were glorious tonight.”

Her smile was soft as color filled her cheeks. “Thank you.”

He let her go and his eyes followed her as she took her sister's hand, the pair finally exiting the library.

“What’s your plan?” Eric asked as his eyes also left the retreating women to rest on Ash.

Ash drew in a deep gulp of air. “You were right. I could just leave him in there until the constable arrives but...” He picked up Melisandre’s pistol. “I have a more satisfying idea.”

“What is it?”

“Just be ready with a loaded pistol in case I fail.”

Eric’s brows rose but he silently left the room to retrieve the requested weapon.

Beyond, Ash could hear the muffled calls of Jack, his fist pounding on the inside walls. The individual words were lost. Jack had no idea what had happened. He’d surely heard the shot, and he could hear voices.

But he wouldn’t know who had won and who had lost out here. Did he think Melisandre would let him out at any moment?

That idea gave him some small measure of satisfaction.

Eric returned. “Ready,” he said, raising up the gun.

“Don’t shoot him unless I’m losing.”

“What if he’s got another pistol and he fires on you the moment the door opens?”

Ash appreciated Eric’s worry. “I’ve got a plan.”

Eric cocked a single brow, his chin notching to the side but he didn’t protest further.

Stepping to the side, Ash flattened himself against the wall and placed his hand on the candelabra. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

He pulled down the lever and the door swung open...

FERN PULLED at Ella’s hand, but she didn’t move up the stairs like Ash had requested. Instead, she led her sister outside. Lifting her night rail and house coat, she tugged Ella faster. “Come on, we don’t have much time.”

“Time for what? Where are we going?”

Fern didn’t slow as she called over her shoulder. “To retrieve the jewels.”

Ella pulled her sister to a stop. “But the jewels are in—”

“You think I would have let Jack in that room if the tiara was in there?”

Ella blinked at her sister. “They’re in your tower.”

Fern grimaced as she tried to explain. “Ash knew they were in the library, and I didn’t know if we could trust him, so I moved them last night.”

Ella shook her head with a laugh. “I’m so proud of you, Fern. That is plotting at its finest.”

“High praise from you but I shall stop with this single attempt. Quit with this win.”

Ella started forward. “And we’re going to get the jewels now because...”

Fern aimed a devilish grin at her sister. “Perhaps we’ll want to wear them as Melisandre is carted off to prison.”

Ella’s eyes glowed with pride. “Now that is the Fern I know and love.”

“Honestly, I just want to put them safely back in their boxes and then sell them to the first buyer we can find.” She shook her head, the entire ordeal making her tired.

“The tiara is yours to do with whatever you wish,” Her sister replied. “Keep it, sell it, toss it in the river. Though I am not sure I’d recommend the last. It’s worth a small fortune.”

Fern stopped, turning back to her sister. “Really?”

“It’s your dowry. Eric and I had already decided.”

Fern wrapped her arms about her sister. “Thank you.”

Ella hugged her back, then stepped back, squeezing Fern’s fingers. “The jewels can stay in your tower for one more night.”

Fern’s brow scrunched in question. “Surely you want them back in their boxes for safe keeping.”

Ella shook her head. “I’m sure you’ve hidden them well. Go to your tower and enjoy a quiet night of solitude. I’ll tell Ash where you are.”

Fern’s brows lifted in surprise. Was her sister saying what she thought she was saying?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN, and Ash positioned against the wall, just out of sight of the little room. He knew the moment it swung wide, Jack would come racing out. Being trapped in a small space was hell on earth.

And just as he suspected, Jack came lunging out of the door opening, a pistol in one hand, his sword in the other.

Jack dropped down, and kicking out, swept Jack clear off his feet.

It had never been a fair fight where Jack was concerned. The first time Ash had been drunk and alone in a strange city, and tonight he'd been unarmed with Fern to protect.

But this time...

Jack went down on his back with a guttural cry that ended abruptly when his back slammed into the floor.

Ash jumped on him within a second, knocking the pistol across the floor and then wrenching the short sword from his grasp, tossing it in the other direction.

“Guess what...” he said as he stared down into the wide-eyed gaze of his pirate enemy.

“What?” the man tried to push out, but he seemed to be struggling for wind.

Ash felt no sympathy. “You missed.” And then he raised his fist and dropped it straight into Jack’s perfectly straight nose. At least it had been perfectly straight.

It was probably going to be crooked from here on out.

He pushed up and then grabbed Jack’s jacket by the lapels, tossing him back into the small room and closing the door again.

“That’s it?” Eric asked from behind him.

“It?” Ash turned with a grin. “No. Hardly. I hope he lives a long life in a very tiny, barred room.” Jack deserved nothing less and Ash felt both vindicated and free. Free from his own small room but also free from the anger and hate that had been eating him up. Letting Jack face his consequences with nothing but a punch. Ash had let go of his need for revenge.

Eric gave him a bow of appreciation. “Fair point.”

“And a beautiful woman I happen to wish to marry has pointed out that I ought not to darken my own soul with vengeance.”

“Fern said that?” Eric let out an appreciative whistle.

“She did. And what kind of husband would I be if I didn’t heed those sorts of wishes?”

Ella appeared in the doorway. “Done?”

“For now,” Eric answered.

“Good.” Ella turned to him. “Ash, Fern needs your assistance.”

His spine snapped straight. “What’s wrong?”

Ella waved him forward. He approached, concern coursing through him until he noted the teasing dance in Ella’s eyes.

He slowed his steps, stopping in front of her. She leaned forward so that Eric wouldn’t hear and then whispered, “She’s gone to the tower.”

“I’ll see to it right away,” he replied, sounding serious but inside, excitement swelled like the rising of the tide.

Had Ella just gifted him time alone with the woman he loved?

He left without a backward glance. What had happened to the man who wished for revenge? He didn’t even bother to stay to watch Jack get carted off to prison.

Which reminded him. “Eric,” he called, turning back again.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind asking if the constable can dig up Jack’s last name? I’d like to know.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

Ash saluted Eric and then started toward the rear entry of the house, by the time he’d made it outside, he broke into a near run.

He almost tripped and fell twice but kept his feet until the tower finally came into view in the narrow sliver of moonlight.

It wasn't even a question if he'd enter the small space, He opened the door, and finding the key hanging on the hook, he locked it in place.

“Ash?” Fern called from upstairs.

“It's me,” he answered, starting up the stairs.

The tower had been lit with several candles, casting a warm glow about the small room.

Fern half sat in the bed, with the covers pulled up just above her chest, her bare skin glowing in the dim light.

“Fern?” he asked, sounding a bit strained even to his own ears. Was she naked?

Desire pulsed through him. His gaze cast up her chest, over her narrow shoulders, to the slender column of her neck. Her hair had been undone and it streamed down one shoulder, looking like spun silk.

Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight but what really stopped him.

The tiara was perched in her hair, winking in the flickering light. “Where did that come from?”

She lifted her hand to touch one of the fine points and the blanket slipped a tantalizing inch lower. “This old thing?”

He chuckled, leisurely moving forward. “When did you remove it from the library?”

She winced. “Yesterday.”

“Who didn't you trust... Melisandre or me?”

“I won’t lie to you.” Her teeth sunk into her bottom lip.
“Both.”

He stopped. “Good.”

“Good?”

“I didn’t deserve your trust and I appreciate that you know better than to place value in fools.”

“Ash.”

“But if you let me, I’ll prove I’m worthy of it now.”

She sat up straighter, holding the blanket in place. “You’ve already proven you’re worthy of my trust.”

His breath stuttered in his chest. “I’m not so certain.”

“If you consider me a good judge of these things, then you’ll have to take my word for it.” Her chin notched as he held his gaze and he found himself pulled toward her once again, the urge to touch her skin overpowering nearly everything else.

“I suppose you’re right.” He reached the edge of the bed, and bending down, he captured those soft, supple lips with his own. “Who am I to argue with that?”

She kissed him back, rising even more. He kissed her, his eyes opening long enough to peek down her back and confirm. She wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing.

He groaned against her mouth. He’d never been happier he’d given up on revenge.

But he’d no more thought that when she pulled away, sitting back down, close but just far enough away that their

gazes could lock. “Ask me again.”

For a moment, he struggled to understand what she asked. But then he remembered. Just before they’d been interrupted by Melisandre and Jack.

They’d been discussing marriage.

“Fern.” He leaned forward and kissed her again before he pulled back. “Will you...” another kiss, “...consent” and another, “...to be my wife.”

She lay back then, and deliberately slid the blanket down her front all the way to her waist. “Yes.”

FERN HAD NEVER in her life been so bold, but boldness might suit her after all.

Ash’s jaw clenched, his gaze burning down her. His expression neither frightened her nor made her feel shy. In fact, it only sharpened the ache she felt. She wanted him to touch her. Everywhere.

As if he’d heard her request, he reached for her cheek and cupped her face in his hand. The other planting on the mattress next to her shoulder, he leaned down and kissed her again. It was equally soft but the way his lips lingered held a promise that stole her breath.

And then he slid his hand away from her cheek and down her neck, his fingers tracing the swells and hollows.

Her breath hitched in short bursts, her skin pebbling in goose pimples as his touch dipped lower and lower until he came to her breast.

Gently, he traced around the mound and then, with aching deliberateness, he moved up to the pebbled nipple, the brush of his finger causing her to cry out with need.

And then he brought his lips to her neck.

Her senses were on fire, her fingers winding into his hair as he began kissing a trail down the same path his fingers had travelled.

And when his lips covered her aching nipples, she worried she might faint from the pleasure.

Too soon, he lifted his head and stood. She gave a cry of displeasure, sitting up. "Don't leave."

"I'm not leaving." He shrugged off his jacket, letting it drop to the floor, and then he tugged at his cravat, adding it to the crumpled clothing. His vest was next and then his boots.

He pulled at first one and then the other, Fern giggling at his frantic movements as she lay back down, one of her arms settling over her head.

Ash abandoned his attempts to remove the second boot, instead yanking his shirt over his head.

And then he moved over her, balancing his weight on his arms as his bare chest came down on top of hers, his mouth capturing hers once again.

The feel of his skin against hers had her moaning in pleasure as she wrapped her arms about him again.

“Fern,” he groaned against her lips, embracing her, once again kissing a trail down her neck.

She didn’t say anything as his lips teased a path down her body. He kissed and sucked both her breasts and then he moved lower, his lips skimming her abdomen before his kisses travelled further down her body to the ticklish V where her torso met her legs.

Gently, he pushed one of her knees out and her entire body tensed with anticipation, pleasure so vivid coursing through her that she held her breath until the moment that the pad of his thumb brushed over her most intimate flesh.

“Ash,” she gasped, half sitting up.

“Shh,” he murmured, lacing his other hand through hers. “I won’t make you feel anything other than good.”

“I’m aware of that,” she half laughed, half gasped back. Intimacy with him so much more than she’d ever imagined, and she was overwhelmed.

But his finger was slow and leisurely. “Are you worried? Scared? Do you wish for me to stop?”

“No.” She didn’t have to think as the word popped from her mouth. “Don’t stop.”

From her place between her legs, their eyes met, his lips curving into a smile. “Good.”

And then he inched forward, replacing his finger with his tongue. The action was so erotic, so pleasurable, that her entire body stiffened, her eyes rolling back as her neck arched up.

She'd never imagined this sort of pleasure. Her fingers curled into his hair, her body matching his rhythm as over and over he stroked her sensitive flesh, causing the tension in her to climb higher and higher.

Her toes curled as she pulled him closer until finally her passion broke, her cries echoing off the stone walls.

Ash kissed her thigh, slowly climbing back up her body.

Her hands leisurely traced his shoulders, her eyes half closed. "What happens next?"

He chuckled. "We go to sleep."

That made her eyes pop open. "Sleep?"

He kissed her neck, his fingers stroking along her jaw. "It's been a long and very active day."

Fern wound her arms about his neck. "It has. And that was a most excellent way to end it."

"See. Perfect time..."

"Which is why I assumed you'd also want some..." She searched for the appropriate word. "Satisfaction."

He grimaced. "I will be inside you, receiving my... satisfaction, when we are wed and not before. I am a gentleman, despite many of my actions of late, and your protection is more important than anything else."

Those words melted her inside. Her hand trailed down his back as her lips grazed his temple. “I appreciate everything you just said. So much. But surely there is something we could do that would not risk pregnancy.”

He pulled up, his dark eyes holding hers, the intensity of his stare, making her catch her breath.

“What kind of something?”

He was asking her? “I don’t know. You used your mouth...”

His eyes closed, and his face was so tense he looked pained. “Oh love, you have no idea...”

“What?”

“Are you sure?”

A delightful smile pulled at her lips. Was she sure that she wanted to explore her soon-to-be husband? Learn what brought him pleasure? “I’m sure.”

He lifted, tugging at the falls of his breeches. She peeked down to note that he still had on one boot.

She suppressed a giggle even as the falls came undone. He pushed the breeches down his hips, his member springing free.

A mix of apprehension and excitement niggled in her stomach, and she had to swallow down a lump. His member was rather large and intimidating.

His hand moved over his own flesh a moment before he reached for her fingers. “Would it be easier if I showed you?”

“Yes,” she whispered. He wrapped her fingers about his shaft, her breath hitching at the contrast of velvet skin and rock-hard flesh. So interesting.

And when he helped her fingers slide up and down his flesh...she felt the shiver that moved through him.

Propping herself up with her other elbow, she licked her lips as they moved together, her hand working his flesh, his hand over hers, their combined efforts, creating a tension that was delicious and exciting.

She looked away from his shaft, letting her gaze travel up the lean contours of his torso, over all the muscles and hard edges that made him so different from her in all the most wonderful ways.

“Next time, I want to touch all of you,” she whispered.

But her words only created more tension in him, his head falling back, as his muscles flexed even tighter.

And then he groaned, his body spasming in his finish. Satisfaction of a different kind washed over Fern.

This man was hers.

And they had the rest of their lives to love and please each other.

As much as she loved this first time had been in her tower, she understood that Ash was her home now. And where he was, that was where she'd be safest and most loved of all.

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER...

WAITING for today had been some form of torture. Fern bounced on her toes, and her fingers gripped the late summer flowers her sister had given her. Today was her wedding day.

Fern drew in a tremulous breath as Ash's sister, Emily appeared in the door. She had the same brown hair and warm eyes as her brother and Fern reached out to her, so glad to have the reminder of Ash at her side in this moment.

She was so anxious to be by his side again.

She hadn't seen him in a full day and night, and she missed his touch.

Her sister appeared as well, each of the ladies taking one of her arms. "It's time."

They made their way to the waiting carriage and then, climbing in, they started the short journey to the nearby chapel.

There, Eric, and Emily's husband waited along with a few other friends and family.

She craned her neck toward the window, hardly able to attend the conversation between Ella and Emily. Finally, the chapel appeared, and her heart jumped in her throat.

Before Ash, she'd wished to hide. Now? She could hardly wait to rush into the future. "We're nearly there."

Both Emily and Ella laughed.

Emily patted her knee. "Ash was equally anxious this morning."

"Not worried?" Fern asked, her brow knitting in concern. She and Ash had hardly been separated since Melisandre and Jack had been carted off to prison.

"Not worried." Emily winked. "Just anxious for your forced separation to end."

Fern let out a long breath. She knew how he felt. They'd kept to their promise not to be completely together until after the wedding but the tension and anticipation between them had been heightening until Fern thought she might snap if it didn't break soon.

She was beyond ready for Ash to become her husband.

"I nearly forgot to tell you," Ella said, reaching for Fern's hand. "We heard from the constable last night."

"Really?" This might be the one topic that could distract her from thoughts of Ash. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine," Ella gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze. "In fact, they finally learned Jack's identity."

Fern let out a rush of breath. Melisandre and Jack had been carted off to prison after their break-in and they were both being tried for attempted murder and robbery.

Investigators had unearthed several other crimes that Jack had committed as well. But the mystery of his identity had remained. “Who is he?”

“His last name is Miller.”

“Miller?” It sounded so ordinary.

“Yes. And he is in fact, the son of a mill owner. Grain.”

Fern shook his head. “His poor family.”

Emily wrung her hands together. “I appreciate your kind heart, but my sympathies are with us. Jack and Melisandre terrorized all of us.”

Wasn't that the truth. “In the end, we're all right.”

Emily nodded. “The investigators have confirmed that my parents' deaths were not foul play. The villains just capitalized on the event.”

Fern imagined that gave Emily a great deal of comfort. It certainly would Ash.

The carriage rolled to a stop and a footman helped the women out of the vehicle. Fern let out a long breath she'd been holding all morning.

She was finally here.

The three of them made their way up the stairs into the airlock of the church.

A murmur moved through the small group of friends and family that had assembled.

At the front of the church, she just caught sight of Ash standing, waiting for her. He reached out a hand and hers lifted toward him as well, their eyes locked together. It was finally happening...

Her forever started now.

THANK YOU FOR READING, the *Viscount to Avoid*! Writing these jeweled centric mysteries with fairy tale elements has been such a joy! There is supposed to be a fifth book in this series but after much debate, I think that book may not come to life.

But that is not to say, I won't be putting out new material! In 2024, seven more "Lords of Temptation" books will be launching. In addition, I have already started a new series that I am so excited for.

The series name is still in debate but I know that the series will be based around a secret club with dukes at the helm! The first three titles...

The Keeper of Secrets

The Master of Sins

The Emperor of Darkness

STAY TUNED! Want to be alerted for details? Join my newsletter! www.tammyandresen.com.

AND NOW GET ready for a sneak peek:

THE KEEPER OF SECRETS.

KEEPER OF SECRETS

He's a scoundrel.

A wastrel and... a duke.

But the moment Ryker, the Duke of Helmsworth, meets Chloe Fairchild everything changes.

Not because with a single look, he falls in love. That horse s**t is for fairytales.

She's half his age and so sweetly innocent she makes his teeth hurt.

She was meant to be a simple diversion. One little taste of decadent temptation in a world so dark and bitter.

But that was when he learned the truth.

Chloe wasn't just some random girl meant for fun, she was his new charge. The very innocent he'd been tasked with protecting. The one woman he should never touch.

Too bad he's had a taste. And Chloe...

She is delicious.

But keeping Chloe goes against every code he's ever followed for both his club, **The Duke Fraternity**, and his own personal plans which have always aligned perfectly.

Never get caught.

Never marry.

Lucky for him...

He's the Keeper of Secrets.

Welcome to The Duke Fraternity! In this secret society of powerful dukes there is only one absolute... rules were meant to be broken.

Keeper of Secrets

Master of Games

Emperor of Fates

Summoner of Sins

KEEPER OF SECRETS

The Club With No Name...

Masks were a necessity. The flickering candlelight cast the room in shadow, but the covering of their faces ensured that their identities were kept secret.

That was part of the fun...

Part of Ryker's position at the club was to make certain that their meetings, their games, even the club itself was kept in complete confidence.

Only one man knew all the members' identities, and he was called Emperor. Ryker had his suspicions about the Emperor actually was, but he kept those to himself. Wasn't his role as the Keeper of Secrets to guard what should not be shared?

And besides, life had trained him not to say what should not be said. Likely, why he'd been given the job in the first place.

His job was usually easy.

The Club was made up of men with power and position and most wanted their activities here to remain out of the

public's eyes.

Only the occasional fellow decided he wished for others to know about his illicit activities. And that's when Ryker stepped in.

But wasn't what tonight's meeting was about. Tonight was about murder.

Specifically, one that had occurred three nights prior when one of their members had been killed in the Hadley Square Park on the way home from a particularly debauchorous evening.

The question on everyone's mind was this...Was the murder random, targeted to the man in question, or somehow related to the Club?

The third seemed unlikely and yet...

"Can we know his name, now that he's dead?" A man called from the end of the table. The other nine members turned to the Emperor, who's only reaction was to grimace.

"How can we determine the cause of his murder if we don't even know who he is?" Another called.

The Emperor leaned forward his eyes narrowing under his mask. "We keep our identities secret to keep all of us safe."

"Except we're not all safe, are we?" A third called, a man with a ruby red mask, his dark hair sweeping back from his high forehead. He was known behind these walls as the Master of Sins and he created the games they often played.

Well liked for this, and for his easy way, the other man murmured their agreement.

Behind the Emperor, the Summoner cracked his knuckles, silencing the murmur. A massive man, the Summoner never spoke. Ryker believed he was mute, but it was entirely possible that he just chose not to speak within these walls. Who could say.

But either way, as the Emperor's second, and the one man who delivered messages to members outside the club, should the service be needed, and therefore, knew several of the men's identities, it made everyone more comfortable that he was built like a brick house and was equally silent.

"We don't know that," the Emperor spit back, his hands spreading out on the table. "If you're that concerned, perhaps you should give up your seat."

Silence fell.

No one wished to give up his seat. The occasional man decided that he tired of the play, but the club's turnover rate was incredibly low.

To act with such debauchery and then have a group with which to share without the worry of consequence... it was just too good.

"That's what I thought." The Emperor sat back in his seat. "Now..." he glanced about the table, "I've considered your words and have decided to create a subcommittee to explore the death."

There was a murmur of ascent about the table that Ryker did not share. Because, if he wasn't mistaken, the Emperor's gaze, from behind his jet black mask, landed upon him.

He didn't need a murder to add to the list of problems that were landing upon his door.

Just this week he'd received a letter from his father's sister. Never married, Lady Mildred Somerset had spent much of her adult life, meddling in Ryker's. It wasn't that he didn't care for the old crow. She was the closest thing to a mother he'd had, his own gone far more than she'd ever been available to Ryker.

But Aunt Mildred had a way of always disapproving. And now, some distant country cousin had died and his daughter, according to Mildred, was now in Ryker's charge. What the fuck was he supposed to do a child? A girl no less?

His lip curled into a sneer. Aunt Mildred would be filled with all sorts of thoughts on the matter. *Love her, treat her like your own. Your too much like your father, Ryker. Don't you want to be different from him?*

He could hear Aunt Mildred already and she hadn't even arrived with the girl. And he was different.

Despite being the new Duke of Wayland, Ryker had vowed not to marry. In that way, he'd never repeat his father's mistakes. Wasn't that different enough?

Shifting in his seat, he turned to more fully face the Emperor. "Who is going to be on this subcommittee?"

"Messages will be sent to the chosen men," the Emperor murmured back. "In the mean time, I will turn the meeting

over to our Master of Sins. It's time for our next challenge."

The energy shifted in the room but for the first time, Ryker was not all that interested. Be it sexual conquest or physical challenge, Ryker only listened with half an ear as the Master stood. "This month's activity is in preparation for the upcoming season..."

Ryker looked at his folded hands, studying the pale skin where his signet ring usually sat. He took it off for the meetings, but he wished he hadn't. Even this meeting was reminding him that his aunt would be coming to stay for the foreseeable future.

As events for London's season would begin in just a few weeks, she'd likely spend the remainder of the winter and most of the spring in his home.

"With that in mind," the Master continued. "You are to collect, at the minimum a kiss from a perspective debutante."

Ryker's head snapped up. A kiss? That was it? Normally the challenges were much more...interesting.

"Remember, you're not to get caught and neither is she, but you will need proof. Any man who does not obtain evidence will be on duty at Esmerelda's."

Esmerelda's was the nearby gentleman's club where ladies of the evening entertained men. Being on duty was not as glamorous as it sounded. Depending on how handily a man lost, he might be washing the bed linens of the whores.

Cleaning up another man's spunk was never appreciated.

"Who chooses to participate?"

Men were allowed to skip one challenge a year but no more. Choosing which one, was important. Last year, Ryker had saved his pass until nearly the very end when the challenge had been to... well... challenge a man to a duel.

While most members didn't choose to leave, some were forced. An earl the year prior had been caught debauching a lady and had been forced into marriage. That was an automatic removal.

But in the case of the duel challenge, two members had died.

That was the way in which seats sometimes opened.

So as much as Ryker had little interest in stealing some paltry kiss and even less in investigating a murder, he threw in his coin to signal his participation.

Perhaps the kiss would be fun.

Perhaps the Emperor hadn't chose him to be part of the subcommittee.

But as the meeting wrapped up, and the men began to leave, making their way to their unmarked carriages, a large finger tapped Ryker's shoulder.

He turned back to stare in the dark, humorless eyes of the Summoner.

Well. Fuck.

Want to read more? Find Keeper of Secrets on major retailers!

*Keep up with all the latest news, sales, freebies, and releases
by joining my newsletter!*

www.tammyandresen.com

Hugs!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tammy Andresen lives with her husband and three children just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. She grew up on the Seacoast of Maine, where she spent countless days dreaming up stories in blueberry fields and among the scrub pines that line the coast. Her mother loved to spin a yarn and Tammy filled many hours listening to her mother retell the classics. It was inevitable that at the age of eighteen, she headed off to Simmons College, where she studied English literature and education. She never left Massachusetts but some of her heart still resides in Maine and her family visits often.

Find out more about Tammy:

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OTHER TITLES BY TAMMY

Lords of Temptation

Marquess of Fortune

A Bet with a Baron

A Romp with a Rogue

A Score with a Scoundrel

A Bargain with a Beast

A Wager with an Earl

A Rendezvous with a Rake

A Deal with a Duke

A Masquerade with a Marquess

A Vengeful Viscount

Lords of Scandal

Duke of Daring

Marquess of Malice

Earl of Exile

Viscount of Vice

Baron of Bad

Earl of Sin

Earl of Gold

Earl of Baxter

Duke of Decadence

Marquess of Menace

Duke of Dishonor

Baron of Blasphemy

Viscount of Vanity

Earl of Infamy

Laird of Longing

Duke of Chance

Marquess of Diamonds

Queen of Hearts

Baron of Clubs

Earl of Spades

King of Thieves

Marquess of Fortune

Calling All Rakes

Wanted: An Earl for Hire

Needed: A Dishonorable Duke

Found: Bare with a Baron

Vacancy: Viscount Required

Lost: The Love of a Lord

Missing: An Elusive Marquess

Wanted: Title of Countess

The Dark Duke's Legacy

Her Wicked White

Her Willful White

His Wallflower White

Her Wanton White

Her Wild White

His White Wager

Her White Wedding

The Rake's Ruin

When only an Indecent Duke Will Do

How to Catch an Elusive Earl

Where to Woo a Bawdy Baron

When a Marauding Marquess is Best

What a Vulgar Viscount Needs

Who Wants a Brawling Baron

When to Dare a Dishonorable Duke

The Wicked Wallflowers

Earl of Dryden

Too Wicked to Woo

Too Wicked to Wed

Too Wicked to Want

How to Reform a Rake

Don't Tell a Duke You Love Him

Meddle in a Marquess's Affairs

Never Trust an Errant Earl

Never Kiss an Earl at Midnight

Make a Viscount Beg

Wicked Lords of London

Earl of Sussex

My Duke's Seduction

My Duke's Deception

My Earl's Entrapment

My Duke's Desire

My Wicked Earl

Brethren of Stone

The Duke's Scottish Lass

Scottish Devil

Wicked Laird

Kilted Sin

Rogue Scot

The Fate of a Highland Rake

A Laird to Love

Christmastide with my Captain

My Enemy, My Earl

Heart of a Highlander

A Scot's Surrender

A Laird's Seduction

Taming the Duke's Heart

Taming a Duke's Reckless Heart

Taming a Duke's Wild Rose

Taming a Laird's Wild Lady

Taming a Rake into a Lord

Taming a Savage Gentleman

Taming a Rogue Earl

Fairfield Fairy Tales

Stealing a Lady's Heart

Hunting for a Lady's Heart

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Boxsets!!

Taming the Duke's Heart Books 1-3

American Brides

A Laird to Love
Wicked Lords of London